

## ‘Beyond the Hills’ Entraps Audience in Claustrophobic Nightmare

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on March 14, 2013 - 3:47pm

- [4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days](#) [2]
- [Beyond the Hills](#) [3]
- [Cannes Film Festival](#) [4]
- [Cosmina Stratan](#) [5]
- [Cristian Mungiu](#) [6]
- [Cristina Flutur](#) [7]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [8]
- [IFC Films](#) [9]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [10]
- [Movie Review](#) [11]



Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – There is an excellent 90-minute film hidden somewhere within the two-and-a-half-hour ordeal that is Cristian Mungiu's "Beyond the Hills." It's far from a bad film, and offers many sequences of entrancing power, but simply doesn't have enough material to justify its sprawling running time. Instead of probing deeper, the picture merely becomes repetitive.

There's also a dour sense of inevitability that overtakes the suspense at about the one-hour mark. The final outcome is obvious long before it arrives onscreen, and the same could be said of Mungiu's previous effort, 2007's Palme d'Or winner, "4 Months, 3 Weeks and Days." Yet whereas that brilliant film was fueled by its often excruciating tension, "Hills" unfolds with a ponderously cynical logic. Though Mungiu's work has brought tremendous global attention to the Romanian film industry, neither film will do the country's tourism market any favors.

Perhaps Mungiu's greatest strength is his ability to create a tangibly claustrophobic atmosphere through his utilization of long takes that entrap his characters within unwavering frames. Both "Days" and "Hills" center on a pair of young women confined in a society that is at odds with their increasingly desperate needs. Whereas "Days" upped the suspense tenfold by taking place over a single 24-hour period, "Hills" stretches over a great many days in an enclosed community where time itself appears to have been frozen indefinitely. Though the setting is modern day Romania, that's hardly apparent at the film's primary location: an archaic Orthodox monastery tucked in the hills of a desolate countryside. It's not long before the surrounding hills start to resemble the barred walls of a cage, as a reluctant visitor, Alina (Cristina Flutur), realizes that there's little hope for escape. Of course, Alina can leave whenever she wants, and the grim priest (Valeriu Andriuta) hopes she leaves as soon as possible, yet the troubled woman doesn't intend on departing without her dear old friend, Voichita (Cosmina Stratan). It was Alina's understanding that she would be taking Voichita with her to Germany, but Voichita soon reveals that she has no intention of leaving her new home, for fear of losing the divine love of the Lord. It's her newfound spiritual devotion that has caused her love for Alina (and all of mankind, for that matter) to run cold.



Cosmina Stratan and Cristina Flutur star in Cristian Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills*.

Photo credit: Mobra Films/Why Not Productions/Les Films Du Fleuve/France 3 Cinema/Mandragora Movies/IFC Films



Some of the film's most compelling scenes explore the grave philosophy preached by Andriuta's priest, who claims that he's "all for tolerance...but within reason." He ridicules the superstition of his nuns, yet simultaneously uses it to exert dominance over his flock. In order to live a truly spiritual life, the priest argues that one must sever themselves from all earthly things. Of course, this is the sort of devout strategy that prevents a life from ever truly living. If one is not allowed to express their love outwardly, then what good is God's love? I was reminded of the line delivered by a gay Baptist teen in Stephen Cone's "The Wise Kids," who asked his youth minister, "Aren't we god's gift to each other?" Such simple wisdom is lost on this priest, whose fear of the outside world has caused him to seek solace in the primitive cell of his monastery, the only place on earth where he has any semblance of power. It's the fear that he showers over Voichita that forces her to stay, much to Alina's bewilderment. The priest and nuns have so little understanding of the world that when Alina starts rebelling, they interpret her volatile behavior as some malicious form of demonic possession. Since Alina's motivations are clear, Mungiu is more interested in the well-intentioned yet tragically misguided response of the nuns, whose fearful acts are regarded in lingering, mournful takes by cinematographer Oleg Mutu.

What ultimately caused me to cave into this picture, flaws and all, is the exceptionally strong work from fresh-faced newcomers Stratan and Flutur, who deservedly shared the Best Actress prize at last year's Cannes Film Festival. There are echoes of eroticism in their scenes together, implying that Alina and Voichita used to be lovers when they lived together in an orphanage. Both women are striving to find a sense of belonging in the world, though Alina has never felt loved by anyone other than Voichita. This makes her friend's sudden emotional detachment all the more unbearable. Faith has proven to be somewhat of a healing force for Voichita, as evidenced by her hypnotically serene speech, which makes it seem as if she's under a self-imposed trance. Only after Alina starts lashing out in protest does Voichita's façade start to crumble, as she awakens to the alarming ignorance of her fellow nuns. As her agony reaches a fever pitch, Alina sports animalistic behavior not unlike Joaquin Phoenix in "The Master," while the allegedly enlightened priest proves that he's as prone to flying off the handle as Lancaster Dodd. The scene where she confronts him about the supposedly sacred icon he keeps locked behind the altar is unquestionably the dramatic highpoint of the entire film.



Valeriu Andriuta, Cosmina Stratan, Teo Corban and Calin Chirila star in Cristian Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills*.

Photo credit: Mobra Films/Why Not Productions/Les Films Du Fleuve/France 3 Cinema/Mandragora Movies/IFC Films

If Mungiu hadn't indulged his instinct to remain on an individual shot long after it had outstayed its welcome, "Beyond the Hills" would've been a much more viscerally affecting film. As it stands, it's still an impressive achievement well worth seeing, but its overall impact is dulled by the sheer length of Mungiu's script, which revisits the same conflicts over and over before the predictable yet deftly executed finale arrives. There's a baptism in slush reserved for the picture's last few frames that provides the perfect poetic note to accompany the final fade out, though one wishes Mungiu had peppered the rest of the film with similarly provocative touches. As riveting as its highest points may be, "Hills" is as dry and oppressive as the monastery it attempts to portray—and perhaps that's the point. It's a good sermon, but it doesn't know when to quit.

*'Beyond the Hills' stars Cosmina Stratan, Cristina Flutur, Valeriu Andriuta, Dana Tapalaga and Catalina Harabagiu. It was written and directed by Cristian Mungiu. It opened at Landmark Century Centre Cinema on March 15th, 2013. It is not rated.*



[12]

By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [13]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

[matt@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com) [12]

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