

A Cinema Guild Release

From the director of THE DEATH OF MR. LAZARESCU

AURORA

A film by Cristi Puiu

181 minutes / 1.85:1 / Dolby SR / Romania / 2010
In Romanian with English Subtitles / Not Rated
Stills available at: www.cinemaguild.com/downloads

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“There is no such thing as a murderer, only people who kill.”

- Cristi Puiu

Synopsis

Inside a non-descript apartment kitchen in Bucharest, a man and a woman discuss the inconsistencies in Little Red Riding Hood, their voices hushed, mindful of waking the little girl sleeping in the next room. Behind a line of abandoned trailers, on the outskirts of the city, the same man waits for something or someone to arrive. At a factory, where he's been working most of his life, he picks up two hand-made firing pins secretly prepared by a coworker. The man's name is Viorel. He is 42 years old, divorced, a father of two young girls, and today, he will carry out a plan that will bring order to his world.

Director's Statement

I had been wondering about the idea of crime and the act of murder after I saw a TV series on Romanian criminals a few years ago. What struck me was that most of those crimes were perpetrated within a circle of people who knew one another: parents, friends, co-workers or neighbors. I also realized that as an ordinary citizen, I had access to this “world of crime”, this underworld, only through cinema, literature and the media.

I have always been convinced that they give a crude misrepresentation of both the profile of murderers and the act of murder. As I tried to mentally visualize a murder, by starting with the evidence and finishing with the confessions of the murderer—often the only witness to the act—I more or less came to understand how events unfolded and how one thing led to another. However I still felt I was coming closer to cinema than to real life. Bearing this in mind and wishing to avoid the clichés that are too often conveyed by films, my purpose with *Aurora* is to reconstruct the act of killing by integrating the personal story of the criminal into the crime and by avoiding any form of discourse that would turn the murder into an extraordinary act.

A killer's confession sometimes seems to suffice as an explanation of what went through his mind during the act of killing. But how can one accurately recount such an extreme experience as taking another man's life? What comparison can we make with the experience of giving death to another human being based on our experience as people who have never killed someone? After conducting my research I realized that what I knew or thought that I knew about the world of crime bore no resemblance to the actual reality. Criminals are frighteningly ordinary people. Frightening because they are so similar to the ordinary man, so similar to me... Just as imperfect as any man in the street, the criminal, the victim and the investigator, stripped of all Hollywood glamour, obviously belong to a world apart, a doomed world, a world close to ours and at the same time totally foreign to us.

How can one capture, on film the murder, the act of killing, the context in which the crime takes place, and the characters of the criminal and victim? Can the meaning of a murder be contained within the limits of a cinematic discourse? How much freedom do I have to invent, given the fact that even all documentary representations can be called into question, since the moment of the crime and the moment of the confession are two separate moments, and no matter what you do, the actual crime remains distinct from the recounted crime.

Beyond the questions generated by this topic, and beyond my anxieties about them, I worked relentlessly to make a “realistic” film and tried to render the toxic climate reigning in post-communist Bucharest as accurately as possible. The demands of documentary like realism are a constant in my overall vision of film; the raw image is therefore accompanied by direct sound recording. I worked with both professional and non-professional actors and I approached with the film in the same way as a researcher. I sought to reconstruct the act of killing by depicting the dark side of people I see every day: people who have never committed a murder.

Director Bio and Filmography

Cristi Puiu was born in Bucharest in 1967. As a student in the Painting Department of the École Supérieure d’Arts Visuels in Geneva, he shot several short films and documentaries in the 1990’s. After he returned to Romania, he continued to paint and co-wrote screenplays with Razvan Radulescu and Lucian Pintilie. In 2001, he made his first feature film, *Stuff and Dough*, a road movie filmed with a hand-held camera in a near documentary style. The film was selected at the Directors’ Fortnight in Cannes and received several awards in international film festivals, notably the Thessaloniki International Film Festival. After being awarded the Golden Bear for best short film in Berlin in 2004 for *Cigarettes and Coffee*, Cristi Puiu shot *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, which won the Un Certain Regard Prize in Cannes in 2005, as well as many other awards. *Aurora* is the second installment of the Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest series and is Cristi Puiu’s third feature film. It premiered at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival and was an official selection of the New York Film Festival.

2001 *Stuff and dough* (Feature film)

2004 *Cigarettes and coffee* (short film, Golden Bear for a Short Film, Berlin 2004)

2005 *The death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Feature film, Un Certain Regard Prize, Cannes 2005)

2010 *Aurora* (Feature film)

Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest

Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest bears witness to what I experience day in and day out in my hometown of Bucharest. It is also an attempt to express my conviction that cinema is a tool for investigating reality. The six films tell the stories of middle-class Romanian citizens who live in a capital on the edge of Europe. They are eager to reach self-fulfillment quickly and are haunted by the nagging fear of falling into poverty, which always lurks just around the corner. Romanian society is currently at a crossroads. Its moral foundations have been eroded by the unpredictable course of history: Romanians were not prepared for the social, economic and political upheavals that occurred over the past few years. The Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest are about this moral crisis and they denounce how inefficiently and artificially the Western model has been applied to a country that had just emerged from the darkness of communism. Beyond cinema and beyond the tales, the Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest aim to provide insight into a certain mindset. The project consists of six independent films: a series of tales focusing on human relationships and how distorted and twisted they can become in a country that is in a state of permanent crisis. They imitate Balzac's structure: the characters' cross one another's paths, and reciprocally perturb each other. Each of these six tales takes place within a period of 24 hours. They tell six stories:

The story of a taxi driver

The story of Aunt Geta

The story with the ambulance – THE DEATH OF MR. LAZARESCU

The story of the Petra couple

The story of sharing - AURORA

The story of naked Flavia

I am dedicating this series of six tales to Éric Rohmer. It is a tribute to the director of the Six Moral Tales, who is one of my spiritual masters. I owe to him my interest in clear expression and essential narrative, stripped of Hollywood's grandiloquence.

Interview with Director Cristi Puiu

How did you come up with the project for AURORA?

In 2005, Romanian television broadcast a series of stories on criminals. It made me want to look into a topic in which I had always been interested. I grew up reading mystery novels, and even though film was a strange land to me at that time, I watched a lot of film noirs on television. At the age of sixteen, I came upon the writers who became my models: Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Camus, Borges and Sabato; *Crime and Punishment*, *The Outsider* and *The Tunnel* left a deep impression on me when I was a young man. The research I conducted for this film probably fused with all of the reading I had done before. Finally, there was Murnau's *Sunrise*, a sort of fairy tale, which is very different from my vision of life. I consider cinema more as a tool for the investigation of reality. In that respect, AURORA is to some extent the counterpoint of *The Dawn*.

Why did you call your film AURORA?

Dawn is the beginning of the day; it seems beautiful and full of hope because it heralds light. I wanted the audience to think of this tangible ambiguity when light takes over from darkness. From the point of view of the senses, it is a moment of the day that I strongly dislike: leaving home for school in the cold, a very specific kind of cold, that is what I wanted to evoke. If you dig a bit further, the star that ushers in light is Venus, and Venus – which in Romanian is called *Luceafărul* - is linked to Lucifer, the messenger of light, the favorite angel, who then became the devil. This ambiguity, the impossibility of telling good from evil is the defining ambiguity of the human condition. AURORA is not a film about good and evil, which are nothing but mental constructions, but a film about ambiguity and the impossibility of knowing how you relate to the world, to others, and the impossibility of real communication.

Is AURORA a film about the act of killing?

No, for I am not interested in the motive behind the murder. If you wonder what the motive for the murder is, you have not grasped what is at stake in the film. It is not a film about the act of killing. A film about the act of killing would start at the end of mine. The investigators would ask precise questions about the motives behind the crime. In any case, there is no explanation for the act of killing; this is what I made a point of highlighting with AURORA. In films, criminals are glamorous and have a sort of aura around them. This is a pitiful cliché. In fact killers are people who kill, and people who kill are ordinary people.

Don't you think that portraying the murderer as an "ordinary" human being is provocative because it trivializes the very act of killing?

There is a tendency to show a murder as something dramatic, but it is a trivial act. Society protects itself using prisons. They ease our conscience by placing people into categories such as criminals. AURORA does not seek this kind of clear conscience, it seeks questions. It seeks to raise questions about crime, the criminal state of an individual, and more generally, the violence that defines our existence and our relationships with others. I am not defending murderers, far from it. I am demanding that we adopt a rational attitude, that we do not flee our condition as

potential criminals, that we do not deny the obvious, that violence is part and parcel of our condition and our relationships with others. When one commits a murder, one is still a human being, and that's what I was interested in... AURORA lays out all the information one has access to if one watches this ordinary human being. We kill alongside this person. It will probably make some viewers uncomfortable; because the character does not fit with what they believe they know about murderers.

How did you reconstruct the daily life of a murderer, did you do any special research?

I did a lot of research over the course of nearly two years; I met with criminals, investigators, judges and forensic surgeons. I visited a prison in Bucharest with a friend of mine who is a prosecutor, so I could talk with criminals including many serving a life sentence. I acquired a very large collection of documentaries about criminals. Most of them are riddled with commonplace stereotypes, but the images, the portraits or the small gestures were valuable clues. I finally came to the conclusion that the story of the criminal had to be my story, told by me and about me. I am the main character, I am Madame Bovary and I am also Crime and Punishment. It was the only conceivable approach...

Why are the murder scenes subdued?

They are not really subdued. I wanted the camera to be a sort of eyewitness. The witness is the viewer but it is also me, and this reflects the attitude I chose to adopt towards murder. This has a lot to do with my own fears. That's why I never get too close to a dead body. I keep a certain distance in order to protect myself. This is why you get the impression that the murders are subdued. The murderer does not really seem to question his own actions. Questioning an act is an inner process. I had to let Viorel, my main character, express himself with his body, his eyes or his gestures. Viorel experiences events and then wonders about them. He does not say much, but he asks himself questions. They are not spoken questions however and this may seem destabilizing. In the film, we are faced with a new situation in which instead of being given answers, we are given fragments of the life of a character. He does exactly what anyone else would do in their solitude: look, touch, move about... His expressions, his gestures and his explanations are working hypotheses. It is then up to the viewer to make up his mind, because it is he who plays the part of the investigator. Besides, I directed the film in a way that encourages viewers to guess what's going to happen, because it's shot so that very often, we watch the characters behind doors or walls.

Would you say that Viorel is a social outcast?

No, it would be too easy to consider him as an outcast or a rebel. The history of cinema and of literature would tend to make us see Viorel as a hero. But what is a hero? Heroes do not exist, what does exist is the need for heroes: we make them up, we imagine them, and we create stories... The need for heroes, paradoxically enough, creates fake heroes: "misfits." But if we give it some thought, we're all misfits. Real life heroes would be artists or geniuses, those who remain misunderstood, while the regular man is understood by his contemporaries. But this line of thinking is wrong. One is not born a hero, one unwittingly becomes one.

What made you decide to play the lead role?

Originally I wasn't supposed to play Viorel. I first auditioned about sixty actors, professionals and non-professionals, but I couldn't make up my mind. This was when Clara Voda, who plays Gina, suggested I audition myself, which I found quite an odd idea at first since I am rather bashful. But I gave it a try, especially because I didn't want to regret not doing it later on. The result wasn't very convincing but there was something about the eyes of the character that I attempted to convey and which I found interesting. My decision was especially linked to something I found out at the time. The concept of the film was that you could not get into somebody else's head. However, directing an actor means being able to enter his mind and that of the character he plays which was, after all, contrary to my first working hypotheses. I realized I had to play the lead role, which was very scary as there was no way to turn back: I had to go all the way, and that's what I did.

Did you encounter specific difficulties being on both sides of the camera?

It was a very thankless position to be in. It was very difficult to make this film especially because I had to be an actor. My relationships with the crew changed: I found out that a director could lose his authority, that people were becoming less demanding of themselves.... It was a schizophrenic experience to look at myself and also have control over my character.

Four camera men worked on the film.

It turned out to be complicated to obtain what I was looking for in terms of cinematography for this film. Each one of us has a different history, and this also determines one's aesthetic position behind the camera. Even though I tried to provide as many indications as possible on the camera movements and the framing, communication was difficult. I told the cameramen to follow the character, and to look at him with a feeling that resembles a father watching his child learn to walk. Each person brought something different and interesting. The point of view I was seeking was something that was not abstract or distant but included an important emotional component. The camera could not be reduced to a machine for this film: it had to function as a witness and bring out what the audience felt for the character. My intention approaches that of the documentary cinema of Raymond Depardon, and it was even more difficult to find the right cameraman in Romania, where this approach to film is not at all valued.

You were surrounded by both professional actors and non-professionals.

I think there is no such thing as an actor. There are only human beings with who I can work with. It's tricky to cast only non-professionals, but I know these people, and know they will be loyal all the way to the end of the project. I try to cast real human beings for the roles that I conceive. It is not only a question of them fitting the role; it's also about whether they will remain faithful to the project's goals.

The film's structure is very different from the traditional dramatic style of film noir or Hollywood thrillers...

I based the script on the principles of direct cinema and documentaries, in which what is filmed is raw material. During the shoot we improvised quite a few things; the film was really constructed in the editing room. We had footage for a five hour film, two hours of which we threw out. The result is an organic structure. An author will select the details he thinks are

significant according to his sensibility, his cultural background, or the things that shape his own perception and thought. He can decide to add more or take out details likely to reveal things to the audience. But what I may find enlightening may not be interesting to everyone else. That was the original concept of the film and what I intended to highlight in the final scene. I am not opposed to traditional structures but this is the structure I saw fit for my story.

How does AURORA fit into the Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest series?

It is part of the series just like THE DEATH OF MR LAZARESCU. It is an unfinished series, a query about love on the outskirts of Bucharest where I grew up. And given that love has many facets, I will continue to express what I think and what I have discovered. THE DEATH OF MR LAZARESCU was a story about love for one's fellow man, based on a true story. AURORA is a film based on several true stories, it's a composite work. Even though THE DEATH OF MR. LAZARESCU matters a lot to me, (I had my grandfather in mind), AURORA is more a film about me. I don't know where it fits into the series, if it is the second installment, the fourth or the fifth, but it's the film I wanted to make now. THE DEATH OF MR. LAZARESCU, was dedicated to Thanatos, and my next film may be dedicated to Eros. AURORA is a film about the missing link between Eros and Thanatos.

Following your recent success with THE DEATH OF MR. LAZARESCU and the success of your fellow countrymen, would you say it has become easier to make films in Romania nowadays?

No, because ever since the fifties, we have been in the first stage of Romanian cinema. We have not yet understood that cinema is an art form. Some filmmakers are following this path while others regard cinema as mere entertainment. Moreover, the success of the new Romanian cinema is perceived by older filmmakers as a personal failure. There is a sense of discomfort. It is similar to what the philosopher René Girard describes as the scapegoat mechanism. There are new filmmakers today who are trying to redefine cinema. The latest success stories, which have been acclaimed abroad, have helped us attract co-productions. But in Romania, it's still difficult.

CAST

Cristi Puiu	(Viorel)
Clara Voda	(Gina)
Valeria Seciu	(Pusa)
Luminita Gheorghiu	(Mioara)
Catrinel Dumitrescu	(Mrs Livinski)
Gelu Colceag	(Mr. Livinski)
Valentin Popescu	(Stoian)

CREW

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