

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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GRADUATION (2016)

CRISTIAN MUNGIU

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OVERVIEW

Auteur Cristian Mungiu (b. 1968) is one of the most gifted directors of the Romanian New Wave Cinema. To date, he has directed twelve movies, for which he has received numerous awards. He became widely known after his movie *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* (2007), which received the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. He also received the *Best Screenplay* award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2012 for the movie *Beyond the Hills*. For the movie *Graduation*, he received the *Best Director* award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016. In 2017 he was knighted with the Legion of Honour by the French ambassador in Bucharest, Michelle Ramis.

Film The movie was released on May 19, 2016, at the Cannes Film Festival. Other than the award at Cannes, it also received the award for directing at the Palic Film Festival and the best screenplay and best actor award at the Chicago Film Festival.

The film is a chronicle of life in post-Revolutionary Romania, fraught with corruption, violence and intolerance. However, in Mungiu's film, there is *katharsis* through the humanity of the characters, their moral values and principles, even their foibles and weaknesses. In Mungiu's movie, there is hope for a better life in the future, due to these ideals which are put forth in the movie and due to the opportunities of development for the new generation.

Background In a sense, *Graduation* could be inscribed in the series of Romanian movies that criticize life in post-revolutionary Romania. The movie was dubbed an X-ray of the grim state-of-affairs in contemporary Romania. In another sense, the movie chronicles the desperate situation of the generation of people in their forties who do not seem to have any hope for a better future. In another sense yet, *Graduation* seems to show that the only hope for a better future for the younger generation is to leave the country. The movie problematizes the issues between parents and children, between the outer world and the inner family, between husbands and wives, husbands and their mistresses, as well as the complex network of social relations which help one advance in life.

SYNOPSIS

Graduation is an episode in the life of a Romanian family: the moments around the daughter's high school graduation exam. Romeo Aldea is a respected local doctor who is married to Magda, a librarian. The two have a daughter, Eliza. Shortly before the graduation exam, Eliza is raped in full daylight. The distraught family have to find ways to cope with this difficult situation and make sure Eliza does not fail her exam and future career, as she had been admitted to Cambridge. In order to make sure this does not happen, Romeo makes a compromise, which he had never done before: he arranges that his daughter's exam is fixed by the grading teachers. He obtains this in exchange of his treatment of Bulai, a corrupt vice-mayor who needs a liver transplant. But things are further complicated when the police find out about this as they had been taping Bulai's phone calls. Romeo also has an affair with Sandra, which will almost cause the separation from his wife. Through all of these unfortunate events, Eliza remains strong and determinate. She is able to take the exam, in spite of the trauma, and the movie ends on Eliza's graduation day.

CHARACTERS

Romeo Aldea	The father of the Aldea family and a doctor
Magda Aldea	Romeo's wife and a librarian
Eliza Aldea	Magda and Romeo's daughter
Sandra	Romeo's mistress
Chief Inspector	The inspector who helps Romeo
The Director of the Graduation Committee	The director of the final graduation exam
Marius	Eliza's boyfriend
Mrs Aldea	Romeo's mother

Bulai Bulai is a corrupt vice-mayor
The Prosecutors The prosecutors are the ones who investigate Bulai

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ROMEO ALDEA Agreeable (*Caring, Assertive, Principled*)

Romeo Aldea is Eliza's father in the movie. He is a respected doctor in his community, due to his principles and professionalism. He is a very caring and attentive father, but sometimes he exerts too much pressure on his daughter. He is married to Magda, but he cheats on her with a younger woman, Sandra. His greatest wish is to extract his daughter from the corrupt and violent Romanian environment.

Caring In his relationship with Eliza, as well as in many of his other relationships, Romeo is generally caring and affectionate. He talks a lot to Eliza and teaches her the difference (in principle) between good and evil, but the practice in Romania makes him appear not as good as his word. He is there for his daughter at all times, with the exception of the moment when he leaves her a bit too far from school and she is attacked. He is nice and sensitive towards his wife, lover and mother.

Assertive Romeo has a firm way of imposing his will. With kind words and a calm tone of voice, he explains all the reasons why people should do as he wishes. At times, he is manipulative, as in the case when he tells his daughter that everything he has done was for her. With his wife, he has a minimal but polite relationship, until the end, when they seem to become reconciled. When she tries to present a different perspective on things, he contradicts her and manages to impose his will on her.

Principled Romeo is also a very principled man (in principle, at least; we should not forget he has an affair). We can see that he is tormented by having to intervene to manipulate his daughter's exam scores and make the compromise of treating someone who is essentially corrupt, in exchange for a better exam result. However, when the prosecutors propose that he let them question the patient, who was a suspect in a corruption case, he refuses to jeopardize his patient even if he knows he will be prosecuted, too.

MAGDA ALDEA Conscientious (*Delicate, Decent, Principled*)

Romeo's wife, a sickly but kind woman, with a lot of affection for her daughter. She is delicate, decent and principled. She protects her daughter from her husband's, at times, forceful attitude; she decides to leave him and take care of her daughter after she graduates. She is aware of his affair with Sandra and decides to set him free.

Delicate Sandra is a very delicate woman. It is not only her physical appearance that is delicate but also the way she approaches her husband and daughter. When her daughter is assaulted, she does not ask her to give her details about the event, but merely comforts her. She has a closer relationship with Eliza than Romeo does since she knows that her daughter is no longer a virgin, which Romeo will discover from the doctors only after the assault. She is understanding, saying that her daughter needs to experiment at her age.

Decent Magda is extremely decent, she does not inquire about her husband's affair and does not demand explanations. When her daughter finds her father at his lover's place, however, she decides to leave him and starts packing his things. She no longer wants to have him in the same house with her. She is the type of mother who will sacrifice her life for the sake of her daughter, who says she will follow her anywhere she goes and cook and take care of her.

Principled Magda is also a very principled woman. When her husband asks her what she thinks about the intervention in Eliza's final grade, she completely opposes it, saying that they have raised their child to have principles and moral values, and this will destroy everything. Romeo replies that, on the contrary, this will help her to have a life where she is safe from corruption. Magda disagrees, saying that this will affect Eliza's whole life.

ELIZA ALDEA Agreeable (*Assertive, Strong, Smart*)

Eliza Aldea is Romeo and Magda's daughter. She is in the final year of high school and about to leave for England to study at Cambridge. However, just before the graduation exam, she is assaulted in full

daylight. She will, however, carry on with the graduation exam, although it is very difficult for her as she has been clearly traumatized.

Assertive Although her father has a way of imposing his will on her, Eliza stands her ground on occasion, in spite of the fact that she has been traumatised. When he wants to take her away from her grandmother's place, she refuses and has it her way in the end. Although she understands her father's point, she is not sure she wants to leave for England. She tells her father about her intentions even if she knows how important it is for him that she leave the country.

Strong Eliza is clearly a very strong young woman, who is able to take her graduation exam in the wake of her assault and with an arm wrapped in a plaster cast. She resumes her relationship with Marius, her boyfriend, and goes on with it even after the assault. She knows about her father's affair with Sandra and reproaches him having done this to her mother.

Smart Eliza is also a smart young woman, with very good grades in high school and who is able to do fairly well in the graduation exam despite her trauma. She has been admitted to Cambridge and offered a scholarship there. Her replies are articulate, in spite of her young age. She knows how to defend herself and even impose her will.

SANDRA Agreeable (*Understanding, Needy*)

Sandra is Romeo's lover and a teacher at his daughter's school. She has a son and was operated on by Romeo. They have had an affair for a year, and we can tell she would like more out of it. She is understanding towards Romeo's situation and emotionally supports him, but she has her own needs.

Understanding Sandra is very understanding of Romeo's problems. When his wife tells him to leave their house, she receives him in her apartment and gives him soup to eat. She does so even after telling him she might be pregnant with his child and seeing that he has no reaction to that announcement. She is concerned about his problems and constantly inquires about Eliza's situation.

Needy However, Sandra is also very needy. Knowing the crisis situation Romeo is in, she still asks him to help with her speech-impaired child and reproaches him for not paying enough attention to her and her needs. She chooses a very bad moment to make these claims, as Romeo is in over-his-head with Eliza's situation. At the end, she asks Romeo to take care of her son while she is away at a clinic, probably having an abortion.

CHIEF INSPECTOR Disagreeable (*Corrupt, Friendly*)

Chief Inspector is a middle-aged man who is connected with everybody. He is friends with Romeo and also with Bulai, the corrupt vice-mayor. He is equally corrupt, used to arranging all sorts of illegal deals for his friends and for himself. He has a friendly demeanour, and one would think he is a nice person, really.

Corrupt The Chief Inspector is a corrupt man, who is acquainted with all the city's gangsters and does them favours (probably in return for favours he has received from them). The same goes for his favour to help Romeo's daughter, in exchange for a liver transplant for his friend, Bulai. He dispenses with these matters in a casual way, as though it were the most natural thing for a police inspector to do.

Friendly He is very friendly and understanding towards Romeo's situation. He has long conversations with him and has a way of endearing himself to the people he speaks with. He is jovial, makes jokes and is relatable. He is the type of man who is friends with everybody and nobody, but who manages to ingratiate himself with everyone.

MARIUS Disagreeable (*Independent, Evasive*)

Marius is Eliza's boyfriend. Young and somewhat reckless, he is her motorcycle lessons instructor and seems to be fond of Eliza. He is involved in the assault on Eliza, appearing as a passer-by in the film of the event and is the one who made an anonymous call to the police after he saw what was happening. However, we do not know for sure the degree of his involvement in the heartless event.

Independent Marius is somewhat reckless and independent, the type of young, rebellious biker. When Romeo confronts him with the picture of him at the site of the assault, he denies being the one in the picture or the one having made the phone call. Romeo loses his temper and asks him to leave

his daughter alone. Marius pushes Romeo to the ground and says, 'You are lucky that you are an old man'.

Evasive Marius is also very evasive. Whenever Romeo asks him about Eliza, he never gives a straight answer, as if he were trying to cover up for something. He smiles all the time, but his words betray him. Even in his relationship with Eliza, we cannot tell whether his intentions are serious or not. Thus, Marius is somewhat of a mystery in the movie.

MRS. ALDEA Agreeable (*Nice, Needy*)

Mrs. Aldea is Romeo's old, ailing mother. She has a bad circulatory condition and one night she loses consciousness. She is a nice and sweet old lady, but one who does not forget to stake claims and make reproaches.

Nice All in all, Mrs Aldea is a nice old lady. She almost stops breathing one time while cleaning the house and looking for a photo album of the family to give to Eliza when she leaves. She talks to Romeo in a calm and mild manner, and she is equally caring and affectionate.

Needy However, Mrs Aldea is also needy: she asks her son to bring her medicine and moreover to clean her husband's tomb. She seems very dependent on Romeo, and he obliges. However, her claims are not unjustified because, as she says, she cannot go to clean the tomb herself since she is now very old.

BULAI Disagreeable (*Corrupt, Kind*)

Bulai is the city's vice-mayor. He is fundamentally corrupt but is the sort of man who speaks kindly and whole-heartedly. He is terminally ill with liver cancer and asks Romeo to help him with a liver transplant. It is too late though for Bulai: he dies before the doctors can perform the surgery.

Corrupt Bulai is the chief suspect in a police investigation into corruption and other illegal business. He accepts to help Romeo's daughter by talking to the director of the exam committee, who is indebted to him. In return, he expects to be helped with a speedy liver transplant, not minding the fact that other sick people whose turn is before him might die because of that.

Kind Bulai has a kind manner of speaking and behaving. When he is in hospital, he insists that he pay Romeo a considerable sum of money even if the latter is indebted to him. When he hears he will be operated on urgently, he starts crying like a baby. He seems to have a kind heart and have simply fallen victim to the corrupt system of Romanian politics.

PROSECUTORS Rational (*Persuasive, Fair*)

The two prosecutors who visit Romeo are in charge of the investigation on Bulai. As part of a criminal investigation, they were entitled to record Bulai's phone calls, which means they know about Romeo's deal. They want to interrogate Bulai, but Romeo refuses as he considers the patient to be too ill for an interrogation.

Persuasive The two prosecutors are very persuasive. They do not waste any time and tell Romeo that he will be involved in the prosecution. They imply that he might benefit from leniency were he to help them interrogate the main suspect, Bulai. Romeo refuses but they insist. They give him twenty-four hours to think matters over and promise to come back the next day.

Fair However, the two prosecutors are also fair. They promise not to involve Eliza in the prosecution and say that they are understanding of Romeo's situation and that most people would have acted the way he did. They represent the lighter side of the Romanian authority system, its less corrupt and fair version.

THEMES

SOCIETY (Bureaucracy: Corruption)

Bureaucracy: Corruption The movie *Graduation* puts forward the problem of corruption in contemporary Romania. In a sense, the whole plot revolves around corruption: it triggers the chain of events and dramatizes the action. In the movie, almost all the authorities are corrupt: the police officers, the director of the examination committee; even the most principled of men, Romeo, the

movie's protagonist, becomes corrupted. Mungiu shows the complex network of personal relationships which leads to corruption: Romeo knows the director of the police department who, in his turn, knows someone who can arrange for a good graduation mark for Romeo's daughter, who happens to need a liver transplant and Romeo, who is a doctor, can help him. However, through the character of Romeo, his wife and daughter, and the teachers, we are not left with the idea that everyone is essentially corrupt. Rather, we feel that these people have principles and values which help them make good decisions. When Romeo decides to have Eliza's mark 'improved', it is only because his daughter has been assaulted and is mentally unable to take the tests. This would jeopardize her future, as she has been admitted to Cambridge and plans to leave the country. Romeo's wife also has a very ethical stance towards this matter, urging Romeo not to intervene. The examining teachers are also very helpful, as they give Eliza extra time to finish her task. The headmaster, too, says he would never accept or tolerate corruption, although we can tell from his luxurious house and car that he is not telling the truth. In the end, we can say that Mungiu foregrounds and criticizes corruption, but also highlights the qualities of the ones who embrace an ethical attitude.

JUSTICE (Violence)

Violence In the movie, violence appears in the guise of the assault on Eliza. We do not actually see it, but we can tell from Eliza's condition, her crying and sadness, how violent and disgraceful this act has been. This act of violence, which triggers the drama of the story, remains one of the unsolved mysteries in the movie, as we never find out who perpetrated it. From the police's and Romeo's findings, we can infer it was one of Eliza's acquaintances or friends, both of whom she and her boyfriend, Marius, are trying to cover for. The assault has consequences for all the characters, leading to Romeo's fall into corruption, to Eliza's deplorable state of mind and to Romeo's wife's decision to leave him for good once Eliza has graduated. Violence is also perpetrated against Romeo as his house and car windows are smashed by someone who remains unknown until the end of the movie. Nothing seems to be safe in these violent conditions and Romania is a country where the best one can do is leave.

PSYCHOLOGY (Teenage Problems)

Teenage Problems Teenage problems are epitomized by the character Eliza. First of all, she has the problems related to her being assaulted: she is deeply hurt not only physically but also emotionally, feeling insecure and threatened. Secondly, there are the problems associated with her school and future career: she has been admitted to Cambridge, but she has to get an A in her graduation exam if she is to keep her scholarship. Her father, Romeo, puts a lot of pressure on her: it is not really her desire to go to England, but rather his. When Romeo insists, she says she no longer wants to go, believing that she will not succeed at university or in a career, and that her parents have sacrificed everything only for her to fail. A child raised with principles and moral values, Eliza is forced, because of her condition, to accept the compromise of corruption, so that she can please her parents. Although she is in no condition to pass a test, she forces herself to go to the graduation exam because her father, mildly but assertively, demands it. Moreover, she has a relationship with a young man, Marius, who is also her motorcycle riding instructor. In the movie, there is the hint that Marius had witnessed the assault but did not intervene, presumably because he was protecting the aggressor. Eliza has a lot of problems, which are happily solved in the end.

RELATIONSHIPS (Parents and children)

Parents and children The movie also chronicles the complex relationship between parents and children. Romeo is the type of father who will do anything for his daughter and who wants her to have the life he dreamt of. In the corrupt and violent landscape of Romania, it is very difficult to make a decent living, and this is why he would like his daughter to leave the country. But he puts a lot of pressure on her, first of all by forcing her to take the graduation exam immediately after the assault, secondly by arranging for her to pass her exams through corruption, and, lastly, by insisting that she leave for England, in spite of her reluctance. Eliza's mother is much more understanding. She does not insist that her daughter take the graduation exam at that moment, and she totally opposes the idea of any external manipulation of her final grade. However, she is too weak (probably due to illness) to impose her viewpoint. She is there for her daughter after the rape and is very caring and affectionate towards her. Thus, Mungiu shows that even in the best parent-child relationships, there are manipulations, victimizations, accusation and undue pressure.

APPEARANCE

Appearances vs. Reality In *Graduation*, there is a complex network of secrets, which cast a shadow on the relationships of the main characters in the movie. In spite of his being a principled man, Romeo has an affair with Sandra. His wife, Magda, does not tell him that their daughter has begun her sexual life. Marius, Eliza's boyfriend, has some insight into the assault, but refuses to tell anything. The local authorities – the Chief Police Inspector, the vice-mayor and the director of the examination committee – who are supposed to have an ethical position in society, are corrupt, use traffic of influence and conduct illegal business. It is though the whole corruption system in the Romanian society has changed the lives of the characters for the worst. They each try to project a benign, luminous image of themselves, but are more tainted than one might expect on a first impression. Thus, Mungiu problematizes the dialectic appearances vs. reality in his movie, to show how profound corruption is in people's lives.

SCENES

THE ASSAULT ON ELIZA

At the hospital The couple in the first scenes have a daughter who is about to graduate from high school. Her father takes her to school and leaves her a bit farther from school than he should have. On the way to school, the girl is assaulted in full daylight. At the hospital, Magda reproaches Romeo for having left their daughter some distance away from the school. Both of them are devastated.



At the police station Eliza has to make a declaration about her being assaulted. It is a very tense scene, where we witness how hard it is on the girl to recount the facts of the assault. The police officers are nice and treat her well and her father is very distraught. Eliza declares she does not know the aggressor.



The line of suspects Eliza goes to the police station to see if she can identify one of the suspects as the one who assaulted her. Although it is very hard for her, she accepts to see the suspects. They are asked to repeat some of the aggressive words that had been said to Eliza during the assault. The last suspect snaps and exaggerates dashing towards the screen behind which Eliza was standing. Eliza is very distraught by this and she flees the police station.



CORRUPTION

Arranging the exam After the first exam, in which Eliza did not do very well, Romeo starts worrying about her final results: she needs an A in order to take the scholarship at Cambridge. He talks about it to the Chief Inspector of Police, who says he could arrange that Eliza has good test results: he knows vice-mayor Bulai, who is acquainted with the director of the examination committee. In his turn, Bulai needs a liver transplant that Romeo could arrange for, and this would settle things nicely for all of them.



With the graduation committee director Romeo goes to meet the graduation committee director in his home to arrange for the rigging of his daughter's exam. He arrives in the middle of a birthday celebration and apologizes for it. The director says he will make an exception in Eliza's case but that otherwise he does not countenance corruption. However, we can tell from his luxurious home and car that his words are far from the truth.



Bulai's offer As promised, Romeo admits Bulai to his hospital, in order to treat him. He goes to see the ailing Bulai now lying in the hospital bed. Bulai offers him money for the surgery, as is the custom in Romania. Romeo refuses, saying that he is already indebted to Bulai, but the latter insists. At the end, the two agree that Romeo will have the money if the surgery is successful.



Explaining to Magda Romeo then goes home and tells Magda, his wife, about the deal he is about to make for Eliza's sake. Magda does not agree, saying they have raised their daughter on different principles and moral values, but Romeo will not have it any other way. Magda also says this arrangement will impact Eliza's future life, but Romeo believes it is the passport to a better life for her.



Explaining to Eliza After the conversation with his wife, Romeo goes to Eliza's room, to persuade her to agree to have the exam rigged. He starts by talking about the sacrifices that he and his wife have made for their daughter. Then, he introduces the problem of rigging the exam: he tells his daughter that all she has to do is cross three words from the right-hand corner of the page. Eliza seems reluctant and then he says: "Sometimes in life, the result is the only one that matters". At the end, Eliza seems to accept this compromise.



With the prosecutors One morning at the hospital, Romeo is visited by two prosecutors. They ask him to let them interrogate Bulai, as he is the prime suspect in a case of corruption and scandal. Romeo replies he does not believe that his patient is in any condition to be interrogated. However, the two insist, saying that they had been tapping Bulai's phone calls and are aware of his involvement in the scandal concerning Eliza's graduation. Shocked, Romeo refuses to compromise.



SEPARATION

His wife leaves On returning home at night, Romeo sees his wife packing his suitcase. He enters the house and the two do not speak for a while. Magda says she wants him to leave the house and remain apart from her. She is aware of his affair with Sandra and would like both of them to carry on with their separate lives. Magda says she wants to go with Eliza wherever she goes and take care of her.



His mistress leaves After Sandra's abortion, Romeo meets her at the school where she works. He comes in with her son whom he had taken care of while she was having her abortion. They do not actually speak words of separation, but we can tell from Sandra's final embrace of her child that this is what will happen.



The fight with his daughter's boy-friend At the Chief Inspector's office, Romeo sees the film of Eliza being molested in the street and the few passers-by. He identifies one of them as Marius, Eliza's boyfriend. Romeo asks Marius to meet him and tries to persuade him to tell the truth, to admit he is covering for someone. Marius denies these allegations and the two end up fighting.



CONCLUSION

Graduation day The movie ends with scenes from Eliza's graduation ceremony. In the end, no intervention was necessary after all, as the teachers gave her more time to finish her test because of her condition. At the ceremony, father and daughter do not speak to each other, but are reconciled. The music is from a popular movie during communist Romania about high school life, which showed an innocuous, idealistic way of living. Mungiu's *Graduation* is much more realistic.

