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Film Review: 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days

Romanian abortion drama uses hyper-realism to powerful effect

BY [Steven Rosen](#) | Posted 07/16/2008

What keeps film alive as a creative artistic medium is the influx of exciting, challenging new movies from countries we never expected to be factors in contemporary cinema.

The latest is Romania, which in the last couple years has given us several powerful, naturalistic dramas that address life as lived far better than CG-addled Hollywood seems capable of doing. These include *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, *12:08 East of Bucharest* and now director-writer Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, which won the Palme d'Or at last year's Cannes Film Festival.



It is a 2007 release that played well earlier this year in art houses around the country and within Ohio, yet -- in one more example of our local art-house bookers' unenthusiastic timidity for the new -- never screened here until now. Fortunately, Cincinnati World Cinema is bringing the film to the Cincinnati Art Museum July 22 and 23. It's already on DVD, though not easy to find, but this is a way to see it on a big screen -- which it merits -- and have a discussion with moderators afterward.

The film, set in the drab Bucharest of 1987 before the vile Communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu fell, concerns the efforts of one young woman to help another -- both single college students -- get a then-illegal abortion. The title refers to the stage of pregnancy for the one needing the procedure.

The woman who needs the abortion, Gabita (Laura Vasiliu), actually is only peripherally in the movie. She is immature and irresponsible, especially about making arrangements for the procedure.

It thus falls on her friend Otilia (Anamaria Marinca, an actress to be reckoned with in the future) to improvise her way through the devastating problems that ensue. As she does so, the movie slowly increases its tension, especially as Otilia confronts a potentially dangerous (and sexist) male abortionist (Vlad Ivanov, in a nuanced but scary performance).

It'd be foolish to say this film isn't about the politics of abortion and feminism. It starkly presents us with the only issue that in the end matters -- will women of the world have safe, legal abortions or unsafe, illegal ones? -- and views this period in Romanian history as the bad old days.

But it isn't at all a pleading or polemical movie on the subject like Mike Leigh's *Vera Drake*. It is a taut, suspenseful and melancholy drama -- a thriller, really -- about Europe's haunted recent past. It compares well with *Cache*, *The Legends of Rita* and *The Lives of Others*.

Mungiu and his cinematographer Oleg Mutu use long takes, sometimes steady and sometimes briskly on the move with the actors, to maintain a sense of immediacy. The film is devoid of flashy crosscutting or artistic lighting and doesn't have a score -- the barking of the city's wandering dogs is used to unnerving effect.

There is an ambiguous, enigmatic "anything can happen" quality to the film that itself seems like unplanned pregnancy. It starts in a completely off-handed way, with the camera first focusing on a fishbowl in a room and then moving to a nervous, cigarette-smoking Gabriela as she gazes warily. We hear a "yes" from somewhere -- it is from off-camera Otilia -- who then walks from the room down the hallway to the shower room on an errand. This is a dormitory, but for a while we don't know where the women are. It could be a prison.

Mungiu has faith that his actors can make long underwritten scenes happen by the force of their presence. In one, the camera looks on from a distance at a crowded dining table as a silent, struggling Otilia tries to stay polite while others chatter. She is worried about Gabriela back in the hotel. You know this is going to lead to something wrenching, but what, when and how? The director keeps you guessing.

If there is a weakness to *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* it's that Mungiu keeps you guessing a little too much. There are a few unresolved doppelgangers, mostly involving Otilia's problems with the abortionist. But overall, this marriage of searing realism to a ruminative, artistic sensibility marks him as a powerful director to watch.

Grade: A-

CINCINNATI WORLD CINEMA screens *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* at 7 p.m. July 22-23 at the Cincinnati Art Museum. Get screening details, buy tickets and find nearby bars and restaurants [here](#).