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The Aesthetics of *Discomfort* in Cristi Puiu's *Aurora*

Abstract: This paper discusses the spectator's discomfort triggered by Cristi Puiu's film *Aurora*. In 2010, when it was launched, the film stirred heated controversy between those who labelled it as masterpiece and those who were bothered by the dreariness contemplated by the Romanian filmmaker. Starting from the critics' reactions, Puiu's public interventions and a series of audience reception theories, the paper sets to explain why the film *Aurora* causes unease.

Keywords: Cristi Puiu, Romanian New Wave Cinema, Realism, *Aurora*, 2010, *Discomfort*, Audience Reception Studies, Observational Cinema, Hyperrealism.

Films planned and created under the aesthetics of a realistic observational wave — with long takes and (detached, falsely objective) ordinary events — are a mental and physical challenge to the spectator. Most of them are dull, difficult to watch, seem to claim some sort of originality that means an intellectual commitment, therefore, exhaustion. This trend is not new. One can say and would not be wrong that to record reality, even in dull ways, was the goal of cinema in the first years of cinema too, starting with the first films made by the Lumière Brothers in 1890s and 1900s, but at a more assumed and conscious level it started a bit later and has been refined over the decades since. *Le jour se lève* (d. Marcel Carné, 1939), *Roma città aperta* (d. Roberto Rossellini, 1945) and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (d. William Wyler, 1946) can be

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seen as the basis of this possible list. Carné, Rossellini and Wyler, apart from a few other filmmakers in the same family of creators, can be considered the predecessors — or even the inventors — of an organic cinema. The phrase *organic cinema* is based on the term 'organic' which, according to the dictionary is defined as, "structured as an organism, by forming a differentiated and unified whole; organized, unified, inseparable; which results from the organization, from the construction itself of a thing; essential, inner, interior."

Therefore, the organic cinema is the type of essential filmmaking that gives films closed to the natural, to the idea of observational cinema, where things occur apparently without *exterior* intervention, as if without being first deigned by the filmmaker; the latter merely caught them while they were happening. Usually, this type of cinema must focus on daily, non-sensational, truly ordinary events that occur in a society as close as possible to our reality. At the same time, the cuts in the editing must be as few as possible, hence the long and rather static takes, which show the normal pace of things in an individual's life. Thus, this type of cinema relies on events taken as directly as possible from the real life, shooting outside the sets and, perhaps the most important aspect, of a cinema that would integrate in its narrative a series of marginal or nondramatic events, for which the representatives of a conventional cinema would have no interest, because these moments would uselessly stretch, prolong or hinder suspense.

This characteristic may be represented most faithfully by Michelangelo Antonioni: his panoramic views, abandonment of music, of subjective angles, of the shot/counter-shot technique, his characters' tendency to experience their dispositions with their back turned to the camera – all these are an inceptive peak of this ethics. From a type of cinema created somewhat involuntarily in the 40s, we can comprehend the way in which Italian neorealism consciously promotes these practices. As Doru Pop states in connection with the way this movement intersects with the new Romanian wave, "we are feeling close to the character, yet detached since these are heroes who lack the 'classical' deep motivation for their actions" (55). The characters are simply opaque, most of the spectators being unable to understand their intentions and actions. The 60s refine these practices furthermore, and *Cléo de 5 à 7* (d. Agnès Varda, 1962) or *Blow-Up* (d. Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966) reinforce the idea of an almost documentary-style cinematography¹, which could happen in real time. After the 70s, especially in Europe², this way of filmmaking receives more and more attention, even though it remains a rather marginal tendency, if we compare it to the "wide" *mainstream* practices, with cuts every several seconds, with the removal of any event which is thought to brake the burst of rhythm and, thus, useless in the depiction of landscape. *A Woman Under the Influence* (d. John Cassavetes, 1974), *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (d. Chantal Akerman, 1975), *The Seventh Continent* (d. Michael Haneke, 1989), *Festen* (d. Thomas Vinterberg, 1998), *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (d. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010) *Deux jours, une nuit* (d. Jean-Pierre Dardenne,

Luc Dardenne, 2014) or *Sorry We Missed You* (d. Ken Loach, 2019) are illustrative of such an evolution. The aforementioned films rely on different (inter)national geographies, temporalities and movements, but together they define the tendency of an extremely niched cinema, which has the spectator face a number of uncertain narrative situations, with debatable answers given the vagueness or, at any rate, the absence of a film discourse we could call *explanatory*.

This is the line followed by *Aurora* (2010) as well — directed by Cristi Puiu, nominated for *Un Certain Regard Award* at Cannes. With each approach, we can speculate at the fact that Puiu seems to pursue a series of beliefs — relating to a specific state of discomfort at the spectator; with it, Puiu's films display an increasingly more important and assumed integration of the hyper-realist theoretical basis. *Aurora* is a benchmark of discomfort for the entire *Romanian New Cinema*. It is undoubtedly the extreme part in a film gearing that had already become a national wave with global (technical, aesthetic, sociological, ideological) tones; this feature is given precisely by the focus on an international film language, which emphasizes the ambiguity of the illustrated reality and the author's distance from his own subject (Toderici 150). Here, Puiu is not a pioneer, but we will see that he is a filmmaker more than able to master this way of making films.

However, before moving on to the analysis of *Aurora*, it would be sensible to briefly understand the extent of discomfort in art, regarding its form and the way in which it was and can be constructed.

One of the most striking positions on this type of aesthetic comes from Frederick Luis Aldama and Herbert Lindenberger, who build their academic journey as a daring dialogue, contributing to current aesthetic theory by debating aesthetically challenging works, and the relationship between creator, artifact, and consumer. The two researchers identify different aesthetics of discomfort throughout history of art and culture, such as in music: John Cage's nontonal music (112, 113); Merce Cunningham's "no relation between the dance and the music" (115); in painting: Francis Bacon's "picture of blood on the sidewalk" (3); Pablo Picasso's "many raw (brutal even) depictions of women" (30); Willem de Kooning's "woman portraits that have continued to rankle feminists for their alleged misogyny" (147); Margaret Bourke-White's "photos of Nazi victims taken as the American army was still fighting in Germany" (150); Goya, seen as "the first major visual artist to exploit [the war] in his print series *Disasters of War* (1810–20), which shocks the viewer in much the same way as earlier depictions of hell" (141); or in literature and theatre: "Shakespeare's early play *Titus Andronicus* (1589–90) contains not only ordinary murder but rape, the amputation of a tongue and hands, and, at the end, a well-planned Thyestian meal in which Queen Tamara discovers that the pie she has just eaten was composed of her two sons" (157, 158); James Joyce's "discomforting work all while appreciating how he deforms classic patterns of grammar and generic forms" (9), managing to "awaken the usual feelings of disgust that

hit you when you confront feces in literature. Joyce opened up this world when he showed Leopold Bloom defecating in his outhouse in the Calypso episode” (47).

Last but not least, the authors introduce to their discussion filmmakers attracted by this aesthetic of discomfort. For example, they analyze the rape scene in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*: “within the *mise-en-scène*, too, there is a beauty in the furniture and architecture. It's all beautifully filmed; Kubrick creates in us viewers a cognitive dissonance where we experience two opposing feelings” (165). This dissonant combination between a harmonious cinematography and a repulsive event is even more visible in Pasolini's film *Salò, or 120 Days of Sodom*. Here, one can identify at least one form of discomfort that affects the viewer in a way that no other one does, which is the disgust:

Although I was able to maintain a degree of composure while watching most of the atrocities depicted in the film — the repeated rapes, the murders, the dismemberments, even the forced eating of nails — what was called the Circle of Shit proved too much for me. [...] Although I had felt nausea in the many scenes of Sade's original novel in which other people's excrement is swallowed, the visual portrayal in the film brought me close to vomiting (and this despite my normally iron stomach). And the horror even seemed amplified by the elegant settings of that great film designer Dante Ferretti. (161)

As we can understand, the international cinematographic context in which Cristi Puiu works is full of uncomfortable movies and works of art. As mentioned, he is not a pioneer in this regard. Coming to the present, we can identify more and more such awkward movies and even national waves recognized for their weird approaches (Austria, Greece). There are many contemporary filmmakers who became known for this type of cinema, which causes a great deal of discomfort to the public. Some of them come from: Denmark (Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg), France (Bruno Dumont), Austria (Michael Haneke, Ulrich Seidl), Greece (Giorgos Lanthimos, Athina Rachel Tsangari, Ektoras Lygizos), Hungary (György Pálfi), USA (Harmony Korine, Gus Van Sant) — to name just a few. When discussing films such as Lars von Trier's *Dogville* or Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers*, Nikolaj Lübecker emphasizes the following question: “what do these directors think they can achieve by establishing a disturbing or an outright antagonistic relation to the spectator that they would not be able to communicate in any other way?” (3). In other words, what is their purpose when deciding to make such uncomfortable pieces of art? Furthermore, “how do the various films produce the feel-bad experience?” (4).

These are all important questions, which we will try to answer in regard to Puiu's *Aurora*. It is not enough, as a filmmaker, to want to impregnate a state into the spectator; as a filmmaker, you have to be able to achieve it by knowing how to manipulate the cinematic language. For example, an interesting discussion — which is relevant for Puiu's case as well,

as we will see — centers on Lars von Trier, who makes extra-ordinary thrillers. Why is that? Because the spectator embarks on the ride expecting something will be terrifying indeed, but in the same time he or she hopes that everything will end safely and happily. “But what if your train gets stuck in the middle and you and the other passengers have no idea if and when it will reach its destination — or even if the train behind you may crash into you?” (Aldama and Lindenberger 155).

With these ideas in mind, we can understand an important difference between conventional rough films and the ones which, in the end, do not offer their spectator a clear answer, a feel-good ending, or a reassuring conclusion.

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To better comprehend the motivations of Cristi Puiu for his type of cinema, a discussion on the aesthetics of the discomfort in *Aurora* can start from the one who generated it, i.e. from Puiu himself, and it can be built on his ideas on cinema, which he expressed in a number of interviews or public interventions. Several years ago, Puiu stated that between *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* and *Aurora* there is a difference of the approached topic — while the aesthetics is approximately the same and, since the more recent one is not focused on a general problem that most people might face, it tends to be more exhausting. In other words, it was very likely that *Lăzărescu* would build empathy, while in the case of the other film these chances are lower. This is a conscious choice by Puiu:

Lăzărescu had benefitted from one very simple help: it includes doctors. And the doctors are the representatives of a profession with which we are in contact very early in our lives. The spectators were protected, everybody knew the thing about doctors, they could guess their own situations here. With *Aurora*, there is an understandable reluctance. An explainable aspect, just like the suspicion and the unease prompted by the film. Because the problem of this film is not that it extends over three hours. There are three-hour films you can watch without any problems. Because they are undemanding. They tell you a story you already know. (A. M. Sandu 2010)

This is exactly the *problem* with *Aurora*. It requires quite some patience and it is demanding at all times, a hardly digestible situation for an audience not necessarily drawn to the topic — the murderous journey of an ordinary man, who thus cannot find any refuge. In this sense, *Aurora* is the type of film meant to generate a deep fissure between those who believe it is a somber, challenging, demanding masterpiece, a stronghold of the *arthouse* film, which rejects any commercial compromise, and those who read it as an experiment of film torture and find it unbearably long, dreadful, nihilistic and, even worse, tedious (Grădinariu). *Aurora* does not give in to any commercial compromise and this is precisely what accounts for its negative reception. The film is irritating even for the more specialized part of the criticism which is

more drawn to dynamic films, the topics of which are exterior of the sphere of the ordinary. A more detached mediation shows the witting, lucid movement of Puiu's career toward of an observational approach of minimum resources. Starting from *Stuff and Dough* (2001), he tried to make us feel uncomfortable in the film theater each and every time. He proposed a deeply cognitivist-reflexive reception which could prompt personal analyses, in favor of the spectator's self. For this reason, its realism is profoundly organic, each gesture is mirrored by another one, nothing is left at random in the universes it opens (Buja 5-7).

This intervention moves closer to the theorizing of Puiu's view — an almost documentary view; we will deal with this syntagm later. The Romanian filmmaker creates his films — and we can note an evolution with each of them — on the idea that each action should be substantiated and the matching reaction should be as normal as possible, taken from an *as real as possible ordinary context*; this means an environment in which sometimes the subjects do not act rationally and logically according to a diagram where a situation A is equal with a situation B, hence both from A and from B an equal event C would result. At Puiu, even if situation A is equal with situation B (where A and B are the beginning of the film plot, therefore they can be read as an initial situation), the result can be both the event C and the event D, where C and D are different. The context as envisaged by Puiu suffers constant transformation, hence the modeling, each time somewhat different, of a character's evolution. This alleged changes, from one case to another one, may or may not entail various endings. The fact that the society operates with specific constraints and rules, added to Puiu's hyperrealism³ (Quinlivan 152), means that the narrative path in Puiu's films is, however, unlikely to diverge from the route initially conceived by the director. Nevertheless, the important aspect is that these deviations are possible and that we do not know when they may occur. Thus, the difference between consumer films, which are easy, and Puiu's, which are more encrypted, non-explanatory, is the fact that the observed "subjects" do not know that they are followed, which means the possibility that their conversations, unlike the conservations of characters in a regular film, be deprived of the type of references that allow the spectator to better understand the relations between characters. The immersion in such a type of uncertainty, which sometimes generates mystery, some other times mere baffle, threatens to cause discomfort amid the audience (Schenker 2010).

We may label Puiu's cinema as an organic one, and we can also note a type of professional evolution in his regard. The Romanian filmmaker has reached a point where he can control the illustrated environment, by making it appear purely random, even though it is planned thoroughly. At the same time, (t)his type of cinema may irritate patient spectators, as well as critics who understand its aesthetic and theoretical premises. The film line to which Puiu adhered, which is extremely niched, is one aspect to discuss in this case study. Starting from all the issues described before, we can attempt a preliminary conclusion, according to which in Puiu's (and not only his) opinion, prior to the film aesthetics, the director's formal

choices, the topic could be the one to generate (mental) discomfort. Most of the times, we do not ask about the type of aesthetic convention applied to a film; what we do ask is *what it is about*. This happens because we try to relate to it with the help of other films and because we want to overlap the reality of the filmic world on our near, and known, reality; we try to find in it *a story we already know*, to allow us to stay in our comfort zone or to create it beforehand. It is precisely as an extension of this idea to which Puiu speculates and alludes in the beginning of the book ‘Tăietorul de lemne’/ The Woodcutter of the Romanian post-war writer Mircea Ciobanu⁴ — “the writing gains autonomy, it claims its right to become a world” (P. G. Sandu 2007): “The message must be included in the overall communication rather than be seeped word by word in the reader’s ear.” The story must work organically and you, as a spectator, must avoid being caught in comfortable formulae (A. M. Sandu 2010).

The difference of focus between *Lăzărescu* and *Aurora* signals an increase of Puiu’s trust in his own means. As compared to Lăzărescu Dante Remus’ tragedy, Viorel’s drama is significantly more obscure. Puiu goes from a topic that caught the general attention — the disorders of the healthcare system in Romania, to a more personal one — how a murderer acts; the killings turn him into a murderer. In *Aurora*, we can see an apparently normal man, without behavioral deviations, whose speech and actions are balanced, who is able to relate socially in a normal manner — seen in the fact that he lends money to a colleague in trouble or that he does or receives various (quite practical) visits, who has interpersonal relationships (a possibly erotic one), who renovates his flat — actions which prove that, despite a painful divorce (which triggers all the present events), he seems to seek to keep his existence afloat, to *rebuild his life*. In many of the sequences, Viorel seems the coolest interlocutor, but we can detect his slight distancing from fellows who, in his opinion, may as well form *a confederacy of dunces*. He does not really want to see them, but he has no say in it. This is why his attitude is cold, somewhat superior. The long periods of silence before answers that are at any rate readily uninvolved show the lack of the desire to engage in a real conversation. What he does is to communicate matters he cannot express otherwise than verbally or to answer when he sees his interlocutors may become aggressive unless he confirms their opinions in relation to aspects that are insignificant at all events. Viorel avoids any conflict that may threaten his plan. Here, the sequence with the flooding of the flat is illustrative: his neighbor wants to solve the problem caused by his son and tries to reach an agreement by insisting that the *repairs cannot amount to more than 50 lei*. Viorel does not seem interested in the money, because he was *anyway renovating*, but the uncertainty he causes is unbearable for this neighbor — an intellectually average man, with ambitions that relate strictly to his own survival — so, in the end, Viorel agrees with him, to avoid any potential conflict. It is only Stelian, his widowed mother’s boyfriend, that he confronts directly and with whom he seems to diverge from his self-imposed behavior, but in fact he does it only to clarify an aspect and to ease his evolution, by sensing a threat more

significant than he is ready to accept:

If there's another rightful owner of these things, that is me and don't even think that Puşa can't see how you're trying to cozy up with others, so you'd better rework your plans. (...) Maybe you, Stelian, aren't getting your hooks into other people's things and maybe you are serious about Puşa because you like her, but please leave me alone. I don't like you and you should have seen that a long time ago. It's chemical and it's epidermal and your sense of humor actually bothers me, so please, stay away from me.

Furthermore, this is the first somewhat less obscure conversation and it occurs midway through the film (after one hour and a half). Although Viorel has already killed two people (of four), this dialogue is the first real confrontation. The previous conversations, with his former father-in-law, with his neighbor, his work mate etc., are partial confrontations because there he avoids open conflict. The protagonist is aware that the said interlocutors (work mate, former father-in-law, neighbor etc.) cannot interfere with his *plan*, while Stelian is unfortunately likely to appear in some of the worst moments and this is why he needs to confront and remove this risk.

This moment has a twofold purpose. The spectator may say that, finally, something *palpable* and *dynamic* is happening, but Viorel's overwhelming candor imposes the physical discomfort to the audience's mind, too, who may think a long time about the film and its scenes, who may be troubled by the character's actions and by the filmmaker's choices. Then, toward the end, after the second double murder, Viorel is unleashed. Since he fulfilled his primary objective, he is now free to solve other older conflicts. However, since this is an *anti-pattern film*, he cannot find those he wants to confront, so, prompting a sense of authenticity, Puiu *has* Viorel abandon the meetings he is seeing, from the last day's agenda, only the final scene remaining the one imagined a priori.

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When he/she watches *Aurora* — especially in a film theater, a form of cognitive dissonance may appear in the spectator's mind used to films that relax him; this cognitive dissonance is defined as a specific conflict between a belief and an action (Mock 322). Before we discuss why this feeling may appear, we should follow a theoretical case proposed by Leon Festinger and James Merrill Carlsmith:

Assume a couple leaves their home in the city for the seaside, where they plan to spend a whole day and night. They have already paid 100 dollars in advance in order to book a hotel room. While they are travelling by car, they can see the sky getting clouded and, as time passes, it turns frightening; we also assume they don't really feel well. Our couple could reach an agreement that, given the circumstances,

the time spent at the beach would not be pleasant. Perhaps they'd rather spend their day and night together at home, feeling comfortable and without the stress of so long a trip. Will they go back home? This is exactly the problem described earlier: to lose 100 dollars and to be in a pleasant place or to lose 100 dollars and be in a less pleasant place. Since the 100 dollars are lost at any rate, it's better to feel well than not. (Mock 367–368)

Festinger and Carlsmith anticipate that, undoubtedly, one of the partners will object, saying that, if they go back, they lose the money. Nevertheless, the money is lost in what is an *irrecoverable cost*, so they have to decide between a place where they want to be (at home) and a place where, given the circumstances, they do not want to be (any longer) (the hotel room); the money issue — the waste of money — is clear. However, cognitive dissonance appears precisely because the decision to go back home means the waste of money. There is a possibility to continue the trip, despite the risk of an already significant discomfort; the reasoning is based on the fact that the *waste* of money should, at any rate, be prevented. The effect of the *irrecoverable cost* beats the effect of a day potentially worse than it already is — hence the choice to continue the trip, with the hope of a decrease of cognitive dissonance.

The discussion relates to *Aurora* in the following manner: the spectator, who has paid for a ticket, is aware of spending some financial and physical resources — the simple trip to the film theatre to the detriment of another potentially more relaxing activity —, so he/she continues to invest, by raising the stakes and staying to see the film, in order to decrease the already existing cognitive dissonance since he/she is in front an audio-visual object that makes them feel uncomfortable, that pushes them outside their *comfort zone*. This cognitive dissonance relates sooner to the psychological discomfort, because the unpleasantness is protracted — certainly, there is immediate physical discomfort seen in a state of unrest, of boredom, of pain caused by sitting for a longer time than usual; usually, it is felt exclusively on the spot, because later it may be forgotten. Here, we can see the convention established by the dominating group of producers: a *normal* film does not *usually* exceed two hours and when it does the subsequent sequences must have a solid reason, they must be spectacular and should maintain interest by standardized methods. But, similar to the couple on the road, the spectator, too, chooses to sit until the ending credits, hoping that their discomfort is repaid by relaxing events on the screen — a reward which fails to be delivered. At least, not as it is usually *solved in the end*, a solution to which most of the filmmakers adhere, irrespective of how brutal a film is, in order to follow the mainstream ideology. An ideology which operates considerably with happy, hopeful endings, which means the large group of spectators is easily controllable by films which are devices able to convey accurately the illusion of reality. By using Freud's theories, Baudry likens the film with a simulacrum and,

although aware that it is not a dream, it works the same way:

It reproduces an impression of reality, it unlocks, releases a cinema effect which is comparable to the impression on reality caused by dream. The entire cinematographic apparatus is activated in order to provoke this simulation: it is indeed a simulation of a condition of the subject, a position of the subject, a subject and not reality. (707)

The fact that the spectator is caught by the “impression” or illusion of film reality makes him perceive an image as real, a direct means of seeing the world, although the point of view is created precisely by this apparatus, which perpetuates the spectator’s disavowal of the fact that the perception of reality is determined only through representation. What emerges here is the specific function fulfilled by the cinema as support and instrument of ideology (Baudry 703). Reception is manipulated prominently by

the darkness of the movie theater, the relative passivity of the situation, the forced immobility of the cine-subject, and the effect which result from the projection of images, moving images, the cinematographic apparatus brings about a state of artificial regression. It artificially leads back to an anterior phase of his development — a phase which is barely hidden, as dream and certain pathological forms of our mental life have shown. In this way, the separation between one’s own body and the exterior world is not well defined. Following this line of reasoning, one may then be able to understand the reasons for the intensity of the subject’s attachment to the images and the process of identification created by cinema. (Baudry 703–704)

Nevertheless, *Aurora* tries to avoid working mot-à-mot with these precepts. Puiu intends that the staging should be as obvious as possible and the spectators should be aware that they are watching a film. The wide and long takes are illustrative of this idea, as compared with close ones, which make the rule in commercial filmmaking. *Aurora* reminds us at all times that we are dealing with a film, with a construct, and this is why it does not hide its residues; it leaves them in plain sight, it works with them, it integrates them. This does not mean Puiu can reject ideology completely or that he can transcend the limits of filmmaking, but what he does do is to seek these limits, to push them as far as possible. „He is keen in testing the limits of the identification with the camera” (Pop 72), somehow toying with his spectators. For this reason, the rule within which the spectator witnesses the simulacrum is circumvented – in plain words, it no longer exists here, as if the exception were the rule and the rule, the exception –, which creates unease, because a less used, uncommon practice is applied, with which the general audience is not familiar. Puiu breaks the balance; because he eliminates the means and the steady points on which classic filmmaking relies. But it does not mean the illusion disappears: it lingers, by the deconstruction of the apparatus, a procedure that gives

a maximized manipulation of the audience. Puiu does not try to deceive the spectator, as it happens in conventional movies, but imposes a significantly more pressing truth, through which he fights against the *film as body of purely unconscious manipulation*. He chooses to manipulate *in plain sight*.

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Puiu said on the discomfort created by the film length that, with *Aurora*, “people complain about its duration and about how they get lost in a narrative that fails to show any type of kindness to the spectator. The story unfolds right in front of their eyes and the spectators are invited to rework the puzzle. And this does not suit them. It troubles them. But, I have to say it, this was the only truly valid solution of an author who recounts an experience he did not try.” (A. M. Sandu 2010). Therefore, the subject of a film may tangle the anticipations of an audience who often goes to the cinema to relax. We talk about an audience who wants to watch standard, mentally undemanding stories. But Puiu is not the kind of director who creates in order to favor relaxation; against it, he chooses to break the convention. He breaks the barrier and undermines the conventions with which we are used by the classic cinema. In some film theaters, among which the former Arta (Cluj-Napoca, Romania), where I saw the film for the first time, the screen format and, perhaps, of the film sent for the projection, let the microphones placed above the actors be seen, in several scenes. In the digital format, the microphones cannot be seen.

It is another element of confusion to which we also add that, for approx. one hundred and eighty minutes, Puiu does not indicate, nor does he reiterate, the classic points of reference. This means those where the story begins, the protagonist’s purpose is described as clearly as possible, then several barriers he must overcome, and then the denouement comes with the solution, not with the explanation, which is not necessary (any longer).

In *Aurora*, the explanation is at the end, but not only does it provide a half-answer, but it adds to the confusion — it is the not *regular* ending. In the final discourse — which we will discuss, the murderer justifies his deeds so clearly, so rationally, so cold, that *our* entire world view is blown to pieces, because he *sets outside the normal* the representatives of the law and makes them seem exaggerated, unprofessional, slightly uninvolved and not at all prompt. For this reason, even if it may not seem so, *Aurora* can be seen as an honest film, which remains true to its spectators. Why? Because Puiu’s view is not tributary to box-office success, but it does relate to the representation of ordinary things, in interminable takes. He says he is offering three hours and he does not ask anything from anyone; therefore, if you watch it in a film theater, you can come in and exit one minute later. Or you may choose not to come in at all. Or you may sit through all the 180 minutes. Puiu says he is not putting anyone in chains to watch his film, hence the honesty of the author-spectator relationship; before the film is projected, the spectator says, “My god, a 3-hour movie?! That is a lot!” It’s a lot as compared with what? Perhaps with the span of a *drosophila melanogaster*’s life. And this is

how we are back to the discussion on the brain that has specific patterns and rules. And here we are producing our timers and meters and we say, three hours is a lot.” (Vasilescu 2010) shows Puiu.

Apart from its length, *Aurora* disquiets and irritates precisely because it emphasizes bluntly some realities we tend to avoid, because we know that, if we acknowledge them, we will suffer. Therefore, we choose to live an unnatural reality, filled with lies and illusions. But Viorel has already embraced his new life and therefore he wants to awake from his nightmare; he lost his wife, his two daughters and the life he made for himself. Cristi Puiu points out this loss and for this reason, in *Aurora*, we are also talking about the aesthetics of the protagonist's *discomfort*, not only the spectator's — Puiu materializes his discontent in the alter ego who, as a proof, is the filmmaker's creation, the character equivalent with the supreme alienated, but in an upside down world: an ignorant and indifferent world, whose reins are well held by leaders to lead by choosing to number each of its citizens. Thus, each individual become only a number in a register, deprived of a real voice which could be heard. By means of his films, Cristi Puiu seeks also to protest against this arrangement.

But the film's specificity does not end here. To the question *Which is the greatest discomfort that it (Aurora) could cause (to the audience, our note)?*, Puiu answers that the spectator should try to throw overboard the entire ballast made from expectations, illusions and mental projections and watch what happens and does not happen on the screen, careful to what is said and left unsaid in the film — and to allow himself the privilege of seeing the aspects the shooting camera cannot observe/record. He concludes that he knows this is almost impossible and, with most of the people, it would cause unrest and discomfort (Chirilov 2011). Puiu wants to emphasize in all his interviews and public interventions the necessity of a *realist* cinema — called *psychological* by André Bazin⁵, in relation to which Andrei Gorzo notes:

Although in real life, too, we do have our eyes focus on this or that object — which interests us or draws us -, these mental adjustments occur post-factum. The event does not cease to exist as a whole, *each* of its parts claims attention; we are the one who select this or that aspect instead of another one, because this is what our feelings or thought dictate. Someone else could make another selection. At any rate, we are *free* to create our cutting: another 'creation', another cut, to change radically the subjective aspect of the event, this is possible at any time. (2012 27)

Although discomfort is also caused by the fact that the spectator, typically used to a clear disclosure of all the significant details that build the motivation, here, has to acknowledge puzzlement, because he has to search for the points of reference on his own and he is not sure his conclusions can correspond to reality. Used to an even key of comprehension-interpretation of the film product, here the spectator has to make choices the *accuracy* of

which is uncertain. Aware of the limitations of the seventh art, which he wants to avoid as much as possible, Puiu says the most ambitious intent of the film was to cast out the demon hidden inside the filmmaking mechanism. “And I don’t know if I managed it”, he concludes (Chirilov 2011). This *demon* is given by the fact that filmmaking has a series of limits according to which, irrespective of how detached a film is in relation to what it describes, it will always indicate to the spectator the decryption key: of course, some filmic acts are more explicit, others are more obscure in their own means, but absolute objectivity is not present in cinema, just as there isn’t in any of the arts. In the end, perfect objectivity and perfection are almost impossible or unlikely attributes to obtain. In this regard, Kant stresses that

the objective purposiveness is grounded either on the internal possibility of the object, or on the relative possibility of its external consequences. In the first case the teleological judgment considers the perfection of a thing in accordance with an end that lies in it itself (since the manifold elements in it are related to each other reciprocally as end and means); in the second the teleological judgment about a natural object concerns only its usefulness, namely its correspondence to an end that lies in other things. (49)

Therefore, the fact that Puiu *doesn’t know if he managed* to cast out the demon hidden inside the filmmaking mechanism relates to the camera’s inability to catch *reality as it is*, unaltered by the filmmaker’s nature or by the conventions created between the film and the spectator — despite the fact that the film is the art that gets closest to everyday life, “the feeble mechanical reproduction of real life” (Arnheim 272).

At any rate, Puiu goes as far as possible and says he has to do his job and wait for the events to happen and, at the same time, for the camera to capture them so that they reach their targeted effect. He can set things, two or three elements, he can give some indications. When he says action, everything is out of control. Things happen (Chirilov 2011). This *things happen* is relevant and revealing. The notion defines Puiu’s whole film idea. It is not a notion derived from the absence of means⁶, but one that proves a rather rare openness which helps create discomfort precisely by the fact that, when things are let happen *as they really are*, the story moves significantly away from the classic, *matrix* one. Here, the characters act in a non-characteristic way for a formalist-filmic situation, where we are used to cuts every several seconds, with an emphasis on a specific object of the mise-en-scene, by focus, with an indication of the interpretation key precisely owing to this *selective* aesthetic key, against which Puiu operates. He seeks an *anti-selective* aesthetics, even if its accomplishment, the point where its refinement, purity is obtained, could be impossible.

However, it is possible to intervene in the movie *from the outside* — i.e. small events that occur during shooting, which Puiu (and other filmmakers in the same category) chooses to keep, at least for two reasons: because they validate even more his work and because

they are moments which, even if they were not envisaged beforehand, are acknowledged as elements that make a sequence more inspired than what he had in mind originally. Such infiltrations, which seem to follow a random judgment, are acknowledged and allowed by Puiu; they humanize the entire approach, they award it an additional dimension, inside this formalized case study. In a somewhat different approach, the aforementioned meta-discourse is also assimilated by Radu Jude in *Aferim!* (2015), when he allows the “light that falls for one moment straight in the camera to form two huge hexagons briefly appearing on the screen” (Ferencz-Flatz 2015). These tolerable intrusions reinforce the position of a film which is already designed to include so-called *accidents*, staged wittingly by the filmmaker. Such an *accident* occurs in *Aurora* when Viorel seeks a woman at the store where she worked or works – we understand she may be close to Viorel. This changes and narrative thread and appears somehow unexpectedly, since up to this point, Viorel had followed his plan without great deviations. Until this point, Viorel had found all those he had searched for, he had told or done to them what he had intended, but he cannot find this woman — who may be his ex-wife. We may believe that, if he had found her, he would have done to her something unpleasant, but, because he cannot find her, he changes his plan and goes to the police, to surrender, without *settling his accounts* with her.

Puiu also talks about such a moment when he says there is something that really touched him when he watched *L'arbre, le maire et la médiathèque* (Éric Rohmer, 1993). At a point, the character, who is involved in an investigation in the country, talks to an old lady. This is the actual old lady, she is not an actress and, while they are talking, the sun can be seen out and then again in the clouds. This was when Puiu understood Rohmer (Cojocariu 2013). The two filmmakers want unconstructed characters who come from an *epidermal reality*, a phrase mentioned by Gorzo when he discusses André Bazin's theories (2013).

In *Aurora*, the several *encounters* with individuals who seem taken from real life — such as the boutique vendor who initially fails to give the correct change to Viorel — come close to this belief-intent. Although he seeks such a *realism as unaltered as possible*, Puiu avoids the documentary, because the condition of this genre requires a wandering in the events, while fiction requires a construction of the events, by choosing to film the ineffable. It is somehow Puiu's inability to be directed by events that are, to a great extent, untrue. “When I am constructing, I can push things myself. When I am letting events occur, I am at the mercy of reality and, when a camera appears, everything starts to lie” (Cojocariu 2013), concludes the filmmaker.

It is obvious Puiu does not seek a *random* documentary *realism*; instead, he creates with accuracy his topic and adopts the aesthetics of *discomfort*. With *Aurora*, he offers once again a false feeling of reality, because he is the one who makes the choices of what we are watching — even if not by *mainstream* editing and close shots. Leaving us the impression that he does not offer the film reading key and does not give a social, psychological and film

aesthetics lesson, he has us seated for three hours in a constant state of discomfort and, at the end, he leaves us in an even more marked state of uncertainty, with the remark to the police officers, “*With all due respect, I’ve listened to you and I’ve seen how you think you know and understand and followed what I’m saying and I’m scared... I don’t know if you can understand what I’m saying.*” This verdict pronounced, on top of it all, again by him — not by the legal bodies who are in some sort of mental blockage caused by how some absolutely tragic events are recounted to them with serenity and with some kind of natural wisdom of the one who thinks he knows all answers, and, thus, cannot be wrong —, so, this verdict, placed in the same aesthetics of the *discomfort*, completes a (self-) ironic approach that prompts a range of contradictory reactions. On the one hand, Viorel’s logic is impeccable and cogent, but also cold and dry. We could be tempted to stay on his side, but all the aspects, society, human rules, the criminal code converge toward the other option. Viorel is a murderer and any excuse, any rationalization, no matter how perfect, *must* be unnecessary. It is only *now* that the profound discomfort — which reaches its maximum possible depths — appears, while the ending credits are run, because the questions that arise in the audience’s mind are more distressing than the slowness assumed by Puiu, by the aesthetics of the *organic cinema* — and everything it means in a technical direction — or than any brutal actions included in the narrative.

End Notes

1. The fact that more titles are not included here is based on the idea that a longer list is not actually necessary; the omissions are generated by the intent to limit typologically the object of study.
2. The phenomenon could also be seen in North America, by the New Hollywood, as well as in Asia, by the New Iranian and Indian Cinema, in South America, by the Brazilian Cinema Novo, but the Europeans were the most prevalent in this direction and the ones who launched the whole trend.
3. There are many attempts to define hyperrealism in cinema, but one of the most interesting belongs to Davina Quinlivan, who explains hyperrealism in von Trier’s film *Breaking the Waves* (1996), “as it both reveals and restricts the body in a way that draws attention to respiration. [...] breathing offers a way in which to shed light on the significance of breath in the closing act of the film. Through discussion of both the visual and aural track, I suggest that breathing is not only hyperreal, but what I describe as an inner, and thus also immaterial, unravelling of the cinematic, corporeal subject. This will lead me to consider how breathing is a central aspect of Emily Watson’s performance at the close of the film, while the film’s audio track prompts me to consider the haptic implications of listening to a body that breathes.” In the same way, we can feel Puiu’s breath after his first murder; while driving his car outside of the hotel perimeter, we can hear his heavy breathing, meaning he is still adjusting to what he did.
4. Mircea Ciobanu (1940-1996) Romanian poet, prose writer, editor, translator and essay writer. At the end of the novel Cristi Puiu cites in the interview — *Tăietorul de lemne* (1974) —, he lets his

- character out of his control, a technique also used by Puiu, hence the idea that art, like writing, gains autonomy, claims its right to become a world.
5. Gorzo, by using Bazin's theories, does not discuss effectively Puiu's filmmaking, but his opinions relate to the direction that was also approached by *Aurora*.
 6. For *Aurora*, the documenting process alone took two years (Blaga 2011).

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