

GRADUATION

Romania *dir* Cristian Mungiu 2016



The theme of compromise is integral to "**Graduation**" (or *Bacalaureat*"), written and directed by [Cristian Mungiu](#). The Romanian director won the Palme d'Or in 2007 with his second feature "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days," and competed again in 2012 with "Beyond the Hills," which won Best Screenplay and Best Actor.

In "Graduation," a father's ambition for his daughter causes him to step outside his moral and ethical framework for just one crucial decision, the fallout quickly reaching into every aspect of his life. A stone crashing through a living room window is the film's first startling image, and Mungiu patiently builds the story of a father's misdirected love in telling details. Confidential conversations, tit-for-tat favours, and influence trading all play a part. The cover is blown on seemingly benign professional friendships to reveal a code of silence as the real bond.

Romeo ([Adrian Titieni](#)) is a respected doctor with a reputation for honesty in his small town. He's quietly having an affair, and he and his wife Magda (Lia Bugnar) are living separate lives within their small apartment, but they are united in pride over their high-achieving daughter Eliza (Maria-Victoria Dragus), who has been offered a scholarship to Cambridge. To her parents, Eliza's opportunity represents the chance they never had. "We thought we'd move mountains," comments Romeo, looking back with regret on the dashed idealism and failed ambitions of his own early life.

The day before her final graduation exam, which Eliza must pass with a specified grade in order to claim the scholarship, she is attacked and hurt within sight of her school by an unknown man. Badly traumatized, and with her arm in a cast, she takes the exam but her mediocre grade puts Cambridge plans in the balance. Unknown to the girl, her desperate father pursues a series of unorthodox and illegal strategies to help her, eventually involving a school administrator, the police chief, and the town's venal vice-mayor. Each step appears trivial, but involves under the table favours. Mungiu's style is not flashy, but engrossingly careful and methodical. While this well-meaning but morally myopic father is slowly drawn into the lapse of values that will

destroy him, the film's view is that of an ever-widening moral universe in which every bad choice is connected, creating the great web in which Romeo is caught.

Barbara Scharres **Roger Ebert.com**

The latest from the Romanian director of '4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days' is a tough drama about a father who'll stop at nothing to get his daughter ahead
We'd do anything for our kids, wouldn't we? Romanian director Cristian Mungiu ('4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days') understands that, he gets it. But with this bruising, powerful drama he also asks the question: what if the broken social, political and judicial culture around you literally allowed you to do anything for them, without any regard for right or wrong?

The anti-hero of this intense, talky, busy and completely compelling morality play is Romeo Aldea (Adrian Titieni), and he's far from an obvious villain, if indeed he's a villain at all. Romeo is a well-regarded local doctor in a Transylvanian town who is determined that his daughter Eliza (Maria Dragus) does well in her exams so that she can study in the 'more civilised' UK.

Romeo has clearly given up on the idea of Romania being part of the 'better world' he dreams of, and he's quietly complicit in various local corruptions without always realising it. He's also having an affair with Sandra (Malina Manovici), a recent patient 15 years younger than him who has a young son. When his daughter is attacked on the eve of her exams, he's ready to act to win her the grades she needs.



Mungiu doesn't explicitly judge Romeo; he simply presents this brief, exposing and perhaps defining chapter of his life in captivating detail. He also makes clear that, although Romeo is a man of considerable influence, able to pull strings here and there, emotionally he's very much on the edge and liable to fall apart any second. How Mungiu explores more deeply what all this means is via a mystery element to his story. Who threw a rock at Romeo's apartment window? Who damaged his windscreen wipers? Who smashes his car window? And are these aggressions in any way linked to the attack – an attempted rape – on Romeo's daughter?

Cramming an enormous amount of story into just over two hours, with a time period of just a few days, 'Graduation' combines the always-on-the-move energy of Belgium's Dardenne brothers with an oblique mystery familiar from Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke's 'The White Ribbon' and, especially, his 'Hidden'. Both of those films were partly about the morality we do or don't pass down to our kids, and that's the abiding theme here. It's not a despairing movie – Mungiu even suggests that a new generation might put things right – but it's a brutally honest one.

Dave Calhoun **Time Out**

It's not easy to be Romanian – at least, according to Christian Mingu's cinematic oeuvre of depressing socio-political commentaries. "Occident" told a complex story of youth fleeing the country. "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days" followed a woman, step-by-step, through a grueling abortion in the 1980s. I haven't had the "pleasure" of watching Mingu's "Beyond the Hills," but "Graduation," again, subjected me to a 130 claustrophobic, despairing minutes of corruption and heartlessness, before I got to the glimmer of hope at the very end.

Reminiscent in style to the Dardenne brothers' films (who act as co-producers on "Graduation"), the film's focus is on everyday men and women, struggling to survive in a bleak, heartless world. Traces of Hollywood "gloss" – rapid-fire editing, spelled-out themes, predictable narrative beats, swooping camerawork, Jennifer Lawrence – are nowhere to be found in this exercise of ultra-realism. There's no score, no embellishments – just a straight-up account of a man,

somewhat ironically called *Romeo* (a brilliantly restrained performance by a desperate, bordering-on-reprehensible Adrian Titieni) battling uphill against a corrupt society, and himself. While a bit dry, and lacking the Dardennes' spiritually-cleansing conclusions, "Graduation" is a worthy addition to the talented director's filmography, whose next film should perhaps shift its lens on a different topic. Though he manages to convey a multitude of ideas and themes through that prism of contemporary Romania, I would love to see the director try his hand at another genre. Unless, of course, he has found his niche – the multiple Palm d'Or awards on his shelf speak for themselves, after all.

Romeo is a morally-torn man. His wife, Magda (Lia Bugnar), is depressed, homebound, and aware of Romeo's affair with Sandra (Malina Manovici), a teacher at their daughter's school. His daughter, Eliza (Maria Dragus), gets attacked and potentially raped. Romeo's primary goal, however, is to make sure Eliza graduates with honours and gets a scholarship in the "more civilized" UK – her (and, vicariously, his) golden ticket out of the hellhole that is Romania. Unable to escape himself, finding temporary solace in infidelity, he fervently pursues this goal, at the expense of disregarding everyone's actual needs. "My daughter wasn't raped, just assaulted," he hesitantly corrects his reassuring neighbor. In denial much?

Romeo projects his insecurities and desires onto his loved ones, believing he will ultimately find redemption when his daughter flees to greener pastures. He keeps reiterating to poor Eliza that a top score on the exam is top priority, even when she cries at night, traumatized from the incident. "You know if your heart hurts, this isn't right," Magda says. "That's not the path I want her to take... Why this burden on her shoulders?" Romeo instills Eliza with fear and a need to please him, as opposed to finding herself – something most parents unknowingly do, in one way or another.

Perhaps not so surprisingly, it's Romeo's mother (Alexandra Davidescu), a symbol of Romania's past, who provides the most acute insight regarding her granddaughter: "She should stay and change things. If they all leave..." She trails off. Romeo, who represents the country's tumultuous, ever-changing present, can't accept that fact. It may ultimately be up to Eliza – Romania's future – to decide her own path. Mingu plays heavily with this generational juxtaposition, to great effect.



The city itself seems to be against Romeo. It all starts with a rock thrown through his window, and later through the windshield of his car. He runs over a dog. A complication leads to a school board confrontation, which in turn leads to bribes and a general defiance of principles. His mother collapses. Eliza finds out about Sandra, the other woman. A dying patient under investigation may prove to be the pivotal point. And the entire time, in the background, a phone rings incessantly, a nagging, invasive sound. "Why did we abolish the death sentence?" Romeo inquires solemnly. I have a feeling he would murder quite a few people, if he legally could, just so that Eliza could ace that baccalaureate.

Disregarding the soulless individuals and crumbled-down city, the country's natural scenery actually looks stunning, courtesy of cinematographer Tudor Vladimир Panduru and, of course, the beautiful country itself. That said, the film is basked in 50 shades of gray, reflecting the moral areas its characters inhabit. Two scenes stood out to me: one involving a policeman, who found a way to deal with depression through... marbles, each representing a day in his life; and another, in which our stoic doctor breaks down sobbing uncontrollably in the woods.

A tad repetitive, and not nearly as razor-sharp, succinct, emotional and focused as "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days," "Graduation" is nevertheless a beautifully-written, assuredly-directed (as acknowledged by Cannes), incisive critique of a corrupt society. It's a study of parenthood, of a man driven to obsession, of a crumbling marriage and crumbling values. It's filled with searing exchanges, subtlety that's uncommon in contemporary film and powerful performances. Things

may be tough today, but the future holds sparks of hope. Perhaps Mingu's palette will broaden too. I'm glad that, after such a dismal education, this graduation may lead to a promising scholarship.

Alex Savaliev **Irish Film Critic**

Romanian director Cristian Mungiu won the Palme d'Or here in 2007 with his pregnancy drama [4 Months, 3 Weeks & 2 Days](#). Now he's closing in on the double. His new film *Bacalaureat*, or *Graduation*, is a masterly, complex movie of psychological subtlety and moral weight, about the shabby choices people make as they claw their way up: people constrained by loyalty to others who have helped them with wrongdoing, who use those others' corruption as an alibi for their own failings, and those who hope that the resulting system of shifty back-scratching somehow constitutes an alternative ethical system. But how about the children, those innocent souls for whose sake all this grubbiness has been endured? Should they be preserved from graduating into an infected world of compromise and secret

Graduation stars the Romanian stage and screen actor Adrian Titieni as surgeon Dr Romeo Aldea; he has a difficult relationship with his 18-year-old daughter, Eliza, played by Maria Dragus – who played the priest's daughter Klara in Michael Haneke's [The White Ribbon](#). It isn't just the presence of Dragus that will remind an audience of Haneke. There are many signs that Mungiu has been intelligently influenced by the Austrian director, particularly his 2005 classic [Hidden](#): the same return of the repressed, the same queasy, opaque riddle of guilt-symptoms in the body politic, the same idea of a terrible disgrace being imperfectly buried in the shallow grave of ordinary, day-to-day life and likely to be uncovered at any time. There is also the intimate civil war between an exhausted and cynical middle-aged generation and their angry, bewildered children.

Aldea lives with Eliza and his wife Magda (Lia Bugnar) in a tatty apartment on a grisly Ceausescu-era estate in the city of Cluj-Napoca in northwest [Romania](#). The parents are intensely, almost desperately proud of Eliza: she has been a stellar pupil and has the offer of a



scholarship from a British university to study psychology after graduating from high school, conditional on top marks in her final exams. (The exact British university isn't specified, but Aldea's beaming remarks about Eliza getting chased by squirrels in Kensington Gardens might indicate Imperial.) Eliza has a chance of getting out of Cluj that her parents could only dream of, yet her unsuitable, low-achieving, motorbike-riding boyfriend might yet drag her down.

From the very first, it is clear that his relationship with both women is cool: his wife is clearly suffering from a depression which appears to be undiagnosed and untreated, despite Dr Aldea's medical background. The opening sequence indicates that she is almost bedridden. Aldea himself is a success: he has risen to the top in his chosen profession, though there are signs that he clearly wished for something other than this provincial existence. The problem is that Aldea has a terrible secret of his own, a secret which may account for mysterious attacks on him: stones thrown at his flat window and car windshield. As the drama continues, Mungiu cleverly allows the audience to consider and discard the various possibilities concerning which characters might have an interest in harming Aldea, before finally offering an enigmatic partial solution at the end (like Haneke).

Peter Bradshaw **The Guardian**

