

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## CRISTI PUIU (1967- )

### LIFE

Cristi Puiu was born in Bucharest on April 3rd 1967. In his childhood, he was an avid reader and he loved music. When he was ten years old, he started taking painting lessons. However, he was not admitted to the Art High School, Nicolae Tonița, and went to a Chemistry high school instead. He did not manage to finish the twelfth grade, as he was expelled. He eventually graduated in 1988. After that he started painting again. Together with six other artists, he exhibited some of his paintings in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Upon his return, he tried to become a student of the Art Institute in Bucharest, but was not admitted there. He took over another one of his passions, the design of jewellery. In 1992, he was admitted into the Art School in Geneva, the Painting department. After a year, he gave up painting and enrolled in the Film Department there. He graduated in 1996. In 1995, he directed the movie *Avant le petit déjeuner*, an adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *Before Breakfast*. In Switzerland, he was married for two years. Cristi Puiu is now remarried and has three daughters.

He has directed eight movies (five features and three shorts) and was the screenwriter for nine movies. His features have received numerous awards at national and international film festivals.

He was decorated in 2006 by the President of Romania, Traian Băsescu, with the National Order for Merits at the Rank of Knight. In 2001, Cristi Puiu was made Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the ambassador of France in Romania, Henri Paul.

### ACHIEVEMENTS

Cristi Puiu won numerous awards at national and international film festivals. At the Cannes Film Festival, he received the Palme d'Or for *Sieranevada* and Un Certain Regard for *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu*. In Berlin, he received the Golden Bear for *A Carton of Kent and a Pack of Coffee*. He also received many Gopo and European Film Academy awards.

### FILMOGRAPHY

1995 – *Before Breakfast* (short)  
1996 – *25.12 Bucharest, North Railway Station* (short)  
2001 – *Stuff and Dough* (feature)  
2004 – *A Carton of Kent and a Pack of Coffee* (short)  
2005 – *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* (feature)  
2010 – *Aurora* (feature)  
2016 – *Sieranevada* (feature)  
2020 – *Malmkrog* (feature)

### THEMES

#### 1. Death

*The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* Death is the main theme in the movie and it encompasses several motifs, such as old age, people's attitude towards death, the way the elderly are treated in their last days of life in Romania. Puiu shows in this movie that society at large is unconcerned with old age and death and mistreats and mishandles the people who reach this stage in their life. The main character in the movie, Mr Lăzărescu, epitomizes a general medical and societal problem as concerns the treatment of the elderly. Moreover, the movie reverts the resurrection motif into death through the name of its protagonist, which echoes the Bible's Lazarus.

*Aurora* Death is problematized in an original way in *Aurora*: the movie tells the story of a serial killer who commits four murders of people he blames for his divorce. Here we witness death in cold blood

and the theme is associated with personal justice. The main character, Viorel, believes that social justice is incapable of making amends for the injustice perpetrated on him, so he takes the matter in his own hands. He believes that marriage involves very deep emotional relationships and this can only be repaired through personal justice. Death is brutal and cold in the movie, showing with precision the cold-blooded mindset of the murderer.

*Stuff and Dough* Although death is not the movie's main theme, it does appear in the film's most poignant scene. When Ovidiu, Vali and Bety are on their way back home, they witness the car crash of their followers and aggressors. The crude image of the dead people in the car has a strong impression on Ovidiu, who seems to have an epiphany in that moment. This represents his moment of 'return' when he decides to stop his initiation into crime. Thus, death becomes the trigger to moral awakening in the movie.

*Malmkrog* In *Malmkrog*, all the characters are shot dead about half-way through the movie. This scene contrasts the tedious and mannerist atmosphere of the movie up to that moment. Death symbolizes in the movie the disappearance of a whole generation of aristocrats and intellectuals from Russia. It shows the violence with which they were murdered, the futility of their philosophical discussions. There is a great gap between the refined and eloquent philosophical discussions, clothes and manners they have, on the one hand, and the brutality of their killing, on the other hand.

*Sieranevada* *Sieranevada* is about the death ceremonial of commemoration of the father of a large Romanian family. In this sense, it displays several characteristic rituals of the Romanian culture, in relation with the commemoration of the dead. Cristi Puiu shows the gap between the old world (traditionalist) and the new world (progressive) by highlighting the ridiculousness and inadequacy of this ritual in his movie.

## 2. Corruption

*Stuff and Dough* Corruption is the main theme in *Stuff and Dough*. The movie shows how a corrupt system corrupts, in its turn, the younger generation who is helpless in front of a well-devised mafia system. In the movie, a young man, Ovidiu, receives the task of transporting drugs to Bucharest from a certain Mr Marcel. Mr Marcel tells him he is transporting medicine, but on the way, he and his two accompanying friends are followed and aggressed by people in another car. At the end, Ovidiu wants to quit this job, but Mr Marcel threatens to hurt him and his family. Thus, Puiu offers a grim perspective on the rampancy of crime and corruption in Romania

*The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* In the movie, the director shows a morally corrupt medical system. Mr Lăzărescu, an ailing old man, is carried one night from hospital to hospital due to neglect, carelessness, lack of facilities, ignorance or mere bad faith. Due to this mistreatment, his condition deteriorates very much and the movie ends indeterminately whether he will survive his late brain surgery or not. This situation is because over-worked doctors do not have the time or patience to see or treat a patient who is old and also drinks heavily. The movie is a grim picture of the medical system in Romania, with very low prospects for the future.

## 3. Alienation

*The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* One of the main themes of the movie is alienation. Puiu documents, in painful detail, the life as a widower of his main character, Mr Lăzărescu. He is left alone, his daughter has immigrated to Canada and his sister lives in another town. He has very little food in his fridge and he drinks bad alcohol. The only acquaintances he has are his neighbours, who do not take him very seriously. Alienation pervades the scenes where he is taken from hospital to hospital, as we witness the carelessness and indifference of his fellow citizens.

*Sieranevada* Although alienation is not a fundamental scene in the movie, its main character, Lari, is essentially an estranged man. We can see his alienation in the dialogues he has with his wife where she is the one doing most of the speaking and he giving almost unrelated replies, when he visits his mother in her room and she notices his fatigue and he lies speechless on the bed, in the non-committal way he addresses all the other members in the family. In the movie, personal relations are fraught with distrust and power relations and Puiu shows how these elements lead to estrangement.

*Aurora* After his divorce, Viorel lives alone in an apartment that needs renovating. In the movie, there are many scenes where we witness the character's loneliness, the vacuity of his days and nights, the sense of meaninglessness of his occupations. It is as though after the divorce, Viorel had

lost all appetite or sense of life. He is equally misunderstood and mistreated by the people he encounters, and he responds aggressively to this. The world is a hostile place for Viorel, who checks the door's peephole every time he enters his house.

#### 4. *Lack of communication*

*Sieranevada* In *Sieranevada*, personal and family relationships are hindered by various problems of communication – not listening, lack of empathy and understanding, narcissism, or obtuse and backward perspectives on the world. There is, on the one hand, the generational gap which makes it difficult for family members from different generations to communicate. On the other hand, there are the hidden life and secrets (cheating) between husbands and wives. Moreover, between some of the couples in the movie, we witness power relations, that is the need to dominate the other. In the movie, Puiu weaves a complex texture of social relations plagued by the lack of communication.

*Aurora* Another important theme in the movie is the lack of communication. In most of the relations he has with the other characters, Viorel is passive-aggressive, which might explain his decision to kill his 'enemies'. Whenever he feels he is attacked, he does not respond, or he responds curtly and aggressively. He has a problem conveying his feelings and thoughts and because of this he has flawed relationships with the outer world. He does not even communicate with his mother whom he calls (distantly) Puşa. Thus, the movie problematizes the consequences of bad communication among people.

#### 5. *War and conflict*

*Malmkrog* In *Malmkrog* the justification of war is one of the main themes. The five characters in the movie are each advancing a different perspective on war. There is, on the one hand, Ingrida, for whom war is necessary and deeply imbricated with the collective mentalities. On the other side of the coin, there is Olga, a mystic and fervent advocate of pacifism. In-between, the other characters find nuances, both pro- and con-. War is a favourite theme of the time, and its importance is high in the lives of the characters in the movie.

*Sieranevada* *Sieranevada* starts from the premise of the Charlie Hebdo attacks and this topic is discussed by the characters in the movie, together with the 9/11 attacks. The characters debate the authenticity of these attacks, some favouring conspiracy theories, others embracing the realistic position. Puiu tries to create a premise for the conflicts appearing later on in the movie, making it clear for us that he is interested in complex perspectives on the themes of war and conflict. Moreover, conflict seems collated to people's personal lives, as most couples in the movie have a conflict of sorts.

*Aurora* In *Aurora*, Viorel, the main character, is at war with the world. He does not get along with anyone, does not like the way people address him, is hostile towards them and is full of rancour towards the people he considers his enemies. He never finds a fault in himself, but rather in anyone else. His war with the world bespeaks the drama of the contemporary, alienated man, living in an inhospitable environment where people have very little, or no patience for his problems.

#### 1. *Philosophical Perspectives*

*Malmkrog* Many philosophical perspectives are the topics of discussion in *Malmkrog*: the existence of God, good versus evil, rationalism vs. idealism, mysticism vs. atheism. The whole film structure is practically made up of these philosophical debates which address these matters to exhaustion. The characters in the movie represent one philosophical current of the time – Nikolai – rationalism, Ingrida – traditionalism, Olga – mysticism, Madeleine – realism, Edouard – pacifism. Thus, the director is trying to bring together these strong ideas permeating the end of the nineteenth century and express his regret for their brutal disappearance. With them, Russia might have followed a more enlightened path.

*Sieranevada* The movie has a very complex take on philosophical perspectives on life, trying to cover all the attitudes towards historical or life events. For instance, in the discussion on the 9/11 bombings, we hear three different perspectives: Sebi's, which advances conspiracy theories, Lari's, which embraces the realism perspective and Relu's, which tries to reconcile the two. Each character in the movie brings a different perspective on the matters discussed and thus we see that for Cristi Puiu truth is a highly subjective and complex issue.

## 7. Violence

*Stuff and Dough* Violence is another important theme in Cristi Puiu's movies. Most of the times, the director criticizes and denounces it. In *Stuff and Dough*, violence is present particularly in the red jeep scenes. First of all, when the three protagonists are attacked and their car windows smashed and afterwards when we see the red jeep after the crash and the dead people inside it. Cristi Puiu condemns the violence present in the interlope world in Romania and its devastating effects. Moreover, he condemns verbal violence as he presents Vali's aggressive attitude in the movie.

*Sieranevada* In *Sieranevada*, we witness two types of violence: verbal violence, present in some of the couples' dialogues, and physical violence in the scene where Lari's wife has parked in a wrong spot. In the micro-universe presented in the movie, personal and family relations are plagued by passive-aggressive attitudes, reproaches, victimizing and blaming. Violence erupts in the parking spot scene where Lari is physically aggressed by one of the neighbours. Thus, Puiu shows how violence interferes with, and disrupts human relations, as well as its impact on contemporary Romanian culture.

*Aurora* In *Aurora*, violence is present almost throughout the movie. In an obvious sense, it appears in Viorel's murders, which are filmed in precise detail. More subtly, though, it is present in the intercourse he has with the people he meets in the movie. Viorel has a passive-aggressive attitude towards the characters he meets, with the exception of his lover, Gina. Thus, the motif of the murders is grafted on these unsuccessful human relations filled with violence. For instance, in the clothes shop scene, Viorel is very aggressive towards the shop assistants.

## CHARACTERS

### 1. Alienated

*Mr Lăzărescu* is an ailing old man living alone with his cats. He has hardly any food in his fridge and drinks a lot. He is grumpy and ironic. He is an intellectual who lives apart from the outside world, with no relationship with his daughter and having a troublesome one with his sister. When seeing the doctors' indifferent and cynical attitude towards him, he ironizes them. In the movie's last scene, we see him alone on the surgery table in an all-white decorum, being prepared for the surgery.

*Viorel* also lives alone in a flat that needs renovating, after his divorce from his wife, which seems to have affected him very much. Every time he comes back home, he looks through the peephole to check if he has been followed. He is wary of other people, distant and passive-aggressive. He is unable to get along with most people, not even the members of his family.

*Lari* is not alienated in an obvious sense; however, there are moments when we realize he is tired and reclusive and his ironical stance comes from the fact that he is mainly misunderstood. For instance, in the dialogues he has with his wife, she is unable to perceive his jokes and ironies and he replies in a non-committal, disengaged way. There is sadness in his eyes, in spite of the humour which almost always accompanies his jokes.

### 2. Intelligent

*Lari* is a very intelligent man, with a great sense of humour. He derides idealism, prejudice and obscurantism. He is able to argue for his position very well, with well-constructed ideas and replies. He is the type of man who is smart and knows it. This also works against him because most of the times he is misunderstood.

*Vali* has the type of intelligence which is related with resourcefulness and capacity to solve difficult situations. He is the one pointing out for the first time that they might be transporting drugs to Bucharest and he takes the matters in his hands when they are attacked by the red jeep. He is witty, capable of making the conversation flow, and courageous.

Nikolai is perhaps the most intelligent of Puiu's characters. Through Nikolai, Cristi Puiu has constructed the type of aristocratic intellectual who is highly eloquent, extremely well-read and refined. He constructs his lengthy arguments with surgical precision and wins every debate. He is the one leading most of the conversations and the character all the other characters look up to.

### 3. Original

*Viorel* is, in a sense, a highly original character. His sense of personal justice is so peculiar and his decision to kill the ones he blames for his divorce is equally interesting. He believes that social justice is unable to make amends for the injustice perpetrated on him because family relationships are of a higher order. Viorel is thus a very peculiar man, who seems to have his own laws and rules of conduct.

*Nikolai* is also very original; his erudition does not prevent him from basing some of his arguments on real-life events, such as on the occasion when he tells the story of a friend who had killed himself out of politeness. Nikolai is devoid of clichés and all the examples he gives are highly original and instructive. He really tries to make sense of what he has read and seen and this appetite for meaningfulness makes him a highly original character.

*Madeleine* is original mainly through her attitude and position in their small society. Equally erudite and eloquent, Madeleine never takes a trenchant position on anything. Instead, she provokes or endorses other characters' viewpoints. She is the perfect conversation catalyst, but we never know for sure what her position really is on the matters discussed.

*Relu* brings a more complex perspective on life in *Sieranevada*. He is just as intelligent as Lari, but less ironic and more understanding. He takes the side of Sebi in the 9/11 bombings discussion, arguing that these matters should be looked at with more attention and that the only reason why we do not do so is because we are afraid. He is a military and knows first-hand what political issues mean.

#### 4. Empathic

*Mioara Avram* is the nurse taking care of Mr Lăzărescu in *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu*. Throughout the movie, she accompanies and takes care of him from her visit to her home, through the hospitals she takes them to, until the final surgery. She is caring, nice and full of attention for Mr Lăzărescu. At one point, she gets into a fight with one of the doctors in order to save him.

*Ovidiu's mother* is also a very empathic character, who works a lot at the grocery shop, takes care of her family and organizes the matters in the household. She is very caring towards Ovidiu, makes sure he has a snack before he leaves for Bucharest. She tries to cover for him when Mr Marcel arrives and Ovidiu is still sleeping. She also takes care of her old, ill mother.

*Pușa* is also the type of caring, empathic mother. She takes care of Viorel as though he were a child: she brings him food, irons his shirts and hosts his suitcases. She has a nice manner of talking to, and addressing Viorel, which is warm and affectionate.

*Olga* displays the kind of empathy typical of mystics and fervent believers. She grounds her empathy in teachings from the Bible. She is against war and believes that the Word of Christ could soften the hearts of even the most cruel of savages. For her time, she is somewhat progressive, believing in the love and understanding of the other, no matter how different.

*Mrs Mirică* is also very caring and empathic most of the times. She is the matriarch of the family and takes care of everything in the house. She is particularly affectionate towards her sister, whom she protects against her violent husband, and her elder son, Lari. She is a great cook, a master of ceremonies in the commemoration of her husband's death.

#### 5. Lacking empathy

Dr Breslașu is the type of cynical doctor, who does not care about the patient's feelings. When he reads Mr Lăzărescu's CT scan results, he remarks that he should be operated on quickly so he can then go back home and die of liver cancer. He is callous, sarcastic and cold.

Dr Ardelean is the first doctor to see Mr Lăzărescu. He is aggressive towards the patient, scolds him for drinking and uses bad language when addressing him. He is rudimentary, violent and rude. He completely lacks understanding for his patient's situation and talks to him as if he were the lowest of the low. He also sends the patient to another hospital.

Laura is Lari's wife in *Sieranevada*. She is superficial and prejudiced. For instance, in one of the film's first scenes, she complains that her daughter cannot possibly have the same dress at the school festivity as the daughter of people who used to work (manual labour) in Spain. She only sees her interest and she goes to the supermarket even though everybody was waiting to have lunch. She is biased and arrogant and has to have everything only her way.

#### 6. Corrupt

*Mr Marcel* is probably the most corrupt of Cristi Puiu's characters. He is a local gangster in the movie *Stuff and Dough*. He is a drug dealer and does not hesitate to corrupt innocent young people into his wrongdoings. He epitomizes the Romanian post-Revolutionary mobster, who is supported by the local authorities and makes tons of money out of illegal business.

*Doncea* is just as corrupt as Mr Marcel. In *Stuff and Dough*, he appears as the man the drugs have to be delivered to. He lives in a huge house in Bucharest, has guards and servants. He has obviously also made a lot of money out of illegal dealings.

*The police officer* in *Stuff and Dough* is also corrupt. The three young people meet him after the red jeep attack as he stops them for going past the speed limit. But this no longer is a problem when Ovidiu pays him an important sum of money to let them go. He accepts immediately and the three are free to continue their drive. Through this character, Puiu shows how widespread corruption is in Romania.

## 7. Ironic

*Lari* has a very subtle and fine sense of irony. When his wife tells him about the Snow White festivity, he calmly replies that the problem is that Disney did not respect the original story. He also ironizes Sebi when he begins talking about the conspiracy theories and also at the end when he mocks the ceremony of commemoration by mimicking words from it in a non-religious situation. He is smart, sharp and attacks anyone he does not agree with.

*Mr Lăzărescu* is also very ironical. He takes most of the happenings in his life with a grain of salt, to which he adds his specific sense of humour. He ironizes the patronizing doctors and also has a sense of self-irony. He is the typical intellectual who has come to a state of degradation and is aware of it.

*Edouard* has the type of irony that bites and destroys the enemy. In spite of his pacifist profession throughout *Malmkrog*, Edouard is highly ironic towards Olga, whom he mocks for constructing a fallacious argument, based on mere suppositions. His retort completely deconstructs Olga's discourse and she is left speechless.

