

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Ioana Cosma

BEYOND THE HILLS (2012)

CRISTIAN MUNGIU (1968-)

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OVERVIEW

Auteur Born in Bucharest in 1967, Cristi Puiu is one of the most talented and promising of the Romanian New Wave film directors. One of his first movies, *Stuff and Dough* (2001), won several awards at international film festivals – The Trieste Film Festival, the Angers Film Festival, the Buenos Aires Film Festival. He received the Goppo award for *Aurora* (2010) and was awarded the Silver Hugo Award for *Sieranevada* (2016). For *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* (2005), he received the *Un certain regard* award at the Cannes Film Festival.

Film Beyond the Hills premiered in 2012 at the Cannes Film Festival, where it was awarded for the best screenplay. The film's two main actresses, Cosmina Stratan and Cristiana Flutur, got the best actress awards. The movie is based on the nonfictional novel of Tatiana Niculescu Bran, which presents the case of the exorcising at the Tanacu Monastery.

The movie represents the director's criticism of the violent and bigot ways of the Romanian Orthodox Church, forwarding the inherent decay which lies inside a system which presents itself as pure and sinless. Through the two main characters, Mungiu depicted the face of bare humanity in the hands of a system which oppresses and destroys. The dehumanization present in the movie bespeaks the need for the Orthodox Church to reform and leave behind its obscurantist ways.

Background The movie is based on a true story that happened in 2005 at the Tanacu Monastery in Romania. A priest and four nuns crucified a young woman, called Irina Cornici, under pretense of exorcising her. She eventually died of heart attack. The priest and the nuns were condemned to a few years in prison. Thus, Mungiu wanted to highlight the backward and violent ways of the contemporary Romanian church.

SYNOPSIS

The movie tells the tale of two young women, Voichița and Alina, and their reencounter. They had previously lived together in a foster home and it is hinted that their relationship had implied more than mere friendship. However, things have changed – Voichița has become a nun at a monastery and Alina, after working for a while in Germany, comes back home in order to take Voichița with her to travel in Germany. While at the monastery, Alina has a rage attack, when she realizes that she has lost Voichița to God. She is tied up by the priest and nuns and taken to a psychiatric hospital. There, she is treated for several days, at the end of which, the doctor treating her suggests that she would be better off at the monastery, where she would have the peace and quiet she needs. At first, Alina tries to adjust to the new home (mainly out of love for Voichița) but her wild ways give her away and it all culminated with her bursting into the altar (which is strictly forbidden) in order to pray at a wish-fulfilling icon. She is taken away and submitted to incredible torture by the priest and nuns who think she is possessed and needs to be exorcised. She eventually dies, after tremendous pain.

CHARACTERS

Alina	The main characters in the movie, a young woman who has worked in Germany.
Voichița	The other main character in the movie, who is a nun a friend of Alina.
The priest	The head of the monastery where Voichita has become a nun.
Mother Superior	The head of the nuns at the monastery.
Nun Antonia	One of the nuns at the monastery.
Doctor Solovastru	The doctor who treats Alina.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ALINA Emotional (Rebellious – Mad – In Love – Clingy)

Alina is one of the movie's main characters. She is wild and rebellious, she cannot be harnessed in any way. She becomes mad in a world which has too many rigors and impositions. She is a human being who is in love with her best friend and her mad love torments and tortures her to the point of madness. She falls victim to a religious system which condemns rebellious people such as herself.

Rebellious Alina is wild and rebellious. She cannot suffer or understand a religious system which has too many rules to follow, too many restrictions and impositions. Having grown up in a foster home, she is prone to being on the margin of society. She does not adapt anywhere she goes, be it Germany, or the monastery. When the priest tries to calm her down in her first fit of rage, this infuriates her further. Although she knows it is forbidden to enter the altar, she does so, attracting the rage of the priest and nuns.

Mad Alina suffers from a certain madness, but it is not madness proper: she is simply madly in love with Voichița. When they take her to the psychiatric ward, she screams and shouts, scratches and fights, hurting the nuns and the nurses. But her suffering comes from knowing that Voichița no longer loves her the way she used to. What's more, she falls into the hands of a system which, through its backwardness and oppression, enrages her even more. It is a system for which being rebellious equals with being possessed by demons. Abandoned by the medical system, Alina becomes the victim of a religion which condemns all that she stands for. This system will torture and kill her eventually.

In Love Alina is in love with Voichița, her best friend. They used to have a relationship in the past, but now Voichița has become a nun and embraced God, adopting a sinless life. When Alina realizes that Voichița no longer loves her the way she used to, she becomes mad with despair and tries to kill herself by throwing herself in a well. She is saved by a nun who sees her in time. The love of Alina for Voichița never perishes and she will even enter a monastery which represents a way of life she abhors in order to be with Voichița.

Clingy However, in her relationship to Voichița, Alina is very clingy and needy. She asks Voichița if she still loves her and when the latter replies that someone else has taken her place in her heart, she becomes mad with jealousy. When she is hospitalized in the psychiatric ward, she falls back again on Voichița to host her at the monastery, despite the priest's warning that people who do not seek God, should not be part of a monastery. Alina is jealous of all the people Voichița enters contact with and makes a lot of trouble while at the monastery, which makes Voichița miserable.

VOICHITA Agreeable (Loving – Generous – Kind – Passive)

Voichița is the other main character of the movie. She is a kind-hearted and generous young woman, who also lived her early years in a foster home. She is very gentle and tries to pacify Alina with her kind words and attention. After a few wayward years in her youth, she has decided to become a nun and follow God. She tries to help Alina as much as she can, but she is too submissive and blinded by her love for the church to act on Alina's being abused.

Loving Voichița is very loving towards Alina. When Alina arrives from Germany, she shelters her in her tiny room at the monastery, and, since Alina has a fever, Voichița offers to massage her. When Alina is sick in the psychiatric ward, she visits her and comforts her. She then takes her back with her at the monastery, begging the priest to accept to take Alina in. She always treats Alina with sisterly love, which probably disturbs Alina even more.

Generous Voichița is also very generous. We see her as she takes food and supplies to the foster home where she used to live. Seeing that Alina is sick, she offers to go get the immigration papers for her at the police station. We see her try her best to please everyone and do only good deeds. Voichița is a generous young woman and she only wishes for the best for her friends and acquaintances.

Kind - Voichița has a very kind and gentle nature. We see it in the way she speaks and reacts to the problems presented to her by Alina. When she is troubled, she starts praying. She almost never gets mad or has a harsh word towards anyone. Her ways are gentle and tender and we see it in the way she puts up with Alina's fits of rage, and also with the way she relates to the other nuns and priest.

When Alina is sick in hospital, she brings her oranges and peels them herself for Alina to eat. Thus, Voichita is a naturally kind woman, much in the image of Saint Mary.

Passive - However, this kind nature and humbleness make Voichița almost inert when it comes to standing up for her friend who is about to be tortured. She is incapable of opposing the priest and the nuns and does not attempt to rescue Alina. She is rather submissive and obeys blindly the priest's commands. She has no agency and takes Christian humility for submissiveness.

PRIEST Conscientious (Backward – Intolerant – Violent)

The priest is the head of the monastery. He seems to be a kind, understanding man, and accepts the visit of Alina in his monastery. He even agrees to have her in after her fit of rage and being hospitalized in a psychiatric ward. However, his worldviews are so backward and bigot that he makes the life at the monastery a torture for Alina. Moreover, he is violent and treats Alina with harshness.

Backward The priest is a very backward man, he believes in all sorts of superstitions and has many prejudices about the world he lives in. For instance, he reprimands Alina for entering the church while on a period and asks her to go outside. He is also quite prejudiced about the outer world, which he considers depraved and corrupt. His perspective on the world is one fraught with fear, hate and anger, which he skilfully masks as Christian compassion and humility.

Intolerant The priest is quite intolerant of people who are dissimilar to the way he envisages a devout person should be. He perceives Alina as depraved, morally corrupt and a danger for the nuns in his monastery. He tells Voichita off for wanting to protect her friend, whom he believes to be the devil incarnate.

Violent The actual violence of the priest really comes out towards the end of the movie when we see Alina being tortured on pretence of being exorcised. He is the epitome of religious violence in its myriad forms, throughout history. Through him, Mungiu criticizes the violence inherent in religion, showing that it is murderous, perverse and immoral.

MOTHER SUPERIOR Closed (Intransigent – Passive)

Mother Superior represents the submissive type of nun, who obeys the priest's commands. She is austere and intransigent and has little mercy for Alina. Only when she finds out that Alina is dead, does she realize the terrible thing they have done to her. By submitting to the orders, she has been an active part in the killing of Alina.

Intransigent Mother Superior is the type of intransigent nun, who has austere ways. She is well-organized and runs the monastery with acrimony. She has a task for each of the nuns, who are always busy cooking, repairing, feeding the animals, etc. Everyone listens to her and she is a woman of few words, but authoritative.

Passive Mother Superior is also passive as concerns her role in the future of the two young women. When Voichița asks her if she agrees to have Alina in the monastery, she says that she will have to ask the priest, that she has no say in this matter. She also complies to the exorcising of Alina and has an important role in it. She is to blame for Alina's death, just as much as the priest is.

NUN ANTONIA Disagreeable (Quarrelsome – Bigot)

Nun Antonia is the type of person who has to know everything about everybody, with the addition of an unkind word, now and then. She is mean and treats both Voichița and Alina badly.

Quarrelsome Nun Antonia is quarrelsome, she likes to gossip and follow everybody in the monastery. She is unkind and provokes Voichița whenever she has the occasion to. She is inquisitive and questions Voichița on the state of Alina, trying to find out more about what is happening.

Bigot Like the rest of the nuns and priest, nun Antonia is a bigot. She likes folk stories about how people become possessed, she also condemns Alina for the slightest of mistakes and she has a worldview which is similar to that of the priest and of the Mother Superior. She believes that Alina is a sinner who will bring suffering to the monastery.

DOCTOR SOLOVASTRU Rational (Professional – Passive)

Doctor Solovastru is the type of doctor who is a good practitioner but is resigned to the countless problems he encounters in his line of work. He decides to release Alina from hospital, although her state is quite serious, on grounds that there is not enough room or peace in the hospital for her.

Good practitioner Doctor Solovastru is a good practitioner. He asks Alina all the right questions and is attentive to her problems. He tries to identify the cause of her condition, but he fails, due to lack of time and resources. He admits he still does not have a diagnosis for her but believes that she would be better off at the monastery.

Passive Doctor Solovastru is also passive. Although he sees the terrible condition Alina is in, he decides to release her and leave her in the hands of (non-specialist) people from the monastery. It is due to lack of resources and space that he decides to release Alina. Thus, Mungiu also seems to blame the Romanian medical system for the situation of Alina.

THEMES

SOCIETY (Religion, *Bigotry/Superstition, Violence, Dehumanization, Idealism*)

Bigotry/Superstition One of the main themes in this film is the bigotry, superstition and narrow-mindedness of the Romanian Orthodox clergy. We witness it in the discourse of the priest, in the discussions among the nuns and even in the words of Voichița. It is a way of understanding religion and the world in a superstitious, obscurantist manner, filled with stories which foment fear and the demeaning of the self. For instance, the priest tells off Alina for entering the church and confessing while 'unclean' (i.e. during her period). He also has backward views of the West, which he considers depraved and sinful. The nuns, in their turn, are equally narrow-minded. They view everything through the prism of submission and humility. Although they seem kind, they cannot be tolerant enough to accept the fact that Alina is different. Voichița has also been touched by this perspective and, despite all her love and affection for Alina, she prioritizes God and her belonging to the church. She tells Alina that she still suffers so much because Alina has not confessed all her sins. Thus, Mungiu presents us a picture of the contemporary Romanian clergy as backward, bigoted and intolerant.

Violence The theme of religious violence reaches paroxysm at the end of the movie when Alina is literally crucified in order to be exorcised. Here, Mungiu wants to point out the great violence residing in the religious rituals still present in Romania. The belief in demons and the ability to drive them out through physical violence is a mentality whose victim is Alina. We witness her last days with horror, mercy and frustration, knowing that she is prey to the violence of a heightened spiritual (collective) self. She is also the victim of bigotry, narrow-mindedness and lovelessness. Mungiu hints at the idea that so-called religious love is not actual love, but rather violence, hate and fear. Because the priest and nuns fear the wild nature of Alina, they torture her. It is really a tragedy, especially since it happens nowadays, when this kind of thing should have disappeared long ago. Mungiu condemns a church for being so backward and violent that it puts to death a young woman for disobeying the rules they have arbitrarily created.

Dehumanization Mungiu exposes, in his movie, dehumanization at its worst. On the one hand, there is the dehumanization of Alina, in the hands of a system that rejects and condemns her; on the other hand, there is the dehumanization of the priest and nuns, who, because of their narrow-mindedness and bigoted perspectives on religion and life, come to crucify a young girl for not being the same as them. We witness the slow decay of Alina's mind and heart as the film advances. She first comes to the monastery troubled and worried, mainly because she has been without Voichița, whom she loves so much. Then there is the moment where she wants to throw herself into the well and she is tied up and driven to the psychiatric ward. With no options, from here, she returns to the monastery, where she tries to integrate, but her free ways and mind slowly erode the thin texture upon which her integration is based. In spite of their ostentatious kindness, the priest and the nuns are too withdrawn from the world to comprehend the problems of Alina. We could say that, in a way, too much spirituality dehumanizes and renders one intolerant.

Superstitions One theme that Mungiu brings to the fore in his movie is that of religious superstitions. The priest and nuns are all filled with superstitions about life and spirituality. They like to tell tales about demons and believe in their existence. Because of this worldview, they are convinced that Alina is possessed by demons and consequently beat her to drive the demons out of her body. They also believe in omens, such as in the scene when a nun faints upon seeing the sign of the cross in a broken log. Thus, Mungiu criticizes the backward mentality of the Romanian clergy, showing how superstitious and erroneous it is in its judgement. It is a mentality which is based on folk tales and

scary stories for children, an archetypal, primitive view of the world. It is very similar to views from primitive societies which were scared of natural phenomena and called them 'gods' or 'demons'. Thus, the priest and nuns in the movie embody a mentality which is not only occasionally present in today's Romania, but prevalent and powerful in many circles.

Idealism In the movie, there is also the aspect of religious idealism, which Mungiu foregrounds as flawed and dangerous. At the monastery, the priest and the nuns live apart from the outside world, which they consider corrupt and inherently sinful. They believe that the only way to lead a good life is by seeking God and being righteous. But their righteousness consists of intolerance and inadequacy. They are mainly unadapted people whose backward mentality is harmful for everyone around them. This is very dangerous, particularly since the Church has great power over the minds and being of the people living in the country. It is the sort of spirituality which only embraces light and punishes and condemns darkness. Everything stemming from darkness (mental depression, otherness, difference) is deemed as evil and condemned to perdition. Under the pretence of good and peace, this sort of idealism annuls difference and otherness.

RELATIONSHIP (Friendship – Love – Desire/Lust)

Friendship The friendship between Voichița and Alina is the only thing that saves the movie from utter morbidity. It is a friendship so beautiful and tender, supported, on the one hand, by the kindness and generosity of Voichița and, on the other hand, by the love of Alina. Although the two are now miles apart, the hardships they had been through together and the good moments they have shared make them cling to each other in the worst moments. Voichița is there for Alina when she first loses her mind and agrees to host her at the monastery, even after her fit of rage. Alina is tender towards Voichița and sees her as the only person in the world she could care for. However, Alina is needy and in this friendship, she is the one wanting help at all times. Voichița is there for her, not knowing that what she is offering Alina might be the worst for her. Nonetheless, their friendship shines bright and saves the two characters from the other foibles which make them commit serious mistakes.

Love Mungiu depicts in the most subtle, yet trenchant, way the love of Alina for Voichița. It is a love so great, that she simply cannot live without Voichița and turns her violent and jealous towards all the people surrounding her. It is the kind of love that drives one mad, that makes life intolerable without the beloved that gives everything and demands everything in return. It is implied that they may have had a closer relationship in the past, when Alina asks Voichița if she still loves her. When Voichița says there is now someone else in her heart, Alina immediately thinks that Voichița is in love with the priest. She is also jealous of the other nuns. Voichița does love Alina, but not in the way Alina would like her to. She has rejected the life she had previously had and embraced religion with all her heart. In spite of this, she does not reject Alina and acts in her defence. Thus, Mungiu portrays a type of love which is not only impossible by its very nature, but also forbidden by the church and society.

Desire / Lust One of the themes of the movie is the desire that Alina feels for Voichița. Most of the time it is present in the form of a tension we feel between the two, given Voichița's sexual restraint. But it does emerge in the scene where Voichița gives a massage to Alina, when Alina turns on her back and exposes her breasts to Voichița. However, Voichița says she is tired and immediately goes to pray. We can tell that it is very hard for her to fight her sexual desire towards Alina. There are other scenes where the two girlfriends have physical connection, such as when they sit close to each other on the bed and Alina gently touches Voichița's hair. The lust that Alina feels for Voichița is omnipresent and it is what frustrates and torments her.

POLITICS (Power)

Power The theme of power is problematized in the movie through the priest's and the Mother Superior's leadership over the other nuns. The nuns obey blindly all the orders and words of the priest and the Mother Superior. They embrace their 'wisdom' and go about doing the chores and tasks they command them to do. Moreover, the priest and the Mother Superior have the final word in whatever decision the nuns make. So much so, that Voichița has no agency in the priest's abuse of her friend, Alina. She comes to believe it is for her best. The priest is manipulative, as he cloaks his violence with the appearance of gentleness and peace. All the nuns believe he is a good man and call him 'daddy'. They also call the Mother Superior 'mommy'. So what is created is a twisted relationship of power where the abuser has a parental role.

PSYCHOLOGY (Alienation-Psychosis)

Alienation In the movie, we witness Alina's alienation in a world which not only does not tolerate her but victimizes her for being different. She has difficulty adjusting to the nonsense rigor of the monastery because she cannot understand or internalize it. When the priest tells her that it is forbidden to enter the altar, she wants to know why. She has no respect for the rules of the monastery (such as not being allowed to enter the church while having a period) because they are backward and senseless. She scandalizes everyone there through her behaviour and opinions, which are deemed wild, irrational and even demonic. This is why she is truly alienated from that community, which condemns and kills her.

Depression In the movie, Alina has a mental breakdown when she realizes Voichița no longer loves her like she used to. Consequently, she decides to kill herself, by throwing herself in a well in the yard of the monastery. However, she is saved by a nun who was passing by. After this, she does not recover from her depression especially given the harsh treatment of the priest and nuns. Alina's depression bespeaks her great love for her friend and it is a type of love whose loss equals the loss of the appetite for life. It means that Voichița represents the world for Alina, and the idea of not having her anymore is simply unbearable for Alina.

Psychosis In these conditions, it is only natural that Alina should be driven insane. There are two factors which lead to Alina's loss of rationality: her frustrated sexual attraction for Voichița and the fact that she has to adjust to an environment which she does not comprehend or accept. Moreover, this new environment is intolerant and harsh toward her. She responds, in turn, by rejecting and rebelling against such terrible and unjust impositions. Her psychosis has roots in her unrequited love and in the fact that she has lost her beloved to a community she despises and which despises her. Unlike Voichița, who is sedate and gentle, Alina is wild and cannot be controlled in any way.

QUEST (Search)

Search In the movie, 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 time in her dialogue with Alina, Voichița confesses that, by being a nun, at least she is no longer alone anymore. Thus, her spiritual quest implies 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.

PAST

Memories Mungiu's film does not linger on scenes from the two young women's past lives. However, hints are given throughout the movie that they used to have an affair, most likely, also of a sexual nature. We see this in the massage scene, when Voichița is clearly disturbed upon seeing Alina's breasts. We also get a hint of their past affair when Alina asks Voichița if she still loves her. Thus, memories appear in the movie in the guise of hints and innuendos, and ambiguity is preserved until the end.

Transience While the two girls used to be very close friends in the past, something has now happened to Voichița's heart, which has displaced her love for Alina. Voichița says that it is now God who occupies her heart. Thus, although she is very helpful and caring towards Alina and does not abandon her when she has the fit of rage and attempted suicide, she takes the side of the priest and nuns in considering that Alina is possessed by demons. Therefore, Voichița is completely changed from what she used to be when she had an affair with Alina.

SCENES

TWO OLD FRIENDS MEET AGAIN The movie starts at a railway station where two old friends, Alina and Voichița, meet after a separation. The encounter is emotional, as Alina starts crying the minute she sees and hugs Voichița. Alina had been working in Germany and Voichița has become a nun. They used to live together in a foster home during their childhood and early youth.



THE PRIEST AND VOICHITA HAVE A DISCUSSION Alina has come to take Voichița with her in Germany where they would both work on a cruise ship. Voichița goes to tell the priest of the monastery about this, telling him that Alina is troubled and needs her help. However, the priest refuses to let Voichița leave, telling her that he would not be able to receive her back should she leave then. Voichița accepts and goes to tell Alina about this.



THE DINNER While the nuns, the priest and Alina have dinner, the priest interrogates Alina about her stay in Germany. He says that people in the West are depraved and have lost the connection with God. Alina is reserved, but we can tell that she is troubled by what the priest says. All the other nuns, including Voichița, seem to agree with the priest.



THE TWO FRIENDS ARE GETTING CLOSER Back in Voichița's room, the two friends have a discussion about their future plans. Alina has a fever and asks Voichița to give her a massage. The scene is slightly sensual, as Alina turns on her back revealing her breasts to Voichița. Voichița then says she is tired and immediately goes to pray fervently.



VOICHIȚA VISITS HER PREVIOUS FOSTER HOME Voichița goes into town and visits her former foster home, bringing food for the children there. She meets an old friend who says she would also like to become a nun, but there is no room for her anywhere. Voichița then goes to the police station to ask for papers for her future stay in Germany with Alina.



ALINA'S SUICIDE ATTEMPT Back at the monastery, Alina and Voichița have a discussion in which Voichița reveals to Alina that she no longer loves her the way she used to and that it is now God who has taken her place in her heart. Alina is clearly very troubled and then she tries to throw herself in a well but she is rescued by a nun who was passing by. She then has a fit of rage and the priest and the nuns have no other choice but tie her up and send her to the hospital.



ALINA IS TAKEN TO THE PSYCHIATRIC WARD At the hospital, Alina is equally enraged and she is consequently sedated and tied up by the nurses there. She calms down under the medication. Voichița visits her and calms her down. Alina tells her never to leave her again. Voichița is very caring and loving and stays by her friend's side.



DOCTOR SOLOVASTRU DECIDES TO SEND ALINA BACK TO THE MONASTERY Alina is visited by Doctor Solovastru, who interrogates her on her state. After a few days, Voichița comes back to see if she can take Alina back with her to the monastery. Doctor Solovastru says he thinks this would be for the best, since there is not enough room and quiet in the hospital for Alina's condition. He still does not have a diagnosis but believes that she needs tranquillity and understanding.



ALINA TRIES TO INTEGRATE AT THE MONASTERY Back at the monastery, Alina tries to conform to the rules there. She sits with the nuns who read from a religious book about sins that Alina presumably should confess. Alina is clearly distraught, but she restrains herself for the sake of Voichița.



THE BAD OMEN One afternoon at the monastery, a nun faints upon seeing a bad omen – she has seen a black cross inside a log she had cut. The priest and the nuns gather around her and comfort her. But everyone is clearly disturbed by this bad sign, which they take as a presage of a great misfortune to come.



ALINA ENTERS THE ALTAR Consumed by her love for Voichița, Alina hears that there is an icon which fulfils wishes in the altar of the monastery. Although she knows it is forbidden to enter the altar, Alina enters it nonetheless. The priest scolds her and tells her it is a great sin. Alina asks why. She does not understand why she is told off and keeps insisting to see that icon.



ALINA IS CANONIZED After this incident, Alina receives a canon and is confined in a cell. After this she will be increasingly tortured on pretence she is possessed and needs to be exorcised. Her suffering is great and she will endure everything with stoicism.



ALINA DIES Alina eventually dies, due to the terrible treatment she has suffered in the hands of the nuns and priest. Voichița has very little to say in this matter. It is only when they see that Alina is dead, that the nuns begin to realize their horrendous act. But it is too late.

