

## Notes on Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days*

by Joshua Hudelson

Otilia is pregnant.

We do not know this for certain, but we are given several indications. She gets nosebleeds. She vomits. She doesn't give her boyfriend a definite "no" when he asks if she is. She accuses him of being careless about contraception.

But there is even greater evidence in metaphors—when Otilia vomits, it is because she failed to catch a taxi. She was *late*. The theme pervades the movie. Otilia's boyfriend accuses her of arriving late to his mother's birthday party, Otilia claims to never be late (unless, that is, "something unexpected happens"), Otilia is always just barely missing buses and is late arriving back at the hotel after Gabita has aborted the fetus.

It is an ironic twist that Otilia has lied to her gym instructor twice in one month about having her period.

Likewise, there is constant suspicion aimed at Otilia. The ticket collector in the bus gives her an accusatory glance, the hotel clerks barrage her with questions, and Mr. Bebe accuses her of trying to swindle him.

Read with this in mind, the film seems more like a bad dream that Otilia is having about herself, with the pregnancy displaced onto Gabita.

"What if I am discovered to be pregnant?" she is asking herself, "What would happen?" There is a constant, ambient fear of being found out, of being heard, of being given away... Pregnancy here is the noise of the female condition.

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But for all the suspicion, Otilia is relatively honest. She does not whisper when she buys items on the black market. The lies she tells the hotel clerks are innocuous. She openly asks for an illegal favor from a stranger on the bus. Likewise, she asks Mr. Bebe to explain what the worst possible outcome of an abortion could be—she values the cold truth.

In contrast, Gabita's lying is what causes many of the problems in the movie. She tells Mr. Bebe that she and Otilia are sisters, she tells him that she is only three months pregnant (earlier she had claimed it was two), and there is even a question of whether she ever really made the hotel reservation for the abortion in the first place.

Here is how we might describe Otilia's relationship with sound: she is prepared to listen to the very worst of it.

There is a distinct *thud* when the bag containing the fetus hits the bottom of the garbage chute. According to the director, he and the sound engineer spent an entire evening in a stairwell trying out different ways to get the sound exactly right.

As grim a task as the disposal of the fetus is, it is easy to see that what has been driving Otilia through the film so far is also what drives her carry out Mr. Bebe's instructions so precisely—the desire to not lie to herself, but to hear the very worst, the most gruesome, the truth.

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It is perhaps no coincidence that Mr. Bebe (who commits harm) and Adi's family (who are in denial about this very harm) have the same thing to say about Otilia's decision to study Tech, "With Tech, they don't send you to the country." This is an understandable sentiment; people are starving out in the country. On the other hand, it betrays a certain prejudice that Otilia must be keenly aware of, having been raised in a rural town. After all, Adi's family calls Otilia's parents "simple people."

But perhaps there's more to it than that. Could it be that Otilia's upbringing among "simple" folk out against the boundaries of nature has given her a different attunement to the sonic world? She is something of a stranger to the city world—could she be an emissary from a more natural world, bringin with her a new clarity of listening?

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Mr. Bebe's relationship with sound fits his ethical position in the film. He claims repeatedly to have "nothing to hide." And yet he seems to have everything. We watch him bark at his elderly mother, and when she tries explain why she was sitting outside, he says, "I don't want to hear! Inside, now!" He follows that with a harsh reminder that she should never answer the phone while he's out.

Far from being an honest figure, Mr. Bebe is the embodiment of failure in communication. Nowhere is this more evident than when Mr. Bebe implies that he will be willing to take less money for the abortion if Otilia and Gabita have sex with him. In his words, they are coming to an "understanding." We might ask why, here in this hotel room where everything else has been said out loud, is Mr. Bebe unwilling to directly name this one condition.

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Notice in how many scenes we listen to people whom we don't see: several times in the hotel, in the bathroom, and especially at the dinner party. The camera is focused on something else, so we hear the sound and see the image separately. That is, we hear the sound with our ears and see the image with our eyes. Is this dangerous territory for a film, which is generally more accustomed to blurring these boundaries?

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By the time the movie gets to the hotel scene, we have become so sensitive to the world of sound that we are ready to hear anything, even the sharp pain of the probe. Of course, the probe makes no sound, except for silence—and that is what's so unnerving. Those events and spaces that we cannot hear typically have a soundtrack to cover them up. In this case, however, we are referred precisely to that impossible place of silence—a place where horrific fantasy must fill in the gaps. Without a soundtrack, we find our imaginations vulnerable to all those things that cannot be heard.

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We never see Gabita outdoors.

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There are three moments in the film that are arguably musical.

The first is in the dorm room full of girls buying cosmetics, where pop music plays softly on a radio. The second is during the party at Adi's house, where the guests sing a birthday song to his mother. The third is during the wedding at the end of the movie, where people are dancing on the ground floor of the hotel.

In all three cases, music is a tool of oppression. In the dorm room, the music joins the ranks of cosmetics and contraceptives strewn across the table. It is yet another device for maintaining appearances.

At the dinner party, one of the guests who has already been giving Otilia a hard time insists on her singing more loudly. Given that the dinner conversation has been between middle-aged doctors (all reasonably well-off under Ceausescu's Romania) discussing how the youth of today need to be taught more discipline, the song is a way of insisting on Otilia's obedience.

At the wedding, the music from the room next door is bleak-sounding (in spite of the fact that it's a pop song) and it fills the silences in conversation between Otilia and Gabita. The contrast is powerful—Gabita and Otilia find themselves confronted with the underbelly of marriage while party music plays in the background. We recall what Adi proposed to do if Otilia were to get pregnant—to marry her: marriage being the only acceptable solution to an unwanted pregnancy. Here the wedding music is a façade for this oppression.

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Gabita is clearly a woman; she is pregnant. In the opening of the film we also find her carrying out a woman's activity: waxing her legs. Between her and Otilia, Gabita is the traditionally pretty and feminine one. She is also soft-spoken, meek, and—at her most violent—shrill.

Otilia is different. Her beauty is more robust. She is street smart and occasionally argumentative. She raises her voice and expresses discontent. We see her visit the girls who sell cosmetics and contraception (this combination itself is interesting) where she momentarily toys with some rouge. But that is it all.

But we also believe that she, too, is pregnant.

Here, perhaps, we have the grounds for Otilia's intense interest in Gabita. She is looking for an answer to the divide between Gabita as a woman and Gabita as a "woman."

Her question might go something like this: "What does being pregnant mean for a woman? What is this thing that both I and Gabita, two very different women, have in common?"

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That the film has no score means that the many ambient sounds can rise to the surface. We hear them in all their ambiguity, and they are many: cables slapping on the bridge, the table cloth rustling, towels dragging along the floor, the contents of Otilia's purse spilling, the sharpening and snapping of Mr. Bebe's syringe, the click of his switchblade opening, the water faucet running...the list could go on for a long while.

Without a score and the traditional use of foley to simply accent the actions of the scene, our relationship to the sounds becomes complicated. We become agents of surveillance—pry to things that we were not meant to hear. We often find ourselves uncomfortably close to the sounds.

Consider the two scenes in which Otilia and Mr. Bebe first meet. From the other side of the street we watch her talk to Mr. Bebe through his car window. The conversation is quite audible, and far clearer than it would be if we were actually standing there. We are intruding into private space.

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That Otilia and Gabita share a deep bond is evident in several ways. Otilia is willing to do a series of difficult and painful things for Gabita. She occasionally reprimands Gabita for them, but she never refuses, claiming that Gabita would be willing to help her in a similar situation.

But the two also share less explicit connections: Gabita tells Mr. Bebe that they are sisters, at different points in the film they both relax by running the water in the bathroom, and they both sit on the arm of the same chair in the hotel lounge in separate scenes.

In fact, the end of the movie is heralded shortly after this moment—when this implicit bond between Otilia and Gabita is broken. Otilia has just returned from getting rid of the fetus and waits for a moment in the lounge outside the hotel room. She sits on the arm of a chair, exactly where Gabita had sat after Otilia agreed to let Mr. Bebe have sex with her.

When she finally knocks on the door, however, Gabita isn't there. Downstairs, Otilia finds Gabita in the hotel restaurant. Gabita explains why she left the room: "I was starving."

For a girl who has subsisted the entire movie on cigarette smoke, this seems like a strange time to get hungry.

Gabita asks if Otilia buried the fetus. Otilia responds: "You know what we're going to do? We're never going to talk about this, OK?"

Then the waiter arrives with some food, "Beef, pork fillet, liver, breaded brains, marrow..."

Otilia asks for just a bottle of water. Gabita takes the menu and begins to read it.

And here the film ends, with the secret communion of these friends broken. What had been a mutual engagement with femininity and the ability to give and take life has now been reduced to an issue of biology: liver, brains, marrow. That Gabita is now hungry means that she is in a different world than Otilia, and that all that Otilia's has

been through amounts to nothing deeper than a big favor, like any other favor. Gabita is more than willing not to talk about it.

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In the world of this film, there are kittens and there are dogs.

When Otilia sees the kittens in the dormitory, there is a clear maternal impulse. “I’ll get powdered milk for them,” she promises.

Outside, however, the world is run by dogs. As Otilia is walking to catch a bus, we notice a stray walking by—foreshadowing the constant barking that will haunt Otilia later when she searches for a place to get rid of the fetus.

Is this Otilia’s problem: how to kill a kitten without becoming an animal?

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The first thing we see in the film is a fishbowl.

“Was it like this when Marius gave it to you?” asks Otilia.

“They’re different fish,” says Gabita.

“The picture’s so strange!”

“You’ll ask Daniela to feed them when we’re away?”

“They’ll be fine without food for two days.”

Likewise, Otilia and Gabita are different fish in the fishbowl of the film. They endure the day without food. And in the hotel room where Gabita receives the abortion, Otilia notices a painting above the bed, “This painting’s really weird.”

The metaphor also extends Gabita’s pregnancy, which fuels the action of the film. Just as we are listening into the fishbowl world of Gabita and Otilia, Otilia is listening into the Gabita’s world—the world of “woman.”

At the very end of the film we move back out of the fishbowl. As we watch the two women sit in miserable silence at a table in the hotel restaurant, headlights appear on the screen. The music of the wedding dance fades out and we hear the sound of cars on the street. For just two hours we are privy to a secret world, and then we depart.