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Death as a Theme

An Interview with Cristi Puiu

Abstract

This is a seven-hour long conversation that explores the theme of death between two colleagues of the same generation. In this personal documentary project, Lucian Georgescu engages directly with Cristi Puiu, “the Bergman of the East,”¹⁾ an auteur known for weaving the Grim Reaper as a fundamental, consistent theme throughout his films, including *Stuff and Dough* (2001), *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2006), *Aurora* (2010), *Sieranevada* (2014), and *Malmkrog* (2020). The dialogue ventures into the elusive, fragile, and often hidden realms of the auteur’s creative process, striving to grasp the origins of thematic inspiration. Drawing on sources such as Ernest Becker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Denial of Death* (1973) and his subsequent theory of terror management, explored in *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski, 2015), and touching on Gnostic theories, Georgescu engages Puiu in a frank, intimate exchange. The result is a profound radiography of a major contemporary filmmaker’s creative process and a nuanced portrait of an influential yet socially controversial Romanian auteur. The dialogue, published on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of *Lăzărescu*, offers insights into the deeply personal art of screenwriting and filmmaking.

Keywords

New Romanian Cinema, Cristi Puiu, *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu*, screenwriting, auteur cinema

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Cristi Puiu (b. 1967) is a Romanian film director and screenwriter, widely recognized as a pioneering figure in the New Romanian Cinema (NRC) movement. Initially educated as a painter in Romania and (partially) at Geneva’s École Supérieure d’Arts Visuels, Puiu tran-

1) Lucian Georgescu, *Texticole: Texte și articole despre cinema 1990–2025* (Cluj: Presa universitară clujeană / UBB, 2025).

sitioned to filmmaking in the mid-1990s. He returned to Romania to craft his debut feature, *Stuff and Dough* (Marfa și banii; 2001), a low-budget road movie regarded as the inaugural film of the new wave of Romanian cinema. In 2004, he won his first international award, the Golden Bear for Best Short with *Cigarettes and Coffee* at the Berlin International Film Festival, further cementing his early reputation. A long list of awards and honors followed since then.

Puiu's breakthrough came with *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (Moartea domnului Lăzărescu; 2005), a darkly comic examination of an old man's final hours that earned the *Un Certain Regard* award at Cannes and garnered numerous international prizes. This achievement — Romania's first major Cannes award in decades — not only affirmed Puiu's status as a leading auteur but also brought global attention to Romanian cinema. He followed with *Aurora* (2010) and *Sieranevada* (2016), both of which premiered at Cannes (the latter competing for the Palme d'Or). More recently, the period drama *Malmkrog* (2020) earned Puiu the Best Director award in the Berlin International Film Festival's *Encounters* section. Across these works, Puiu has maintained a distinctive realist style characterized by long takes, dark humor, and naturalistic detail.

Critics note that a consistent engagement with mortality and “final matters” runs through Puiu's filmography, from the literal confrontation with death in *Lăzărescu* to the post-mortem family tensions in *Sieranevada*. His films combine unflinching existential inquiry with subtle irony, reflecting the complexities of post-communist Romanian society and the human condition at large. As a result, Puiu's oeuvre has significantly shaped both national cinema and modern realist storytelling, earning him a legacy as one of Europe's most influential contemporary filmmakers. After writing his first two features with his friend and fellow writer, Răzvan Rădulescu, Puiu embarked on a solo auteur career, consistently returning to a single, overarching theme. In 2001, when the first real Romanian indie film, *Stuff and Dough*, was produced, the Romanian cinema was in full mourning, with less than a few mediocre features per annum. The appearance of repatriated Cristi Puiu²⁾ was like the neon light in a mortuary. The members of the deceased's “family” are not the only ones dazzled, the Western neighbors who saw the film at the *Quinzaine des Réalistes* in Cannes are equally impressed. Additionally, the film received an award from FIPRESCI in Thessaloniki. Two years later, Puiu won the *Golden Bear* for short film in Berlin,³⁾ and in 2005, *Un Certain Regard* and dozens of other awards for *Lăzărescu*. The talk in the halls of Cannes in that year was, “Did you see that three-hour Romanian film? Oh, boy. You've got to see it.”

It is the “moment of grace” for Romanian cinema⁴⁾ when a small and insignificant country is suddenly noticed on the map of the seventh art. The critics praised Puiu;

2) Cristi Puiu graduated in film from the ESAV (today, HEAD) Geneva school, dropping out of the painting class after a conflict with his teacher.

3) *Cigarettes and Coffee* (Un cartuș de Kent și un pachet de cafea; Cristi Puiu, 2004).

4) Andrei Gorzo, “Moartea domnului Lăzărescu,” in Andrei Gorzo, *Viața, moartea și din nou viața criticii de film* (Bucharest: Polirom, 2019), 231. Also in a German version, see Andrei Gorzo, “Der Tod des Herrn Lăzărescu,” in *Klassiker des rumänischen Films*, eds. Stephan Krause, Anke Pfeifer, and Dana Duma (Marburg: Schüren, 2024), 133–140.

Lăzărescu was included in all classifications from “the best thousand films”⁵⁾ to “the best of the decade”⁶⁾ and even ranked fifth in the “twenty-five best films of the 21st century.”⁷⁾ The term New Romanian Cinema (NRC) was coined to describe the series of Romanian successes that emerged, characterizing a generation with Puiu as its spiritual leader.

Rising like a comet in the night, Cristi Puiu remains the beacon of Romanian cinema, continuing his string of successes with each of his films. *Aurora* (2010) was selected for *Un Certain Regard* and won the *East of the West Award* in Karlovy Vary; *Sieranevada* (2016) was nominated for the *Palme d’Or* and won the *Best Director Award* at the Chicago IFF, where Martin Scorsese acclaimed it, and *Malmkrog* (2020) won a similar award in Berlin in the *Encounters* section.

Romanian film critics finally find a *raison d’être* and embrace the NRC religion, no longer doubting its mission like Doubting Thomas (the title of the Andrei Gorzo book, “The life, the death and again the life of the film criticism” — meaning the resurrection of the local film criticism alongside the national cinema — is relevant in this respect).⁸⁾ After a long period of fasting, the emaciated orthodox apostles of national film criticism, now bulimic jet-setters, replace their solitary penance with joyful travel, parties, and social events, going on tour to places they would never have dreamed of visiting (Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Toronto, San Sebastian, Sarajevo, New York, Locarno, Sundance, Locarno, Busan, etc.) without being considered the poor relative at the funeral table. The Transylvania International Film Festival is becoming the place to be for European cinephiles and filmmakers. In June you can hardly find a room (more expensive than in Berlin anyway) in the hotels of Cluj, the once poor socialist hostels that are not very different from the one where Mr. Lăzărescu is picked up by the ambulance.

I have had my share of crumbs from the coleslaw, sorry, canapés from the film premiere. I pride myself on having published the “world’s first review”⁹⁾ of *Lăzărescu*, though it was pure coincidence. At that time, I was writing film reviews for a glossy magazine printed abroad; I had to see films at least two months before their premiere. I met Alex Munteanu, *Lăzărescu*’s producer, at the CNC in the spring of 2005 in the festival office with a VHS tape in his hand. He agreed to give me a copy of the film on the condition that the article would not be published before Cannes and whispered to me anxiously: “It seems we’ve been selected, but don’t let anyone know.” When I got home, I slammed the tape into the video player, determined to dislike it. I didn’t know Puiu personally, but from the outside, he seemed a shabby, awkward, blunt, unpleasant, uncomfortable artist-turned-blockboy type of guy. Although (or maybe because?) he was similar to my personality, something whispered to me that we could not be friends. I hoped that *Stuff and*

5) “The 1,000 Greatest Films (by Ranking),” *They shoot pictures, don’t they?*, accessed February 21, 2025, http://www.theyshootpictures.com/#!/gf1000_all1000films.htm.

6) “Best of the Decade #18: The Death of Mr. Lazarescu,” *Reverse Shot*, accessed February 26, 2025, https://reverseshot.org/symposiums/entry/5/18_death_mr_lazarescu.

7) “The 25 Best Films of the 21st Century So Far,” *The New York Times*, sec. Movies, June 9, 2017, accessed February 21, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/09/movies/the-25-best-films-of-the-21st-century.html>.

8) Gorzo, *Viața, moartea și din nou viața criticii de film*.

9) Lucian Georgescu, “Cinematograful după Cristi,” *CLASS*, March–April 2005, 8. For a version of the text published see Georgescu, *Texticole*.

Dough was the only exception to a type of cinema I could not fall in love with. But it was a *coup de foudre*.

I finished the screening late after midnight (only Daneliuc had ever made a film this long in Romanian cinema). Someone gave me his phone number, and I called Puiu right then in the middle of the night to warmly declare my admiration. It was a way of apologizing for my petty feelings, and we have, I dare say, remained close friends ever since. That night, I finished the text — a short, passionately written review. I used the jargon I had adopted at the beginning of this text, which always seems to suit Puiu's cinema. The title is a play on words, deliberately exaggerated (Cristi/Christ), because the article was to be published in the holy week after Orthodox Easter. I was well aware that from then on, Romanian cinema would be discussed diachronically as if it was “before and after Cristi,” a miracle, a resurrection:

The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu is a slap on the back of the Death of Romanian cinema, a candlelit not for mourning but for celebration. [...] It is a talk in the desert of suspense because although you know the ending from the title and every sequence is narratively predictable, Puiu's film keeps you breathless until Lăzărescu's last breath.¹⁰⁾

Warm, humane, and generous, Puiu was always ready to talk about cinema, literature, philosophy, and about his art and its purpose. Conversations with him are like his films: long, deep, slow, and with multiple layers of meaning. Puiu does not waste words, but he needs many; he is a lover of logos, not logorrhea. Every idea of his is carefully weighed, and the Socratic, doubting attitude he adopts, that of the man who “knows nothing,” is not a social mask — as is often the case with others — but the essence of his way of seeing and representing the world. As I have written, Puiu is “born, not made.” His speeches constitute a veritable *ars poetica*, taken up by NRC filmmakers, consciously or not, and publicly acknowledged only by very few, one of them being Corneliu Porumboiu, who once declared that the success of this so-called “New Wave” was due to Puiu. Porumboiu was referring not only to the fact that Puiu had paved the way for international awards but also to a stylistic and thematic direction that Puiu had established. Therefore, to say that the NRC had no “master,”¹¹⁾ or mentor, can perhaps only be applied with a strict reference to the role played by theoreticians in the completion of movements — such as Umberto Barbaro in the case of neo-realism, André Bazin and the Cahiers du Cinema group for the French New Wave, or Lotte Eisner for the New German Film. The theoretician for the NRC is the practitioner, Cristi Puiu. None of the other NRC exponents has crystallized such a consistent and coherent theory through discourse as he has. Finally, he is the only Romanian auteur who systematically, consistently, and obsessively returns to the same central theme: man confronted with death.

“I can't imagine talking about anything else,” he says in the interview I have recorded below, a transcript of a seven-hour long discussion on the topic of death. Regarding the-

10) Ibid.

11) Doru Pop, “The Grammar of the New Romanian Cinema,” *Acta Universitatis Sapientia: Film and Media Studies*, no. 3 (2010), 28.

matic consistency, Puiu is the most consistent Romanian filmmaker, the last Mohican of the tribe of auteurs on the verge of extinction. In what follows, we will discuss the “auteur theme” as the most crucial element in the writing of the screenplay and its filming. In preparation for this discussion, I found it helpful to use other interviews in which Cristi returns to the theme of death as a central element of his poetics. I chose three¹²⁾ from the national premiere of the film *Sieranevada* and supplemented them with an in-depth interview from the magazine *Film Menu*¹³⁾ and one of his most recent interviews.¹⁴⁾

Initially, our conversation was not intended for a press article; a double, common denominator, all personal needs drove it. I was going through a troubled period of physical uncertainty and metaphysical restlessness. I had begun to document the theme of death in filmed encounters with friends and loved ones, trying to find out how they felt about a death that was getting closer and closer, whether they were colleagues of a generation or older friends, all of them going down the slope of life. I filmed our meeting and then transcribed the dialogue for the edit. The discussion lasted almost seven hours, and the transcript is one hundred and forty pages long. When I finished, I realized I was holding a *fundamental discourse on the theme*, the cornerstone of the screenplay and art in general. The seeming digressions (the shooting in the Romani villages, the description of Costel Cocheci’s funeral, and the scenes of Ozana’s neighborhood) are concentric circles of death that hover over the life, and over each story of Cristi Puiu, the Bergman of the East.

Over the years, we have met several times and each time it has been a long, complex conversation, whether intimate or public, as in the series *Romanian Realism*,¹⁵⁾ filmed at the Cervantes Institute in Bucharest. One of our last meetings was in Cluj, at the Transylvania International Film Festival, when Puiu launched the DVD version of *Stuff and Dough*, twenty years after its official premiere. We met at the hotel for breakfast in the morning and left the dining room at eight in the evening; neither of us had seen a film at the festival that day.

I am grateful to him not only for the films he made and the thoughtful care with which he led those discussions but above all for his unwavering humanism, the fundamental note of his cinema, and the defining trait of the man Puiu. I thank him; I am honored to have met him in this life, and I know our paths will cross again sometime.

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12) “Ce ai face dacă ai afla după moarte că Dumnezeu există?”, *Adevărul.ro*, accessed February 20, 2025, <https://adevarul.ro/stil-de-viata/cultura/cristi-puiu-daca-afla-dupa-moarte-ca-dumnezeu-1732137.html>; “Cristi Puiu: De frica de aparatul de filmat nu scapă decât oamenii cu adevărat înțelepți,” *News.ro*, August 27, 2016, accessed February 21, 2025, <https://www.news.ro/cultura-media/interviu-cristi-puiu-de-frica-fata-de-aparatul-de-filmat-nu-scapa-decat-oamenii-cu-adevarat-intelepti-192240002700201608121555220>; “Cristi Puiu: Nu sunt un regizor,” *Scena 9*, accessed February 20, 2025, <https://www.scena9.ro/article/cristi-puiu-sieranevada-cannes>.

13) “Cristi Puiu — Interview,” *Film Menu.ro* (blog), November 30, 2014, accessed February 21, 2025, <https://filmmenu.wordpress.com/2014/11/30/interviu-cristi-puiu/>.

14) “Cristi Puiu: Un singur lucru poți să faci în viața asta: să fii!,” *Liternet*, accessed February 20, 2025, <https://atelier.liternet.ro/articol/40108/Claudia-Nedelcu-Duca-Cristi-Puiu/Un-singur-lucru-poti-face-in-lumea-asta-SA-FII-Noptile-albe-ale-filmului-romanesc-la-TRV.html>.

15) “Realismul românesc cu Cristi Puiu (partea 1),” *CINEPUB*, accessed February 26, 2025, <https://en.cinepub.ro/movie/episode-4-icar-romanian-realism-with-cristi-puiu-1st-part/>.

The best camera position is the one where you have the best view of death.

Cristi Puiu

Interior, room: late autumn, a weekend afternoon in the quiet Bucharest, where noise has fled beyond the city walls. “Little Paris” is bathed in the rays of a golden sun, literally and figuratively decadent, reminiscent of the glorious afternoons of childhood. We have improvised a brunch at my place, just the two of us, middle-aged men: Cristi was born in April 1967, and I, a month later, both conceived just before the “Decree”¹⁶⁾ came into force. Our parents may have wanted us, so that means our lives are not coincidental?! Neither I nor my guest have anyone else to ask. But what about death? [...] Cristi picked up a book I had left on the windowsill and read the title:

CP: The Denial of Death.

LG: Yes. By Ernest Becker.¹⁷⁾ A book about man’s flight from death. It later became the theory of terror management,¹⁸⁾ the basis of which is the expression “the worm at the core,” a visualization of the obsessive idea of death from which man is always trying to escape.

CP: And this idea is the worm.

LG: Yes. I wanted to talk to you about death, Cristi, because you’re an expert.

CP: Me, an expert on death? I’m more of an expert on *the fear of death*...

LG: But you told me that your fear of death was postponed when Zoe¹⁹⁾ was born.

CP: It’s something I felt physically, like a kind of postponement. I now have some fatherly concerns: until the child takes flight, I’m responsible for someone, to something. We set these age limits according to certain transient demands and linked them to our interests of the moment. If you turn the clock back 100 years, women married at 16 and had children. Now, because of this... (hesitates) I don’t know what they call it, because I don’t want to call it technological evolution; I don’t think there is evolution, just some changes that have taken place in our lives. For example, now it’s the middle of November, the day after the celebration of St. Michael and Gabriel, but outside, it’s like summer. Things change, times change, and we adapt. I filmed in 1997 in a gypsy community (I still have the footage, but I didn’t edit it for financial reasons); some friends, Jean and Corina, asked me to do it. They were having a project of education through painting, and they went to Roma villages in three communities, one of them in Coltău, an impoverished village, half Hungarian, half Gypsy. It’s a community that has been grafted onto this Hungarian village. They used to steal from the Hungarians in the garden; they were destitute. Ceausescu had once built a brick factory there, but they were bricklayers, so they took the bread out of their mouths. Very poor gypsies, and an extraordinary experience. Then I went to rich ones in Sibiu and to Mangalia. It wasn’t that great, money changes people a lot. I filmed at a wedding where the groom was 11 and the bride was only 10. I think the world as it is today pushes us through technology to make choices that we now automatically take for

16) Decree No. 770 of 1 October 1966, a notorious piece of legislation by the Ceausescu communist dictatorship that banned abortion and aimed to accelerate population growth.

17) Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press [and others], 1973).

18) Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (London: Penguin UK, 2015).

19) Zoe is the youngest of Anca and Cristi Puiu’s three daughters.

granted because we don't realize where they come from because they're falsely natural. The world is changing around you, and you're being carried along by these currents, and you think it's normal. You think you're living, but you're being lived.

LG: Have you always been aware of the theme of death that recurs in all your films as a super-theme, a fundamental, central concept? Did you think about it as a series?

CP: You mean if I set out to do it from the beginning? No, I didn't think about it initially, but somehow, I noticed it from the outside. Later the realization happened when I thought about what I was doing in *Sieranevada*, or maybe even in *Aurora*.

LG: You said, when we were talking about *Stuff and Dough*, that the accident in the film represents a significant event in your biography.

CP: This is the starting idea of the screenplay. It's the re-enactment of an accident, the representation of death, of a family tragedy. In 1998, Anca's brother Adi was killed in a car accident. He was the model boy every mother wanted: good at school and serious. He was about three years younger than me, and we didn't necessarily have a relationship. We were always mischievous, football, things like that; he wasn't; he was good, and he and his sister Anca were good students, prize winners; we were far from that. With the fall of Ceausescu, there was an opportunity to do business. Adi had a kiosk and a coffee shop, and at the same time, he went to school. He was a student in two faculties, Cybernetics and Automatics, and then he had a business and private life. It was an enormous amount of pressure. He asked me to put him in touch with the head of Perrier Romania; I returned from Switzerland in 1996 and knew the man there. He had made a mineral water called Ana Vie. I thought it was a foolish title, but I still think it's a stupid one. Adi was hired to sell this water on the Black Sea coast; he worked very hard. The accident happened, I think, around two in the morning. I'd come home from a friend's house and had some wine. Anca told me that Adi had an accident. I was half awake and asked: "Is it serious?" "No, he's in hospital," she didn't know he was dead. I was still numb from the alcohol and mumbled, "Hey, I told him not to drive tired like that," and then I fell asleep. Then Radu, a colleague of his, called. And suddenly Anca started screaming and went to her mother, who was asleep, and told her screaming, "Adi is dead, Mummy! Mummy, wake up, he's dead!" And her mother woke up from her sleep, and so did I, with this screaming, with this terrible news, and all the anesthesia was gone. Mum was rolling around screaming in the middle of the room, and Anca was crying in the corner. We all lived in her family's block flat; we married in April, and Adi died in August. I grew up in a working-class neighborhood, Ozana, where people were vociferous, and I saw much of that. In the old days, when someone died, the streets would rumble, and we, as children, would follow the funeral procession. At the crossroads, people would throw money in front of the coffin, and we would collect it and buy Polar ice cream for one buck or Sport for 75 cents. I grew up in the cult of heroic death, of heroes, Vasile Roaită,²⁰⁾ and others like him. Just think of *The Freckled*

20) Vasile Roaită was a young worker in the Romanian railway workshops of Grivița during the 1933 workers' mutiny. He was one of the symbols of communist propaganda in Romania, transformed from an accidental victim of a revolt into a true national hero. His death was idealized, the inert hand of the shot hero continuing to be called to fight. This powerful scene of official Soviet-sounding fiction shaped the childhood of generations of many Romanians.

One²¹⁾, which was on TV when we were growing up. Do *The Freckled One* and *All Sails Aloft*²²⁾ have another pair? They're all stories full of death and the danger of losing one's life. The fairy tale of my childhood that petrified me, brought me down, destroyed me, crushed me, and shattered my confidence and my hope is *Youth Without Age and Life Without Death*.²³⁾ The scene where Death slaps the hero and he crumbles to dust... to powder...

LG: You visualized the void?

CP: Yes. The end. Absolutely. The stories that marked my childhood are *Youth Without Age and Life Without Death*; and, oh yes, *Bambi*!²⁴⁾ *Bambi*, because Mom is dying.

LG: So, a childhood fairy tale triggered your awareness of death?

CP: Awareness? I don't know. But an episode that made me really aware of it was the death of Costel Cocheci, a neighbor boy. The Cocheci family lived one floor above us; we were a sort of "symmetrical" family in this working-class block; we were three children — Florentina, myself, and Iulian, and the Cocheci children too, an older sister and two brothers: Titela, Costel, and Florin. We were the same age as Costel, friends, as in the block. One evening, Mr. Cocheci came to my father and told him that Costel was very ill. My father worked at the hospital, and he also gave injections in private, as was the case then; the neighbors knew him. They put him in the car and drove to the hospital, but at the tram stop, a drunk from the Ozana restaurant appeared; they hit him, stopped, put Costel in a taxi, and when they got to the hospital and laid him on the table, the doctor on duty said, "He's bleeding internally. I don't think we can do anything. I'll open him up, but I can't guarantee anything." Anyway, that's what my dad told us the next day. We had to go to bed early; we were schoolchildren, and the next morning, when we woke up, my mother told us that he had died. At the funeral, we said goodbye to him, as is customary at our funerals, and that is the moment I remember vividly. Costel had a sore on his lip. I remember this very well because it was my only worry. It was a bizarre thing, a confusion, because in my mind, herpes belonged to living people, and Costel was dead. But I kissed him goodbye. When the others kissed the dead, I kissed him. I obeyed because we were raised to behave and to do what everyone else does. And yes, he had herpes. But then something even stranger happened. The Cocheci family was from Oltenia, and the Oltenians have an ancient custom whereby the family whose child dies "adopts" one of its friends. And they adopted me; I became their child. They bought me clothes, a desk for school, school supplies, and toys. And then there was a whole ritual that I had to go through. His mother was devastated, crying all the time, and he, Costel, was lying there on the dining room table. Then, after the funeral, she called me into a room and told me to take off my clothes and put on the new suit she'd bought me. I was humiliated to undress in front of her. She cried and said, "Don't be ashamed, dear. My child is dead, and I am like your mother." Then I

21) *The Freckled One* (Pistruitul; Francisc Munteanu, 1973), whose director was in the close circles of the Romanian Communist Party.

22) *All sails aloft!* (*Toate pânzele sus*; Mircea Mureșan, 1977), one of the most famous TV series of the communist period, adapted from a novel by Radu Tudoran.

23) *Youth Without Age and Life Without Death* is a classical Romanian folktale, see Petre Ispirescu, "Tinerete fără bătrânețe și viață fără de moarte," in Petre Ispirescu, *Legende sau basmele românilor: Adunate din gura poporului* (București: H. Steinberg, 1892) a classical Romanian folktale.

24) *Bambi* (David D. Hand, 1942).

was embarrassed that I was ashamed. I undressed awkwardly, then dressed again, and sat at the table in my new suit. After that, I tried to live up to their expectations, to behave with Florin, the younger brother, as if he was my brother, to adopt him somehow. And we had a good relationship for a long time.

LG: In *Sieranevada*, we're after the funeral; the point of view, the subjective angle of the camera, is that of the ghost floating through the room, right? We're in the bardo, looking from his point of view... I think his name is Emil, right?

CP: My father, yes!

LG: Not only your father but also the one whose ceremony feast we are attending in *Sieranevada*.

CP: Well, yes, that's exactly why he is so-called.

LG: Emil, your father, and Iuliana, your mother, appear episodic in *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*. They are the patients in the corridor when Lăzărescu is taken to the CT scanner. Did you want to immortalize them, to have a photograph of them for when they're gone?

CP: Yes. That's why I cast them, and that's why I told Fiscuteanu²⁵⁾ to lift his head from the stretcher, turn around, and look at him (Figure 1). And he said, "Why should I look at him?" I said, "Well, it's like recognizing the one coming after you and saying, you're following me." And that's what happened. Lăzărescu dies in the film, and my father died a year after him.

LG: Does this mean he took him by the hand to hand him over?

CP: Yes, of course. He was diagnosed with cancer in the same year, 2005, but my father's health had not been good for a long time, and I knew that he was going to leave in the near or distant future. I chose to link him to the main character in my story because it



Fig. 1: Ion Fiscuteanu (Mr. Lăzărescu) looks at Emil Puiu (the Patient). Credits: Oleg Mutu (*The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, Cristi Puiu, 2006), courtesy of Mandragora

25) Ioan Fiscuteanu, the actor who plays Remus Dante Lăzărescu, the protagonist of the film.

seemed infinitely more important to me that he be linked to the resurrected Lazarus than anything else. My father collapsed while I was on the Cannes jury in 2007. My brother called me halfway through the festival. We were at a film screening from Paraguay; I'll never forget it. When I left the cinema, I had nine missed calls, and I knew he was dead. I told Thierry Frémaux²⁶⁾ I was going to Bucharest and said goodbye but never returned. [...] The feeling of death is a feeling that comes with subtle signals. The fear of death is for me is the fear of separation. I'm not afraid of death; I'm afraid of separation. When I close a novel and finish it, I've separated myself from it; I've died a bit there. And it's hard for me; it stays on my bedside table; I come back to it to stay with these people, these characters, to keep it going. It seems to me it's about fidelity.

LG: But it's human nature, not necessarily just you.

CP: Yes, it's the fear — and now we're going to use some strong words — of falling away from God. Do you understand? It's the fear of somehow breaking away from the flagship. When you die, you fall off, like a leaf that falls off the tree and gets lost.

LG: Maybe we think that way, but I don't believe it's like that.

CP: I don't believe either; it's just a lack of faith. When there is faith, the fear goes away. I try to be as honest as I can with myself and my conscience. It's not hard to say that I don't know anything, but it's very easy to avoid it because you're afraid to do it in relation to someone else, and you think it might be used against you. But let's take the case where you are alone in front of the mirror. You know you don't know anything. All these stories about Jesus being a Buddhist, or not being a Buddhist, or being an alpinist, or whatever, are all mind games. It's speculation that leads nowhere but to despair.

LG: Is despair a lack of faith?

CP: And lack of humility. All these things, all that we are, are part of this knowledge, which, in the end, is not even called knowledge. Proper knowledge, as I understand it, is that moment that lasts for a split second when we are unconscious, a split second, and that intuitive knowing is *being*. It is the moment when *knowing* overlaps with *being*. And that is peace. I mean, *knowing* is *being*. But that implies not only belief but trust! And so you get to a point where you can't communicate what you're experiencing; you start to speak disjointedly. And people say, "Man, this guy's crazy!" Because these things can't be put into words.

LG: And you think they can be translated into films? No, that's why many people don't understand your movies.

CP: They can't be put into cinema, but what can be related to both words and cinema is understanding that humility has an epistemological dimension. If I were a priest talking to people, I would say to them, "It's important to be humble." Not because it's a matter of morality but primarily because it's a matter of epistemology. If you don't humble yourself and you think *you know*, you won't see, and you won't understand. Because you assume that you *know*. But you have to believe that you don't know, that you are zero, a handful of dirt at the bottom of the pit, as Father Cleopa²⁷⁾ said, and look at the world clean, unencumbered by this consciousness that you know something. You don't know shit! This ab-

26) The then director of the Cannes Film Festival.

27) Canonised as a saint by the Romanian Orthodox Church in 2024, monk Cleopa is considered as an outstanding spiritual leader of the 20th century in Romania.

solute zero state is the only one we can aspire to. But we're embarrassed and don't want to admit it; what Ionescu or Popescu says is more important. It's as if you're trapped in a cage cut to your size, and you can't communicate with others who are also in their cages. And those cages might as well not exist if you accept that nothing can bind us together if there is not this binding bond, which is called love. I think we both take what you say for granted. But if there is suspicion instead of love, the worm in the apple you spoke of will appear, and I'll suspect you of hidden interests.

LG: You told me that you want to make two films. Why are you still making them? Do you have to? Or because you're scared not to separate yourself from something you know? Why do you still make films, Cristi?

CP: I don't want to make films anymore. But I've already contracted them. The time has passed, and now, honestly, I wouldn't want to do them anymore, but I must.

LG: And if someone came and said it's done, don't worry, you don't have to film anymore; what would you do?

CP: I would return to painting. To Buzău, a county that has nothing to do with me or my family or where we come from. Anca and I have been looking for a house since *Stuff and Dough*, in 2001. It's already a quarter of a century; can you imagine? And we've only just found it in Buzău, in Pietroasele, at the end of the "wine road." From there, if you concentrate, you can see the whole south, the Balkans, maybe to Sofia. That's the opening, the horizon that goes on relentlessly to nowhere. And there, in spring, everything blossoms, from the arbutus to the cherry and whatever else man has. It's such a joy. And I said to myself, "Let's use this house for the film production," first, but afterward, I felt it might be my tomb.

LG: The last place, is that what you meant?

CP: I think that when a man is looking for a home, he is looking for his grave. You're not looking for a house; you're looking for a place to die. Yes, it's about the grave.

LG: But what do you do with the fickle, so to speak?

CP: It doesn't exist. It's just a way to cheat death, but you must be an idiot. How can you cheat death if you're not Ivan Turbinca?²⁸⁾ The point is, if you want to cheat death, to trick it, you're cheating God. You'd rather say, "God, I'm here too, I'm not tied to you, and I'm autonomous." Then say, "Thank you, God, and I'm glad, God, that you've taken me under your wing." There is also a cold, dark side to us, to the individual. Because freedom and autonomy are essential, and it's hard to reconcile them with faith in God and the shelter His wing gives you.

LG: You say that if you have faith, you don't have to be afraid of death.

CP: It's not that you "don't have to;" you simply don't fear death if you have faith. Period!

LG: You're not afraid of death?

CP: I'm not a good Christian... I'm afraid of separation because, as I told you, for me, death is the fear of separation.

LG: Which is also a kind of death.

CP: Of course.

LG: So, you see yourself painting in Buzău? But aren't you very... urban?

CP: I'd be in coffee shops if I were very urban. But I'm not.

28) Hero of Ion Creangă's story, who faces death with great wit and common sense.

LG: Sounds like you get all your juice from the block stairs, right?

CP: Well, these are lived experiences. I was in the military, the standard service at that time. Does that make me an *apevist*?²⁹⁾ I don't even know if it's Bucharest that I can't stand or... Cities have a dynamic; they change and don't keep up with you. The thing is, the moment you retrace your steps, you don't find the same place. When I go to Ozana, there aren't the same people, the neighborhood has changed; that one isn't there anymore, that one went to France, that one went to Italy... I feel the need for eternalization, for eternity. The confirmation of eternity. That's what it's about. I want to be able to say something about it: it exists!

LG: Well, Ozana exists, doesn't it?

CP: It doesn't. Don't you understand, or are you crazy? You can't superimpose the present on the past. When you go back into your history, you must find what you left there, according to the map you've constructed. But you see a tail! And not a hard one. It's one of those soft, false, approximate, sad things. Why am I here? Where are we going, sir?

LG: You say you're not afraid of death, but the fingerprints of death are all over your films.

CP: Well, yes, but it's not consciously done.

LG: What do you mean? It just comes out of the ether and sits there by itself.

CP: If the question is how the story is born, I tell you very clearly that I can never imagine myself doing a story that has nothing to do with death. I can't; it doesn't interest me. But yes, I can watch films that have nothing to do with death. As a spectator, I can take in a lot of stories, the whole ROGVAIV spectrum, but as an author and filmmaker, the choices are somehow made from the start about the relationship I have with death. I can't tell the story of young people who go to the seaside, have fun, and return to Bucharest, and everything is... "cool."

LG: We should presume that your next films will again be about death?

CP: Yes, if God gives me days and strength, but can I know what tomorrow will bring? If I have days, I will make them. One is *Sântandreiul Lupilor*, and the other is *The Bald Singer*, after Ionesco. We are a generation that grew up in libraries, which is why the new Romanian wave could only be a narrative, a story with a moral, with a plot, in a world that has lost it. We live in a world that is still negotiating its meaning.

LG: Are the protagonists of your films your alter ego?

CP: It's not my decision; whether I think about it or not, I can't get rid of this identification. What could be the individual's capacity to get out of his mind and fly like that autonomously? You are a prisoner of your mind and the education you have received. Someone once asked me in an interview what the best camera position was. And I had then this sudden epiphany that the best camera position is the one from which you can best see death. It came to me spontaneously, and afterward, when I came back and thought about it, I started to think about it consciously, that there is no correct answer because you can consider all sorts of spatial cues and narrative cues. "In this story, the character is drinking a glass of milk at the table." You must see the glass of milk on the table... but maybe you don't; perhaps you just have to shoot his eye. The criteria are completely different, but

29) Abbreviation of the term "army-for-life," which was used to designate career military personnel.

in the beginning, you are bound to the narrative, and I think it is also very accurate that someone — I can't remember who — said that "the story does not belong to the cinema; the cinema has been taken over by the story." Cinema is not storytelling; it is beyond story. And if you manage to use the story as a lure for the spectator, to lead him into that cinematic territory, then you're in heaven, but it's hard and not up to you anyway. But that's the ideal, that in certain moments — and this has nothing to do with the film born of pure fiction, if there could be such a thing, like in specific segments of *The Straight Story*,³⁰⁾ for example, how metaphysical that film is, it makes you realize that cinema is beyond the story being told! The only thing I can point to that contains this infinity of the world, of creation, is the gaze of the man in front of the camera, the gaze that includes the individual's history. It doesn't matter who the character is, the individual matters. And it's impossible to decipher. It is infinitely mysterious because there is a lot of suffering, joy, and a whole history in a person's gaze, which the actor cannot fake. He can move the eye muscles, but he cannot intervene in the content of the gaze. And that's the joy of being a director because you know that the look is essential. I know that when I cast an actor, I cast him for the content of the look. I'm not interested in what he can do and in his performance. I'm interested in the fact that he's not uptight and that he doesn't smudge that look. God, grant he listens to you because he has to move inside and do things in a certain cadence, but that's all. Just the look and saying things correctly because that look is everything; there's nothing else apart from that! If I had to force a definition of cinema, there couldn't be a more precise definition than "the author's gaze on the character's gaze." The author's gaze records how the character's gaze looks at the world. And that has to do with separation. *E la nave va*³¹⁾... It gives me goosebumps that, at some point, we're going to separate and part.

LG: Does your current position as a new grandfather change things?

CP: No, they might even get worse. Because of the people coming after us, I don't know if they are better or worse prepared; I don't care, but they are prepared differently; they come from a different world. Their world is the computer, and their interest in the person next to them diminishes. The goal that man has set for himself, consciously or unconsciously, is to reach a higher level and transcend his condition, but this taste for it... transhumanism, as it is called today, does not make you more potent than the man you were. It only makes you more blind and deaf to the suffering of your neighbor, more selfish, and more self-centered. Because you put money and rational thinking before everything else, and you cancel out all emotion.

LG: Humanity has never excelled at loving one another.

CP: If it weren't, it wouldn't be said... Why else would Christ say, "Love your neighbor as yourself," if you had already done it? He said it because you didn't. The Ten Commandments were given to the people precisely because people didn't keep them.

LG: You originally called the series *Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest*. *Lăzărescu* is part of that series, right?

CP: *Lăzărescu*, yes. And after that, *Aurora* and *Sieranevada*, in my mind, I counted them as coming from there.

30) A film by David Lynch from 1999.

31) *And the Ship Sails On* (*E la Nave Va*; Federico Fellini, 1983).

LG: And do you want to finish the series of six, or is the number irrelevant?

CP: It was relevant at the time because I was in a Rohmer period of inspiration, with his packages of *Six Moral Tales*³²⁾ and *Comedies and Proverbs*³³⁾ and *Stories of the Four Seasons*³⁴⁾, each season being a film. I found this *feuilleton* idea interesting. Then there is the influence of Truffaut because the French New Wave writers who have influenced me are Rohmer and Truffaut. Not Godard, who I find very sad. But we like to say “Godard” because it’s *de bon-ton*, right? And Louis Malle impressed me, although I never thought I’d say that.

LG: Why, because he’s *calophilic*?

CP: No, he didn’t impress me with the films he made during the French New Wave period, but with his later films, *Uncle Vanya on 42nd Street*³⁵⁾ and *My Dinner with André*³⁶⁾, which seem to me to be like make-believe films, films that change you in many ways when you see them. Because filming is such a hard thing to do, the energy you have to put into it is enormous. Talking about filming in the hospital: it’s so tough. One day, at Lăzărescu, I was filming at night, a long winter night, in the CT scanner. Around five in the morning, when we were leaving the set walking towards the lift, two stretchers with a corpse in a black bag approached the corridor. One of them, a tall one with a glass eye, grinning at us, took the corpse’s hand out and hurried it out of the plastic bag like this: “Goodbye!” A Lynch scene. It was after a night of shooting, I was exhausted, in a hostile environment, where the CT nurse was keen to tell us that in her hospital, they didn’t say “pops” when we gave the dialogue cues for the shot. “But why don’t you call him ‘daddy’ or ‘pops’?” I asked her. “Well, the management told us not to.” “Ah, you told him anyway, so he told you not to.” “Yes, but he never peed on our CT, even if he’s an old man, like in your film.” And just that day, the film was stopped, the CT scanner was running, and we were sneaking between cases with the shooting, and they stopped us because they brought in an emergency an older man, put him on the CT scanner, and the first thing he did was pee all over the place. She wouldn’t even look at us. The CT doctor was a great guy; a year after we finished filming, I went to see him for a CT scan. My dad had bowel cancer. I’ve had CT since; the last one was before the pandemic.

LG: Are you nervous when you do this?

CP: Every time. I prepare myself for death, but not in a Zen way, you know? I’m not a samurai. I prepare myself like an “auntie.” In an “auntie” mind (and we all have an “auntie” mind), we think we’ll manage somehow... but it doesn’t work that way; it’s tricky.

LG: Aren’t you afraid of the road? Of the gradual, physical deterioration?

CP: It must be so. Steinhardt³⁷⁾ said, “Being a Christian is hard because you have to realize that (rough quote) every day you have to start from scratch and that nothing you did yesterday matters.” That is, if I was good yesterday, it doesn’t mean I have the freedom to-

32) *Six moral tales* (Six contes morales; Éric Rohmer, 1963–1972).

33) *Comedies and Proverbs* (Comédies et proverbes; Éric Rohmer, 1981–1987).

34) *Tales of the Four Seasons* (Contes des quatre saisons; Éric Rohmer, 1998–1990).

35) *Uncle Vanya on 42nd Street* (Louis Malle, 1994).

36) *My dinner with André* (Louis Malle, 1981).

37) Nicu-Aurelian Steinhardt (1912–1989) was a Romanian writer, Orthodox monk and lawyer. His book, *Jurnalul Fericiirii*, is considered to be a seminal text of 20th century Romanian literature and a pre-eminent example of anti-Communist literature.

day to be more relaxed about the moral imperatives of being a Christian. We always start again. We have to struggle.

LG: I'm scared of death, Cristi.

CP: You're not scared of death. You're afraid of separation. We're all fearful of separation.

(Bucharest, November 2024)

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Biography

Lucian Georgescu is a filmmaker and professor of screenwriting at the National University of Theatre and Film, Bucharest, and visiting professor of audiovisual arts at Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj. His research interests include narrative paradigms in road movies, the application of open-source principles to film distribution, and the impact of streaming on film language. A trailblazer in national cultural marketing, Georgescu founded cinepub.ro, a curated platform for national independent cinema.

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