

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SAND CLIFFS (1983)

DAN PIȚA

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OVERVIEW

Author Born in 1938 in Dorohoi, Romania, Dan Pita is one of the most gifted directors of the Romanian golden age of cinematography. He is the director of an impressive number of films, such as *Paso Doble* (1985), *November, the Last Ball* (1989), *Top Hotel* (1992), *Pepe and Fifi* (1994) and *Second Hand* (2005), to name just a few. In 1986, he was awarded Honorable Mention for *Paso Doble* at The Berlin Film Festival. The film's title (and the film itself) is based on a novel written by Bujor Nedelcovici, titled *Days of Sand* (1979).

Film *Sand Cliffs* was released in January 1983, during the Communist era, but was immediately withdrawn because of censorship. It is a psychological drama on the plummeting into chaos and death of a respected doctor due to his obsession for truth and power. This doctor plays God, taking control of a young boy's life and then destroying it the pretext that he is seeking the truth. But the truth is not immediately available to the doctor, as his friends remark. Therefore, he succumbs to obsession and insane quest until he loses his own life.

Background It is no wonder that the movie had to be withdrawn from the cinema at the time. It draws a less than flattering portrayal of the police force and shows how the upper class was connected with politics and power at the time. For instance, the police officer is shown bringing bottles of Pepsi to the doctor and his friends, which were, at the time, a luxury only the privileged could afford. Moreover, we see how Dr Hristea and his friends are treated in a preferential way due to Dr Hristea's position in the party. Vasile, on the contrary is ill-treated because he is poor and not connected with the Communist Party. On another occasion, Stefan tells Dr Hristea that he has obtained his position by being on good terms with the Communist Party. Thus, there is an inherent criticism of the communist regime in the movie.

SYNOPSIS

Sand Cliffs is a psychological drama on the obsessive quest of a doctor for the thief who stole his bag. One sunny day at the beach, we notice a group of people become agitated over seeing a man. A woman on the beach has identified this man as the thief who had stolen a bag the other day. The men go to catch the youth who was watching the waves peacefully. They take him to the police station where he is interrogated. At the police station, using his position of authority, Dr Hristea interrogates Vasile himself and eventually persuades him to admit that he is guilty. Submitting to psychological coercion, Vasile confesses. A trial ensues and Vasile is declared innocent. In the meantime, Dr Hristea has fallen out with Cristina, his lover. But his greatest obsession remains Vasile, and he goes to look for him after he is set free. He finds him, there is an altercation and Vasile accidentally stabs him in the stomach.

CHARACTERS

Dr Hristea	He is a doctor.
Cristina	She is Dr Hristea's lover.
Stefan	He is Dr Hristea's friend.
Vasile	He is a young man accused of theft.
Lt Popa	He is the police officer investigating the theft.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Dr Theodor Hristea

He is a respected doctor who goes to the seaside with his lover, Cristina, and his friend, Ștefan. He is a man obsessed with power, strong and determined. He is sure of himself and does not relent until he proves he is right.

Suspicious Dr Hristea is a suspicious man: not for a second does he believe Vasile, although he keeps saying he is innocent. While the others have their misgivings and hesitations, Dr Hristea remains suspicious until the end. He does not believe Vasile is innocent even after the trial which acquitted him and he goes back to him to make him confess.

Determined As his friends and peers remark, Dr Hristea is also a determined man. In the first phase of Vasile's investigations, he does not relent until he makes Vasile admit that he is guilty under psychological pressure. He puts so much pressure on the young man that the latter falls to the ground and starts crying. However, this does not impress Dr Hristea. He is merely pleased that he was proven right.

Confident Dr Hristea is also self-confident. He believes in his convictions and has no moment of hesitation. All his life he has achieved what he has set himself up to do and this confers on him an arrogance and self-confidence which are hard to bear for the people around him. He is confident that the truth is on his side and that truth (and himself) must prevail.

Dissatisfied Because of his constant need for power and gratification, Dr Hristea is never quite satisfied. This is why he goes to see Vasile again at the end of the movie: to gain the satisfaction that he does not get with all his success. He does not care that he is pursuing a man whose life has been ruined by his previous treatment of him. This need for recognition will never be fulfilled as he dies before learning the truth.

Cristina

She is Dr Hristea's mistress, an assertive and independent young woman. She has put up with Dr Hristea's egocentrism for a long time and she has had it. She leaves him after the incident at the Black Sea.

Aware Cristina is aware of Dr Hristea's problems and she tries to talk to him and convince him to calm down and see things more realistically. She is not taken seriously because the doctor thinks it's just a woman's fit of nerves. She tells him that he is not as good as he thinks he is, which enrages him. Cristina gives some good clues as to what the film is about: Dr Hristea's obsession with power.

Determined Although Dr Hristea tries to win Cristina back on several occasions, she remains firm on her position. She does not get back with him. When they meet again at Vasile's trial, Dr Hristea makes one final attempt, asking her to spend the day with him. She refuses him and leaves for good.

Unhappy Cristina is also very unhappy. She tells the doctor that he has made her immensely miserable. Dr Hristea is a difficult man to live with and she has had to endure his egomania and his need to prove that he is the best all the time. Cristina makes an attempt to escape and save her life.

**Ștefan **

He is Dr Hristea's friend, a former reporter become photographer. He is the exact opposite of Dr Hristea: a modest man, who does not like to shine and is not convinced that everything is black and white.

Aware Ștefan is also aware of Dr Hristea's problems and he talks to him about them. In one of their conversations, they argue about whether everything is black and white. While Dr Hristea thinks that this is how it is, Ștefan is inclined to see the multitude of greys. He is the only witness who says he is not sure if he has really seen Vasile.

Creative Ștefan is also creative as a photographer. He has isolated himself in his photography lap where he develops pictures. At the seaside, he likes to take pictures of fishermen, the sea and his friend, Dr Hristea. He is the stereotype of an artistic man, while Dr Hristea is the stereotype of scientific man.

Helpful As a friend, Ștefan is also helpful. He tries to put sense into Dr Hristea's head, to make him reason, pointing out that what he calls reality is an illusion and an obsession and that the reality might be different. He is there for his friend in his further quests, going with him to the seaside whenever Dr Hristea feels like going.

Vasile

Vasile is a hard-working young man. He is accused of having stolen a bag from Dr Hristea. Although he denies having stolen the bag for a long time, eventually he gives in and admits that he has. He is taken to prison where he is tried. At the end of the trial, he is acquitted.

Serious Vasile is a serious man. He works as a carpenter in his home village at the sea. Although he has left his parents' house and lives at his aunt's, he makes his own living. He seems to like honest work and tries his best to make a decent living. During his interrogations, he is equally serious.

Determined In spite of the enormous psychological pressure that Dr Hristea puts on him, Vasile is determined to fight as he says, 'I will get out of this one, too'. Dr Hristea is also determined, but Vasile has the determination of a sane man while Dr Hristea has the determination of an insane man. Therefore, Dr Hristea temporarily wins and Vasile's life is turned upside down.

Insecure Because of the psychological pressure and his low social status, Vasile is insecure. He says he cannot compare with Dr Hristea, who has connections and is well-placed in society. He fears for his life because he knows the injustice the powerful can perpetrate on the weak. He is afraid he will not get out of jail, especially after the added murder suspicion.

Angry Because of all this injustice, Vasile is angry. He shouts and he curses, he screams and he cries and even says he wants to go out and cry out that he is innocent. Dr Hristea plays with his nerves telling him, while in jail, 'C'mon, go outside and scream'. This frustrates and enrages Vasile.

Lt. Popa

Lt. Popa is the type of police officer who is shrewd, favours the powerful and disparages the weak. He is angry and intolerant and treats Vasile roughly.

Angry In his interrogations of Vasile, Lt Popa is angry. He threatens and shouts at Vasile, he is rough and rude. This is because of the low social status of Vasile.

Shrewd Lt. Popa is shrewd, first he intimidates Vasile, then he plays the good cop, then he aggresses him physically, seeing that Vasile will not admit.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Class The theme of class differences appears clearly in one of the dialogues the doctor has with Vasile. In this dialogue, Vasile reproaches the doctor that he has all the connections and money to set him up, whereas he, as a worker, has nothing. The director points out some of the class differences at the time, for example, that doctors lived in luxury and workers in the darkest poverty. The doctor represents the type of man who is adept at climbing the social ladder. He was born in a well-off family and he has succeeded in everything he has set his mind to in his life. Vasile, on the contrary, was born to a poor family, which he had abandoned a year before because of his abusive father. Ever since then, he has been working as a carpenter and living at his aunt's. The two men thus represent the extremities of two distanced social layers at the time. Usually, people from these two layers did not ever meet. Thus, Dan Pița portrayed the highs and lows of both classes and showed class inequalities present in communist Romania.

JUSTICE

Crime The whole plot revolves around a crime which Vasile is thought to have committed. Dr. Hristea is persuaded he has seen Vasile steal his bag from the beach and run with it. He was unable to catch him because on his way he had found a wounded child. The child died the next few days. So the crime becomes larger. Witnesses are called to identify the suspect. Three out of the four witnesses identify Vasile as the thief, with the exception of Ștefan, Dr Hristea's friend. Interrogations ensue, but Vasile keeps saying he is innocent. The doctor becomes somewhat obsessed by the case and tries to convince Vasile to admit his crime. Although he says he is innocent, Vasile eventually gives in,

probably due to psychological pressure. Later on, at the trial, Vasile is found innocent. But the doctor keeps being obsessed with this case. Through the crime, the director problematizes the interplay between fiction and reality, obsession and fact. The doctor seems to fall victim to the incapacity of distinguishing between the two.

Injustice Injustice appears in the movie in the way a suspect of crime is treated and pursued. Vasile is not given the benefit of a doubt from the very beginning. On the slightest identification by a woman who, like all the other characters, had not seen the thief clearly, Vasile is caught and brought to prison. There, the police lieutenant does not give him the benefit of the doubt either and starts from the premise that Vasile is lying. However, the most patent expression of injustice comes from Dr Hristea, who will not admit that Vasile might not have perpetrated the crime. Moreover, he tries to persuade Vasile to confess his guilt even though he might not be guilty. Dr Hristea is aided in his unfair approach by the police, who give him the right to interrogate and put mental pressure on Vasile. In this way, the director dramatises the way the people in power at the time exerted a tremendous influence on those who were powerless.

POLITICS

Power The question of power is important in the movie. Dr Hristea is a man obsessed with power. He says he does not ever admit to being second-best, that it would wreck him. This is why he starts pursuing Vasile like a madman, mainly to prove he is right and to assert his power over him. He is clearly a man who seeks power, as Cristina points out on one occasion. Although he is an appreciated doctor, this is not enough for him and he wants to become director of the hospital he works in. Dr Hristea's need for power is the engine that drives the plot forward. He does not relent until Vasile admits he stole his bag. Although whether Vasile has really stolen the goods or not remains indeterminate till the end. Dr Hristea seems possessed with this puzzle. All his friends and his lover tell him to leave the matters be, but he says he cannot do that because it would mean admitting he was defeated.

RELATIONSHIP

Love For a man so obsessed with power, Dr Hristea is nonetheless a man in love with his lover, Cristina. He cannot admit being left and continues to pursue her. He calls her all the time and does everything he can to win her back. However, Cristina is determined and she does not back down. He tries to find solace in prostitutes but he keeps seeing the face of Cristina. It is not clear whether it is true love or his need to be loved and appreciated. However, he does have feelings for Cristina and tries to win her back until the very end. Even after he learns that Cristina has found a new lover, he insists that they get back together. When they meet in court, he begs her to grant him a day together but Cristina refuses.

QUEST

Search The whole movie could be defined as Dr Hristea's (avid) search for the truth. It starts with scenes on the beach. The film ends with Dr Hristea's return to the sea to keep on preying on Vasile, who is trying to reconstruct his life. In-between, we have the doctor's incessant wandering around the idea of who was the real perpetrator of the theft. As Vasile is acquitted in court, matters are complicated further. Dr Hristea takes this as a personal defeat and he is not the man to admit defeat. His apparent search is for truth but, in reality, he searches for traces of self-esteem which he has lost for some reason. This obsessive quest tragically costs him his life when Vasile accidentally stabs him to death in their last encounter. Thus, the movie plays on the blurring between truth and fiction, authenticity and fakery.

APPEARANCE

Self-delusion This interplay has to do with the theme of self-delusion, which is predominant in the film. Dr Hristea's friend, Ștefan, warns him from the beginning that what he is seeking might shock and appall him. Cristina also criticizes this attitude to reality. They are all taken aback by the doctor's obsession with Vasile, especially since the things that he lost are of no value to him. He even tells Vasile that he will forget searching for his goods (i.e., leave them to Vasile) were Vasile to admit his crime. He corners Vasile and does not relent until the boy admits. However, when they go to the place where he says he'd hidden the bag, they are unable to find anything. The director also plays with the viewer on this theme, as we are never really told who stole Dr Hristea's bag. It is the psychological drama of Dr Hristea's obsession that represents the core of the film.

SCENES

THEFT

VASILE HANGS OUT WITH A GYPSY GIRL Vasile, a young man on the beach, goes to a stand to buy a bagel. The stand is run by a gypsy woman who has a daughter. After he buys the bagel, Vasile hangs out with the young daughter. He then leaves, heading for the sea.



VASILE IS IDENTIFIED AS A THIEF As he is walking towards the sea, Vasile passes by an older couple who are lying in the sun. The woman gets up and looks intently at Vasile. She then starts screaming that he is the one who had stolen Dr Hristea's bag the previous day.



VASILE IS CAUGHT BY THE MEN ON THE BEACH A group of people who were on vacation and lying on the beach go to catch the young boy who was looking at the sea. They accuse him of stealing the bag and take him to the police station.



THE WITNESSES IDENTIFY VASILE AS THE THIEF In order to make sure that it is Vasile who stole the bag, four witnesses are brought in to testify: Dr Hristea, Cristina, Ștefan and the woman who first identified Vasile. Three witnesses say he is the one who stole the bag, with the exception of Ștefan, who says he is not sure because he has not seen what happened very well. Vasile is taken back to his cell.



UNKNOWN THIEF The movie goes back and forth with scenes near moment of the theft. They are displayed in a non-linear fashion, short-circuiting the main narrative. However, no image clearly shows the face of the thief and the director gives us to understand that no witness has ever clearly seen his face. They have seen his figure but never his face.

THE THEFT As Simona was bathing in the sea, she sees a young man (whose face we do not see) come and steal her lover's bag. She starts screaming but she is not heard because of the waves. The thief casually takes the bag and flees.



THE THIEF IS SEEN RUNNING AWAY There is a recurrent scene of the thief's running away with the bag. We see a man from behind approach the place where were Dr Hristea and his lover's belongings, take away a bag and slip away in the forest surrounding the beach.



POLICE

THE POLICE INTERROGATE VASILE After the identification episode, Vasile is roughly questioned by the police, but he keeps denying that he committed the theft. The police lieutenant tries all the tricks in the book – the good cop/bad cop – but Vasile is adamant that he has not stolen the bag. In the meantime Dr Hristea and his friends watch the interrogation scene at the police station



THE POLICE SEARCH VASILE'S HOME The police go to search Vasile's home and to interrogate his family. They cannot find anything suspicious. Vasile's sister is annoyed by their intrusion.



THE CHIEF INSPECTOR INTERROGATES VASILE'S AUNT Vasile's aunt, who had taken Vasile in after he had left his parents' house, is interrogated by the chief inspector. He learns from her that he is a good, hard-working man who brings money into the house. The aunt seems very fond of him.



THE POLICE FIND A BAG The police start searching the beach and its surroundings for traces of the stolen bag. It is a bag that was supposed to carry Dr Hristea's goods, money and a camera. They manage to find a plastic bag, but it is empty. They are frustrated but continue searching.



THE POLICE INTERROGATE THE GYSPY WOMAN The police go to interrogate the gypsy woman who Vasile says he bought the bagel from. She confirms that he bought the bagel and adds that he is not to be trusted. After this, the younger gypsy daughter performs a dance in front of the police officers.



VASILE SEARCHES FOR THE BURIED BAG Upon Dr Hristea's insistence that he admit he is the thief, Vasile says that he has buried the bag in the mounds of sand by an old restaurant by the sea. They all go there and search and search, yet nothing is found. Dr Hristea tries to rush Vasile and Vasile keeps digging desperately with his own hands, but to no avail: nothing is found.



SICK BOY

THE WOUNDED BOY Immediately after the theft, Dr Hristea goes to look for the thief, but cannot find him anywhere. Instead he finds a little boy lying on the ground in the bush with a wound in his hand. He takes the boy in his arms and brings him to hospital.



THE CHILD IS DEAD The next day, the theft witnesses are again called to the police station. They are told that the child that Dr Hristea found has died in hospital. They are also told of the implications for Vasile if the death of the child is connected to him. The witnesses seem worried. The police associate the death of the child with Vasile as the child was found lying on the ground in the trail left by the thief.



DR. HRISTEA

DR HRISTEA KEEPS SEARCHING Dr Hristea keep on searching for the thief. He gets entangled in the thorns in the hill above the beach but he does not give up. He sees the thief from the back but never sees his face.



DR HRISTEA AND ȘTEFAN HAVE A CONVERSATION Dr Hristea asks Ștefan why he did not identify Vasile as the thief. Ștefan says he had his doubts that truth is not as clear for him as it is for Dr Hristea. While for Dr Hristea, it is all black and white, for Ștefan there is a multitude of greys.



DR HRISTEA EXPLAINS HIMSELF Simona and Ștefan want to know why Dr Hristea is so obsessed with the thief and cannot leave Vasile alone. He explains that he cannot stand to be cheated and to be defeated. For him, it is important to show he was right and to have definite proof of that.



PROFESSOR CANDIANO TEACHES Dr HRISTEA A LESSON Professor Candiano, a man who was also at the seaside, listens to Dr Hristea's reasoning on why he needs to find the thief. He says Dr Hristea is right, with one exception: he should have a *volant*, meaning something to rely on in case his construction should crumble. All this time, Dr Hristea is eating without caring too much about what Prof. Candiano has to say.



Dr HRISTEA GOES TO SEE THE FISHERMEN Dr Hristea and Ștefan go to talk with the fishermen in the hope of a more definite answer. One of them responds, taking Vasile's defence. The two leave even more frustrated than before.



DR HRISTEA PERSUADES VASILE TO ADMIT HIS GUILT In an interrogatory worse than that of the police, Dr Hristea coerces (psychologically) Vasile to admit that he is guilty. He keeps asking him questions and even promises Vasile will be released and that he will drop all charges, should Vasile confess. In the end, Vasile reluctantly confesses.



CRISTINA

DR HRISTEA AND CRISTINA HAVE A FIGHT Cristina is upset by Dr Hristea's obsession with the thief and shows it. Dr Hristea notices and tries to convince her of his point of view. She reproaches him for many things, one of which being that he makes her miserable and that he has ruined their vacation.



CRISTINA LEAVES Dr HRISTEA After a dispute they have on the impossible character of Dr Hristea, Cristina decides to leave and go back home. The doctor and Ștefan take her to the bus where they wave farewell. Cristina goes with the intention of leaving Dr Hristea for good.

DR HRISTEA MEETS CRISTINA AGAIN At Vasile's trial, Dr Hristea and Cristina meet again. He tries to persuade her to spend the day with him but she refuses, pretending that she promised someone else to be home. He insists, but to no avail. Cristina leaves and the two part for good.



DR HRISTEA LIVES ALONE IN HIS APARTMENT After Cristina has left him, Dr Hristea lives alone in his apartment. He listens to music and tries to reach Cristina over the phone, but she does not answer most of the times. He is lonely and still obsessed with the thief.



DR HRISTEA AND ȘTEFAN HAVE ANOTHER CONVERSATION Dr Hristea goes to visit Ștefan in his photo laboratory. We can tell that they have not seen each other for a long time. Ștefan points out some of his flaws which Dr Hristea denies.



DR HRISTEA VISITS PROFESSOR CANDIANO Dr Hristea also goes to meet Prof. Candiano, who reminds him of the *volant* and tries to give him some good advice. Dr Hristea does not seem to pay attention or to have the intention to heed the advice. The *volant* stands for all that is relative, precisely that Dr Hristea does not take into account with his 'scientific' approach.



DR HRISTEA GOES TO A BROTHEL After he comes back to the city, Dr Hristea tries to win back Cristina on several occasions, but to no avail. Desperate, he goes to a brothel. However, instead of the so-called dancers there, he sees her face everywhere.



DR HRISTEA GOES TO LOOK FOR VASILE Still obsessed with proving that he was right, Dr Hristea goes to look for Vasile at his aunt's house. She tells him how he has ruined Vasile's life, how he has lost his job and friends. The only thing that interests Dr Hristea is to find him. Vasile's cousin tells Dr Hristea that after he was acquitted, Vasile had managed to find another job with difficulty and to marry the gypsy daughter.

DR HRISTEA AND VASILE MEET AGAIN Vasile's cousin, Maria, eventually tells Dr Hristea where Vasile now works and that he is about to get married. Dr Hristea goes to the place where Vasile now works and reaches out to him. Vasile tells him to stay away from him and that he does not want his money. Dr Hristea insists and grabs him. As he reaches out, he goes straight into a knife that Vasile was holding in his hand.



DR HRISTEA DIES With the wound from the knife in his stomach, Dr Hristea pursues the running Vasile to the beach. He runs after him but is unable to reach him. He eventually falls on the sand and dies.

