



# RMN

**Director:** Cristian Mungiu

**Country:** Romania

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A review by Michael Brooke for *Sight and Sound* magazine:

Writer-director Cristian Mungiu packs a lot into three letters. RMN is the internationally recognised abbreviation denoting Romania, and it also stands for *rezonanță magnetică nucleară* (in English, ‘nuclear magnetic resonance’ or NMR), a phenomenon in which nuclei in a magnetic field are disturbed by another magnetic field nearby, and respond by producing a resonant frequency directly proportional to the second magnetic field’s strength. NMR principles also underpin magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanners, one of which is pressed into service when the ailing town priest, Papa Otto (Andrei Finți) has his brain scanned; meanwhile, Mungiu is scanning the collective psychology of the small Transylvanian town of Recia.



Contrary to the impression given by the synopsis, this is no simplistic tract in which a monocultural and monoracial settlement perceives itself to be ‘tainted’ by outsiders and reacts accordingly. In fact, Recia (Récfalva in Hungarian) is outwardly a model of social diversity, comprising ethnic Romanians, Hungarians, Germans and Roma, their various conversations a thick linguistic stew. Subtitles are subtly colour-coded: white for Romanian, pale yellow for Hungarian, pale pink for other languages. This perhaps sounds gimmicky in outline, but in practice it’s unexpectedly useful, highlighting when a single phrase of one language is dropped into a speech dominated by another, which happens often.

One might have naively thought that adding Sri Lankans to this mix would make little difference, but there are already signs that Recia isn’t quite the rose-tinted utopia that Csilla (Judith State) and her boss Mrs Dénes (Orsolya Moldován) would like to suggest in their bakery’s application for EU funding, as well as in their appeal for immigrant guest-workers to compensate for the lack of local interest in the jobs they are offering. For starters, Matthias (Marin Grigore), who has been a guest-worker in a German slaughterhouse, has had to return home after assaulting his supervisor for calling him a “lazy Gypsy”. His uneasy attempt to re-establish relationships with his wife Ana (Macrina Bărlădeanu) and his former lover Csilla dominates the film’s first half; clearly, neither of them expected him to come back (“What are you doing here?” is Ana’s unenthusiastic substitute for a welcome).

Matthias then tries to build a rapport with his eight-year-old son Rudi (Mark Blenyesi), apparently struck mute after witnessing something horrifying in the nearby woods. But when Matthias teaches Rudi basic survival techniques (and gnomish catchphrases like “Those who feel pity die first; I want you to die last.”), is this a father passing hard-won knowledge down the generations, or is he preparing Rudi for an eruption that he thinks is inevitable? Or perhaps it is merely a knee-jerk counter to Ana teaching Rudi “sissy” stuff like knitting? The closest thing to a single protagonist in this sprawling, Altmanesque wide-screen canvas, Matthias is also the human embodiment of the various prejudices and contradictions regularly on display elsewhere.

The mountains, lakes and forests – at least one of these features is visible in practically every outdoor shot – contribute to a terrific sense of place. A similar attention to topographical and situational detail was an aspect of Mungiu’s *Beyond the Hills* (2012); the two films also share a fascination with ritual, visible in R.M.N. in the form of work processes in the abattoir and the bakery. This isn’t just a surface resemblance:

Recia and the hilltop Orthodox monastery in the earlier film are run according to similarly intricate, often unspoken social and cultural rules.

As in films such as *Occident* (2002), which also touched on racism and the lure of the West, and *Graduation* (2016), which also posited an intractably knotty dilemma, Mungiu is keen to air all sides of the argument. Yes, it's true that the Sri Lankans are doing jobs none of the locals wanted, but that's because the bakery was offering a deeply unattractive deal (minimum wage, minimal perks). As she pays more attention to her new employees, Csilla increasingly detaches herself from the rest of the town. She plays cello in a local ensemble, but is more frequently seen at home alone, trying to master Umebayashi Shigeru's 'Yumeji's Theme' (inevitably evoking memories of that music's repeated appearance in Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*, 2000 – another film about lives reluctantly steered by stifling societal pressure). And since Csilla's from the Hungarian minority, she inadvertently opens up fissures between Recia's long-established communities. (Although Recia is fictional, Mungiu was inspired by a similar incident that occurred in the Transylvanian village of Ditrău in January 2020.)

In *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007), Mungiu memorably staged a ghastly dinner-party scene in a single seven-minute shot, the camera staring fixedly at a woman forced to make meaningless small talk while desperately worried about a friend who's just undergone an illegal abortion. He ups the ante in *R.M.N.* with an unbroken 15-minute take in which all the townspeople's simmering resentments boil over in the form of angry xenophobic harangues aimed at Csilla, Mrs Dénes and Matthias, who sit awkwardly in the foreground soaking up every verbal blow. British viewers may be particularly attuned to the extreme scepticism about the European Union, regarded locally as a colonising force, like the Ottoman and Habsburg empires of centuries past; they also won't be blind to the irony of Romanians, so often demonised by populist politicians like Nigel Farage as epitomising undesirable immigration to the UK, behaving in exactly the same way when confronted by unwanted immigration situations of their own.



As ever, Mungiu tosses in unexpected grace notes, such as the French researcher, Ben (Victor Benderra), who is funded by the EU to assess Romania's bear population, something that attracts ridicule ("Why can't he count the bears in his own country?"). Ben is not only the film's token ambassador from the West, but part of a recurring ursine theme, from the possibility that Rudi has had a close encounter with a bear at the start (he's not saying), to the bear costumes sported by the locals during festivities, to what may or may not be the genuine article appearing as a climactic *deus ex machina*. Even the imitation bears are an abiding reminder of what humanity can reduce itself to when it collectively gives into baser impulses. *R.M.N.* is a deeply uncomfortable film, but that's no surprise with Mungiu: few current filmmakers can match his ability to stare into the abyss, and then deliver a disconcertingly eloquent report

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