

Entertainment

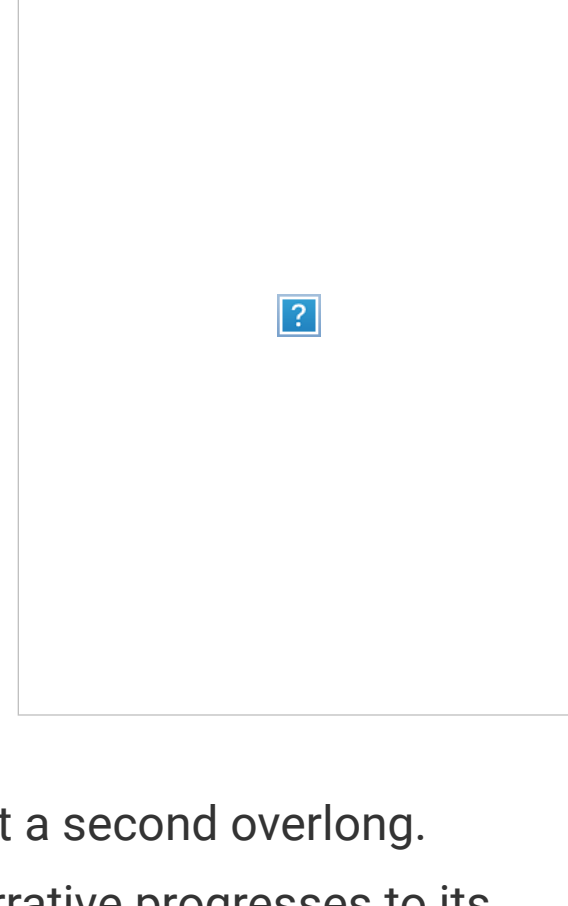
MIFF 2012: A heady, spellbinding experience awaits just ‘Beyond the Hills’

*Beyond the Hills (Dupa dealuri)*

Directed by Cristian Mungiu

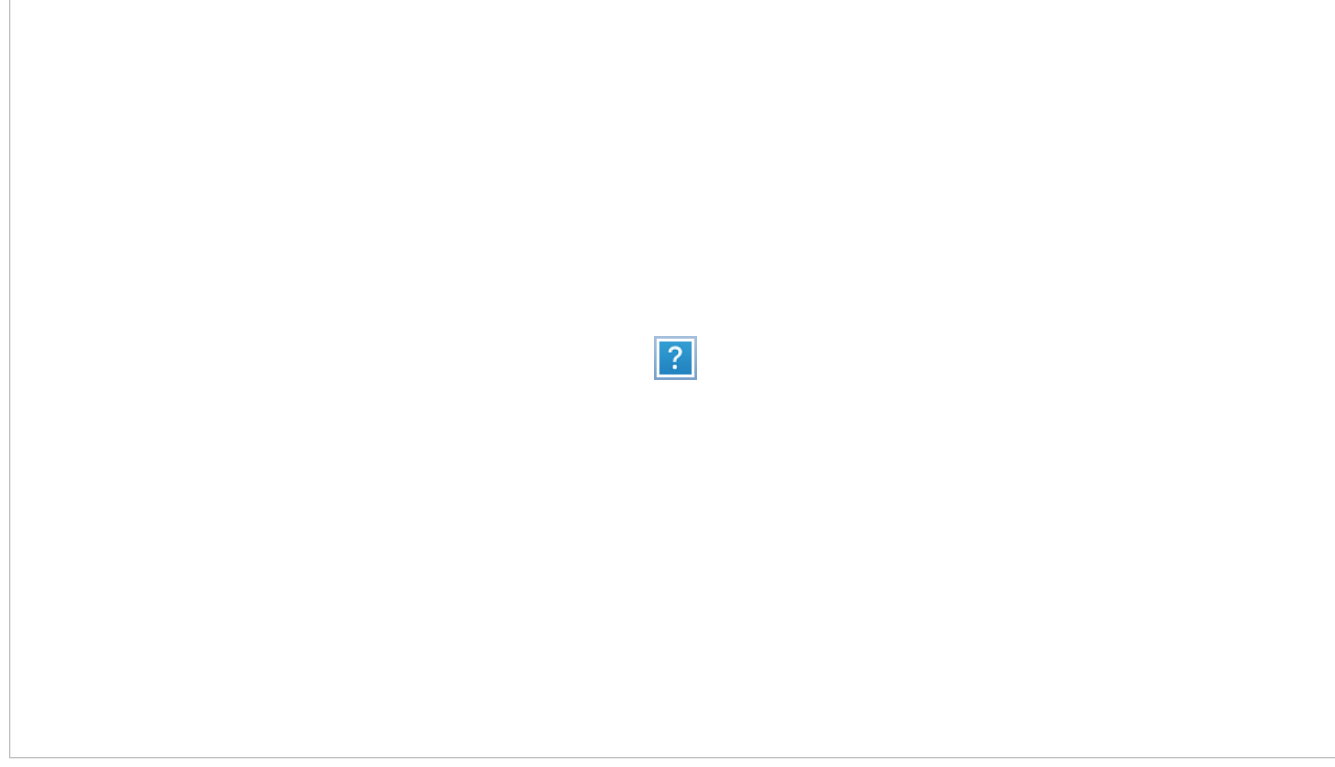
Written by Cristian Mungiu (inspired by the non-fiction novels of Tatiana Niculescu Bran)

2012, Romania



At 150 minutes, Cristian Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills* is not a second overlong. Extended as its takes may be and as patiently as the narrative progresses to its drained conclusion, there is a heaving sense of urgency to this story of a young woman who was failed by pretty much everyone – including herself – and died because of it. It is a true story in fact, fashioned by Mungiu, with the assistance of Niculescu Bran whose non-fiction novels he drew much inspiration from, into a fine screenplay that contains more religious and anti-religious rhetoric than a movie that ultimately feels this morally cagey has any right to. This might partly be due to the way the director shoots his actors and the way the actors speak his lines, without any undue emphasis or thematic/emotional spotlighting. The naturalism at work here is a masterclass, particularly impressive considering the two co-leads are straight-up non-professionals, who we all know can be at risk of either overacting or underacting, at least more so than those more seasoned.

Alina and Voichita grew up together as girls in a Romanian orphanage and became very close, until Alina was moved to a foster whom which she eventually left for Germany. *Beyond the Hills* opens with Alina returning to her hometown to visit her old friend, now a sister at a local orthodox monastery beyond some hills. From the outset, it is clear that these two young women had and still have something deep; how deep exactly, though, is never made explicitly clear. Was the relationship Alina and Voichita had ever sexual, or is Alina simply beside herself with joy? When they embrace at the train station where Alina has just alighted, Voichita, dressed in her black nun's gear, implores her friend not to hug so tightly and for so long lest people being to stare. Either way, Alina makes no secret of her desire to abscond with Voichita so they can be together and work as waitresses on a boat, or something to that effect. Voichita, however, has other plans for herself, ones involving a life of devout service to God, whom she credits with rescuing her from the loneliness and sense of loss that plagued her in the wake of Alina's departure from the orphanage. Alina does not comprehend Voichita's new found religiosity and is suspicious of it, adamant that they flee the country together. What seems to follow is a haunting tale that touches on everything from identity and displacement to sexual abuse and repression to religious dogmatism and the failures of the Romanian public service (a nod to *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* perhaps?). These are complex, weighty topics for any one film to fancy itself capable of tackling at a go and Mungiu rightfully weaves these deep into the fabric of the film, so deep that they may not show but can definitely be felt. But if this film's subject matter could be articulated in a couple of words they might very well be “the failure of the individual by society.”



Alina, as portrayed by first-timer Cristina Flutur in a quietly bruised performance, displays the kind of affectlessness that is often a sign of a deeply troubled mind. With the stubbornness of a young child, Alina makes attempt after attempt to draw Voichita away from her sheltered life at the monastery, and time after time, Voichita resists without seeming to truly acknowledge that there might be something else to Alina's neediness, some unaired pain or suffering. And even when she does take notice of the fact that something is not entirely well with her friend, like the stern but patient priest called Father by all, Voichita is inclined to preach to Alina, convinced that her psychic unrest is due to an absence of God in her life. Now while there might be nothing inherently wrong with this approach, the true ignorance of it is made even more glaring when compared and contrasted with the ignorance of all those who could have prevented tragedy befalling Alina when they had the chance. The tunnel vision of the health system with its antipsychotics and the conveyer-belt approach of Alina's foster parents ensure that she lands right back in the monastery, which is when the situation ascends to a level of emergency that necessitates drastic and out-dated measures. Admittedly, even in the presence of a society too eager to remedy and too impatient to truly enquire, Alina doesn't come across as a wronged saint either. Where religion, government, society are ineffectual, she is unyielding in her stance but at the same time remains a cypher and a dogged mystery, unwilling to voice the extent of her feelings for Voichita to anyone but Voichita and in so doing, suffers in silence. All things combined, there is nary a hope in hell of harmony, or even discourse.



A notable contemporary practitioner of the long take, Mungiu seems less interested in the pure aesthetics of it than he is in the narrative, thematic and atmospheric effect of allowing a scene or sequence to happen as naturally as possible without interruption. By curtailing the influence of editing on the pace and potency of a scene, Mungiu forces the writing and the acting to dictate how everything plays out on screen. There is always something happening in this film. Despite what one might think when “150 minutes”, “foreign”, “long takes” are tagged to a film, *Beyond the Hills* is not inundated with static shots of people simply breathing, but is rather quite rich in drama, dialogue and incidence. Even then, Oleg Mutu is too inspired a cinematographer to endorse pedestrian visuals. The look of this film is strikingly textured, the rough-hewn quality of the monastery made somehow tangible as is the blackness of the night and the monastic garb, the lifelessness of the city and the hills in winter, and the ghostliness of breath in cold air.



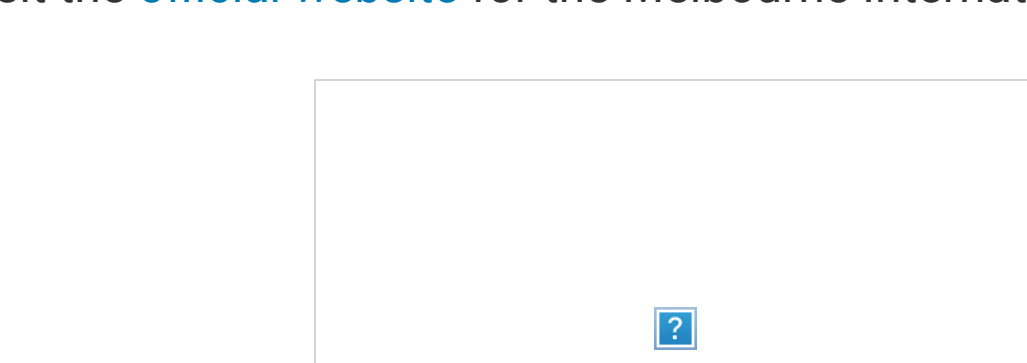
Early reviews accused *Beyond the Hills* of being dull and repetitive. The latter is somewhat accurate, but insofar as it being precisely this aspect of the narrative which underscores the extent of the charade surrounding Alina, it's utter absurdity. Having said that the film lives or dies on its writing, its mise en scene and its performances, one could easily level criticism at any or all of these elements. With dialogue that deftly captures the voices of those sections of society that too easily fall into the rhythms and trappings of jaded inflexibility – bureaucracy, public service (read: health care), religion – *Beyond the Hills* could very well come across as dull, repetitive and unengaging, that is if one fails to appreciate the oh-so-unassuming satire and humour at work underneath the words. If you also happen to be easily distracted, not even a dynamic, painterly mise en scene captured within the borders of a widescreen canvas by a quality DP will hold your attention. As for the acting, where exactly can the faults be located? In the two central performances by Cosmina Stratan and Cristina Flutur, who do not in any way draw attention to their greenness? Where Stratan as Voichita is a quietly-spoken, somewhat timid soul desperate for a sense of security, a sense of purpose and a sense of home, Alina – as played by Flutur, with her severe cheekbones and prodding gaze – is as wintry as the landscape and as headstrong as the priest is pious. Father, (an intense and appropriately fatherly Valeriu Andriuta) is a man that could easily inspire dislike in an audience if placed in different hands. Inflexible and pragmatic, religion is to him what numbers are to an accountant: precise, infallible and reproducible if you maintain your books fastidiously and do not drop the ball in this. To him it seems, salvation and forgiveness are earned, and he is not above expressing such absolutisms to non-believing Alina. Nonetheless, he and the entire company of nuns at the monastery, particularly Dana Tapalaga's Mother Superior, are treated with respect and empathy by the filmmakers, even at the lengths to which they go to save Alina from the evils they believe to have befallen her. The decision to commit herself to God or depart from the monastery is always Alina's to hold in her hands and is never forced upon her (until the end), only neither of these options interests her in the least. It's precisely this moral mire that makes *Beyond the Hills* such an engrossing piece of cinema, a near masterwork that could easily sustain lengthy and heated debate.



I suspect that the source of the dislike that many people seem to have for this film might lie somewhere in the last third of it, when all possible options have been exhausted and the monastery descends into hysteria. It was during this final stretch that the Melbourne audience's patience plummeted, and by the time the final credits began rolling there was a disappointed, perplexed silence, with a small army of supporters applauding to voice their admiration amidst the sour reception. The thing is, I get the impression that Mungiu would rather madden and annoy if discussion and awareness are the eventual outcomes. Even so, there is much to enjoy in this film, and much to appreciate artistically and intellectually. This is a great work.

Tope Ogundare

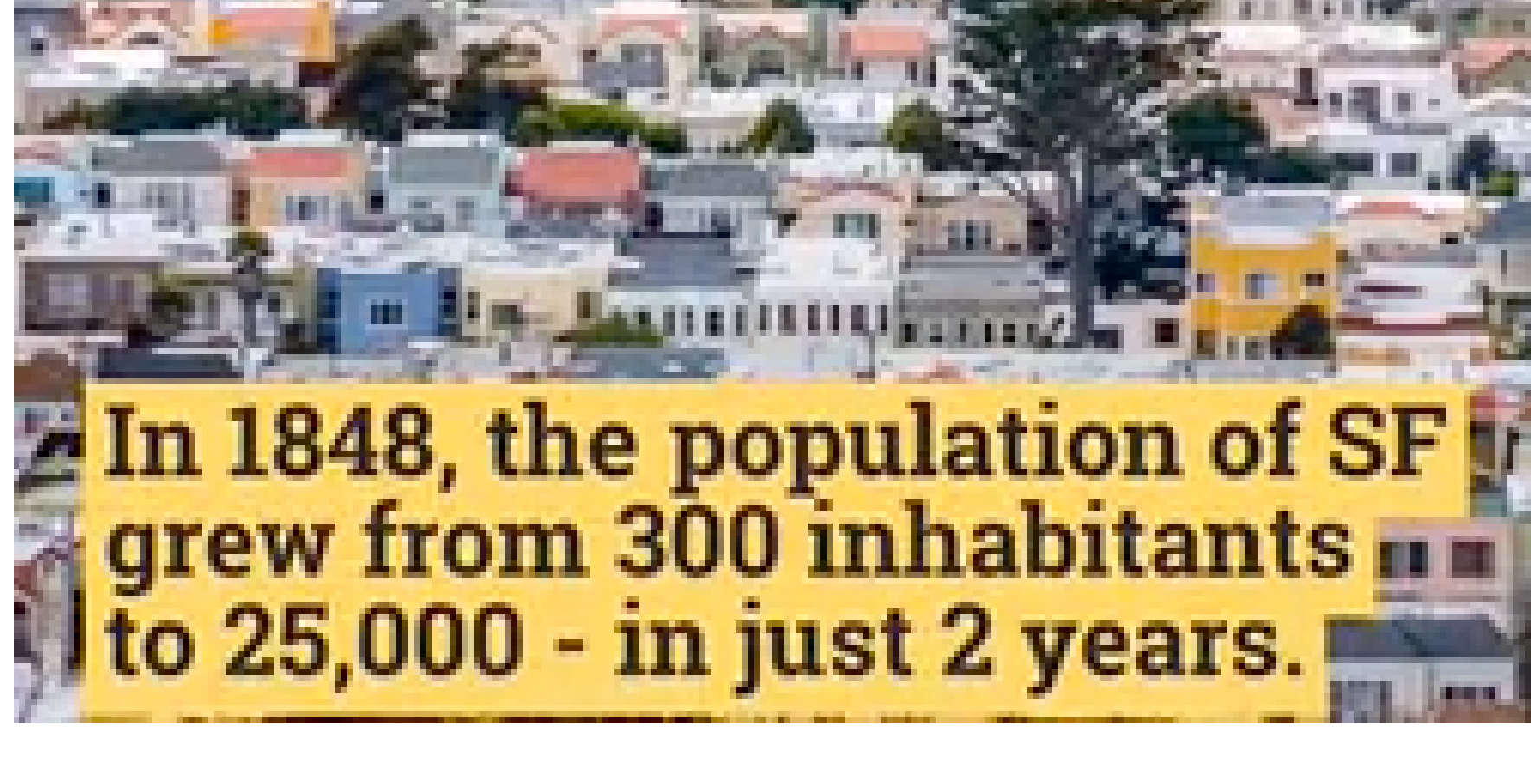
Visit the [official website](#) for the Melbourne International Film Festival



Are 'Go On' and 'Animal Practice' worth your time?

'Bachelorette' is a poorly constructed and uninspired comedic mess

MORE FROM: ENTERTAINMENT



#BEYOND THE HILLS #CANNES 2012 #CRISTIAN MUNGIU #OLEG MUTU #RELIGION #ROMANIA #ROMANIAN NEW WAVE #SOCIAL

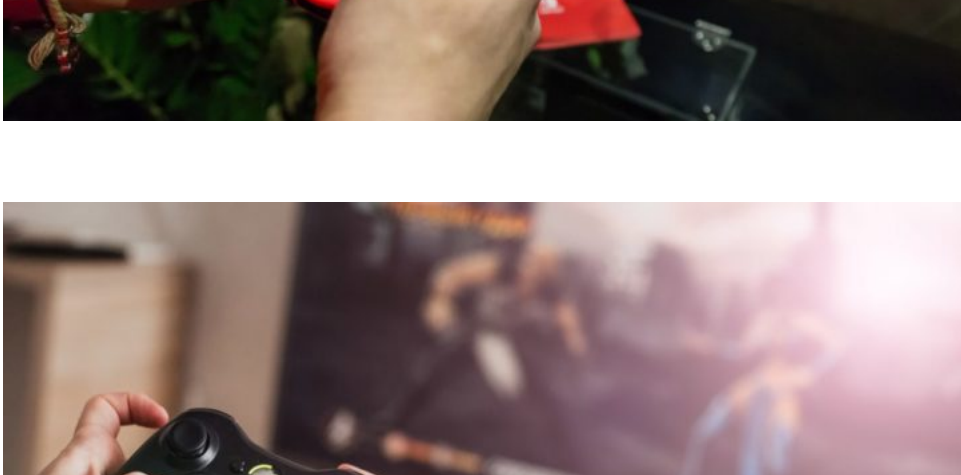
Previous article

Next article

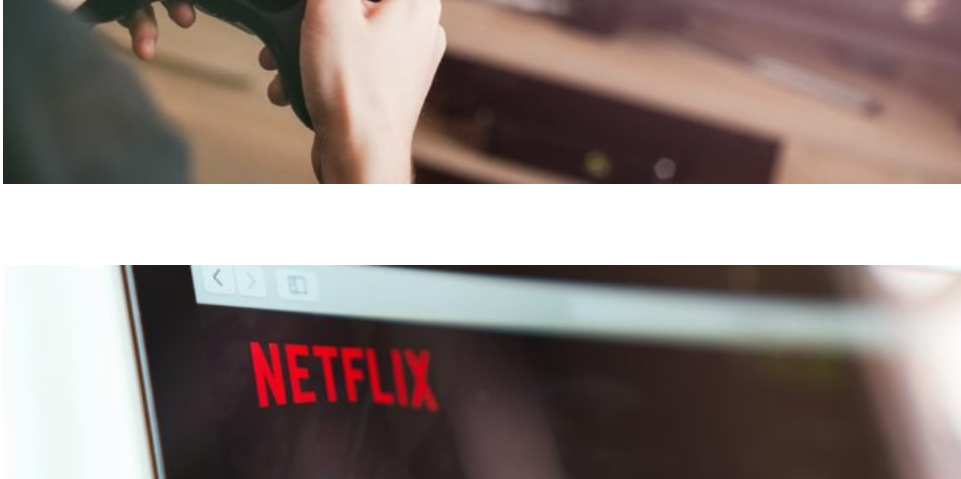
Are 'Go On' and 'Animal Practice' worth your time?

'Bachelorette' is a poorly constructed and uninspired comedic mess

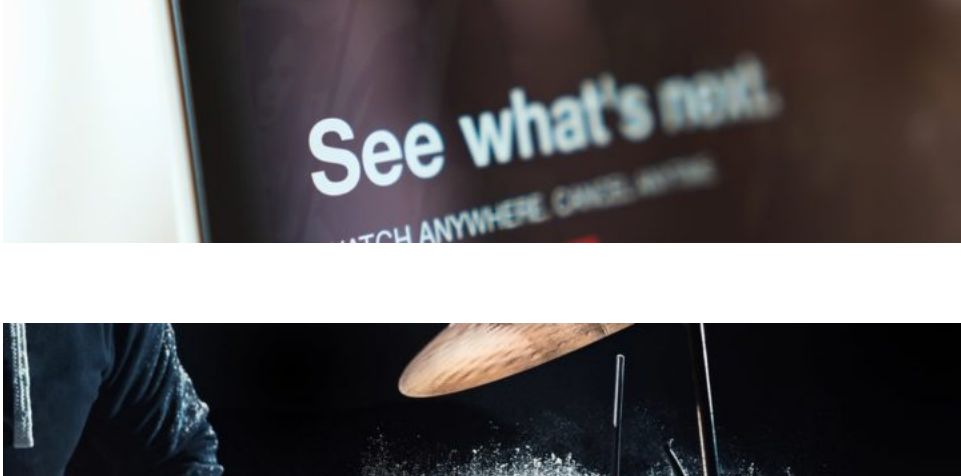
MORE FROM: ENTERTAINMENT



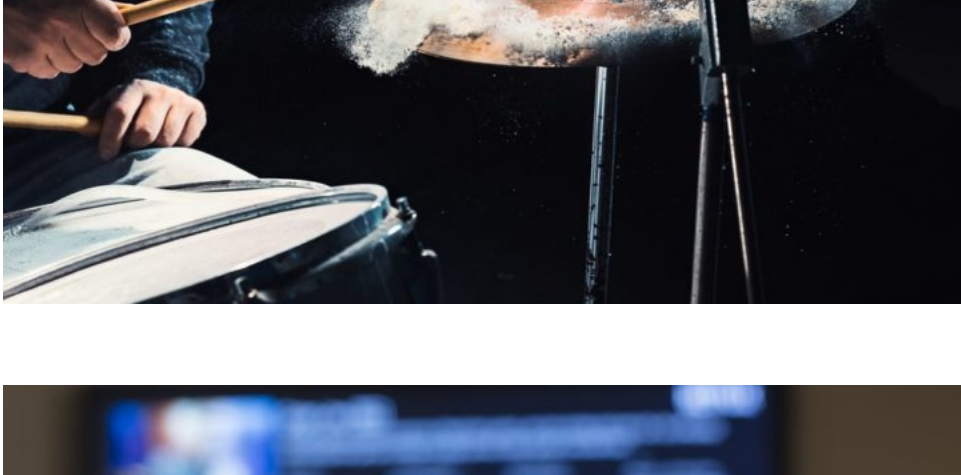
Where To Find Used Nintendo Switches Online



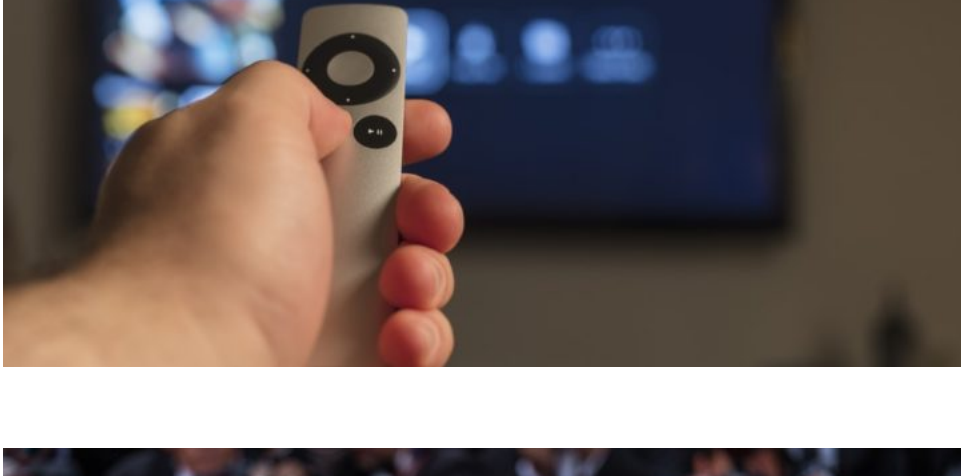
What is Texture Streaming?



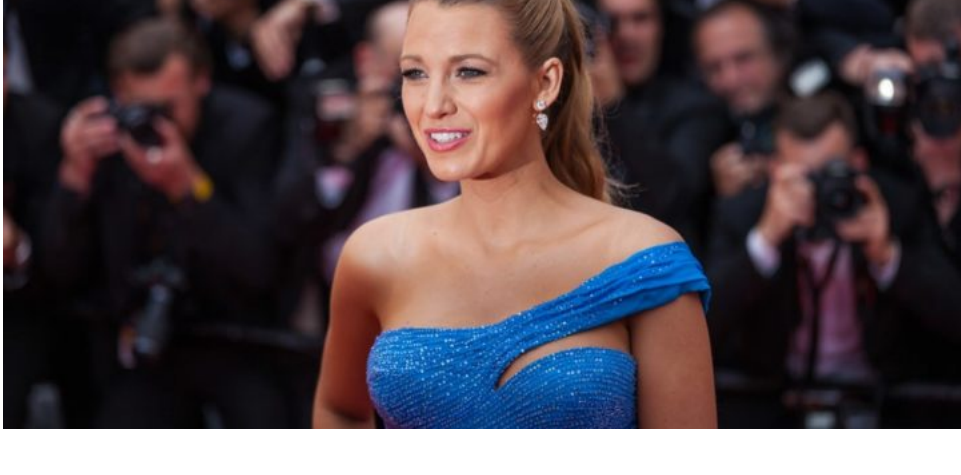
22 Things You Didn't Know About Netflix



28 Gift Ideas for Drummers



How Do I Know If My TV has Bluetooth?



10 of the Best Blake Lively Movies