



# Tales of the Golden Age

**Director:** Cristian Mungiu  
**Country:** Romania  
**Date:** 2009

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:

The new wave of Romanian cinema has become known internationally for a single, grim masterpiece: Cristian Mungiu's incomparably bleak *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, about a young woman's attempts to procure an abortion under the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Yet Romania's film-makers are also capable of the darkest comedy, as in Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr Lazarescu*, and a rich and tonally complex attitude to the wretchedness of the Ceaușescu police state. (British audiences have incidentally yet to experience Corneliu Porumboiu's truly strange, deadpan new satire *Police, Adjective* about a cop of that era refusing to collar an innocuous dope-smoker, a bizarre work whose exact flavour is almost impossible to define.)

Cristian Mungiu's new film is in a lighter and more commercial vein than his last feature, and arrives to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Nicolae and Elena's downfall. It's a portmanteau collection of cine-sketches about life under their hated regime – bulging with scorn, surrealism and gallows humour. Mungiu is the sole screenwriter, but he has partly sub-contracted the directing to a group of other film-makers: Ioana Uricaru, Hanno Höfer and Constantin Popescu. The stories are purportedly based on urban myths: rumours of the farcical absurdities that Romanians suffered under the communist rule.



It's comparable to Brecht's *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, yet the humour is drier, slyer. One story is about a village preparing frantically to Potemkinise their dismal community before the arrival of a party bigwig, but when an underling arrives to say that the visit is cancelled, everyone piles on to a fairground carousel swing in a mood of delirious relief. Too late, they realise they can't stop, because no one can reach the off button – they must just whirl on until the machine runs out of fuel 12 hours later: a great image for incompetence, insincerity and an eternity of desperation.

Elsewhere, an official photo retoucher has the job of making Ceaușescu look as tall and imposing as Giscard d'Estaing during that pre-Photoshop era. A couple of students, apparently inspired by a samizdat video of Bonnie and Clyde, embark on a confidence scam to part people from glass bottles, which can be sold for cash. In another tale, a truck driver played by Vlad Ivanov (the abortionist from *4 Months*) has the task of conveying chickens across country in food-strapped Romania, under strict orders not to stop. When he does, calamity strikes, and his story provides the serious centrepiece to the collection.

But easily the best mini-film concerns a middle-aged copper who, like the rest of Romanians, is starving hungry. When his brother-in-law gives him a live pig, he knows that if he slaughters it in the usual way, the animal's screams will alert his neighbours to his pork supply. So he prepares to gas the animal, a plan that relies terrifyingly on no one nearby striking a match. It's a tremendously tense farce, which reminded me pleasantly of Alan Bennett's *A Private Function*. The dark laughter involved is Romania's way of staying sane, not merely at the time but, also, in a way, right now. Comedy is a way of looking back at the horror without the rage and despair becoming unendurable.

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