

CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

An Independent film society based in Chelmsford

Visit our website at

www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk

Follow us on:

twitter.com/ChelmsfordFilmC

www.facebook.com/ChelmsfordFilmC



Beyond the Hills ("Dupa Dealuri")

Country: Romania/Germany (2012)

Written and directed by: Cristian Mungiu
(inspired by non-fiction of: Tatiana Niculescu Bran)

Cast:

Cosmina Stratan	(Voichita)
Cristina Flutur	(Alina)
Valeriu Andriuta	(Priest)
Dana Tapalaga	(Mother Superior)
Catalina Harabagiu	(Antonia)
Gina Tandura	(nun Iustina)
Vica Agache	(nun Elisabeta)
Nora Covali	(Nun Pahomia)
Dionisie Vitcu	(Mr. Valerica)

Film reviewers and ex-alcoholics have this in common. At times they can find sobriety fulfilling, perhaps even thrilling. Accustomed to the fumes of imbecility – for the drinker liquor, for the film critic Bruce Willis movies (and dozens like them) – they discover a rapture in clarity, seriousness and the unadorned manifesting of human truth.

Cristian Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills*, the latest film from the Romanian director who won the Cannes Palme d'Or in 2007 with [4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days](#), is austere beyond belief. Austere partly *because* it goes beyond belief: to the bare, forked, poignant humanity that exists in everyone when religion – or any other form of doctrinaire revelation – is removed or put in question as spiritual comfort raiment.

This is a truth-based story. A girl *was* robbed of life by the elders of a monastery seeking to cure her by exorcism and punishment; cure her of her – so perceived by them – hysterical emotional individualism. The Romanian press and public went into ferment; the priest and Mother Superior were jailed. In *Beyond the Hills* there is little hysteria, just an epic narrative unfolding, contour upon contour, like those hills of the title, which have divided Germany-working Alina ([Cristina Flutur](#)) from her former orphanage friend Voichita ([Cosmina Stratan](#)), now a novice nun, whom she returns to Romania to visit at the story's start. Is Alina in love with her? She cleaves to her friend; shares her bed; dreams of a life together. She frets when Voichita steps from their cell in the dark hours to pray. Driven to sip from the

Please Note:

I struggled to find discussion of this film without "plot spoilers." If you'd prefer not to know, in advance, what will happen, you might want to save these notes until after the screening. Eric



same cup of belief — if only to share the same communion of souls – Alina starts to give away her possessions, to practise the recital of vows

Seen one way, Alina is unstable. Seen another, hers is the insanity of a sanity finding itself in a greater madness: that of disciplinarian mysticism. [Mungiu](#) directs each scene as if it is a film in its own right: long, sometimes belief-begging takes, some involving many characters, most shot with an unmoving camera. Editing for him is editorialising. He won't make up our minds for us. We the audience must choose whether to believe the priest ([Valeriu Andriuta](#)), an honest, well-meaning, visibly troubled man – who does not *intend* the Alina-restraining wooden stretcher with cross-piece to resemble a prop from Calvary – or to believe the police inspector of the last scenes, rational yet at moments angrily righteous in his repudiation of Christian good intentions. "I'd rather go to hell than have you pray for me."

Its muteness and impartiality are the film's eloquence. Alina never labours to justify her dreams aloud. The priestly arguments are often mere bewilderment, we sense, dressed as faith or reason. Inside the monastery we watch the long, tormented wrestling of inarticulate souls. Outside, in the last scenes, is the majestic beauty of snowfall, a visitation beyond man and woman, beyond God. The film's final shot goes straight to the story's heart and the spectator's. Amazing grace. Now at last we know what those words mean. [Nigel Andrews, FT](#)

Background (contains spoilers)

Only a select handful of directors know the honour of having had their film booed at Cannes. I tax Cristian Mungiu with the memory of that hullabaloo last May when his *Beyond the Hills*, which later won two



major prizes and a sheaf of rave reviews, raised the hackles of early festivalgoers. The 44-year-old Romanian director's first feature since his 2007 Golden Palm winner, **4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days**, is – like that film – a harrowing, climactically shocking story based on true events: here a girl's death in a monastery after attempts to “save her soul” with punishment and exorcism.

It's often a good sign, isn't it, when audiences boo? It means the film has got to them?

“That is the point of making a story on a controversial topic,” Mungiu agrees, sitting in a southern European café. Forthrightly spoken he is pristine-looking, even faintly priestly, in his white buttoned-up shirt. “You can't expect unanimity about a film on a subject that has polarised people. I want the film to generate questions and debate.”

This it has, along with the acclaim. Of its Cannes prizes – Best Screenplay and Best Actress – the second was shared between newcomers Cosmina Stratan and Cristina Flutur, playing the former orphanage friends reunited when Alina (Flutur) returns from a stay abroad to visit Voichita (Stratan), now a novice nun. Alina seeks friendship or more – a shared bed for the beginning – in the Romanian monastery where her intrusive emotionalism starts to incur the adverse attention of the senior priest and Mother Superior.

The film ends in tragedy; so did the real story. “The case is very well known in Romania; if you look on the internet it's still very popular. In 2011 the priest was finally released from prison, and also the Mother Superior.”

“It's clear they have done wrong,” Mungiu asserts when I remark that his film seems to hold off condemning them. “But what I try to bring out is, they did wrong after nobody else did anything. Their first reaction was good, they took the girl to the hospital” – when the violence of Alina's distress expresses itself in physical assault – “and had no initial intention to take her back. But if you let the church be the only organisation that will take any initiative, what do you expect to happen?”

Initiative, in this and similar cases, regarding the lost and orphaned: that notorious demographic in Romania, first under Ceausescu, more recently in a country where emigration has denuded families. “You'll always have problems in a poor country. Today many people leave to live abroad, leaving children behind who don't get a good schooling, who grow up without having the set of values they need. And then you wonder why so many bad things happen.”

“Beyond the Hills is not a criticism of religion but of a failure to understand that religion should not be taken literally. The church is very popular in Romania. But if you focus on the surface, on ritual and tradition, you encourage the irrational part of Christianity. Religion doesn't mean you go to church and light a candle. It means – it should mean – that you absorb a set of values which you can use in your everyday life.”

Tell that, though, to parts of the “religious” world today; tell that to the dark forces of mysticism powering up their jihads. *Beyond the Hills* goes beyond the hills of Romania because the truth of a director's local,

parochial story has a modern reverberance. That may be, too, why this country's cinema has had so potent a recent heyday, starting with Mungiu's 2007 Palm winner: an abortion drama that rang globally recognisable alarm bells about everything from flawed national welfare systems to skilled scam artists exploiting the vulnerable.

It has been an extraordinary renaissance, or *naissance*, Mungiu concurs. After **4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days**, we have had an important film at Cannes every year,” he says, citing directors such as **Cristi Puiu** (**The Death of Mr Lazarescu, Aurora**) and **Corneliu Porumboiu** (**Police, Adjective**). It is the documentary approach, I put to him, that has made New Romanian Cinema so distinctive: the quest for an exactitude of truth – a magnifying-glass realism – which can be scary, tragic or satirical. Stylistically, in *Beyond the Hills*, Mungiu's documentary instincts manifest themselves in long camera takes, a method that, in fictional drama, can result in a near-Kubrickian shooting ratio.

“I shot a lot of footage because it's not easy having eight people interacting in a scene without cutting. I have one take per scene: always something can go wrong and you start again. But I wanted long takes because it's my idea of cinema. In life, important things don't happen one on top of the other. There are dead moments, which can also be important. I try to preserve this in film. I don't want a process whereby I select what's important and tell you; I want to stage a situation without including myself as director.”

That's why during the powerful moments in *Beyond the Hills* we don't know quite how to react. The priests: are they guilty? Are they malevolent or merely stupid? The girls: is Alina designing or victimised, possessive or “possessed”?

“In the original real story there was no strong friendship between the two girls,” says Mungiu. “One girl from the orphanage came to visit but the other never tried to help. Is there more than friendship, in my film, between them? It's for the viewer to decide. For me it's not important; their affection for each other is important. When you have only one person you love or feel loved by, the sense of abandonment when you lose that love gives you the energy, the terrible energy, to do what this girl does.”

“In the same way, it's for the audience to decide if the priests act from malice or ignorance. What I want to ask is, ‘How much can a person, or an organisation, ask in the name of love?’ I don't think it's fair, in the name of God, to ask someone like this innocent girl to give up her love for anybody around her, for another human being. Very cruel things are done in the name of love. That includes the love of God.” **Nigel Andrews**



Don't forget the Quiz Night, on Friday, November 29th: tickets from Sally — £5

Our previous presentation:

Based on the feedback slips returned on the night, you rated **In The House**, screened Monday, October 14th, **4.37** stars out of 5. Please visit the current season page at <http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk> to read all the feedback comments.

You can still provide feedback on this, or any other film, by visiting the Discussions page:

<http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk/discussion/>.

Next **Cramphorn Film**, on Monday 28th October: **The Gatekeepers** (15), Israel/France/Germany/ Belgium, 2012, dir: Dror Moreh

Our next presentation:

The Big City (“*Mahanagar*,” India, 1963, dir. Satyajit Ray) will be shown on **Friday, 1st November**, starting at 8:00pm.