East European Film Bulletin

INTERVIEW

Cristi Puiu on Romania, its cinema, and his own work

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We met Cristi Puiu during the Transilvania IFF in Cluj (June 3-12), where he presented his film "Stuff and Dough" from 2001 to mark the 10th anniversary of both the festival and the existence of the Romanian New Wave.

Your last two films take place at night. What role does time play in your films?

In my films, time is related to the narrative. It is a dramatic constraint. If you relate time to crises, mental or physical, they takes place at night. Apparently the human body is more vulnerable when the sun disappears. Most people die at night. This was the case for Lăzărescu. The chances for him to survive diminish as the night proceeds. But I don't want to suggest that we live better during day time. *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* is not an ode to the sun. Setting the story at night was just a scientific acknowledgment.

If I ask this question to myself, I was not at all happy filming at night because I lost sense of the city. It was important for me to show Bucharest and you can see some of it from the ambulance. But I had to renounce to a more detailed depiction because of the night. As I wrote the scenario, the setting of the film turned out to be a kind of "huis clos." The apartment, the ambulance, the hospitals are all closed locations. Of course, the character goes on an odyssey, but really he is locked behind closed doors.

Solitude provides another dramatic reason for the night. In a very banal sense, we are alone at night, when we fall asleep, when we dream, when the city sleeps. Solitude was also important for *Aurora*. In *Aurora* the main character doesn't sleep. In fact, time in *Aurora* doesn't exist. It's neither night nor day. *Aurora* is a film confusion about the impossibility to separate between black and white, night and day. There is only an eternal moment of passage. This is why I shot the film during spring time, which is a time of passage, an in-between. Dusk and dawn are times that lack distinction. The french expression

“entre chien et loup” signifies that. But the important thing is that it’s an expression for the unexplainable. Everything depends on the place from which we see things. We have found all sorts of symbols to give meaning to this time, but suppose that we could teleport ourselves to the sun, there would be neither night nor day. Night and day are fabricated concepts.

So why did you shoot at this time of day, if it doesn’t exist?

Because we have to choose a language in order to communicate with others. If you want to make movies you choose cinema as a language. This is a paradox you can’t avoid. But I choose to show you the time between night and day to tell you that night and day don’t exist. If I tell you that night and day don’t exist, that’s only because from a different point of view, they don’t. It’s only because we live on earth and not on the sun. We don’t have the perspective the source of light has, so we give significations to things that are only true from our perspective. We fabricate fictions that are limited to our perimeter of existence.

This is what determined me to make this film, *Aurora*, and to make it in this way. Of course, I have to return to concepts that exist. Art, love, hate, crime are all concepts that we know somehow and that I used in order to fabricate my film. So how can you create a fiction where the people looking at that fiction start to ask themselves: does this make sense? There is no conceptually valid information coming from this film.

We are confronted with fictions everyday. I experienced the fall of communism in 1989. We assassinated Ceausescu on December 25. We could have assassinated him on the 24 or the 26. But we are too attached to fictions, so we had to assassinate him on Christmas. Or when we demonstrated for months in front of the university, the news on television told us that we were bought by western agents with jeans, drugs, and Coca-Cola. We live in a cosmic fiction and we can’t get out.

Are the doctors in “Lăzărescu” victims of their medical jargon, and does Dante loose his personality because he turns into an impersonal case-study ?

People that work in emergency rooms have a lot of patients. Maybe on the first week or first month of your time there you discuss the personality of your patients. But then you have to protect yourself and you stop integrating the personality of the people you encounter. The patient is just the carrier of a sickness or of a health problem that you have to solve. You can’t speak about compassion in this profession. It’s stupid to speak about compassion.

What about the nurse in “Lăzărescu”?

She doesn’t have compassion. She doesn’t care about Lăzărescu and she doesn’t have the angelic character that people attribute to a nurse. She might be more sensible to his problem, but she is indifferent. That’s why I made her reappear in *Aurora* with the same personality. She was Lăzărescu’s assistant in the film before, and here we find her again, at home with a Lăzărescu as a husband. If she would be compassionate, she would recognize a link between the problems she has at home, and the problems she sees in others. But she doesn’t see them. Compassion doesn’t exist. It exists, but people who suffer for others are rare. You have to be above everyone else to suffer their suffering. Most people are only capable of seeing their own suffering, they think that their problems are the worst and the most important.

Institutions and Lăzărescu

Most critics that wrote about *Lăzărescu* thought that the film criticizes institutions. But that’s only the background. The film also talks about the story of a dying man. It’s horrible because those critics, like the doctors, ignore the death of the old man. Of course, there is a critique in the film, but it wasn’t the film’s focus. The only thing that interested me was to reconstruct how an event happened. I didn’t want to denounce the sanitary system. Again we can talk about Réné Girard’s “scapegoat.” We have to find people or events that are responsible, and if we can’t find them, we create them. Once found, there is no reason to continue looking. But one should always go a step further and ask: and what if it’s not the system, what if it’s not this or that person, dictator or whatever? It’s more comfortable not to take that step. Doubt causes instability.

So there are multiple explanations for this death. Is Lăzărescu responsible for his own death?

We enter in a process of decomposition the moment we are born. Lăzărescu drinks, he doesn’t seem to live a healthy life and the first medicine refuses to treat him for that reason. He has the profile of an authoritarian doctor. He will treat you like a problem to solve, but don’t you dare and interfere with his solutions. The other type is the friendly doctor, who tells you everything you need to know about your sickness and how he will try to heal it. In *Aurora*, there is no such a doctor.

Aurora background

The number one problem in *Aurora* is that we are the prisoners of our own minds. We can’t leave our own fictions. This is why we can’t understand others,

not because he or she defends himself, but because we can't leave our mind. It's as simple as that. The presence of something exterior has to vanish for someone who lives inside his own fictions and who wants the world to work according to that fiction. If you want to live within a community, you have to make compromises, you have to negotiate. Of course, you might have a vision or a philosophy. It's important and vital to have visions, but you have to arrange yourself and your vision with those of others.

So what happens if you don't want to negotiate? I don't even mean if you refuse to negotiate, because this means that you are aware of discussion. I mean if you don't talk about your vision, but if you impose your vision. There are the Brothers Grimm. I never liked fairy tales because I had problems with the good characters, the princes and princesses. You can't be upright in real life, a man of integrity. The funny thing is that knights don't negotiate. They also defend their vision. If they would enter life in community, they would turn into dragons, or society would turn into dragons for them.

The starting point in the film is that there was a divorce, division of assets, and the instinct of the character to reconstruct his life. He has an unknown girlfriend, he tries to renew an apartment. But he's distressed. He already took the decision to kill before the beginning of the film. He already has the rifle and is already in the mood to kill. So there might have been some big incident before the film that completely changed him. But I don't think people change that much, even when they take radical decisions. Most criminals in the history of cinema are completely bizarre. They don't eat, their every-day life is deleted, because a criminal is different. So I wanted to show is that a criminal is like everybody else.

What about Murnau's "Sunrise"?

That is a film I despise, and *Aurora* is an answer to that film. Murnau's film demonstrates wishful thinking. All of a sudden the main character realizes that he can't kill that woman, in the scene in the boat at the end of the film. That doesn't work! Give him time! I can't stand wishful thinking.

The question I want to ask Murnau: if the character in *Sunrise* doesn't kill because he found the path of love, would he still be able to kill something else? My character kills the elements that are guilty of his separation. He has a certain vision of how a family should work. That vision is destroyed by the intervention of outsiders. So they have to be punished. Maybe these outsiders had a reason for separating the couple, but the character does not look for other explanations. So does he kill out of love? No, because to love is to leave your mind. But the character is enclosed in his own mind. He protects his perspective on life. I found a citation where Hitler said that everybody who paints the sky in green and the grass in blue has to be sterilized. That's exactly how my character thinks.

Acting in Aurora

After three months of casting, Clara Voda, the actress playing Gina, asked me why I didn't play the role myself. So I thought about it, and it frightened me. But in the end, she was right. The decision to play myself was a moral one, as well as a conceptual one. If the film is about a person that can only live in his own mind, then how in the world can you direct someone who shouldn't listen to the outside world? This would have been a paradox, and against the concept of the film. So I had to direct myself from my own interior, which was very difficult – it was a nightmare.

In the films that I made before, I knew what I was doing, both films were based on stories I experienced at first or second hand. But I never killed anybody- making this films turned into an ethical question. Who am I to talk about something like that? In a way I had to come to terms with that, I had to embody Flaubert's proposition: "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." So I had to go all the way, lend my body to that affirmation, and put myself into the head of that person. What would I really do in a situation like that? Like the scene in Miller's crossing: "Look in your heart."

Playing the role myself, I had to cut a lot of dialog. The scenario was full of dialog, but I would never speak in such a situation. I would avoid contact with other people. Because to discuss with other people is a first step towards negotiation. Changing words is a trading process. Communication is a risk, because one has to accept a position entirely different to one's own.

Autism in Aurora

Critics said that the character was autist because he doesn't speak. But he speaks, even if he speaks in a strange way. There is an Italian neurologist, Giacomo Rizzolatti, who discovered so called mirror-neurons. In short, we learn by imitation, education is a process of imitation and certain parts of our brain corresponds to that process. But for autists, these neurons are not activated. That's why a lot of autists are isolated, they lack empathy. They can't connect with the state of mind of other people. Experiments show that when an autist looks at laughing or crying faces, he doesn't react. When I imagined my character, I also imagined him disconnected on a similar level. Everything that is outside and demands interaction is amputated.

But then again he is not autist. He observes. There are two scenes in the film where the camera observes the main character observing a family. The camera is subjective, it reacts to the things that the main character observes. The camera is not an impersonal window. So if there is choice, the choice of showing certain scenes and not showing others, there cannot be autism.

Why does he turn himself into the police?

The character realizes that he did something unthinkable that other people would never attempt. He takes responsibility, but back in his head he thinks that he is superior to other people. He smiles insolently. When he tells the police men that they don't understand anything, that they only think they understand, he speaks like a God. He's arrogant and self-conscious. This is one explanation, maybe there are others.

Toys in Aurora

You cannot imagine the importance of having a matchbox car when I was a kid during Ceaușescu's time. Those were toys from the rotten imperialistic countries, but I had an aunt in England, and my father was allowed to visit her and he brought two matchbox cars for me and my brother. We also changed toys with other kids, and I had a compass that I traded in for another matchbox car, a Honda F1 without wheels. Even without wheels I really wanted that car. So the toy scene in *Aurora* had to do with that experience, without being explicit about it. The character in the film is very fixated on objects. It's a consequence of the fact that he's attached to his ideas. After all, it's a trap. His identity relies on the possession of objects.

What do you think about the reception of *Aurora?*

The reactions were mixed. Some people liked it, some people didn't. There were some stupidities that I expected. But I was also surprised by the primitivism of some of the comments. For example, concerning the shower scene and stupid comments like "was it necessary to be naked?" If they would know how hard it was for me. A lot of people also complained that there was no dialog, so I'm thinking: alright, then let me make a film with dialogue and we'll see what you'll understand. Dialogue doesn't solve any problem.

A lot of women reacted to the film. Most men refused the film because of they didn't like the dimension of the character that is tactless and clumsy. They like characters like Kevin Spacey in *Seven* who is precise, a real mastermind. But a lot of women identified the character with men that they knew, men that are like delayed school-children.

Editing, montage, and lenses in *Aurora*

I wanted to tell *Aurora* in an elliptic way. Every cut is an ellipse. It was very important to show that this story was born in my head. I thus tried to eliminate transitions and links to show the fragmentary character of the process of thinking. I was very influenced by Rudolf Arnheim's *Film als Kunst* where he

says that the filmmaker “can choose his motive.”

I try to use lenses that don’t deform the image, but that are close to what we see in real life. I can’t stand telephoto lenses. It perverts space. Viorel’s apartment in *Aurora* was very small. One of the difficulties was to find the right place for this monster called camera in a room of twenty square meters. No matter where you put the camera, you will cut off almost half of the room. But that’s good! It’s not a limit of film that when you direct the camera towards an object, you lose what is behind the camera. There are visual obstacles in real life. Loosing information is part of the narrative and Viorel’s condition. Too many directors try to show you everything. They work with reverse-angle shots, they put lights everywhere so that nothing gets lost.

Camera in Aurora

I told the cameraman to observe and to stop thinking of composition. We had to change the cameraman four times. I told the cameraman to observe the main character like a father looking at his child when it begins to walk. Try to imagine a father looking at his child knowing that it can fall any minute. There has to be alertness in the look of the father. I can’t explain it otherwise. You can’t predict such a condition saying that in two minutes the camera will move this much in that direction, turning in an angle of I don’t know what degree. You also have to be behind the camera. But cameramen like that don’t exist. The only cameramen that can observe are those doing documentaries. They are the ones that look at people.

In what films do you feel at home?

There are tons of films and tons of masters that help me with my profession. I feel very close to Cassavetes. I say Cassavetes because his films educated me, not only his films, but the man, his discourse. Cassavetes said that when you make a film, you have to start off telling yourself that you don’t know anything. For Cassavetes, making films is an attempt to understand something, it’s research. He also gave me the definition for films that I hate, which are films that answer questions instead of posing them. But one of the first films that struck me was when I was seventeen in 1984. I still was into painting and a friend of mine showed me Buñuel’s *L’ange exterminateur*, and my reaction to the film was that I didn’t understand anything. So that was a revelation, namely that cinema is not entertainment. Later I discovered documentary filmmakers like Wiseman or Depardon. But I prefer thinking in terms of films than in terms of filmmakers. I tried to make a list once with my ten favorite films, but then I ended up with over 200. But under the first were:

1. *La Maman et la Putain* – Eustache

2. *Angst essen Seele auf* – Fassbinder
3. *Ma nuit chez Maude* – Rohmer
4. *Bande à part* – Godard
5. *Mouchette* – Bresson

But it's complicated, because when I say *Mouchette* I have the feeling that I betray Bresson's other films. The same goes for Ozu. There is no way to say that his or that film is THE Ozu, as there might be *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull* and maybe two or three others for Scorsese. You couldn't say that for other filmmakers.

What is cinema?

Cinema is a laboratory. Cinema is science. Scientists work very much like filmmakers. Filmmakers use cinema as a tool, like scientist's instrument. They ask questions about human existence, human nature, and the world. The camera is an anthropological instrument. If it's not that, then it doesn't interest me.

So cinema is research. But making films also means to have a style or a form. You came up with a form for your Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest before making them.

It's important to have a style. But there is a trajectory to that. You have to go on a path, but the further you advance, the more complicated it gets. You look back, and what made sense before no longer makes sense.

Fiction and realism

People construct their own realities. They invent stories for their lives. I once met a writer who told me his story- a terrible story. He was a prisoner of war, then he spent some time in a Gulag, then he was chased out of Romania by his own people and was sent back to Siberia. All in all, he spent some twenty years in prison. A crazy story. I was very impressed, and he told it very beautifully, he didn't feel resentful. Two months later, I found his book in a shop and I read the same story almost word for word. So maybe that's how his story happened, but I don't think it did. Of course, the events have really happened. But the details got lost. They were overwritten by a reality that he created for himself.

The story of that writer works like almost every film. There is a cause-and-effect-relationship in the way stories are told. They tell you how things happened and give you a reason why they happened. If you talk to criminals, fresh or imprisoned, the same thing happens. They invent stories that they carry around like a ball on a chain.

I don’t know how far you can go with realism. One question I ask myself all the time is how to avoid the explicit without leaving narrative cinema. For example, if I’m in a restaurant watching two people talking, and I imagine for example that they are mother and son. Their dialog would probably reveal indications that would tell me their relationship. But they would never say something like “listen, mother”, those are sentences for a public. Where are the limits of observational filmmaking? I fought for a long time with the dragon of explicit films, but whenever I saw films that explored a similar observational territory, I was glad that I’m not alone. For example Šarūnas Bartas, Pedro Costa. Even in *Au hasard Balthazar*, things are not explicit. Bresson tells his stories in an elliptic way, he reconstructs stories.

Imagining a story is exactly as real as the reality you perceive. From that perspective, there is no reality. But realism in cinema can be summarized with what Roland Barthes called “effet de réel”. It’s a question of details, of participating with something happening under our eyes.

Observational filmmaking

For observational filmmaking it’s enough to watch an individual do the most banal things. In *Aurora*, you don’t know where the story begins and ends. It reconstructs a story that doesn’t follow an obvious narration. But what is really interesting is not the story. The truth comes from details. If the things I observe are *being*, if the actors are *being*, then I look at the film without knowing why it’s interesting. I don’t film stories, I film people.

Visual anthropology

It would be challenging to make a historical film and reconstruct very precisely all the elements of an era. It’s already challenging to reconstruct what happened to me today in a precise way, but to reconstruct something you didn’t experience must be very difficult. You really have to do anthropological research and go as far into details as choosing the right plates and silverware. How did people drink, and what did they drink? Like in *Unfinished Piece for a Mechanical Piano*, where they really tried to reconstruct an era, they even lived in this house for some time to experience a different life. But even in this film, the table looks like it was there for decoration. You have to do research and turn yourself into a visual anthropologist.

There is also the question of responsibility when making films about verifiable historical events, like films on the Second World War for example. The only films that seem to work are films that use history as a canvas to talk about something else, that tell humane story. But that’s a problem because you can invent whatever story you like. Like in *Titanic*, where the accident of the boat disappears behind the love-story. Essentially, it tells more about our society

than about the society of a certain historical time.

Cinematic malpractice

The question of historical responsibility arises for *Autobiography of Mr. Ceaucescu*. What we see is not an autobiography, what we see is the perspective of the filmmaker on a biography. The film depreciates more or less known images from a contemporary, and to a large extent ironic point of view. It's like beating a cadaver. That's why I think it's immoral.

Malpractice exists in film. Images are delicate and what you show can be dangerous. Nobody will die from it, but it's dangerous nonetheless. Why go to the cinema and watch a movie about Ceaușescu, knowing that Ceaușescu was a criminal, a bad guy etc.? Only to confirm your judgment on that deplorable figure? It's very comfortable to show and watch history as if it didn't concern us, as if we always knew who the good and the bad ones were. But you can't reconstruct the world as if you were God. There is a moral dimension to making art. We can't predict what impact a series of images will have in the future, but I have the feeling that this film will be paradigmatic of something to avoid, it will be part of the dark side of the force.

I talked to Ujică when he was preparing his film. He wanted to use sequences that didn't pass censorship, reels half-way destroyed. But he didn't do that because it risked to turn into something too abstract, like a Stan Brakhage film. But what Ceaușescu didn't want the world to see would say a lot about what he thinks of himself.

If we can't enter the inside of a person living inside his head, what do we see? How can you show something hidden?

To live in your head is to live in your head. You don't see anything else. I am someone who doesn't act, I react. *Aurora* was also an answer to *Taxi Driver* and the voice-over of Travis Bickle – that doesn't work! I'm not a purist, but I try to eliminate all the remnants of literature, theater or music. I like films with music, like Hitchcock for example, Hitchcock wouldn't work without music. But I can't put music in my films. I did it in one scene in *Aurora* just for the ironic effect, I played a part of Shostakovitch's composition for Kozintsev's *King Lear*. It's complicated, why do I accept music in Hitchcock's films, but not in mine? It's the same with voice-over, I think voice-over is a literary not a cinematographic device, but there are films where I don't mind voice-over. There is nothing more admirable than Godard's voice-over in *Bande à part*.

Acting

I speak to an actor and he wants me to give him indications to understand his role. But he will never understand. How can he, if what I want to say can't be put into words. Then I shoot some takes and all of a sudden the actor does something really good. And almost every time he will come to me to tell me that he understood what I wanted, and that now that he understood, he wants to shoot one last take. But he will never be capable to act in the same way, so there is no point in doing another take, but anyway I let him do it. Why will he not be capable of reproducing what he did? Because he thinks it depends on himself. But it's not the actor that found the way to the door, but the door found its way to the actor. It's a moment of grace that can only happen once. So if he wants to find the same intensity, he'd better not look for that open door. He has to look elsewhere until another door will open.

The only obligation an actor has, is to be.

Actors are never in the present. They always think of the future, they want to make predictions about everything they do. They think about how things will be: gaze, gestures, comportment, speech.

Metaphors

Metaphors are arrogant. They are not dangerously arrogant, but they are still arrogant. Real metaphors, metaphors that are told by someone who sees, are no metaphors. There is no point in fabricating metaphors. Signs are everywhere. Everything is there, you just have to open your eyes. The moment you fabricate, you are using the same mechanism of someone trying to demonstrate a truth. You think that only your mind exists, and that only your mind is capable of producing some unique vision. I think it is enough to witness. If your testimony is real, then your film will reveal enough truths that you yourself did not see. Metaphors want to see for themselves what should be seen by others.

Is the donkey in "Au hasard Balthazar" a metaphor?

No. If you think the donkey is a metaphor, then you're lazy. If you loose an object in your house, why do you always find it in the last place you look for it? Because then you stop looking for it. Too often, we define something that has the form of a metaphor, but then we don't question our discovery with a different thought. The donkey in Bresson's film is the result of a profound thought. It must have been a revelation. It had no choice but to appear. Metaphors are valid if they arise out of a condition of long reflection. It's something that couldn't have been said differently. So in reality, Bresson wasn't even in the search of a metaphor. He was under the pressure of expression, but not of expressing a metaphor. That's why you can't rationally create metaphors.

Here’s an example: When I had a little studio in Bucharest in the eighties I had to cross a park to get there. The pathways in that park were designed with right-angles. But the people didn’t use the pathways. They made their own one, short-cutting the angles in order to get to the other side. I didn’t have anything to do that day, I wasn’t under pressure to get home. I arrived at the park and I could have walked the two pathways, but I decided to win time and take the diagonal path on the grass instead. Then I got to the other side and there were some teenagers sitting on a bench. They didn’t have anything to do either. At the other end of the corner, there was a trashcan, and the moment I arrived, one of the teenagers threw a bottle on the floor. He could have walked to the trashcan, but he preferred to stay on the bench, as if to tell me: look, what you’ve done. You could have taken the pathway, but you decided to trample down the grass. He did a metaphor of what I was doing, without consciously knowing so.

Social paradox of filmmaking

There is a huge paradox in filmmaking. You make a movie, and you’re a humanist, your discourse is humanist and so is your film. But it is not humanist because the conditions under which you made the film are not. You’re doing exactly the opposite. You have to make concessions and compromises, you have to be violent. So can you unify your discourse with your life? I don’t know. Romanians say that you have to do what the priest tells you to do, not what he is doing. There’s a cruel difference, and maybe we can’t escape that paradox.

Final scenes

Sometimes scenes that want to conclude the proposition of the film have a problem. For example in *The Great Dictator*, where Chaplin gives his great humanist speech, as if good words would put things back into place. It’s risky. When I wrote the scenario for *Aurora*, I had only one thing in mind for the final scene: Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. The final moment at the police station, where they explain that he is psychotic, schizo or whatever. Why did they not cut before? I like Hitchcock, so it can be forgiven, but that scene is just too naive. I used to think it was the producer that imposed him to write that scene, as to calm the audience. He’s a paranoiac, so now that we know that he is mentally ill we can sleep peacefully because we are healthy.

Romanian film

I once thought that Romania doesn’t have a vocation for film. Romania wasn’t present during the invention of film. Romanians are perpetual beginners. There were lucky accidents like Pintilie, Ciulei or Daneliuc. Other countries like

Hungary are film countries. Even if they couldn't make films during communism, the spirit of film did not abandon them. Russia, Japan, USA, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, all these enormous cultures make films. And only once in a while little countries make films that seem to come out of nowhere. Romania is a rural culture. It's not an accident that the most famous Romanian artist is Constantin Brâncuși who worked with his hands. We are down to earth. Cinema is too abstract. Even now, I think we don't have theoretical tendencies for the films we make. That doesn't mean that we have to establish manifestos to articulate aesthetic ideals. But it means to think and do research on the objects we make. It is important to think film. People that are interested in analysis are very important because they see things a filmmaker will not see. Even the method a director uses to make a film is not the same he would use to analyze a film. Maybe the roads can cross, but it's vital to have people that are able to give a different point of view on the same subjects.

Critics don't have authority here because the system doesn't work. There are a lot of cities that don't even have cinemas. Of the 450 cinemas that existed during Ceausescu's time, there are some 80 or 90 left. So authority over what? And the four or five film distributors show American films. So to find a niche for your films is difficult.

Stranger in Romania

Romania helped me to feel like a stranger. When I returned to Romania in 1996, I wasn't part of a group. So when I wanted to produce my film, they said it's worthless arguing that the Swiss never made films. Only when I won that prize they started to look at me differently. My first film didn't have any success in Romania, they even tried to ban the film because of the language. But with prizes came peace.

The Romanian cinema was saved by the Palme d'Or for Mungiu's film. He was at the Film School in Bucharest, so he's one of them. They can say: Mungiu won the Palme d'Or, we won the Palme d'Or. It's like Nadia Comăneci, when everybody said "we won the gold medal". It's a strange mentality. In the end it's not the prize that counts, it's the films. But that prize is almost already history. It could have changed things, but we were too comfortable.

Western influence in Romania

In my district there was a cult for Germany. After the fall of communism, a lot of people left Romania. Most people went to Spain or Italy, but about thirty people from my neighborhood went to Germany which turned into a sort of promised land for them. So every summer they would return, and you could listen to their hymns on Germany. If you said the word Peugeot, they would

consider you the last of last. They were so in love with everything representing Germany. There was a guy who thought that he could recognize BMW types only by listening to the sound of the car's shutting doors. There were even some gypsies in the subway singing a song on "my mother Germany". It was crazy. Even before the fall, people were rejoiced in astonishment, looking at the labels of Whiskey bottles people had at home that they bought somewhere and refilled with tea. But you shouldn't culpabilize that. Romania has a young government, it is a young nation without an identity. We still try to articulate our identity.

Communication in Romanian films

In *Police, Adjective*, Porumboiu uses cinema to demonstrate something. A lot of films do that. In the same year, they also showed *Dogtooth* in the *Un certain regard* section at Cannes which is also a film about language problems. Both films focus on linguistic confusion and verbal perversion. So those problems are not specifically Romanian, they might be cinematographic. They didn't begin with Romanian cinema, and they won't end with Romanian cinema.

In fact, Romanian cinema doesn't exist. There are four or five filmmakers that try to articulate their vision of the world and that work here, in Romania, but to say that this is Romanian is an awkward declaration. Romanians for instance are very proud of a dish called Sarmale, which they call Romanian. It's a dish where meat is rolled into cabbage leaves, which you can find in India, in France, in Greece, in Turkey. Tastes might change, but the dish doesn't. So what I want to say about the story about communication and Romanian cinema is that it has nothing to do with Romanian cinema, but with life within a community. If you would place a camera into any society, inevitably it will record problems of communication.

So much about specific "Romanian" issues. To the other question concerning cinema, I think that films such as *Police, Adjective* or *Dogtooth* have another problem. I think that cinema, or art in general, should stay away from demonstration. Wherever there is demonstration, there are lies, manipulation, propaganda. Demonstrations only allow one possible discourse. But cinema means to be able to see, which is a lot. I can't carry a camera around with myself all the time, but everything we see everyday has a human logic. It's wonderful! So just look around yourself and then try and reconstruct step by step what you saw. The result will be a proposition, a question. If a film does not turn into a question, it is wrong because it tries to manipulate.

In "4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days", the women don't seem to decide about their fate. In almost all current Romanian films, even if they talk about women, men are in charge, and women are victims.

No, I don’t think that they are victims. You have to be precise. To say that the girls in *4 months* are Mr. Bébé’s victims is one thing, but to say that they are the victims of their own decisions is different. They are victims, but perhaps not because of something outside of themselves. To say that is to say the obvious. It is too simple. The question concerning culpability is very complicated. Can you really identify a culprit? If you can, then very often you are driven by the mechanism of the scape goat.
“It was the communist system” – but what’s the communist system? Look at yourself instead of running away from responsibility.

Romanian art, with films such as “4 months”, tries to take responsibility however, and was faster than other countries in doing so

Italian neorealism was even faster! In any way, to run away from the past is very human, but so is the need to say the truth. To put the camera into society and make films like *La Terra Trema* or *Paisa* for example was necessary for the people who made these films. But it’s not everybody’s need. Most Italians didn’t feel the urge to look at themselves and were against these films. They didn’t want to see *Ladri di bicicletta*. It’s the same here. I can’t stand it anymore. People say we’re destroying Romania’s image. But what is that supposed to mean? When I was in Vienna with my first film, a Romanian came up to me and asked why I didn’t film the mountains: “Our country is beautiful”! I don’t make films for tourists. But that’s how it is. People want to stick to the truths they tell themselves. For example, when I want to take a picture of my mother, she will say: “wait”, and then she will arrange her hair, turn her head to the side, and smile. It’s a reflex! Why can’t we be the way we are? We are too much at home in truths that are make-ups.

If you make films and you know the film industry, you are always endangered by make-up. The biggest danger is to make a film and say: “Voilà, le monde est comme ça”. That’s why I have a problem with demonstration. I just try to see, and then show what I see, and maybe what I see is what it is, or it isn’t. How can you show an affirmation and the contrary of that affirmation? I don’t want to undermine my own vision, but I want to show what I see without enforcing a period at the end. All films that are dear to me work that way.

I am very radical with Romanian films because they are very close. I succumb to them and that model. It’s like I am more intransigent with my children than with the children of others. So when I say these things about Corneliu’s films, I feel regret. I have a different vision of cinema.

Do you believe in God?

I believe in God. Of course, I don’t believe in the church, but I also don’t think that they don’t have a reason to believe in God. In every profession there are great minds. But after the fall of communism, people started believing in God again since religion was more or less forbidden during communism. So they went back to church and started watching religious Masses on television. I didn’t have any religious feeling watching that. But with cable TV, we also had Discovery Channel and all these programs on nature and on the human body. So watching that I said to myself that it’s impossible. This cannot be chance! The complexity of the human organism cannot be the fruit of chance.

We cannot make exact predictions because our minds don’t work fast enough. For example, when you throw a coin in the air, you will say that I can only guess with a 50% chance to be right on what side it will fall. But it’s not chance. It’s only that I am not made in a way that I can tell you the answer. If I had Terminator’s eye and a different brain, I could measure and calculate speed, weight of the coin, physical impulse, gravity, wind conditions, etc. and give you the correct answer right away. I could eliminate chance. But we have limits.

Even science works with fiction. For example the physician Heinz von Förster explained in an interview he gave when he was 91 that whenever his or other theories lack information, one has to invent so called particles. These particles fill out the lacking information. Every time you find a particle, you have an unanswered question. I really liked that because it proved that even scientists work with fiction. You have to see that old man, with his open eyes saying that even the most “scientific” explanation for the beginning of the universe is a fiction. I cannot not believe him. It’s so beautiful. You can’t say God doesn’t exist if you can’t say where you’re coming from.

We just circulate ideas that we receive: reproduction; egg and sperm; mother and father. Alright. That’s the configuration of an event. But that’s not how things work. If you put aside external ideas, and if you consider yourself as a little universe capable to think about the event of his coming into existence, you will be unable to say where you came from. You can formulate an hypothesis, but you yourself cannot provide any valid explanation. So you will stop looking for theories. That’s where science reaches its limits. Scientists such as Werner Heisenberg already understood that.