



# Anca Ursa

## Dystopia, Bureaucracy and Identity in *Crulic – The Path to Beyond*

### ABSTRACT

The allegorical film about a young Romanian victim of the Polish justice system is an upside-down dystopia, in the three-dimensional mirror of the real. A typical Kafkaesque character passes the path to death in a world that refuses to hear him. We see dystopia as a study method, not as a purpose for the analytical investigation. In addition, we do not start from the idea that this is the opposite of an ideal world, but it's the utopia converted into a degraded version which unfolded badly. I applied two scales of understanding to a deep and challenging scenario: the sociological theories about the world as a dysfunctional mechanism and the archetypes of the contemporary imaginative.

### KEYWORDS

Death; Laughter; Identity; Bureaucracy; Dystopia; *Katabasis*.

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### A Film Hard to Classify

About *Crulic – The Path to Beyond*, Anca Damian's 2011 work, it is easier to talk in negative definitions than positive ones: it is neither documentary, nor fictional; neither biographical, nor Romanian; neither a feature film, nor a short one; neither fully animated, nor exclusively with *crêpe* paper characters or actors; neither drama, nor comedy; neither realistic, nor totally parabolic; neither just narration, nor poetic collage. But it has something from all, in varying proportions.

With a less numerous team, consisting of two Poles and a few Romanians, with a budget under € 300,000, the film won 25 international awards in the first year of the festival circuit and it was very well received by the public and the press. What part of the composition makes each spectator resonate? How come the typical Kafkaesque hero and the bureaucratic dystopia have not lost their fascination, although the last half century has created numerous and redundant avatars for them in the lineage of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell's novels, following the theories of Max Weber and Adorno or cinematic achievements like *Metropolis*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Brazil* etc.?

The script created by Anca Damian after a thorough documentation presents the



story of Daniel Claudiu Crulic, a Romanian young man who went to work in Poland.

In 2007, at 33 years old, already a suspect in a case of theft, he was falsely accused of sneaking the wallet of a High Court judge. He was arrested on September 9, 2007, in preventive detention, for 3 months initially, with a further extension of another two months. From the first week, he went on hunger strike to protest against his abusive arrest, which led to the young man's death in January 2008. For four months he had sent letters to the Polish authorities and the Romanian consul in Warsaw, asking to consider the proofs of his innocence, but all the institutions involved continued to deny or abolish the emerged evidence as being irrelevant. Only in 2014 did the first convictions for Crulic case appear: two doctors from the prison hospital got eight months in prison for criminal negligence.

The idea of a documentary was rejected by the producer from the beginning.

Although she managed to obtain copies of the files from Warsaw and Bucharest, though she transcribed endless confessions and details from the relatives, Anca Damian considered that the mosaic had too many missing parts, on one hand, and that extrapolating the experience through parable and poetry would be more valuable, on the other hand.

I refused that proposal [to make a documentary] because I didn't want to go with the microphone in front of people's houses and harass them with unnecessary questions. What would I have won? I believe that a film is a piece of art which compensates some misconducts of the society and of the man. I am not Michael Moore and I don't want to be him.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, she chose the protagonist's voice from beyond the grave to simply narrate a biography which was apparently boring. The actor Vlad Ivanov narrates everything in the first person, with a mild irony, with a genuine Moldavian accent and an equal voice. It is an inspired trick; dystopia is stealthily created in the middle of the dull everyday life so that its subversion can be more persuasive.

In the following pages, I use two scales to interpret the proposed film, one based on the psychological and sociological theories descended from the world-bureaucracy initiated a century ago, and the other derived from the analysis of symbols and archetypes of the current imaginary.

#### **The Typical Kafkaesque World of Nonidentity: A Quasi-Eastern-European Bureaucratic Dystopia**

*Crulic – The Path to Beyond* is an allegory of a society which is still dysfunctional institutionally, now in the twenty-first century. We are not dealing with a classic dystopia, it is not a future projection fully imagined, and the reference to the present plays an essential part, as it creates the historical narrative core of the script. But as stated above, the film goes beyond the negative evolution of a destiny in order to draw a typical Kafkaesque world, with which the new millennium begins and which reinvents a couple of fears that we considered obsolete.

Before detailing the perspective of some dystopian anxiety, a few terminological explanations are needed. Firstly, we do not focus on dystopia itself, as an object of study, but as an analytical category useful for understanding how we relate to the future, in view of the past. Not as an object of research, but as a method. It is a necessary distinction, recently promoted by the coordinators of the investigation volume on



utopias and modern dystopias at Princeton University.<sup>2</sup> Therefore fable is not important in itself, but when and where the artistic projection appeared. What these issues say about the creator and his receptors becomes more important than the coherence or spectacular circumstantial narrative. How do we relate to the future here, in the Eastern areas of the old continent, in the European Union democratic frameworks, based on respecting human rights? It is important, in the same respect, to see how the problem of immigrants is perceived and managed by the responsible administrative bodies. Four years after the movie, the dilemmas tackled in *Crulic* are up-to-date topics for not such a far future as we thought then.

In an analysis of the imaginary modern democracy, Lucian Boia believes that currently Europe has exhausted its aspirations, no longer has what to hope for, and no longer has ideologies that could divide it or give some consistency.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, a revitalization of solidarity and motivation can be achieved around an ancient, but eternally productive archetype, that of an immigrant or a foreigner. Crulic is a foreigner who went to Poland, a country from the former Soviet bloc, too. At the beginning of the film, in his genealogical tree, the protagonist mentions his grandparents, as immigrants from Poland and his surname (*crulic* means *rabbit* in Polish) retains traces of their native language. However, it is not enough for the young man to be assimilated by the adopted country. He is in preventive detention also because the judge frequently makes confusion between a Roma and a Romanian. Crulic is sure he will remain in custody for a while until they realize that “I’m not the Gypsy described by the saleswoman” (for sure, the stigmatic chain of *the other one* is endless). However, the archetype of otherness appears as a preface to the democratic labyrinth and as his legitimization. Solidarity through indifference to

the *stranger* may be a confirmation of his own social or even national identity.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, our analysis relies on the coherence of defining dystopia as not necessarily an opposite form to utopia. Despite the common element, we cannot speak of an antinomy. If that is the case, dystopian society would likely be anarchic or planned to evolve dramatically for its members. But anti-utopia or dystopia derives from a utopia that went in a wrong way or that works only for privileged groups.<sup>5</sup>

Claudiu Crulic is doing quite well in the new country, until he is arrested for stealing from the judge. He does not think he has much chance of employment when he gets there, with a little Polish caught during his previous trips for merchandise. And yet, he finds an “*uncle*,” Razdvanek, who lets him live in his house. He is hired temporarily at some garages and car-washes. He also has a girlfriend, Lica, whom he knows from back home. He pays annual visits to his family in Italy and Romania. The hopes are confirmed by the initial images of Krakow, performed in the style of the 1970s communist advertising, long blue and pink, with naive optimistic messages -English “Krakow rocks,” “PeaceLove,” “Krakow is so cool!” Nevertheless the utopian imaginary is already threatened by visual oxymoronic clues. The last message of the sequence above, “Sun Shine Krakow” is projected on a rainy landscape, on an increasingly gray background, with a paroxysmal acceleration of both background music and images. Since the cinematic process of accelerating images usually gives place to gags and comic effects, here there is only anguish and menacing.

The items that ruin Claudiu Crulic’s newly created idyllic world suddenly occur when returning from a vacation at home. The foreground image of the common file with Lica, the typewriter’s chatter, the



judge's hammer, the final group that summons him not to make an appeal, place the protagonist in another paradigm, that of the convict. The episode is frustrating for the innocent viewer as the cause and the sentence are missing altogether. Perhaps Anca Damian, attached to her character, intentionally omitted tougher strokes since it is important to see an innocent dying at the end, in the typical Kafkaesque world. The real process is yet to come.

But first of all, a brief statement about the theoretical bureaucracy is useful, as it was done by two of the theorists of anti-utopia, with reference to the mechanized world, in the last century. In 1922 in his complex essay "Economy and Society," Max Weber outlined a portrait of the new species of inhuman beings, rational experts in administration and production, incapable of emotion.<sup>6</sup> In the lineage of Weber, Ralph P. Hummel emphasizes that the changes made by bureaucracy do not affect the human being only at a superficial psychological level, but they challenge and even changes it at an ontological level, through at least three strategies:

1. Bureaucracy replaces autonomous personality with organizational identity.
2. Bureaucracy takes the functions of conscience (superego) and mastery (ego) out of the individual's psyche and distributes them across organizational structures: hierarchy and the division of labor.
3. Bureaucracy, the increasing dependency of the individual self on structures of the organization (in effect, mingling self and organization), controls its functionaries by manipulating the existential anxiety over the loss of self that a separation from the job threatens to produce.<sup>7</sup>

These theories will be taken and adapted gradually to the history of the twentieth century by groups of critics of modern civilization, members of Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Benjamin) or French postmodernists (Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard).

Does Crulic's world resemble the picture of the dystopias foreseen by the theorists? Not only has it common elements, but it seems to confirm the scenarios of the mechanized institutionalization in each detail. It is a dystopia *à l'envers* in a three-dimensional mirror of the real, an existential interpretation of speculative theories. Already suspected of theft in the first case, Claudiu and Lica are "recognized" in the police photos by the sacked judge. Here the voice changes, the producer has chosen to alternate confession in the first person with a neutral and serious narrative of the events in English, with Jamie Sives' voice, as once inside the mechanical state institutions, destiny no longer belongs to Crulic, he can no longer control it.

This is how it eventually turns out that those responsible for the development of Crulic's case collaborate with solidarity worthy of a better cause than to ruin the prisoner's life. The initial investigators keep on talking at the interrogation, overwhelming him with questions. In the first instance, Crulic says he was in Krakow on the day of the theft, as he was preparing to go to Italy, but then remembers that he was already on the bus on July 11, when the theft occurred. Nobody wants to hear, no one records. The Romanian Consul tells him to trust the Polish justice system, even when the main character's requests are accompanied by an official letter from one of the majors from the detention center, in the investigation. The testimony of the guide who was on the bus on the way to Italy on the date of the theft and Crulic's appearance in the company records as the ticket's owner are not



valid. The doctors at the prison kept postponing feeding him artificially; they declared him healthy, although he got unconscious in the prison hospital, for three times. They also delayed the start of maneuvers for artificial feeding, a gesture that would have saved the prisoner's life after 4 months of strike. The Court hadn't given them the permission yet. The serious voice, which exclusively dominates the last 15 minutes of video, is presented neutrally but with pauses that cause the spectator's revolt: "Everyone followed the law. And according to the law, any decision of the Court awaits validation."

However Crulic has an admirable strength in refusing to get into the swirl of the declarations of guilt. He knows he is innocent, so he fights with every means to avoid being sentenced: hunger strike, letters to prosecutors, letters to the Romanian Embassy, a calendar made by him, allowing him to appear in court on the day of the trial, a journal in which he thoroughly documented the evolution of his case until the last moment and, not least, his efforts to remain aware and vigilant all the time, despite the weakness induced by the prolonged strike. In his chronicle, Angelo Mitchevici underlines the surprise that this Everyman from the East offers to the viewers:

What is surprising is not the dissolution of the lost ego, but its resistance to nothingness. The stubbornness with which Crulic wants to prove his innocence, to claim his rights has something stronger than any activism, it is an outrage that does not turn into a cry, but rather a kind of *flatus vocis* coming from nowhere. The committed injustice awakens in Crulic a reaction that is stronger than him, which he is unable to justify, a sense of dignity that redesigns him as a character in an intense and absurd drama.<sup>8</sup>

The symbolism of the body is well managed metaphorically by the drawers. If until then Crulic appears in vague strokes, with his body often transparent or outlined in watercolor, in order to suggest the common fate of an individual who remains faithful to his standards, now the touches of the outline are precise, their color inside is thicker, as if as the body melted into a hunger strike. His existential substance is much more consistent, more valuable. The relentless fight against a mechanized system increases its ontological value.

#### **A Failed *Katabasis***

Erling B. Holstmark includes utopian and dystopian films in the series of those that take the mythological patterns as the journey to the underworld, along with westerns, detective thrillers, and war stories.<sup>9</sup> What else announces the title and leads the scenario for *Crulic – The Path to Beyond*? The *Katabasis*, the descending initiatory journey is associated with a profound knowledge of himself and his return to the surface as a superior being. All coordinates are found in Anca Damian's movie, excepting the return from death, even if the final metaphor of the flying sheets can be interpreted as an escape, as a transition into a higher plan. But death is there, it is final and beyond doubt. It is present at the core of the film and the script seems not to negotiate anything with the receiver and not spare him in any way. Death is often treated with warm humor by the "dead" character, which makes it less frightening, but not less present. In addition, elements that connote it appear recurrent and consistent.

The first scene already transmits unequivocally that the character is speaking from beyond the grave. His uncle finds out that his nephew Claudiu Crulic has died in



Poland. The scene is presented as a novel exhibition. A raven appears on the left of the screen and sits on a black branch in front of the house. Reading from left to right is a good anchor for the viewer's gaze, as he/she enters the "story." The transparent role of the raven is that of psycho-pomp who will lead the dead man's soul to the underworld. It appears with variations, whenever it feels the breath of death. When he moves to Krakow, the screen is invaded by a whole bevy, as a sign for a series of initiative attempts that were awaiting him on the path towards death. It also occurs when Crulic has a serious car accident and his companion dies. It comes when his and Lica's child dies at birth. A very emotional scene is the "Russian roulette." During the hunger strike, there is a decisive moment: once it is overcome, the striker cannot stop, either the problem gets fixed or he finally dies. The raven enters the character's head and the wings keep on moving smoothly. Finally, in the episode of death, it appears in the window and then leaps over the sill.

The descent into hell includes two major archetypes, outlined in the coherence of the pattern in Greek mythology, Hades and the road. The prison has the features of Hades: long and tangled roads / corridors, Cerberus guards without eyes, but whose menacing teeth can be seen, money confiscation, the tortures that he endures from the detainees and his imprisoned colleagues and, finally, the conviction that there is no way back.

The Christian imagery of death is part of the story, too. The rooms in the prison and in the hospital often have long, narrow walls, like a tomb. A wall is always absent initially but after a few frames it slams loudly, like a coffin lid. Orthodox icons appear both in the wallet that his mother gets back after of his death and on the wall next to the bed. They do not necessarily express

faith or the presence of a transcendent entity. They are rather a character hint, a sign of traditional education. Sometimes religious courts are even involved in the extermination scenario, their protective role being out of question. The Romanian Consul who is asked to intervene appears in a silhouette shaped like an angel, who wants to be begged, but who urinates on the applicant. A similar moment is when the camera slowly approaches the icon of Jesus on the wall and the viewer is almost waiting for a miracle. But the only noise that is heard is that of a coin dropped on the table.

The last reiterated symbol is the road. As a matter of fact, at some point in his confession, Crulic creates a metaphor of his personal life as a trip by bus. In one of the first scenes, the Mercedes with the coffin comes on a road lined with leafless and black trees, which may be lost in a white nothingness, where the path ends. The image returns towards the end, to conclude the story as a circle. Symbols of death are so numerous and diverse; the whole movie could be considered a poem about death.

*Crulic – The Path to Beyond* is a very tender story about death, as tender as such a topic can bear. But there is also a breakdown of utopia for the immigrant in Europe, which is too overwhelmed to be functional and to have efficient mechanisms and institutions in order to give importance to isolated individuals. A failed utopia, converted into a criminal scenario, under the eyes of his victims, a dystopia which does not talk about an individual's mistakes, not even about the system, but about a reorientation of the current imaginary toward social system that we considered it was linked and exhausted by the history of the last century.



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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anca Damian, "Despre cazul lui Claudiu Crulic: Nu m-a interesat cine e vinovat. Vinovați suntem toți," <http://www.mediafax.ro/cultura-media/anca-damian-despre-cazul-lui-claudiu-crulic-nu-m-a-interesat-cine-e-vinovat-vinovati-suntem-toti-video-8525928>, accessed on 03.10.2015.

<sup>2</sup> Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tille, Gyan Prakash (eds.), *Utopia / Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, Princeton – New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Lucian Boia, *Mitul democrației*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2003, p. 128: "Europe before nations was a strongly fragmented space, however unified around common political and spiritual principles: the Empire (half reality, half fiction), Christianity or Latin as instrument of communication elites. It was a space divided equally by thousands of borders and without borders. Then the nation came and simplified things, erasing interior borders and deepening the exterior ones. It seems that we are about to reinvent a complex system, heading towards a unified and equally fragmented world.."

<sup>4</sup> Gallya Lahav, *Immigration and Politics in the New Europe: Reinventing Borders*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 158: "One of the safest ways to confirm the identity for both communities and individuals is to find a way and measure what you are not."

<sup>5</sup> Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tille, Gyan Prakash, *Utopia / Dystopia*, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *Orașul*, București, Editura All, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph P. Hummel, *The Bureaucratic Experience: The Post-Modern Challenge*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1977, pp. 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> Angelo Mitchievici, "Dosarul unei inexistențe," *România literară*, no. 15, 2012, [http://www.romlit.ro/crulic\\_\\_dosarul\\_unei\\_inexistente](http://www.romlit.ro/crulic__dosarul_unei_inexistente), accessed on 04.10.2015.

<sup>9</sup> Erling B. Holstmark, "The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth & Culture in the Cinema*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 25.