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## Narratives of Cruel: Cristian Mungiu's Cinematic Work and the Political Imaginary of East-Central Europe

*Narracje okrucieństwa: dzieła filmowe Cristiana Mungiu, a polityczne imaginarium Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*

### ABSTRACT

This article employs Lauren Berlant's concepts of *cruel optimism* and *impasse* to explain the way the cinematic work of Cristian Mungiu comments on the condition of small East-Central European cultures. The article analyzes *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007), *Beyond the Hills* (2012) and *Graduation* (2016), and draws evidence from the narrative structure of these films, gender and social and economic condition of their characters, as well as the audiovisual poetics of their endings. The main point of the article is that Mungiu's films criticize a mental mapping East-Central Europe with origins in the Cold War that imagines it as a region of small nations in a permanent state of danger and in need of urgent protection. Mungiu's films show that this mapping exposes these cultures to inescapable cycles of political abuse. The slow and contemplative endings of Mungiu's films also propose a solution. They gesture toward the development of a condition of political hovering that,

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as interruption, may enable East-Central European political imaginaries to envision more creative solutions to escape cycles of abuse. This interruption is linked to the memory of 1989 and to the historical openness 1989 created. As a political approach for East-Central European cultures, interruption is a strategy of letting one's political imaginary be inspired to the opening of 1989.

**Key words:** East-Central European political imaginary, cinema of Cristian Mungiu, cruel optimism, 1989

This article examines the work of the East-Central European multi-awarded filmmaker Cristian Mungiu. The purpose of this examination is to show the way an artistic project critically comments on the political imaginary of the small cultures of East-Central Europe [hereinafter: ECE]. This imaginary informs shared narratives about the past and current political and economic predicaments. ECE cultures often narrate their pasts and presents in terms of imperialist endangerment, abuse and calls for urgent defense. Mungiu's films, I will show, propose a storytelling that is post-imperialist and that envisions redemption differently. I focus on three of his films: *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007), *Beyond the Hills* (2012) and *Graduation* (2016).

The article is divided into five parts. The first describes particularities of ECE political imaginaries. The second delivers film analyses and shows the way the work of Mungiu engages these imaginaries. The third provides the theoretical toolbox to facilitate the understanding of Mungiu's commentary. The fourth explores Mungiu's invitation to rethink the narratives generated by the imaginaries of ECE's small nations. The fifth, the Conclusion, reflects on Mungiu's perspective on redemption and on how his films envision staying faithful to the legacy of 1989.

### ECE'S POLITICAL IMAGINARY

To better understand ECE's narratives about its past and current predicaments, I will refer to texts written at various moments in the region's nation-state history after World War I. 1918 is an important landmark because, with the crumbling of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, ECE as a region of small nation states came into being. For obvious reasons linked to the fall of the German Third Reich and the rise and fall of Soviet-style communism, so are 1945 and 1989. The texts that I have in mind build on discourses that shaped 19th-century struggle for national self-determination. They envision ECE as a vulnerable territory, present it as

under constant threat of being conquered by superpowers, and articulate calls for urgent defense. What makes them stand out is the more or less explicit expression of a deep lack of trust in history, understood here in a Hegelian sense.

This sense of vulnerability and distrust in history still marks the present political imaginary of ECE cultures even after ECE states have become members of the European Union (EU) and when 19th and early 20th-century imperialism in its military and brutally exploiting forms is no longer a real threat. Currently, Europeans live in the most peaceful era in their history, and neo-imperialist or neo-colonialist practices, as Hardt and Negri argue, come nowadays, in the times of generalized capitalism, at least in Europe, in rather demilitarized, de-centered, and cultural forms<sup>1</sup>. Thus, one of the quintessential modes of governance in post-political or biopolitical era is the generation of states of danger and exception as complements or sometimes even substitutes for what the modern era envisioned as progress<sup>2</sup>.

In spite of the decentered functioning of power described by Hardt and Negri and the cultural turn in imperialist practices, danger narratives have neither become less dramatic nor have changed the nature of their protagonists, which still include civilizations, states, empires, and their leaders. In fact, anti-imperialist defense remains an important ingredient in the legitimization discourses of governing elites in ECE. As many political theorists have shown, these elites are industrious discoverers and inventors of threats and producers of dramatic storytelling. They rule by generating antagonisms in the public arena, mobilizing constituencies and exploiting the anxieties of deficiently informed citizens<sup>3</sup>.

In the recent history of ECE, anticommunism has remained the dominant danger narrative. Denunciation of communism has been used throughout the 20th and even in the 21st century by both rulers and the oppressed to mobilize the political imaginary of the region. In the 1920s and 1930s, anticommunism served to legitimate state alliances with Nazi Germany and stimulate cultural and xenophobic nationalism. In the post-1945 era, it morphed into a resistance discourse inspired by liberal capitalist values. It was articulated in samizdat writings as Soviet troops imposed Soviet-style regimes in the region and synchronized these small nations' political

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<sup>1</sup> M. Hardt, A. Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge 2000, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, vol. 2, Chicago 2005, pp. 10–11.

<sup>3</sup> J. Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU*, London 2006, pp. 51–54.

practices with those of Moscow. Anticommunism persisted in the post-1989 era under various avatars: as a framework of remembering the crimes of communist regimes, as an incentive to fight their lasting networks of power, as an ideological stimulus to adopt unbridled forms of capitalism, and as a medium for re-legitimizing conservative values and the influence of the Church over politics.

I will not analyze anticommunist texts of the fascist times. An insightful account of this literature among leading Romanian intellectuals can be found in Totok<sup>4</sup> and a broader study of the intertwinement of anticommunism and fascism in ECE in Gerrits<sup>5</sup>. Instead, I will focus on a text that originates in the ECE anticommunism resistance literature and advances a liberal pro-EU perspective. It is also one of the most influential anticommunist texts in ECE history and one that emphatically places endangerment at the core of ECE identity. I have in mind Milan Kundera's essay *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, first published in the French journal *Débats* in November 1983, then translated into English by *New York Review of Books* in April 1984, which sealed its notoriety<sup>6</sup>.

Circulated at the height of the Cold War angst and a year before the perestroika, the essay reuses insights put forward by the Czech philosopher Tomas Masaryk. Masaryk was among the first liberal intellectuals to write about 'the zone of small nations' of ECE as a cluster of states and cultures 'between the East and the West', more exactly 'between the Germans and the Russians'<sup>7</sup>. Kundera embeds Masaryk's post-World War I insights into the late 20th-century predicament of Soviet hegemony over ECE and maintains the tone of urgency of 1918. As if in times of war – but a Cold War with significantly fewer casualties in Europe than World War I – Kundera argues that superpower imperialist menace and abuse is affecting the very existence of the small cultures of ECE<sup>8</sup>. For him, these cultures exist in the horizon of being conquered, alienated, and destroyed at any moment, and are deeply affected by this predicament in both their view of history and their cultural output. Not only are they in a continuous state of emergency but are also in a continuous need of protection. They imagine themselves

<sup>4</sup> W. Totok, *The Generation of Mircea Eliade Under the Spell of Fascism*, (*Die Generation von Mircea Eliade im Bann des rumänischen Faschismus*), 'Halbjahresschrift für südosteuropäische Geschichte, Literatur und Politik' 1995, 7, 1, pp. 42–55.

<sup>5</sup> A. Gerrits, *Antisemitism and Anti-communism: The Myth of 'Judeo-Communism' in Eastern Europe*, 'East European Jewish Affairs' 1995, 25, 1, pp. 49–72.

<sup>6</sup> M. Kundera, *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, 'The New York Review of Books' 26 April 1984, pp. 33–38.

<sup>7</sup> T.G. Masaryk, *Pangermanism and the Zone of Small Nations*, 'New Europe' 1916, 1, 9, pp. 271–277; idem, *The New Europe (The Slav Standpoint)*, London 1918, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> M. Kundera, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

as constitutively dysfunctional and feel, think and act as if they could not survive without protection<sup>9</sup>.

In the times when Kundera wrote his essay, the big threatening other of ECE was Soviet imperialism. The protector was Europe, to which his essay made an effort to show that ECE essentially belonged. After 1989 and the NATO and EU enlargement processes, as well as after the end of the first love-affair with Europe, narratives of imperialist peril started to change. Even if the real and immediate threat of an invading Soviet power disappeared, Kundera-style anticommunism was kept alive through acts of public remembering, of telling the truth about the past and of denouncing the crimes of Soviet-style heavy-handed and sometimes murderous social engineering, and of the corruption and callousness of the men and women who built the communist elite.

Countries like Romania generated an abundant anticommunist literary, historiographic, and documentary and feature film output. As I show in another article<sup>10</sup>, anticommunism was the main ideological matrix informing Romanian cinematic production of the 1990s and early 2000s. It served as a framework for coming to terms with the past and as an object of urgent intellectual condemnation, as specters of communism were imagined haunting the post-1989 present<sup>11</sup>. Feature films like *The Earth's Most Beloved Son* [*Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni*, Șerban Marinescu, 1993], *The Oak* [*Balanța*, Lucian Pintilie, 1992], *The Afternoon of a Torturer* [*După amiaza unui torționar*, Lucian Pintilie, 2001], and *Bless You, Prison* [*Binecuvântată fii, închisoare*, Nicolae Mărgineanu, 2002], narrate in a regime of urgency as if the past, Soviet communism, could return at any moment and take over. But even later films made under the label of New Romania Cinema such as *Portrait of the Fighter as a Young Man* [*Portret al luptătorului la tinerețe*, Constantin Popescu, 2010] continued the trend<sup>12</sup>.

Beyond this more or less legitimate concern, the threat of Soviet-style communism started to be employed as a tool of cultural and political marketing. It was used to generate support for political and economic decisions that were only hypothetically connected to the past.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> C. Parvulescu, C. Turcus, *Introduction: Devices of Cultural Europeanization*, 'Studies in Eastern European Cinema' 2018, 9, 1, pp. 3–14.

<sup>11</sup> K. Verdery, *Nationalism and National Sentiment in Post-socialist Romania*, 'Slavic Review' 1993, 52, 2, pp. 179–203.

<sup>12</sup> Though this is an exception. Mungiu's omnibus project *Tales from the Golden Age* [*Amintiri din epoca de aur*, 2009], which he produced, has a different approach to the past, as do most films of the New Romanian Cinema. Its humoristic and sometimes slightly nostalgic approach suggest the irreversibility of the departure from state-socialism.

The threat of communism became a top-down induced social anxiety<sup>13</sup>. As such, one of its last grand manifestations took place in 2006 in Romania, shortly before the admission of the country into the EU. Led by a former sovietologist, Vladimir Tismaneanu, a commission set up by the president of Romania of that time delivered a voluminous report whose main function was to provide the documentation of an official, final and unquestionable condemnation of the communist regimes of 1948–1989 as ‘illegitimate and criminal’ as well as of communism in general as an ideology that leads with necessity to dictatorship<sup>14</sup>. The condemnation was performed in a ritualized televised public session of the reunited chambers of the Romanian parliament, and its function was to mark the passage to a communism-free society. Collaterally, it also had the function of marketing the center-right neoliberal government of the time as the agency with the legitimacy and know-how to perform this exorcism, as well as to secure international protection against communism by joining the EU<sup>15</sup>.

But even in countries like Romania, which took longer to separate from state-socialism, the appeal of anti-communist narratives has started to wear off in the last decade. Elites had to invent new threats to feed the demand for narratives of danger and rescue of the country’s political imaginary. The example of the Hungarian FIDESZ Party is perhaps the most relevant. While initially a Christian Democrat popular party that won elections on an anticommunist ticket, its message changed threats in time. While starting to build a solid alliance with the former great menace from the East (currently known as Putin’s Russia), FIDESZ built its campaigns on saving Hungary from Jewish-American finance capital, the LGBT community, and Muslim migrants, presented as possible terrorists, economic burden and corrupters of the Hungarian way of life.

Most importantly, however, Hungary’s new threatening imperialist other became the EU, the power that played the role of defender of ECE small nations in Kundera’s story. This mutation in the collective political imaginary took place in many ECE countries<sup>16</sup>. Hungary and Poland are in

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<sup>13</sup> C. Mudde, *In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populisms in Eastern Europe*, ‘East European Politics and Societies’ 2000, 15, 1, pp. 33–53.

<sup>14</sup> The report can be accessed here: The Tismaneanu Report, [http://media.hotnews.ro/media\\_server1/document-2007-12-20-2118604-0-raportul-tismaneanu.pdf](http://media.hotnews.ro/media_server1/document-2007-12-20-2118604-0-raportul-tismaneanu.pdf) [accessed on: 20 X 2020].

<sup>15</sup> M. Ciobanu, *Criminalising the Past and Reconstructing Collective Memory: the Romanian Truth Commission*, ‘Europe-Asia Studies’ 2009, 61, 2, pp. 313–336.

<sup>16</sup> P. Kopecký, C. Mudde, *The Two Sides of Euroscepticism: Party Positions on European Integration in East Central Europe*, ‘European Union Politics’ 2002, 3, 3, pp. 297–326.

the lead, with Czechia and Romania of the 2015–2019 period following suit. Moreover, the identification of the EU as the next imperialist threat also marks a radicalization of the political practices of these countries, which, commentators argue, have started to borrow from the elitist governance toolbox of their pre-1989 communist predecessors<sup>17</sup>. The other threat to democracy that these narratives generate is the stronger implication of the Church in politics with its conservative agenda and limited sympathy for human rights<sup>18</sup>.

### NARRATIVES OF CRUEL

But narratives of danger and salvation come with costs. To better understand them as well as Mungiu's critique, I will use Laurent Berlant's concept of *cruel optimism*. Berlant defines cruel optimism as attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. It is an investment of desire in an object or a narrative that, at a certain moment in time, becomes an impediment to the aim whose achievement it was supposed to serve. The situation can become, however, even worse than just an impediment. Instead of liberating, the narrative turns into a means of oppression. Promises and visions of a good or better life are fulfilled at a price that is too high<sup>19</sup>.

Such high costs are, for example, the outcomes of the narratives that informed the desire to purify ethnic groups in former Yugoslavia, and which lead to war crimes, embargoes, marginalization, and years of coping with shame and trauma on both sides of the conflict. The same can be said about the new nationalisms of ECE and the high price citizens of Hungary or Poland pay today for the desire to put 'real' Hungarians or real Poles into power. Here, under the rubric of higher costs one can list the oppression of minorities (Muslims, LGBT, Roma) and the growing influence of helpers with demonstrated bloody pasts and undemocratic agendas like the Christian Church and Putinist Russia. But most

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<sup>17</sup> Z. Enyedi, *Paternalist Populism and Illiberal Elitism in Central Europe*, 'Journal of Political Ideologies' 2016, 21, 1, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Most of these refurbished forms of politics of danger and salvation are nowadays addressed by scholars under the rubric of ECE populism. B. Stanley, *Populism in Central and Eastern Europe*, 'The Oxford Handbook of Populism' 2017, 140; Bayer L., *The New Communists: In Budapest and Warsaw, Nationalist Governments are Stealing Pages from Their Predecessors' Playbooks*, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/new-communists-hungary-poland-viktor-orban-jaroslaw-kaczynski/> [accessed on: 1 X 2020].

<sup>19</sup> L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham 2011, p. 10.

importantly, these countries pay the price of an increasing democracy deficit and deterioration of the quality of public dialogue<sup>20</sup>.

The commentary offered by Mungiu's films on the predicament of small ECE political imaginaries goes along the lines of Berlant's cruel optimism. His films tell stories of danger, promises of salvation, and abusive helpers. Their narrative threads reveal how saviors become oppressors and how characters who ask for help regret doing it. Mungiu articulates his critique of narratives of danger and salvation from an intellectual position that I define as *faithfulness to 1989*. This faithfulness can inspire the interruption of the vicious circle of self-oppressing narratives of cruel optimism that inform the ECE political imaginary and that perpetuate the condition of vulnerability and dependency on protectors that Kundera defined as essential to small ECE cultures<sup>21</sup>.

But before analyzing Mungiu's work, it is necessary to make a final preliminary observation. Mungiu's critique of the ECE political imaginary is also part of an aesthetic project. His stories and histories also question the politics of the dramatic structure of mainstream three-act narrative cinema, proposing more ambiguous plot developments that do not claim to unmistakably distinguish between helpers and oppressors, as well as between success and failure.

Mungiu's questioning at the level of storytelling is important because, as popular culture, cinema is an influential apparatus of shaping mindsets. Dramatic storytelling employs narratives of threat, urgency, and rescue. It features a variety of antagonists, helpers and fake friends, as well as multiple situations of danger, entrapment, exploitation, and last-minute rescue. The public impact of these structures of understanding reality and the past, which reproduce themselves in television materials and other forms of audiovisual entertainment should not be neglected<sup>22</sup>. In the context of recent Romanian cinema, a good example of a cinematic reflection on the way in which heroic historical dramas influence real-life behavior in times of radical political change is Radu Muntean's 2006 film *The Paper Will*

<sup>20</sup> A. Ágh, *The Decline of Democracy in East-Central Europe: Hungary as the Worst-case Scenario*, 'Problems of Post-Communism' 2016, 63, 5–6, p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> An analysis that cruelty in Hungarian film can be found in G. Kalmár, *Formations of Masculinity in Post-Communist Hungarian Cinema: Labyrinthian Men*, Cham 2017, pp. 105–107.

<sup>22</sup> J. Nelson, *Popular Cinema as Political Theory: Idealism and Realism in Epics, Noirs, and Satires*, New York 2013; R. Rushton, *The Politics of Hollywood Cinema: Popular Film and Contemporary Political Theory*, Basingstoke 2016.



be *Blue* [*Hârtia va fi albastră*], analyzed in Parvulescu<sup>23</sup> and, in a broader context of Romanian screen historiography, in Strausz<sup>24</sup>.

ECE national cultures have used this dramatic storytelling structure and the rhetoric of cinematic storytelling to construct their national mythology. No surprise then that the first feature film made on Romanian soil was a historical film significantly titled *The War of Independence* [*Independența României*, 1912], immortalizing an important historical moment in the modern Romanian nationalist discourse. A similar phenomenon can be noticed after Romania's 1947 turn to Soviet-style socialism, when the recently reorganized Romanian feature film industry generated danger and rescue films to mobilize patriotic anti-capitalist sentiments.

One should also add here that, during the socialist era, Balkan cinema developed original genres that encoded the anti-imperialist danger and salvation dialectic. According to film historian Marian Țuțui<sup>25</sup>, these were the bandit/ hajdouk and partisan films. Bandit films delivered a narrative of defense of the abused rural peasantry – the core bearer of national traditions according to officially sanctioned nationalist discourse – against the exploiting classes. The partisan films glorified national defense against the grand imperialist superpower of the first half of the 20th century, Nazi Germany.

### MUNGIU'S INTERVENTION

I will start my analysis of the critique of the small national political imaginary proposed by Mungiu's films by reflecting on the way they portray the fragile, help-demanding condition of being small and exposed, as modeled in Kundera's essay. Feminist film scholar Jane Gaines argues that Mungiu's films rely on melodrama tropes and that these tropes reveal the contradictions within political assemblages<sup>26</sup>. I would add that Mungiu's films not only gesture toward the contradictions of a melodramatic political imaginary, but also that they provide a critique of this format of narration and a recommendation as to how to disentangle oneself from

<sup>23</sup> C. Parvulescu, *Post-Heroic Revolution: Depicting the 1989 Events in the Romanian Historical Film of the Twenty-First Century*, in: *A Companion to the Historical Film*, eds. C. Parvulescu, R. Rosenstone, Malden 2013, pp. 365–383.

<sup>24</sup> L. Strausz, *Television as a Factory of History: The Broadcast of the 1989 Romanian Revolution*, in: idem, *Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen*, Cham 2017, pp. 83–114.

<sup>25</sup> M. Țuțui, *Orient Express: The Romanian and Balkan Cinema*, Bucharest 2011, pp. 156, 177.

<sup>26</sup> J. Gaines, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days: Where is Marxism in Melodrama Theory*, in: *Le mélodrame filmique revisité*, eds. D. Nasta, M. Andrin, A. Gailly, Bruxelles 2014, p. 181.

them. Mungiu's films feature indeed female vulnerable protagonists that seek help from a patriarchal agent and focus on recording in detail the development of this relationship. Mungiu's twist to the melodrama genre is that the development of the relationship becomes in fact a process of deterioration, and that the patriarchal agent generates abuse and further exploitation instead of liberation.

Let us look at the narrative construction of the films under scrutiny. In melodramatic cinematic three-act narratives, the moments of cruel occur in the second act. The protagonist realizes that friends have turned into foes, new and true helpers appear, and goals need to be reformulated. Unlike this 'classical' three-act plot, Mungiu's films do not include a second act awakening and a reformulation of goals. The initial goal and the plan to achieve it do not change until the end. His films just show how helpers turn gradually into abusers and how the protagonists adapt and struggle to survive this tragic situation.

In *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days*, *Beyond the Hills*, and *Graduation*, this abuse comes in the form of rape, rape attempt, child molestation, unwanted pregnancies, and patriarchalism. In its initial sequences, each film includes a metaphor of the condition of vulnerability of their female protagonists. *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* opens with a close-up of fish in a tank. The offscreen dialogue performed by the protagonists refers to what will happen to the fish while they are away, because nobody will be there to take care of them. The sequence also anticipates the subsequent exposure to abuse of the protagonists, which will take place once they leave the safe environment of their home<sup>27</sup>.

In *Graduation's* initial sequence, a rock breaks the window of the protagonists' apartment. Later the windshield of their family car is smashed by an unknown perpetrator. No explanation is given regarding who did it and why. The inclusion of these acts of vandalism is to suggest a looming danger and emphasize the exposed predicament of the protagonists. Later in the film, after the female protagonist is attacked, the film tellingly includes a scene in which there is an effort to put a face, a name, and a reason to this mysterious violence. The identification fails, and the viewer never finds out who broke the windows or who aggressed the young female protagonist. Mungiu uses these sequences to suggest that danger is structural, and what matters is how one understands and reacts to it.

This imminent sense of danger and stress is sharpened by Mungiu's choice of unorthodox camera angles (especially in *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2*

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<sup>27</sup> I. Uricaru, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days: The Corruption of Intimacy*, 'Film Quarterly' 2008, 61, 4, p. 13.

*Days*) and the use of a slightly trembling hand-held camera. In addition, all the three films include scenes showing the protagonist unsuccessfully trying to find something that is not clearly defined or escaping an unidentified offscreen threat. These are usually night scenes and sequences that stylistically stray away from Mungiu's assumed poetics of contemplative cinematic realism. Sound becomes the principal signifying medium, such as the heavy breathing of the character, while the image is devoid of indexical contribution.

These scenes are the ones in which the emotions of the characters are the most animated and corporealized. They rather constitute exceptions within the emotional landscape developed by Mungiu. The predominant reaction of his protagonists to their exposure to abuse is muted. His characters have a resigned or sometimes embarrassed reaction to their powerlessness and entrapment. Mungiu's films do not seek to exploit dread or outrage. Characters seem to have grown accustomed to function under abusive conditions.



Fig. 1. Vulnerable protagonists (*Beyond the Hills*).

In the opening sequence of *Beyond the Hills* the protagonists, two childhood friends and lovers, are shown on a narrow platform between trains moving in opposite directions. They have just met after a long separation. They embrace, surrounded by a screechy, heavy, metallic, and overpowering scenery. It is a long and tight embrace. Tears of separation mix with the smiles of being reunited. The length of the embrace suggests a certain unwillingness to break this moment of security and face again the threatening external world.

Let us now analyze the way the films present the hopes of their protagonists, the help they seek, the urgency with which this help is demanded, and how it is delivered by the patriarchal helping agent. In

*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, two women seek help in order to interrupt an unwanted pregnancy. The procedure needs to be carried out urgently because, as the title of the film indicates, the pregnancy is already mature. Since in 1987 Romania abortion is illegal, they must rely on the help of an underworld abortionist. The abortionist intervenes successfully, saves the pregnant young woman from an unwanted child and subsequent social marginalization, but at the price of abusing both the pregnant protagonist and her friend. He makes them sleep with him allegedly because they did not bring enough money to cover his services.

In *Beyond the Hills*, the helper turned oppressor is a Christian orthodox priest of a monastery. The protagonists seek shelter there because they are orphans and do not have any other place to go. Moreover, one of them considers becoming a nun, hoping that religion can heal her childhood wounds and her hopeless social and economic condition. In their childhood, both young women have been abandoned by their parents, have suffered sexual molestation in the orphanage, and have lived in poverty outside of it. In addition, they share a homosexual relationship. The more religious protagonist believes that homosexuality is the root of their suffering. As an apprentice nun, she has abandoned it, and thinks her friend needs to be cured from it as well. The price for this cure is however high. A religious exorcism is performed on her former lover. Instead of saving her, it kills her, and might send the apprentice nun to jail.

*Graduation's* approach is slightly different. Its main theme is that abuse can be perpetrated with good intentions as well. This is why the film pays close attention to the helper. The helper is the overprotective father of a young woman who needs to score high at her high school graduation exams in order to be admitted to a prestigious university abroad. Yet shortly before her first day of exams, she is sexually molested by an unknown perpetrator. She is not raped but is psychologically affected and has a broken arm. In this situation of urgency, the father, who is more concerned than his daughter about the admission to the foreign university, feels compelled to offer his assistance. The film shows how the more the he tries to protect his daughter and help her pass her exams, the more he turns into an oppressor, jeopardizing her psychological balance, her relationship with her boyfriend, and her academic career.

A second indicator of Mungiu's interest to provide a cinematic reflection on the condition of the cruel optimism is the inclusion in his plots of references to past abuses, and even to future ones. These references suggest that abuse is cyclical. The protagonists of *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* are presented as having been forced to have unprotected sexual relations in

a context that severely punishes abortion. The protagonists of *Beyond the Hills* share a past of repeated sexual molestation from a foreign citizen who visited their orphanage to offer material help. *Graduation* includes references to the father having help-abuse relationships with other women than his daughter, one of them being the mother of his daughter, who is depressed and sees herself as his victim.

In this context, the plots of these three films develop as an attempt to fix the harm done in the past. But as we have seen, the procedure to fix past abuses leads to further mistreatment. The young women previously exposed to unprotected sex by their male partners are raped. The molested orphanage girl is tortured and killed. The sexually aggressed high-school girl of *Graduation* is further distressed by her father's efforts to find the attacker and bribe school officials to give her high grades. *Graduation* even includes a reference to the future. The father will leave his wife and move in with his mistress, who expects him to take care of her and her son.

### IMPASSE

Mungiu's reference to cycles of abuse suggests that the abuse of the vulnerable is inscribed in the very structure of the society that they live in. The abrupt openings of Mungiu's plots, as well as their inconclusive endings indicate that the plots are segments or excerpts of these cycles that mark the condition of being small and defenseless. In relation to cruel optimism, the endings have an important function. They serve as moments of reflection on what the protagonists have experienced and on the effects of these experiences on their future. It is also here that the condition of cruel optimism is being acknowledged, as the endings stage a situation that Laurent Berlant calls *impasse*<sup>28</sup>.

According to Berlant, *impasse* is a moment of non-action. The protagonist included in cycles of hope and pseudo-salvation realizes that he or she cannot move forward within the given coordinates. *Impasse* is thus not only a moment of recounting the past and reflection on one's predicament, but also one of suspension of desire and of disengagement. And this act of suspension is not merely passive. It is an act of waiting for an opening and for an exit that no longer requires the kind of help sought in the past. It indicates that what truly needs to change is the way things change<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> L. Berlant, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.



Fig. 2. *Impasse* (4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days).

*Impasse* is thematized in the endings of *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* and *Beyond the Hills* through long, silent and mournful sequences of non-action. These are the moments when the protagonists reflect on the quality of the help they sought and the price they had to pay for it. But most importantly, they reflect on their condition as vulnerable and question it. In *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* the two protagonists sit at the table and look at each other or through the window realizing that there is nothing more to say about what happened other than to ask why it did happen. Suspension of action is constructed not only by the silence of the characters, but also, by contrasts within the frame. In the background there is a noisy wedding, in the offscreen foreground, on the street, several cars pass by, this action being indicated by lights reflected in the window of the restaurant and the offscreen sound.

*Beyond the Hills* uses similar visual means to show *impasse*. It presents the perpetrators of the exorcism crowded in a police van, as they are taken to the station for questioning. The van drives slowly through a wintry city street covered in slush. At a moment, the van stops in traffic and the policemen have to wait for the prosecutor, who is busy with another case. It is a three-minute-long shot from the back of the van. All six heads of the detainees are bent down in silence. As in *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, the silence of the protagonist, the apprentice nun, who in previous scenes has shown doubts about the institution of the monastery and the authority of the priest, stands in contrast with what takes place in the foreground of the frame: the traffic and the people crossing the street in front of the van, the chatter of the policemen on the front seats, the windshield wiper

cleaning the car window, especially the nagging noise of construction work in front of the car, as well as other street sound. All this happens as an almost unobservable slow zoom cuts out from the frame the profiles of the people in the van and focuses on street image.

In *Graduation*, *impasse* is presented differently. Suspension of action is delivered through a still photograph. As in the previous two films, reflection is not introduced into the plot via duration, but it is hinted at, by the photograph, and the fact that it will be looked at again and again in the future by all those who took part in the story. The photo is taken at the graduation ceremony. The daughter asks her father to take a souvenir photo of her and her classmates. This is also the moment in the film when she tells him that she has not followed his advice on how to cheat at her exams and that she has doubts about studying at a university abroad, marking her disobedience and her emancipation from her controlling father.

This last shot of *Graduation* is thus of the protagonist posing among her generation-mates for the father helper-abuser's eye taking the picture. Yet it is important to notice that although the gaze is his and the camera is in his hands, the souvenir belongs to his daughter. The daughter's rebellion, as well as that of the apprentice nun's against her institution suggest that, as intervention against cruel optimism, *impasse* is interruption with the purpose of refusing to continue participating in the circle of abuse and of lingering in a state of hovering in order to expect a way to improve one's condition and avoid abuse.

#### CONCLUSION: FAITHFULNESS TO 1989

In the context of *impasse* and of the reflection that what truly needs to change is how things change, Mungiu's stories originally comment on the political imaginary of small ECE cultures. Their commentary focuses on understanding the nature of powerlessness and hopelessness, as their ending scenes suggest that the condition of being small and helpless is not, as Kundera argued, somehow ontological. For Mungiu, whose stories propose these statements after 1989 and in an era in which imperialism works differently, being small and helpless means being addicted to certain narratives of rescue articulated in moments of urgency.

The non-action endings of his films present Mungiu's intention to show how his protagonists aim to disconnect from thinking in terms of danger, urgency calls for rescue. Danger and violence might be structural, but not the narratives of urgent salvation and call for grand help. Being exposed

is not synonymous to being vulnerable. And it is at this point that his films articulate their commentary on the political imaginary of ECE small cultures, questioning not the exposure that small cultures experienced thought history (something that they can't control), but the way in which their political imaginary envisioned reactions to this predicament, especially by declaring situations of urgency and by calling on big helping others, who will, in the future, turn into oppressors and perpetuate the cycle of abuse.

Mungiu designs his moments of *impasse* in order to suggest that they should be regarded as an extended indecision. The core of Mungiu's prescriptive message on memory and on the political imaginary of ECE is to be found in this prolonged hovering understood as a political practice. Narrative performances of memory as well as scenarios of emancipation of small ECE cultures should follow this model and abandon rushing to seek help against more or less invented imperialist threats. The protagonists of *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* or *Beyond the Hills* might remain fragile beyond repair, but the more optimistic ending of *Graduation* suggests that the daughter can overcome on her condition. Her generation can deploy acts of self-understanding in differently structured narrative formats, relieved from the small culture concerns and grand narratives of liberation one finds in Kundera.

Hovering is also Mungiu's way of asserting a certain way of being faithful to the event 1989. 1989 is the defining political moment for Mungiu's generation, in the same way as 1968 and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia were defining moments for Kundera's vision of the predicament of small ECE nations. 1989 can be remembered in two ways that are significant for the discussion developed in this article: on the one hand, as an autonomous expression of people's power and as a movement from below that triggered national liberation without significant help from outside. This interpretation would resonate with the ending of *Graduation*. Mungiu's prescription of faithfulness to 1989 suggests thus that there is a generational split between the father and the daughter, as the latter tends not to share her father's narratives of urgency and intervention.

On the other hand, and, in my opinion, more relevantly for understanding Mungiu's political statement, 1989 represents, as Slavoj Žižek argues, the whole in the flag that becomes a symbol of the revolt of the Romanian people. Mungiu seems to view the hole in the same way as Žižek, who argues that the hole is a form of suspension, the 'salient index of the 'open' character of a historical situation in its becoming'. As such 1989 is a moment of *impasse*, perhaps the most prominent in the history of ECE, and faithfulness to it means faithfulness to what Žižek calls the





Fig. 3. Generation split (*Graduation*).

indecision and suspension of governance 'when the former Master-Signifier, although it has already lost its hegemonic power, has not yet been replaced by the new one'<sup>30</sup>.

Mungiu's ambiguous and non-action endings suggest thus there is a virtue inherent in the prolongation of the moment of *impasse*. Non-action and dead time are not to be interpreted only as moments of reflection, but also of listening and of expectation to connect to an event<sup>31</sup>. As a political statement faithful to 1989, this use of duration articulates a call to prolong the situation of hovering as much as possible. Mungiu's critique of the ECE political imaginary is that this imaginary is too eager to leave its moments of hovering, and is too willing to declare emergencies, seek solutions and follow helpers, as Kundera did when he spoke about the tragedy of Central Europe.

The memory of the Romanian 1989 is such an example of rushed exit out of a state of openness that Žižek talk about. Moments of hovering such as the ones represented by 1989 have been cut short in Romanian history, as well as in the history of other ECE states, by narratives of urgent relief, such as anticommunism and nationalism, as well as various forms of shock strategies. Instead, as shown above, Mungiu prescribes seeking these moments of indeterminacy and, as political strategy, prolonging them as much as possible. This will help to avoid reentering un-reflexively and unpreparedly cycles of abuse. Furthermore, if prolonged, indeterminacy triggers the deconstruction of narratives of fear that call for helpers, which nowadays bear the names of religious intolerance, new populist nationalism, anti-Europeanism, and neoliberal capitalism. Moreover,

<sup>30</sup> S. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Durham 1993, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> L. Berlant, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

impasse can serve as breeding ground for original political thought that can inspire increasing democracy in both ECE and the EU.

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### STRESZCZENIE

Celem poniższego artykułu jest przedstawienie sposobu opisu stanu pomniejszych kultur Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w filmach Cristiana Mungiu. Rozważania te zostały oparte o pojęcia *okrutnego optymizmu* oraz *impasu* autorstwa Lauren Berlant. Analizie poddano filmy *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007), *Beyond the Hills* (2012) oraz *Graduation* (2016). Pod uwagę wzięto w szczególności strukturę narracyjną wspomnianych dzieł, płęć bohaterów, uwarunkowania społeczno-ekonomiczne wpływające na ich byt, a także poetykę mediów audio-wizualnych prezentowaną w zakończeniach filmów. Autor argumentuje, że filmy Mungiu stanowią krytykę mapowania wyobraźniowego na terenach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej zapoczątkowanego w czasach zimnej wojny, która prezentuje narody zamieszkujące te tereny jako skazane na nieustanne przebywanie w stanie zagrożenia, a co za tym idzie, niewygasającą potrzebę obrony, co naraża je na przeżywanie nieuniknionych cykli politycznych nadużyć. Propozycja rozwiązania przedstawiona jest w powolnych, skłaniających do przemyśleń zakończeniach filmów. Wskazują one na rozwój sytuacji politycznego zawieszenia, która jako zakłócenie statusu quo może pozwolić wyobraźniom politycznym na stworzenie rozwiązań bardziej kreatywnych, pozwalających uniknąć wspomnianych cykli. Przerwa ta wiąże się z pamięcią wydarzeń roku 1989, a także historyczną otwartością, która emergowała w owym czasie. Jako polityczny paradygmat kultur środkowo-wschodnioeuropejskich, zawieszenie jest strategią, która pozwala na zmianę postawy wyobraźniowej wobec początku roku 1989.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wyobrażenia polityczne kultur Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, kino Cristiana Mungiu, okrutny optymizm, 1989

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