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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

'A River's Gaze' Review: A House Becomes a Verdict

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Anyone who has driven through the Romanian south knows the feeling this film opens with. The village goes by the car window: a shack, a dog, a woman hanging washing, and you don't stop. You have somewhere to be. You file it away as scenery and keep driving, and your life goes on exactly as planned.

A River's Gaze is what happens if, for once, you stop the car.

Andreea Bortun's debut feature finds a mother and son trapped in a loop of longing, and turns the Romanian countryside into something closer to a verdict than a backdrop. The first faces in the film arrive out of focus. Parts of faces, really, a cheek, a jaw, a blur that takes its time resolving into a person. It is a strange way to open a film about recognition, and it is exactly right. Lavinia, a single mother, has come back to a poor village in southern Romania. We are told almost nothing about where she has been. The film will keep withholding like this for the next ninety minutes, not because it has nothing to say, but because it isn't here to brief us.

It's here to make us stay.

Her son Dani is thirteen, at the hinge between childhood and whatever comes after it, and he does not believe his mother's stories. She tries to pass off the anonymous tributary next door as a grand river, and promises to build him an extraordinary house. The foundation of that promise is an old shack, nothing like a palace. Dani smiles in a way that still looks sad. He has heard this before.

What's striking about Bortun's approach, and what separates A River's Gaze from the social-realist mode it could have easily collapsed into, is its refusal to choose a scale. The film sits between two registers at once: the dully practical question of whether a roof will hold, and a much more vertiginous one, about what it means to belong to a piece of land that has never belonged to you in any way the law would recognize. Early on, someone asks, almost idly, whether this is the place they were born. The question lands harder than it should. Origin, in this film, is not a fact. It's a claim everyone is making at once, on ground too poor to be worth claiming.

Bortun shot across four real seasons, and it shows in a way that no amount of production design could fake, not in pretty montage, but in the slow attrition of weather on a structure that was never going to be sound. Holes, rats, pigeons. The house will likely not stand. Lavinia keeps building anyway, the way she seems to have kept pushing through everything else in her life that the film declines to show us directly but lets us

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infer from the wreckage. Her cinematographer, Laurentiu Raducanu, her collaborator since her acclaimed 2021 short *When Night Meets Dawn*, favors a tight, almost airless frame, broken only occasionally by a wide shot of the land changing through the seasons.

The effect is a landscape held at arm's length, glimpsed rather than inhabited, which suits a story about people who have never been allowed to feel settled anywhere.

There's a recurring image of a car spinning in place, going nowhere, and it's as close as the film gets to announcing its own thesis. Time here doesn't move forward so much as circle. The ex-partner resurfaces. Old grievances refuse to dissolve. The same problems return wearing slightly different clothes. Bortun films this determinism, locked and mysterious at once, without sentimentality and without judgment, which is harder than it sounds when your subject is a mother whose love keeps curdling into damage before she can stop it.

Lavinia is the film's great achievement and its great risk. She is nurturing and reckless inside the same scene, sometimes inside the same breath, and Bortun never softens her into something more digestible. It would have been easier, certainly more commercial, to give us a mother we could fully forgive or fully condemn. Instead we get someone closer to the truth of it: a woman doing her best with almost nothing, whose best is sometimes indistinguishable from harm. The film trusts its audience to sit with that contradiction rather than resolve it for us.

A film this withholding asks something of its audience that not every viewer will want to give, but it's a fair ask. Bortun spent years immersed in the communities she's depicting, and that immersion never curdles into ethnography. There is no anthropological distance here, no sense of a camera observing from outside the glass. What remains is something rarer: a film that feels less like a record of a place than an argument for actually looking at it.

We've all driven past a village like this one. *A River's Gaze* asks you to park the car, get out, and stay long enough for the blur to resolve into a face you recognize.

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