



PURE UNKNOWN

a film by Valentina Cicogna and Mattia Colombo

Italy 2023

93 min / 52 min

Jump Cut in co-production Amka Films Productions, Sysifos Film Production and RSI

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Original title:	Sconosciuti Puri
Country of production:	Italy, Switzerland, Sweden
Year of production:	2023
Length:	93 min / 52 min
Shooting format:	4K
Screening format:	DCP / 2.39:1 / 5.1 / 25 fps
Language(s):	Italian, English
Subtitles:	English
Color or b/w:	Color

Production:

Jump Cut in co-production with Amka Films Productions, Sysifos Film Production and RSI

Credits

Author and director:	Valentina Cicogna and Mattia Colombo
DoP:	Jacopo Loiodice
Sound:	Simone Paolo Olivero, Paolo Benvenuti
Editor:	Valentina Cicogna
Music:	Zeno Gabaglio
Commissioning editor:	Silvana Bezzola for RSI
Co-producer:	Amel Soudani (Amka/CH), Nicola Bernasconi (Amka/CH), Mario Adamson (Sysifos/SE)
Producer:	Sebastiano Luca Insinga (Jump Cut/IT), Chiara Nicoletti (Jump Cut/IT)
World Sales:	Deckert Distribution

Logline:

A person who dies without a name is like a story without an ending

Short Synopsis:

Every night nameless bodies land in Dr. Cristina Cattaneo's autopsy room.

She calls them Pure Unknown.

The Pure Unknown belong to the fringes of society. They are homeless, prostitutes, runaway teenagers. Lately, they have mostly been migrants, rejected by the Mediterranean Sea onto the shores of Italy.

If all rights belong to the living, nothing is left to the dead.
So what happens when the dead have lost their identity?

In the face of this growing multitude, no one seems concerned about their right to dignity. No one but Cristina.

Synopsis:

Cristina does not sleep every night. But not because she suffers from insomnia.

When she does sleep, she rarely remembers her dreams. But when she does, they have to do with ghosts repeating: "you didn't do enough".

When she isn't sleeping, she is driving. She drives towards the Police's blue flashing lights that, at night, bounce off Milan's buildings. The police cars station near a crime or an accident scene. Sometimes it happens that law enforcement is called because someone has discovered a dead body, and it's not possible to establish immediately the identity of that corpse. Perhaps it's the body of a woman who was forced into prostitution and then killed. Or that of a homeless man who died of cold. Or that of an illegal migrant hit by a train. That lifeless, nameless body could easily remain an unsolved mystery if, on its journey from the morgue to an anonymous headstone in some random suburban cemetery, it doesn't come across Cristina herself, a forensic scientist and professor at the State University of Milan, and the team of her laboratory, the Labanof.

There are hundreds of unnamed corpses Cristina has analyzed since the early 2000s when her former professor chose her to succeed him as the head of the forensic anthropology and odontology laboratory he had founded eight years before. She had been his brightest student, devoted to forensics and driven by the need to bring justice. Once the head of Labanof, her strong ethical drive towards justice led Cristina to decide to deal precisely with those who, in death even more than in life, are forgotten, the Pure Unknown. These are corpses or skeletons that are found without documents to prove their identities.

The Pure Unknown are often people who in life belonged to the most vulnerable bangs of society. They die far from home, almost always in solitude, invisible. Anonymous, indeed. Cristina and her team intercept these bodies, snatch them from a system that would bury them in a hurry, and sink their hands into them, bringing back to light the life that once was, giving them back some dignity, a weight, an existence, a uniqueness. They then derive a name and return, at last, the remains to a family that, somewhere in the world, is waiting to know what happened to their beloved and disappeared ones.

Restoring an unknown person's identity is not easy. And it becomes even more difficult if you cannot cross-reference the dead person's information with one among missing people. The equation is simple: for each unknown person, there is a missing one. But what if no one has filed a report? Or if the report was collected in a foreign, distant country? Or if the body is unrecognizable? And if the only confirmation of identity could come from a DNA test, but the only living relatives cannot reach the place where the body was found? These are the types of obstacles Cristina and her team try to overcome every day, when they find themselves in front of every Unknown they care for.

It is a matter of principles and values. According to Cristina, a name is a right that no one should be denied. Not even those bodies that, in her nightmares, dangle from the deck of a barge. The last of the last, the forgotten among the forgotten. The Unknown among the unknown. The victims of shipwrecks in the Mediterranean, mass slaughters of migrants whose families will not be sought, warned, or welcomed as they would be before any train or air disaster that happens on European soil. Slaughters that divide, instead of uniting.

Cristina has a goal. She wants to bring the attention of the European Union to the denial of the right to a name. She wants Europe to officially recognize this right and to put in place the necessary tools so that this right is assured to all. Even to dead migrants.

For this to happen, a European database needs to be created, in which the data of the Pure Unknown can be cross-referenced with the data of the missing collected in whichever country the report is filed. The word that someone is looking for the identity of these dead people needs to be spread, relatives should be tracked down, and be put in the position to send photos, DNA swabs, dental records, or anything that will allow an accurate identification. And it must be done because it is the right thing to do and because, for Cristina and her team, Europe's identity itself and what Europe will choose to be depend upon how it decides to treat these dead.

Cristina carries out her battle in a continent where governments argue fiercely over the fate of live migrants, where states either do not reach agreements or reach them painstakingly watered-down. She carries out her battle even when the world forgets about the landings of migrants to project its attention on the disasters brought by the Covid-19 pandemic.

It seems like a battle against windmills, hopeless and one that most people do not understand the point of. Yet, Cristina doesn't give up and doesn't let go of any of the Unknown she manages to intercept. Because she has learned that returning a corpse to those who loved that body means taking care of the living, those who remain, freeing them from the oppression of not knowing, saving them. Saving them and saving Europe from its indifference.

The film "Pure Unknown" is the story of this struggle for salvation.

Director's statement:

On a technical level, the concept of "identity" can be defined as a set of individual characteristics that unmistakably differentiate a particular individual from another. And this, after all, does not go beyond scientific details such as the peculiar features of the face, the shape of the teeth or DNA characteristics. Cristina and Labanof's approach shows that there is something more, that identity is also something else. It is the combination of experience, affection, feelings and emotions that characterise an entire existence. And this existence leaves recognizable "marks" on each of us, in the same way that genetic code might "shape" our traits. I am the color of my eyes, but also the broken nose, a sign of my passion for boxing. I am the shape of my face, but also the fragility of my heart scarred by surgery. I am my protruding ears, but also the circumcision that I have undergone for religious reasons.

Identity is not a defined and immutable concept, given at birth. In the age of globalization and anxiety such as ours, it is a concept that fits into a very current political, social and cultural debate. Gender, class, ethnicity are all part and parcel of the identity discourse in which the world has engaged. More often than not, the discussion is lively amongst those groups of people looking for safe, stable and reliable truths, as they attempt to preserve a set of values in the midst of uncertainty and change. Debating identity is a defence and for it to work, barriers, both physical and psychological, are raised. The term identity, which derives from the Latin "idem" (i.e. the same), has only recently become popular in the social sciences. Since its early appearance in the early 1950s, the term has rapidly gained popularity and has been widely adopted, however, this development did not proceed hand in hand with theoretical studies. Even in the scientific circles the term has been used in a generic way, as if it had such a clear and obvious meaning that it does not require further specification. This was particularly evident in the early stages of its emergence, when the term identity was used in discussions on immigration, to discuss the problem of uprooting that this entails, or on the problems that the individual can experience in a rapidly changing society. Today, fifty years later, we have come to realize that the coexistence of different forms of identity is at the basis of contemporary society, and many scholars have begun to take an interest in studying this concept, bringing to light its complexity.

Identity is defined both in particularistic terms (a person's identity is unique and unrepeatable), but also in terms of "recognition", equality, within a context, with a group of people. "Deciding the identity" of someone ultimately means deciding what a person is and what he is not, but also wondering which other individuals that person is similar or dissimilar to. The process therefore involves two opposing but closely connected operations: separation, on the one hand, which builds identity on the basis of those characteristics that make the subject unique and unrepeatable, and inclusion, on the other, which plays the card of generality. and recognizes belonging and similarities with others.

"What is our identity?". On the one hand, Cristina and Labanof interrogate the unknown remains in search of those unmistakable characteristics that constitute a person's identity and uniqueness, at the same time they are confronted with issues that go beyond particularism, universal questions such as death, mourning, the end of an existence. These are issues that generate feelings common to all: sadness, compassion, emptiness. This is why we have the impression that Cristina and Labanof's work explores not only the identity of the individual, but also that of entire societies, while presenting itself as an "inclusive" response in the context of the anxieties and barriers that characterize our time.

Pure Unknown is an observation documentary film, therefore it is shot without the aid of interviews, a technique typical of the so-called "cinema of reality" and which endeavours to tackle the theme of identity from an unusual point of view and, through the investigation, to answer the question of what makes us ourselves, what makes us recognizable, in every nuance of the term. Essentially, it tries to touch on some of the issues that are part of our daily life, such as the massacres in the Mediterranean Sea and small / great stories of the invisible that we read on the newspapers.

So, the theme we decided to explore is identity, but we tell the story of a woman, Cristina, and of the battle she finds herself fighting every day to ensure that the "nameless" are not lost, forgotten. She is the protagonist of the film, she is the one we follow closely and accompany with our camera between the remains of saints, autopsies of unknown people, DNA tests, exhumations and meetings with the Labanof team. We accompany Cristina, step by step, in her attempt to shake the conscience of the European institutions, until her hearing in the European Parliament.

In any self-respecting film, the protagonist never faces a challenge alone. She must have helpers by her side. And in our film Cristina's helpers are her colleagues, people who have worked alongside her for years and who, over time, have become something more for her than just collaborators. Cristina engages with each of them, sometimes they collide. Davide Porta, the biologist and artist of the group, models plasticine facial reconstructions on the skulls; Danilo De Angelis, is an odontologist and computer wizard; Dominic Salsarola, is an archaeologist and cadaver dog trainer, Marco Caccianiga, a botanist who recognizes all kinds of plants on the face of the Earth. And then there are Debora, Giulia, Lara and Barbara, the researchers, former students of Cristina's who support her in every step. And Pasquale Poppa, known as Pas, who has the thankless task of finding the resources to keep the laboratory running, to pay for the necessary tests for identification, to buy some new machinery when the previous one is to be thrown away and to support female researchers with meager grants.

In the film, Cristina obviously has to compete with antagonists, "enemies", who, unlike the helpers, have no face and often hide behind rubbish, behind doors that close or do not open at all. They are the indifference and slowness of the bureaucracy. The apathy of the institutions. The ignorance of those who do not understand the importance of looking after the dead to take care of the living, those who remain and their need to start mourning. These are the obstacles that Cristina and her team have to face. And sometimes they will be so difficult to overcome that Cristina will allow herself to be overwhelmed by despair and fatigue, even these invisible enemies can bring her vulnerability to light.

Our story is a story set in the present and is built through the direct observation of what happens in the offices, in the corridors of the Labanof, in the classrooms of the University and in Cristina's private life. As we said, there will be no interviews to "explain" what happens, but the understanding of what happens will pass through the dialogues that arise spontaneously between the characters in the film, during autopsies, investigations, but also coffee breaks, meetings, lessons.

This is our approach as documentary makers, the mode of "observation" that we are accustomed to putting into action in front of the stories we decide to tell. Just as Cristina and the Labanof researchers try to reconstruct a person's story starting from the tiny fragments of bones that are in front of the eyes, so we try to put our story together, collecting, piece by piece, fragments of reality. For this mode of observation to bear its best results, our presence within the laboratory and in the private life of the characters we decide to follow must be accepted with loving disposition. And this took years of research and of relationship building with Cristina and her team.

All the people involved embraced the documentary project in the form we were proposing, without hesitation. So much has been done in this sense that we, the authors, first of all, have become an integral part of the laboratory, discovering not only its most hidden and secret sides, but also the most human ones. It is thanks to this total access that the film can be enriched with a wider range of emotions and tones. In fact, Cristina and her family are people capable of the greatest professionalism and seriousness, but also of incredible comedy and lightness, qualities necessary for those who work so closely with death. It will be this alternation of notes to allow the viewer to empathize with the protagonists and their conflicts.

The visual style of the film immerses the viewer in an atmosphere that has a lot in common with the crime genre. An atmosphere made up of autopsies, genetic tests, inspections on the scene of the discovery. Precisely the presence of lifeless bodies leads us to reflect on the position to take while filming death. And so we choose to work mostly off-screen. The following example should clarify this choice: during an autopsy, the height we adopt for the camera is for sure that of the body lying on the

anatomical table, but the body is not framed in full, the camera points the lens on the faces and the gestures of Cristina and her team. We let the "missing" image compose itself in the viewer's mind, thanks to the words exchanged by doctors, the reactions you can read on their faces, the emotions in their gazes. This off-screen narrative, however, is not just about the bodies, but is a common thread running through the entire film. We want to lead the viewer to autonomously fill the invisible, empty space through their imagination. An invitation to constantly look for the missing part of the story exactly as Cristina and the researchers do when they collect the clues necessary to reveal an ending, a name, an identity.

With a view to visually reproducing the investigation process that Cristina and the researchers have to undertake on the remains and bodies, the way in which they try to "focus" on the clues to find the "sharpness" of a clear and certain answer, in some moments of the film we use filters on the lens to blur, cover, mask reality. The scenes in which we decide to apply these filters are moments of abstraction, which place the viewer in Cristina's position in front of a reality with turbid and confused contours, the same reality that is the background to the dreams and nightmares that often occupy her nights .

Festivals and Awards: tba

Biography director

VALENTINA CICOGNA, 1984, Milan, Italy.

She worked as assistant director and assistant editing on the documentary 'Napoli Piazza Municipio' by Bruno Oliviero, produced by Indigofilm and Point du Jour, winner in the Italiana Doc section at the Turin Film Festival in 2009. She is the screenwriter of the film "La Variabile Umana" by Bruno Oliviero, with Silvio Orlando and Giuseppe Battiston, produced by Rai Cinema, Lumière & Co., Invisibile Film, distributed by BIM. She was the editor of several documentaries feature films, including "Quartieri Cinesi", (Rai Cinema and Indigofilm), "Il giudice e il segreto di Stato" (Point du Jour and MIR) and "MM Milano Mafia" (Invisibile Film, distributed by Chiarelettere) by Bruno Oliviero, "Il Comandante" by Enrico Maisto, "74 Miglia" (Invisibile Film) by Laura Viezzoli, "Alberi che camminano" (Oh! Pen) by Mattia Colombo, based on a subject by Erri De Luca, distributed by Feltrinelli; she worked as scriptwriter and editor of the documentary "Voglio dormire con te" (Start and The Kingdom) by Mattia Colombo, winner of the Salani Award and the Filmmaker Competition "Nutrimenti terrestri, nutrimenti celesti", finalist of the Solinas Award. She edited the film "Ritmo Sbilenco - un filmino su Elio e le Storie Tese" by Mattia Colombo, presented at the Rome Film Festival and distributed by Feltrinelli, and the documentary "Il Passo" (Start srl and Rai Cinema) by Alessandra Locatelli, Mattia Colombo and Francesco Ferri, in competition at the Nyon Festival. She is the author and editor of the documentary film "La convocazione" (The Summoning) by Enrico Maisto, winner of the 2015 Solinas Documentary Award for Cinema, produced by Start srl and Rai Cinema. The film was selected in competition at the 58th Festival of Peoples, where it won the MyMovies Audience Award, and at IDFA - International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam. The latest works are "La scomparsa di mia madre" by Beniamino Barrese, which had its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival 2019, and "Brotherhood" by Francesco Montagner presented in Locarno. 'Sconosciuti Puri' is his directorial debut.

MATTIA COLOMBO, 1982, Milan, Italy.

His first short film 'Il Velo' was selected at Visions du Réel, EIFF Edinburgh Film Festival, AFI Silver Docs. The documentary "Alberi che camminano", written with Erri De Luca and distributed by Feltrinelli, was in competition at Festival dei Popoli, Slamdance Film Festival (Sundance) and Trento Film Festival. The documentary "Voglio dormire con te", winner of the Corso Salani prize, finalist at Filmmaker In Progress Lab, finalist at Premio Solinas Documentario per il Cinema and selected at

Périphérie Cinéastes in Paris, participated in Cinéma du Réel and Biografilm Festival. The documentary "Il Passo", a Start and Rai Cinema production, was presented at Visions du Réel and broadcast on Rai and RSI.

Mattia directed the film "Ritmo Sbilenco", a documentary on the Italian band Elio e le Storie Tese, a special event at the Rome Film Festival, distributed in Italian cinemas and on home video by Wanted Cinema. The documentary 'Uninvited', a biographical film on Marcelo Burlon, fashion designer and outsider DJ, was released in Italian cinemas and distributed on home video by CG Entertainment.

His most recent documentary, 'Il Posto', was selected at Visions du Réel and Hot Docs. Mattia is currently working on the documentary 'Sconosciuti Puri', co-directed with Valentina Cicogna, an Italy/Sweden/Switzerland production. The project was a finalist in the Solinas Documentary Award for Cinema, received support from MEDIA Europe, MiC, Trentino Film

Commission, Piemonte Doc Film Fund, and was selected for the international workshop Dok.Incubator.

As author and screenwriter, he is working on a crime series produced by The Family, inspired by the books of forensic scientist Cristina Cattaneo.

Filmography director

2015 Voglio dormire con te (I want to sleep with you)

2016 Il passo (The Pass)

2022 Il Posto (A steady Job)