



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Cristi Puiu A Hero of Our Time

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**Abstract:**

Cristi Puiu is one of the exceptional representatives of contemporary cinema as a director, and as well as a screenwriter and actor. He is also one of the precursors of the Romanian New Wave movement. The Romanian New Wave Cinema is one of the most important artistic phenomena of the post-communist era. Cristi Puiu is the owner of many international cinema awards. His latest film, *Malmkrog* (2020), is a new and original example of cinematographical adaptation. *Malmkrog* has been adapted from Vladimir Solovyov's *War and Christianity Three Conversations* (1900). This is a philosophical text, similar to Plato's dialogues; At the same time, it encompasses an evolving global panorama accompanied by historical explanations and political and cultural debates of 19<sup>th</sup> century *fin de siècle*.

This study, focuses on Solovyov's identity and oeuvre after briefly introducing Cristi Puiu and his works, and then examines the film *Malmkrog* with descriptive method.

**Keywords:** *Cristi Puiu, Romanian New Wave Cinema, Malmkrog, Vladimir Solovyov, War and Christianity, Post Communism.*

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## Introduction

Great historical events cause great cultural changes. From historical or mnemonic perspective, through the processes before and after of these changes, the art of cinema is one of the environments where the sincere, humanistic and most importantly original definitions and interpretations of change take place. On this subject, 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and Dziga Vertov's avant-garde cinema (1920's), German Expressionist Cinema (1920's) during the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), Italian Neo Realism (1945-1955) after Second World War, French New Wave Cinema (the late 1950s and 1960s) towards 1968 can be given as examples.

Although, now the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution belongs to the historical past, Dziga Vertov's avant-garde formalism, a cultural reflection of this revolution, has an important place that is constantly updated in the Digital Revolution and accordingly New Media aesthetics. Taylor (1984:186) makes the following determination regarding Soviet Cinema in the 1920s: "cinema was also a new medium and this strengthened its appeal in a period of revolutionary ferment. Cinema represented tangible evidence of new technology in practical application for the creation of the new society and the new epoch". Taylor's determination is also confirmed by Lev Manovich (2013: 4) in the cyber-art formalism context as follows: " In a 1924 article titled, "The Birth of Kino-Eye," he (Dziga Vertov) writes: "Kino-Eye is understood as "that which the eye does not see...Kino-Eye as the possibility of making the invisible visible". Today, data visualization designers often use the same phrase "making the invisible visible" to describe how visualization can reveal patterns in the data".

In the chaotic, neurotic, decadent but highly creative cultural and artistic environment of the Weimar Republic, German Expressionist Cinema emerges as a crisis cinema and this cinema develops a new cinematic style in a society dominated by the traumas of war and where the footsteps of Nazism are heard.

Italian Neo Realism is a phoenix-cinema that emerged from the ruins of Second World War. If an example is given in this context, regarding the cinematographer of Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (1945) is one of the cult films of Italian Neo Realism: "Ubaldo Arata's photography was nothing short of a miracle work by skill, courage and sheer madness: the light was created by siphoning off electricity from an Allied headquarters for makeshift lamps; the negative on which that light impinged was composed of lengths of film, which had mostly expired, gleaned from warehouses..." (Di Giannatempo, 2000:17).

1968 is a turning point. It is a year that has become a symbol of many modern social transformations such as the revolt of university students in Paris, the Marxist and Maoist initiative, the strengthening of the feminist movement, transforming of existentialism into a philosophy of life and sexual emancipation. French New Wave Cinema is a movement that accompanies all these revolutionary changes. According to Toubiana (2006:151): "The sixties simply called for something else, a profound change in the way of perceiving things: noise, speed, rhythm, male-female relationships, the street, youth... The New Wave obviously embodied this, thanks also to actors: Jean-Paul Belmondo, Anna Karina, Bernadette Lafont, Stéphane Audran, Jean-Pierre Léaud, Françoise Dorléac, Marie-France Pisier, etc."

After the Romanian Revolution of 1989, the Ceaușescu Regime ended and the post-communist period began. Likewise, Romanian post-communism is a new historical beginning and an ongoing social process. Romanian artists show an energetic performance in this process, from painting to cinema, from literature to photography, in

many branches of art. Critical points of the post-communist Zeitgeist are found in these works. The collapse of totalitarianism naturally removed the barriers to artistic freedom of expression. Then, "in 1994 the Romanian National Center of Cinema was born" (Tutui, 2012:3). Thus, a new page was opened in the History of Romanian Cinema. Today, the success of Romanian Cinema has been proven many times over at the world's most important film festivals. Cristi Puiu with his movie, *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* (2005), Corneliu Porumboiu with his movie, *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006) and Cristian Mungiu with his movie, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007) are examples of it; "This trio of filmmakers are considered the symbolic fathers of the New Wave" (Harrison, 2016, para.3). The other directors who represent Romanian New Wave Cinema are Florin Șerban, Cristian Nemescu (1979-2006), Cătălin Mitulescu, Călin Peter Netzer, Radu Jude, Radu Muntean, Corneliu Porumboiu, Alexander Nanau, Adina Pintilie, and Radu Mihăileanu. Romanian New Wave Cinema directors continuously gain great success at international film festivals. Some examples of awards won by the directors of Romanian New Wave Cinema are as indicated below:

Cristi Puiu's *Cigarettes and Coffee* won Golden Bear for best short film at the 2004 Berlin International Film Festival

Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* won the Un Certain Regard at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival

Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest* won Caméra d'Or Prize (for best first film) at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival.

Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* won the Palme d'Or at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival

Cristian Nemescu's *California Dreamin'* won the Un Certain Regard at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival

Cristi Puiu's *Aurora* won Best Cinematography award at the 2010 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival

Călin Peter Netzer's *Child's Pose* won the Golden Bear at the 2013 Berlin International Film Festival

Radu Jude's *Aferim!* won the Silver Bear for Best Director at the 2015 Berlin International Film Festival

Radu Jude's *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* won the Golden Bear at the 2021 Berlin International Film Festival

### **The Features of Romanian New Wave Cinema:**

-Romanian New Wave Cinema's debut film is Cristi Puiu's *Stuff and Dough* (2001).

- Romanian New Wave Cinema is a common definition. One reason for this is that the directors representing this cinema have created an original genre with their independent styles and films.

- Romanian New Wave Cinema is a Post-Communist Era movement, and in the 2000s, the main subject of this new cinematographic vision is Post-Communist Romanianness as life, activity and mentality.

-The stories of ordinary people, which at first glance are told with the natural rhythm of daily life, turn into common dramas of the humanity at the end of the film

- "In terms of aesthetics...the films of the Romanian New Wave are united by a realist, almost documentary, austere and minimalist style than by black humor" (Tutui, 2012: 3).

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- Romanian New Wave Cinema has a distinctive social-realist genre. It includes clear observations about problems of Romania, but this attitude is free from actual or ordinary political speculations.

- We can say that the secret of the originality of Romanian New Wave Cinema is perhaps hidden in the following words of Cristi Puiu (2006): “ What is the point of making films or telling stories? There are too many stories already, and all these stories are the same. Well, maybe the point is to tell the same story differently”.

### **Cristi Puiu**

Cristi Puiu was born in 1967, in Bucharest, Romania. He studied at the ESAV (École Supérieure d'Arts Visuels), Geneva, Switzerland (1992-96). He graduated from ESAV with his dissertation film "25.12" Bucharest, North Railway Station" and his thesis titled "Notes on a Poetic Realist Cinema".

He is married to film producer Anca Puiu and father of three children. He is a polyglot person who speaks English, French and Romanian. He has also many academic and intellectual activities, institutional and festival memberships in the field of cinema and culture.

### **His movies:**

**Marfa și banii** (2001, Stuff and Dough)

This is a contemporary road movie; Ovidiu, a modest young man, carries a package to Bucharest for the mafia, which creates an adventurous journey.

**Un cartuș de Kent și un pachet de cafea** (2004, Cigarettes and Coffee )

The movie takes place in a restaurant in Bucharest. There, an unemployed father and his wealthy son talk about work and financial difficulties.

**Aurora** (2010),

Viorel, a divorced man in his 40s, wanders around Bucharest for a long time, acquires a gun and kills the people who he considers responsible for his divorce; he then surrenders to the police. Cristi Puiu interprets the role of Viorel himself.

**Moartea domnului Lăzărescu** (2005, The Death of Mr. Lazarescu)

A man living alone in Bucharest, Mr. Lazarescu feels unwell and calls an ambulance. The ambulance is delayed. Then they go from one hospital to the next, but none of which has an available place. Finally, Mr. Lazarescu's condition worsens.

**Trois exercices d'interprétation** (2013, Three Exercises of Interpretation)

This is a trilogy and an experimental adaptation of Vladimir Solovyov's Three Conversations realized as an actors' workshop project.

**Sieranevada** (2016)

In an apartment in Bucharest, members of a family gather to commemorate their deceased father. However, this is not just a family meeting, but an internal matter with historical and psychological dimensions.

**Malmkrog** (2020).

This movie is the second adaptation of Vladimir Solovyov's *Three Conversations* after “Three Exercises of Interpretation”. Puiu, previously interpreted Solovyov's work as aforementioned, in 2013 at les Chantiers Nomades Center in Toulouse. Then with Malmkrog (2020) he won The Best Director Award at the 70<sup>th</sup> Berlin International Film Festival. Indeed, this is a conversation story: At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a manor in the village of Malmkrog (Mălâncrav) in Transylvania, a group of aristocrats gather for a Christmas party.

Cristi Puiu, in “ Malmkrog”, also as the screenwriter of the movie has transformed the Mediterranean summer scene into a Romanian winter scene ; again

with the same people of transcript, he made minor changes within the group. Cristi Puiu's adaptation "Malmkrog offers one of the most extraordinary cases of adaptation in cinema history" (Martin, 2021: para.1).

**Cast of Malmkrog:** Agathe Bosch (Madeleine), Ugo Broussot (Edouard), Frédéric Schulz-Richard (Nikolai), Diana Sakalauskaitė (Ingrida), Marina Palii (Olga), István Téglás (Majordome).

### **Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1901)**

Vladimir Solovyov is one of the most interesting figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He is a close friend of Dostoevsky. There is an intense communication and interaction between them, as follows: "In national culture Solovyov owned Dostoevsky as his prophet" (Graham, 1915:VII). He is one of the pioneers of Theosophy. Theosophy is a new kind of modern humanism and a *fin de siècle* doctrine that is a multicultural, multilingual, esoteric and universal mysticism. According to Blavatsky (1890): "For many a long year the "great orphan," Humanity, has been crying aloud in the darkness for guidance and for light. Amid the increasing splendors of a progress purely material, of a science that nourished the intellect, but left the spirit to starve" (p.186). Helena Blavatsky, co-founder of theosophy was a self-proclaimed guide to illuminate the humanity. On the other hand, Theosophy is an ethical understanding that believes in the tangible power of the soul and is based on spiritual values. Thus, "The universal brotherhood of humanity is a truth of terrific proportions; for it involves responsibility for every act we perform, for every thought we generate" (Hargrove, 1897:222).

Similarly Solovyov has an extraordinary intellectual formation. He did theological, spiritualist and linguistic researches in England and Egypt. On these journeys, Sophia, who was a "female emanation of divine wisdom", accompanied him as a vision (Hare, 1958:29-31). In fact, Solovyov met The Beautiful Sophia three times in his life. Solovyov described in detail –mapping the itineraries of his spiritual and geographical journey- these encounters in his poem "Three Meetings" (1898): "while attending Liturgy in Moscow in 1862 (when he was nine years old), in the British Museum in London in 1875, and in the Egyptian desert outside Cairo in 1876" (Giragosian, 2014:53). A stanza of the poem is as indicated below:

*Three times you gave yourself to my living sight  
No phantom, no mere mind's flight  
As omen, aid, and as award,  
Your image answered my muffled call.* (Translated by I. M. Granger)

Vision of Sophia is similar to Emanuel Swedenborg's Vision of Christ. For both Swedenborg and Solovyov, these visions define the philosopher's mission or meaning of their existence that means spiritual guidance.

However, according to Solovyov's philosophical design, the existence of his Beloved Sophia is both Anima Mundi and Divine Wisdom and, she represents the formula for man to become supreme perfection (Kojève, 2018: 54-55).

But, Solovyov, although himself a theosophist and mystic, had clear and comprehensive global information about contemporary political facts and historical realities. In its simplest definition, he is an exceptional witness of his era. As a philosopher and poet, Solovyov has worked on many subjects such as the crisis of Western Philosophy, Christian unity, Jewish mysticism, but his last work titled *War and Christianity Three Conversations* (1900) exhibits also a very original literary creativity: "Solovyov in *Three Conversations* discourages an affirmative reading by creating a multiplicity of storytellers who recite poems and proverbs, relate stories, and

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make frequent references to questions of style, metaphor, and grammar in various language” (Deutsch Kornblatt, 2001: 306). Indeed, the text in question was formed by the articulation of three interconnected conversations designed like Plato's socratic dialogues. Solovyov (1915:X) underlines this literary design as follows: “Being afraid to compose out of my own head after the model of Plato and his imitators I began my transcript...”.

### **War and Christianity Three Conversations (1900)**

The scene of transcript is as follows: “ In the garden of one of those villas which, at the foot of the Alps, look down on the blue depths of the Mediterranean, there met one summer five Russians...”( Solovyov, 1915:IX).

Bakhtin's (1999:7) definitions of Dostoevsky's style also illuminate the literary structure of Solovyov's text: “Dostoevsky's major heroes are, by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse... Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel”. Therefore, there is the same polyphonic structure in Solovyov's work and the persons in the group are in the same manner as contemporary sophists who develop either together or individually a rethoric about human condition in eternal present time focusing especially on historical martial, religious and cultural conflicts.

These “Three Conversations” create an example of heteroglossia in sense of Bakhtin because, beside of persons of group, the voices of an another large group-philosophers, writers, poets, classical Russian authors, historical figures, kings, saints-are also heard.

Solovyov has critical and objective perspective. For instance, in First Conversation, Mr.Z speaks as follows: “It is possible to have a good war; it is also possible to have a bad peace” (Solovyov, 1915: 11).; in Second Conversation, Mr.Z underlines as follows one more time : : “I remember that in Turgenyev's “Smoke” somebody very justly observed: “progress is a symptom” (Solovyov, 1915:91). Thereafter each conversation begins with this Seneca's sentence: “Audiatur et altera pars” or in English “ Let the other side also have a hearing” (Stone, 2005:11). This expression is taken from Medea of Seneca (2020:14/line200):

*“Qui statuit aliquid parte inaudita altera,  
aequum licet statuerit, haud aequus fuit”.*

Solovyov (1915:IX) as a fantastic story-teller, describes his position in this environment as indicated: “ I was a silent listener to all their conversations”. Finally, this work has no end in the usual sense. The ending of the text is potential for new conversations, as form and as content.

### **The plot of the movie:**

In a manor in the village of Malmkrog (Mălâncrav) in Transylvania, a group of Russian aristocrats gather for a Christmas party; Landowner Nicolai, Prince Edouard, a politician, Ingrida, the wife of a general, Contess Olga, and Madeleine, a young lady. All together they discuss issues such as war, war crimes, war atrocities based on historical events, then evil, existence of God, Christianity, nature of culture, Russian-Slavic identity, Europeaness, the actual state of the world and finally the death and problematic of existence.

While this *fin de siècle* conversations of élite continues, István, the majordome, together with the other servants in a perfectionist way, maintains the order of the manor and the reception. Meanwhile, there is also an old, bedridden colonel in the house, whose blur presence is almost a *fin de siècle* metaphore.

The Christmas invitation continues, and outside there is a quiet, vast snowscape.

### **Mise en scène features**

Malmkrog is an historical film. However as it is indicated “cinema is the art that gives form to the history because it can show a historical reality by arranging the fragments according to an original and aesthetic organization: la mise en scène” (de Baecque, 2013:150)

The mise-en-scène of the film has a pictorialist aesthetic quality. “A series of fixed shots work as canvases, since Puiu generates subtle tableaux vivants in this film”(Delgado, 2020: para.6). Sometimes there are also *mise en abyme* images due to the paintings, windows and doors in the manor interior environment. We watch the movie on the screen, but at the same time we see the actors standing in front of the several frames like paintings, windows and doors.

*Mise en abyme*, in its simplest definition, means image within image, story within story. As a creative strategy, it was first described by André Gide in 1893, inspired by the historical coat of arms and he applied the mise en abyme technique in his various texts like *Narcisse*, *Tentative Amoureuse* or *The Counterfeiters*. This visual or literary technique in question is a duplication that enriches the expression. Gide (1963:31) gives some examples in his Journal: “The small and dark convex mirror found in some of Memling's or Quentin Metz's paintings... A slightly different, Vélasquez's Las Meninas... in literature the comedy scene in Hamlet ... the puppet scenes in Wilhelm Meister...”.

Besides, the cinematographic choreography of the film has an extraordinary fluidity throughout the perfectly pictorial compositions. This means a new cinematic experience that the visuality of film transforms simultaneously into an immersive, auratic portrait gallery.

### **Malmkrog is a *fin de siècle* film.**

The film is a *fin de siècle* film. Tudor Vladimir Panduru, the cinematographer of the film, and Dragos Apetri, Andrei Iancu, Bogdan Zarnoianu, who edited the film, transformed the historical and psychological features of *fin de siècle* described by Solovyov into a classical chronotope by their virtuosity. Consequently the movie has paradoxically silent and transparent narration despite its theatrical nature.

The actors and actresses are corporeal representatives of the Solovyov's philosophy. Extremely tragical historical events are narrated in a de-dramatic manner. This is a political coolness. Puiu made the following statement as cited in Cronk (2020): “I believe history and memory are very close to one another, and from a certain perspective quite dangerous, because history can be a subjective memory of fact” (As cited in Cronk, 2020).

The aristocrats of Malmkrog will probably disappear after a while, but for now, during the Christmas Eve, they are in conversation. They discuss frankly many issues or historical events that can only be said off-record, even today, especially nowadays. For example, Politician says: “*Il y a Européen et Européen*” (Solovyov, 1915: 83). Regarding the current significance of this text, Puiu (2020) makes the following statement: “It's crazy because I found it to be extremely revelatory—prophetic in a way, and in different ways. And also pretty sad in the end, because it shows that we haven't moved an inch”.

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From the point of view of film language, in this adaptation, Puiu's method of constation oscillates between Visconti's tragical decadence and Antonioni's cool objectivism. On the context of subject, Antonioni made the following determination cited by Deleuze(1989a:35): "If we are sick with Eros, we are sick because Eros himself is sick ... because he is captured in the pure form of the time". Again, according to Deleuze (1989b:35): "For Antonioni there is only chronic disease, Chronos is the disease itself".

"*Fin de siècle*" emerged in the 1890s and became also a cultural paradigm. *Fin de siècle* is a multifaceted phenomenon. It is a psychologically collective environment of melancholy because, a historical period is closing, a new one is beginning. Even though uncertainty and ambiguity prevail, social liberation processes are experienced. *Fin de siècle* is eventually a rich source of inspiration for artists and philosophers and currently it's an artistic topic. Even if we are not historically in the time of *fin de siècle*, *fin de siècle* is a perfect metaphor for political and cultural criticism. One critic (1893:9) elaborated on this *fin de siècle* as indicated: "How did they rise so suddenly! Oh, there have been mighty pioneers for the *fin de siècle* movement. Only to mention a few among the dead, Wagner, Schopenhauer, Walt Whitman, Taine, Rossetti, Darwin, Poe, Manet; and among the living, Ibsen, Tolstoj, Monet, Puvis de Chavannes, Zola, Nietzsche etc. This mighty age began with Napoleon and Goethe and apparantly will end with *fin de siècle* art and Utopian aspirations...With gigantic strides we will pass through the coming centuries!... Let us go from darkness to light, from light to darkness, and again, to light, to the light of lights".

### **Malmkrog is a multilingual movie**

Malmkrog is a multilingual movie: the landowner and guests eventually speak French- because Russian aristocrats preferred French-, Majordome István speaks also Hungarian and German and the servants speak Romanian. Multilingual movie genre is a relatively new cinema genre that began to evolve in the 1980s and it has been determined first time by Chris Wahl in 2005. A multilingual film director can apply various linguistic strategies; he or she can use several languages simultaneously or discover old languages or invent new ones.

"A multilingual movie has a particular esthetic because multilingualism shapes ontologically multilingual movie. In the context of multilingual movie as a genre, cinematography and film editing should be realized as visual equivalents of linguistic mobility, navigation between different languages, cultural specificities of different languages and the variable nature of speakers of different languages" (Atay, 2019:152).

Malmkrog, as a representation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *fin de siècle* is now a lost microcosm. Puiu updated Solovyov's design, creating ametaphore for our era. However, in developing so, his main territory is French Language. For this reason, Puiu constructs his historical criticism in French or Lingua Franca that is the language of 19<sup>th</sup> century modern culture and civilization.

On the other hand, we are living historically in the second *fin de siècle*, but there is no specific time for *fin de siècle* psychology anymore; also, *fin de siècle* has become one of many postmodern aesthetic contexts. Meanwhile communism was an utopian aspiration in 19<sup>th</sup> century; In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this utopia was realized and then turned into a dystopia. Now, there is just post-communism.

The magic of the Malmkrog is mnemonic; At the time of Christmas 1900 and every time we watch this movie, the present historical perspective allows to remember



the future. This is perhaps the “Blochian reconciliation of the past and future” (Geoghegan, 1990:59).

### Epilogue

As known, on the night of November 10, 1619, René Descartes had three dreams; in the third dream he finds an anthology titled CORPUS POETARUM and reads a verse written at the beginning of the book: “*Quod vitae sectabor iter?/ What path of life shall I pursue?*” (Feuer, 1963:5). There is no instant answer to this question, in that it is the beginning of any infinite research process in any area. Solovyov's vision, Descartes' dream, are always in search for wisdom between mysticism and rationalism!

After all, Cristi Puiu, as a film director and comrade of all these mighty historical figures participates to shape the cultural profile of our postmodern, post-communist, post-truth era by his films and he gives us aesthetic and philosophical clues to evaluate actual “*Quod vitae sectabor iter?*” adventures.

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