

# WHAT IS SAID BETWEEN THE LINES: ADAPTING

## *SPOVEDANIE LA TANACU INTO BEYOND THE HILLS*

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**Резюме:** Настоящото изследване разглежда адаптацията на журналистическия роман на Татяна Никулеску Бран *Spovedanie la Tanacu* (2006) във филма на Кристиан Мунджиу *Beyond the Hills* (2012), като се фокусира върху ролята на подтекста и тишината при пренасянето на смисъл между различни медии. Целта на статията е да анализира как наративни елементи, които са експлицитно формулирани в литературния текст, се трансформират във визуален и звуков подтекст в киноадаптацията, като акцентът е върху моралната амбивалентност, етическата сложност и емоционалното напрежение. Чрез сравнителен анализ на литературни и кинематографични стратегии се аргументира, че силата на адаптацията се корени преди всичко в имплицитното, а не в директно изразеното. Изследването има принос към изследванията на адаптацията, като подчертава естетическите и наративните функции на тишината като специфично медиен механизъм за интерпретация.

**Ключови думи:** литературна адаптация; подтекст; тишина; интермедиялна трансформация; интерпретация

**Abstract:** This study examines the adaptation of Tatiana Niculescu Bran's journalistic novel *Spovedanie la Tanacu* (2006) into Cristian Mungiu's film *Beyond the Hills* (2012), focusing on the role of subtext and silence in the transfer of meaning across media. The article aims to analyze how narrative elements that are explicitly articulated in the literary text are transformed into visual and auditory subtext in the cinematic work, with particular emphasis on ethical ambiguity, moral complexity, and emotional tension. Through a comparative analysis of literary and cinematic strategies, the study argues that the expressive power of adaptation resides primarily in what is implied rather than overtly stated. By foregrounding silence, glances, and restrained gestures, the film extends narrative meaning beyond textual exposition. This approach contributes to adaptation studies by highlighting the aesthetic and narrative functions of silence as a medium-specific strategy of interpretation and meaning-making.

**Keywords:** literary adaptation; subtext; silence; intermedial transposition; interpretation.

## Introduction

Adaptation from novel to film involves more than the transfer of narrative content; it is a process of intermedial reinterpretation in which meaning is redistributed across the specific expressive resources of different media. Adaptation should not be viewed as a secondary or subordinate form of storytelling, but rather as a deliberate process of reinterpretation and re-creation across media (Hutcheon 2006). Adaptation may be understood as an interpretive and creative process through which meaning is reconfigured in accordance with the specific expressive capacities of each medium. Rather than functioning as a subordinate reproduction of its source, the adapted work establishes a dialogic relationship with the original text while asserting its own aesthetic autonomy (Hutcheon 2006: 70–75).

Recent scholarship in adaptation studies has further emphasized the interpretive dimension of adaptation, which is a process of transformation rather than reproduction. As Thomas Leitch notes, contemporary adaptation theory increasingly focuses on the ways in which adaptations reinterpret narrative structures and thematic concerns through the specific expressive resources of different media (Leitch 2017). In this perspective, the relationship between source text and film adaptation should not be understood in terms of fidelity alone, but rather as a dynamic process of reconfiguration in which narrative meaning is redistributed across visual, auditory, and performative elements. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant in the case of *Beyond the Hills*, where the cinematic language transforms the explicit narrative structure of the journalistic novel into a system of visual suggestion and interpretive silence.

In both written and visual arts, meaning is generated not only by what is explicitly stated, but also by what remains implied, suggested, or silent. This dimension of subtext—what is communicated “between the lines” of a text or within the interstices of cinematic form—is central to the audience’s interpretation and emotional engagement.

The role of silence as an expressive device is also foregrounded in aesthetic theory. Silence in modern artistic practices may be understood not as an absence of meaning, but as an expressive strategy that actively shapes perception and creates a reflective space for interpretation (Sontag 1969).

The adaptation of Tatiana Niculescu Bran’s journalistic novel *Spovedanie la Tanacu* (2006) into Cristian Mungiu’s film *Beyond the Hills* (2012) exemplifies how subtext and silence operate across media. While the novel constructs a documented account of the real-life “Tanacu exorcism”, foregrounding explicit narrative detail, the film reframes these elements through a visual economy where meaning is often generated through glances, pauses, and the

## WHAT IS SAID BETWEEN THE LINES...

absence of spoken explanation. In doing so, the film invites the viewer to grapple with moral ambiguity and emotional nuance precisely in those spaces where traditional narrative exposition is withheld, illustrating the power of what is said—yet unsaid—between the lines and frames.

### **Subtext in Literature**

In literary studies, subtext refers to the layer of meaning that lies beneath the explicit narrative, guiding readers to understand emotions, motivations, and ethical dilemmas that are not directly articulated (Brooks 1984: 12). In *Spovedanie la Tanacu* (2006), Tatiana Niculescu Bran employs journalistic rigor to reconstruct the events surrounding the infamous “Tanacu exorcism”, using interviews, court documents, and eyewitness testimonies to establish a factual narrative (Niculescu Bran 2006: 45–60). However, beneath the surface of the meticulous reporting, the novel generates a rich subtextual dimension, where questions of responsibility, morality, manipulation, and faith emerge implicitly, compelling the reader to engage critically with the material.

One prominent aspect of subtext in the novel is the question of responsibility. While the narrative recounts the roles of priests, nuns, and medical personnel in the exorcism episode, it deliberately refrains from offering a clear judgment (Niculescu Bran 2006: 78–90). By presenting multiple perspectives and documenting procedural details without authorial commentary, Niculescu Bran allows readers to infer moral and ethical responsibility themselves, creating a tension that resonates beyond the surface facts. This implicit questioning encourages readers to consider broader societal and institutional culpability, rather than relying solely on explicit statements.

Morality constitutes another important dimension of subtext in the novel. Through her account of acts that appear simultaneously devout and violent, Niculescu Bran constructs a morally ambiguous narrative framework that challenges conventional ethical categories (Niculescu Bran 2006: 58–62). Rather than prescribing a moral stance, the narrative places the reader in a position of reflection: how should faith intersect with human agency? What ethical boundaries are crossed in the name of spiritual devotion? These questions are rarely stated outright, but they shape the emotional and cognitive engagement of the audience.

Manipulation is also conveyed through subtext. Characters’ actions are often presented alongside contextual evidence that hints at psychological pressure, coercion, or influence exerted by authority figures (Niculescu Bran 2006: 112–130). Niculescu Bran employs this technique to suggest a dynamic of control and submission without labeling these explicitly,

leaving interpretation open to the reader. Similarly, faith—both personal and institutional—is a recurring subtextual concern. While the novel reports prayers, rituals, and spiritual experiences as factual occurrences, it invites the reader to consider the complex interplay between belief and doubt, obedience and autonomy, which is never directly spelled out.

The difference between explicit and implicit meaning in the novel is crucial to understanding its narrative strategy. Explicitly, the book documents events, actions, and statements, providing factual accuracy and credibility. Implicitly, the text creates an interpretive space where readers are invited to grapple with ethical ambiguity, emotional complexity, and social critique (Chatman 1978: 34–36). In this way, the novel exemplifies how literature communicates between the lines, producing a layer of meaning that transcends the literal content and anticipates the challenges of cinematic adaptation, where such subtleties must be expressed visually or through silence.

### **Silence and Subtext in Film**

Silence, being a communicative device in art, literature, and cinema, carries a unique expressive power, often conveying emotional, moral, or psychological nuances that cannot be adequately expressed through words (Sontag 1969: 119). Silence is not an absence but a form of presence, allowing the viewer or reader to engage actively with a work and to interpret meaning beyond overt narrative or description (Sontag 1969: 120–121). Silence in artistic expression functions as a space of reflection, where ambiguity, tension, and ethical complexity can emerge without explicit exposition.

In literature, silence often manifests through ellipsis, narrative gaps, or understated description, prompting readers to infer character motivations, moral dilemmas, or emotional states (Brooks 1984: 45–47). In cinema, these literary mechanisms translate into visual and auditory techniques: pauses in dialogue, extended takes, restrained gestures, and careful framing can all communicate what is left unsaid. Roland Barthes’s theory of semiotics emphasizes that meaning in narrative is not fully contained within explicit signs, but also in connotative and suggested layers—the “between the lines” elements that require active interpretation (Barthes 1977: 85–88).

Cristian Mungiu’s *Beyond the Hills* (2012) exemplifies the cinematic deployment of silence and subtext. Unlike the novel *Spovedanie la Tanacu*, which relies on detailed journalistic reporting to convey facts, Mungiu’s adaptation uses glances, gestures, and pauses to communicate the emotional and ethical stakes of the story. A key example occurs in scenes between the protagonists, Alina and Voichița, where dialogue is minimal or entirely absent, yet

## WHAT IS SAID BETWEEN THE LINES...

the complexities of friendship, love, and spiritual tension are vividly expressed through eye contact, bodily positioning, and physical restraint. These moments allow the audience to perceive subtle psychological and moral dynamics that the book narrates explicitly, transforming explicit information into visual subtext.

A particularly revealing example occurs in the early encounter between Alina and Voichița shortly after Alina's arrival. The scene unfolds in a restrained visual composition, where the camera remains largely static and the dialogue is minimal. Rather than relying on verbal explanation, Mungiu constructs meaning through framing and spatial distance between the characters. The medium shots emphasize hesitation and emotional tension, while pauses in dialogue allow gestures and glances to convey the unresolved emotional history between the two women (Mungiu 2012, approx. 00:04:00). The absence of expressive musical cues further intensifies the austerity of the scene, encouraging the viewer to interpret the emotional subtext through visual observation rather than narrative exposition.

Mungiu also employs silence to heighten narrative tension. Extended, quiet sequences—such as the moments before or during the exorcism—create a sense of anticipation and unease, making the viewer interpret events without verbal guidance. The absence of explanatory dialogue mirrors the ethical ambiguity and unresolved moral questions present in Niculescu Bran's novel, but in the film these meanings are constructed through specifically cinematic devices, such as lighting, sound design, spatial arrangement, and camera movement. In this respect, Chatman's discussion of the formal means through which narrative is communicated in film helps explain how *Beyond the Hills* shifts emphasis from verbal exposition to visual and auditory suggestion (Chatman 1978: 201–203). By doing so, the film converts explicit factual information from the book into atmosphere, suggestion, and psychological tension, demonstrating the power of silence as a conduit for subtextual meaning.

Another significant instance of cinematic subtext can be observed in the sequences leading up to the exorcism itself. The film employs extended long takes and restrained camera movement, creating a sense of temporal realism that gradually builds psychological tension. Lighting remains deliberately naturalistic, reinforcing the austere environment of the monastery and avoiding any dramatic visual emphasis that might guide the viewer toward a single moral interpretation. In the scene where Alina is restrained, the camera observes the action from a distance, maintaining a detached perspective that compels the audience to confront the unfolding events without editorial commentary (Mungiu 2012, 01:48:10). This stylistic choice reflects the film's broader strategy of transforming narrative explanation into visual ambiguity and ethical tension.

Moreover, the use of silence and visual economy allows *Beyond the Hills* to explore themes such as faith, authority, and manipulation with a subtlety that words alone could not achieve on screen. Where the novel details institutional structures and procedural events, the film presents ethical dilemmas and spiritual confinement through mood, pacing, and restrained acting, inviting viewers to infer motives, intentions, and moral consequences.

An additional cinematic strategy through which subtext is constructed in *Beyond the Hills* involves spatial composition within the monastery environment. Mungiu frequently frames characters in collective interiors that emphasize discipline and hierarchy. In the communal dining scene, the camera remains static while the nuns sit in a rigid spatial arrangement around the table, visually reinforcing the strict order of monastic life. Alina's position within the frame subtly marks her as an outsider to this regulated space (Mungiu 2012, approx. 00:55). Through this restrained composition, spatial organization itself communicates the tension between individual identity and institutional authority. In this way, the architecture of the frame visually externalizes the growing emotional and ideological distance between the characters. Rather than articulating this conflict through dialogue, the film allows the viewer to perceive it through the organization of cinematic space.

The result is a cinematic subtext that parallels the literary subtext: the story is told not merely through events, but through what is left unsaid, visually suggested, and emotionally felt.

In this way, Mungiu's film illustrates the transposition of literary subtext into cinematic language. Silence functions not as emptiness, but as a strategic tool for moral and emotional engagement, demonstrating that the unsaid—what is conveyed between glances, gestures, and pauses—can be as communicatively potent as spoken dialogue.

### **Comparing the Novel and the Film**

The adaptation of *Spovedanie la Tanacu* into *Beyond the Hills* illustrates the shift from explicit narration to cinematic subtext, revealing how the same story can operate differently across media. In Niculescu Bran's novel, events, testimonies, and institutional details are presented explicitly, ensuring that readers are fully informed about the social, ecclesiastical, and procedural contexts of the Tanacu exorcism (Niculescu Bran 2006: 45–90). For example, the novel meticulously documents the roles of priests, nuns, and medical personnel, as well as the chronological progression of events, leaving little ambiguity regarding factual circumstances (Niculescu Bran 2006: 112–140).

## WHAT IS SAID BETWEEN THE LINES...

The contrast between literary exposition and cinematic suggestion becomes particularly evident in the film's closing sequence. As the authorities arrive and the protagonists are taken away, Mungiu avoids dramatic emphasis and instead relies on distant framing and prolonged silence. The camera maintains a detached observational position, allowing the viewer to contemplate the consequences of the events without explicit narrative closure (Mungiu 2012, approx. 02:20:30). In contrast to the novel's detailed documentation of the legal and social aftermath, the film leaves the ethical implications unresolved, reinforcing the interpretive role of the spectator and demonstrating how cinematic language can replace explanatory discourse with visual reflection.

More broadly, Mungiu's film transforms much of this explicit information into subtext, conveyed through visual storytelling, silence, and gesture. Scenes that in the novel are described with detailed exposition are condensed into long, quiet takes, emphasizing spatial relationships, facial expressions, and bodily comportment rather than spoken explanation. The consequences of actions, such as moral or spiritual failures, are implied rather than narrated. By doing so, the film transfers a greater share of interpretation to the viewer, who must infer ethical and emotional meanings from what remains unspoken and visually suggested. This observation can be related to Chatman's distinction between story and discourse, which is useful for understanding how film reorganizes narrative information through its own formal resources (Chatman 1978: 201–205).

This contrast between explicitness and subtext has a profound effect on audience engagement. In literature, the reader receives direct information: the novel informs by providing facts, context, and commentary, shaping a clear understanding of events and motivations (Brooks 1984: 50–55). Conversely, the film provokes reflection: it relies on silence, pauses, and visual cues to stimulate contemplation, compelling viewers to confront the moral ambiguity of characters' choices and the consequences of their actions without being guided toward a definitive judgment.

Sound design also plays an essential role in transforming literary exposition into cinematic subtext. Unlike many dramatic films that employ non-diegetic music to guide emotional interpretation, *Beyond the Hills* relies predominantly on ambient sound and prolonged silence. The sparse acoustic environment—composed of footsteps, distant voices, or the sound of wind—creates a heightened sense of realism and psychological tension (Mungiu 2012, aprox. 01:12:20). This restrained soundscape reinforces the film's aesthetic of austerity, encouraging viewers to interpret the characters' emotional states through visual observation rather than through explicit narrative cues. In contrast to the explanatory tone of

the journalistic narrative in the novel, the film's sound design amplifies ambiguity and interpretive openness.

The interplay of subtext and silence in the film also enhances moral and psychological complexity. Whereas the novel can explicitly articulate conflict or ethical dilemmas, Mungiu's cinematic techniques create a space of ambiguity that foregrounds the tension between spiritual conviction, institutional authority, and personal agency. Sontag's reflections on silence are useful here because they help conceptualize silence as an expressive strategy that opens a reflective space for interpretation rather than functioning as simple absence (Sontag 1969: 119–121). For instance, the ambiguous ending—presented through a cold, detached lens—refuses to resolve questions of culpability or redemption, forcing the viewer to interpret the ethical implications of the story in a personal, reflective manner.

In sum, the comparison reveals that adaptation is not mere transposition, but a transformation of narrative strategies to suit the expressive strengths of each medium. The novel's explicit exposition informs the reader with clarity and offers factual detail, while the film's subtextual and silent techniques engage the viewer emotionally and morally, demonstrating how silence and suggestion can communicate what is said between the lines even more powerfully than explicit narration. This dynamic interplay underscores the central thesis of adaptation studies: each medium conveys meaning differently, exploiting its unique capacities to generate understanding, affect, and ethical reflection (Hutcheon 2006: 20–25).

### **Conclusion**

The adaptation of Tatiana Niculescu Bran's *Spovedanie la Tanacu* into Cristian Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills* exemplifies the transformative potential of cinematic adaptation. As this analysis has shown, the process of adaptation is not simply a matter of translating events from page to screen, but rather a creative reinterpretation that exploits the expressive capabilities of each medium (Hutcheon 2006: 20–25). In the novel, meaning is largely conveyed through explicit narrative, detailed documentation, and authorial commentary, providing readers with clarity and factual understanding of the Tanacu exorcism (Bran Niculescu 2006: 45–90).

In contrast, the film emphasizes subtext and silence as primary vehicles for meaning. By employing glances, pauses, gestures, and extended quiet sequences, Mungiu conveys complex moral, emotional, and spiritual tensions without relying on direct verbal exposition. The cinematic economy of silence invites active viewer engagement, as ethical ambiguities, interpersonal dynamics, and spiritual dilemmas are communicated less through explanation

## WHAT IS SAID BETWEEN THE LINES...

than through visual and auditory form. In this respect, Chatman's discussion of the difference between narrative content and the formal means of its presentation is useful for understanding how the film reconfigures the subtextual richness of the literary source through specifically cinematic devices (Chatman 1978: 201–205).

This comparative study highlights the distinction between what remains explicit in the novel and what becomes subtext in the film. The novel informs; the film provokes reflection. Where Niculescu Bran's meticulous reporting provides facts and social context, Mungiu's visual and auditory storytelling invites viewers to inhabit the unspoken ethical and emotional spaces of the narrative. Silence and suggestion create a tension that is central to the film's impact, underscoring the power of implication in cinematic storytelling. In broader narratological terms, Brooks's work is relevant here insofar as it emphasizes the role of underlying structures of meaning and readerly interpretation beyond the explicit surface of the text (Brooks 1984: 50–55).

Furthermore, the adaptation demonstrates that subtext and silence are not merely stylistic choices, but essential mechanisms for moral and psychological engagement. The unresolved ethical questions, the ambiguous ending, and the restrained performances collectively encourage a reflective reception, compelling the viewer to confront complexity rather than accept prescriptive judgment. Sontag's discussion of silence is relevant here because it frames silence not as absence, but as a meaningful expressive strategy that opens a space for interpretation (Sontag 1969: 119–121). This underscores a fundamental principle of adaptation studies: each medium has its own strengths, and meaning is shaped not solely by narrative content, but by the techniques through which the story is communicated (Hutcheon 2006: 25–30).

In conclusion, the journey from *Spovedanie la Tanacu* to *Beyond the Hills* illustrates the liberty and responsibility inherent in adaptation. Rather than replicating the book, the film reimagines its subtextual core through cinematic form, using silence, visual suggestion, and ethical ambiguity to engage the audience beyond the level of direct verbal articulation. The present analysis therefore indicates that what remains unsaid, implied, or visually observed may be as narratively and morally significant as what is explicitly stated. In this respect, Barthes' semiotic understanding of connotation offers a useful framework for thinking about how meaning is generated through implication and formal arrangement, rather than through explicit statement alone (Barthes 1977: 85–88).

The analysis of specific cinematic strategies—such as framing, spatial composition, restrained sound design, and extended long takes—demonstrates how the film redistributes

narrative meaning through visual and auditory mechanisms that replace the explanatory discourse of the literary source. In this sense, *Beyond the Hills* illustrates how adaptation functions not merely as narrative transfer, but as a process of semiotic transformation in which silence, image, and cinematic space become central instruments of interpretation.

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