

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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# CRISTIAN MUNGIU (1968 - )

### LIFE

Cristian Mungiu was born in the city of Iași, Romania, son of Ostin Mungiu, medical university professor, and Maria Mungiu, teacher of Romanian language and literature. Mungiu did undergraduate studies in English and became an English teacher and journalist for a while. In 1998, he graduated from The Film and Theater Academy in Bucharest becoming a film director. He co-directed Radu Mihăileanu's *Train de vie* (1998) and also directed several shorts before his first full-length feature, *Occident*, in 2002. Thereafter, he directed several movies which were awarded national and international awards – *Beyond the Hills* (2012), *Graduation* (2016), and the recent *RMN* (2022). He has been married since 1991 with Izabela Coman, whom he met in Iași. They have two children.

### ACHIEVEMENTS

In 2002, *Occident*, was presented at the Cannes Film Festival and it won the best movie award at The Transylvania Film Festival. In 2007, Mungiu received the Palme d'Or at Cannes for *Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*. Mungiu was also awarded The Golden Star by the president of Romania at the time. In 2013, Mungiu was part of the jury of the 66<sup>th</sup> Cannes Film Festival.

### FILMOGRAPHY

*Mariana* – short (1998)  
*Paulișta's Hand* – short (1999)  
*No Events- short* (1999)  
*Zapping - short* (2000)  
*The Firemen's Choir - short* (2000).  
*Occident* (2002)  
*4 Months, Three Weeks and Two Days* (2007)  
*Tales from the Golden Age* (2009)  
*Beyond the Hills* (2012)  
*Graduation* (2016)  
*RMN* (2022)



## THEMES

### 1. SOCIETY

#### Gender

In *4 Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*, the question of gender is problematized through relationship of the two main characters with the doctor. He coerces them into sexual intercourse, threatening that he would not perform the abortion unless they have sex with him. Since the two have no money, they agree to this. Thus, Mungiu shows the grim face of Romanian female discrimination in his movie. The doctor is the type of the misogynistic man who, moreover, is a predator and an abuser. The women do not seem to stand a chance in these conditions, and they are consequently traumatized and stigmatised by the men's views about women.

The problem of gender also appears in *Beyond the Hills*, where the nuns and Alina are all at the mercy and absolute control of the priest. He is the voice of authority and the women have to submit, meekly, to his will. All of them do, except for Alina, who is harshly punished for her insubordination. Moreover, there is the question of lesbian love, which appears in the movie in the guise of Alina's attraction for Voichița. In those times and context, this was a forbidden and punished love. Thus, Mungiu offers a complex problematization of gender identity in this movie.

In *Occident*, the problem of gender appears in the guise of matriarchy and family relationships. The mother of the family is the typical matriarch, who takes care of everything in the family after her husband dies. Also, the women seem to have more agency than the men, since they are the ones who have the final word. Mungiu shows that, in Romania, the mother/wife has a very important role in the family life, being the one who imposes the rules.

#### Religion

In *Beyond the Hills*, religion is problematized from several perspectives: religious superstition, religious violence, religious dehumanization and religious idealism. First of all, the nuns and priest at the monastery are very superstitious, backward people: they believe in demons and fear them more than anything. This is why they exorcise Alina, whom they consider possessed. Secondly, they submit Alina to countless tortures and physical abuse because this is how they believe they can drive demons out of her body. Thus, they become less than human in their approach to alterity and difference. They are dehumanized beasts with the appearance of peacefulness and righteousness who come to kill an innocent young woman. They are driven in their quest by their twisted religious ideals which claim that lack of peacefulness and submissiveness equals demonization and deserves to be punished.

### 2. JUSTICE

#### Injustice

In *Graduation*, the theme of injustice appears in the school system's approach to the girl's trauma after a sexual assault. She is supposed to take the graduation exam the day after the sexual assault and the school principal and directorship have little understanding for her situation. Thus, she is forced to go through the exam having her arm in a plaster cast and being clearly troubled by the recent events. This unjust state of affairs forces her father to respond with the same unjust coin and to intervene so as to improve his daughter's graduation exam mark. In this way, Mungiu shows a complex network of injustice and corruption in contemporary Romania.

In *4 Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*, injustice appears in the guise of the doctor's treatment of the two young women. Seeing they are penniless and helpless, he takes advantage of the situation and forces them to have sexual intercourse with him in return for the abortion he is about to perform illegally. Mungiu foregrounds the harsh reality of communist Romania, when many women were forced to have an abortion in very precarious conditions, since abortion was illegal. Many of them died or suffered immense trauma in the process. The two young women undergo the same trauma, plus the shame and repulsion of having had sex with a man who is a total stranger.

In *Tales from the Golden Age*, there is the problem of injustice in many forms: the corrupt ways of the Party members and leadership; the enforcing of arbitrary and senseless rules on the population; the way common people are trying to make ends meet by engaging in illegal actions. Thus, Mungiu shows that in Communist Romania injustice was prevalent and had entered all strata of social life. It appeared mainly in the form of corruption, most of the time with comic-tragic effects.

In *Beyond the Hills*, Mungiu showed the injustice of the religious system in Romania. The priest and nuns at the monastery are representative of many members of the Romanian clergy whose view of reality and life is backward, superstitious, bigoted and intolerant. Alina is the victim of this flawed perspective of the world and her life becomes similar to the Christian sacrifice due to the inclemency of the priest and nuns. She incurs terrible torture and pain until she eventually dies. Mungiu shows how far religious bigotry can go and condemns its influence on the world.

### 3. POLITICS (power)

#### **Power**

In *Tales from the Golden Age*, Mungiu addresses the theme of power through several of his characters: the mayor, the party inspector, the party activist, the policeman, etc. Through these examples, we witness how power was distributed in Romania during Communism. First of all, each individual had his rank and was subservient to the rank(s) above him. Secondly, the lesser the rank was, the more abusive the person in charge was. Thirdly, the top leaders, otherwise having no merit of their own, received all the honors and distinctions belonging to other people. Thus, it was not a society based on merit, but on servility and obedience. The results were that many unintelligent people came to be part of the leadership. This, in turn, had tragi-comical effects, which Mungiu caught very well in this movie.

In *Beyond the Hills*, Mungiu deals with the power of the church and the power retained by priests and mother superiors in the monasteries in Romania. Mungiu shows how they abuse power, asking the nuns to do hard work and to follow impositions and restrictions that are, most of the time, whims of their own. The priest and mother superior are symptomatic of a society chartered and dominated by the church, which is backward and bigoted. This has devastating effects on the lives of average people, who are simply trying to make an honest and decent living. For a priest, such as the one in the movie, working in a bar in Germany equals being a prostitute. This is why he holds Alina in contempt from the moment he sees her. The will to power is such that the priest does not relent until he sees poor Alina dead.

### 4. RELATIONSHIP (Love, Marriage, Friendship)

#### **Love**

In *Occident*, the theme of family and love relations is predominant. The film's main characters are in search of their true love, after they have been abandoned by their loved ones. They are not able to find it, mainly due to the misconceptions and prejudices their families instil in them. However, these parents are far from perfect: they have extra-marital affairs and have a simplistic and limited/materialistic view of the world. Thus, the two main characters are victims of the societal biases present in post-revolutionary Romania.

In *Beyond the Hills*, friendship appears entangled with sexual desire. Here, too, we have the relationship between two young women who used to have a sexual and emotional relationship in the past. Alina's desire and love for her friend is so great that it pushes her to wanting to commit suicide the minute she sees that her beloved no longer loves her the way she used to. Mungiu suggests that, because of the restrictions and prejudices in the Romanian society, a lesbian relationship is harshly punished and stigmatised. This is why Voichița becomes a nun. She feels ashamed and guilty of the life she used to have.

#### **Marriage**

The family and love affairs are also an important theme in *Graduation*. Romeo Aldea, Eliza's father, is a man who has an extra-marital affair, which alienates and estranges his wife from him. Mungiu seems to say that extra-marital affairs are normal for this generation, which has come out of the Communist era with the idea that they can have everything and all the freedom they need. The family is thus put aside and endangered. In the movie, there is also the theme of parent-children relationships. Under the appearance of caring and affection, Romeo imposes on his daughter rules for a life he would have liked to have had. With little care for her aspirations and needs, he manipulates her into following his life-plan.

#### **Friendship**

In *4 Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*, there is the theme of friendship and loyalty. Gabi and Otilia are two students who live in the same room in the students' dorm. Gabi has become pregnant and is forced to have an abortion. Otilia is there for her, making sure that everything goes smoothly with the abortion. But, in the turn of events, in which the doctor demands to have sexual intercourse with both of them, Otilia proves her immense loyalty and love for Gabi. She agrees to have sexual intercourse with the doctor so that her friend can have the abortion. This is the supreme sacrifice for a woman, who is otherwise in a good relationship with a man her own age. The loyalty we see in the movie is the image of the beauty and innocence of friendship.

## 5. PSYCHOLOGY (Alienation, Trauma, Psychosis)

### Alienation

In *Graduation*, Eliza is alienated by the sexual assault that she suffered and also by her father's attitude towards her. After the assault, Eliza becomes secluded and does not want to go outside. However, her father insists that she go and take the graduation exam on which her whole future and career depend. This enrages and frustrates her, and she shies away from her father, becoming closer to her mother. Mungiu shows how others' perspectives and imposition of rules on us makes us miserable and alienated.

### Trauma

In *4 Months, Three Weeks and Two Days* Gabi suffers the trauma of abortion and this clearly destabilizes her. Otilia is also traumatized, as she is the one having to take care of the foetus. Mungiu shows how troubling the experience of abortion is for women, and how stressful it was during Communism, when abortion was illegal. Gabi and Otilia are the victims of an intolerant system, which has little respect or care for women's needs.

### Psychosis

*Beyond the Hills* problematizes the theme of mental illness through Alina's suffering. First, she suffers from her unrequited love for her friend and second, from the violence and intolerance of the nuns and priest. All these problems naturally throw her into fits of rage, which are deemed as demonic possession by the priest. Alina is not really mad and Mungiu shows that in intolerant and backward conditions, even the sanest of human beings can lose her mind. Alina is the victim – very much in the Christian tradition – of religious obscurantism.

## 6. QUEST (Search)

### Search

In *Beyond the Hills*, the theme of search is problematized through Voichița's attempt to find a new (religious) path for herself, after a kind of life she probably regrets having led. Her quest is highly spiritual, and she seems to have found peace at the monastery. At one point in her dialogue with Alina, Voichița confesses that, by being a nun, at least she is no longer alone anymore. Thus, her spiritual quest was triggered by her fear of being alone. Her fear is such that she submits to all the abuses and hard work she is asked to do by the priest and mother superior.

In *Occident*, the theme of quest appears in Romeo Aldea's need for his daughter to leave the country and live in a better world. He himself is not satisfied with the life he is now living in Romania and is looking for consolation (a mistress, well-placed acquaintances, etc.). In this sense, he is the typical parent who would like his child to live the life he was not able to have (and only dreamt of). However, he puts a lot of pressure on his daughter, Eliza, who becomes estranged from him because of this. They make up towards the end of the movie, but there is still a bitter after-taste of a tense father-daughter relation.

## CHARACTERS

### **OPEN** to the new experiences

#### *Sensitive*

- a) Voichița (*Beyond the Hills*) is a sensitive and empathic young woman. When she sees that her friend, Alina, is in pain, she does not abandon her and takes her to live with her at the monastery. She is very caring and attentive towards her old friend, up to the moment when she can no longer control what is happening to her. She puts up with Alina's fits of rage with calm and understanding. She is a very peaceful and sensitive young woman, who has been drawn to the church by the fear of living alone and by the need to make up for what she considers a sinful past.
- b) Eliza Aldea (*Graduation*) is the type of very intelligent and sensitive young woman, who is ready to fight for her ideals, no matter the hardships she has to endure. She is deeply troubled by the sexual assault perpetrated on her and by her father's interventions. In spite of her sensitivity, she faces up to face all of reality's challenges.
- c) Magda Aldea (*Graduation*) is the type of woman whose sensitivity has brought her to the brink of mental breakdown. She puts up bravely with her husband's cheating on her, up to the moment she can no longer endure this state of affairs. She is understanding and empathic towards Eliza's problems, which brings the two close together.

#### *Aware*

- a) Romeo Aldea (*Graduation*) is aware of the harsh reality of post-Communist Romania, which is corrupt, manipulative and violent. But even a man as aware as himself is shattered by the sexual assault on his daughter. Being aware of the sad realities of post-communist Romania, he adapts, that is, he manipulates, corrupts and controls in order to secure a good future for his daughter. He used to live abroad and knows life there is better than in Romania.
- b) Otilia (*4 Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*) is also aware of the reality of communist Romania. She has adapted to this environment, where the black market is rampant, where bribing is the general rule and hiding things and having secrets are a must. With this kind of knowledge and awareness, she is able to get her friend, Gabi, out of all sorts of problems that the latter has got herself into. But it is an awareness which does not make Otilia very happy. On the contrary, it ruins her personal life.

#### *Engaged*

- a) The secretary (*Tales from the Golden Age*) is a very engaged man, going beyond himself to please the party inspector visiting his village. He makes sure that everything is in order, makes the villagers wave flags and wait for the inspector with bread and salt, and even tries to find some doves to be released on the arrival of the inspector. Mungiu mocks the servility and submissiveness of party members toward their chiefs.
- b) In the party activist (*Tales from the Golden Age*), we witness a man keen on implementing alphabetization in the villages of Romania. The situation is ridiculous as most of his students are older people who have a lot of work to do. However, he forces them to come to school. Most of them are naturally unable to understand or learn anything, but all ends well when the party activist is forced to leave the village, having been hit by lightning.
- c) Ildiko (*Tales from the Golden Age*) appears as the stereotype of an engaged, enterprising woman. She runs a hostel and has great business and entrepreneurial abilities. She convinces Gligore to steal the eggs from the hens he was transporting and to sell them in order to make some money.

- d) Mihaela's father (*Occident*) is a police officer who is keen on getting his daughter married. For this purpose, he engages all the policemen under his supervision to tidy up the house where his daughter is to meet her presumed future bridegroom. Mungiu ridicules the police officer as a figure of authority, in particular when he meets his future son-in-law-to-be and sees a black man.
- e) Romeo Aldea (*Graduation*) is a very engaged man. He does all he can in order to help his daughter have the future she deserves. He will even become corrupt, opposed to his principles, which he presents in a dialogue with his wife. He even contacts mobsters to save his daughter from the harm the sexual assault has done to her.

#### **AGREEABLE** in social life

##### *Friendly, Helpful*

Otilia (*Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*) is very friendly and helpful towards her friend, Gabi. She manages to get a hotel room for the abortion, to give advance payment to the doctor and move Gabi into the hotel room. Everything goes smoothly until Mr Bebe comes in and she has no other choice but to sleep with him, like her friend does.

Voichița (*Beyond the Hills*) is a very helpful friend, standing by Alina almost until the end. She does not abandon her after her first signs of depression in Germany, or after the attempted suicide and fit of rage, or even after the series of incidents at the monastery. She is trying to help as best she can.

##### *Tolerant, Generous, Loyal*

a. Marusia (*Tales from the Golden Age*) is a faithful wife. Although her husband has made a terrible mistake, at the end she brings him food in jail, and we realize she has forgiven him. While their relations are cold (because Gligore had fallen in love with Ildiko), she is willing to forgive him and stay by his side in difficult moments.

b. Magda Aldea (*Graduation*) is another loyal wife. She does not cheat on Romeo, even though she knows he is cheating on her. She is very committed to her daughter, whom she is willing to accompany – almost as a servant – to England for her studies. She is a principled woman and cannot condone adultery. This is why she decides to divorce Romeo.

#### **DISAGREEABLE** in social life

##### *Insensitive*

- a. The priest and nuns (*Beyond the Hills*) are both insensitive to Alina's problems. Although they see her great suffering, their response is to beat and torture her to death. The director shows the callousness of the clergy in the face of human suffering.
- b. Party Secretary (*Tales from the Golden Age*) appears as the stereotype of a party official who is insensitive to his subordinates' problems and worries. Moreover, he is corrupt, domineering and harsh. He gives no alternative to the photographers but to do as he dictates. Should they fail to do so or dare contradict him, they might face punishment.
- c. Mr Bebe (*4 Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*) is the doctor who is supposed to help Gabi have an abortion. When the girls admit that do not have the necessary cash, he takes advantage of the situation and proposes they have sexual intercourse instead. The girls beg him to give them time to get the money, but he is stern and insensitive to their cry for help.

##### *Selfish*

Sorina (*Occident*) seeks only her own interest. She leaves Luci because she wants to have a better life with a man richer than Luci. She wants to leave the country because she can no longer stand to live in poverty, but she does not think that she is the only one living in poverty; her fiancé is, too.

Ildiko (*Tales from the Golden Age*) is selfish in that she thinks only of her own good and material gain when she corrupts Gligore into stealing and selling eggs. When Gligore goes to prison, she does not even go to see him there. She only sees her own interest and uses people in order to attain it.

Romeo Aldea (*Graduation*) is selfish in that he puts his own interests and wishes first, instead of considering those of his daughter or wife. When Eliza, his daughter, says she does not want to take the graduation exam, he insists that she take it, regardless of the assault she had suffered the previous day. When Eliza says she does not want to leave the country, he also insists that she does.

Mr Bebe (*Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*) is a very selfish and materialistic man. He thinks only about his own profit and not about helping others (as a doctor should). He asks a lot of money from Gabi and Otilia and then sexual favours from them. He is insensitive to their cry for help and excuses. He wants to be compensated for his 'work', one way or another.

### *Disloyal*

Gligore (*Tales from the Golden Age*) is disloyal towards his wife, Marusia, by falling in love with Ildiko. He visits Ildiko often but never really has the courage to be serious with her. He is also disloyal to his wife by hiding from her the illegal egg business.

Sorina (*Occident*) Although they are no longer together, we can say that Sorina is unfaithful to Luci when she moves in with another man. She does not seem to care for Luci's sacrifice, for his willingness to make things better, or for his feelings. Her unfaithfulness stems from her egocentrism.

Romeo Aldea (*Graduation*) cheats on his wife with a younger woman who is a teacher in his daughter's school. He has no remorse doing this. The only time we see him regret this is when his daughter shows up at his mistress' house to look for him. He then realizes his daughter knows about his misbehaviour.

### *Intolerant*

The party inspector (*Tales from the Golden Age*) in this movie, about the wrong picture in the paper, is a monument of intolerance. He scolds and he threatens. His whole attitude is one of fear induction and terror. All the people present at the meeting are afraid of him.

Mihaela's mother (*Occident*) is oppressive and intolerant. She completely controls her daughter's life and does not admit any deviation from the path that she prescribes. She even goes to find a suitor for her daughter at a matrimonial agency.

The priest and nuns (*Beyond the Hills*) are intolerant of any type of difference: sexual, spiritual, conceptual traditional or in terms of customs and superstitions. Intolerance is the primary cause of Alina's death in the movie. Because she is so very different from them, she is tortured and crucified.

## **UNCONSCIENTIOUS** in work / life

### *Disorganized*

Alina (*Beyond the Hills*) is quite disorganized. She does not know if she wants to go back to Germany or remain in Romania. She leaves everything until the last minute as she does with the papers that Voichița has to get instead of her. Her being disorganized comes from her depression.

Gabi (*Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*) seems lost because she is unable to cope with the harsh realities of everyday life. This is why she is disorganized and is an obstacle in the way of Otilia, who is trying to solve matters. For instance, she has made only a phone reservation of the hotel room which now can no longer be found.

The party activist (*Tales from the Golden Age*) represents the type of air-headed intellectual who does not really understand what he is doing but knows (from orders above) that he has to

do it. Because of carelessness, he is struck by lightning and has to abandon his 'grandiose' school program.

Luci (*Occident*) is also somewhat distracted. We can see this in his over-working in menial jobs that do not suit his level of education. He is also devastated by the fact that Sorina has left him. This is why he always gives the impression that there is something else on his mind.

## EMOTIONAL

### *Anxious*

Gabi (*Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*) is very anxious because she is about to undergo an abortion in unsafe conditions (a hotel room) by a doctor who seems more like a businessman. She sits trembling in bed most of the time and she can't control her anxiety no matter how much Otilia tries to help.

Alina (*Beyond the Hills*) is very anxious throughout the movie, but her anxiety is greatly intensified by the nuns' and priests' behaviour towards her. She is anxious she will lose Voichița forever. She is anxious she will be locked in a mental institution. And she is anxious she might end up dead in the hands of her abusers, which is exactly what happens.

The photographers (*Tales from the Golden Age*) are anxious because they are afraid the party inspector will fire them or, worse, put them into jail. They personify the common people's fear of their rulers. The rulers always abuse their power and put in jail or punished whomever they want to.

Luci (*Occident*) is also anxious all the time because of the situation he is in. His fiancé has left him, he has a bad job and he lives in his aunt's apartment. He still hopes he will get Sorina back and this makes him a bit edgy. He is feisty and loses his temper easily.

### *Unhappy*

Alina (*Beyond the Hills*) is a very unhappy person. She is mainly unhappy because of her unrequited love for Voichița, which throws her into mental breakdown. She is also unhappy because she cannot get used to the customs of the monastery and is abused there.

Eliza Aldea (*Graduation*) is a very unhappy young girl. First of all, she before the graduation exam, she is sexually assaulted. The other problem which bothers Eliza is that her father is too domineering and wants to impose his will on her. Lastly, she sees that the relationship between her parents is no longer working, and this distresses her (she also knows about her father's affair).

Sorina (*Occident*) is unhappy with the life she has and wants to change it. She can no longer stand the poverty she lives in and the fact that Luci, her fiancé, cannot provide for her. This is why she chooses another man, to try and have a better life. However, she is not happy after this move either, as she does not love this other man.

Gabi (*Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*) is unhappy because she has become pregnant and has to have an abortion at a time when it was forbidden to do so. She also lacks money, which puts her in a precarious position as to her future. When she has to have sexual intercourse with Mr Bebe, she is devastated.

Otilia (*Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*) is also unhappy, first of all, because she has to make love to a man who demands sexual favours from her, in exchange for her friend's abortion. She is also very unhappy when she carries the unborn child to a place of burial. This unhappiness makes her fall out with her boyfriend.