

On Two Romanian Films
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This past week, I saw a couple of films I found remarkable, compelling, personally transforming. Both are Romanian: “The Death of Mr. Lazarescu” directed by Cristi Puiu (2006), and “4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days” directed by Cristian Mungiu (2007). I saw “Lazarescu” five nights ago and “4 Months” last night. I obtained the films through Netflix, but I assume they are available in a good video store.

I won’t go into detail about the subject matter and themes of the films because I believe that would detract from your experience when watching them. I think it is best, not just with films but with all art--fiction, poetry, painting, whatever it is—to encounter it cold, as it were, engage it freshly and fully and let your experience of it take you where it does. With films, I don’t read reviews from beginning to end before I see them. I don’t want to be told what I am going to see, what it means, what is going to happen to me, any of that. I don’t want anything to come between the film and my immediate experience of it. In order to get a sense of whether I might be interested in a film, I glance at the first sentence of the last paragraph of a review, which tends to convey a sense of the film’s merit in the reviewer’s judgment.

I will say that both “Lazarescu” and “4 Months” deal with the last day of someone’s life. The protagonist of “Lazarescu” is the title character, Mr. Lazarescu. This morning I find that the protagonist of “4 Months” is not the person I thought it was while I was watching the film last night, a young woman, a college student, but rather someone we don’t see until very late in the film, and then only briefly, albeit unforgettably. I also find that I can’t get the complete title of “4 Months” out of my mind this morning—“4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days.” Before I saw the film, I couldn’t keep the title straight and found it an unwieldy, cumbersome choice for a title. Now I can’t forget it, and don’t think I’ll ever forget it.

In an earlier thought on this site, I discussed three other films that touched me deeply this past year, from the 1940s and ’50s by the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu (see the thought “Three Films That Touched Me”). As I think about it, the Ozu films from long ago

and these two contemporary Romanian films are similar in important ways.

The Ozu and the Romanian films provided me with a direct, in contrast to mediated, experience. They went very light on the use of the techniques of modern filmmaking, which increasingly I find get in the way of my taking in fully what is happening to the people on the screen. These directors and their cinematographers stayed away from shifting camera angles, quick cuts, and super close-ups. They didn't call attention to themselves by suddenly showing us the scene from the point of view of the ceiling or some other exotic camera placement. They didn't use heightened music to tell us what to think and feel. There were no digital effects to remind us that this is a movie. There were long scenes with wide angles. The camera stayed still and didn't follow people if they stood up or sat down. People moved about within the frame and entered and left it. We simply witness people living their lives. The movies are about these people and what they do, step-by-step, decision-by-decision, and where it takes them and where it takes us, not filmmaking.

The Ozu and Romanian films are straight-forward, clear-cut stories involving everyday, anonymous people. But within these apparently simple actions lie complex motivations and, at least for the people involved, enormously significant consequences. There is universality in these films: at least when I watched them and thought about them later I said to myself, and felt, "Yes, that is [or was, or will be] me." Watching these films was more than an entertainment or diversion for me. At the end of these films, I felt different than before; something in me had shifted; I wasn't the same as I was. I felt more sensitive, less deadened, less armored against reality, including memory, more aware, more directed, more fundamentally human. I was left with sadness and loss and regret after watching these films, but at the same time, I had greater hope and resolve to live fully and honorably in whatever time I have left.

Even as I consider these two Romanian films (as well as the three Ozu films) superb and suggest that you consider viewing them, I realize you may not like them as much as I did. Art is an exchange between a particular creative work and a particular viewer at a particular moment in time. What results from that exchange is a function of both what the art is like and the person engaging the art is like: his or her make-up and history and stage of life, what he

or she is going through and dealing with. All I can do is call your attention to these films and tell you about my experience with them—and then you take it from there.