

## San Francisco International Film Festival 2012—Part 2

# Crulic—The Path to Beyond from Romania: The tragic fate of a decent, humble human being

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*This is the second of a series of articles on the 2012 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 19-May 3. Part 1 was posted May 17.*

The second film by Romanian filmmaker Anca Damian, *Crulic—The Path to Beyond*, was another noteworthy documentary (or semi-documentary) featured at the 2012 San Francisco film festival.

In form, it is the opposite of Ra'anan Alexandrowicz's *The Law in These Parts*. Instead of the Israeli director's choice of an austere set and clear, linear presentation, Damian (born 1962) tells her story through a mélange of different media and narrators. She attempts in this manner to draw the viewer into the bleak story of a young Romanian immigrant in Poland—falsely imprisoned for theft—who embarks on a fatal hunger strike against the injustice.

The film, which is primarily told with the aid of primitive-looking animation, begins post-mortem and is told for the first half from “beyond the grave” by the deceased himself. Thirty-three-year-old Claudio Crulic guides us from a Krakow prison where his withered body lies at rest to his modest funeral at which he arrives in a nicer car, the tormented ghost points out, than he'd ever ridden in while alive.

Combined with the moody animation and beautiful score by Piotr Dziubek, this storytelling device makes one quickly identify with Crulic's tragedy. One becomes concerned about his death as though he were a family member or close friend—a news article or even a more conventional documentary might not have the same impact.

Crulic's specter then recounts the story of his

childhood, adolescence and emigration to Poland. Narrating this portion of the film, Crulic is a comical and totally unpretentious character. He recounts the story of his life as a series of personal experiences: the breakup of his family, childhood abandonment, the loss of a beloved pet, his first job, a girl-friend.

The drawings are supplemented at points with real photographs of a sturdy, stoic-looking young man. The pre-arrest autobiography eventually climaxes when Crulic returns to Romania to see his family after being released following his brush with the law. They beg him to stay and warn what might happen if he returns to Poland, but he naively insists that he will prevail because he is innocent. Then, he surprises himself by inexplicably bursting into tears. “Just like that...,” he tells us.

Damian cleverly and intelligently makes us take interest in and care for Crulic. Unfortunately, her single-minded focus on him and his plight to the exclusion of all else is, at the same time, the film's great weakness.

In essence, Crulic's plight is that of countless Romanians who came of age after the fall of the Ceausescu regime and the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in 1989-1991. Moreover, his is also the shared fate of many immigrant workers internationally, forced to leave their homes to seek a livelihood as cheap labor in a foreign country, scapegoated for the social ills of decaying capitalism, eking out a living in substandard accommodations, harassed and herded into foreign jails where even native-born workers can expect little justice.

The universal experience of the wrongfully jailed immigrant is captured best in Crulic's initial, naïve belief that the embassy, the press, the judge, the prosecutor and the police will take his adamant declarations of innocence seriously. When he is met instead with coercion, harassment and threats in order to force a confession, he reacts with shock. Crulic's notions about the country he works in, about the law, about the courts are dashed. To his captors he is an insignificant joke. He realizes he is trapped.

However, the larger truths embedded in Claudio Crulic's story seem to show themselves almost accidentally and are not adequately developed in the film. In fact, in the final chapter, Damian's film seems to suggest that Crulic's plight was no more than the result of a series of failures by individual professionals in Poland, an isolated case of injustice, something that might be cured by a well-written piece of legislation or perhaps better training for Polish medical and legal professionals.

Virtually in tandem with the imposition of this narrow viewpoint on Crulic's plight, his ghost ceases to narrate and in its place we get a preachy Englishman documenting every excruciating moment of Crulic's hunger strike until his death.

Portions of the final chapter are valuable—for example, the stark representation of day-to-day life in prison: the constant cell changes, psychological warfare, loud boot steps plodding down the corridor, the expression of frozen anger on the guard's face, the ceiling view in a small cell. Unlike the ubiquitous television crime dramas made in the US—where prison conditions and criminal courts are in fact worse than those depicted in *Crulic*—the animation in Damian's film is refreshingly honest in its portrayal of bourgeois criminal courts and prisons from the inside.

However, the narrator's constant harping on the professional blunders that led to Crulic's needless imprisonment and death becomes grating. Right at the point when the most valuable generalizations could be made, the filmmaker chooses not to see the woods for the trees. Was this really an aberration in an otherwise healthy, transparent and fair judicial system? In contemporary Poland? What is required to turn this Kafkaesque nightmare of a legal system into something rational and humane? Is Crulic the only individual whom such tragedy has befallen?

Although one knows the outcome from the beginning, the final scenes—and the narrator's clinical descriptions of Crulic's demise over a montage of photos from different stages of his life—are gut-wrenching. We know his story now, his voice and attitude. He is a decent, humble human being railroaded and ultimately destroyed by a criminal court designed primarily for retribution and social intimidation.

Damian is certainly an engaging storyteller, but without a broader social perspective, there is only so much she can tell us.

*To be continued*



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