

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE WHISTLERS / LA GOMERA (2019)

CORNELIU PORUMBOIU

OVERVIEW

AUTEUR Corneliu Porumboiu is one of the Romanian New Wave film directors. He was born in Vaslui, Romania, in 1975. He first studied Management at the National Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest between 1994 and 1998. After this, he enrolled in The Theatre and Film Academy (UNATC) Bucharest which he graduated from in 2003. He has won several awards, the most important of which are: Un certain regard at the Cannes Film Festival for *The Treasure* (2015); Un certain regard at the Cannes Film festival for his feature *Police, Adjective* (2009).

FILM *The Whistlers* premiered in Cannes in 2019 and was Romania's selection for the Oscars in 2020, but it was not nominated. It won the Best Feature Award at the Gopo Awards in 2020, where it received six other awards: best director, best script, best supporting role actress, best supporting role actor, best image and best montage. The film was shot in Romania and the Canary Islands. The film's structure is non-linear, presenting the action in several tableaux which go back and forth in time. The title refers to the language El Silbo, the native whistling language of the island La Gomera.

BACKGROUND The movie is a *noir policier* and we could attribute it to the tradition of Jean-Luc Goddard. Just like in Goddard's movies, the police officer is also a criminal but he has a very humane character and personality. In *The Whistlers*, Cristi is such a typical *noir policier* hero, the typical negative character who is actually kindhearted. This is why his actual foil is not Paco or Zsolt, but his own boss, who goes by the rules, and is intransigent and ruthless.

SYNOPSIS

The Whistlers tells the story of Cristi, a police officer who investigates a drug criminal organization. The story is complicated by the fact that Cristi has been involved with this criminal organization for some time and has been receiving money from it. In the beginning of the movie, Cristi goes to La Gomera, a remote island in Spain, where he is supposed to learn the bird language, or the secret language of the criminal organization. There, he meets Kiko and Gilda. Gilda's lover is Zsolt, a drug dealer. Gilda helps Cristi to learn the bird language. Previously, Gilda and Cristi had met and had sex in order to rescue Zsolt. When they meet again, Gilda tells Cristi to forget about the sex they'd had. Cristi's boss, Magda, also investigates the case. She learns that Cristi had been involved with this criminal organization and makes a deal with Cristi in order to catch the criminals. In the process, Cristi is hit by a car and loses his consciousness, while Gilda is released from the criminal organization which was holding her hostage. Zsolt gets killed, as does one of the police agents working for Magda. In the end, Cristi is released from the mental institution he had been admitted to and meets Gilda again. The two fell in love with each other during the investigation due to bird language and their common fight to save Zsolt. The movie explores several aspects of a police officer's turned into a criminal life, presenting a humane image of this character. It is a typical action movie with car races, heists, kidnappings and murders.

CHARACTERS

Cristi – a police officer
Zsolt – a drug dealer
Gilda – Zsolt's lover
Magda – Cristi's boss
Paco- head of the criminal organization
Kiko – one of the criminals
Cristi's mother – an elderly, pious woman

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Cristi

Cristi is the main character in the movie. He is a police officer who is corrupt. He is adventurous, but keeps a calm appearance. He is also a generous man.

Adventurous Cristi is adventurous. As a police officer who is investigating a drug crime, he is also involved and collaborates with the criminals he is investigating. In La Gomera, the island he goes to in order to infiltrate the criminal organization, he takes all the risks. When his chief lets him know she wants to arrest Zsolt, Cristi sends Zsolt an anonymous message to warn him of the danger.

Generous Cristi is a generous man. When Paco says he wants to kill Gilda and Zsolt, Cristi offers his share of the money, in exchange for their lives. He also bargains with his chief for the release of Zsolt. Thus, he is generous towards the people he looks up to and cares for.

Calm Although he is going through numerous adventures and his life and reputation are at risk, Cristi keeps a calm appearance until toward the end of the movie. He never gets mad or frightened and deals with the situation with calm and composure.

Gilda

Gilda is Zsolt's lover. She is a beautiful woman, who will do anything to rescue Zsolt. She is adventurous but keeps her cool, just like Cristi. She is determined to save Zsolt and will do anything to attain this purpose.

Adventurous Gilda is an adventurous woman. She becomes involved with the criminal organization through her relationship with Zsolt. However, together with Zsolt, they steal Paco's money and try to get away with it. But Paco catches Gilda and keeps her hostage in order to catch Zsolt, too.

Determined Gilda is determined to rescue Zsolt. For this she will even sleep with a total stranger and she will also risk her own life. She is a determined and brave woman, who is intelligent enough to outsmart both the police and Paco's organization.

Calm Even if she knows she is followed both by the police and Paco's band, Gilda is calm throughout the movie. When Kiko tells Paco about Gilda and Zsolt's heist, and Gilda's life is threatened, she still keeps her composure and does not become scared or irritated.

Magda

Magda is Cristi's boss. She is responsible, determined and confident.

Responsible Magda is the type of police officer who is responsible. She does not make compromises unless it is to achieve her purpose as a police investigator. She does not betray the cause of the police and she even exposes Cristi for betraying this cause.

Determined Magda is very determined to catch the criminal organization. She even makes some compromises to achieve her goal and jeopardizes the lives of several people. She uses Zsolt as bait to catch the criminal organization, not caring if he might lose his life in the process.

Confident Magda is a confident police officer. When she exposes Cristi for his corruption, she has all the facts checked and she nails him. She never risks her position and this gives her immense self-confidence. She is smart and this also helps with her self-confidence.

Zsolt Zsolt is a drug dealer. He is adventurous and aware of the systems he is confronted with. Throughout the movie, he also keeps his calm.

Aware Zsolt is aware of the two systems – the police and the criminal organization – he is dealing with. He does not trust either. He betrays the criminal organization by running away with the money, knowing that Paco will never share his great wealth with him. He refuses to cooperate for a long time with the police knowing that they want to nail him.

Adventurous Zsolt has been an adventurous man since his high school years. He has been involved in drug dealing since that time and has not stopped ever since. He takes risks and does not shy away from dangerous situations.

Kiko

Kiko is one of the criminals in Paco's organization. He is insensitive and unstable.

Insensitive Kiko is the type of criminal who is insensitive. When Paco orders him to kill Gilda and Zsolt, he does not hesitate to do it even though he has spent time with both of them and knows them well. He kills on order as a cold-blooded criminal.

Unstable Kiko is also unstable. Drawn to Gilda's beauty, he goes into the swimming pool after her and tries to rape her. He loses his temper because of her rejection.

Paco

Paco is the typical criminal organization chief. He is insensitive and controlled.

Insensitive Paco is equally insensitive. Although he has known Zsolt and Gilda for a long time, he does not hesitate to give the order to have them killed when he learns that they have betrayed him.

Controlled Paco is controlled even when he is angry. In his discussion with Cristi when he tells him the drowning man parable, Paco keeps his calm and control, even if he is desperate and afraid.

THEMES

Suffering Suffering appears in the movie through Cristi's affliction when he is fired from the police service. After this moment, he has become estranged and aloof, no longer speaks normal language; he only speaks La Gomera bird language, which his mother and doctors take for an infallible sign of madness. Cristi suffers not only from his downfall but also from his love for Gilda. His bird language messages are all addressed to her.. When Cristi and Gilda meet again, it is after an immense suffering, probably on both sides. Gilda first suffers for Zsolt because she loves him and tries to rescue him. She will do anything for him, even sleep with a man she does not know. As the events evolve, she becomes estranged from Zsolt and closer to Cristi and eventually falls in love with him. When they are forbidden from seeing each other, they both suffer. Their meeting again at the end of the movie is a sign that this suffering will pass as they construct together a new life for themselves.

Investigation The film begins as an investigation Cristi is making on a drug case. Further on, this investigation is complicated by the fact that Cristi is actually a collaborator with the criminal organization he is investigating. On the other hand, there is the investigation Cristi's chief, Magda, is conducting. In contrast to Cristi's investigation, Magda's investigation is legal and devoid of criminal intentions. These two investigations clash at the end when Magda exposes Cristi for his involvement with the criminal organization. However, to achieve her goals, she decides to collaborate with Cristi in order to catch the drug dealers. Cristi agrees, on condition that Magda releases Gilda and Zsolt. The investigation reaches a climax when Zsolt is taken to hospital to be kidnapped by the drug organization. The investigation makes up the main narrative of the movie and is a pretext for the other themes explored by Porumboiu. It is a study of the morality of the police in the investigation of criminal organization and of the corruption present among the ranks of the police. Even Magda, who is just and honest, makes compromises and agrees to be paid by Cristi in order to attain her objectives. Her ways are unorthodox. The investigations presented in the movie present the corruptibility and even illegality of the methods of the police system.

Sexuality In the beginning of the movie, Gilda and Cristi have sex in order to deceive the police who were following them. While for Gilda this is just a way of covering up her relation with Cristi, we can tell that Cristi is taken by Gilda in the process of sex making. Gilda is a very beautiful woman and the camera lingers on her attractive physical traits. She seduces by her mere presence. In another scene, when Kiko almost rapes Gilda, we realize that Gilda is not interested in having sex with just anyone.. Gilda's sexuality appears in the movie only to signify her immense power of attraction and the beginning of her relationship with Cristi. When she sees Cristi again in La Gomera, she tells him to forget everything that happened between them in Romania. After this, they no longer have sex. But a relationship develops, based on bird

language and their shared criminal activity, as well as their common effort to rescue Zsolt. But we do not see any sign of physical attraction between them until the very end of the movie when they meet again. Sexuality is thus secondary in the movie and is highlighted by the director in order to contrast it with real love.

Love There is a love triangle in the movie: Zsolt-Gilda-Cristi. We do not know for sure if Zsolt loves Gilda, but we do know that Gilda loves Zsolt. Zsolt is probably too preoccupied with his endangered self to be able to think of anything else. During the course of the story, there develops a relationship between Gilda and Cristi, based on bird language and their efforts to rescue Zsolt. Cristi falls in love with Gilda earlier; and Gilda, later on, is touched by Cristi's commitment to their common cause. When Paco tells Cristi he wants to kill Gilda and Zsolt, Cristi proposes to give up his share of the money in order for Paco to spare the lives of Gilda and Zsolt. Thus, Cristi nurtures a true love for Gilda, which is selfless and touching. Gilda, in her turn, eventually responds to this love, first in bird language and second by being present at their meeting after Cristi's release from hospital. They are both battered and tired, but there is still desire and the love that holds them together. Love in the movie humanizes and qualifies the traits of these two characters and gives them dignity.

Greed Greed is present in the movie in most of the characters. Greed is the main reason why Cristi betrays his profession and turns into a criminal. We see this when we find out about the great amount of money that he has stashed in his mother's cellar and how desperate he is when he learns that his mother has given it all away to the priest. Greed is also the reason why Gilda and Zsolt decide to steal from Paco, risking their lives for this money. As for the other criminals, it is clear that money is the reason they traffic drugs, with no consideration for the lives they put in jeopardy. Thus, the characters are in no way 'redeemed' by Porumboiu. They are shown as materialistic, greedy and opportunistic. Greed is also the reason for the corruption present in the police and other institutions, such as the church. The priest is not spared from this characterization: he is shown as motivated by greed when he refuses to return the money to Cristi. The characters in the movie are limited from becoming 'good' mainly by their greed.

Risk-taking versus safety. Greed is the reason why the characters in the movie take risks, to the point of putting their own lives at stake. Cristi first takes a risk by becoming corrupt by the drug mafia and betraying the police. If found out, he risks losing his job and spending years in prison. Secondly, Cristi takes a big risk by infiltrating the criminal group as an undercover policeman. If Paco found out about this, he would have no hesitation in killing Cristi. Zsolt and Gilda also take a great risk when they steal the money from Paco. Knowing Paco as they do, they are also aware of the fact that Paco would kill them the minute he found out. Magda also takes risks. She organizes the catching of the criminals but, in doing so, she risks the life of Cristi and other police officers who lose their lives in the operation indeed. Magda only sees the higher purpose and uses her subordinates as pawns in catching the criminals. In her case, it is not greed that motivates her choice, but ambition and opportunism. The many risk-taking situations in the movie add to the drama of the action.

Belonging to Secret Organizations The secrecy in the movie is mainly in the secret organization of La Gomera. Cristi belongs to this organization, in secret—the police do not know anything about it up to a certain point. The criminal organization of La Gomera has its own code and rules, and even its own language, the bird language. We could say that Cristi is initiated into this organization when he learns bird language. This learning and initiation transform Cristi altogether; he becomes one of the criminals and moreover, when he becomes ill, he is able to relate to the world only through bird language. From then on, the only friends he recognizes as such are Zsolt, Gilda and, to a certain extent, Paco. He remains faithful to Zsolt until the end, risking his life, position and money for him. As for Gilda, Cristi falls in love with her and she remains the only person he can relate to after he has been hit in the head. Belonging to a secret organization is a transforming experience for Cristi and he will never be the same man as before.

Culture There are two different cultures presented in the movie: the culture of crime and justice in Romania, and the culture of crime in La Gomera. In Romania, the culture of crime is represented by Zsolt and his partners, including Cristi. The culture of justice is represented by Magda, Cristi's boss. The culture of crime appears rampant as it has infiltrated the police, as we can see through the character of Cristi. Cristi is a police officer who works for a drug dealer, Zsolt. He is not undercover; he is just in the drug business to make some extra money. On the other hand, Magda represents the face of justice and police in the Romanian system, apparently incorruptible, inflexible and responsible. In La Gomera, things are of a

different nature. There, the drug dealers have found a retreat from which they can manage their business as led by Paco. They have even developed their own language, the bird language through which they communicate messages to one another that the police will not understand. The interflow between these two culture through Cristi and Gilda shows that the mafia system has infiltrated Romania too.

Language Language (together with music) is what makes the movie almost poetical. Cristi goes to La Gomera, where he has to learn the bird language of the mafia men living on the island. The bird language is called *El Silbo*, a whistling language used by the inhabitants in La Gomera to communicate. The whistling language can be heard up to a distance of five kilometers. At first, Cristi has difficulty learning it. Then, little by little, he gets used to it and manages to communicate in bird language. When he is sick and confined to a mental institution, he finds a way to communicate with Gilda across the city through bird language. This language is peculiar to criminals and is the common ground Gilda and Cristi meet on. It gives Cristi a language when he can no longer communicate in everyday language and it saves his relationship with Gilda, making it a real possibility. Gilda is well-versed in this language since it is the language she has had to learn as Zsolt's lover. The police do not understand this language and are unable to identify the criminals when they communicate in this way. As a matter of fact, nobody else knows about this language and this is why Cristi is confined to a mental institution (he was making bird-language noises, which his mother took for signs of madness).

Religion Porumboiu directly criticizes the Romanian church system in his movie. Cristi's mother decides to give the church all the money that she found in the tool shed and that she rightly identified as being Cristi's. When Cristi goes to the priest to ask his money back, the priest tells him that all the money is going for the building of his church. Thus, we see a face of the Church as materialistic and opportunistic under the pretense of humbleness and selflessness. However, Cristi's mother is a fervent Orthodox Christian and urges Cristi to go to the priest and confess his sins. He does just that, and the priest tells on him to the police. Thus, the sacrament of the private confession is trespassed. Religion appears as an opulent and preying institution, which lives on the money of the Christians who are forced into giving them donations because of induced fear. Cristi's mother is fooled into betraying her own son because of her blind faith. Through her, Porumboiu also criticizes the blind faith of certain Christians who are duped into wrongdoing by the ones who pretend to work for the good of everyone.

Work The work of police officers is under scrutiny in Porumboiu's movie. Cristi, a police officer, is responsible for investigating Zsolt, a drug dealer. He is asked to frame Zsolt and plant drugs in his apartment by his boss. When he learns this, Cristi informs Zsolt through an anonymous message. Later on in the movie, we find out that Cristi is an old collaborator of Zsolt's and that Cristi himself is involved in drug traffic. On the other side of the coin, there is Magda, Cristi's boss, who orchestrates the investigation. She learns that Cristi is also involved in drug dealing and tells him that she knows about his secret work with the drug mafia. She then convinces Cristi to catch the mobsters who were threatening the lives of Zsolt and Gilda. Then, Cristi proposes Gilda a sum in return of the release of Zsolt and Gilda. Magda accepts and, for a moment, we are inclined to believe that Magda is not as incorruptible as she seems. But she is just using Cristi to catch the mobsters. The director portrays two opposing characters from the point of view of corruptibility: Cristi, who stands for corruption, and Magda, who stands for incorruptibility.

Crime Crime is a central theme in the movie. The crime is drug dealing, and the protagonists of the movie are involved, in one way or another, in this business. We learn what organized crime looks like from the head of the operations (Paco), to his subordinates (Kiko, Zsolt, Cristi) and his enemies (Zsolt and Gilda). They have all the characteristics of a criminal group: a secret language, threatening messages, blackmailing and punishment. They operate on a large scale as we can tell from the fact that they have involved a police officer in their business. Thus, criminality has spread to all levels of Romanian society. Zsolt started off his career in drug dealing when he was in high school and was arrested. The police officer who investigated the case was Cristi, so we can infer that Cristi has also been involved in drug traffic for a long time. Porumboiu hints at the fact that criminality and corruption are present at all levels in modern-day Romania. Through his characters, he portrays the image of a corrupt police service, which is of course inefficient in dealing with and stopping organized crime.

SCENES

CRISTI GOES TO LA GOMERA Cristi, a police officer who is investigating a drug crime, takes a trip to La Gomera, an island in Spain by the Atlantic ocean, to infiltrate the criminal group. He is supposed to learn the bird language there, which the criminals use to communicate, so they will not be discovered by the police.



CRISTI IS MET BY KIKO Once on the island, Cristi is met by Kiko, one of the criminals in the organization. Kiko drives Cristi to a beautiful mansion on the seacoast.



THE MANSION A woman waits for them at the mansion. She is Gilda, who mysteriously whispers to Cristi to forget about what happened in Bucharest. She then sees Cristi to his room.



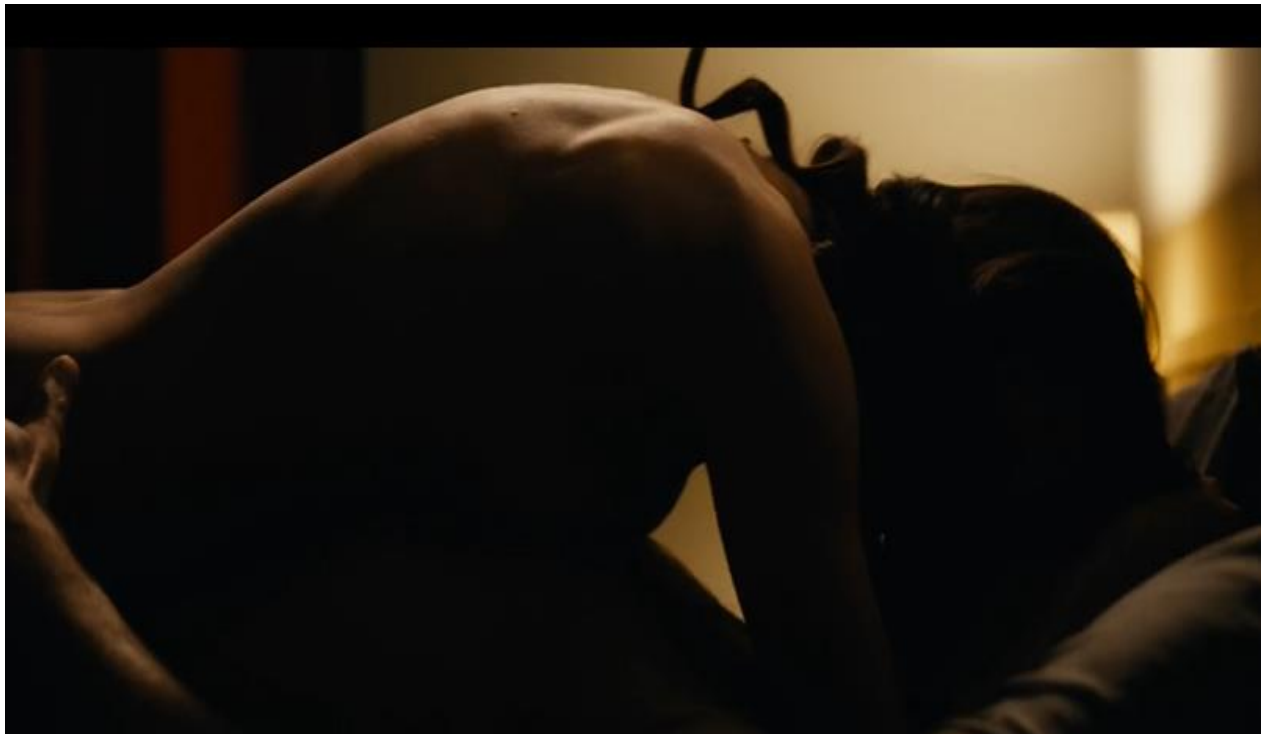
THE KISS Back in Bucharest, we see Gilda and Cristi meet in the street. We also see a police officer who is following them. Gilda kisses Cristi so that it will appear they are together and tells him to go to his apartment (as Cristi is followed by the police, it has to appear like he is having an affair with a prostitute). Cristi tells her that there are surveillance cameras in his apartment.



A POLICE OFFICER WATCHES THE WHOLE SCENE As Gilda and Cristi go to Cristi's apartment, a police officer is watching them closely on camera. In the elevator, Gilda suggests that she should pass as Cristi's paid prostitute so that they will fool the cops. She also says that they will have to have sex.



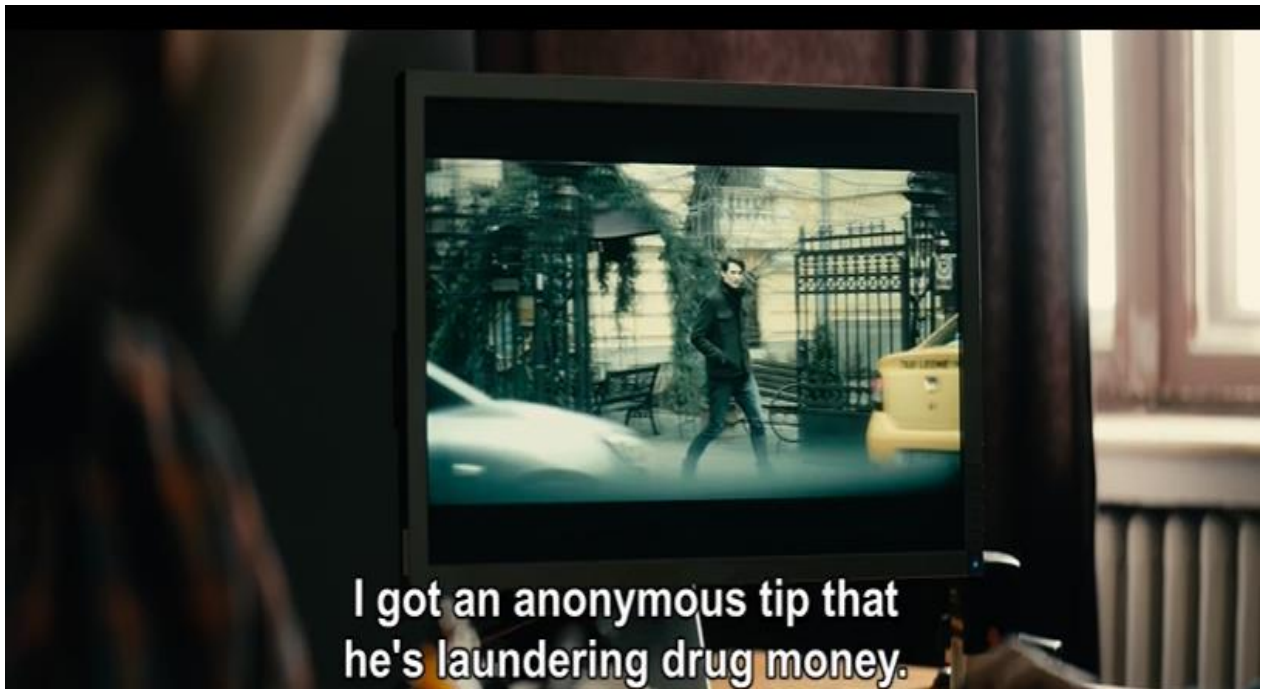
GILDA AND CRISTI HAVE SEX Gilda and Cristi go to Cristi's bedroom where they have sex. In the act of love-making, Cristi tries to get closer to love-making with Gilda but she pushes him back.



CRISTI BEGINS TO LEARN THE BIRD LANGUAGE Back in La Gomera, Cristi begins his course on bird-language. Kiko explains to him the basic rules and he tries to imitate it but is unable in the beginning.



ZSOLT APPEARS At the police station, Magda, Cristi's boss, is presenting the file of Zsolt, a drug dealer who is laundering money. She proposes that they start investigating Zsolt and arrest him.



ZSOLT VISITS CRISTI Cristi goes to a hotel and books a room. There he receives a visit from Zsolt. They seem to know each other well. Zsolt hands Cristi a package.



MAGDA DECIDES TO ARREST ZSOLT At the police station, Magda tells Cristi that she has decided to arrest Zsolt at once. She proposes to have him framed just to be able to arrest him.



CRISTI SENDS ZSOLT A MESSAGE Learning that Zsolt is in danger, Cristi decides to warn him that he is about to be arrested. For this he buys a phone with an anonymous phone card and sends the following message to Zsolt: 'get lost'.



MAGDA INTERROGATES ZSOLT The police arrest Zsolt and they take him to the police station. There, he is interrogated by Magda, who urges him to confess his crime. Zsolt refuses to admit anything, denying all of the crimes.



KIKO LEARNS ABOUT ZSOLT AND GILDA'S BETRAYAL At the mansion in La Gomera, Kiko learns that Zsolt and Gilda have stolen money from Paco, their boss and are planning to run away with it. He threatens to kill Gilda, but Cristi rescues her.



CRISTI AND PACO MEET Paco starts by telling Cristi a parable of a drowning man. He then tells Cristi that he and Zsolt are his two arms and now that he has lost Zsolt, Cristi remains his only arm.



KIKO ATTACKS GILDA Gilda is swimming in the pool. Kiko watches her, goes into the pool and tries to rape her. Gilda pushes him back and gets out of the swimming pool.



THE BIRD LANGUAGE LESSONS CONTINUE Cristi goes on with his bird language lessons. This time it is Gilda who is teaching him. He is making progress.

CRISTI IS CAUGHT BY PACO'S ORGANIZATION Paco's organization kidnap Cristi and take him to an abandoned room. There they interrogate him. They release him after learning he had nothing to do with stealing the money. He is assigned a different teacher of the bird language.



CRISTI HAS A CONVERSATION WITH HIS MOTHER At his mother's house, Cristi learns that his mother has found all the money he had gathered as a result of his criminal activity. Moreover, his mother has donated all this money to the church. Cristi gets mad.



CRISTI HAS A CONVERSATION WITH THE PRIEST Cristi goes to the priest his mother had donated his money to and tries to get his money back. The priest refuses saying that that money will go in the rebuilding of the church.



CRISTI INTERROGATES ZSOLT At the police station, Cristi goes to interrogate Zsolt. In order to appear credible in the eyes of his boss, Cristi punches Zsolt in the face then winks at him. Zsolt continues to refuse to admit his crimes.



CRISTI HAS A CONVERSATION WITH MAGDA After the interrogation is over, Cristi goes out of the interview room where Magda is waiting for him. She tells him she has learnt that he and Zsolt have known each other for a long time; she also knows about the money he has been hiding and was donated to the church.



CRISTI MAKES AN OFFER TO MAGDA Cristi offers Magda a large sum of money to let go of Zsolt and drop the case altogether. Magda accepts but only so that she can catch all the drug dealers.



THE SCENARIO Magda, Cristi and Zsolt make up a scenario of how to catch the criminal organization. Zsolt is supposed to take them to a deserted building in order to give back the money he has stolen from Paco. Then, the police would come in and arrest them.

ZSOLT DRINKS UP A POTION

Magda proposes to use Zsolt as bait in order to attract the drug dealers. She suggests that Zsolt drinks a potion that will make him feel sick and thus they will have to take him to hospital. There, the criminal organization will surely try to kidnap Zsolt.



ZSOLT IS KIDNAPPED As planned by Magda, Zsolt is taken to hospital and the criminals come after him. They kidnap him and take him away.



CRISTI IS HIT BY A CAR As he is walking in the street one night, Cristi notices a car following him. It is the same police officer who was following him on camera at the beginning of the story. The car intentionally hits him and Cristi falls on the ground hitting his head.



GILDA VISITS CRISTI'S MOTHER Gilda goes to Cristi's mother's house and learns that after he had been hit in the head, he was dismissed from the police and admitted to a mental institution.



CRISTI SPEAKS BIRD LANGUAGE At the mental institution, Cristi speaks bird language close by the window. He is calling out to Gilda, who hears him and answers back. The nurse comes in and tells Cristi to stop making noise.



GILDA AND CRISTI MEET AGAIN After he is out of the mental institution, Cristi is a free man again. By communicating with Gilda through bird language they arrange to meet each other again in another country. They eventually meet in exile and seem happy to see each other.

