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Graduation: Near and Far

Abstract: Along with Olivier Assayas of France, Cristian Mungiu was named Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016. Mungiu's award, for directing *Graduation*, was not his first—*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* had won the Palme d'Or in 2007, and *Beyond the Hills* had won Best Screenplay in 2012. Thus Mungiu's body of work has been crucial to the sudden prominence in recent years of Romanian films. Accounts of the artistic success of these films have often emphasized their minimalist and neorealist renderings of the daily lives of ordinary people. In addition, though, *Graduation* excels at depicting human psychological and moral complexity—in particular, the inner struggles and disrepair of the film's main character. Critics have ascribed his problems to the chaos of Romanian economic, social, and political life. But however imposing this chaos may be off the screen, it is relatively limited and muted within *Graduation*. The psychological complexity and disorder portrayed in Mungiu's film chiefly reflect not external chaos at a specific time and place, but internal, ongoing, and, most likely, universal dilemmas of the human soul.

Keywords: Cristian Mungiu, neorealism, time, slow cinema, long take, André Bazin, chaos.

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Introduction

Every feature-length film written and directed by Cristian Mungiu since his debut feature, *Occident* (2002), has garnered a major award at the Cannes film festival. *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* received the Palme d'Or for best film in 2007. Mungiu won Best Screenplay for *Beyond the Hills* in 2012, while the film's stars, Cristina Flutur and Cosmina Stratan, shared the award for Best Actress. In 2016, Mungiu was named Best Director for *Graduation*, an honor he shared with Olivier Assayas, who directed *Personal Shopper*.

In a *New York Times* article in January, 2008 enitled "New Wave on the Black Sea," film critic A.O. Scott hailed not only Mungiu's 2007 triumph but also the successes of Cristi Puiu, Cornelius Porumboiu and other little-known Romanian auteurs who suddenly won prestigious awards at Cannes in the years 2005–2007. Scott's mention that Mungiu and his fellow auteurs were "sometimes described as minimalists or neo-realists" (Scott 2008, 30) perhaps brought to mind Cesare Zavattini, the Italian neo-realist screenwriter and theorist who, Andre Bazin wrote, dreamt of filming eighty minutes "without a cut" (Bazin 1971, 67) in the life of a man "to whom nothing ever happens" (Bazin 1967, 37). Bazin himself advocated a cinema that made "'life-time'—the simple continuing to be of a person to whom nothing in particular happens—take on the quality of a spectacle, of a drama" (Bazin 1971, 76). Possibly Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1964) and other films by experimental filmmakers have approximated the extreme minimalism envisaged by Zavattini and Bazin. Mungiu's films, however, reflect a less stringent minimalism. While relying on limited means, such as a camera that rarely moves and long takes that by definition preclude intrusive or dramatic cutting, his films tell realistic stories about the daily lives of relatively ordinary people—to whom things do happen despite their ordinariness.

In the course of these things and the actions taken by Mungiu's characters, conflicting thoughts and emotions emerge that complicate and deepen the realism of his films while stretching the bounds of his minimalism. His characters frequently seem not only oppressed and marginalized by society, but also at odds, even at war, with themselves. Such is the predicament not only of the mistreated orphan Alina (Cristina Flutur) in *Beyond the Hills*, for example, but also of the reputable physician Romeo Andrade (Adrian Titieni) in *Graduation*. These dissimilar individuals both fit A. O. Scott's description of Romanian New Wave characters as generally existing "in a state of restless, agitated motion, confused about where they are going and what they will find when they arrive" (Scott 2008, 30). The exceptional emotional range and complexity of Mungiu's characters has led critics and scholars to relate his films not only to minimalism and realism, but also to modes and genres such as suspense, surrealism, thrillers, horror, and tragedy. In any event, his characters' struggles with themselves and their conscience as well as with other people make for intensely psychological films. Mungiu may well be, as Doru Pop has said, "one of the most astute psychologists of contemporary cinema" (Pop 2012, 4).

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An elderly woman, who is being filmed by her daughter thousands of miles away during their Skype communication in *No Home Movie* (2015), questions her daughter's motive: "Tell me, why are you filming me like that?" Celebrated filmmaker Chantal Akerman replies enthusiastically: "Because I want to show that there is no distance in the world. You're in Brussels and I'm in Oklahoma. Look, there is no more distance."

Contrary to Akerman's figurative claim, Dr. Romeo Aldea, the central character in *Graduation* (2016), believes that "distance," which in effect he defines as political, economic, social and cultural difference, most assuredly persists in the world. Even if the many miles between Romania and the United Kingdom were erased, for example, Romania would remain far less civilized than the UK in his view—hence the crucial difference or "distance" between the two nations would be unchanged. Romeo's belief leads him to urge his daughter Eliza (Maria Dragus) to emigrate to the UK as soon as she graduates from high school in Cluj, Romania's fourth largest city. Provided her scores in upcoming final exams match her stellar academic performance until now, Cambridge University will award her a scholarship to pursue studies in psychology. Yet more important, states Romeo, the civilizational benefits of residing in the UK will enable her to build a life far more fulfilling than any available to her in Romania.

In urging Eliza to seek her future in the UK, the doctor recalls that he and Eliza's mother, Magda (Lia Bugnar), fled Romania's communist regime ruled by Nicolae Ceaușescu only to return in hopes of building a better nation after Ceausescu's execution and the regime's collapse (1989–91). But Romeo states that he and Magda have long regretted returning, for the nation has failed to progress as they hoped it would. Thus the doctor points to a predicament portrayed in other post-Ceausescu Romanian films besides *Graduation*: the misgivings and disappointments of Romanians who have left and returned to "an impossible land," as Doru Pop refers to the Romanian nation in *Romanian New Wave Cinema: An Introduction* (Pop 2014, Loc 2139). "Emigrating brings only pain and suffering," adds Pop in discussing *Weekend with My Mother (2009),* directed by Stere Gulea, "and the returning emigrant has nothing in the adoptive country and nothing to return to in the native country" (Pop 2014, Loc 2146). Neither Romeo nor Magda divulges the name of their adoptive country or their activities while living there. Nor does the spectator learn what progress they sought upon returning to their impossible native land and what they believe went wrong. Thus, while *Graduation* conveys the couple's disappointment, the context remains vague. In the spectator's view, Romeo and Magda exist in something of a void.

More defined is the context wherein major characters exist in *Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days* (2007), Cristian Mungiu's film that won the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes nine years prior to *Graduation*'s release. *Four Months* dramatizes specfic cruelties of Ceausescu's dictatorship, most notably the regime's strict anti-abortion laws established in 1966 and the severe penalties for defying them. *Four Months* also exposes bourgeois passivity and even indifference in the face of authoritarian oppression. Perhaps the fact that Mungiu, who shared the Best Director Award at Cannes for *Graduation* in 2016, refrains in this later film from naming and condemning a specific law, political system, or socio-economic class helps explain why the origins of emotional pain in *Graduation* seem hazier than in *Four Months*.

Further, *Graduation* largely sidesteps devastating dilemmas in Romania such as extreme poverty, child mortality, and mass emigration to wealthier European countries. There's little indication in the film that, as historian Timothy Garton Ash has noted, "more than 3 million people left Romania in just a decade after the country joined the European Union in 2007" (Ash 2019, 54). *Graduation* also overlooks the healthcare crisis—so central in Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2005)—that one would assume impaired Romeo's work as a physician and surgeon in a busy hospital: "Romania spends the least on its healthcare system **of any EU** country, both per resident and as a percentage of its GDP," *BBC NEWS* has reported; "it has the highest child mortality rates on the continent… and a persistent shortage of medical staff" (*BBC News* 2019). Unsurprisingly, the country's medical profession has long been underpaid; and in the decade ending in 2019, 25,000 doctors left the Romanian healthcare system because of poor working conditions and substandard infrastructure in the nation's hospitals (*Romania-Insider.com 2019*).

Rather than focusing on these huge crises, *Graduation* centers on issues that are perhaps less extraordinary: low-level corruption, cronyism, and feelings of physical insecurity in daily Romanian life. While such problems, in conjunction with defects of local and national governance, undoubtedly warrant attention, they do not amount in *Graduation* to "chaos," or to a "culture going to rot," as film critic Bilge Ebiri asserts and Romeo implies (Ebiri 2018, 3). Such extreme claims probably befit phenomena more vast and destructive than occur in *Graduation*.

As an aside, I note that while I was writing this section of my essay in 2019, prior to the Covid pandemic and of course Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there was no lack of chaos in the world: war, famine, and national collapse in Yemen and Libya, for instance; Australian megafires and accelerating climate destruction; violent mass protests for freedom, democracy, and economic justice in societies ordinarily considered democratic, such as France, Hong Kong, and India; and explosive mixes of demographic revolution, political upheaval, and moral decay in the United States. Moreover, not just events but also individuals outside *Graduation*'s fictive realm portended truer chaos than any depicted in this film. Well before his impeachment trial, for example, the occupant of the U.S. Presidency, an office once identified with responsible leadership of the free world, stood accused of fomenting global chaos with his inconstant words and deeds. "Say no to chaos," warned one Democratic primary campaign in December 2019; "Trump has tweeted thousands of false statements—causing chaos and embarrassing our country" (Peters 2019). In early February, 2020, conservative columnist Ross Douthat described Trump as "obviously unfit, chaotic, cruel…." (Douthat 2020).

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Romeo's mother (Alexandra Davidescu) and his longtime chum, the chief police inspector (Vlad Ivanov), imply that misconduct and criminality such as Romeo considers peculiar to

Romania may be more common in today's world than he acknowledges. Although Eliza has been sexually assaulted, Romeo's mother, upset that her granddaughter may leave for the UK at Romeo's urging, challenges him during his visit to her apartment in Cluj: "What's so terrible about here?... You think it's any different anywhere else?" Referring to both the sexual attack and Romeo's admiration for the UK, the chief police inspector asks him almost the same question: "Think it doesn't happen there?" But Romeo is adamant about the UK's superiority, a belief woven into his obsession with Eliza's present and future well-being. He believes that "there" and "anywhere else" are not just distant and different from Romania, but far better.

In their essay, "New Romanian Cinema: Geography and Identity," Marian Tutui and Raluca Iacob note that films by Romanian filmmakers have been considered "part of the 'slow cinema' trend" (Tutui and Iacob 2019, 218) explored in various essays and books in recent years. Tutui and Iacob refer to my book, *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action,* which examines "slow" aspects of the form and content of several movies from around the world, including works by Cristi Puiu and Corneliu Porumboiu as well as Cristian Mungiu. Not unlike *Four Months*, *Graduation* diverges in key respects from slow cinema. Its drama is relatively intense, fast-paced, and complex, for instance, and the film includes considerable dialogue. However, Romeo's repeated assertions of Romania's inferiority to the UK and his relentless anxiety over Eliza's academic performance, physical safety, sexual purity, and social and romantic progress grow monotonous, impairing the film's momentum. The slowing is reinforced by Romeo's brooding, deadpan countenance and heavyset, squarish body. A figure of overbearing rigidity for much of the film, he appears in every shot except two, and almost everywhere his presence discourages motion and uplift in the people around him. Even when he advises Eliza, while driving her to school in his car, to rid herself of worries over leaving her home and friends, or later reminds his daughter and her classmates to smile and be happy as he photographs them at their high school graduation, Romeo casts a pall that slows or depletes life rather than invigorating it.

Not surprisingly, his conduct in the course of the film rarely yields the results he seeks. Time and again he strives to overcome Eliza's reluctance to move to the UK, but at the end of the film she seems more reluctant than ever, albeit more willing to tell him so. Romeo also presses his daughter, despite her anguish and physical pain caused by the sexual assault, to take her final exams as scheduled the day after the assault. She wears a cast on her arm, injured in resisting the attacker, and tells Romeo she may be unable to write. He insists she try anyway, but promises to seek the postponement of her exams. Rather than seeing him do so, however, we observe Romeo persuading the exam committee president (Gelu Colceag) to suspend the rule that would block Eliza from taking her test while wearing a cast (the rule was instated, says the president, after a student cheated by hiding notes in a cast the previous year). In any event, Romeo's determination that Eliza not miss or delay the opportunity

to attend Cambridge evidently transcends his desire for an immediate end to her physical and mental pain and to all impediments to her recovery. She emerges from her first exam enervated and unhappy, and informs him that she lacked time to address two questions. Her disappointing news increases his anxiety that her overall score on the exams will prove too low to secure her Cambridge scholarship. Consequently, perhaps with robotic predictability, Romeo sets out to alter the test results.

His new actions prove no more salubrious than his previous conduct, however. Romeo takes pride in his reputation for being an honest as well as competent physician. He refuses gifts, or what one character calls "incentives," which might tempt him to favor one patient over another while boosting his low income as a Romanian medical practitioner. Moreover, Romeo regards not just his professional life as honorable, but also his conduct outside the medical arena. True, he is having an affair with a former patient who is also Eliza's English tutor; but his wife, if not his daughter, knows about it. His confidence in his integrity falters, however, when he adopts an illicit plan to improve Eliza's exam scores. Upon the advice and encouragement of his old friend, the chief police inspector, Romeo agrees to barter his medical connections for the cooperation of two officials who govern the grading of final exams. In particular, Romeo agrees to elevate the eligibility for a liver transplant of the more powerful of these officials, vice-mayor Bulai (Petre Ciubotaru) who, incidentally, arranged years earlier for Romeo and the police inspector to evade military service. It turns out, though, that the scheme to improve Eliza's exam scores also requires that Romeo persuade his daughter to mark or alter her exams so the graders can identify them as hers. In seeking to advance Eliza's interests, then, Romeo draws her into the scam and sullies her. Moreover, his refusal to admit, or inability to see, that his actions torment more than help his daughter puts her love for him at risk. Romeo also misleads her and besmirches his wife by informing Eliza that "we" (meaning both parents) want her "to be a winner," though Magda has told him she opposes the scam and the moral harm it will do to Eliza. Further, as Romeo and Eliza sit on the bed in Eliza's room, and he enjoins his skeptical daughter to cheat on the exams, he repeats the credo he presented to Magda when she argued against his unethical proposal: "Sometimes in life, the result is all that matters."

Romeo also advised Magda, when she resisted his contention that "everyone cheats on their final exams," that "what they studied in school is useless." Thus Romeo degrades himself as well as much of humanity. Indeed, his incipient nihilism so weakens his ties to himself and the world that he brings to mind, despite his considerable education and professional status, the estrangement of slow-movie characters described by Gilles Deleuze in *Cinema 2: The Time Image* as "emptied," "absent from the world," and "suffering... from their absence from themselves" (Jaffe 2014, 68). The sense of nullity and regret that gnaws at Romeo also brings Pop's statement back to mind: "the returning emigrant has nothing in the adoptive country and nothing to return to in the native country." Romeo expresses

his anxiety about being empty and absent, having nothing and amounting to nothing, near the end of his dialogue with Eliza on her bed in the scene cited above. He tells her that his return to Romania with Magda was "a mistake" because life in his native country failed to improve, which is to say, "we didn't move anything." Then he cautions Eliza against making "a mistake now just because we did, or our lives will have been for nothing, understand?" He thus answers a question implicit throughout *Graduation*, not least in Romeo's exchanges with Eliza: Does he wish her success solely for her own sake or for his as well—even, perhaps, primarily for his—so that his life will not "have been for nothing"? Romeo apparently looks to his daughter to save him from nullity and emptiness.

Yet he might look elsewhere, and thereby transform his conceptions of failure and the void. "Value your calamities as part of your being," counsels Laozi in the *Tao Te Ching,* and then notes with equanimity, "Further, if I had no being, / What trouble could I have?" (Laozi 2017, 63). The *Tao* also suggests a positive view of apparent emptiness: "Throwing clay to make a vessel; / The vessel's use lies where the clay is absent" (Laozi 2017, 59). A more rapturous view of absence, emptiness, and nothingness is found in Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980). The French author tells of experiencing "a ravaging joy" at age seven while looking out a window at the winter sky turning "absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing (as though the pane had been broken) such an absence that all has since always and forevermore been lost therein—so lost that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond" (Harrison 2020, 37).

Whereas Laozi and Blanchot convey equanimity and joy, Romeo communicates dread; unable to surmount his egocentrism and his disappointment with himself and his native country, he finds in nature, the cosmos, and human existence little or no basis for affirmation. The tension in *Graduation* between Romeo's drive to ensure Eliza's success and his seething though mostly unspoken sense of defeat and nothingness leads at moments to his sundering, to his taking leave of his senses, as I will explore further. Such moments, of course, advance neither his well-being nor that of Magda, Eliza, her boyfriend Marius, or Sandra. Rather, as I have indicated, Romeo seems locked into—and inured to—a way of being that negates or discourages vitality.

His wife Magda is not only in poor health, but also drained of energy and hope. Apparently her inexplicit fears and regrets as well as her failed relationship with Romeo have exhausted her. Further, his present indifference to her is unlikely to bring her back to life. Magda and Romeo reside together warily as intimate strangers; he sleeps alone on the living-room couch at night; and just as he evinces no love for her, his presence seems only to aggrieve her. They subsist on love for Eliza as well as fear and sorrow, but their feuding over what is best for their daughter underscores their mutual estrangement rather than any intimacy they may have formerly enjoyed. Late in *Graduation*, Romeo asks Magda incredulously

how they have managed to become grave enemies. His question is suspect, however, for he seeks primarily not explanation or reconciliation, but Magda's help in persuading Eliza to complete her exams and depart for England without delay. In any event, neither Magda nor Romeo answers Romeo's query about the history of their antagonism. Possibly each spouse's anguish stifles a verbal response. Further, husband and wife seem unpracticed in probing and articulating their gnarly emotions.

Their refusal or inability to speak of deep feelings and differences augments their resemblance to Deleuze's "emptied," "absent," slow-movie characters, whose abstinence from spoken words and dialogue seals their aloneness and keeps the movie spectator at a distance. Magda in particular wraps her bereavement, isolation, and emptiness in dense, nervous silence, uttering few words regardless of the topic or question at hand. Further, while evoking the condition of slow-movie characters, Magda's silence also brings to mind the beliefs in silence and absence held by slow-movie directors. Not a word is spoken in the first ten minutes of *Distant* (2002), for instance, partly because Turkish writer and director Nuri Bilge Ceylan believes that "truth lies in what's hidden, in what's not told. Reality lies in the unspoken part of our lives" (White 2011, 66). Spoken words are notably scarce also in *Liverpool* (2008) and other works by Argentine filmmaker Lisandro Alonso, to whom words seem pointless."I just don't have any confidence in words," he says; "I do have confidence in what I see" (West and West 2011, 36). Perhaps because Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa regards cinema as "an art of absence" (Jaffe 2014, 126), just thirty words are heard in the first twenty-five minutes of his film *Ossos* (1997). Similarly, in asserting that "art is only where... reticence exists" (Sokurov 2005), Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov prepares us for the paucity of spoken words, as well as the austerity of visual images, in his films like *The Second Circle* (1990).

In *Graduation*, a pivotal wordless confrontation between Romeo and Magda occurs not long after Romeo and Eliza return home from the police station where Eliza has provided a description of the sexual assault. Romeo prepares a plate of food for his daughter, takes it to her bedroom, moves a white teddy bear out of the way, and sets the plate down. Then the sound of a shower in the bathroom and the appearance of vague human forms in the window of the closed bathroom door capture his attention. He walks to the door, hesitates, opens it, and sees Magda washing, comforting, and stroking Eliza's back in the shower. Both women face away from him, until Magda, perhaps sensing his presence, turns and stares without beckoning to him, while she continues to cleanse and stroke her daughter, who remains unaware of his presence. Then as Magda's hands descend toward Eliza's bare buttocks, she turns abruptly away from Romeo, thus signaling that his gaze is unwelcome and that her moment with Eliza is hers alone. Romeo is taken aback and speechless.

Rather than being heartened by Magda's care for their daughter, he seems gripped by feelings of loss and longing. He seems to believe, perhaps correctly, that the scene he has

just witnessed betokens his exile or exclusion—particularly from his daughter's embrace and trust. Moreover, here as elsewhere in the film, his desire for access to Eliza, for intimacy with her such as she readily grants Magda, seems not only intense but tinged with lust, as does Magda's possessive stroking of Eliza. One might say the two parents compete for every aspect of Eliza's love, multiplying the tensions in their home. Moreover, Romeo's preoccupation with Eliza undoubtedly increases his estrangement not just from Magda, but also from other individuals he regards as either competitors for access to his daughter or hindrances to his quest. Such individuals arouse his disposition, mentioned above, to retard and impair life.

Romeo regains his voice in his face-off with Magda right after the shower scene, but their communication is no more successful than previously. He was already in torment before he found Magda with Eliza in the shower; not only the sexual assault endured by Eliza weighed on him, but also the report by the hospital's attending physician that Eliza was not a virgin when the assault occurred. Now, as Magda enters the kitchen where Romeo stands slicing bread, his hurt and anger are evident as he questions her: Did she know Eliza had surrendered her virginity? How did she learn of it? Why did Eliza tell Magda but not him? Why did his wife fail to share this disclosure with him? "Magda, we agreed that, when it comes to Eliza, we'd talk," he says. "I didn't hide anything," she replies tersely, after implying it may have been easier for Eliza to broach the sexual issue with her mother instead of her father. The exchange grows more accusatory and futile:

Magda: "Ever think maybe she doesn't want to talk about it with you?"
Romeo: "She can discuss anything with me."
Magda: "Then why didn't she?"
Romeo: "I don't know… Maybe you told her not to."
Magda: "I thought we were having a real talk."

But "a real talk"—civil, respectful, perhaps even restorative—doesn't come easily to the doctor and his wife. Possibly it would be less difficult in the UK.

Yet given his preoccupation with Eliza, Romeo may be unable to have "a real talk" wherever he is. "I know Eliza is always your top priority, but it's never the right time for me," complains Sandra, his mistress who vainly seeks from him a lasting commitment—or at least a meaningful discussion of this possibility. When she also asks Romeo to help her find a speech therapist for her silent, withdrawn son, Matei, the doctor agrees to do so, but only after Eliza's exams are over. "Sorry, but I can't focus on anything else right now," he says. His inability to focus on his lover and her needs has been evident since early in the film when he received the fateful phone call informing him of the assault on Eliza and prematurely ending his tryst with Sandra at her apartment. Romeo had gone directly to Sandra's after driving Eliza just part of the way to her school; he might have driven her farther, and thereby spared himself subsequent guilt, but he was eager to see Sandra. Eliza was accosted while

alone after Romeo dropped her off. Although she wasn't raped—apparently the attacker was impotent—Romeo is understandably distraught. He grows furious when Magda or a stranger suggests that Eliza was penetrated, and he insists that the assault will not prevent his daughter from acing her exams and going to England. In any case, his increased focus on Eliza scarcely enhances his conversational skills and pleasures. Sandra is left out in the cold, though in a milder clime than Magda, who is stricken with grief and frustration.

As indicated above, even though Romeo's devotion to Eliza far surpasses his interest in Magda or Sandra, his impact on his daughter's life is no more positive or uplifting than his effect on the two older women. Romeo's passion for Eliza, perhaps because it arises from his neediness and egocentricity, oppresses rather than enlivens her, and prompts Romeo's abuse of her boyfriend as well. Marius's modest attainments obviously fall short of the doctor's requirements for a young man who would court his daughter. The suitor has vocational training rather than a university degree, and his work revolves around cars and motorcycles. He's teaching Eliza to ride a motorcycle, but what more can he teach her? Romeo's stature as a physician, his desire to see Eliza become "a winner"— a member of an elite, professional class—and his need to vindicate his life through her success preclude his embracing Marius as a prospective son-in-law. There's an even greater impediment to such an embrace, however: in Romeo's view, Marius poses a unique obstacle to his access to Eliza, to his primacy in her eyes. For it is likely Marius who has brought Eliza's virginity to an end and pleased her as Romeo cannot. Rather than welcome Marius as the film nears its end, Romeo attacks and threatens to kill him.

First Romeo shows Marius a photograph of the outdoor space where Eliza was assaulted, and insists that an indistinct young man among the passersby is Marius. When the latter denies he is the young man in the photo and implies that Romeo's claim is foolish, the doctor accuses him of having abetted the crime: "You watched and didn't do anything. Why didn't you call the police? How could you just go off?" Marius again replies, "It's not me," whereupon Romeo warns him, as perhaps he has wanted to do for a long time: "Don't you dare see Eliza again, understood?" He emphasizes his command by thumping Marius's chest and slamming him against a metal pillar. Then the doctor issues one more provocation: "Beat it, or I'll kill you," he tells Eliza's suitor, who responds by thrusting him to the ground. "You're lucky you're an old man," says Marius.

After Marius walks off, Romeo presses his hands against the pillar and raises himself slowly to a standing position. His brutish accusations and threats against Marius represent a new low in his conduct. In particular, his claim that Marius lacks adequate love and courage to protect Eliza is self-destructive as well as callous—not least because it will upset and alienate Eliza while adding to Romeo's burden of shame and regret.

The doctor's bad conduct is unsurprising, of course, given his mounting frustrations, not the least of which involves the police's failure to identify and apprehend Eliza's attacker.

Romeo most likely feels that he too has been assaulted, victimized, made to suffer, as he not only cares deeply for his daughter, but regards her as an extension of himself. Further, Eliza's physical and psychological injury has impaired her exam performance, and this deficiency has led to Romeo's cheating scheme and its dire consequences. In order to avenge all of this damage to himself, as well as to Magda and Eliza, Romeo seems inclined, well before he accuses Marius, to blame anyone he can for the attempted rape rather than let the heinous deed go unpunished. The doctor thus moves from the role of victim to that of judge, and almost, when he strikes and warns Marius, to that of executioner.

Along the way, Romeo also becomes a detective, as his friend, the chief police inspector, notes with amusement. Romeo investigates the crime and crime site independently of the police. He discovers a video surveillance camera mounted above the site, and reminds the chief police inspector to examine the surveillance footage. Then Romeo himself examines these moving images, comprised mainly of high-angle long shots. From a height comparable to the camera's, he looks down at Eliza standing, perhaps at a bus stop, as a nondescript male walks up to her, places his hand over her mouth, and pulls her slowly out of camera range while passers-by appear oblivious. Romeo next requests from the police a still photograph, derived from the video footage, of an apparently passive observer of the assault. It is this passive figure Romeo identifies as Marius when he shows him the photograph, accuses him of having refused to rescue Eliza, and threatens to kill him.

The passage from the video of motion to the still photograph yields the doctor no respite from his agitation and fear. His manifold needs, woes, and roles persist, along with an additional concern that we have not yet considered and that *Graduation*'s narrative fails to resolve: Romeo suspects that unseen, unknown miscreants are tracking his movements and commiting unnerving acts against him with no clear motive. Although these tormentors are most likely distinct from Eliza's assailant, Romeo tends to conflate them with her attacker and, more broadly, with hazards he considers endemic to Romanian life. The enemy first strikes in the second shot of *Graduation*, when a rock bursts through Romeo's livingroom window in broad daylight, leaving a hole in the glass above the couch on which he sleeps at night. Later, he finds the windshield wipers on his car, parked outside his apartment, upended; and subsequently an unidentified object crashes into the windshield on the passenger side as he walks to his parked vehicle. In each instance, Romeo looks for the perpetrator to no avail. Following the first incursion at the start of the film, a series of short, hand-held, tightly-framed shots primarily of Romeo's back as he runs futilely in search of the attacker prompts us to anticipate a mystery thriller, which *Graduation* to some extent is. Yet for the most part the universe framed in the film is eerily inert; as in the sexual assault on Eliza, no one emerges from Romeo's apartment complex or the surrounding community to offer aid or comfort. Instead, a sense of emptiness, stillness, and isolation typical of slow movies distinguishes the world of growing danger through which Romeo moves.

Perhaps the physician's most profound experience of isolation and vulnerability occurs late in *Graduation*, in his mini nervous breakdown or disintegration, presaged to some degree by events at the police station at night as Eliza examines a lineup of men suspected of assaulting her. When Romeo enters the station to join her, Eliza instantly expresses her bitterness toward him for accusing and threatening Marius and for disrespecting the love she and Marius share. She also disappoints both Romeo and the police by concluding that none of the suspects in the lineup is her attacker. Then she leaves, and Romeo, futilely seeking reconciliation, catches up to her. She evinces some concern that he may have nowhere to sleep, since Magda has finally banished him from their home. Then Eliza departs on her motorcycle.

The police-station scene thus reminds the viewer of key aspects of Romeo's increasing sense of failure and alienation prior to his crackup: He has been unable to protect his daughter and to help identify and capture her assailant. He has enraged Eliza by condemning her boyfriend, and reduced his chance of winning her trust and the intimacy with her he seeks. Moreover, Romeo has lost his home as well as his wife. He has even been separated from his automobile, which has been his second home, his sanctuary of opera and fine music dispensed by the car's radio to insulate him from the turmoil of his life.

After Eliza leaves on her motorcycle, Romeo appears in a slow-moving public bus rather than in his car for the first and only time in *Graduation.* He espies from the bus a bearded man standing on the sidewalk who closely resembles a suspect in the police lineup. The doctor excitedly orders the driver to stop, leaves the bus, and follows the man as he enters an alley. Romeo loses sight of him in the dark, indeterminate spaces behind the buildings facing the street. Possibly unsettled by the disappearance, as well as by a dog barking offscreen and recurring thoughts of Eliza and Magda, Romeo advances in the dark more slowly and warily than when he got off the bus. Soon he looks frightened and breathes more heavily. His movements grow more erratic. Startled by a strange sound, he wheels around and seems to look toward the camera that has been following him. He turns again, steps and peers in one direction, then another. His advance slows, accelerates, ceases, resumes. He proceeds with his head turned sideways, and then walks backward, at risk of stumbling and falling.

His broken apartment window and fractured windshield led him earlier to tell the chief police inspector, "I have this feeling someone's following me." Now his backward walking implies retreat more than advance. Possibly he fears that the bearded man or another presumed antagonist is following him, and that one of them will emerge from the dark and attack him. Having left the bus abruptly to hunt down evil, he has come to resemble evil's prey, or perhaps a fugitive from justice—in any case, a person fleeing rather than pursuing someone. The reversal has been wrought, moreover, by Romeo's feverish imagination more than by external events. While the dark, deserted spaces he has been traversing would give anyone pause, he has encountered no clear malignity. Rather, Romeo in his isolation has

turned the spaces into a netherworld of dread and madness. When finally he reaches a wide alley that leads into a city street, both of which are better illuminated than the indeterminate spaces behind the buildings, he stops and looks back into the darkness. Appearing stunned and exhausted by his breakdown as well as relieved that it seems to be over, he stands in the alley with one foot slightly angled toward the netherworld from which he has emerged, while the other points toward the street. The ambivalent stance suggests that the dark space's hold on him lingers, though not necessarily because of the bearded man.

If the dark space continues to attract Romeo, the reason may be that it has enabled him to experience horrific feelings he'd kept largely hidden, perhaps even from himself. The release of emotion has likely been cathartic, affording him relief if not liberation, and expanding his self-knowledge. Perhaps dimly hoping for such gains when he got off the bus, Romeo may have entered the dark space not chiefly to accuse the bearded man, as he had Marius, but to discover and confront *himself*—and to issue, in his pained gestures and movements, a silent primal scream. His entire journey in the dark space (comprising two shots totaling two minutes and fifty-one seconds) is wordless, by the way, which is unusual, since he speaks in almost every other scene in *Graduation*. But the expressive force of his silent scream bolsters Nuri Bilge Ceylan's claim, cited previously, that "reality lies in the unspoken part of our lives." Romeo remains drawn to the dark space because he has heard and uncovered there significant aspects of himself. He has come out of hiding.

Yet the spectacle of his lost, bewildered, out-of-control journey in the dark space likely reinforces the film spectator's doubts about Romeo's right and ability to control, govern, or guide those close to him in one way or another, particularly his daughter, wife, mistress, and Marius. Indeed, the collapse in the dark space of his usual poker-faced composure signals an end to the dominance he has taken for granted in his domestic life. Of course, his paternalistic posture, swathed in self-righteousness, was already in question prior to the collapse. Although Romeo demonstrated tender devotion to Eliza and his mother as well as dedication to his patients, he was often morally and emotionally obtuse. His authority was undercut especially by his commitment to the cheating scheme, his embroilment of Eliza, and his abuse of Marius. These actions crossed into lawlessness, linking Romeo—a dedicated doctor, loving father and son, amateur sleuth, and self-appointed judge—to Eliza's assailant and the miscreants who hurled rocks at Romeo's window and windshield. On Romeo's behalf, though, one could argue that his toggling between the right and wrong side of the law bespeaks not just social deformity, but also "human, all too human" complexity (Nietzsche 1996).

At the police station, as mentioned earlier, Eliza fails to find her attacker in the lineup of men suspected of assaulting her. Perhaps equally important is that the scene identifies and aligns Romeo, who seems secondary or merely incidental to the scene's main action, with the men in the lineup suspected of attacking his daugher. These suspects are to stand

on one side of a glass barrier, while Eliza observes them from the other. The one-way glass will allow her, somewhat like a movie spectator, to study the suspects without being visible to them. Romeo will stand quite apart from Eliza, but on the same side of the glass as she; hence he too will view the suspects while remaining unseen. But when the suspects file in, Romeo alters his position slightly, and, as a result, his reflection in the glass suggests not that he faces the suspects but that he stands alongside them, at the end of the lineup, on the wrong side of the glass and the law. Reinforcing this association of Romeo with errant rather than lawful persons are the attacker's venomous words, presumably cited in Eliza's report to the police, which each suspect is required to repeat aloud: "Shut up or I'll kill you." This statement echoes, of course, Romeo's earlier words to Marius: "Beat it or I'll kill you." Both the positioning of Romeo's reflection so that he appears to be a suspect and the close resemblance between the attacker's words and Romeo's eerily suggest an affinity between Eliza's father and the man who sexually assaulted her. And this suggestion possibly reminds the audience that Romeo not only adores Eliza, but also in a sense violates her. In a review in the *New York Times*, A. O. Scott called Romeo, "for all his sins, a pretty good dad" (Scott 2017). He's also, of course, a pretty bad one.

As Eliza studies the suspects through the one-way glass, the chief police inspector tells her, "Take your time. Get a good look," and then repeats,"Take your time." The inspector might as well be a director of slow movies, since such filmmakers typically encourage viewers to take the time needed both to "get a good look" and to think deliberately about the movies they are watching. As if to facilitate such thoughtful viewing, slow movies often contain long takes, or shots that last an unusually long time (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 431), so as to limit potentially distracting interruptions of spatial and temporal continuity due to cutting or editing. While no rule specifies the duration of a long take, the shot that depicts Eliza viewing the suspects, which lasts nearly three minutes, would normally be considered lengthy. Moreover, shots of comparable duration predominate in *Graduation.*

Andre Bazin famously wrote that the long take in conjunction with composition in depth permits "everything to be said without chopping [or cutting] the world up into little fragments..." (Bazin 1967, 38). Rather than discontinuity or fragmentation, said Bazin, the long take "respects the continuum of reality" (Bazin 1967, 37), "the continuity of dramatic space and... of its duration" (Bazin 1967, 34), and "the unity of [the] image in space and time" (Bazin 1967, 35). In other words, the long take grips the viewer's attention by shunning the discontinuity of cutting and by supporting the realism and credibility of the cinematic moment. Or as Cristi Puiu has observed, the long take conveys "this taste of truth" as well as "the feeling of time passing" (Jaffe 2014, 90). Further, the preference for holding the shot rather than cutting to a new one comports with the minimalism and restraint typical of slow movies, regarding not only visual style, but also other elements such as plot, acting, dialogue, and the expression of emotion. In any case, the chief police inspector's directive that Eliza take

her time relates to the mingling in *Graduation* of aspects of the long take, slow cinema, and cinematic realism that influence what Christina Stojanova has called "the superb handling of time—objective and subjective, astronomical and social, and even metaphysical" (Stojanova 2019, 124)—in works by Mungiu, Puiu, Porumboiu and other Romanian filmmakers.

Bazin was enthused by motion on the screen. The long take combined with "composition in depth" conveyed the expanse and continuum of real space and time in which people, animals, and objects moved freely. Bazin also valued camera movement, and likely would have endorsed, for instance, Deleuze's observation in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*: "It is always a great moment in the cinema… when the camera leaves the character, and even turns its back on him, following its own movement at the end of which it will rediscover him" (Deleuze 1986, 23). Of course, just as important as camera movement can be the arrival of a ship, or the motion of characters through differing spatial depths and in and out of the motion-picture frame. Motion may be as ubiquitous in the cinema as in reality.

But consistent with the overbearing rigidity and fixity of Dr. Romeo Aldea, movement, open space, and depth of composition are limited in the long takes that prevail in *Graduation*. "The more I learn my trade," said Jean Renoir in 1938, the year before he made *Rules of the Game*, "the more I incline to direction in depth relative to the screen. The better it works, the less I use the kind of set-up that shows two actors facing the camera, like two well-behaved subjects posing for a still portrait" (Bazin 1967, 34). Yet such a set-up or still portrait of two stationary characters conversing in front of a stationary camera occurs frequently in *Graduation*. Further, no cutting or shot/reverse shot editing between the two characters breaks the static condition of their exchange or disrupts the spectator's attention. Nor do shots of "little fragments" of the world observed from either character's point of view (POV) intrude. Indeed, few if any subjective or POV shots occur. Moreover, *Graduation*'s characters repeatedly appear in medium shot in the foreground of the image, and thus limit the visibility of open, deep space beyond the characters' bodies, whether indoors or out, and distance the spectator from the environment of the action. Finally, as indicated above, the camera usually remains as stationary as the characters do, and moves only if necessary to keep moving characters in the frame.

The restricted motion and space in *Graduation* may feel all the more onerous because the extended duration of each long take precludes any quick escape via cutting. Reviews allude in one way or another to the sense of confinement conveyed in the film. A. O. Scott writes that *Graduation* "feels… claustrophobic" (Scott 2017); Richard Brody notes the "narrowness of performances" (Brody 2017); Peter Bradshaw sees characters "caught in a web of embarrassment and guilt" (Bradshaw 2017). Even in the absence of *Graduation*-like constraints on motion, open space, and compositions in depth, long takes may entail what David Bordwell has termed an "overall confine" (Facets Multi-Media 2008, 6). Sam Mendes, director of the highly kinetic war film *1917*, has observed that long takes allow "no cuts, no

way out" (*YouTube.com* 2019), and hence evoke the feelings of entrapment experienced by soldiers at war. Using scarcely noticeable cuts, Mendes joined several long takes containing motion and deep space into what appears to be a single take running the entire length of his film. He asked rhetorically while conceiving his World War I spectacle, "Why don't we lock the audience into men's experiences in a way that feels completely unbroken...in real time?" (Siegel 2019) His references to "locked" and "no way out" were echoed by his co-writer, Krysty Wilson-Cairns, as she recalled her reaction to the long take's significance in Mendes's early draft of the screenplay: "For the first few scenes... I would feel like I was wearing a straitjacket" she said (Buchanan 2019). Despite obvious differences in the "content" of the long takes in *Graduation* and *1917*, these takes reflect similar artistic interests.

In slow movies, long takes may allow characters expanses of time for contemplation, or at least for proceeding unhurriedly through life. But Romeo, obviously in a hurry, cannot stop to adopt the chief inspector's advice to Eliza. Rather than taking his time, the doctor races against time, much like the two soldiers who race across the Western front in *1917* to deliver an urgent message intended to save thousands of lives. Romeo also resembles major characters squeezed for time in other celebrated Romanian films, including the college student Gabita (Laura Vasiliu), who seeks an abortion in Mungiu's *Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days*, and Dante Lazarescu (Ion Fiscuteanu), the ailing old pensioner who awaits an ambulance that a neighbor predicts will never arrive in Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*.

Further, as in *Four Months* and *Lazarescu*, regrets and fears related to temporal limitations permeate *Graduation.* A middle-aged colleague of Romeo's at the hospital where he works tells him "it's too late for us" to improve the quality of life in Romanian society. Romeo's mistress, Sandra, a single mother anxious about getting older, complains that "it's never the right time" to ask anything of him, partly because he's always preoccupied with Eliza. For Romeo as well as his colleague and Sandra, the time never seems right: While driving Eliza to her high school early in *Graduation*, he asks whether she has made her reservation to fly to England, which he has urged her to do. When she replies that she has, and tells him the departure date, he asks, "Isn't that too late?" Romeo wants to be sure she has enough time to settle into her new home before her classes begin at Cambridge; and since he knows she is ambivalent about leaving Romania, he stresses that he would leave "if I were your age now." Were she to remain, he says more than once in *Graduation*, "in ten years you might regret it, and then it would be too late." He also implies that young Eliza lacks ample experience of regret, and that such experience comes only with age and missed opportunities.

As noted earlier in this essay, Romeo learns after the sexual assault that the physical injury to Eliza's hand coupled with her psychological trauma hamper her ability to complete her exams within the allotted time. But when he explores putting the exams off until she can recover, he concludes that the alternative dates would be "too late." Then, toward the end

of *Graduation,* he worries that Eliza may not get to the police station in time to view the rape suspects. “It can’t wait,” he anxiously tells Magda; Eliza must arrive on time. Similarly, Romeo insists that Eliza’s attendance at Cambridge on a scholarship can’t wait, and that she musn’t miss this opportunity since it might be her only chance for a better life. Why does he speak of it as her *only* chance, even though she is young, serious-minded, and an excellent student? Might it be her only chance because *he* can’t wait to mitigate through her success his unbearable disappointment with his life?

A.O. Scott considers Romeo’s disappointment a consequence of “the spiritually and morally desolate place his country has become” (Scott 2017); and other film critics, including Peter Bradshaw, Bilge Ebiri, and Richard Brody, seem to agree with Scott. But as previously indicated in this essay, I find the corruption and moral desolation pictured in *Graduation* unremarkable in today’s world, and probably more limited than actually is the case in Romania. Moreover, the characters who interact with Romeo, including the chief police inspector, the vice-mayor, and the exam committee president (Gelu Colceag), do not strike me as morally desolate—as devoid of, or indifferent to, moral values. Nor are they devoid of fellow feeling. Romeo himself, while regretful, brittle, and destructive, remains alert to personal and professional moral issues; he’s also warm and loving toward Eliza and his mother, if not toward Magda and other persons. His primary conflict, in any case, is with himself rather than his country. While Romania may sorely disappoint him, his principal antagonists are his own grim phantoms, which emerge in the dark space and batter him as he pursues the bearded man.

Romeo found himself similarly assailed earlier in the film upon entering another deserted, though leafier, locale at night. Having parked his car in the street and armed himself with a flashlight, Romeo advanced tentatively, often concealed by foliage and darkness. He looked down toward the ground, searching with his flashlight. Then, with just an edge of his spectacles and forehead visible, he was heard weeping, and next was observed trembling. The flashlight, as though free of Romeo’s hand, illuminated him instead of the ground or underbrush, casting him as the tremulous object of his search.

Ebiri has commented that this early scene on leafy terrain represents “a surprisingly vulnerable moment for a protagonist who is usually all business. We’re not even sure why he has wound up in this spot at this moment.” Possibly, says Ebiri, the doctor has been “seized by a sudden pang of guilt” for having struck a dog on the road while driving Eliza to school earlier in the film and now searches for the animal (Ebiri 2018, 3). But the scene amid the foliage immediately follows Romeo’s discussion of the cheating scheme with the exam committee president, who explains that Eliza must participate in the scheme in order for it to work. This stipulation upsets Romeo, who has hoped the exam could be fixed without Eliza’s knowledge. “I have to involve her?” he asks in a soft, doleful voice. One need only have watched him at the hospital touching and kissing Eliza after hastening to her side following

the sexual attack to know he is neither "all business" nor invulnerable as regards her welfare. Most likely his weeping in the darkness signals his remorse for injuring not the dog but his daughter—and for losing control of his life while suspending his moral self.

Romeo is not the only father in the world who has acted illicitly to help his daughter or son enter college. Comparable instances in other countries perhaps support Chantal Akerman's claim, cited at the start of this essay, "that there is no distance in the world….no more distance." Consider the highly successful American lawyer based in New York who was one of fifty-three defendants in the recent college admissions scandal in the U.S. In March, 2019, reported *The New Yorker* magazine, the lawyer "was indicted for paying seventy-five thousand dollars for a test proctor to fix his daughter's ACT exam" (Osnos 2020, 37). While far more prosperous and powerful than Romeo, the New York lawyer behaved much like the Romanian physician. Perhaps a major difference, though, is that the lawyer was assured by the individual arranging the fix that his daughter "would never know that her family had cheated on her behalf." The lawyer was unimpressed, however, and replied, "'To be honest, I'm not worried about the moral issue here'" (Osnos 2020, 37). Romeo, by contrast, is deeply worried about his cheating scheme's effect on his daughter's moral life, on her feelings toward him, and on his own state of mind. He would embrace the assurance brushed aside by the lawyer. There's distance between the physician and the lawyer after all.

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