



10-2-2016

## Bearing Witness: The Sight of a Sacrifice in Cristian Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills*

Megan Girdwood  
University of York, mcg511@york.ac.uk

---

### Recommended Citation

Girdwood, Megan (2016) "Bearing Witness: The Sight of a Sacrifice in Cristian Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills*," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 3 , Article 25.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss3/25>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

# Bearing Witness: The Sight of a Sacrifice in Cristian Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills*

## **Abstract**

Drawing on the theories of sacrifice advanced by Sigmund Freud (1913) and René Girard (1972; 1982), this article interprets the exorcism depicted by Romanian director Cristian Mungiu in *Beyond the Hills* (2012) as a sacrifice. Explicating Girard's defence of Freud, I use his framing of sacrifice as a function of religion to reassess scholarship addressing the parallels between liturgical and cinematic forms of representation. If, as some scholars propose, the practices of the cinema-goer and the worshipper mirror each other, then the sacrificial witness portrayed by Mungiu constitutes a third pillar in this discourse. I argue that Mungiu dramatizes the act of bearing witness via a visual rhetoric that mimes particular elements of a sacrifice, notably the ritualised violence that leads to the persecution of the scapegoat. As such, his cinematic composition forces the viewer into the position of the witness, raising uneasy questions regarding the relationship between spectatorship and culpability.

## **Keywords**

Sacrifice, Rene Girard, Violence and the Sacred, Scapegoat, Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo, Sexuality, Cristian Mungiu, *Beyond the Hills*, Religion

## **Author Notes**

Megan Girdwood holds a BA in English and an MPhil in Modern and Contemporary Literature from the University of Cambridge. She is currently working on an AHRC-funded PhD in the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York. Her research explores representations of the dancer in modernist theatre and silent film after 1896. Other research interests include the history of sexuality and contemporary film.

In June 2005, an exorcism performed at a convent in the north-east of Romania resulted in the death of a twenty-three year-old nun, Maricica Irina Cornici.<sup>1</sup> This particular incident formed the basis of a number of novels by the former BBC World Service Bucharest Bureau Chief, Tatiana Niculescu Bran, whose work was subsequently adapted by the Romanian director Cristian Mungiu. In *Beyond the Hills* (*După dealuri*, 2012), a work that is yet to receive the attention of film scholars, Mungiu dramatizes the rituals of the exorcism, exposing the structural violence motivating its perpetrators. An uneasy relationship between sight and culpability is implicit in the film's cinematographic logic throughout, and is clearly articulated in the closing scenes, when a police inspector issues a final call for witnesses. Indeed, the exorcism of Cornici's fictive counterpart, Alina (Cristina Flutur), summons a number of historical specters for a country emerging from the collapse of Nicolae Ceaușescu's communist regime. In *Beyond the Hills*, Mungiu negotiates the lingering effects of political and spiritual control on contemporary Romania, focusing on the experience of a community at a small Orthodox church, which exists in largely isolated and archaic conditions.

One of the nuns at the church, Voichita (Cosmina Stratan), Alina's childhood friend and former lover, invites Alina to stay with her so that she might participate in a new life of devotion and prayer. However, Alina's attempts to resurrect their romantic relationship, and to persuade Voichita to return with her to Germany, test the heterosexual and patriarchal norms of the religious order, and of conservative Romania more broadly. Arriving as a guest,

Alina quickly becomes an intruder, undermining the community's fixed social structures by refusing to cooperate with the nuns' highly disciplined way of life, and their attempts to regulate her desires. A series of strange incidents occur, and Alina becomes increasingly unstable, culminating in a breakdown that the others interpret as satanic possession. On one level, the relationship between Alina and her hosts is framed as a tense encounter between Orthodox religion and its secular opposite, finally resulting in a crime justified by its perpetrators as a spiritual cure. Yet this film is also full of subtle collusions and contradictions, and it raises the question of guilt from which the spectators are not exempt.

In this article, I query the characterization of Alina's exorcism as a form of religious remedy and posit it more specifically as an act of sacrifice. In particular, I suggest that certain elements of the sacrifice—the role of the spectators described by Freud in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), and René Girard's theory of a "scapegoat mechanism"—are enacted through the formal qualities of Oleg Mutu's cinematography, placing an emphasis on the act of viewing.<sup>2</sup> In the context of the exorcism/sacrifice, this mere "seeing" becomes an act implicated in issues of culpability, turning the experience of spectatorship, both within and beyond the diegesis, into that of bearing witness. I lodge my discussion in a close analysis of gendered power and desire in *Beyond the Hills*, showing how Mungiu composes a visual rhetoric of exclusion and asymmetry that defines the experience of witnessing the sacrifice. Indeed, this representation of witnessing is couched in ancient spiritual and ritualistic

traditions that go beyond the specifics of religious denomination, and those of cinematic convention.

### **Sacrifice and Cinema**

In the wake of the publication of *The Golden Bough* (1890), J.G. Frazer's pioneering study of magic and religion, attempts have been made to explain the purpose of sacrifice by a host of theorists including Freud, Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and Georges Bataille.<sup>3</sup> For Freud, sacrificial rites offer an outlet for violence, which he reads in psychoanalytic terms in *Totem and Taboo* as patricidal, and as satisfying a "creative sense of guilt [that] still persists among us" by providing an opportunity for atonement.<sup>4</sup> The ancient sacrifices described by Freud usually involve the offering of a totem animal, either an ordinary domestic creature or an unclean animal, whose consumption is prohibited. Freud suggests that a religious communion is made possible through the ritualistic destruction of this object.

In the earliest times the sacrificial animal had itself been sacred and its life untouchable; it might only be killed if all the members of the clan participated in the deed and shared their guilt in the presence of the god, so that the sacred substance could be yielded up and consumed by the clansmen and thus ensure their identity with one another and with the deity.<sup>5</sup>

Freud touches on an important function of the sacrificial victim, which will be of subsequent significance to my discussion of *Beyond the Hills*. Performing the rituals of sacrifice—the murder of the animal *and* the sharing of guilt—creates the opportunity for religious communion among the individual participants, and between them and their god. In ethical terms, the sacrifice resolves its own internal dilemmas: its rituals encompass both the crime and its reparation. In antiquity, this atonement was, on occasion, achieved via a performance of justice. At the Athenian festival of Buphonia, for instance, the priest who performed the sacrifice fled the scene and a mock trial was held in the aftermath, with participants giving evidence as witnesses. Ultimately, blame was placed upon the murder weapon, which was then thrown into the sea.<sup>6</sup> Such a spectacle reflects a shared need for accountability and retribution amongst the participants of a sacrifice, albeit a need satisfied by the symbolic verdict of a pseudo-legislature. Furthermore, the collapsing of the boundaries between participants and witnesses in this particular example, along with the sentencing of the knife rather than the knife-bearer, illustrates the inherent fragility of sacrificial culpability as a concept, a difficulty that will take on further ramifications in the cinematic depictions of sacrifice considered here.

Challenging what he perceives as a near universal condemnation of *Totem and Taboo*, René Girard works hard in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) to reframe Freud's ideas, disputing their oedipal basis in favor of a theory of "mimetic desire," a process of combative imitation that leads to discord. He

defines the role of the sacrificial victim as that of a surrogate or “scapegoat,” an agent of unity whose purpose is “to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric.”<sup>7</sup> Redeploying Freud’s theory of collective murder, Girard claims that the act of violence performed upon the victim is ratified by religion, as its main agenda is to ensure communal unity. In *The Scapegoat* (1982), he takes this theory further, discovering a sacrificial logic in the essential myths and narratives that lie at the basis of society, read alongside what he terms “texts of persecution.” These texts, including the medieval poet Guillaume de Machaut’s *Judgement of the King of Navarre*, and documents from historic witch trials, exemplify the workings of collective murder from the perspective of the persecutors. Vitaly, however, Girard asserts that the Christian Passion, as told in the Gospels, works against this model, revealing the systemic violence otherwise camouflaged by myth—the scapegoat mechanism inherent in the sacrifice of an innocent victim.<sup>8</sup>

For the purposes of this article, Girard’s brief but important discussion of the subject of exorcism is illuminating. In *Violence and the Sacred*, he characterizes exorcism as a “replacement” for what he terms “the vanished sacrifice”—the ritualized violence that no longer concludes in the “sacrificial immolation.”<sup>9</sup> He goes on to assert the fundamental similarities between the practices of exorcism and sacrifice, suggesting that both create an outlet for mob anger, and often involve “ritual disputes” prior to the final act of violence, which in the case of exorcism is nominally directed against satanic forces. An exorcism

is, above all, an act that imitates the essentials of a sacrifice, using ritualized violence to protect social unity.

Sacrifice is the boon worthy above all others of being preserved, celebrated and memorialised, reiterated and reenacted in a thousand different forms, for it alone can prevent transcendental violence from turning back into reciprocal violence, the violence that really hurts.<sup>10</sup>

This framing of the exorcism as a function of sacrifice, complicit in the destruction of an outsider within the community, offers a helpful starting point for my assessment of *Beyond the Hills*. The liberally minded and spiritually skeptical Alina takes up a role that bears striking affinities with Girard's scapegoat figure, emphasised in the crucifixion imagery associated with her death. Her entrance into the church initially threatens a social rupture, but her eventual exorcism is portrayed as a radical attempt to restore community order.

Given the spiritual fanaticism that informs the depictions of sacrifice and witnessing in *Beyond the Hills*, it is important to couch this discussion in scholarship addressing the interplays between cinematic and religious forms of representation. In this spirit, Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz, among others, have asserted the need for a "serious dialogue" between the disciplines of theology and film in order to determine the extent of their mutual influence in contemporary culture.<sup>11</sup> Answering this summons, critics such as



Peter Fraser have compared the formal practices of cinematic spectatorship to liturgical solemnities on the grounds that both operate ritualistically.<sup>12</sup> The kinds of religious communions made possible through worship (and also through the modes of sacrifice) bear a resemblance to the role of the spectator in the cinema auditorium. As Christian Metz asserts, film enables the spectator to “[*identify*] with himself, with himself as a pure act of perception [...] as the condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject.”<sup>13</sup> Here cast by Metz as “transcendental,” the viewer operates as a liminal figure, simultaneously within and beyond the mechanisms of the projection, participating in the kinds of spectral communions facilitated by prayer.

According to this “transcendental” model, the screen becomes a “strange mirror,” situated before audience members who “receive” and “release” its images, from which they compose a narrative based on their own habits of perception.<sup>14</sup> Reconsidering Lacanian readings of the gaze, however, other scholars have questioned the status of this transcendental or masterful spectator, pointing to the potentially subversive nature of the gaze in cinematic representation.<sup>15</sup> As Steve Nolan writes, paraphrasing Jean-Louis Baudry, it is “the very mobility of the camera that provides the conditions for the manifestation of the ‘transcendental subject,’ a subject unfettered by the limitation of objective reality.”<sup>16</sup> The camera intervenes between viewer and screen, framing and directing the experience of the spectator in a manner that challenges the notion of a masterful gaze. Furthermore, Nolan argues that the

relationship other critics have perceived between cinematic and religious practice is an analogical one, brought about by the fact that both are “representational media.” Again using a Lacanian framework, he shows how the worshipper is “sutured” into the rituals of liturgy and religious iconography, paralleling the experience of the cinematic spectator.<sup>17</sup>

If we consider one of sacrifice’s primary functions to be the facilitating of religious communion, it is possible to apply Nolan’s model to the role of the witness/participant in sacrificial rites. Much as the suturing of the worshipper and the cinema-goer into liturgical and cinematic apparatuses depends upon a point of identification—embodied by the priest or the actor—the sacrificial participant must be integrated into the rituals of the sacrifice via a symbolic vessel. This vessel is best understood as a double-construct: both the individual who performs the sacrifice and also the victim, the scapegoat. This two-fold identification therefore enables a resolution of the shared guilt, since the participant/witness figuratively embodies both the murderer and the murdered subject. Hence, we have the offering of sacred animals in Freud’s accounts of ancient rituals, through which “the worshippers in some way laid stress upon their blood kinship with the animal and the god.”<sup>18</sup> Girard articulates this kinship differently in *The Scapegoat*, writing, “those who make up the crowd are always potential persecutors,” but later recognising that, “despite what is said around us persecutors are never obsessed by difference but rather by its unutterable contrary, the lack of difference.”<sup>19</sup> At this fearful moment of recognition, the participant identifies with the scapegoat, whose sacrifice thus

represents the community's desire to cleanse itself through what is, symbolically, an act of self-directed violence.

It is by way of this conflicted experience of communion, I argue, that the parallels emerge between the position of the cinematic spectator, the religious worshipper, and the sacrificial witness. How these internal tensions and relations are perceived, both by those witnesses within the fictional setting's parameters and by the film's spectators, is central to *Beyond the Hills*. Religious witnessing is consistently shown to be a spectacle of sight. Indeed, the rituals of the sacrifice are encoded in the film's composition, whereby the terms of visibility imposed by the camera frame, perform, and permit a critique of the events surrounding Alina's exorcism.

### **Surveilling Desire**

The religious nature of the sacrifice in *Beyond the Hills* is foregrounded in a contemporary Romanian setting that remains, in part, hidebound by its history. Although the Orthodox Church's relationship to the State has been considerably redefined since Ceaușescu's overthrow in 1989, it has remained a privileged, at times inscrutable institution.<sup>20</sup> In particular, its influence on post-communist legislation regarding female reproductive rights, prostitution, and homosexuality has been the subject of critical study. Lucian Turcescu and Lavinia Stan have outlined the fervent efforts undertaken by the Orthodox and Greek Catholic churches to prevent the changes made to Article 200 of

Romania's Criminal Code, which outlawed homosexuality and punished same-sex relationships with prison terms. This legislation was not altered until 1996, when private consensual sex between same-sex individuals was made legal, although Romanian society continued to be overwhelmingly homophobic, and ambiguities about what precisely constituted a "private" space meant that such relationships were still dangerous.<sup>21</sup> These are the mutable, shifting definitions and tensions that interest Mungiu in *Beyond the Hills*, and in his earlier film *4 Months, 3 Weeks & 2 Days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*, 2007), which confronts the subject of illegal abortion under Ceaușescu's government. Attempts to manage and regulate the body, particularly the female body, recur across Mungiu's work, uncovering the potent intersections between the State and the Church.

The homosexual desire implied between Alina and her friend Voichita, a nun who abides by her order's strict codes of practice, clearly conflicts with the church's chaste and ascetic values. Mungiu's suggestive evaluations of religion and sexuality are largely articulated through the women's relationship, which is not only constructed verbally, but also in terms of their physical positioning and habits of perception. The pious Voichita is painfully conscious of a Higher witness monitoring her behavior; Alina, on the other hand, displays her agency through looking at things directly, and Voichita is often the object of her desiring gaze. This opposition is in evidence in the opening scene, when Voichita goes to meet Alina at the train station. As they embrace, Alina holding on a little too long, Voichita voices her discomfort as a fear of being seen:

“Alina, let me go. People are looking.” As far as the viewer is aware, the only witness to their reunion is the camera (Mungiu’s first tracking shot of Voichita walking along the platform shows her moving firmly against the crowd, and when she reaches Alina, the platform has virtually emptied). As such, the suggested presence of watching eyes extends to the viewers beyond the screen, the invisible yet all-seeing witnesses Voichita apprehends, who become assimilated with her all-knowing God.

This construction of an unseen observer troubles the very boundaries between the public and the private that were rendered so uncertain by the phrasing and enforcement of legislation regarding homosexuality in Romania: an act could be classified as “public,” “purely because there is a possibility for it to be made public.”<sup>22</sup> As a public space that is often the site of intimate encounters, the train station is an apt choice for the opening sequence in *Beyond the Hills*, where it forms a locus for the fraught interactions that dominate Mungiu’s film.

In this scene at the station, as in many others, the gazes of the two women are set along a perpendicular axis: Alina’s side-on, longing watch of Voichita is indicative of what Žižek calls the “awry” look of desire, while the latter looks ahead, often in prayer (Fig. 1). Through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Žižek identifies an essential fear of proximity at the core of this model of desire, arguing that anxiety arises from “the danger of our getting too close to the object [of desire] and thus losing the lack itself.”<sup>23</sup> Intriguingly, it is this kind of anamorphic gaze that persists in *Beyond the Hills*, not only in

Alina's askew view of Voichita, but in the community's watch of Alina, the uninvited guest and eventual scapegoat. As such, the parallels between the mechanisms of desire and sacrifice are played out: the troubled sense of proximity created by Alina's desire reflects the anxious recognition Girard observes among those who nominate a scapegoat – an identification that manifests as violence.

Deliberate editing and shot choices articulate the rigid structures of the community. Mungiu never uses the shot/reverse-shot process to construct dialogue, but sets up conversations through interfacial positioning or triangulations, rendered in static long takes. Consistently in these shots, women take up similar stances, mirroring each other physically as a man sits between them, usually facing the camera (Fig. 2). The use of costumes reinforces the sense of a prescriptive gender model: the majority of the female characters are nuns, who wear identical black uniforms, and whose bodies, frequently shot from the back or the side, become almost indistinguishable. Those shots that position the camera in direct relation to the male figure—often “Papa,” the priest, or, in other scenes, a police officer, and a senior medical consultant—allow Mungiu to subtly construct gendered power divisions and collusions between the various patriarchal institutions represented: the church, the police unit, and the hospital.



**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**

Indeed, when Voichita visits the police station to obtain her passport, snatches of external conversations reveal how far the community is steeped in mythologies and superstitions that act as controls on female desire. The other officers are discussing the story of a local man who has left his wife for a younger woman. The dialogue implies that an act of unnatural manipulation has taken place: “they say she used witchcraft. Mrs. Nistor is now trying to break the spell and curse this girl.” Crucially, this archaic association of female allure with black magic is threaded into broader discourses of sexuality in its

contemporary forms. The police officer probes Voichita on her plans to visit Alina in Germany, and asks her about a German man she knows, named Pfaff. After Voichita admits that Pfaff has taken photographs of her in the past, the officer asks what kinds of photographs; she replies, “all kinds...” This elliptical statement alludes to some sort of undisclosed exploitation, and when the officer asks whether Voichita would like to make a complaint, she pauses, heavily, and then declines. Overshadowed by the specter of the unspoken, Mungiu’s silence-laden dialogue has political implications reaching beyond its immediate context. Indeed, the last decade has seen large numbers of young Romanian women lured into the sex trade by promises of lucrative employment in Western Europe, as documented by Turcescu and Stan.<sup>24</sup> Alina and Voichita may well fit into this category, but the lack of clarity about precisely what kind of work they intend to do in Germany is just one of many uncomfortable ambiguities defining the sexual politics of *Beyond the Hills*.

Similar fears about the effects of female desire are evident in the scenes at the hospital. Alina is taken in for treatment following some kind of breakdown, apparently connected to her confession with Papa, during which she admits to “self-abuse” or masturbation. Her neighbor in the ward is a fifteen-year-old girl, who threw herself from a window after missing her period. In *Beyond the Hills*, female sexual expression, whether queer or heterosexual, leads straight to the hospital, an institution whose staff members are beholden to the same religiosity as the rest of the community. Mungiu composes another shot that shows two women, Voichita and the leading Sister, positioned across



a desk from a man: in this case, a doctor. His office is decorated with Christian iconography, including a painting of the Virgin Mary, and he declares that Alina “won’t get any better here,” but “get her to read the scriptures, it will help.” This spiritual remedy is advised in the same breath as the delivery of Alina’s prescription, aligning drugs and religious rites as supposed curatives. The *mise-en-scène* not only recreates the gendered power plays of other scenes (Voichita and her companion are shot from the back, facing the doctor) but also assumes a significant alliance between church and hospital.

These suggestively choreographed interactions, with their emphasis on lines of sight—who can be seen and who looks at whom—stress the interplays between agency and visibility. Repeatedly, the latter is shown to be contingent on divisions of power, and desires deemed to be subversive or irregular. The queer gaze of Alina is staged as an asymmetrical act of sight within the community’s tightly managed system, and it is a transgression witnessed in turn by those who facilitate her alienation and sacrifice.

### **Identifying the Scapegoat**

The conflict between community and outsider in *Beyond the Hills* is structured around the conditions of sight created by the cinematography. How and where characters look defines their position in the religious order; their compliance or their difference. Where the latter exists, it is punished, a response in keeping with the theory of sacrifice outlined by Girard, and the “scapegoat mechanism”

he identifies as a crucial component of such rituals. For Girard, sacrifice must be understood as a process encoded in the social structures of a group, designed to expel violent instincts that are inevitably directed towards the subject figured as “other”: “difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility, and its mortality.”<sup>25</sup> Alina’s strident “otherness” has precisely this effect on the monastic community into which she enters. Her subversive manner of looking introduces an unwelcome precedent to the patriarchal sect by offering a model of female desire in which a woman demonstrates sexual agency. Her body, the source of this problematic longing, becomes the site on which the community’s insecurities are played out, revealing the nature of this particular brand of fanaticism and its rabid scapegoating of difference.

For Girard, the foundational narratives and theologies of modern culture repeat and rationalize acts of violence against the appointed victim, whose isolation is an important stage in the sacrificial process. The first act that Alina and Voichita perform upon arrival at the church is washing, subtly reflecting the fears of contamination so often attached to Girard’s scapegoat. Alina’s precarious status within this topography of exclusion soon becomes clear: during communion, she stands on the threshold of the chapel, unable to participate because she is “dirty.” It emerges that she is menstruating, a definition of “dirtiness” that reveals the religious order’s deep mistrust of the (female) flesh, with all its messy, disordered emanations and uncontrollable longings. This sort of phobia correlates with Girard’s assertion that “concepts

such as impurity and contagion, because they translate human relations into material terms, provide a sort of camouflage.”<sup>26</sup> It is indeed through a process of disguise and deferral that Mungiu encodes the phobic response to Alina in the rhythms of daily life at the church, allowing indicators of her alien status to accrue gradually but perceptibly. For instance, she is implicitly compared to the unseen dogs that we frequently hear barking, in a scene where the leading Sister tells Voichita to stop bringing in strays because they break their chains. These metal chains are later used to tie Alina to her sacrificial cross, casting her as the real stray unwisely brought in by her friend.

As an outsider within community parameters, Alina becomes the subject of an aggressive surveillance. Mungiu establishes the stark differences between the reluctant hosts and their “deviant” visitor through this systematic observation, perhaps most strikingly in the kitchen scene after Alina’s discharge from hospital. As Voichita exits the room, Alina’s gaze pursues her off-screen, and her longing look is watched in turn by the remaining nuns, whose hostile eyes mark her out as an alien subject. In such a context, the knives in their hands begin to look more like weapons than domestic tools, foregrounding Alina’s subsequent sacrifice in imagery charged with violence (Fig. 3). In looking at Voichita with acquisitive intent, Alina threatens the heteronormative patriarchy of the institution, specifically by presenting her body as one that is both conspicuously visible and primed to gaze at others.



**Figure 3**

### **Rituals of Exorcism**

As the events around the sacrificial sequence unfold, the act of bearing witness becomes embroiled in issues of truth and culpability. A growing sense of anxiety is shown to be rising amongst the nuns, as their attempts to ward off deviant influences become increasingly intense. In one scene, several of them rush to Voichita, who is fetching water from the well, with cries that “Sister Antonia has fainted [...] Sister Antonia is sick!” It soon transpires that Antonia came across a “black cross” in a pine log while she was chopping wood. Her response to this satanic image carries the suggestions of contamination repeatedly associated with Alina—a “sickness” arising from devilish contact. It is significant that the body of the working woman is momentarily immobilized by this symbol because it sets the chaste, laboring female figure in opposition to forces that might jeopardize the stability of the community. What appears to be under threat from external influences is not just a theology, but also a way of

life. However, the Priest, “Papa,” instructs the nuns to continue with their work, declaring “enough of this rubbish about signs.” The trigger is deemed insignificant; the reaction of the witness asymmetrically demonstrative.

Several minutes later, Voichita is shown working again, and is situated at the center of the frame, with the other actors at greater depths. In the background, the viewer can just perceive an altercation between Alina and Sister Antonia. Barely three seconds after Alina has approached her, Antonia runs to Voichita screaming “the Devil is in her!” and alleges that Alina spoke “awful things, and in a changed voice!” From the perspective of the viewer, this has the same hyperbolic ring as the nun’s earlier account, with further extraordinary claims about satanic possession. Through these carefully constructed scenes, Mungiu builds a climate of unreliable witnessing, whereby the nuns project their spiritual anxieties onto the susceptible scapegoat, Alina.

Alina’s alleged descent into a psychotic delirium, and her subsequent exorcism and death, are framed according to those who bridge the participant/witness divide. Mungiu focuses on the nuns who claim to have witnessed Alina’s madness, although the camera rarely lingers for long on individual faces, preferring instead to show hands busily at work—sweeping, sewing, retrieving water, and later, sawing boards and tying chains. Through this attention to the rhythms of labor, Mungiu frames the sacrifice as an attempt to remedy the discord caused by Alina to the organization of the community. Yet these shots of manual work become a source of nervous excess: the pace of movement rapidly accelerates, and the nuns are shown flocking to Alina’s

struggling form, like vultures to carrion, as they tie her to the cross.

By emphasizing Voichita's changing position within the visual network he has established, Mungiu maps a crucial break between his protagonist and those engaged in the rituals of exorcism. Voichita and Alina's bisected visual trajectories—the perpendicular model previously described—become parallel: the former is placed at a distance from the other nuns when Alina is confined to her cell, a pseudo-medical quarantine that confirms the links between church and hospital. When Alina attempts to break out of her cell by starting a fire, Voichita runs to the window to douse the flaming curtains, situating her outside the room looking in at Alina. Separated from the nuns who fall on her friend, restraining and gagging her, Voichita starts to assume the position of the outsider within, observing the rites without participating in them directly. Standing by the window, she becomes a spectator peering through a frame, aligning herself with those viewers beyond the diegesis whose experiences are conditioned by camera and screen.

Mungiu makes this development explicit in subsequent scenes, including a shot of Voichita looking through the chapel window at Alina, who has been bound to a makeshift cross. The imagery denoting the crucifixion is a striking component of the *mise-en-scène*, and it purports an analogical relationship between Christ's self-sacrifice and Alina's exorcism, casting the latter as a scapegoat for the community's specific brand of religious conservatism. This correlation with Christian sacrifice also suggests that the cleansing initiative motivating Alina's exorcism is in fact for the benefit of her

persecutors, designed to purify the community, much as Christ's sacrifice atoned for the sins of humanity. Framing this sacrificial discourse is a sequence of specifically established shots, set up to accentuate the status of the witness within the filmic medium. In this particular scene the camera faces the window, concentrating the viewer on the gaze of Voichita, the witness, rather than Alina, the scapegoat (Fig. 4). In fact, Alina's body is partly obscured, occupying the bottom of the frame with her head and torso off-screen. Thus, the shot underlines the difficulties of bearing witness, allying Voichita's exterior position behind the glass with that of the viewers in the auditorium, and so instigating correlations between the rituals of sacrifice and cinematic spectatorship.

Building on this extra-diegetic mirroring, the camera later takes up Voichita's position at the window and, as she approaches from behind, her face appears as a reflection in the pane. At this moment, a reflexive tension is created between the screen and the projected image, suggestive of Metz's claim that "in a certain emplacement, the mirror [of the cinema screen] suddenly becomes clear glass."<sup>27</sup> As the glass becomes the mirror, Voichita perceives herself as both the subject and object of a gaze: a witness on the other side of a window *and* a projection within the cinematic medium.



**Figure 4**

Soon after, Alina's sacrifice reaches its harrowing conclusion with the confirmation of her death. This is followed by the arrival of a police unit at the church, and, when they discover the object used to restrain the victim, one officer comments: "Looks like a cross to me, Father." Papa's subsequent denial is in fact a confirmation of the exorcism's holy purpose: "a cross is sacred." By acknowledging the sanctity of the instrument that served as Alina's deathbed, the priest implicates his company in a different kind of religious performance: a sacrifice disguised as an exorcism. The dialogue and composition of this scene consolidate the film's thematic intricacies, revealing the mirrored power structures of State and Church, and pointing to the fatal results of one being permitted to carry out its own form of justice. Reversing the gender figurations of earlier scenes, Mungiu has Voichita, a woman, stand at the altar directly facing the camera, while the Priest and police officers converse in front of her. By making his crucial witness, Voichita, the visual focal point of this scene, Mungiu creates particular resonances between the imagery and the dialogue.



When one of the officers queries, “Father, I’m asking you, was anyone to blame for this girl’s death?” the spectator’s gaze is naturally trained on the figure at the center of the shot: Voichita. Her role as witness, heavily underscored by the cinematography, is now shadowed by the prospect of culpability. Finally, the policemen declare that they “need some more witnesses to come with [them],” and Voichita volunteers to go, conforming to a sacrificial logic that demands trial and retribution, albeit in a contemporary society in which antiquated rituals may meet with newer forms of justice.

### **Twice Sacrificed**

Where practices, beliefs, and social values collide in *Beyond the Hills*, Mungiu plays out such tensions through his specifically suggestive cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. This is a film of spare and quiet dialogue, but the shots are crafted according to a visual rhetoric that mimes the forms and rituals of the sacrifice in question, and calls attention to the various structures of power and desire that frame it. Issues pertaining to the regulation of the female body, to sexuality, and to the currency of knowledge—spiritual and political—emerge from Mungiu’s depictions of illicit desires and explicitly gendered power relations. Sacrifice acts as a vessel for these discourses, as its targeted violence and spiritual purpose make community structures visible, briefly illuminating the prejudices and insecurities that lead to the nomination of a scapegoat. But the visual composition of *Beyond the Hills* finally asserts the difficulties of

bearing witness—of assigning responsibility, or even being sure what has been seen. The film’s closing image is of a filthy pane of glass: it is the windscreen of the police van, dirtied by a passing vehicle lifting the snow. Here, with the sight of the police officials impaired, Mungiu undermines the possibility of any clear-sighted justice, and leaves his spectators troubled by their own position as witnesses to the film, which fades upon the image of a contaminated screen.

In the context of such ambiguous filmic shifts, the spectator’s own response to the sacrificial structures of Mungiu’s work is necessarily conflicted. Thomas Cousineau has shed a light on the difficulties readers face in interpreting Girardian narratives of scapegoating, using canonical modernist texts as his case studies. He contends that the narrators of such texts often covertly support the scapegoating process, offering only an “*ostensible demystification*” of this mechanism. Yet the authors simultaneously create a “demystifying counter-text [...] available to readers who have successfully resisted the narrator’s sacrificial misreadings.”<sup>28</sup> Although Cousineau is dealing with the very different conditions of literary narrative, his insights are pertinent to the sacrificial themes of *Beyond the Hills*. Voichita is the film’s anchor: the spectator’s experience is biased towards her perspective, particularly during the scenes of the exorcism. Moreover, there is considerable emphasis placed on how she behaves as a witness—where she is positioned, and how her gaze is framed. Consequently, the spectator becomes embroiled in the contradictions of Voichita’s relationship to Alina, the scapegoat, and to Alina’s persecutors. Voichita is ambivalently placed between these categories—as witness and as

passive participant. The act of bearing witness to the film cannot be extricated from the charge of blame finally posed to Voichita when the camera confronts her head-on. Indeed, as Cousineau recognizes, identifying the “truth” of the sacrifice can be a problematic business. If the dirty window of the police van signifies anything at the conclusion, it is the utter opacity of this particular spectacle. Assigning responsibility is an uneasy task against this backdrop of institutional collusion, which only serves to blur the distinction between the various agents at work. Complicit in the power structures that isolate this scapegoat, the police force and the medical profession are not exempt from guilt. This uncertainty is of course compounded by the precarious position of Voichita and the film’s spectators who, through their inert observation, sit on the brink of participation. The audience members, as “worshippers” before their screen, cannot escape being implicated in the ritualized violence inflicted upon Alina, who is doubly sacrificed upon the altars of faith and spectacle.

---

<sup>1</sup> Craig Smith, “A Casualty on Romania’s Road Back From Atheism,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2005, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/03/world/europe/a-casualty-on-romanias-road-back-from-atheism.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Numerous anthropologists have criticised Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965). Girard offers a lone defence in *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MA: University of John Hopkins Press, 1977). He claims that Freud ‘lucidly perceived [the] necessity’ for a real murder to have operated as the basis of sacrificial myths, and describes *Totem and Taboo* as ‘a step toward the revelation of something far more profound’ (92; 118). Acknowledging that the murder motif lodges itself uncomfortably in Freud’s attempt to explain the evolution of sexual prohibitions, and the power of totemism, Girard frees the concept of collective murder from the context Freud assigns it, positing it instead as a function of religion and a means of restoring social order.

---

<sup>3</sup> Frazer's teleological readings of ancient myth and religion can be traced through more recent considerations of sacrifice, for example, in Girard's work. Other related works on sacrifice include Jean-Luc Nancy's "The Unsacrificeable," *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 20-38. Nancy ultimately argues that 'the truth of existence is that it cannot be sacrificed,' thus reclaiming the territory on which sacrifice has long staked its values.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 159.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>7</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (London: Athlone Press, 1986). For Girard's definition of "texts of persecution" see in particular pp. 1-11; for an account of the scapegoat mechanism in the Gospels, see pp. 112-116.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), ix. Deacy and Ortiz position their study as a natural continuation of the work done by Clive Marsh, Ortiz and others in *Explorations in Theology and Film* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998). Greg Watkins, however, has emphasised the importance of considering film on its own terms in this "discussion," rather than using it to confirm theological theories. The "uniqueness" of the filmic medium must also be used to shed a new light on religious concerns. See Greg Watkins, "Seeing and Being Seen: Distinctively Filmic and Religious Elements in Film," *Journal of Religion and Film* 3 (1999).

<sup>12</sup> Peter Fraser, *Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film* (London: Flick Books, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Christian Metz, "From *The Imaginary Signifier*," *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 735.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> For example, Todd McGowan argues that traditional Lacanian film theory misrepresents the spectator as a 'masterful' subject, without recognising the real 'trauma' of the gaze in cinema. He claims that the radical potential of film has been overlooked in terms of its ability to 'take us to an encounter with the gaze that would otherwise be obscured in our experience of social reality.' See Todd McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and its Vicissitudes," *Cinema Journal* 42 (2003).

<sup>16</sup> Steve Nolan, *Film, Lacan, and the Subject of Religion: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Religious Film Analysis* (London: Continuum, 2009), 81. Nolan reconsiders earlier scholarship that identified the ways in which cinematic spectatorship is comparable to religious ritual, arguing instead that liturgy, like cinema, is a representational medium and can be better understood through the lens of film theory. He then applies the Lacanian concept of 'suture' to religious practice in order to delineate the position of the worshipper within the liturgical apparatus. This study helpfully underscores the analogies between liturgical and cinematic modes of representation, offering useful inroads into analysing the reflexive mechanisms of worshipping and witnessing in *Beyond the Hills*.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 136.

<sup>19</sup> René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 16; 21.

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of how the Orthodox church has been revived in the wake of Ceaușescu's fall, see Liviu Andreescu, "The Construction of Orthodox Churches in Post-Communist Romania," *Europe-Asia Studies* 59 (2007), 451-80.

<sup>21</sup> Lucian Turcescu and Lavinia Stan, "Religion, Politics and Sexuality in Romania," *Europe-Asia Studies* (2005), 291-310.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1991), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Turcescu and Stan, "Religion," 302. This section of the article outlines the movement of vulnerable Romanians through the European sex market, and highlights cases involving young men and women from impoverished rural communities sold into this trade by their families. Turcescu and Stan frame this description as part of the debate regarding legislation on prostitution in Romania, and the attempts made by the Democrat party Deputy, Mariana Valeria Stoica, to have the profession legalized.

<sup>25</sup> René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>27</sup> Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," 822.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Cousineau, *Ritual Unbound: Reading Sacrifice in Modernist Fiction* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2004) 5; 22.

## References

*4 Months, 3 Weeks & 2 Days*. Dir. Cristian Mungiu. Artificial Eye. 2008.

Andreescu, Liviu. "The Construction of Orthodox Churches in Post-Communist Romania." *Europe-Asia Studies* 59 (2007): 451–80.

Bataille, Georges. "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice." *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 9-28.

*Beyond the Hills*. Dir. Cristian Mungiu. Artificial Eye. 2013.

Cousineau, Thomas. *Ritual Unbound: Reading Sacrifice in Modernist Fiction* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2004).

Deacy, Christopher and Gaye Williams Ortiz. *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide*. Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2008.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Willis. London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Fraser, Peter. *Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film*. London: Flick Books, 1998.

Frazer, J.G. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1963.

Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo*. Translated by James Strachey. 2nd ed. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965.

Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

———. *The Scapegoat*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. London: Athlone Press, 1986.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006.

Marsh, Clive and Gaye Ortiz, eds. *Explorations in Theology and Film*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998.

McGowan, Todd. "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and its Vicissitudes." *Cinema Journal* 42 (2003): 27-47.

Metz, Christian. "From *The Imaginary Signifier*." In *Film Theory and Criticism*. Edited by Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.  
Nancy, Jean-Luc and Richard Livingston. "The Unsacrificeable." *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 20-38.

Nolan, Steve. *Film, Lacan and the Subject of Religion: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Religious Film Analysis*. London : Continuum, 2009.

Smith, Craig. "A Casualty on Romania's Road Back From Atheism," *New York Times*, July 3, 2005, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/03/world/europe/a-casualty-on-romanias-road-back-from-atheism.html>.

Turcescu, Lucian and Lavinia Stan, "Religion, Politics and Sexuality in Romania." *Europe-Asia Studies* (2005): 291-310.

Watkins, Greg. "Seeing and Being Seen: Distinctively Filmic and Religious Elements in Film." *Journal of Religion and Film* 3 (1999).

Žižek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.