

FILM REVIEW: THE DEATH OF



There is such a thing as knowing too much. There is also such a thing as knowing just enough to rip the floor out from under you and tap into that underlying river of uncertainty and subjectivity that courses beneath all seemingly-concrete institutions and structures. The latter is where watching the bleak, Romanian film The Death of Mr. Lazarescu left me—lying awake in bed anxious with freeform hypochondria, the movie validating all my deep-seated medical fears; left considering a possible religious conversion to Christian Scientist so as to never visit a hospital or medical professional again. I wish I didn't know that medical error is the 5th leading cause of death in America. There are more people dying every day in hospitals from misdiagnosis than are being killed in car accidents, from breast cancer, or suicide. Untold masses more are dying outside of hospitals from undetected prescription "side effects" (a common one being: DEATH) that pharmaceutical corporations couldn't possibly be aware of yet. To cite one particularly macabre example, who could have guessed that taking the first FDA-approved incarnation

of the wildly popular anti-depressant Celexa along with a swig of grapefruit juice would kill you. The problem was quickly corrected by a little molecular rearranging by chemists who probably weren't really paying attention when they took chemistry classes, no doubt just shifting the lethal food/drug interference around to a less-ingested like say, oh I don't know, Play-Doh, so that fatalities would be minimal enough for the lawyers at Glaxo to frame them as unexpected heart attacks. I wish I didn't know folkloric tidbits that I pick up around my local co-op and could still use a microwave with a clear conscience. I wish I didn't know that you shouldn't take a deep whiff when you open up a bag of microwave popcorn, because a chemical is released that has been known to cause a deteriorative respiratory condition called "butter lung".

Franz Kafka was a man whose vast body of work is centered around his paranoia of getting lodged away in the labyrinthine inefficiencies of modern bureaucracy. The Death of Mr. Lazarescu is a harrowing journey through one man's doomed voyage; the middle-aged alcoholic Dante Lazarescu wakes up with a headache and after being scuffled around several public hospitals is dead within twenty-four hours. Clocking in at over two and half hours, the Death of Mr. Lazarescu is painful to watch. Some critics have chuckled that the movie was supposed to be about a Kafkaesque experience, but was a Kafkaesque experience in itself—it is unrelentingly bleak, filmed on cheap DV cameras in long, sweeping shots and has the look of an extremely long episode of E.R. Imagine two and half hours of E.R. if instead of being about doctors rushing around to help people, the camera steadied uncomfortably long shots of

doctors standing around flirting with nurses, smoking cigarettes and checking their email while in the background patients slowly died on hospital gurneys. The most agonizing part of the film is the slow, triggering realization that medical professionals, just like everyone else on the job, are running on complete autopilot. From the beginning, no one listens to what Mr. Lazarescu has to say about how he feels. He is repeatedly humiliated and told that drinking will kill you. The ambulance tech comes in for a house call while he's throwing up bile and smells liquor on his breath, and sneers "You've been drinking haven't you?"

He protests: No, no! The pains started before he had a drink for maybe twenty minutes of the film before she reluctantly shuffles him along to the hospital, saying that he's wasting her time with a hangover. They arrive at the hospital, which is jam-packed with wounded and dead from a bus accident, and Mr. Lazarescu manages to get a bed in the emergency room. A young doctor comes over to inspect him and wrinkles his nose, saying,

"You stink, old man...Haven't you heard about the bus accident? And by the way, have you been drinking?" before yelling at him for being a bum and taking up too much space. Mr. Lazarescu is booted out of the hospital and shuffled along to another clinic across town, where they do a brain scan and discover that he has a lethal tumor requiring immediate operation. There's no space on the operating table at that hospital, so Lazarescu is thrown back into the ambulance and taken to another emergency room. It goes on and on like this. The next emergency room is quiet and the doctors and nurses are all about to get off shift for the night. The surgeon

talks to his wife on the phone while the pale, limp Lazarescu lies on the table waiting to be seen. When he finally comes over to his cadaverous patient, the doctor sniffs and then sighs disgustedly,

"You peed yourself didn't you?" The woman from the ambulance insists that he needs surgery, but the doctor insists that Mr. Lazarescu must first sign a consent form before he performs the surgery, to make sure the doctor's not liable should anything go wrong. Of course, Lazarescu is dying and unable to sign, and the doctor bureaucratically succeeds in absolving himself from responsibility. He refuses to operate and gets to go home for the evening.

A chilling pattern begins to come through (probably resulting from the personal fears of the middle-aged director). All of the doctors, nurses and professionals are extremely young, just out of college, and no one seems to know what they're doing. They are portrayed as distractible and incompetent—they fiddle with cellphones, joke with each other and evade doing real work. As Mr. Lazarescu gets sicker, the attendants and doctors become incrementally more caustic. He begs for water from the back of the ambulance, mouthing to the attendant,

"Thirsty....thirsty...". The camera cuts to the attendant asking the driver for water, and gulp down the whole bottle herself along with a couple Ibuprofens. The technicians and doctors are aware that they are around a purgatorial presence, and thus, in some convoluted logic, the sickest are the least important—the dead aren't going to file malpractice lawsuits.