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# Close Up

FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES

Academic Journal of National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale" – Vol. 2, No. 1, 2018



UNATC PRESS

# Close Up

FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES

The academic journal of the National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale" publishes original papers aimed to analyzing in-depth different aspects of cinema, film, television and new media, written in English.

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**UNATC PRESS**

ISSN: 2343 – 7286

ISSN-L: 2286 – 4466

**Art Director:** Alexandru Orian

**Photo cover:** Vlad Ivanov in *Dogs* by Bogdan Mirică

**Printing House:** Net Print



**This issue is published with the support of  
The Romanian Filmmakers' Union (UCIN)**

**National University of Theatre and Film “I.L. Caragiale”**

# **Close Up: Film and Media Studies**

Vol. 2, No. 1, 2018

**UNATC PRESS  
BUCUREȘTI**

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# Greek Tragedy and the Films of Cristian Mungiu. A Comparative Analysis

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## Abstract

It is the intention of this article to underline the similarities and the links between Greek tragedy and Cristian Mungiu's screenplays, from the perspective of plot structure and its intentional purpose (the effect the film has on the spectator). The article will analyse Mungiu's film scripts by applying the concepts of action, decision making, choice and ethics of action as they are outlined in Aristotle's works *The Poetics* and *Nicomahic Ethics*, in order to identify common structures and traits.

## Keywords

action, choice, decision, learning model, plot, tragedy, screenplay, Aristotle, Cristian Mungiu

This article wants to demonstrate that Cristian Mungiu's screenplays are constructed as paradigms for choice and decision, as they are defined by Aristotle in the *The Poetics*. The main character is caught up in a dramatic situation which compels her/him to make a decision and act upon it accordingly, in order to get out of the coercive situation. In adopting the plot structure of a Greek tragedy, and keeping an open end of the film's plot, the screenwriter Cristian Mungiu is guided by a didactic and an ethical (not moralizing) purpose. He places the spectator in the position of an empathic, yet lucid witness, who should debate, at the end of the film, the moral and ethical aspects of the characters' decisions, choices and actions. The films chosen for this comparative analysis are: *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*, 2007), *Beyond the Hills* (*După dealuri*, 2012) and *Graduation* (*Bacalaureat*, 2016).

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## PROLEGOMENA

The Greek theatre at the end of the sixth century BC was contemporary with the birth and the exercise of democracy in the Athenian polis, a new form of government which was fundamentally different from those of the ancient world. The representatives of the *demos* who were members of the *ecclesia*<sup>1</sup> were responsible for taking decisions for the entire population of Athens and its two annual meetings took place in the Theatre of Dionysus<sup>2</sup>.

To function, democracy needed citizens trained in the art of making decisions, and the tragic representations with Aeschylus' and Sophocles' plays in the same Theatre of Dionysus were written also with the intention of providing a 'training camp' for this process.

Constructed as learning models, tragic performances represented virtual spaces where the viewer (the spectator) could analyse and understand the mechanism of decision making and, most importantly, its consequences. They were designed to trigger a reflection process in the spectator. What decisions he/she would have made if confronted with a similar situation? A tragedy performance can thus be seen as a 'learning by doing paradigm', made possible by the spectator's empathic link with the protagonist.

## TRAGIC SITUATION AS THE TRIGGER FOR HERO'S DECISION AND CHOICE

The tragic situation is defined as the coercing dramatic situation which compels the hero to deliberate and choose. The decision cannot be avoided. The tragic hero has to decide, even if he/she is afraid and tries to avoid it, such as Orestes, for example. In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the hero is compelled by the unwritten laws of the community to revenge his father by killing his murderer, who is Orestes' mother, Clytemnestra. The play's plot follows Orestes' hesitations to fulfil the deed. Cornered by the tragic situation in which he is caught up, he invokes Apollo as the god who ordered him to do it, in a desperate try to avoid the consequences of parricide.

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the protagonist is forced to choose between the burial of her brother, Polinikes (considered a traitor, who fought against his own country), thus committing an act of disobedience punished by Creon, the ruler of Thebes, with a death sentence, or leaving the corps of her beloved brother to be eaten by vultures, thus disobeying the sacred law given by the Gods, which grants the right for burial to any human being, disregarding his/her actions. Antigone's moral dilemma is set in the context of a coercing dramatic situation: the death of her brother has an element of urgency; her decision is made in a Thebes which is at war, in a *force majeure* situation and any citizen who disobeys the martial law might put at risk the country's entire population. Disobedience is not a good example for a population which has to be united in the face of the enemy who wants to strip Creon off his crown.

Cristian Mungiu's scripts place the protagonist in a dramatic situation which compels him/her to act, outlined from the very beginning of the film. In *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*, 2007) the plot's framework is similar with the one in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Ceausescu's Romania and Creon's Thebes are ruled with an iron



*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days (4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile, 2007)*

fist, and the rule of law functions as a straitjacket for the citizens trapped within a high-walled prison. Abortions are forbidden under the communist dictatorship, and doctors who perform it and are caught red-handed are sentenced to jail. In this larger framework, Mungiu sets up the dramatic situation which obliges the main characters to make a decision and act on it as soon as possible: Otilia's friend, Gabi, is pregnant and she doesn't want to keep the baby; she decides to make an abortion, decision which carries a high-risk factor – the foetus is 4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days old, and an abortion in such a late development stage of the intra-uterus life is endangering the young mother's life. Besides this, the abortion is performed by Mr. Bebe in a clandestine location (a hotel room), and not in a hospital. Mungiu's choice of the physical space functions as another coercive tool in the construction of the dramatic situation.

The script of *Beyond the Hills (După dealuri, 2012)* is based on two books written by journalist Tatiana Niculescu-Bran<sup>3</sup> investigating a real case of exorcism within a Romanian Orthodox monastery, which had tragic consequences: the death of a young woman.

The film's main characters, Voichița and Alina, have lived all their lives in an orphanage – a place where decisions were made by others. According to the Romanian law for institutionalised children, the orphanage provides them shelter and a home only until their 18th birthday, when they have to leave the orphanage and start a life for themselves in the 'outside' world. Institutionalised children are thus forced to choose and make a decision on how to continue their life, even if they are not ready, yet, for this. Voichița is partially avoiding a radical decision, by choosing a monastery as her new 'home' – an equivalent place to orphanage, where rules are imposed from outside and decisions are made by those

in charge. The monk who shepherds the nuns and the mother superior are called ‘daddy’ and ‘mommy’. At the other end of the spectrum, her friend Alina, who was Voichița’s family in the orphanage, chooses to leave Romania and go to Germany in search of a job that will change her living standards. Unlike Voichița, she is courageous and is not afraid of the consequences of her decisions.

In *Graduation (Bacalaureat, 2016)* an accident which leads to a broken arm puts a high-school student in the impossibility to write at the baccalaureate exam. The graduation exam is compromised and along with it the possibility to get a scholarship from an UK university. This goal is made clear from the very beginning of the film, thus setting the horizon of expectations for the student’s performance in the baccalaureate exam. The teenager has to decide whether she will attend the exam with a broken arm, and being in the impossibility to properly write, accept a fraud proposition which will secure her the high grades needed for attending the UK university, or not to attend the exam at all and thus lose the scholarship and give up a future in the UK. Instrumental for creating the dramatic situation is her father, Romeo, who insists his daughter should attend the graduation exam despite her broken arm.

## **ACTION, THE BACKBONE OF THE PLOT’S STRUCTURE.**

Aristotle’s view on Greek tragedy revolves around the concept of action seen as the core, the essence of tragedy and also as the aim of man’s life, which, in his view, is the completion of actions started with a purpose (*praxis*).

In Chapter VI of *The Poetics*, which outlines the definition of tragedy, Aristotle analyses dramatic action in comparison with the character (*ethos*) of the tragic hero. Tragedy is about what the hero **does**, not about his/her qualities, therefore is not a description, but a series of actions linked by necessity or verisimilitude (a cause-and-effect dialectics). The *ethos* of the tragic hero is to be discovered by the spectator through his/her actions, and a good dramatist will create the plot of the tragedy around the hero’s actions, and not of his/her qualities.

The plot is considered by Aristotle ‘**the first principle**, and as it were, the soul of tragedy: Character holds the second place. (...) Thus Tragedy is an imitation of an action, and of the agents, mainly with a view to the action.’ (Aristotle, 1902, pg. 27-28) In the same chapter Aristotle comes back several times to the definition of plot as ‘the arrangement of incidents,’ (Aristotle, 1902: 25) which he considers to be the final purpose (‘the end’) of tragedy: ‘Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief of all.’ (Aristotle, 1902, p. 27)

Cristian Mungiu builds up his scripts along the back-bone of protagonist’s actions. The story line follows step by step what she/he does, with all the subplots supporting the through-line action. The hero’s image in the viewer’s mind is not complete until the last action is performed. With mathematical exactitude, Mungiu applies the Aristotelian rule: ‘Dramatic action, therefore, is not with view to the representation of the character: character comes in as a subsidiary to the actions.’ (Aristotle, 1902, p. 27)



*Beyond the Hills (După dealuri, 2012)*

In Aristotle's dramatic action theory, building a plot around details describing the protagonist's *ethos* doesn't produce the tragic effect, which is the *catharsis* – defined by Aristotle as a combination of Dionysian empathy felt for the tragic hero (pity 'aroused by unmerited misfortune') and rational, Apollonian detachment (fear), which Aristotle explains as 'fear by the misfortunes of a man like ourselves'. (Aristotle, 1902, p. 45)

What we do is who we are, and not vice-versa. In *Over the Hills*, for example, it's not the film's purpose to describe the two female characters, Voichița and Alina – how kind, courageous, coward or irresponsible they are, how they express themselves. The script's main objective is to outline the series of choices, decisions and actions that led to Alina's tragic end. In this mathematically constructed web of causality, the focus is on Voichița's actions, on her persistence to convince both the monastic community and Alina that the latter is lost in the outside world and the monastery is the only place she would feel at home. The description of the protagonist's character comes in the second place. Although Voichița displays submission and Christian humility, her actions reveal a determined, strong headed young woman, who in her arrogance (*hubris*) wants to impose her will on everybody else. Although neither Alina nor the mother superior or the monastery's monk want this, Voichița ignores all 'warnings' which say Alina doesn't belong to the monastery. Voichița's actions bring, eventually, the plot to the point of no return, which is the actual exorcist ritual performed on Alina by the monastery's monk. From this moment, she cannot choose anymore. Her actions have set in place a mechanism which breaks free from its initiator and will lead to the death of her friend. It's not in her power to stop it.

A detached and, as much possible objective presentation of the dramatic conflict is one of the prerequisite. The link between scenes makes possible to observe the cause and effect chain. 'Again, if you string together a set of speeches expressive of the character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents.' (Aristotle, 1902, p. 27)

According to Aristotle, the happiness or unhappiness of human beings depends on their actions. 'Now character determines men's qualities, but it is **by their actions** that they **are happy** or reverse.' (Aristotle, *The Poetics Of Aristotle*, 1902, p. 27) And it is this emphasis on people's actions and their consequences on the quality of their lives that one can find in all Mungiu's scripts. This is why to some critics they appear didactic and artificially constructed, closer to the theatre mechanism than to the film ones, in this respect.

In *Graduation*, the happiness of the teenage daughter of a provincial, successful surgeon (Romeo) is the main reason for which he insists she should leave Romania and enrol in a British university, seen by the over-zealous father as her ticket for a fulfilled and worthy life. Living in Britain is, in his eyes, not only a status symbol for his beloved daughter, but also a protection against the disillusionment Romania has become over some twenty-eight years of chaotic transition from communism to neo-liberal capitalism. And in order to achieve that, the father is ready to encourage his daughter to commit fraud during the high-school graduation exam, only to be sure she will get the right grades needed to be accepted by an UK university. The causality chain triggered by his actions has bad consequences, and brings in a lot of unhappiness. Fraud is immoral, and its effects on human consciousness cannot be ignored.

## THE ETHICS OF CHOICE, DELIBERATION AND ACTION

There is a good and a wrong way of doing things. Without the moral aspect, there is no tragedy. The protagonist's state of happiness or unhappiness depend on it, as well as the overall state of the community.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle analyses the complex nature of human actions, out of which *praxis*, defined as action which has a clear purpose, is put in practice with only one aim: accomplishing good things. 'Every skill and every inquiry, and similarly every action and rational choice, is thought **to aim at some good**; and so the good has been aptly described as that at which everything aims.' (Aristotle, 2004, Book I, Chapter 1, 1094a) And he continues, adding: 'The idea of acting in accordance with right reason is a generally accepted one.' (Aristotle, 2004, Book II, Chapter 2, 1104a)

The process is a two-way street: exercise of virtue via virtuous actions change the character of the human agent accordingly: 'So too we become just by doing just actions, temperate by temperate actions, and courageous by courageous actions'. (Aristotle, 2004, Book II, Chapter 1, 1103b) In his commentary on *The Poetics*, British Cambridge scholar D.W. Lucas underlines several important characteristics of *praxis*: 'It means, not any random action like opening one's mouth or crossing the street, but **an action initiated with a view to an end** and carried on in pursuit of it. (Aristotle, 1980, p. 96)

Dramatic action has purpose, has as a target another character and is always carried on towards completion. The hero's actions are determined by what he/she wants to achieve. And in Aristotle's view of human action, all human beings want to do good.

However, although aiming towards good, the tragic hero's actions can go astray from the good pursued, since they are rooted in the his/her moral disposition and clarity of

judgement. According to Aristotle, the hero's actions stem out of his/her character (*ethos*) and thought (*dianoia*): 'for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and these – thought and character – are the **two natural causes** from which actions spring, and on actions, again, all success or failure depends.' (Aristotle, 1902, p. 25)

An error of judgement (*hamartia*) such as the one of Oedipus or any type of excess, which springs out of arrogance (*hubris*), is pushing the protagonist's actions away from the common good they are aiming at.

Similar to all tragic heroes, Mungiu's protagonists act for the good of their *protégé*, who is either a friend they hold dear or a family member. No one can accuse them of ill intentions. In *4,3,2 Otilia* not only morally supports her pregnant friend (Gabi) in the decision to do an abortion, but is involved directly in organising the illegal act. She breaks the law, she shares the risks with Gabi, as all best friends should do. According to Aristotle, she acts 'accordingly to the right reasons' and values of friendship.

Romeo, the father in *Graduation* wants all that is best for his daughter. However, along the way, he finds himself in the middle of a moral dilemma: 'he cannot save his child but by breaking the moral principles he has invoked to his daughter – and, if he does that, her salvation and all his education effort are pointless.' (Mungiu, "It is essential the films should reach the public", 2016)

## A PLOT TOOL: PROTAGONIST'S CHANGE FROM IGNORANCE TO KNOWLEDGE

An important element of the plot is the Recognition (*Anagnorisis*), defined by Aristotle in *The Poetics* as a 'change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune'. (Aristotle, 1902, p. 41) Along with Reversal of Intention, Recognition is one of the most important dramatic mechanism of articulating the tragic plot.

There are several levels of recognition, from simple ones, such as between Electra and her departed brother Orestes who returns after twenty years of banishment to revenge their father, to more complex ones, such as in *Oedipus*, when '(...) the messenger comes to cheer Oedipus and free him from the alarms of his mother, but by revealing who he is, he produces the opposite effect.' (Aristotle, 1902, p. 41)

The tragic hero undergoes a process of becoming aware of the consequences of his/her actions. The plot is thus a mechanism for raising the protagonist's awareness. The hero's path is an evolution from ignorance to understanding the the true nature of the situation she/he is in; at the end of the narrative, the hero sees the truth – the reality as it is, and not as it had been projected by him/her.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, it's only at the end of the tragedy the hero arrives to know who his real parents are. Oedipus understands he is not the saviour of Thebes, but the cause of its demise. The murderer of Thebes's King Laius is no one but himself, Laius' son.

All of the three films analysed in this article include in their final scenes this type of revelations. In *4,3,2*, the protagonist, Otilia, sees a new face of her friend Gabi as an

indifferent and selfish individual, one who easily frees herself of any kind of responsibility, attitude which casts a different light on their friendship. In *Over the Hills*, a terrified Voichița comes to the tragic realisation that her actions brought the death of her friend and the condemnation of the whole monastic community. As for *Graduation*, the morally faulty father, Romeo, realizes that by trying against all odds to save his daughter from a corrupt society, he came very close to altering his child's moral values, if it weren't for her own good nature to oppose to committing fraud. In an interview Mungiu confessed he preferred as title for the film the English language one, *Graduation*, since 'it refers, somehow, also to the parent in the film. He also undergoes some sort of an examination, not only his daughter.' (Mungiu, "A Film Like a Mirror", 2016)

## A FILM WITH A CLEAR PURPOSE

The open end structure of the tragic plot enables the spectator to make his/her own opinion on what has happened on the stage and on the characters' faults and errors, on whether they deserve to be forgiven or should be condemned.

In the final part of the trilogy *Oresteia*, Aeschylus lays out in front of the eyes of the spectators the scene of Orestes' acquittal by the tribunal of the Areopagus, on the accusation of murdering his mother, Clytemnestra. Did he really deserved being acquitted through the intervention of goddess Athena, or not, since half of the jury members considered him guilty and half acquitted him?

Mungiu's scripts keep the same question open. Is Romeo guilty of wishing the best for his daughter? Where did he go wrong? What about Otilia? She shouldn't have helped her best friend to make an abortion? Why did she do it? Why Voichița wouldn't listen when everybody told her Alina was not fit for becoming a nun?

## CONCLUSION

To act is the final stage of a decision making process which, according to Aristotle's theory, includes deliberation and rational choice. In Cristian Mungiu's screen plays, the plot and the characters are constructed starting from their choices and actions, prompted by the dramatic situation in which they are.

Their response to the environment, which defines the character's behaviour, is not the main focus of the film's narrative. From this perspective Cristian Mungiu's films don't match the New Romanian Cinema style and structure, which focus more on the characters' behaviour, rather than on their actual actions.

In an interview with *Elle Romania* magazine, Mungiu stresses the ultimate responsibility for the way people live belongs to them, and not to the political system governance: 'Our life is the result of our **own decisions and choices**, even if it's simpler to blame everything on others ...' (Mungiu, "A Film Like a Mirror", 2016)

A tragic hero is not a victim. Despite the oppositions and adversities encountered along the way, it is within his/her power to change the situation. Mungiu builds up his plots

around what the protagonist rationally deliberates and decides to choose as a path of action, leaving the social issue in the background of the narrative line: ‘I don’t want to use the character as a vehicle for a social theme discourse.’ (Mungiu, “A Film Like a Mirror”, 2016)

The moral dilemma and viewer’s reflection on what he/she has seen on the screen is the main purpose of the film. The open end of the film invites the spectator to self-analysis. Discussing in an interview if, at the end of *Graduation*, anyone is saved from the grinder of a society based on negotiable values, Mungiu answers: ‘The important thing is if people save themselves in the real life, not in the film. The film’s intention is to make you understand that if you watch the people on the screen, is you in that grinder.’ (Mungiu, “It is essential the films should reach the public”, 2016)

**Fig. 1 Comparative Analysis**

Elements of similarity	Greek Tragedy	C. Mungiu scripts
1. The tragic situation – it’s a coercing dramatic situation which compels the hero to make a decision; the hero <b>has to</b> decide; the decision cannot be avoided.	In Sophocles’ <i>Antigone</i> , the death of heroine’s brother, Polinikes puts her in the tragic situation of choosing between burring him, and thus signing her own death condemnation or leaving him to the vultures, and saving herself.	In <i>Beyond the Hills</i> , the orphanage is the material representation of the compelling situation for the two feminine characters; on their 18th birthday they have to leave the orphanage and start a life for themselves in the ‘outside’ world. They are forced to choose.  In <i>Bacalaureat</i> , an accident puts the young high-school student in the impossibility to hand write at the baccalaureate exam; the graduation exam is compromised; she has to choose whether she is ready to commit a fraud in order to get high grades
2. Cause and effect law rules the structure of the plot; the point of no return; the plot outlines the dialectics of choice, preceded by rational deliberation and followed by action	In <i>Oresteia</i> , the cause and effect chain was set in motion by Agamemnon’s decision to sacrifice Iphigenia. Clytemnestra is the one who pushes the events towards the point of no return, by her decision to kill Agamemnon in order to revenge the murder of her daughter.	In <i>Beyond the Hills</i> , Voichița’s <i>hubris</i> along the decisional chain brings the plot in the point of no return. From there on, she cannot stop the chain of events to develop along the track she had set it up, towards the tragic end – the death of her friend Alina.

<p>3. The hero evolves from ignorance to understanding the reality of situation; at the end of the narrative line, the hero arrives to the truth (<i>anagnorisis</i>)</p>	<p>Oedipus arrives to know who are his real parents. At the end of <i>Oedipus Rex</i> tragedy, he understands he is not the saviour of Thebes, but the cause of its demise. He finds out the terrible truth: <b>he</b> is the actual murderer of his father, Laius</p>	<p>In 4,3,2 Otilia comes to the harsh realization her best friend Gabi has never taken the illegal abortion too seriously. The high risk of the situation was not actually shared between her and Gabi, as she had thought all along the way.</p>
<p>4. The educational purpose of the plot – the viewer’s reflection on protagonist’s decisions and choices</p>	<p>Aeschylus keeps the end of his tragi trilogy <i>Oresteia</i> open. It is for the spectators to decide if Orestes is to be acquitted or not by Athens’ tribunal, the Areopagus.</p>	<p>What would the viewer have done in the situation of Romeo, the father in <i>Graduation</i>, who wants his daughter to study abroad, in order to escape a shallow and deceiving society?</p>

## ENDNOTES

1. Greek: ἐκκλησία – was Athens’s popular assembly open to all Athenian citizens, which counted around 6.000 people in Solon’s time, out of the total population of around 30.000. It was responsible for approving legislation, nominating and electing magistrates, declaring war, electing the military strategist.
2. The Theatre of Dionysus was located at the foot of the Atheniana Acropolis and could seat around 16.000 spectators. It was built in the sixth century BC and is considered to be the birthplace of Greek tragedy.
3. Tatiana Niculescu Bran – *Confession at Tanacu (Spovedanie la Tanacu)*, Polirom, Iași, 2006 and *The Book of Judges. Tanacu Case (Cartea judecătorilor. Cazul Tanacu)*, Humanitas Publishing House, 2006

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