

## AN INVITATION TO THE 2023 ARCS FILM FESTIVAL

Thoughtful storytelling through film sheds light on the intricacies of different cultures.

*Oameni de treabă (Men of Deeds)* is one of the most recent (2022) Romanian productions that succeeds in immersing both cultural insiders and the non-Romanian spectators in a moral tale about good, evil, laws and choices.

Let us uncover together the deeper layers of meaning among the movie's masterful, functional mix of tongue-in-cheek references. As an ARCS instructor of language and civilization and movie lover, I am happy to help decode some Romanian culture clues.

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Life is non-dualistic. On its outermost level, "Oameni de treabă" is indeed a story about moral ambiguity. The title itself reads as an antiphrasis: in a culture where what is "right" depends on whom you're dealing with, beware of the good men who "get the job done". Choosing one's perspective and one's battles seems to be the preferred mechanism of survival. When both the societal and religious authority embrace selective enforcement of the law, justice and integrity are low priorities. The local cop, Ilie, is the obvious example: choices are forced upon him by those higher in command: the mayor and his appointed prosecutor.



**"Our view is less rigid, we don't see the world as good or evil. What matters is to get the job done, not to worship the principles."**

However, there's more than meets the eye. The lense of cross-cultural dimensions alone may leave us with blind spots. Recognizing religious references, superstitions, myth, and legends helps decode layers of the ineffable Romanian soul.

To better grasp the character's view of life, death and moral choices, let's explore the masterful script, soundtrack and cinematography for some...

### Unmissable clues in decoding Romanian civilization

Even the most trivial conversations or cursing are thick with references to the "hereafter", sin, or some form of irrational forces. Characters obey orders from "above" (hierarchy) and from "beyond" (spiritual).

### The ballad. A Romanian soundtrack

The opening credits run over the cinematic wide-shot of the deceptively peaceful landscape where the local cop contemplates the hills and his chances to own a tiny bit of an orchard. No Enio Moricone music for the Wild East. Instead, the car radio plays a well-known melancholy song by Doru Stanculescu, a popular bard who contributed to shaping a few generations' taste for Romanian spirit since Cenaclul Flacara in the '80s:

*"N-a sti nimeni ca m-am dus,/Numa' m-or vedea ca nu-s  
/Sus e cerul, larga-i lumea,/ Bine c-a-nfrunzit padurea"  
When I pass/ No one would know that I left/ They will  
only see that I'm gone"*

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## MEN OF DEEDS

### The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of the Wild East

#### Râsu' plânsu' Laughing Your Way through Sin and Sorrow

Romanian humor is often tragicomic. We, Romanians, tend to be comfortable with ambiguities and contradictions, we're fine with irony, especially when this allows us to not take ourselves too seriously.

#### The Plot

Complex without being pedantic, director Paul Negoescu's storytelling can be seen as a *parody of a whodunit mystery set in the "Wild East"*. Dialogues rely heavily on innuendos and context: because of the villagers' collectivistic mentality, rules do not need spelling out. In this high power distance culture, everyone knows who is higher up in the food chain...Until one flies over the chicken coop.

Literally! Like the single chicken who falls off the truck that takes them all to the slaughterhouse (watch the opening seconds), one odd bird might just end up on the other side of the coop.

Characters are sketched in rapid strokes, like those in Romanian jokes ("bancuri") or in Tarantino's bars: enter the policeman, the mayor, the priest, the doctor. There will be a Deadman, a widow, and another cop. Some peasants, some chicken, some thugs -all seemingly brainwashed into induced feelings of helplessness and fatalism: one's fate seems to depend on staying "at their place" in the community.

#### The Poster

**"Once Upon a Time in the Wild East"**: When "the Good, the Bad and the Ugly" story takes place in Eastern Europe, who's the real "sheriff" in town?

First nod to a spaghetti Western' triangle of power, we're immediately drawn into the conflict: two cops with two different approaches to restoring justice, "photobombed" by a weasel-faced guy in a sunhat "lurking" in the background.

On one side, the "local sheriff", Ilie, holding up a chicken as a weapon. Middle-aged, divorced Ilie is the only policeman in this small village in the northern part of Moldavia, Romania. A passive aggressive slacker who wears his uniform like a joke, and does not bother with petty crime, Ilie seems to spend his 10th year on the job taking hints from the local mayor's clique and keeping his head down. His only dream is to use his meager divorce money to become the owner of a tiny orchard.

Opposite to the rural justiciar, the academy fresh rookie Vali, is holding a conventional weapon. A city boy with a handsome untanned face and a good haircut, Vali still believes that laws are universal. He naively brings into the office his plastic action figures.

First symbolic stab to the heart for the cultural insider. The spectator may recognize the “archetype”: the contemplative man on a hill and the music in reference to the Ballad of Miorita – the defining Romanian myth about serene acceptance of life/death.

#### The mythical clue:

**Ilie, blajinul (the Gentle, the well-minding)**

Somewhere mid-story, Ilie tells the legend of the **Gentles (Blajinii)- creatures who live on the other side of the world.** “



**“Whatever they (Blajinii) do, it turns out for the best” [...] “How is it down there /in their world/? It’s beautiful! With hills and orchards. ...[One] can’t go there. Only water can go. Only water can flow to the other side of the world, I reckon.”**

In the final scene, Ilie, with a hatchet between his shoulders, will smile at himself in the mirroring **surface of the water**. Not in a narcissistic way, but in răsul’ plânsu’ recognition of how he sees himself: “Better than I expected” (**Mai bine decât mă așteptam**). He is joining Blajinii “on the other side of the water”.



*According to Romanian folk legends, the Blajini took part in a confrontation that shook the foundations of the earth shortly after the creation of the world, a clash between good and evil that sealed the fate of mankind. At some point, a deadly flood threatened the earth, and salvation came from the blajini who supported it with stone pillars and repaired the damages caused by the floods. They also help humans pass “customs” after death.*

#### Indirect, highly contextual communication:

Murder or crime will never be clearly named in the movie. Instead of explicitly asking Ilie to cover murders, Nea Costica the Mayor deplores a recent flood as the supreme punishment for the corrupted human mind, threatening their established (abusive) ways: “This flood took our minds away. If only it had been Holy Water to wash away our sins.” Yet, we cannot dismiss the Mayor as completely evil, ruthless hypocritical, because we’ve seen him privately banging his head against the walls, in remorse and despair (“se dă cu capul de toți pereții”).

Symbolically, the bribe in exchange for the cops’ shallow investigation of a murder is an orchard. Ilie recognizes an opportunity in this crisis: he will not stir the established “ways” and he will make sure his young colleague knows “his place” and follows “the rules”. He senses that in yearning for his corner of paradise (orchard), he needs to cut a deal with the Devil.

On a practical level, multiple people claim a right of property over this orchard: we see Ilie aggressively chasing the alleged “owners” who now must pack up during the night and leave like thieves. We guess that the mayor offered to Ilie this orchard that was not his to give by terrorizing the family who lives there since the wife’s father was sent by Communists to plant it.

A principle reinforced by terror by the Communist regime, “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” still rules in the self-proclaimed collectivistic community where the mayor’s clique rules through a system of favors.



Lacking the charisma and the nobility of a true, protective, Godfather, the weasel faced mayor will eventually show his true colors: under the propaganda of community-oriented values, the mayor’s clique are ruthless manipulators focused on power and property.

Alas, when the good guys and the bad guys are the same, the dust settles on the rulebook. An action guy, oblivious to unspoken rules, Vali risks upsetting “the order of things”.

#### The Stakes

#### Can chicken grow a conscience? The limits of uncertainty avoidance

While we watch the story of a murder that should be left uninvestigated, we question Ilie’s and the entire community’s acceptance of certain behaviors. Ilie’s willingness to ignore evil for the “greater good” exemplifies moral ambiguity: interdependence and the exchange of favors being normal, how far can hypocritical leaders manipulate the community while pursuing selfish ambition?

Ilie’s story seems to be a distorted version of the serenity prayer: he accepts the things he cannot change (corruption), he lost the courage to change the things he can and drinks himself “blind” into the wisdom to know the difference. In fact, he turns out to be a gentle bully: his aggressiveness hides his anxiety regarding his future, which he associates to ownership and closeness to nature (buying an orchard). For the most part, his demeanor and words might ooze cynicism and pessimism, yet deep down his moral code feels almost chivalresque: protect the young and the women, etc.

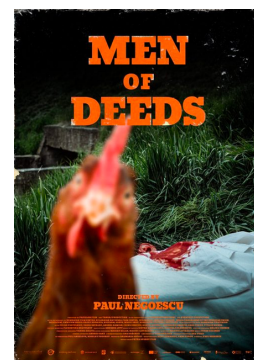
Ilie’s thick indifference sounds hilarious in mundane situations: When Vali first sees the orchard Ilie dreams to buy, he is taken aback by trash. The cop’s response could make our western sensibilities cringe: “Trash? Which trash? If trash bothers you, look at the trees...If you find garbage disturbing, you should pick it up. It’s easy to complain!”

#### The ethical dilemma: To be or to have?

On Ilie’s spectrum of Good/Evil, stealing (an orchard), a crime of passion or even an alcohol-related assault may still be acceptable. Until evil strikes those for whom Ilie feels responsible. Rather than a single breaking point, the story takes us inside Ilie’s contradictory mindset, culminating in his acceptance of duty and his mission to bring some justice. Ilie putting on his lawman hat and his cowboy walk take us back again to old Western movies, now with a Moldavian twist.

**“Some things are better left as they are [...] And everybody gets what they deserve. [...] There’s cow shit on all roads, but you don’t scoop it up and show it to the people”**

 [Click here for trailer](#)



“Oameni de Treabă” isn’t just a random assortment of cultural references; it’s a meticulously crafted tapestry that seamlessly integrates several layers of meaning into a functional and compelling narrative. As we dissect the characters’ choices and cultural references, we gain a deeper understanding of our own cultural dimensions.

*A personal note:*

*This movie made me want to become a cultural informant, to voice what it is not said and will not be translated. Some cultural clues only make sense for natives who share some collective, generational stories, songs, political innuendos. But, above, all, the experience made me embrace my inner Romanian with love, cu drag.*

*I am also particularly grateful to have seen it outdoors, on a balmy early summer night. The linden and laburnum trees in bloom made it a wild 4D experience. The maddening scents could explain why someone is willing to trade his soul for an orchard.*

*Sunteți invitați cu drag,  
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