

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE DEATH OF MISTER LĂZĂRESCU (2005)

CRISTI PUIU

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OVERVIEW

Auteur Born in Bucharest in 1967, Cristi Puiu is one of the most talented and promising of the Romanian New Wave film directors. One of his first movies, *Dough and Stuff* (2001), won several awards at international film festivals – The Trieste Film Festival, the Angers Film Festival, the Buenos Aires Film Festival. He received the Goppo award for *Aurora* (2010) and was awarded the Silver Hugo Award for *Sieranevada* (2016). For *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* (2005), he received the *Un certain regard* award at the Cannes Film Festival.

Film Released in Romania on September 22nd in 2005, *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* is a feature film by Madragora Production. It was shot for thirty-nine nights in real hospitals in Bucharest. Its main soundtrack ('Cum e oare?', 'How is it?') was performed by Margareta Pâslaru. The movie is two hours and thirty-three minutes long and its estimated budget was \$500,000.

It tells the story of the dehumanization in the Romanian medical system from the point of view of an ailing and old intellectual. Although it can be dubbed a black comedy, the movie can also be interpreted as a poignant contemporary tragedy and a social critique on the treatment of the elderly in Romania.

Background The movie is based on a real-life event when a patient from Dolj, Romania, was refused hospitalization three times and eventually died. Cristi Puiu said that it was also based on his own experience in Bucharest's hospitals.

SYNOPSIS

The Death of Mr Lăzărescu (2005) is a tragicomic movie (it was dubbed a comedy in America) about the last hours in the life of Lăzărescu Dante Remus, a sixty-two-year-old retired intellectual, living solely with his three cats, in great misery and sickness. He has a sister who lives in another city and a daughter who has emigrated to Canada. His wife died eight years before. In the morning, Mr Lăzărescu starts to feel sick and vomits several times having also severe headaches and stomach aches. He calls 911 several times, but to no avail. With no food in his fridge, save for some bread and cold vegetable stew, he feels increasingly ill but continues to drink liquor. Eventually, he calls on his next-door neighbours for help. They take care of him, give him pills and stay with him until a paramedic, Mioara Avram, finally arrives. He is taken to a hospital, where he is handled roughly by the medical staff, including the doctor, who tells him off for drinking alcohol while having an ulcer condition. At the same time, a huge accident takes place in the area, so the hospital is flooded. Consequently, they find no place for Mr Lăzărescu and send him off to another hospital for blood tests and a CT scan. This scenario is repeated several times in various Bucharest hospitals until at the last hospital, the Bagdasar hospital, Mr Lăzărescu is finally taken care of. In the last scenes, Mr Lăzărescu, now fully unconscious, is prepared for surgery and the movie ends on an image of him lying under white hospital sheets. We do not know for sure whether he will survive or not.

CHARACTERS

Mr Lăzărescu	An ailing, retired intellectual.
Mioara Avram	A paramedic nurse.
Sandu Sterian	Mr Lăzărescu's next-door neighbour.
Mihaela Sterian	Sandu Sterian's wife.
Dr Zamfir	A doctor.
Dr Breslasu	A doctor.
Mariana	A nurse.
Dr Mirică	A doctor.
Dr Gina Filip	A doctor.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MR. LĂZĂRESCU Agreeable (*Bereaved, Alienated, Intellectual*)

Dante Remus Lăzărescu is a 62 year-old intellectual who lives estranged from his family and friends, in the company of his three cats and, occasionally, his neighbours. He is principled - (does not forget to pay for his debts) and remains dignified even in his poverty. He does have a drinking problem, which everyone in the movie seems to be keen on pointing out, probably due to the suffering he has had to endure with the loss of his wife and the estrangement from his only daughter. He is also reasonably grumpy, given the inconsiderate way in which he is treated. He is, however, very affectionate towards his cats, which he confesses to the nurse, Mioara Avram. As such, he typifies the alienated post-revolutionary, old intellectual who continues to be rejected by society, an outcast and a pariah. He also stands for the generation of Romanians whose children emigrated, leaving them alone in the old age. At the end, he is also abandoned by the medical system, which fails not only to adequately treat him, but to offer him sympathy and understanding. Interestingly enough, the name of the main character of the movie is quite telling. Lăzărescu evokes Lazarus from the New Testament, who was resurrected by Jesus Christ. In the movie, quite the opposite happens, where he is instead killed by a medical system supposed to have a salvific function. The other two names, Dante and Remus, hint at the Latin origin of the Romanian people and perhaps to the contemporary decay of those original values. Moreover, with Dante, we are reminded of the Inferno, which is actually what Mr Lăzărescu goes through in the night when he is taken from hospital to hospital. Thus, we could infer that Mr Lăzărescu typifies the old world of the last authentic intellectuals of Romania who are now deleted by a system that is cruel, lacks empathy and understanding for them.

Bereaved In the movie, we learn that Mr Lăzărescu has been widowed for several years and is also out of touch with his daughter, Miruna, who now lives in Canada. His only relatives living in the country, his sister and her husband, live far away, in another city, Târgu Mureş. Therefore, Mr Lăzărescu lives alone and is hardly able to take care of himself. He is clearly tormented by his daughter's abandonment and we can infer that his alcohol addiction is due to his personal problems. The scenes in his apartment, where we witness his extreme solitude are a symbol of this bereavement.

Alienated Mr Lăzărescu makes himself understood with difficulty by his neighbours and by the other characters he enters into contact with. He is very witty and has little patience for self-deceit. We can see this in the scene where another neighbour, Gelu, mocks him. He is clearly embarrassed and annoyed by this attitude, but keeps silent on this particular occasion. His alienation is most telling in another scene where he is carried on a stretcher while other, elderly patients are waiting in line. We can also witness the barriers between him and the outer world in his explanations about his symptoms, which are never taken into account.

Intellectual Mr Lăzărescu embodies the Romanian intellectual who lives on the margin of the society, is despised by people from other social strata, lives in misery because intellectuals are underpaid. We know he is an intellectual because the movie specifies this and because of his vocabulary which displays neologisms and literate forms of expression. For instance, when he describes his medical condition, he is accurate and uses the appropriate words. .

MIOARA AVRAM Conscientious (*Compassionate, Conscientious, Assertive*)

If Mr Lăzărescu can be compared to Lazarus, Mioara Avram is a sort of Martha, Lazarus' sister who, together with her sister Mary, stood by Lazarus' side in sickness, death and resurrection.

Compassionate Mioara Avram is the most humane of all the characters in the movie: she has the initiative to take Mr Lăzărescu to hospital, to ask his neighbours to accompany him, to call his sister to come over, to confront the doctors who seem to neglect Mr Lăzărescu, and stands by his side all night through, till the very end. She is a foil to the other medical staff appearing in the movie. She is a complex character, who is not only merciful and empathetic, but also a smoker and does not reject the occasional gossip. However, she is courageous and confronts each doctor in order to try to rescue Mr Lăzărescu.

Conscientious Mioara Avram is an extremely conscientious paramedic worker, as well as a sympathetic and communicative colleague. When she examines Mr Lăzărescu for the first time, she goes through the routine, taking her time and not omitting any sign that might indicate something

serious. She decides that Mr Lăzărescu needs to be taken to hospital immediately. Moreover, she never leaves his side the whole night long, until he is finally prepped for the brain surgery.

Assertive Mioara Avram manages to impose herself with the rudest of doctors, stating her views, modestly but assertively. In the first hospital, the doctor is plainly aggressive towards her the moment she tries to suggest a diagnosis. But she stands her ground and justifies her opinion. She has the same attitude towards all the doctors she encounters. With her fellow nurses, however, she is friendly and caring.

SANDU STERIAN Rational (*Caring, Weak*)

Sandu Sterian is Mr Lăzărescu's next-door neighbour and occasional drinking buddy. In spite of the kindness he manifests towards Mr Lăzărescu, he is at times a bit aggressive towards his wife, sending her to see to her affairs in the kitchen when she seems to interfere too much. He helps as much as he can, but when it comes to accompanying Mr Lăzărescu to hospital, he takes his wife's word and does not go. He typifies the middle-aged man with a drinking problem who, despite his domineering attitude, is under his wife's tutelage. He is the typical *bonhomme* who is affectionate with his friends, but also cares for his own welfare.

Caring Sandu Sterian really cares for Mr Lăzărescu, he holds him in his arms, stays with him until Mioara Avram arrives and we can see from his facial expression and attitude that he would have even accompanied Mr Lăzărescu to hospital had his wife let him. He is probably Mr Lăzărescu's best friend and we learn from his wife that it is Mr Lăzărescu who got him into drinking.

Weak Although Sandu Sterian has a rather assertive attitude towards his wife – he does not let her handle Mr Lăzărescu and sends her off to see to her cooking – as the movie progresses, we can tell that it is not he who makes the big decisions, but rather his wife. He is rebuked for planning on letting her spend Saturday night on her own in order that he stand by his friend in hospital. When she criticises him, he has nothing to say and, consequently, leaves Mr Lăzărescu alone, knowing that this will complicate the process of hospital admission.

MIHAELA STERIAN (*Helpful, Selfish*)

She is the typical traditional Romanian housewife who seems very empathetic and helpful – she offers to bring food and she gives the same amount of attention to Mr Lăzărescu as her husband does, but when it comes to ruining her Saturday night, she imposes her will of not going to the hospital with Mister Lăzărescu, knowing that might create problems and delay his admission indefinitely. At times, she is excessively nice and submissive, and we wonder about the authenticity of her submissiveness when she refuses to go to the hospital.

Helpful Mihaela Sterian is the typical housewife who cooks, cleans and takes care of her husband. She displays the same amount of attention towards Mr Lăzărescu and even offers to bring him food when she sees he has nothing in his fridge.

Selfish While she offers her help in many ways towards Mr Lăzărescu, Mihaela Sterian makes all sorts of mean remarks – on the miserable state his apartment is in and on the stench coming from his cats. Moreover, she is reluctant to give Mr Lăzărescu medication when he asks for it and takes forever until she brings him something. She is willing to help, but only to a point – when it comes to ruining her Saturday night, she is adamant about not accompanying Mr Lăzărescu to hospital.

Dr Breslașu Disagreeable (*Cynical, Sarcastic*)

Dr Breslașu typifies the detached doctor who does not care much for his patients and treats them with coldness. He makes ironic jokes and also reprimands Mioara Avram when she gives her opinion on Mr Lăzărescu's state.

Cynical Dr Breslașu is the type of doctor who is cold and cynical. When he sees Mr Lăzărescu's CT scan results, he detachedly affirms that the latter does not have a chance of surviving. He looks into the computer and we do not see any sign of feeling or regret on his face. He merely reads the results and gives the merciless diagnosis.

Sarcastic Dr Breslașu also tells off Mioara Avram for wanting to help Mr Lăzărescu and mocks the possibility of his chances for survival. He says, upon seeing the results, that Mr Lăzărescu should be

operated on his brain immediately so that he might not die in hospital and be released home afterwards in order to die from liver cancer.

DR. ARDELEAN Disagreeable (*Rude, Noncomittal*)

Dr Ardelean is the first doctor who sees Mr Lăzărescu and the rudest of a long line of rude doctors he encounters. He works at St Spiridon Hospital.

Rude Dr Ardelean is rude towards both Mioara Avram and Mr Lăzărescu – he rebukes the former and is condescending towards her, and he scolds the latter as though he were a child. When Mr Lăzărescu tells him that he should not complain about having to do a job he is paid for, he answers, aggressively, 'What did you say?' and calls Mr Lăzărescu an alcoholic and a good-for-nothing. He does not allow himself to be contradicted and when Mioara Avram tries to suggest there might be a colon problem, he immediately scolds and insults her. He also insults Mr Lăzărescu, stating that the latter is the type of man who would drink alcohol and beat his children. At which, Mr Lăzărescu says he never laid a finger on his child. The two have an argument and Mr Lăzărescu wants to leave the hospital, but he is prevented by the paramedic nurse, Mioara Avram.

Noncomittal Like most other doctors in the movie, Doctor Ardelean refuses to take responsibility for Mr Lăzărescu and sends him off to another hospital. Although upon examination, he notices Mr Lăzărescu has some serious health problems, Dr Ardelean refuses to admit him to his hospital.

THEMES

SOCIETY (Intellectual, Medical System, Lack of Empathy)

The status of the intellectual The movie subtly suggests the idea that the intellectual is a quasi-pariah in today's Romania. Mr Lăzărescu's intellectual status is not acknowledged in any way. On the contrary, he is called 'pops'; he lives in the darkest misery on a very small pension; he is looked down on and despised. Cristi Puiu seems to be criticizing the general attitude towards intellectuals through his character. This is a situation that began in Communism and continues after the Revolution. Because of his financial troubles, Mr Lăzărescu is patronized by his family, his neighbours and the medical staff.

The medical system In the movie, we witness a medical system that is overwhelmed by the number of patients and the shortage of medical staff. Because of this, they are unable to treat all the cases they should and have to make choices, as in the case of Mr Lăzărescu, who is told, among other things, that he is not a real emergency and should make way for the younger ones who are in more need than himself. Because of this, the medical staff are angry almost all the time, lose their temper quickly and are unable to make the right decisions. They are the ones to blame for the death of Mr Lăzărescu, the movie seems to imply.

Lack of empathy While the movie displays various forms of empathy – the Sterians' care for Mr Lăzărescu, his sister's help with money and the promise she would arrive the following day, Mr Lăzărescu's own love for his cats – the movie is inflexible about the lack of empathy existing in the hospitals where the main character is treated. The older doctors are rough and angry, the younger ones cold and cynical. They address him as 'pops', a name indicating lack of respect and vulgarity. They all 'smell' the stench of alcohol on his breath and admonish him for that. One of them even accuses him of ruining the previous doctor's work (the ulcer surgery) with his drinking. He is called names, he is abused and he is treated without mercy.

PSYCHOLOGY (Old Age, Alienation, Humour, Death)

Old Age One of the main themes is the societal status of the elderly in post-Communist Romania. Mr Lăzărescu embodies the lack of privilege and attention the elderly have from society at large starting with their own family, and ending with a system that is either too corrupt or badly managed to take care of them. We can tell Mr Lăzărescu's decrepitude from the shabby condition of his home which displays some of the typical signs of poverty – lack of food, plastic table cloth, dirty glasses, bad odour from the cats he lives with, and lack of appropriate medicine. At one point, he is forced to go to his neighbours and ask for a sedative. Perhaps the epitome of society's treatment and view of the elderly is shown when one of the doctors says he should have a brain operation and then left to go home to die from liver cancer. Cristi Puiu shows us that the elderly are treated with carelessness and lovelessness, are mistreated, insulted and humiliated by a system that tolerates

them very little. Almost every doctor in the movie patronizes and humiliates Mr Lăzărescu. Perhaps the most revealing scene is when Mr Lăzărescu is looked down on for supposedly not knowing what *melena* ('tarry, black stool') is, while he had used the term himself in his conscious state. The general attitude of the others towards the elderly in the movie is one of impatience and lack of understanding of their needs.

Alienation *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* addresses the problem of alienation in post-Communist Romania. The phenomenon of the massive youth emigration has left their parents in loneliness and alienation. Not only has Mr Lăzărescu's daughter, Miruna, left for Canada, but she no longer speaks with her father. Although he is still in touch with his sister, they are on very cold terms, they argue and she lives in another town. His sister also has little sympathy for the state he is in, blaming it all on his drinking problem. She reproaches him for this several times, at which Mr Lăzărescu retorts, sharply, that he drinks at his own expense. But the most conspicuous case of alienation is present in the hospitals where Mr Lăzărescu is taken. There, we see several other elderly people who are treated just as coldly as Mr Lăzărescu is treated. But there is little understanding among them, also, as we can infer from one of the patient's emphatic statement that Mr Lăzărescu should go into the doctor's room first, first, while, when the doors open, he is the first to enter. The state of alienation is also present in the last scenes of the movie, first, when they run a CT scan on him and last, when he is prepped for the surgery by a matter-of-fact and casual staff.

Death As the title of the movie suggests, death is an omnipresent theme. Although we never witness it directly, it always lurks in the background, in Mr Lăzărescu's old apartment and belongings, in his illness, in the massive car accident and, of course, in the hospitals where he is taken. Death permeates the final scenes when Mr Lăzărescu lies unconscious on the bed covered in white sheets. It seems a contemporary reenactment of the biblical death of Lazarus. Only this time there is no promise of a resurrection, rather the hint, given also by the title, that this is the end. Thus, the movie performs an anti-Lazarus movement – instead of turning death into life, we have here the turning of life into death through neglect, lack of compassion and coldness.

Humour The movie displays some forms of Romanian dark humour, which were popular in Communist Romania, when people had to deal with gruesome realities. For instance, Mihaela Sterian, in her excessive helpfulness, finds herself almost in a sexual position towards Mr Lăzărescu and her husband rebukes her promptly. There are also all the misunderstandings that stem from the lack of attention on the part of most characters. While Mr Lăzărescu keeps repeating he has a terrible headache, everyone has his or her own ideas about what his problems might be. The humour in the movie is played out around these confusions and misunderstandings, with references to the past that only point to and reinforce the estrangement and alienation of Mr Lăzărescu. There is also humour in the stereotypical characters – Mihaela Sterian, for instance, in her motherly stance towards her husband and Mr Lăzărescu. Thus, the humour in the movie does not necessarily alleviate the pervasive feeling of gloom, but rather reinforces it.

SCENES

Home In the first scene of the movie, we see the main character with one of his cats, in his apartment. The apartment is small, shabby and disorderly, but Mr Lăzărescu's fondness for his cats is evident.



The Illness Mr Lăzărescu starts feeling sick and vomits. After a while, he drinks from the bottle of alcohol on his kitchen table. He calls his brother-in-law, who had lent him money to tell him he'd sent the money back. After that, he has an argument with his sister, who scolds him for his drinking problem, while he reproaches her the relationship she maintains with his daughter. From this, we learn that he and his daughter are no longer in touch.



The Neighbours Mr Lăzărescu's next-door neighbours are helpful and try to make him feel better, but he is increasingly grumpy because of his condition. The neighbours are also fond of drinking. In the midst of the main character's pains, the neighbours come and go making silly and uncalled-for jokes, while, at the same time, bringing him food, pills and even cleaning his slippers which had been soiled with vomit.



The Paramedic nurse A paramedic, Mioara Avram, arrives in the apartment. She tries to convince one of the neighbours to accompany her and Mr Lăzărescu to the hospital, as that would ease the entrance there. However, she is refused, in particular by Miki, the neighbour's wife. Miki scolds her husband for intending to accompany Mr Lăzărescu: 'Were you going to leave me alone on a Saturday night?'



The Ambulance Given that Mr Lăzărescu is carried to and from a lot of hospitals, much of the movie is spent in ambulances. On the occasion, we notice the bumpy roads of Bucharest, the rush of cars and the derogatory tone of the medical staff towards the elderly and helpless.



First Hospital: St. Spiridon In the first hospital, Mr Lăzărescu is seen by a doctor who rebukes him for drinking too much. When he tries to answer for himself, the doctor insults him. The paramedic nurse, Mioara Avram tries to temper both the doctor and Mr Lăzărescu, but to no avail. The two have an argument resulting in Mr Lăzărescu wanting to leave and in the doctor's decision to send Mr Lăzărescu to another hospital.



The second Hospital: The University At the University Hospital, Mr Lăzărescu is seen by several doctors, among whom is Dr. Dragoș Popescu, a neurosurgeon, who, seeing the aggravated state Mr Lăzărescu is in, decides to perform a CT scan. The scan is interpreted by Dr Breslașu. In a detached, cynical tone, Dr Breslașu says that Mr Lăzărescu should be operated on the brain so he can die at home from liver cancer. The doctors decide to send Mr Lăzărescu to another hospital yet again.



Hospital Staff Socialization During this time, the nurse has a chat with Mioara Avram. This chat is significant because it shows Mioara Avram's friendliness as well as the materialistic perspective on life of some of the medical staff because they talk about money, looks and sex.



The third Hospital: The Filaret Hospital At the Filaret Hospital, the patient and paramedics are treated disparagingly from the start. Dr Mirică, however, consults Mr Lăzărescu, but because he is no longer able to sign the surgery agreement, the doctors decide to send Mr Lăzărescu off to another hospital. Mr Lăzărescu's state is by now aggravated, he is almost unable to speak and his motor functions are impaired.



The fourth Hospital The Bagdasar At the Bagdasar Hospital, Dr Zamfir expresses her surprise at Mr Lăzărescu's not having been operated on until then. She decides that Mr Lăzărescu needs to be operated at their hospital at once. In the last scenes of the movie, we see Mr Lăzărescu in an unconscious state on the hospital bed just before the surgery.



The Surgery Mister Lăzărescu is prepped for the surgery in a clean and minimalist environment. The staff are cold and detached, while the paramedic, Mioara Avram, watches the scene with sadness. She eventually leaves him with two nurses, not before making sure they take care of his varicose legs. The two nurses clean him and shave his head and when they are done, one of them says 'ready, handsome'. Dr Anghel is called to operate on him.

