

CONTACT ZONES

STUDIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN FILM AND LITERATURE

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COMMEMORATION AND THE SPACE OF THE FAMILY
IN CRISTI PUIU'S *SIERANEVADA* (2016)

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Space-ing Otherness. Cultural Images of Space, Contact Zones in Contemporary Hungarian and Romanian Film and Literature

Changing Perspectives

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At the recently organised *Contact Zones* conference (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 28-30 September), the participants to panel discussions repeatedly raised the question about the specificity of an Eastern European cinema, only to agree that if there is such a thing, it is definitely related to typical spaces and their modes of representation. The articles of this issue seem to articulate this argument by considering spaces in the Romanian and Hungarian films under analysis as key factors in the discursive strategies of meaning production. As most authors point out, these spatial configurations and performances can be interpreted in close correlation with the characters' and spectators' perspective, that is, their cultural, ideological standpoint and value system. Romanian director Cristi Puiu's recent film, *Sieranevada* (2016) is a paradigmatic example of this specificity. As a new initiative in our journal's history, the *Q and A* entry focuses on controversial concepts or works of art: after a virtual roundtable dialogue about the meaning of Eastern Europe from the perspective of Eastern European scholars in the previous issue, the *Q and A* bloc of articles edited by László Strausz addresses this time the *pars pro toto* correlation between the secrets and lies of a post-socialist family and society in Puiu's film. The five takes on this issue add original, personal perspectives to the interpretation of spatial performances and the meaning of the perspective represented by the camera, placed either in the hall of the apartment or the back seat of the car. Whose perspective does it represent? The missing father's (as Hajnal Király and László Strausz argues)? The spectator's, shaping an uncanny, familiar-unfamiliar space of intimacy (as Teréz Vincze and Katalin Sándor point out)? Or, as Doru Pop proposes, by presenting the same event from different perspectives, does it represent a strong authorial perspective dominated by the philosophy of "la mișto" (the Balkanized mockery), revealing the profound ambiguity of the historical event itself addressing the cinematic conditions of the possibility of knowledge? All these arguments seem to reinforce the central hypothesis of László Strausz's book entitled *Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen* (reviewed in this issue by Zsolt Gyenge), placing a great emphasis on the ideology-shaping force of the ambivalent camera movement in the New Romanian Cinema.

In the context of contemporary Hungarian Cinema, spatial performances become figurative of a changing generational perspective. Anna Bátori in her article comparing *For Some Inexplicable Reason* (2014) and *Liza, the Fox Fairy* through an institutional, contextual and diegetic perspective discusses the outsider's position of the Hungarian Y generation within the post-socialist, consumerist-capitalist structure, as well as the discursive realm the spatial interplays present in these films. Last but not least, two further articles add to the topic of changing perspective: Gábor Schein's essay, written originally in Hungarian on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Kalligram journal, adds new perspectives to the scholarly dialogue around the concept of Eastern Europe from the previous issue by arguing that the not least controversial concept of Central Europe is nothing other than an idea constructed in literary essays. Marie Laura Judge analyses a group of contemporary Romania-located non-fiction human rights films (Edet Belzberg's *Children Underground* (2001), Mona Nicoară and Miruna Coca-Cozma's *Școala noastră* [Our School] (2011), Alexandre Nanău's *Toto și surorile lui* [Toto and His Sisters] (2014)) and the ways in which a postcolonial theoretical reading of these films' and their makers' engagement in transnational production and international festivalisation processes assists in cementing the global divide between centre and periphery. At the end of her article, referring back to Homi Bhabha, she reiterates the relevance of a mobile ideological and theoretical perspective when analysing the cultural products of Eastern Europe, thus reinforcing the arguments of the other essays: "Can the subaltern speak?' will have to be reworded to ask, "Can the subaltern be heard?' I would argue that this be pushed further to include: can the subaltern be seen, and if so, through whose looking glass?"

Commemoration and the Space of the Family in Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada* (2016)

Q and A Dialogue of the Members of the Contact Zones Research Group*

Edited by László Strausz
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Q:

Representations of the family have played an important role in contemporary Eastern European cinema, since these images provide models of larger social transformations. The intimate spaces of the postsocialist family harbour secrets that open up social questions, such as the relationship of generations, memories of and relationship with the state socialist past, transforming gender roles in contemporary wild-capitalist society, etc.

How does Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada* address these topics? What do you think is the director's take on the parallels between the microcosm of the family and the tectonic shifts of postsocialist society? How does the organization of cinematic language and filmic spaces communicate Puiu's analysis of social transformations in Romania?

A:

Hajnal Király

The Phantom of the Father: Displacement, Delay and Excess

After *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* and *Aurora*, in *Sieranevada* Cristi Puiu manages to push even further the strategies of delay and displacement meant to compensate for the gaps in the narrative. For a very long time into the film we do not know where the characters and the story are heading: from a very busy, chaotic street corner in Bucharest (a public space) we move, together with the camera placed in a witness position, to the back seat of the car where we eavesdrop a marital fight, more specifically a monologue full with resentment of a wife clueless in face of her husband's passivity. From the car, they step into the private space of the former home of the husband, the purpose of their visit being to celebrate the

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commemoration of his father's death. By entering this space, the rather acute marital problem is left behind, or rather displaced. In the claustrophobic blockhouse apartment other mini-crises occur, meant to delay, efface and displace the original crisis, the source of all generational issues brought up in the film: the father, although dead, is a phantom heavily weighing down on the family relationships. The screenplay seems thoroughly regulated by the ceremony of commemoration: cooking, waiting for the priest and eating the festive dinner in the company of a man dressed in the costume of the deceased, a symbol of the faith in resurrection. This Shakespearean scene invoking the dead father re-enacts, in fact, the truth about a family and a father who can, even from death, interfere with the lives of his family members, and primarily to impede the Oedipal act of his son. As in family melodramas often happens, in this film nobody can feel "at home" and be himself at the same time. The truth about the father and the family is delayed and displaced into cover-stories channelling the gradually growing tension that breaks out at the end of the film, in a public parking area, again in the car, and sheds light on the relationship issues of the couple. But before that, we assist three generational conflicts of different emotional intensities, all somehow related or rather controlled by the phantom of the dead father and involving the principle spaces in the film: the three rooms and the kitchen. These changing scenes follow each other like a theatrical stage rotating around a camera placed in the middle, in the hall from where all rooms open and from where it can peep into all interiors around. First, at arrival, Lary, the main protagonist has a short argument with his mother when handing over a gift, a room bicycle, and the mother doesn't seem grateful enough, thus refuses him the role of the "provider" after the death of the father. The other adult child of the family, the protagonist's sister, has a nervous breakdown after the aunt is criticising her way of cooking and the delay – again, she harbours the feeling that she can't grow up to the expectation of the older generation and primarily of her dead father. The younger sister brings home a Croatian girl, an alter ego of her: she is just as lost and confused as she is in this family maze. And finally, there is a big scene anticipating the protagonist's confession, the almost hysterical jealousy and infidelity scene between the aunt and her husband to which everybody assists, enacting and re-enacting their personal dramas. All these very private scenes are counterbalanced by the recurrent topic of terrorist attacks, discussed by the men in the living room, in their psychologically motivated attempt to escape, even through discussion, from a specifically feminine space of exaggerated feelings and rituals.

All four scenes are characterised by – either emotional or situational – excess, pointing at a narrative lying beneath all acts: that of a patriarchal order sustained by lies, secrets and taboos. In this respect, the invisible, central camera can be identified with the phantom of the father, witnessing the afterlife of his family, of family members isolated in a visually compartmentalised interior space. This is only one of the multiple allegories of the film: besides the already mentioned parallel (his)stories and alter ego constructions as well as the ritualistic enactment of resurrection, this family melodrama becomes, on the basis of the *pars pro toto* logic, a social allegory of a post-communist society, whose father, although dead, still manages to castrate his sons before they are able to fight back and reverse the castrating act. In this respect, the true story of a publicly happy family, that of a father cheating on the mother with the apparent approval of the latter, is also the story of a generation socialised under communism and charged too early with the secrets, taboos and lies of their fathers. Although they were promised a new beginning, this generation of unwilling accomplices had great difficulties in accomplishing the liberating Oedipal act after the change of the regime. Lary's confession at least foregrounds the possibility that the sin of the father will not be repeated. But this is as uncertain as the meaning of the title of the film: *Sieranevada*.

Teréz Vincze
My space – *Sieranevada*

I had been in Asia and watching a lot but only Asian movies for several months before I coincidentally ran into *Sieranevada* at a film festival in Taiwan. This undoubtedly great movie had an even more accelerated effect on me under the given circumstances. The sudden strong and uncanny feeling of familiarity that struck me in that movie theatre of the foreign city while watching *Sieranevada* was not only the consequence of the difference between the Romanian movie and the Asian movies I had been watching all those months before. It was also related to the profound experience of living for some time in a foreign space, a different climate where the speed of everyday life, the construction of private and public spaces seemed significantly different from my previous experiences. This film almost magically, in the blink of an eye, transported me back into a familiar space.

Thanks to the above circumstances *Sieranevada* has become, first and foremost, a space-related experience for me, and I became interested in the spatial constructions present in the film, and the cinematic meaning created in connection with spaces and spatial practices.

The title of the film already feels deeply symbolic in this context: a misspelled version of a name that could designate a place either on the American or the European continent, meanwhile designating a Romanian film that takes place in Romania and seems to have no connection of any sort to any of the Sierra Nevadas. The motif of misplacement and displacement, the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of spaces and places in the film gained extra significance for me.

In a sense, the flat in *Sieranevada* is a container of history: the remnants of the past linger in the very compressed space of a high-rise building that was constructed during communist times. One of the most amazing aspects of this film is the way it is able to fill every corner of this complicated and compressed space with life, East European history, social relations, and emotional tensions. It is clear from the very first shot of the film that crowdedness, the meaningful use of spatiality will play a crucial role throughout the film. The first scene itself is a strong commentary about the lack of space, the crowded, chaotic environment of a city street where it is impossible to properly park a car.

But most of the time during the film we are – together with the members of an extended family – squeezed into a flat of a high rise. The flat has a meaningful geometry, there is a central hall that the rooms are connected to more or less directly. Although, the space is far from simple. But the basic structure is built around this central space and there are numerous rooms around, most of them are constantly hiding behind closed doors. The image of closed doors, or closing doors is a constant motif of the film that makes the seemingly simple space more labyrinthine, more mysterious. The camera often finds itself locked into the central hall and waiting to gain access into one of the rooms where differing micro dramas are developing. Behind each door some kind of a hiding story is waiting to be discovered. The different spaces contain a different atmosphere and different stories.

The kitchen plays a crucial role – from the beginning it is accentuated that its door has to be kept closed. Even though there is a constant movement in and out, the actors accurately close the door behind themselves each time. Later it becomes clear that this motif has a highly symbolic meaning: a major ideological tension, one that is at the core of understanding post-communism, is behind this door. The post-communist view on the ideology of communism, and the relationship to the achievements of communism – this problem is "hiding" behind the kitchen door. The clash between the communist aunt and the royalist niece takes place in the kitchen – and this scene is one of the important comments made by the film on the post-

communist situation. One of the arguments the aunt uses in defence of the communist regime is that it made affordable housing available for common people – indirectly saying that the flat itself they are in at that moment, exists and can be inhabited by its current owners thanks to the communists. Labelling the space as a communist construction – this gesture makes the space of the flat even more loaded with meaning, and a container of the remnants of history. People are constantly moving dynamically back and forth in the space of the flat like balls in a pinball machine. The whole flat is a vibrant chaos of personal and historic memories and tensions. For the main character, Lary, this place is unable to provide a proper space for real, personal remembering. Although the family is gathered here to commemorate the deceased father, all the circumstances (family conflicts, ideological fight, the absence of the priest, the wrong sized memorial suit) seem to work against the success of this memorial process. Larry himself needs to leave this space, loaded with history and emotion, in order to be able to start his personal remembering.

Towards the end of the film, he sits together with his wife in their car and there is a construction site in the background. This space is also tight, but at the same time looks on an open space. And what is more important on the level of the meaning of spaces: this is a modern space, the interior of a modern car that is not necessarily associated with all the symbolic weight that the crowded flat exerted on its guests.

For me, this film is an example of the power of spatial constructions in meaning production. Its systematic and symbolic use of cinematic spatiality makes this film a forceful container of the memory of an East European past, and an unmistakably post-communist take on everyday existence. *Sieranevada* presents remembering as a characteristically spatial construction, a filmic choreography achieved through composition and editing.

Katalin Sándor **From the Back Seat of the Car – Space and Intimacy**

In what follows, I will focus on two scenes from Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada* in which the characters are filmed inside their car. In the broader context of the film's construction of diegetic space, the space of the car can be interpreted as a particular site for negotiating intimacy in-between the public and the private on the one hand, and the camera's gaze, the diegetic world and the viewer on the other.

In most of Puiu's film the camera and the viewer are positioned within the crowded, both suffocating and intimate domestic space of a blockhouse apartment that functions as a lived space of contact and memory in-between the generations of a family, as well as the socialist and post-socialist period. (One of the aunts referring to herself as "we, the communists" underlines that the very apartment in which they are right now was built during state socialism.) In this space shaped through spatial, social-familial practices and religious rituals performed by a priest, a large family is preparing for the traditional religious memorial feast ('parastas') for the recently deceased father. During the long, absurd postponement of the supper, a dense and tense familial network unfolds in the almost palpable atmosphere of the place emanating from dialogues, gestures, objects, even smells. The camera as an "invisible guest" (Ágnes Pethő) – often resembling the bodiless, but still physically perceptible, carnal memory of the dead father – shares the lived space of the apartment with the characters, and has limited, partial access to the visible. There are two scenes in which two characters, Lary, one of the sons and his wife, Laura are filmed in their car. The vehicle appears to be an exterior space but it may actually become both an extension and a dislocation of the domestic space of the parental home in which every room "houses" (and is literally occupied by) a different family member or guest with a different kind of conflict, intimacy, or past tension affecting the present.

In social sciences, the space of the car is often conceptualised as a transitional, shifting container in-between the private and the public. The car is not only related to travel and transport, to spatial (or social) mobility, but becomes a site in which – besides social positions – a particular kind of intimacy is negotiated within cultural, social, economic conditions. The function of the car related to intimacy ranges from creating space for self-reflection or escape to familial privacy, socializing, erotic practices etc. Harry Ferguson describes the car in relation to the practice of social care as a "fluid container" offering space for therapeutic encounters, for the "processing of personal troubles, emotion and key life changes" (Ferguson quoted in Clare Holdsworth: *Family and Intimate Mobilities*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 80). The car, as a partially isolated, partially transparent personal(ised) space, is impregnated with the outside environment and at the same time exposed to public visibility and the social/spatial strategies of using public space. Thus, it discloses the permeability of exterior and interior/private spaces.

In the first scene shot inside the car, Lary (played by Mimi Brănescu) and Laura (played by Cătălina Moga) are on their way to Lary's mother after a scene of driving around and not being able to find a parking place. They quarrel over Lary's mistake of buying the wrong Disney-dress (Sleeping Beauty instead of Snow White) for their daughter's school performance. In the wife's opinion, their daughter cannot wear the same dress as her classmate, the "peasant" Sabina whose parents "pick strawberries" in Spain. (Lary is a doctor who sells medical equipment.) The consumption and the apparent availability of globalised Disney iconography does not dissolve economic and class inequalities and their social perception. And while the Disney-dress might be available to the "peasant" classmate's family, the Bangkok holiday Laura speaks about (instead of Greece as an already boring and probably lower-class destination) appears to be their economic and social privilege. In the intimate container of the car, privacy is exposed as always already marked by socio-cultural, political or economic conditions. The camera, as an invisible passenger, shares the same space with the characters, being located in the back of the car. Through occupying a position that might as well be that of a character, it embodies a point of view in-between the anthropomorphic and the technical to which the visibility of the interior space is limited, and the event is partially inaccessible. (The characters are always filmed from behind, the conflict is performed through dialogues and partially visible faces.) Having no privileged or exterior position, the camera both observes and participates in the intimacy of the scene.

In the second scene, the use of public space and the car itself are staged in the tense moment of a loud, violent quarrel over a parking place. The social practices of negotiating and occupying space are exposed here on small scale, locating the car as mobile space of intimacy in-between the public and the private. After this scene, we see Lary and his wife sitting in their car parked (supposedly) on someone else's place. The car becomes an intimate space of remembrance: in a cathartic cry (triggered probably by the tension of the previous scene), Lary remembers his dead father and his brother's incredible lie when he was caught smoking, as well as his father's adultery and the lies, the strategies through which the illusion of a stable family was maintained. The car becomes both an extension and a dislocation of home as lived memorial space in which the religious and familial rituals for the dead father are performed. While the rituals attempt to adapt the personal to given customary scripts, Lary's remembrance is unpredictable, uncontrolled, corporeal, and reveals a repressed, unspoken family history. The narrative through which the familial past and the father's adultery are "re-

membered” turns into a confession that might (or might not) “dis-member” the couple’s present: Lary alludes to his own lies and infidelity, which, however, does not seem to surprise his wife. The camera records and participates in the scene from the “back seat,” juxtaposing the immediacy, the corporeality and the audible excess of the cathartic sob with the limited visibility of space and the inaccessibility, the mediated-ness of the face shown through the rear-view mirror.

Whether in the crowded space of the apartment or on the back seat of a car, the camera both observes and partakes in the intimacy negotiated in-between the public and the private, tension and affection, older and younger generations, secular and religious practices, socialist past and post-socialist present. The camera’s gaze and the entire “apparatus” of the film construct the social/historical and the private dimensions of the “real” as mediated and ambiguous: as comfortably or amusingly familiar, “palpable” and at the same time as inaccessible, foreign. Besides restricting the access of the camera to the visible, Puiu’s film reflexively exposes the way in which the characters fabricate different narratives (from conspiracy theories to quotidian stories or everyday lies) to construct, interpret, domesticate or legitimise what counts as “real” at a given historical moment. In the intimacy of viewing, the (Romanian or Eastern European) spectators might experience the ambiguity of the “real” through recognising the constructed world of *Sieranevada* with its spaces, characters, conflicts, stories, gestures, and smells both as their own and as unpredictably other.

Doru Pop

The sarcastic Mr. Puiu or How to Laugh with Tears at the Wake of Mr. Lăzărescu

If there is a typical form of laughter, specific to the Romanians, then Cristi Puiu is without any doubt the laughing Master, with his most recent film being an apotheosis of the cinematic manifestation of Wallachian humour. Sometimes identified as the “serious-unseriousness”, the “râsu-plânsu” (laughter-crying) form of comedy is an existential mode of the Romanians, a behavioural trait that places a distinguishing mark on the cultural and social modes of sublimation.

Obviously other nations laugh in the face of death, and the dark grinning or the sardonic musing about life exists in many cultures. There are many places in the world where you can die of laughter, yet no so many where tragedy can become a laughing matter. *Sieranevada* is a dark humoresque film, based on a typical absurdist sjuzhet encountered in

many stories circulating in this part of the world. Death (or sometimes the Devil himself) is used as a source of amusement. This is the case with the dead-serious fun in this film, which centres on a very particular ritual of remembering the dead. This ritual, called *parastas*, practiced by all the Orthodox nations, is a prayer for the soul of the deceased, who is believed to be present among the living. In Puiu's story there is an ironic twist, as the dead father "comes back" (as a substitute), is seated at the table and is greeted as a member of the family. The motif of the "dummy suit", which is lying empty on a bed, also represents a humorous observation on the nature of representation. Finally the entire *mise-en-scène* generates a parodic version of a wake, a funeral procession turned into amusement. As Lary, the son of the "celebrated-deceased" comes back to his childhood apartment, he is witnessing the empty nature of the world around him, just like the suit of the dead man worn by a close relative. This is a world where not only the dead and the living are sharing the same space, but many incompatible elements are brought together in a nonsensical context, which becomes relevant because of this absurd mashing.

The production must be placed in the traditional tragic-comic dimensions of Balkan cinema (it is not by chance that Bosnian, Macedonian, and Croatian co-producers are involved in this production). Variations of the laughable tragedy exist in innumerable films and Puiu, just as Kusturica in *Underground*, where funerals and weddings are mashed together in a surrealist ensemble, creates a space (the apartment where Emil's death is supposed to be celebrated) that becomes a metaphor for the puzzle of Romanian society today. Here, in this cramped apartment, which has excessively dark rooms and rooms inundated with light, an entire carnival of absurdities takes place, as the sad ceremony is transformed into a comedic chain of almost implausible situations.

Just like the Balkans as a cultural space, the evolution of the narrative is always in-between, with the hallway of the apartment as a symbolic space of indeterminate identity. In fact all the characters are living in a no-man's land, just as the camera wandering about in this small universe of uncertainties. Uncertainty is a key term in order to understand the incomprehensible nature of this movie. Starting with the title of his production (which provokes an absurd reference to anything and nothing), continuing with the conversation the main character has in the car, then continuing with kitsch references to famous works of art, from the beginning to the end, *Sieranevada* is a mockery.

As the Romanian movie director builds up a sarcastic form of cinematic carnivalesque, he also pokes fun at everything. His scenes are often built sarcastically, as the repeated mockery of the Rublev Trinity, as often groups of three men come together in the movie to discuss absurd banalities – from the Charlie Hebdo incident to everyday disparaging comments about one another. Filled with parodic references to the Gospel, with religious quotes (do not throw the stone) placed in the most inappropriate situations, we must see Lary not only as a parodic son, who leaves in the middle of performing his Father's ritual only to get into a fight for a parking space, but also as a failed Christ-like figure. This mockery is omnipresent – two of the characters are ridiculous angels (Gabi) and the parking lot “attacker” (Mihăiță), both diminutives of the great archangels. The lesbian Croatian woman, who is wasted from drugs and alcohol, is placed in the same room where the empty suit of the dead man was lying, which becomes a transparent reference to the empty tomb of Christ, now only a sarcastic reference. Another caricaturesque biblical reference is “tanti Evelina”, while the priest talks about the second coming of the Messiah, in which we recognize the topic of the unrecognisable Saviour from the religious tradition, linked to the motif of the impossible salvation. In fact Puiu mashes together everything he can find in this story. “Ofelia” is a Shakespearian parodic heroine, accusing her husband of getting blowjobs from a neighbour, while other characters make distinctions between Snow White and Cinderella, with specialized discussions about the works of the Brothers Grimm thrown into the mix. Even the music playing in this absurdist apartment carries a constant ironical function, the radio plays songs from Boney M and Ace of Base and then the Romanian folk and pop music (Doina Badea and Stela Enache), with every musical intervention as a counterpoint to what takes place on the screen.

This is a movie dominated by the philosophy of “la mișto” (the Balkanized mockery). Each scene which begins seriously ends up in a sarcastic end. Here everything is taken lightly, as the characters discuss everything and nothing – from the theory of evolution, to the Messiah's second coming, to horoscope matchmaking, infidelity and the crimes of communism in Romania. All the “hard” topics in society, discussed in a smoky kitchen or a crammed room, are emptied of their meaning. Just like the “profound” distinctions that the people at the table make between “chorba” and “bortsch”, everything is a long discussion about nothing. This is supported by the cinematic emptiness, with empty images showing a wardrobe on the hallway or an empty kitchen. Everything, just like the main character, is

treated ironically. The story itself could seem like a bad joke as is told in the manner of a series of silly incidents. The log line sounds like a stupid joke: in a cramped apartment, a military captain, a drunk Croatian lesbian, an Orthodox priest, a pregnant lady, a suckling child and a dead man...

Clearly the corrosive nature of Puiu's treatment of reality in his previous films is now taking a more bitter twist. Lary, who is a wannabe cultural critic, impersonating Puiu himself, ends up bursting into laughter (together with his brother) while eating "sarmale" with "mămăligă". History and its tragedies, transplanted into the kitchen of the apartment, are transformed into a series of empty gestures.

Of course, Puiu places himself in a long tradition of Romanian movie makers (Pintilie's *The Oak* comes to mind) who are using reality as a tangential reference to the "national" defects. The clash between Lary, the doctor driving a BMW, and his environment raises a more problematic question: that of the incompatible dimension of Romanian society overall. As this film is clearly part of the larger project that the director himself announced, called "Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest", *Sieranevada* is a natural continuation both to *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* and *Aurora*. Puiu, born and raised in the Bucharest neighbourhoods, is painstakingly drawing the picture of a monstrous city. Bucharest is a grotesque social creation, and the perfect backdrop for the *funambulesque realism* that the Romanian director is now practicing. Here the bizarre humanity with the amused dark humour turns into a bitter mockery, with tones of disgust and added aggression.

The movie, which could have been called *SierraPadre* (with reference to abusive fathers and their victimized children) projects an image of the life in the Bucharest suburbia as a picture of the national subconscious. The metaphor of living "ca la ușa cortului" (in front of the tent) is projected in gratuitous family feuds (and occupied toilets) where swearing and bickering escalates (in the parking lot scene) into spitting and physical violence. Faced with such degraded forms of humanity, the only way in which one could survive in this environment is laughter. Just like the two brothers laughing at the end of the movie, this bitter form of releasing anger and turning frustration into nervous discharge becomes a cinematic mechanism. The sarcastic director sneers at the world he lives in, mockingly using his characters to disparage society and his own works. Moving about in a universe of laughable spectres, the director takes his viewers into his bitter vision, where the mockery is used as a cure for pain and discouragement. We are sitting in front of the screen, just as Lary sits in his

car crying, where storytelling becomes a way of creating incredible and believable worlds, which in turn are totally laughable. Puiu practices cinema-making as a tool that allows believing the unbelievable, the laughter in front of tragedy and to make visible the serious unserious nature of life.

László Strausz
The Man Who Wasn't There¹

Following the story of the burial feast for the deceased paterfamilias Emil, *Sieranevada* unfolds as an ensemble piece that digs up various deeply repressed conflicts in a complex network of family relations. It could be argued that the various quarrels between husbands and wives, uncles and aunts, parents and their children etc. develop as a result of departure from the top of the family hierarchy of Emil, who kept these fights at bay, but the film does not reveal much information about the deceased man. Instead, the focus is on the bottled-up and now erupting conflicts between the gathered relatives.

The almost three hours-long film comprises various episodes depicting confrontations between the family members that range from amiable exchanges to histrionic shouting matches. Puiu connects these segments by having a character walk out of the room where the conversation took place. Usually, this figure's path crosses the movement of another family member moving in the opposite direction. When they pass each other, the panning changes its direction and follows the incoming character. The complicated blocking and timing performed by the pivoting camera records the exiting and entering characters, creating a mobile domestic tableau. Giving rise to a complex choreography of character movement, this mobility allows for lengthy continuous shots to be recorded, but takes over the function of the film's segmentation as well. The claustrophobic spaces of the apartment, with its narrow hall and low ceilings, partially explain the lack of establishing shots – but Puiu does not seem to be interested in offering a blueprint of the physical setting to the viewer. Instead, throughout the microscopic observations enabled by the lengthy panning medium and full shots, an affective map appears that starts to articulate the identities of the individuals who populate the film. The spaces of the family, the web of relations and conflicts is interconnected: characters who ridicule or deride the opinions or acts of others turn out to be the object of other family

¹ This analysis originally appeared in my monograph *Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen* (Palgrave, 2017), pp. 225-231.

members' disdain in a subsequent exchange. Pompous, condescending comments are later countered by similarly patronizing remarks. The panning camera, generally positioned in the dark hall of the apartment from where it is capable to record the events in each of the individual rooms, laconically registers the wide range of reactions in these family fights. Additionally, the placement of the camera allows for shots to be recorded through doorframes, a technique Puiu developed in *Aurora* to highlight both the lead character's and the audiences' detachment and distance from the events depicted. In *Sieranevada* the diegetic characters' separation and hesitant performativity becomes visible in the discussions on domestic and historical topics.

In one of the early scenes Lary, who can be said to be a protagonist for the only reason that he is present in almost every scene, talks to Sebi and Gabi, two thirty-something relatives, about conspiracy theories. Sebi, obsessed with scouting the web for traces of various governments' involvement in the events known today as acts of terrorism (the Oklahoma bombing, 9/11, the Charlie Hebdo attack etc.) is convinced that "it's all interconnected!" Gabi, a medical doctor appears to be skeptical: he keeps giggling at Sebi's theories and suggests he rely on information that is empirically verifiable. Later during a conversation about the 1989 Romanian Revolution, Gabi claims that during the collapse of state socialist regime they naively believed in change and that their ideals were compromised. His use of the pronoun *we* implies the claim that he participated in the Revolution. When an older family member reminds him that he was only eleven years old in 1989, he rearticulates: "I went with my father." On the one hand, this episode encourages audiences to go back to the conspiracy theory conversation and reevaluate it in the light of Gabi's demonstrated relation to empirical facts. On the other hand, it reestablishes new Romanian cinema's disbelief in the objectively given nature of history and more specifically the 1989 Revolution by highlighting history's performativity, and the processes of myth-making.

Another example of the clashing positions on historical events and their interpretation is the heated debate between the young mother Sandra and aunt Evelina. Sandra holds royalist views and is convinced that Romanian politicians during state social socialism were all agents from Moscow. Evelina identifies as a Communist and asks Sandra: "Are you saying that if we communists, who you dislike, hadn't come to power, that king of yours, who wasn't even Romanian, would've built low-rent housing blocks for you to live in and would've provided the country with electricity? Why call them criminals? Because they fed the poor? Because

they imprisoned the kulaks, and people finally got free medical care?” The incompatibility of the two interpretations is further reinforced through the fact that the women are not interested in listening to the other’s opinion: the emotional Sandra weeps during Evelina’s monologue, illustrating how little their conversation is based on reasoning. Subsequently, she hysterically labels *all* communists criminals and makes disturbing anti-Semitic remarks when she contemptuously refers to Marx and Engels as kikes. What these and other episodes of *Sieranevada* foreground is the profound ambiguity of the historical event itself. The different family members represent various methods of approaching the construction of historical events: Sebi scouts the internet and buys into various conspiracy theories, Lary’s brother Relu psychologises the relation to history and argues that people are afraid to think critically, Gabi focuses on the account of the eyewitness and, similar to the conformist Lary, accepts the official version, Sandra’s royalist interpretations depart from unconditional acceptance of the authority of tradition etc. Interestingly, it is the retired math teacher Mr. Popescu, marginalized and mocked by several family members who spells out the need to approach events simultaneously from different sides. In connection with the 9/11 theories, he argues that “it’s vital to listen to opposing opinions too if you want to get the full picture [...] Allow yourself the freedom to see and to question. I guarantee the truth will come out. I don’t know who is right. But examine and judge for yourself all the given hypotheses.” Popescu here articulates the attitude central to new Romanian cinema toward history and social construction: hesitation as a critical subject position. Puiu’s film however does not simply depict how the diegetic characters contest the meaning of historical events, but goes on to show that the very same people have difficulties agreeing on family events that constitute their own domestic lives. During the conversations about the family scandals, Popescu, similar to his suggestion to contemplate contradictory accounts of history, listens to each of the clashing versions without siding with a specific narrative.

There are many contested and debated family events, most of which revolve around men cheating on their wives. Did paterfamilias Emil really cheat on his wife Nusa, as implied by Lary? Was the notoriously unfaithful uncle Toni involved in various sexual escapades with the neighbour? Why did Ofelia, who was cheated on by Toni, cover for the affairs of his brother Emil? What is the doctor Gabi doing on his nightshifts: is he cheating on Sandra, as she furiously implies during a heated argument? Is the protagonist Lary also cheating on his wife Laura? What else does he confess to having lied about? These questions on adultery put

Sieranevada in the group of films dealing with the crisis of masculinity, and marital infidelity becomes the common element across the various generations of the family not only in the post-1989 era but already during the lives of the characters' parents under the state socialism regime. The unfaithful males' compulsive attempts to maintain the façade of affectionate family providers and husbands, and simultaneously assert their masculinity through various affairs displays the crisis of the available male norms. However, there are other family secrets that remain unsolved. Why did Lary's father Emil, himself a mastermind in fabricating stories to cover up his numerous betrayals, believe the ridiculous story his son made up when busted reeking of smoke (a burglar forced him to smoke a cigarette)? Who is the unconscious girl on the family's couch? There are several additional controversies that the film introduces, but then refuses to give a clear answer to. Puiu's remarkable move consists of the seamless ways he connects the broader social perspective (historical events) with the local events (family scandals). Both are found to be indeterminate and indefinable. Similar to Gabi's conspiracy theories, the various family members' references to the scandalous stories in their discussions remain uncorroborated anecdotes.

The bluish lighting of the rooms where the emotional debates take place stands in strong contrast with the yellow-brown tint of the hall of the apartment, a shared space of negotiation and the common production of meaning. Making the panning camera movement the central device of the film's style allows Puiu – in collaboration with cinematographer Barbu Balasoiu – to do far more than merely capture the complicated dance of the characters in and out of the rooms in the hesitant processes of searching for local and historical meaning. On top of this compositional advantage, the pan introduces horizontality as the fundamental perceptual quality of the images in the expression of hesitation, the central trope of new Romanian cinema. This horizontality becomes a perceptual trope, illustrating how the bewildered camera barely scratches the surface of the recounted events while it attempts to locate their significance. Structurally, this search is analogous to the ways in which the horizontal choreography of the characters' movements represents their disconnection from the real by their resorting to hysterical accounts and emotional narratives that are immediately exposed as contradicting each other. Horizontality in this context highlights an inability to dig deeper, as the conversations on domestic and public history reveal. The fact that Puiu remains reluctant to let viewers in on what *really* happened in the family, extends the performativity and hesitation towards the film's audiences as well. This hesitation, however, does not use

openly reflexive devices that question the illusion of representation, but rather integrates them subtly into the fabric of *Sieranevada*'s narrative. What is even more important in this gesture is the insistence of the artist on including the spectator in the performative processes through which the private-domestic and public-social realities are constructed. *Sieranevada* demonstrates this inclusion in a creative way that summarizes new Romanian cinema's epistemology and addresses the cinematic conditions of the possibility of knowledge.

Our Missing Central Europe

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Abstract: At the beginning of the 1980s Central Europe became the theme of literary and historiographical essays. Those who spoke of Central Europe in the 1980s did so in the hope that, after achieving freedom, the political agenda of the region will lead cooperations, via the great epiphanies of reuniting with one another. But the regime change brought the strengthening of the nation state mentality and of ethnicisms. The dream woven around Central Europe, undefined and shapeless, because it existed primarily as a literary concept, vanished into thin air. In order that the dream of the great writers of the 1980s may acquire the potential to take a political form sometime in the future, the idea should have first gained in strength and accrued in value there where it was born: in literary essays.

Keywords: Central Europe, 1989 regime change, literature, essay, nationalism, transnationalism

Does the entity that we used to call Central Europe still exist? Its name was not given by cartographers, geographers or historians, but by philosophers, poets and novelists, and the reason why it happened so is obvious. They called it so because even at that point in time it wasn't certain that what goes by the name Central Europe exists indeed. And something whose sheer existence is questionable cannot be scientifically defined. Since Friedrich Neumann's book "Mitteleuropa" was published in 1915, philosophers, poets and novelists went to great lengths to make it exist – people for whom words are not merely the carriers of something or its expression, as they are for everybody else, but the things themselves, and in the course of their work this engenders countless difficulties. And yet, in vain they uttered, transported and seized by hope, the magic word "Central Europe," in vain they placed all their trust in it, when from the odours and the sentences overheard on the street they first came to intuit that the Soviet system was not to last much longer: the instant they uttered it they looked around awkwardly to see if anybody else had noticed that what they were speaking about had not yet existed. One might say that they found themselves in the shoes of János Apáczai Csere, the first Hungarian encyclopaedist, as he pondered whether to make an entry for "phoenix" in his dictionary – constrained to decide if such a bird existed, for which he doubtlessly had a word, and about which so many writers had told tales across the centuries.

He couldn't make up his mind – or wouldn't. "The phoenix – he wrote – is an extremely rare fowl (perhaps it doesn't even exist anywhere in the world." (Apáczai Csere, 214)

As far as Central Europe is concerned, the writers of the mid-1980s found themselves facing a puzzle not unlike Apáczai's. In 1984 György Konrád called it a romantic, subversive dream (Konrád 1990, 153.), which appeared to him as a task incomplete for centuries. Milan Kundera became hesitant when he confronted the conceptions of culture with those of political geography: "Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation." (Kundera 1984) Central Europe's existence had been nothing but a hypothesis even for Czesław Miłosz, one he sought to validate by appealing to urban architecture, university tradition, and literary works.

Miłosz's hypothesis is undoubtedly the most factual of the three, and he was also the most methodical in attempting to lend historical reality to Central Europe. But in the end he, too, grounded its reality in the domain of subjectivity, in an intellectual's frame of thinking which bears obvious similarities to his own. The story he tells he could have experienced himself in the course of his journeys and residencies in America:

Now, let us imagine a Central European intellectual in his confrontation with the world at large, with his colleagues from Western Europe, America, or Latin America. As long as he keeps silence or, if he talks, spares the sensibilities of his interlocutors, everything is fine. As soon as he begins to talk frankly, he has the impression that he is regarded as a monster of irony and cynicism... He himself does not claim to be a Marxist or an anti-Marxist; he just shrugs and smiles, for he knows too much. There are, in his opinion, certain demonic subjects which must be approached warily, as many hidden traps and temptations wait there for the imprudent. Marxism appeals to the noble impulses in man, and thence its force of seduction. It is impossible to communicate the truth about it to anybody who has not seen it at work. (Miłosz 1990, 102–103)

How familiar this situation is: the Slovakian, Polish, Czech, Romanian, Bulgarian intellectual and the most self-important of them, the Hungarian intellectual share this mania in common, that the absurdities, demonic powers of history and the obtuse machinations of its actors have stripped him of all illusions, so that, compared to his knowledge obtained at great and painful cost, everybody who lives in allegedly happier parts of the world must be childish and naive. Is this what Central Europe is after all, this putative extra knowledge, the wisdom of the lack of illusions, which so often slides into ridicule? The loss of the capacity for doubt,

of the desire to learn, of the capacity to start anew and think anew – might this not be another name for an ill-disguised inferiority complex, a very typical intellectual disposition in Eastern European countries under Soviet control?

At the beginning of the 1980s Central Europe became the theme not only of literature but also of historiography. In his 1980 study *Sketch on the Three Regions of Europe*, Jenő Szűcs divided Europe into three parts, on the criteria of long-term historical processes and structural elements. His theory was profoundly marked by the experience of the Cold War and by the need to back up the striving for independence of the Soviet Union's Eastern European satellite states with the tools of historiography. Szűcs described the East and the West as constant, typologically immovable structures: in the former, civil liberties, while in the latter, the state's all-pervasive, oppressive and standardizing power define social relations. The in-between region is, according to him, a mix of these two types, which has never been successfully transformed into a stable model with legislative continuity and a continuity of mental frameworks, so in these quarters – the buffer zones of the world powers – the sole structuring power in the long run has remained the lack of balance, and the insecurity felt at every level of social exchange. (Cf. Csordás)

Following from Szűcs's argument, it was probably György Konrád who got the closest to grasping the idea of the region. According to him, what most characterizes Central Europe – of which he considered Germany a part, but whose core he, too, identified with the erstwhile territory of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy – is the medley of ethnicities, to which the 19th-20th century nationalisms have responded with confused, inconsistent identity politics, giving a series of misjudged and plainly wrong answers.

We repeatedly merged into, and separated from one another. Mutual assimilations and dissimilations. Sometimes highly metaphorical combinations of belonging, varying by individual. Our nationalisms show a strong tendency toward self-enclosure, out of an anxiety of foreign influence, which invariably yields nothing more viable than the nation-state bureaucracies' and nation-state cultures' isolationist small-mindedness. (Konrád 1990, 154.) Thus for Konrád Central Europe is to be sought not in the present, let alone in the past, but in the future, as the hope and task of transcending nationalisms. Those who spoke of Central Europe in the 1980s did so in the hope that the insecurity described by Jenő Szűcs could be transcended after achieving freedom by the means of regional cooperation, via the great epiphanies of reuniting with one another. But the regime change brought the strengthening of

the nation state mentality and of ethnicisms that had been conspicuously ailing at the end of the socialist regime. Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia fell apart. Within months the common imaginary was shrouded in the fumes of phantasmagoric national mythologies in almost all the countries of the region, first and foremost in Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Croatia, because neither in tradition nor in contemporary thought were any narratives of true solidarity available, which might have offered the chance of genuine emotional identification to the masses. Everywhere nationalisms became the closest allies of a version of unchecked capitalism that ruthlessly depleted natural and social resources, caring little for the interest of employees – something it could easily afford during the long years of high unemployment – and even less for those living in poverty and precariousness, for the state of education and healthcare, and the state of the natural environment. By now Poland has joined with Hungary the sorry “club” of states where authoritarian tendencies have triumphed. In contradistinction to the Baltic countries, in this region the collapse of the socialist state did not result in a thorough-going mentality change. To a greater or lesser extent oligarchic structures emerged everywhere, corruption and legislative insecurity having sapped the culture of freedom and individual responsibility, still in its infancy. Both the middle classes and the poor became increasingly vulnerable; the old feudal reflexes are flexing their muscles again. In the region the new fortresses of mendacity and inanity sprang up, their walls more solid than concrete. All this casts a sombre shadow on the perspectives of the next generation and heightens the not inconsiderable risk of war on the continent.

The Central European dream might have materialized if the initiators and organizers of re-emerging cooperations and of mutual connecting had not been the state apparatuses, but the most diverse non-governmental, civic initiatives, and if all this had become part of family relations in time. Unfortunately nothing of this came to pass. The prime goal of the elites concentrated into various political parties after 1989 was the establishment of their own clientele and oligarchic hinterland. Political and economic power gave birth to the same kind of mutually dependent, closed systems based on nepotism as at the end of the 19th century and between the two World Wars. Joining the European Union, an act whose subjects were the states, could be of little help, what is more: the money of Western taxpayers served to consolidate, via legitimate institutional systems, the oligarchic autocracies, stifling free initiative and uprooting the vestiges of trust in the rule of law.

The Visegrad Cooperation founded by post-communist states, of which thus Austria is not a part, became a derisory parody of the former imaginings of Central Europe. Fortunately from time to time it ceases to function to all intents and purposes, but so far as it did function at all, its objective had been nothing else but to lend weight to the homegrown biases and bigotries, fundamentally diverging from, and occasionally openly clashing with, the ethical and political values adopted by the EU's core countries, and to the practice of nationalist isolationism and an absolutist interpretation of the state's role.

Today we cannot help but read with incredulity Kundera's confident 1983 paragraphs about the region's unequivocal belonging to the West, and his assertion that Central Europe's tragedy is solely due to its kidnapping and annexation by the Soviet Union. To put it less mildly: although in his time Kundera indeed helped bring round the hesitant Western European political leaders interested in keeping the Soviet Union afloat, as far as the content of his claim is concerned, he was unfortunately wrong. The underdeveloped state of civil society and the persistence of very old feudal reflexes and frames of thinking cannot be blamed on the political relations of the Cold War, for otherwise Central European societies should have shaken these off the way a dog shakes off water from its fur. But instead of Kundera's hopeful scenario, the feudal caste system was reborn, donning the forms known from the 1920s-30s, paralysing and ever more openly intimidating the culture of achievement and solidarity, barely out of its swaddling clothes.

The dream woven around Central Europe, undefined and shapeless, vanished into thin air, and nowadays we hardly ever mention it as a dream even. Might the reason be that the ones to formulate, in Czech, Polish, Slovak, Hungarian, Serbian and German, the versions of an idea born in the medium of literature, with the hopes and apprehensions of the regime change in their nerve endings, tried to transfer their ideas at once into the field of politics, that of the description of social interactions, fearing the ominous onward march of nationalisms — but they failed to define them? Thus after 1989, when various conceptions rivalled for shaping the region in their own image, the idea of Central Europe could not even enter the competition on account of its inchoateness. Apart from a few well-meaning, nondescript exceptions we cannot find the impact of this idea in any program of the region's political parties, although back in the 1990s it numbered quite a few powerful political supporters — first and foremost Erhard Busek, former Austrian vice-chancellor, and Prince Karel Schwarzenberg, Czech minister of foreign affairs between 2007–2009 and 2010–2013.

Today Central Europe exists primarily as a literary concept. But we shouldn't play down the importance of this mode of being. In his excellent *The Essay in Our America*, Germán Arciniegas observes that essays had already been written in the mid-16th century in Latin America, before Montaigne was born. Then he adds that in this part of the world the essay is not a literary pastime, but compulsory musing, thinking about the questions arising in the different epochs. "Compulsory musing": what a strange syntagm. What could be behind it? Arciniegas claims that Latin America, which to this day has remained a puzzle to some extent, an attempt at an encounter between a Christian and an Aztec or an Inca, was in fact not created by the weapons of the Spanish and Portuguese colonists. Mestizo America was born from the work of intellectuals, from essays. "America is the only continent to have appeared recently, the only one to have sprung out of what was totally unknown," Arciniegas writes in his excellent essay, and because I would like us to bear with him for a while, with due apologies I will quote him at length:

Some dreamers had premonitions of its existence but only as an exercise of the imagination, and even the best they could do was invent and then destroy an image, create a fantasy of Atlantis then tell of its immediate disappearance ... America erupted like the provocation for an essay. It is the ultimate subject... In truth, the essay on the New World began to be written in the first decade of the sixteenth century by the explorers themselves. Américo Vespucci discussed fully the problem of the color of American people just as he discussed all the geographical theories that stood between what men saw with their own eyes in the new world and what they had glimpsed in books. From the work of Las Casas or of Sahagún, one can extract independent essays in which it is wonderful to see how currents of medieval thought and humanism cross. Of everything said later in essay of the nineteenth century, there are adumbrations not at all negligible in those primitive texts born on the surprise of discovery... The Latin American essay is a passage along the edge of an abyss. Among our themes is the temptation that one feels only along the precipices of death. One of our first great essays, 'The Letter of Jamaica' by Bolívar, illustrates this dramatic element of our being. You look in vain in the writings of Washington for a comparable page. The deeds that the hero of north needed to consider during his campaigns or after his triumph never formed in him the urgency of reflections so profound... It is obvious that the natural resources of our America and its human reserves of communities formed in battles most anguished and unequal allow us to consider a future of extraordinary influence. But the depths from which we emerge place us in a tragic landscape. One cannot find as a theme for the essay anything more rich of contrasts, with more melancholy shadows, recondite secrets, and sharper crisis – and with more hymns of hope and life." (Arciniegas 2012, 78-81.)

Seen from the West, up to the reign of Maria Theresa, Central Europe had been in fact some kind of blurry, indistinct, uncivilized province outside of time, beyond which lurked, ready to charge, the great monotheistic adversaries of Roman Christianity, until they managed

to conquer a part of it. From then onwards not only did one have to share Central Europe with them, but it also became imminent to reconsider whether Rome indeed was the sole agent to realize salvation through history, or if others also had a share in that task. In fact one needed to consider whether Rome had not misunderstood from the beginning the whole essence of salvation to be attained in history. In the 16th-17th century many travellers and envoys reached the Carpathian Basin, leaving us formidable descriptions. The role that early essays played in the history of Latin America could have been taken, in the case of Central Europe, by these travel narratives. But they never came to define the concept of the region. It is striking how in their wake, in the 19th century no essays follow but poems, and especially anecdotic novels and short stories. Central Europe existed for a very long time in anecdotes which, at the moment when the region's states fall apart, were summed up in a truly wonderful book, Jaroslav Hašek's *Švejk*. The mythical prototype of *The Good Soldier Švejk* encapsulated the mentality of the region's petty *Kleinmensch* – of the survival artist adapting, without revolt, to the most preposterous situations, his apparent doltishness turning out to be astute. Interestingly, in the same period the negative version of this type was also born in Prague: Franz Kafka's Josef K. who perishes, without the relief of the merest uplifting tragedy, by the death sentence never clearly articulated by faceless authority, which strips him of his history and his life, leaving him in the end to die like a dog.

The essay was present to a painfully small degree at the foundation of the Central-Europe concept – and together with it, everything that we call an attempt at articulating thought, in the sense willed by Montaigne: the unique adventure when somebody grasps the singularity, the once-and-for-allness of the individual by contemplating an object, relentlessly putting his judgment on trial, and by arguing why he thinks what he thinks. The essay in fact only makes an appearance in the Central-Europe text in the 20th century, not long before the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It was the time when urban growth spectacularly exploded in the region, the movement of capital gained new momentum, Vienna, Prague and Budapest became the setting for the emergence of new scientific and cultural models, and the mobility of various ethnic groups increased exponentially.

But this late development was followed by quick decline. The region had not recovered to this day from the consequences of World War I. The 19th-century nationalisms were clearly not interested in hammering out the Central-Europe text, but the latter quickly found itself in opposition after WWI as well, faced with the interwar regimes, and later the

region's Communist parties. That the essay may play an important role in history against all odds was demonstrated by this very period and later, even more emphatically, by the period of the regime changes. In Hungary the classical political essay evolved in the wake of György Lukács, Oszkár Jászi, Gyula Szegfű and István Bibó. Everywhere in the European communist countries the regime changes were anticipated and for a short while even accompanied by a flowering of the genre, but this rare plant withered almost completely, because the emerging new societies were not bound into a network by the living veins and channels of common thinking, and because journalism ousted it from public space. Public debates vanished, atrophied in the desert of mutual stereotyping and labelling, of mutually exclusive truisms.

In order that the dream of the great writers of the 1980s may acquire the potential to take a political form sometime in the future, the idea should first gain in strength and accrue in value there where it was born: in literature, philosophy, and the arts. The history of the Hungarian-language *Visegrad Books* series, published by Kalligram Publishing House², is instructive in this respect. Let us place the volumes in a row: Tadeusz Konwiczki, *The Polish Complex* (with a Foreword by Adam Michnik, Afterword by Gábor Csordás), Dominik Tatarka, *Agony* (with a Foreword by Milan Hamada, Afterword by Erzsébet Juhász), Rudolf Chmel (ed.), *A The Slovakian Question in the 20th Century* (with a Foreword by Rudolf Chmel, Afterword by Csaba Kiss Gy.), Bohumil Hrabal, *Schizophrenic Gospel* (with a Foreword by Milan Jankovič, Afterword by Endre Bojtár), Adam Michnik, *The Trouble with History* (with a Foreword by Józef Tischner, Afterword János Kis), Jan Patočka, *What Are the Czechs?* (with a Foreword by Petr Pithart, Afterword by Mihály Vajda). These six books offered to the Hungarian reader the unknown closest at hand, for only painfully few Hungarian readers are capable of seeing the region through the eyes of Czech, Polish or Slovak writers and thinkers. And yet this is exactly what we need: to learn, to acquire the gaze of the next-door stranger, which would make it possible for the Central European peoples to see one another not as rivals, but as the other living with them, whose difference, so to speak, can be located in ourselves. This might enable us to render the territory into a common region in the geographical, historical, cultural sense. Today, however, this extra knowledge can only be

² The Kalligram Publishing House was founded by László Szigeti in 1991 in Bratislava. It worked since 1991 in Budapest as well. Very soon, it became one of the most important publishers of contemporary Hungarian and Slovakian literature and social sciences. The Kalligram Publishing House stopped its appreciated activity in Slovakia in 2017, but it still exists in Hungary.

relied on in the domain of culture and literature. I wonder how many readers seized Attila József's verses seriously:

“Turks,
Tartars, Rumanians, Slovaks, storm this heart.
If in great depths a quiet future lurks,
It owes the past, to-day's Hungarians, part.

I want to work”³ -?

The volumes published in Kalligram's *Visegrad Books* series appeared between 1996 and 1997. At that time the mutual cooperation of the Visegrad countries came to take a back seat in politics, before the situation changed again a few years later. It became obvious that the programme was not grounded in principle, but was solely the negligible or revivable tool of the assertion of domestic interests in Brussels. For this reason, the publisher dropped the series title. László Szigeti, Kalligram's spiritual father said in an interview in 2000: “Politicians are simply not worth our advertising them through literature, and it is definitely not worth advertising something that they will now put into the showcase, only to remove it in the next moment.” (Morvay 2000)

But within other book series, Kalligram has published countless seminal works of fiction, sociology and historiography about Central Europe. I count among these not only the books of Czesław Miłosz and Zbigniew Herbert, Danilo Kiš and Alexander Tišma, István Bibó and Miklós Mészöly, Tomáš Garyk Masaryk and Václav Havel, Ľubomír Lipták and Juraj Špitzer - the classics - but also the works of influential historians, linguists and literary historians. And these are only the Hungarian-language books. What gave Kalligram extraordinary weight over the past quarter of a century was that it carried out a rich publishing programme in two languages, Hungarian and Slovak. With its books of philosophy and social sciences it became an important reference point for the Slovakian intelligentsia as well; it also started a journal of philosophy, *Anthropos*, and a monthly journal of social criticism, *OS*, which means “axis” in Slovak, as well as the abbreviation of “civil society,” also alluding to Karl Popper's term, *open society*, in both Slovak and English. Such a complex and extensive publishing programme is unparalleled in the region's history and could obviously have only

³ Attila József, *A Dunánál (By the Danube)*, trans. Vernon Watkins, http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/J%C3%B3zsef_Attila-1905/A_Dun%C3%A1n%C3%A1l/en/1766-By_the_Danube

emerged in a multilingual, multicultural environment. The greatest loss that Central Europe has incurred in several waves since WWI was the cultural and linguistic homogenization, accompanied by psychic and physical violence. Such a situation can only be assuaged by the natural heterogeneity of thought, of which the twin, Hungarian and Slovak publishing project of Kalligram is a suitable emblem.

If someone takes a look at Kalligram's output of the last 25 years, they will very likely feel embittered at the sight of such treasures wasted on Central European societies' history of fiascos. For it is sufficient to glance at the headlines of the major daily papers, and our everyday experience is reinforced: the world is every bit as complicated, insecure, and as much filled with injustices, falsehood and tragedies as ever. Chagrined, we can affirm that what is going on, albeit in the context of contemporary globalization, is just the old tune. Not even the most cocksure, or the ones who deny others empathy, can escape the feeling of insecurity and threat. We move in time with our back towards the future: the present opens to us as the past's foreground. And the shared European past is traumatic. However justified in our bitterness, we should not judge our present-day situation from the perspective of the exaggerated hopes that defined the political atmosphere of the global North at the time when Kalligram was founded. Europe got over the Cold War, but didn't turn into the peaceful space which is rendered homely by the ethos of solidarity and enlightened reason. The times have come back, even in places beyond one's own region, when even the day-to-day acting-out of humaneness requires great effort, stamina and courage in the face of the cynical viciousness tabulated into the letter of the law.

However, the blame for our bitterness lies not with the state of the books but with the state of our region and the world. The writing, editing and publishing of books remains, even in situations such as ours, a source of ongoing hope. Writing, the creation of books has not simply accompanied every culture from the moment of their birth: cultures are created by writing, by books. To be sure, the world as we know it has always been confusing, threatening – and friendly at the same time. And books had always played their part in the threatening, the confusion, as well as in the friendliness. In the course of its twenty-five-year existence – so short, as compared to the age of the world – Kalligram has always been the home of the spirit of friendliness. Franz Rosenzweig's American translator, Barbara Galli writes in her Acknowledgements: "Friendships have formed, are forming, through us, between us, those of

us who have met with Franz Rosenzweig upon the pages he left for us, these very rich pages that touch us to think, to think anew.” (Galli 2005, vii.)

One could hardly render with more precision what a book is. A place of encounters, of the leaving behind of reminders, and of reminding, where friendships are made, and thoughts set out, travelling beyond fears, beyond the world’s chaos, beyond death. If the book is this, then the spirit of friendship and encounters also animates the publisher, the one committed to thought, to the past and the future; and it animates all those who participate in the creation of the book. Let us therefore not forget that the hope conceived in the spirit of friendliness which can make our imagined and missing Central Europe not only a region where essays feel at home, but also where all of its nations, all of its people and its guests can peacefully live together.

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**Through Whose Looking Glass?
Postcolonial Resonations in the Production and Festivalisation Processes of
Contemporary Romanian Non-fiction Cinema**

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Abstract: This article analyses a group of contemporary Romania-located non-fiction human rights films (Edet Belzberg's *Children Underground* (2001), Mona Nicoară and Miruna Coca-Cozma's *Școala noastră [Our School]* (2011), Alexandre Nanău's *Toto și surorile lui [Toto and His Sisters]* (2014) and the ways in which a postcolonial theoretical reading of these films' and their makers' engagement in transnational production and international festivalisation processes assists in cementing the global divide between centre and periphery. In situating my argument along the centre-periphery binary, I will, therefore, employ a postcolonial perspective because it is within postcolonial studies that the practices and discourses of the subjugation of other, peripheral, or eastern bodies by a central, all-knowing, or western subjugator has been most fervently investigated and theorised. In my analysis, I will use the signifiers of the so-called central and the peripheral rather than the geo-specific and proven problematic 'East' and 'West'⁴ to acknowledge that there *is* a separation between global mass knowledge and culture producers and the locally suppressed, and at the same time to divert from the common colonial binary. As Hamad Dabashi writes, "[t]he point is not to dismiss but to overcome the myth of 'the West' as the measure of truth" (Dabashi 2016).

Keywords: postcolonial, Romanian non-fiction film, postcommunist, humanitarian gaze, festivalisation, transnational

After the fall of communism⁵ and the end of Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule in 1989, the Romanian film production sector underwent drastic modifications. Prior to 1989, the majority of the country's non-fiction⁶ film production occurred through the state-run studio Sahia Film

⁴ See: Benita Perry (2016), <https://www.zedbooks.net/blog/posts/fuck-you-zizek/>; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988).

⁵ I borrow from Liviu Andreescu, author of "Are We All Postcolonialists Now? Postcolonialism And Postcommunism in Central and Eastern Europe[.]" the definition of terminology where he claims, "I employ the term 'postcommunist' to refer to former Soviet client states in Central and Eastern Europe; and 'postsoviet' to refer to former Soviet republics (such as the Baltic states, Moldova, the Caucasus republics etc.)." I do not use postsocialism in this analysis as a majority of the works I make reference to use postcommunist (or post-communist) so for the sake of clarity, I coincide with the majority's choice of terminology. See: Liviu Andreescu, (2011, 58).

⁶ I use the term "non-fiction" rather than "documentary" for I find the term more inclusive of the actuality behind the filmmaking processes at hand. The term documentary holds various contesting definitions with each often revealing the "fundamental ambiguities" of the film form. Thus I employ the term non-fiction, as defined by Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, to refer to the films at hand as "works of narrative prose dealing with or offering opinions or conjectures upon facts and reality." See: Robert Sapino (2011, 5).

(previously Alexandru Sahia Studio) but the fall of communism resulted in the collapse of the studio which caused a cessation in the non-fiction film production industry. This lapse in production became known to those in the industry and the average Romanian consumer as the “death of documentary” and was referred to as such for the better part of the past 10 years (Bradeanu 2007). This ‘death’, however, offers an opportunity to study Romanian non-fiction film’s afterlife.

In the investigation to follow, I will argue that analyzing contemporary Romania-located non-fiction films from a postcolonial perspective, specifically human rights oriented works with a thematic focus on children in strife, provides a thorough understanding of the complex politics of cinema-making”⁷ many Romanian non-fiction filmmakers are obliged to engage in to receive international acclaim and publicity. I will argue that Romanian non-fiction cinema is “located in positions marginal to the economic, institutional, and ideological centres of image making” (Iordanova, Martin-Jones, and Vidal 2010, 5). By establishing Romanian non-fiction cinema as peripheral to the filmic productions made in the centre, such as those from the U.S., Germany, or France, I will be able to more accurately analyse the distribution, production, and presentation processes with which Romanian non-fiction cinema is engaged. I will rely on a 2016 article by Veda Popovici and Ovidiu Pop, *From Over Here, in the Periphery: a decolonial method for Romanian cultural and political discourses*, to hash out the ways in which the centre-periphery dichotomy permeates within the Romanian cultural sphere.

Thus, the “complex politics of cinema-making” for Romanian non-fiction films arises in the way that the filmmakers from the peripheral country of Romania symbolically or discursively migrate to central countries to establish professional networks and return to Romania to make films about their native country; obtain foreign funding to produce their films; pursue international acclaim from film festivals held in central countries before returning to screen their films at the domestic level; and depict the subject matter of Romanian children in strife via a problematically distanced aesthetic to satiate the gaze of distanced (often non-Romanian) viewers. These processes mirror a certain postcoloniality

⁷ I refer here to the phrase used by Doru Pop in *Romanian New Wave Cinema: An Introduction* (2014) in which he writes, “we must describe the connection between their [the filmmakers’] biography and their movies, not simply because they are of the same age, or because they are dealing with problems related to a certain period in communism [subject matter], or just because they share common motifs, also linked to specific historical facts...but because they follow the same ‘politics’ of cinema-making” (25).

where self-exoticization becomes a methodical process as the “postcommunist subject” is urged to mimic the dominant cultural production forms established in the centre which both affirms and perpetuates the socially and politically constructed “central” and “peripheral” division of Europe (and abroad) (Ștefănescu 2012, 16).

When searching for contemporary (2001-present) feature-length (70-90 minutes) Romanian non-fiction human rights-oriented films with a thematic focus on children in strife, I found the following pool: Liviu Tipurita's *Gypsy Child Thieves* (2009), Teodora Mihai's *Waiting for August* (2014), *Children Underground* (2001), *Școala noastră [Our School]* (2011), and *Toto și surorile lui [Toto and His Sisters]* (2014). All films in this pool were made possible in part by funding from either the U.S., the U.K., France, Germany, Switzerland or Belgium. I selected *Children Underground*, *Școala noastră*, and *Toto și surorile lui* to be closely analysed as these three films were most accessible to a non-Romanian speaking international spectator due to their having been screened at a high number of international film festivals. These three films received the most publicity both at the local and the foreign level and each was nominated for their native countries' most recognizable film award; for *Children Underground* it was an Academy Award and for *Școala noastră* and *Toto și surorile lui* it was a *Premiile Gopo* (the Romanian equivalent).

Additionally, the linkages between the Romania-located human rights-oriented non-fiction films in my case study surface through the crossovers in consultants, editors, and producers whose presence dominates the thematic field (see Table 1.0).

		Film Consultant	Producer	Editor
<i>Children Underground</i>	2001	Mona Nicoară	Mona Nicoară Jonathan Oppenheim Edet Belzberg	Jonathan Oppenheim
<i>Școala noastră [Our School]</i>	2011	Edet Belzberg	Mona Nicoară	Jonathan Oppenheim
<i>Toto și surorile lui [Toto and His Sisters]</i>	2014	Mona Nicoară Jonathan Oppenheim	Mona Nicoară Alexandre Nanău	Alexandre Nanău

[Table.1.]

I do not claim that a film oppositional to the type I will analyse does not exist, but rather that when searched for, the Romanian non-fiction films of the criteria I have outlined available to

an international audience follow the trends that I will present throughout this essay as exemplified by the case study.

In the following section I will analyse the advent and progression of non-fiction film within Romania in relation to the country's communist control in order to provide a deeper understanding of the medium's turn toward the international market. In analysing how Sahia Film and the Communist regime utilised non-fiction film to be a propagandist tool for the state, I will provide evidence for the decline of Romanian spectatorship and its effect on Romanian non-fiction film's shift to satiate the desires of audiences abroad.

A brief unpacking of Romanian non-fiction film's post-1989 trajectory

1950 marked the founding of Romania's first non-fiction film production studio, Sahia Film (then Alexandru Sahia Studio) which was an ideological institution that aimed to strengthen the Romanian nation as a whole through the presentation of propagandist media at the local level. Sahia was responsible for producing an immense amount of films and at its peak the studio produced nearly 300 films a year (Uricaru 2012, 430).

Corresponding to Sahia's overt monopolization and the various governmental limitations on the industry, early Romanian non-fiction film remained a largely domestic cultural production with inconsistent international outreach as, under Ceaușescu's rule, there was little to no circulation of Romanian non-fiction films outside of the so called Soviet Bloc. Additionally during this time, both non-fiction and fiction foreign films were heavily regulated, censored, and more often than not banned which created an incredibly controlled perspective towards the medium within the country's general public by the early 70s.⁸ As censorship heightened and foreign language broadcasts diminished, there was a drastic increase in the production of propaganda films via Sahia and the number of Romanian film viewers in both the home and the cinema halls dropped significantly (Bradeanu 2007). This disassociated public attitude towards non-fiction film carried on after the fall of communism in 1989 with Alexandru Solomon, a Romanian filmmaker, stating in 2004:

⁸ Though it was no simple task to see foreign films in Romania during Ceaușescu's rule, Romanian translator Irina Margareta Nistor, who started working for Romanian National Television in 1980, spent four years between 1985-1989 secretly and illegally dubbing more than 1,000 banned foreign language films. These dubbed films were then covertly distributed among specific circles for private screenings. For an article on Nistor see: Kit Gillet, 2014.

Nobody wants to legitimize himself professionally as a documentary filmmaker in Romania. The genre has a low status and the term documentary triggers an array of negative memories which do not fit the prestige attached to the practice elsewhere (Bradeanu 2007).

Thus, from the beginning of the post-communist period, the maintenance of non-fiction cinema was mainly to be provided by the drive of filmmakers, independent production companies, and private funding sources as the newly autonomous Sahia was unable to maintain the country's film production and the interest of the country's viewers had been diminishing for years.⁹

It wasn't until 2004, however, that Romanian non-fiction films started to enter the international scene through a spur of production within the country by independent filmmakers funded in part by non-Romanian sources.¹⁰ Alexandru Solomon's *Marele Jaf communist [The Great Communist Bank Robbery]* (2004), Florin Iepan's *Născuți la comandă: Decreșii [Children of the Decree]* (2004), Dumitru Budrala's *Blestemul ariciului [The Curse of the Hedgehog]* (2004), and Ileana Stănculescu's *Podul [The Bridge]* (2004) all screened at the 2004 International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) paving the route to success for other Romanian non-fiction filmmakers to follow (Voinea 2012, 44).

Andrei Voinea, a historian who writes at length on this surge of productivity, claims that the directors of these four films achieved success due to their acquirement of Bourdieusian cultural capital through various engagements with "European institutions" which disrupted the hierarchy of the Romanian non-fiction film industry (Voinea 2012, 46). For Voinea, the Romanian directors screened at IDFA in 2004 attained a specifically Western European cultural capital through receiving education, training, thus establishing a professional network and personal life abroad. This turn to the European market and transnational production, as well as the pursuit of international acclaim in places other than Romania stems largely from the Romanian non-fiction film industry's complicated state-operated past.

⁹ In 1991 two independent film production companies were established outside of the Ministry of Culture: one led by Lucian Pintilie and the other by the film critic Bujor T. Răpeanu. However, neither made large waves in the non-fiction sector. (Voinea, 2012, 29).

¹⁰ In 1991 the 41st Berlin International Film Festival [Berlinale] held a "A Retrospective of Romanian Documentaries from 1898 to 1990" but none were in competition as the selection ran as a panorama.

See:

https://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/1991/01_jahresblatt_1991/01_Jahresblatt_1991.html

Thus, these Romanian non-fiction filmmakers followed an obligatory route away from Romania and toward Western European countries whose production companies and institutions would afford them the ability to reach markets with an already established demand. In other words, Romanian non-fiction cinema did not enter the international market coincidentally, but rather did so compulsorily. It did so with Amsterdam and IDFA as a point of *central* infiltration; with the co-production amongst non-Romanian European institutions as a necessity; with Romania's problematic past as a forced guide; with the fall of communism and Sahia studio and the non-fiction sector as a path paved to a place of elsewhere, to a place other than Romania. The argument to follow is that this path set by the films and filmmakers that breached the international market in 2004 has been similarly followed by the Romanian non-fiction filmmakers of the case study at hand, Alexandre Nanău, Mona Nicoară, and Miruna Coca-Cozma, who represent a more current Romanian non-fiction engagement with transnational production and international festivalisation. The question for us now is how the shift from a state-run industry to a global market system, i.e. Romanian non-fiction film's inter/transnationalization, was governed by the autocratic relationship between the central and peripheral spaces.

Interpreting Romania between Posts

It is necessary next to understand Romania as a nation peripheral to those at the centre in order to employ a postcolonial theoretical lens with which we may read the production and festivalisation processes of *Children Underground*, *Școala noastră*, and *Toto și surorile lui*. Since the early 2000s, various investigations from Rodica Mihăilă's "Crossing Borders/Exploring Boundaries: American Studies and the Question of the Post-communist 'Other'" (2003) to Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* (2009) to more recent anthologies such as *Postcolonialism/Postcommunism: Intersections and Overlaps* (2011) and *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures* (2015) have attempted to hash out whether or not (post)communism¹¹ should be included in postcolonial studies and on the ways in which postcolonial thinking contributes to a richer understanding of various postcommunist contexts. I contend that the application of postcolonial studies to certain non-

¹¹ The parenthetically demarcated (post) here signifies chronology in that both the communist era and its aftermath have been studied and discussed in the literature listed.

colonised spaces can provide meaningful insight, thus, I will now consider the case of Romania, and more specifically its non-fiction cinema's shift from domestic to transnational film production, as causally related to Romania's (post)communist present and past.

The distinction of Romania as a peripheral country from France, Germany, or the U.S. is deep-rooted and has been analysed by Romanians from a multitude of perspectives including philosophical, literary, and economic since early in the 19th century.¹² Authors of *From Over Here, in the Periphery: a decolonial method for Romanian cultural and political discourses*, Veda Popovici and Ovidiu Pop, claim that "Through internalization, [the fashioning of a Romanian national culture] contributed to the mass diffusion of the stigma invented by thinkers from Western Europe, and ever since generation after generation of Romanian intellectuals, to name the clearest case, have been engulfed by the obsessive question: are we really European or not?"

This question has circulated for more than a century throughout Romanian literature, news reports, journalistic pieces, and EU commissioned studies. The concept of "Europeanness" and "Europeanisation" are crucial to the understanding of Romania as marginalised from Western Europe. It is through this marginalization that certain negative stereotypes of Romanians, as "beggars," "gypsies," "corrupt," or of a "backward culture" have been both constructed and maintained (Rohozinska 1999, n.p.).

Romania's "Europeanness" was a point of scrutiny long before the question of Europeanisation and the country's entrance into the European Union came into play. I borrow a question posed by British historian Tony Judt in his 2001 article titled *Romania: Bottom of the heap*: "Where, then, does Romania fit in the European scheme of things?" What complicates Romania's various attempts to achieve a 'European' status is that

[t]here are no generally acceptable criteria of 'Europeanness' on which such judgements could be based. History, culture and identity, and appeals to these supposed 'inheritances' from the past, have divided Europeans far more than they have ever been able to unite them (Center for the study of the imaginary 2002, 35).

This division among Europeans is most easily drawn in the context of their native countries and often used to separate the European cultural forerunners such as France, Germany, and

¹² For a list of contributions in the varied approaches to studying Romania and other Eastern European countries as "caught between empires" see: Costica Bradatan (2012) and Mária Kovács (2010).

the UK, with those of the “other Europe.”¹³ Nonetheless, “Europeanness” is fluid and conceivably unattainable unless a country, like the concept, remains perpetually in transition. And often times national cinemas of countries “at the edges” follow suit. As the editors of *Cinema at the Periphery* write, “The cinematic periphery is a constantly shifting constituent in a dynamically evolving relationship. It is elusive and intangible, as the centre to which it relates keeps redefining itself” (Iordanova, Martin-Jones, & Vidal 2010, 6). Though not included in Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie’s *Cinema of Small Nations* (2007), I argue that Romania’s non-fiction cinema behaves as that of a small nation, as one that is of the cinematic periphery.

According to Hjort, small national cinemas are defined by limitations on domestic markets and a shortage of domestic audiences and are thus forced into a compulsorily dependent relationship with external powers “by the neo-liberal economic and political pressures of globalization” (2007, 15). In this way, the marginality of Romanian non-fiction cinema and the question of the nation’s “Europeanness” only enhanced the plausibility of Romanian filmmaker’s reliance on external established themselves as the centres of European cultural production.

As the necessity of co-productions continued within the Romanian film industry, the concept of a “national” cinema began to be challenged in light of the more accurate “transnational” production label (Iordanova et al. 2010). Given Romania is a cinematically “small nation”, with its non-fiction cinema peripherally marginalised, its filmmakers are “compelled precisely by a self-colonizing competition for European/Western recognition and, more blatantly in recent decades, economic investment” (Imre 2012, 8). Romanian non-fiction filmmakers are essentially obliged to be in dialog with the funding and distribution sources of more profitable nations and their respective film industries in order to produce cinematic works. This relationship at the level of the industry and film production is also present at the individual level in the way that Romanian filmmakers try to bridge the gap between Romania as peripheral and other central countries through their own personal migratory behaviour.

¹³I refer to the “other Europe” in reference to the Eastern European countries that Phillip Roth included in his four-volume set publication *Writers from The Other Europe*, (1977-1999). The labelling of Eastern Europe as the “other Europe” is also in reference to *European Cinema after 1989: Cultural Identity and Transnational Production* in which it is described that after WWII “Eastern Europe became the “other Europe,” comprising the satellites of the USSR in Eastern Europe, as well as the USSR itself.” See: Luisa Rivi ed., *European Cinema after 1989: Cultural Identity and Transnational Production*, (2007, 13).

Migrating Between the Centre and the Periphery or Establishing Oneself as “European”

The filmmakers of *Children Underground*, *Școala noastră*, and *Toto și surorile lui* all move(d) through various countries for education, workshop opportunities, and for general residence. Nanău, Nicoară, and Coca-Cozma are émigré directors who hold a citizenship or residency status in a foreign but central country. Nanău has German citizenship, Nicoară has lived on and off in the U.S. for nearly 20 years, Coco-Cozma lived and earned her higher education in Switzerland, and Belzberg was born in the U.S. Jordanova describes that instead of trying to draw funds to Eastern Europe, it is easier if the directors themselves move out of their native peripheral countries to attain funding from better financed countries’ film industries (2002, 526). A tracing of Nicoară, her co-director Miruna Coca-Cozma and Nanău’s course from Romania to the countries where they ultimately settled provides evidence of their establishment of the mobile identity between centre and periphery.

Nicoară was born in the Transylvanian town of Timișoara, Romania. She started working as a human rights activist after 1989 and was initially focused on LGBTQ rights. As a human rights activist, Nicoară has been thoroughly engaged with the problems of Romania’s political situation and the various humanitarian efforts regarding Roma inclusion in Romania. Though in 1995 Nicoară moved to New York to attend Columbia University, she stayed engaged with Romanian human rights activism. Nicoară’s interest in the non-fiction film scene started in 2001 while she was still in New York. She says, “I didn’t get hooked on documentary filmmaking until I started to work with Edet Belzberg on ‘Children Underground’” (“Our School Directors” 2011). After living abroad for two decades, she remained connected to her home country and its politics and helped shape multiple films featuring Romanian children.

Nicoară’s co-director, Miruna Coca-Cozma was born in Bucharest, Romania. Coca-Cozma worked for Romanian national television for five years as a journalist and moderator for Antena 1 and TVR (“La Televiziunea Din Elvetia” 2004). In 1999 she moved to Switzerland and began working in radio broadcasting with *Radio Suisse Romande* and became involved with Swiss national television and the Journal of the TSR. While in Switzerland, she attended l’Ecole de Français Moderne [The School of Modern French] in Lausanne. She is a graduate of the BBC School of Journalism as well as the Romanian Academy of Theater and Film. Her

first film, *Omar Porras, Wizard of the Stage* is a Swiss production and was released in 2008. Nanău was born in Bucharest, Romania, but at the age of 10 he and his family of Transylvanian Saxons (a cultural minority of German descent) emigrated to Germany. Nanău went on to study film direction at Deutsche Film und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB) and filmed his first feature documentary, a German and Austrian co-production *Zadek inszeniert Peer Gynt*, in 2006. The following year, Nanău was a scholarship holder at the Academy of Arts in Berlin (UDK). His next feature documentary and first Romanian production, *Lumea văzută de Ion B. [The World According to Ion B.]* (2009), is about the struggle of contemporary collage artist Ion Bârlădeanu to receive recognition while living on the streets of Bucharest. The film was produced by HBO Romania, an affiliate of the U.S. based multinational corporation HBO, and received an International Emmy Award in 2010.

Based on the movement that Nanău, Coca-Cozma, and Nicoară made prior to their first productions, it is evident that the filmmakers' or their families' choices to move abroad directly influenced their access to non-Romanian funding. Both *Toto și surorile lui* and *Școala noastră* relied upon the connections that the filmmakers had made in their time abroad with each film's funding coming from the filmmaker's respective place of non-Romanian residence. In an efficient summary of this phenomenon Iordanova writes:

The way European film financing is set up, in practical terms, urges filmmakers from Eastern Europe to migrate to the West and obtain some sort of status (domicile, residency, citizenship) in a Western country. A simple migratory move, which may be unrelated to any creative considerations, sometimes proves of utmost importance, as fewer possibilities are available to those who chose not to migrate. The movement of people is increasingly becoming a key aspect in the contemporary process of co-producing culture, and in the case of East Europeans establishing oneself in the West becomes a creative imperative: move or perish (Iordanova 2002, 519).

While the bridging of the financial gap present between the Romanian film industry and funding in Western Europe and the U.S. may be made possible by moving from Romania to a central country, this trend has some crucial political implications. As Romanian directors move elsewhere and gain citizenship or residency, they, like their films, become transnational hybrids. Thus, an active participation in a space central to cultural production not only influences these Romanian filmmakers' access to funding, but also alters their positionality toward the creative process in shaping the way they approach their subject matter for an international target audience.

The Influence of International Film Festivals on the Film Production Agendas

Children Underground, *Toto și surorile lui*, and *Școala noastră* all premiered at international film festivals (IFFs) and followed specific festival routes that were largely focused in central countries prior to the films' respective screening in peripheral countries. In this way, the films circulate in a way that sanctions them to attain value from renowned centre-located IFFs. I will argue that these festivals and their audiences have a key role in shaping the canon that films produced in the periphery seeking international festivalisation ought to follow.

As Marijke de Valck, co-founder of the Film Festival Research Network and author of *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (2007), rightly notes, film festivals began as a largely European phenomenon in an effort to bypass the Hollywood system hegemony. Film scholar Thomas Elsaesser affirms that “[t]he annual international film festival is a very European institution (2005, 84).” According to Elsaesser, the main function of IFFs is to “categorize, classify, sort and sift the world’s annual film productions” (2005, 96). However, this sifting is not just into categories of genre, theme, or nation specificity but also into selections of “what’s hot” and “what’s not” that is, what audience members typically want to see and what falls below the standard line of consumption interest. It is through the gaze of international audiences that the shaping of a festival film canon begins to occur. As Elsaesser puts it, “films are now made for festivals” (2005, 96). Mark Peranson furthers this idea in his cynically titled “First You Get the Power, Then You Get the Money: Two Models on Film Festivals,” in which he argues that IFF’s shared selection agenda results nurtures a specific festival film model that attempts to “replicate the success of more talented precursors” (2008, 41).

In this way, IFFs both add and detract value, be it economic, cultural, or artistic, from the films screened in regard to their placement in (or out) of competition and their reception by jury members, film critics, and audiences. Elsaesser argues that festival films are first “offered to the gaze of the international press and visitors, whose response in turn can be fed back into the national public debate, in order to shape the perception a specific country has of its national cinema,” its filmmakers, and itself (2005, 88). De Valck similarly claims that films from cinematically small nations often must be screened at IFFs to seek affirmation and

critical prowess “before they [can] be considered as having any cultural value at home” (2007, 209). This becomes of great importance when considering the ways that cinemas from the periphery, such as Romania-located non-fiction films, are screened first in central countries before returning home. In this way, IFFs are not just venues or events but entities that assert their presence in the global film market, acting as legitimization gateways and “tastemakers” for films and filmmakers (De Valck 2016, 109).

Children Underground follows the daily lives of a group of Romanian children who are living in the metro underpass of Piața Victoriei, in Bucharest, Romania. The film won the Special Jury Prize at its Sundance Festival premiere in January, 2001. It was also selected at independent film awards events following its premiere including the International Documentary Association's Documentary Award, and the Gotham Awards' Documentary Achievement Prize. Most notably, the film was nominated for an Academy Award in 2002. It was screened at IDFA in the Netherlands and also at the International Film Festival Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic but the film is still yet to screen at a festival in Romania. In a 2001 interview with *Variety*, Belzberg claimed she was trying to get it shown but that the Romanian community didn't want it to be screened and that the Romanian Cultural Center in New York also refused to screen the film. Thus, *Children Underground* circulated outside of Romania and mostly within IFFs predominantly in the U.S.

Școala noastră also premiered in the U.S. at a screening for Tribeca Film Festival in New York City, New York in April of 2011. The film follows the lives of three Roma-Romanian children from a small Transylvanian town, Târgu Lăpuș, during its EU-funded ethnic integration process. In June, 2011 the film was screened at the Silverdocs festival in Silver Spring, Maryland. That same month the film screened in Romania for a large audience at the Transylvania International Film Festival [TIFF] in Cluj-Napoca. However, for the film's first screening in Bucharest, Romania – the nation's capital – not a single member of the crew was present which is starkly different to their presence at the various other screenings surrounding the film's release. When the film screened at TIFF, which takes place in a city 1.5 hours away from Târgu Lăpuș, the film crew bussed Dileu's residents to the festival. Nicoară said in an interview that the film's screening at TIFF is where the children really realised the film's impact yet the film continued to circulate more actively abroad than in Romania. Later in the summer of 2011 the film screened at a Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival (Jihlava IDFF) in Jihlava, Czech Republic and was nominated for the Best Eastern European

Documentary during the festival's Silver Eye Awards. Still, it was not until the following year that the documentary received mass recognition and an award from a Romanian-based festival. In March, 2012 the film was nominated for the Premiile Gopo [Gopo Awards], the Romanian equivalent to the U.S. Academy Awards.

Toto și surorile lui follows the lives of three Roma-Romanian children living in Bucharest, Romania awaiting their mothers' release from prison. The film premiered at the San Sebastián International Film Festival on September 24, 2014. Just a few days later it won the Best International Documentary at the Zurich Film Festival. In October 2014 *Toto și surorile lui* "gripped Warsaw" at the Warsaw Film Festival in Poland (A. Andreescu 2014). In 2014, *Toto și surorile lui* also screened at Jihlava IDFF and it won the Silver Eye Award. In November, 2014 the film won the Prize of Ecumenical Jury at Dok Leipzig in Germany. In September of 2015, *Toto și surorile lui* was screened in competition at the Budapest International Documentary Film Festival in Hungary. The film began 2015 by winning the Grand Prix at the Premiers Plans festival in Angers France. It went on to win Best International Documentary at the Luxembourg City Film Festival in March of 2015. In April, the film was nominated and won the 2015 Premiile Gopo and in this same month, the film was screened in Romania at TIFF.

Through the mapping of the festival careers of *Școala noastră*, *Toto și surorile lui* and *Children Underground*, I have made evident the ways that IFFs' power of value addition determines the festival circulation that films from the periphery often follow to receive critical acclaim in the centre that will then affirm their significance at the domestic level. However, what remains to be scrutinised are the ways in which IFFs also create and cultivate a unique kind of audience that is both "mutually self-confirming and self-celebrating" similarly to the festivals themselves (Elsaesser 2005, 102). I will now analyse the ways in which IFF audience members are not merely passive spectators but also play a substantial role in the festival film production scheme.

Watching Back Familiar Scenes at International Film Festivals

Film festival attendees have the means to 'participate' in the film industry not only at the economic level via consumption, but on the production level in the ways that film producers

seek to make films that will satisfy the demands of festival audiences. According to a 2015 study completed by Jan Elise Stambro, film festival attendees tend to be well-educated individuals who earn a high income and are not affiliated with the film industry. In desiring a certain type of film, festival goers have a role in the creation of the canonical festival film structure as it must follow a universally accessible narrative or theme. Therefore, filmmakers are inevitably in the position to “calculate” the spectator, proposing a precise calibration of [their] film in relation to a desired emotional response” (Gaines 1999, 88). Just as filmmakers have a target audience in mind and IFFs seek out a collectively defined ‘festival film,’ festival goers desire a certain screening experience. However, as various film categories and their associated festivalisation processes develop different modes of desired spectatorship or ‘ways of looking,” I will now scale down the scope of my IFF investigation to Romanian human rights oriented non-fiction films to speak of the specific desire and gaze associated with this cinema.

In regard to my case study, I will mobilise the concept of the “humanitarian gaze” as developed by Sonia M. Tascón in her 2015 book *Human Rights Film Festivals*. Tascón begins by defining humanitarianism as both a practice and a discourse of “intervention in other’s troubles” established through an unequal dynamic between giver and receiver of aid (2015, 34). Tascón uses this well-established and often assumed relationship between those in the periphery who ‘need aid,’ – in my case study Romanian children in strife –, and those from the centre who offer help – in my case study these are the EU institutions or foreign funded education centres that provide assistance to the children depicted. She extends this to explain the specific ‘ways of looking” developed from the dynamic between those who are most often watched as peripheral and other, and those who watch as central and hegemonic. Tascón considers this combination of the politics associated with watching human rights oriented films as the “humanitarian gaze.” She writes,

The humanitarian gaze, as I conceive it, organizes what we may expect to see when viewing others’ troubles, and seeks to find it. I call it a gaze because it is constitutive of a way of looking, of expecting to see, as well as being reproduce-able. It organizes who we will expect to see in these (humanitarian) circumstances, and includes who is not permitted into such a frame (2015, 35).

The gaze is established through the system of global inequality by which the world is divided “into zones of Western [central] comfort and safety and non-Western [peripheral] need and

vulnerability” (Bruce 2016, 288). The humanitarian gaze allows for a disidentification¹⁴ on behalf of the viewer from the marginalised others depicted as squalid, vulnerable, and without hope. The feelings of self-righteous pity evoked from these kinds of images can derive a sort of pleasure in the viewer as well as a sense of gratification in that the images presented reaffirm their privilege and separation from the suffering presented on screen.

Tascón describes the “reproduce-ability” of the humanitarian gaze as a product of how human rights work has been limited to making certain claims that are reproduced by a majority of films and human rights film festivals in regard to those seeking help and those in the position to offer it. She writes of how the ubiquitousness of the images and discourses continually presented in human rights films “simply reinforces that only certain parts of the world ‘suffer,’ while others do not” (Tascón 2015, 37). This relates directly to the ways in which *Școala noastră*, *Toto și surorile lui*, and *Children Underground* were received by festival audiences at their respective premiers. Each film received praise for the ways they depict the “grim milieu” and “squalor” of “desperately homeless” Romanian children. The films’ respective reviews call for distributors and other festivals to take up the films for further screening and marketing. The language each review uses to describe the living conditions and lives in general of the Romanian children depicted evidences both the humanitarian gaze’s way of looking at Romanian children as well as its “reproduce-ability” as each film is reviewed in an extremely similar way.

In a 2014 review on behalf of the San Sebastián International Film Festival, where *Toto și surorile lui* premiered, Neil Young writes for the Hollywood Reporter:

Well-received on its San Sebastian bow in the eclectic New Directors section, the fly-on-wall eye-opener looks set for a long festival life with small-screen play also assured in the wake of Nanău 's International Emmy award for *The World According to Ion B* (2010). And while such grim milieu, afflicted with drugs, disease, garbage and general squalor, aren't going to be to all audience's tastes, there's also humor and moments of genuine, hard-won uplift here, suggesting that edgy distributors in receptive, social-minded territories like France, Germany and Scandinavia should at least check it out (Young 2014).

The review speaks of how *Toto și surorile lui* should expect festivalisation specifically from “social minded territories” that are of no coincidence, central rather than peripheral

¹⁴ Disidentification in this context is defined as “the recognition that the subject on display is economically and socially other.” See: Caitlin Frances Bruce (2016, 286).

countries. In a similar manner, a review of *Școala noastră*'s premier at Tribeca Film Festival written by Eddie Crocker for Variety states that the film ought to experience festivalisation and television due to its admirably restrained depiction of the “sad yet resilient journey” of Romanian children. Crocker writes,

Exercising admirable restraint in its expose of ingrained racism in the Romanian educational system, absorbing docu “Școala noastră” follows the sad yet resilient journey of three Roma children over four years as they grapple with prejudice and stereotyping. Unveiled at Tribeca before Silverdocs, where it won the Sterling Award for top nonfiction feature, [this] even-keeled pic carries echoes of Michael Apted’s groundbreaking “Up” series and should enjoy fest, tube [television] and ancillary enrollments (Crocker 2011).

Yet again, a 2001 review of *Children Underground* by Robert Koehler for Variety assures the film’s festivalisation for its depiction of the “desperately homeless” Romanian children who have “slipped into oblivion” at the hands of an unforgiving Romanian society. It reads,

[T]his vérité look at desperately homeless children surviving on the streets and in the subway tunnels of Bucharest will stir debate and emotions. Belzberg’s unsparing camera sometimes portrays a level of cruelty that tests viewers’ tolerance, but her fearless aesthetic is also a measure of the film’s brilliant indictment of any society that can allow its most vulnerable to slip into oblivion. Along with an assured potent life in fests, this tough-minded account should be embraced by a bold micro-distributor (Koehler 2001).

The humanitarian gaze present in the reviews speaks on behalf of the festival goers at large. The reviews reward the films for their investigative work of the Romanian other and recommend a centrally located circulation of the films so they may find distributors. Due to the presence of the humanitarian gaze at the level of reception it is feasible that the gaze is present at the film production level as the filmmakers set out to make films with ‘good narrative arcs,’ characters that appeal to audiences, and stories that can be understood universally. A 2013 article on the social impact of humanitarian films states “[t]here is power in engaging [audiences] through a language that we know, through tropes we are used to, through allowing us to feel good about the work we do – and when done well, it’s both good business and good storytelling” (“Poverty Porn”).

Accordingly, *Children Underground*, *Școala Noastră*, and *Toto și surorile lui* are filmed and structured so that IFF audiences may *watch* “the world back into what they already

know.”¹⁵ The films participate in cultivating the humanitarian gazes’ reproduce-ability and satisfies IFF audiences’ expectation of watching humanitarian work within the circumstances they are familiar with. Thus, when filmmakers from the periphery, such as Nicoară and Nanău, stand in a relationship of dependency with the IFF market to grant their film presentation, affirmation, and further distribution both on the global and domestic level, the images within their films can be read as constructed for this exact market. This dependency contributes to the construction of Romanian children as the watched and troubled other and permits those from the centre to ‘watch themselves’ come to the children’s aid.

It should be noted that this aforementioned subject–other separation is no necessarily exclusive fault of the filmmakers, but rather a learned positionality one that a peripheral country must often take in order to produce a non-fiction film capable of the international outreach that *Școala noastră* and *Toto și surorile lui* have achieved. I do not mean to say that every filmmaker and their filmic product from every peripheral space engages in these processes. What I do mean is that in tracing the festivalisation processes of Romania-located human rights-oriented non-fiction films, certain trends arise that reflect the subject–other opposition between the filmmaker and the filmed and that, seemingly, regardless of any background – Romanian or not – perpetuate a hegemonic perspective and politics of cinema-making.

Conclusion

Viewing Romanian non-fiction film’s death as a platform from which a complex rebirth occurred, brings forth a multitude of crucial relationships between the fall of communism, thus Sahia Film, the resurgence of Romanian non-fiction film in 2004, and the film sector’s turn toward the international market. Romanian non-fiction film’s post-1989 turn toward co-production funding sources from central countries invites an investigation of trans- and

¹⁵ I use this phrase here in reference to how scholar Hamid Dabashi accuses Slavoj Žižek and his “fellow” European philosophers of consistently “read[ing] the world back into what they already know.” See: Hamid Dabashi “Fuck You Žižek!,” last modified July 26, 2016, <https://www.zedbooks.net/blog/posts/fuck-you-zizek/>

international relational patterns between Romania, as peripheral, and the central countries upon which its filmmakers are often forced to rely.

Thus, an understanding of Nanău, Coca-Cozma, and Nicoara's movement from Romania to central countries as necessary to attain a specifically "European" cultural capital, encourages a critical and inquisitive approach to the constructedness of the centre-periphery dichotomy. It is a self-affirming paradigm. Peripheral filmmakers, such as Nanău, Coca-Cozma, and Nicoara must "move or perish" (Jordanova 2002, 519). Their films must follow suit in order to receive the critical prowess at international film festivals that will award their makers the prestige and opportunity required to continue filmmaking. Nations whose cinemas are rendered "small," such as Romania's, have an incredibly difficult time fighting back against the push of the transnational. This is why *Children Underground*, *Toto și surorile lui*, and *Școala Noastră* relied on American, German, and/or Belgian funding and largely circulated in central countries at A level festivals to be consumed by international festival audiences.

This type of transnational production and international festivalisation produces a specific kind of knowledge about the Romanian children in strife that the films depict. What this means is that Romanian non-fiction films that depict impoverished Romanian children are most easily marketable and festivalised, even enjoyably consumed by a distanced spectator specifically when the Romanian children depicted "are positioned as victims and objects of aid, not subjects of their own future" (Bruce 2016, 293). Thus, *Children Underground*, *Școala noastră*, and *Toto și surorile lui* present their subjects according to a sensationalist framework established by a pre-determined humanitarian gaze.

The power dynamic that constructs the humanitarian gaze is the same one that pushes Romanians to question their "Europeaness," that forces Romanian non-fiction filmmakers to outsource in order to receive critical prowess, that positions Romania as peripheral to countries at the world's economic, political, and cultural centre. The issue here lies in the prescribed articulations that international festival goers, jurors, and festival committees seek to display and see which, therefore, pushes peripheral filmmakers to produce. I refer again to this watching back into what we already know. In his 2001 publication, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Hamid Naficy asserts, "Can the subaltern speak?" will have to be reworded to ask, "Can the subaltern be heard?" I would argue that this be pushed further to include: can the subaltern be seen, and if so, through whose looking glass?

Thus, a postcolonial reading of Romania's non-fiction film production sector provides a unique understanding of the complex power relations nestled in the cultural production of and between the centre and periphery. The movements of both the films and their makers work to perpetuate the constructed notions of centre and periphery and contribute to Romania's continued categorization within the latter.

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**Modern Tales of Anti-Capitalism: Gábor Reisz's *For Some Inexplicable Reason* (2014)
and Mészáros Ujj's *Liza, The Fox-Fairy* (2015)**

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Abstract: The article discusses the explicit and implicit socio-political reflections in Gábor Reisz's *For Some Inexplicable Reason* (*VAN valami furcsa és megmagyarázhatatlan*, 2014) and Károly Mészáros Ujj's *Liza, The Fox-Fairy* (*Liza, a rókatündér*, 2015). Through an institutional, contextual and diegetic perspective, the paper discusses the outsider position of the Hungarian Y generation within the post-socialist, consumerist-capitalist structure. By concentrating on the physical space and its two-dimensional narrative space on screen, and the discursive realm these spatial interplays present, the article discusses the directors' approach to the Hungarian past, present and future.

Keywords: capitalism, *For some inexplicable reason*, *Liza, the Fox-Fairy*, space, socialism, Hungarian cinema

Established by the American-Hungarian Andrew G. Wajna, the Government Commissioner for the Renewal of the National Film Industry, the inauguration of the Hungarian National Film Fund (MNF) in 2011 aimed at resuscitating Hungarian cinema by securing international and domestic success with a few, but outstanding productions (Muhi, 2012). Although the new film law has been widely criticized for being 'the centaur of the socialist and Hollywood system' (Muhi, 2012, 4), in the light of festival successes, the accomplishments of the new structure are hard to be questioned. Benedek Fliegauf's *Only the Wind* (*Csak a szél*, 2012) won the Jury Grand Prix in Berlin in 2012, Kornél Mundruczó's *White God* (*Fehér Isten*, 2014) received the Prize Un Certain Regard in 2014 at Cannes, while János Szász's *Notebook* (*A nagy füzet*, 2013) – similarly to György Pálfi's *Free Fall* (*Szabadesés*, 2014) – won numerous awards at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. The series of festival trophies reached its peak with László Nemes's *Son of Saul* (*Saul fia*, 2015), the main project of the fund that won the second Oscar in the film history of Hungary and put the country back on the map of world cinema.

Despite the international harvest of prizes however, the MNF failed to achieve the prophesized 300.000-500.000 viewers per film, which clearly demonstrates the disappointment of Hungarians with domestic cinema productions (Ficsor, 2016, Csákvári, 2016). The most popular post-2010 projects, such as Dénes Orosz's *Coming Out* (2013),

Attila Herczeg's *Whatever Happened to Timi* (*Megdönteni Hajnal Tímeát*, 2014) or Attila Árpai's *Argo 2.* (2015) crossed the number of 100.000 sold tickets. The success of these films mirrors the taste of Hungarians who prefer light, enjoyable comedies and find less joy in heavy art cinema productions. To keep the balance between genre productions and European art film, the MNF seems to lay special emphasis on films that create a fusion of the two; that is, they keep the aesthetics of art cinema, while giving the story a higher entertaining factor. Gábor Reisz's *For some inexplicable reason* (*VAN valami furcsa és megmagyarázhatatlan*, 2014) and Mészáros Ujj Károly's first feature film, *Liza, the Fox-Fairy* (*Liza, a rókatündér*, 2015) are examples of this kind of hybrid filmmaking. Both productions had immense success in Hungary – Reisz's film had more than 60.000 viewers and Mészáros's debut sold more than 126.000 tickets (Csákvári, 2016), while receiving a wide range of praise from film critics. Beyond doubt, the reason for the enormous success is people's easy identification with both stories that, on the one hand, challenge societal norms by discussing certain weighty themes, such as unemployment, migrancy and settling down, while putting these subjects into a comic frame that somehow makes the topics easier to consume. These hybrid films thus wrestle with heavy existential themes that mirror people's struggles in post-millennial Hungary, which gives these productions a critical-political tone that is represented within a self-reflexive, amusing narrative structure.

The present article aims at discussing the very topical dilemma these films investigate via a diegetic-contextual approach to the filmic texts. While arguing that the domestic success of *Liza, the Fox-Fairy* and *For some inexplicable reason* lies in their very national tone, the paper scrutinizes the stylistic elements of the films, with special attention given to the pro-filmic, physical space. By revealing the spatial games that frame the structure of the films, the analysis aims to highlight the directors' explicit as well as implicit preoccupation with the criticism of capitalism. As it will be pinpointed, the very narrative base of the productions – that is built on the individuals' fight for a better future – forms a point of identification for a society in crisis. In this way, the very topical themes of *Liza, the Fox-Fairy* and *For some inexplicable reason* reject the post-socialist, capitalist-consumerist national framework while dealing with the implicit-explicit forms of social(ist) remembrance. The commemoration of the past and the grief over the present situation are situated in a comic set that, despite the funny framework, mirrors a depressed/depressive and lost society.

Hungarian capitalism: uncertainty and volatility

After more than twenty-five years of the fall of communism and the introduction of market capitalism in Eastern Europe, the now member-states of the European Union still face a difficult economic situation. The crises-driven Europeanization process that aimed at introducing welfare capitalism in the post-socialist region was accompanied by serious recessions in social services, such as the cut-back of unemployment benefits and pensions that ‘sent post-communist welfare states into a spinning variegation between welfare states, pension states and debt states’ (Lendvai and Stubbs 2015, 451). For a “particularly crisis-prone” and publicly and externally indebted country like Hungary, the post-2008 economic crisis meant an even deeper recession that highlighted the external and internal imbalances and uneven neo-liberalist structures within the European Union, and strengthened the voices of Euro-scepticism in the country (ibid). Although Hungary is often referred to as having the most liberal market form of post-socialist capitalism, the Hungarian neoliberal structure – including ownership, market and state relations and capital resources – still reflect the socialist political-economic legacy and the mark of the troubled, competitive transition (Roderick, 2008). Since the accession of Hungary to the European Union, the income poverty, rising social exclusion and material deprivation led to an ever-rising demand to exit the insecure labour markets that resulted in the mass outward-migration of educated, young Hungarians¹⁶ (Galgóczi et al, 2009).

The most effected social layer of mass migration is the Y-generation whose members often struggle with unemployment, as well as social and emotional uncertainty. Born between 1977 and 1997 into a digitally advanced society, these young people can hardly remember socialism and/or understand the political struggle of the parental generation (Piszcz, 2014).

¹⁶ In 2009, the level of outward migrant stock was about 1.8-2 % of the Hungarian workforce that means the 0.7-0.8 % of the Hungarian population (Bordbély, 2009). The flow of outward migration reached its height in 2012, when almost 80.000 people left Hungary to seek work in West European countries, such as Austria, Germany and the United Kingdom, in this way raising the number of Hungarian emigrant labour force to 239.000 people (Gödri et al, 2014).

Although they bear with a more liberal, Western way of thinking (ibid.), they also struggle with a post-totalitarian shock that Hundorova (2016, p. 96) calls “trans-generational apocalypse”. In her analysis on contemporary Ukrainian literature, Hundorova argues that the post-socialist trauma led to a great level of instability in the new generation that effects familial connections and historical continuity, which results in a dissociative behaviour among youngsters. As she states, the post-totalitarian generation faces a double-traumatised experience: “on the one hand, they are traumatised by the reassessment of one’s parents’ values and, on the other, by the absence of socio-cultural norms and orientations, which are substituted for active imitations by mass consumer society” (Hundorova, 2016, p. 96). This trans-generational apocalypse that is accompanied by a sense of disconnectedness and social alienation, contributes to anxiety and distress among members of generation Y that is further exacerbated by the lack of future prospects in the Hungarian social context. On the spatial level of the selected films, the outsider position of the protagonists gets often distorted by the degradation of female and male territories and the wandering in the city-structure that builds up a suffocating, disciplinary construction (Foucault, 1975).

Generation Y in crisis. *For some inexplicable reason*

For some inexplicable reason deals with all the heavy topics that form the everyday struggles of the Y-generation. Be that outmigration, political unrest, corruption, unemployment, private life and partnership or the young generation’s broken system of belief in personal, educational and cultural values, Gábor Reisz’s production is not afraid to touch upon all the troubling symptoms characteristic of contemporary Hungarian society. The main protagonist of the film is the young, freshly graduated twenty-nine-year-old Áron (Áron Ferenczik) who suddenly finds himself in a deep personal crisis as he realizes that his diploma has no value in the country. His depressing situation is further exacerbated by his parents’ constant harassment who try to push their son towards a prosperous career by correcting his CV, and having a say in everything the young man does. However, Áron’s most troubling problem – and the frame of the film itself – is his break-up with his girlfriend Eszter (Juli Jakab), who leaves him for another man, which brings Áron in a devastated, disheartening situation. Without a job, girlfriend, future prospects and an emotionally supporting and encouraging family

background, Áron decides to use the flight ticket he mistakenly bought in the heat of a drunken night. In the hope of a better life and personal change, he travels to Lisbon. In Portugal he gets a job as dish washer in a restaurant and then as a doorman in a fancy office building, while he also starts dating a beautiful, local girl. However, the monotonous, robot-like life does not change his way of thinking and personality, and he eventually decides to capitulate his foreign life. In the end, he returns to Hungary where he finds himself in the very same situation of not having a job, a girlfriend and future perspectives.

While displaying all the emotional, professional and social problems of the Y-generation, *For some inexplicable reason* creates a very Hungarian atmosphere. On the one hand, Reisz uses a typical Hungarian milieu that features the emblematic ruined pubs of Budapest, well-known squares and meeting points, and private spaces dominated by a strong (post-)socialist décor. Budapest gets a leading role in the narrative by not only connecting the various locations and sets of the film, but also by standing as the melting pot of all the problems that the younger layer of Hungarian society faces. In this way, the capital functions both as a physical as well as discursive space that contextualizes the Y generation.

Reisz emphasizes the crucial role of the city by several bird-view, panorama images and long shots of Budapest's well-known squares, such as the Astoria, Blaha Lujza and Deák Square. Interestingly, the opening shots that give a comprehensive city-image of Budapest, feature Áron dying in these prominent meeting points, thus giving the physical space a crisis-laden tone. The extra-diegetic narration of the young man explains how he re-visits the central places of Budapest, while imagining and acting his own death. Illustrating the alienation within society and people's self-centred behaviour, no one stops to help Áron who, out of curiosity, collapses at various scenes. His death-tourism in Budapest contextualizes him as an absolute outsider in the city-text that also forecasts his upcoming migration from the space that does not take him in.

Áron is an absolute homeless in his native town that is expressed via the equipment of his rented flat and his constant, languid flaneuring in the city. His accommodation lacks any kind of domesticity: after his girlfriend leaves him, his room gets emptied out and gets further simplified when, in the middle of an emotional breakdown, Áron decides to get rid of the memories that connect him to Eszter. After emptying the walls and windows of curtains and pictures, the home of the young man gets completely bare, with only a bed in the middle of the room. In his parents' flat, he could eventually find a sense of home but, thanks to the

constant harassment of his father and mother, and his outsider position in the family structure, he is treated as an outcast. First, he has to collect the product of his sister-in-law's morning sickness when his brother announces the news about the pregnancy of his wife. Crawling on all fours under the table where he is surrounded by the legs of his family, Áron is portrayed in a spatially-emotionally humiliated position. As the black sheep of the family who, in contrast to his brother, has not settled down or started a prosperous business, Áron gets further annoyed by his parents when he announces his journey to Lisbon. First, he forgets to bring sour creme to lunch, which leads to an enormous fight. His father blames him for not being self-sufficient and gets upset for Áron's selfish move to buy a flight ticket from their money. Áron is portrayed sitting in the cross-fire of his parents who bomb him with a series of questions that he does not know how to react upon [Fig.1.]. Later, when he decides to stand on his own two feet and announces his leave for Lisbon, he is positioned in a similar, spatially subordinated position. Just like in the lunch-scene, the latter interrogation-like situation is captured from a high-angle shot that puts the man into an imprisoned, suffocating spatial position with his parents facing and yelling at him from the couch. These scenes represent Áron's subjective view by constantly playing with a shot/counter-shot structure that builds up a suffocating spatial constellation.

His homeless position in the narrative is further emphasized by his clothing. Dressed in large winter clothes, with his thick scarf embracing his figure, he is often portrayed in extreme long shots in the streets and squares of Budapest, which accentuates his utterly lost and devastated situation. That is, the young man takes on a doubled-outcast position, with both the interior (private) as well as exterior (social) places rejecting him. His drifting in life – that is juxtaposed by his wandering in Budapest – transforms thus the city-text into a metaphor expressing the instable state of the Y-generation.



[Fig.1.] Áron's subordinated position. *For some inexplicable reason*

Reisz also emphasizes the current anti-establishment atmosphere and political upheaval of Hungary by capturing strikes and demonstrations that, as repetitive occasions, accompany the spatial drift of Áron. As a flaneur who stands as a sign of capitalist alienation and disconnectedness among individuals (Benjamin, 2002), the young man remains in an inert, unmotivated position, which further accentuates the downtrodden psychological state of the Y generation. While trying to reach his mother on the phone, the young man walks through extreme right-wing demonstrations, anti-government protests, national commemorations, a well-known beach and a summer festival. The scenes of political unrest and the spaces of leisure and relaxation get thus connected via a long montage-sequence that encompasses four seasons. Áron walks through these emblematic spaces in the same clothes, while focusing on his phone and the long-awaited answer of his mother at the other end of the line. Thanks to the invisible umbilical cord that connects Áron and his mother – which is signified by a cable that binds the man's home with the parental space – this long montage-scene gets interconnected with the metaphoric layer of the narrative that expresses his spatially-psychologically isolated position.

Also, for the sake of an even more realistic portray of the Y generation, Reisz uses several documentary-like scenes. These sequences capture the friends and family members of Áron in frontal, interview-like positions as they make comments on their own life and occupation. These episodes do not fit the narrative flow of the film and pause its narrative progression; however, they also add a very intimate and informative layer to the crisis-brimmed tone of the whole production. It becomes clear, for instance, that all of Áron's friends are intellectuals in

their early 30s who struggle with financial instability. Moreover, these tableaux-like scenes also reference *Neighbours* (*Szomszédok*), Hungary's most successful television soap opera that ran from 1987 to 1999 and was an integral part of the everyday life of the whole nation. The show followed the life of lower-middle-class dwellers in a prefabricated socialist living quarter and mediated a strong political and moral education based on socialist values (Hammer, 2013). Its tableaux-like messages of the protagonists in the end of the episodes portrayed wise "direct-address pledge[s] on the viewing audience" (ibid, 227), usually summarising a situation or teaching something about friendship, society or politics. Aesthetically speaking, these ending scenes show remarkable analogy to the documentary-like episodes of *For some inexplicable reason*: the protagonists are portrayed in the centre of the frame and, while looking into the camera, they convey a message about their everyday life and/or struggles to the viewers. This intertextual reference recalls a post-socialist nostalgia, with special attention given to the childhood of the Y generation that was socialized on this series. The friends of Áron provide the spectator with positive insights into their lives and tell the viewer about small moments and thoughts that interest them, such as the expansion of a business, the recipe of a morning shake or doing sports. As was the case in *Neighbours*, these smaller portraits illustrate everyday gestures – such as smoking in bed or giving a wash to the Hungarian flag – while they also lecture about the significance of leisure time and recycling.

Although the overall atmosphere of the second tableaux scene of *For some inexplicable reason* is generally positive, it cannot overcome the pessimistic – but often humorous – tone of the whole film. Because the friends of Áron and the main protagonist himself struggle to create an existence in Hungary, they often discuss the socio-political problems they face. When it comes to Áron's decision to leave the country, his friends jump into a verbal fight, thus enumerating all the contemporary problems of Hungary. After discussing migration, unemployment and unbearable taxes, the young men find nothing that would attract them to/OR: that would keep them in the country. Ironically, when one of Áron's friends proudly suggests that after all, *Túró Rudi*, a Hungarian sweet is a good thing, another friend responds with arguing that the chocolate bar is not even Hungarian but a Soviet invention. During the discussion, Áron silently draws on his plate and, similarly to his position in the city-text, remains passive in the fight.

Because of the documentary-like scenes and unprofessional actors dominating mobile, jittering shots and the low budget of the film, *For some inexplicable reason* has also been

discussed as a mumblecore-film (Bujdosó, 2014), a production shot by friends to illustrate their everyday life and/or struggles via certain situations. Certainly, the film's mumblecore atmosphere – the spontaneity of the dialogues and certain shots, the well-known sets of the city and the familiar situation and Hungarian experience of the protagonists – made *For some inexplicable reason* a very authentic production that, thanks to its message that a whole generation can identify with, became one of the biggest cinema hits in Hungary.

Global and local spaces. *Liza, the Fox-Fairy*

While Áron drifts in the public spaces of Budapest, Liza spends most of her time in the private, domestic spaces of the film. This coincides with the ideas of Davidoff and Hall (1991) who, while discussing the 19th century segregation of social classes and architectural differences between private and public in 18th- and 19th-century England, identify private space as female and public space as male territory. Arguing that female space is strongly connected to intimacy, while public areas prompt one to associate public work with men, the ideas of Davidoff and Hall corresponds to Gyáni's argument on male sociability and female domesticity and the division of life into a male and female sphere in 19th-century Budapest (Gyáni, 2004). Women were thus tied to the home that also assured their moral superiority, while men occupied and ruled over the public spaces of the city. This gender division and spatial stratification is prevalent in both Reisz's and Mészáros-Ujj's film. Both directors play with the private and public spaces that they surrender to the very female and male distinction, while putting it into a multi-historical spatial setting.

Similar to the clumsy figure of Áron, the titular protagonists of *Liza, the Fox-Fairy* lives in another universe. In this case however, this other world means a literally different fairy-tale-like spatial set created by a unique fusion of socialist, capitalist and monarchist elements. Liza (Mónika Balsai) lives as a live-in nurse of the widow of the Japanese ambassador, spending her last twelve years taking care of the old woman. Lonely as it sounds, the 30-year-old Liza escapes into romantic Japanese books and creates an imaginary friend for herself in the shape of Tomy Tani (David Sakurai), a Japanese pop-singer from the 1950s. Although singing and dancing with Tomy Tani, while dreaming of the prince to arrive, seem to satisfy the young girl, Liza dreams of real love. Eventually, the sudden death of the widow gives a new

direction to her life and the woman – who, in the meantime, became the legal owner of the flat – starts dating. However, out of jealousy, Tomy Tani murders the men Liza meets, which leaves the young girl in a devastated situation. She soon starts to believe that she is inflicted with a curse of the Japanese Fox Fairies that kills every man she comes across. The unusual number of deaths in her environment eventually prompts the police to investigate the case. Sergeant Zoltán (Szabolcs Bede Fazekas), who is assigned to solve the case, soon moves into the empty room of Liza's flat. As expected, he eventually falls in love with the girl and their mutual emotional connection breaks the curse.

Liza, the Fox-Fairy has often been referred to as having an Amelie-like visual structure (Von Hoeij, 2016; Harvey, 2016) that corresponds to the fantastic frame of the narrative. Indeed, the film has a very stylized, highly sensory audiovisual world drenched in bright, yellowish colours and a dull, vintage-like atmosphere. The dresses of Liza and the other protagonists of the film all recall the candy-coloured 1970s, while the urban sphere of the city and the interiors form a “swinging Eurokitsch” (Harvey, 2016) featuring elements of different historical episodes. As von Hoeij (2016) argues, “Rather than just a pretty backdrop, these elements form a sort of natty visual anachronism with a touch of wish-fulfilment (since Hungary was a Soviet state in the 1970s, instead of a Western-style capitalist society). So what's onscreen here is a historical impossibility, underlining the story's escapist and absurdist undertones”. Mészáros Ujj himself argued that the film is set in the capitalist Budapest of the 1970s (Mészáros Ujj, in Bujdosó 2012) which, as noted by von Hoeij, is an impossible historical constellation, given the fact that Hungary followed the Marxist-Leninist dogmas until the fall of socialism in 1989.

By making the time frame of the film even more confusing, Mészáros Ujj uses different locations to portray the political, economic and social milestones of 20th-century East European history. In the fictionalized Hungary of the 1970s (Aguilar, 2015), Liza's private female space serves as a monarchist-bourgeois space enriched by handcrafted furniture, Persian carpet and lace tablecloths and curtains. However, the hardwood floor and the glamorous chandelier, together with the antique cabinetries that were once symbols of the status of the inhabitants, had lost their glamour and in their dusty, dingy state, now stand as reminders of a once-prosperous and aristocratic past [Fig.2.].



[Fig.2.] The bourgeois space. *Liza, the Fox-Fairy*

Thanks to the dark, greyish colours and the lack of light in this bourgeois apartment, Liza's early 20th-century home mirrors a ghost-like, ruined universe that also signifies the crises-laden female quality of the space. The broken waterpipes, and the lack of electricity and phone further emphasize the antique essence of this space that seems to get stuck in the bourgeois past. Most of the deaths happen in this vintage universe: the widow of the Japanese ambassador and Liza's first two dates die in these rooms, while Zoltán has a series of accidents in this flat. The home of the young girl and Tomy Tani thus becomes a lethal space that, on the one hand, mediates the atmosphere of a long-gone historical epoch, while the constant deaths also articulate the faint smell of decay. On the other hand, Mészáros Ujj structures the physical space of this apartment along tableaux-like images that double-frame the figure of Liza, which gives the narrative space a suffocating feeling. The young girl is encapsulated in a past-universe that she, as the textuality of the images illustrate, cannot escape. Her only companion in this cursed universe is the Japanese pop-singer who, as a ghost, only deepens the spooky atmosphere of the flat. Interestingly, the arrival of Zoltán and his hard work to restore and fix the broken installation and torn-apart equipment of the flat, bring changes to the personal life of the young girl who finally starts dating, thus freeing herself from the burdens of the prison-like flat that kept her captive.

Liza's favourite place in the city is the local branch of the fast-food chain "Mekk Burger", the palace of the capitalist-consumerist structure. The kingdom of burgers, fries and sugary beverages is embraced with an emotive excess that expresses the desperate longing of Liza to find true love. In this way, capitalist consumption and emotional security gets juxtaposed in the same space that serves as the number-one destination for the girl to chill out as well as get to know other people. The most important pillar of Mekk Burger is the consumption of fast food that Mészáros Ujj eroticizes through slow-motion acts of eating that he wraps in a close-

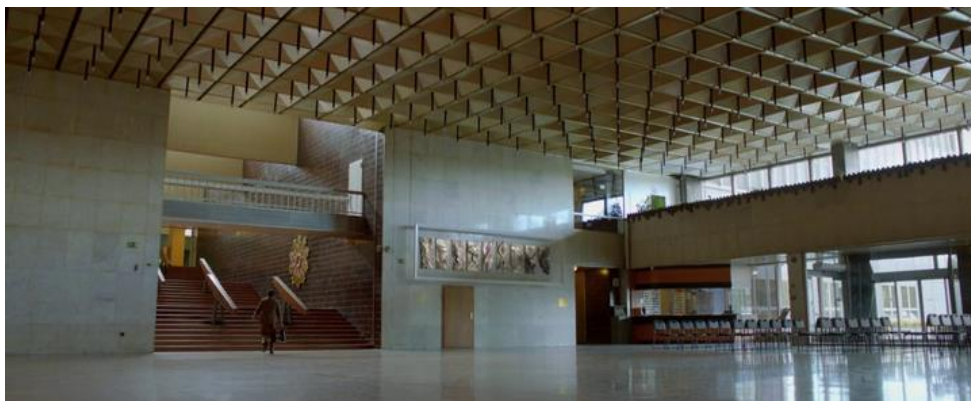
up format. To criticise consumption culture, the director features lonely, obese people in the depth of the images. In this way, Mekk Burger brings attention to one's alienated position in this social space and links food with love that Liza seeks so much. The dominant red colours of Mekk Burger thus accentuate (the lack of) the desired love that the young woman is looking for, while referencing McDonald's – the number one point of Mészáros Ujj's criticism. The process of McDonaldization that pushed consumer capitalism into the realm of local identity and interaction (Ritzer, 2004), has definitely reached and exploited the Eastern European region and went hand in hand with a cultural colonialization that foregrounded Western values and brought about the introduction of the four main principles of McDonaldization in society – predictability, calculability, efficiency and control (ibid). Henrik (Zoltán Schmied), Liza's womanizer friend and possible future love, gives Liza a lecture about the McDonaldization process of society, and highlights the very poor quality of food in Mekk Burger, while criticizing the policy of the fast-food chain to attract naïve people with their small plastic toys that, as gifts, accompany the menus. Still, Liza's determination to find love in this space – that also demonstrates the successful McDonaldization of Hungarian society – is irreversible and gets even stronger when she witnesses a seemingly successful date in Mekk Burger. Inspired by the idea of printed dating service, she registers in a journal column to find love.

Her first – and last – date with the way-out Ludvig Úr (Lehel Kovács) also takes place in Mekk Burger but goes in the wrong direction when the small, potbellied man takes medication and drinks alcohol at once in the hope of a successful night. Although Liza has followed all the instructions that the *Cosmopolitan* magazine – another ideological tool – gave her, Ludvig Úr dies of heart attack, which pushes Liza further away from finding the one true love. Emphasizing her lonely and hopeless situation in the consumerist-capitalist space, Mészáros Ujj again uses the double-framing technique characteristic of the old, bourgeois apartment. In Mekk Burger, Liza is always portrayed against a large, silver column that divides the screen space into two smaller, vertical sections [Fig.3.]. In this way, Ludvig Úr and Liza's other dates get separated from the girl, thus accentuating the isolated position of the nurse in the modern spatial constellation.



[Fig.3.] The divided space. *Liza, the Fox-Fairy*

The third dominant space of the film mirrors the socio-historical period between the monarchic times and postmodern era, thus closing the circle of 20th-century political epochs in Hungary. Socialism, the most influential episode of last-century politics, is strongly connected to the police apparatus and bureaucracy in the film. Recalling the coercive power of communist police forces that aimed to nip any internal, anti-establishment unrest in its bud and practiced ultimate control over society, Mészáros Ujj uses a very strong socialist-realist aesthetics to highlight the heritage of this tyrannical culture. It is not only the old socialist secret police slogans that return on the walls of the police station, but the furniture, equipment, cars and even the fluorescent lighting references the epoch. The large, empty space of the station that recalls the regime's thirst for monumentality, is designed according to a functionalist aesthetics that includes symmetrically aligned, terracotta-coloured chairs and tables. Similarly, the socialist décor returns in the interior of the monumental prefabricated office bloc where Ludvig Úr works. This colossal space of bureaucracy is equipped with socialist-realist mosaics and an enormous, concrete stairway and marble walls that dwarf the figure of the strange man [Fig.4.].



[Fig.4.] Ludvig Úr in a socialist frame. *Liza, the Fox-Fairy*

To outweigh the rigidity of the socialist places and their indirect association with coercion, Mészáros Ujj makes a laughing-stock of the police apparatus by featuring a superintendent who communicates via well-known Hungarian proverbs whose endings he cannot recall. He finishes these trite commonplaces with angry cursing, which caricatures the police force as a powerful institute and transforms it into a laughable national construction. By making fun of the socialist police apparatus via its time-worn mottos, investigation techniques and workers, Mészáros Ujj criticises the very kernel of Hungary's socialist past. The very sarcastic tone of the police scenes – the non-working, smoky coffee machine, the cut-off head of a Barbie doll at a murder scene and the white investigation patterns on the floor of Liza's flat – are all associated and juxtaposed with the police's comedy of manners, thus giving the film a humorous tone and, together with the absurd death scenes, transform *Liza, the Fox-Fairy* into a black comedy.

Whether a monarchist-bourgeois, capitalist or socialist spatial construction, Liza finds herself enclosed into all these spaces. Eventually, her struggle ends with the complete transformation of the narrative space that connects all the above discussed spatial realms of the film. While dying, Liza has a vision being in Mekk Burger, the place of her dreams and happiness. Being near death, she first meets Henrik who then transforms into Tomy Tani. At the same time, the surrounding space also undergoes a complete change. While talking to Henrik, Mekk Burger shines in its average glamour, with a candy-coloured set in the background and the usual silver column in the middle of the frame. This peaceful illusion is then intercut with a parallel scene depicting Zoltán trying to get to Liza who lies in his bed. Reality and delusion thus unite in a cross-cut, whereby the latter constantly varies and gives way to Liza's worst nightmare. When realizing that Henrik only played a game with her emotions, the environment of Mekk Burger suddenly darkens and Tomy Tani finally reveals himself. The Japanese singer asks Liza to stay with him and while getting more and more aggressive, the surrounding buildings of Mekk Burger start to collapse. After the annihilation of the outer capitalist space, the urban sphere changes into a wintery and then a spring landscape with the blossoming of cherry trees around the fast food [Fig.5.]. Then, when Liza realizes that her secret admirer is Zoltán whom she also loves, the tone of the image turns into black and white and Tomy Tani again starts changing faces. When Liza finally agrees to sacrifice herself to save Zoltán, the space of Mekk Burger gets demolished by a black storm that, while breaking the curse, destroys the film's capitalist-consumerist space. The

commodity fetishism connected to the fast food chain thus gets eradicated, giving Liza a final chance to true happiness.



[Fig.5.] The transformation of space. *Liza, the Fox-Fairy*

With cross-cutting between the images of the young nurse's flat of and Zoltán's struggle to reach the woman, the scene also damages the bourgeois space of the film. While running towards Liza, the investigator destroys the chandelier of the living room, and ruins the furniture with his gun. By destroying all the dominant spaces of the film – the space of consumptive practice, the aristocratic room and, by Zoltán's wounds, the socialist police apparatus as well – Mészáros Ujj reckons with all the leading ideologies and political constructions that dominated the space of the film. In this way, he opens a new chapter in Hungary's 21st-century history that, instead of a consumerist-fake culture, socialist nostalgia and nationalist ideology, builds on a new, romanticized world view.

Conclusion

Although *Liza, The Fox-Fairy* does not reference the struggles of the Y generation on an explicit level, the financial instability and emotional unsteadiness that surrounds the main protagonist in her early 30s, is a politically significant point in the narrative. Also, while the film does not openly attack Hungarian society or reveals the ever-rising tensions within it, Mészáros Ujj's production clearly emphasizes the McDonaldization's devastating effects on one's system of belief. Thanks to the spatial contexts of the film that mirror three periods of ideology and social establishment, the director also references the pre-capitalist period and mirrors a post-socialist nostalgia. However, this nostalgia is not identical with longing for the

past. Rather, it illustrates the impact of socialism on Hungarian society whose collective memory is still strongly connected to the era. In *Liza, The Fox-Fairy*, this nostalgia is more of a historical reference that is reflected on the textual level of the film, while in *For Some Inexplicable Reason* it creates a discursive space that encompasses and explains the generation gap within Hungarian society. In contrast to a strong socialism critique, the main pillar of criticism in both films concerns the consumerist-capitalist framework. While Áron has no illusions about the new world order and knows that with his degree in Film Studies, he cannot get on in life that is built on the values of neoliberal economics, Liza believes in the capitalist magic. Still, as Mészáros Ujj's production suggests, she can only be happy by destroying the space of capitalism, thus ending the process of McDonaldization. For Áron, there is no way out of the crisis: although he travels to Lisbon, he remains in the same capitalist context and subordinated position abroad.

Although *Liza, The Fox-Fairy* and *For Some Inexplicable Reason* are seemingly very different productions, both films reference – implicitly or explicitly – the burden posed by the inheritance of the socialist economic system, the McDonaldization of society and the struggle of the Y generation in the capitalist context. While discussing such heavy contemporary phenomena, Mészáros Ujj and Reisz embrace a self-referential, ironic tone that, thanks to the humorous situations and comedy of manners, makes the message of the productions easier to digest and, together with the socio-political references, forms a very Hungarian socio-political texture.

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Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen

(Strausz, László: *Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen*. Basingstoke UK, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. ISBN 978-3-319-55272-9, 257 p.)

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The critical success of the Romanian films produced in the new millennium has generated a wide scholarly interest in what has been called later the New Romanian Cinema. Though László Strausz's book is part of this current, its specificity relies in the fact that he tries to find a conceptual tool for the description and interpretation of the Romanian cinema that is capable to bridge the differences between older and more recent films, and thus he discusses the Romanian films of the past 50 years within one single theoretical framework. *Hesitant Histories* is a theoretical work in the true sense of the word, as it is not one of those film theory studies that simply reshuffle previously existing texts and theories, but rather with a bold move constructs a new theoretical concept, and grounds every interpretation and analysis of the book on that concept.

In the centre of the book we find the complex term of *hesitation*, a term that I see as a conceptual tool with three areas of application. First, it is used by Strausz as an interpretive strategy of individual films – both regarding the explanation of the diegetic characters' motivations and of the representational strategies, formal devices of the films themselves. Secondly, hesitation is used as a common descriptor of strategies of representation of different Romanian screen media texts across time – thus it becomes a tool for a historical approach to moving images, one that argues for a certain national or regional invariant present throughout several decades of filmmaking. And finally in the hands of Strausz hesitation becomes a tool that makes him able to link the discussed media products to Romanian historical and social realities, thus enabling an approach close to cultural studies.

Hesitation in this study – as I understand it – describes a psychic and intellectual attitude of the Eastern European and especially Romanian subject in front of disorienting historical and social realities that resist simple and final explanations. A reality that is being described by uncertainty, impenetrability, ambiguous understanding and evaluation. The most important characteristic of this concept is its hybridity: according to Strausz this attitude is not only perceivable in the behaviour of the characters on screen, but is also integrated in the

design, form of expression and strategy of representation of the Romanian screen media texts themselves. Thus hesitation becomes also the attitude of the viewers of Romanian films, regardless of their origin, as “(...) our meaning making faculties are brought into line with those of the characters.” (Strausz 2017, 2) Thus hesitation is considered to be a central and integral characteristic of most Romanian screen-media texts (Strausz uses this term because beside cinematic moving images he also includes some television broadcasts in the analysis) produced in the past 50 years.

Theoretically Strausz constructs its central concept through a rather eclectic line of arguments. Hesitation seems to be derived from those contemporary re-readings of Bazin that in the past two or three decades re-evaluated the French theorist's body of work. Instead of dismissing him for a supposed naive concept of a transparent realism, several scholars (Ian Aitken, Colin MacCabe, Daniel Morgan, Philip Rosen are being cited) have argued that Bazin's argument was not a normative approach towards realism as a style, but he was much more referring to realism as a (political) goal. In Strausz's view within this approach realism as a political attitude replaces realism as a stylistic category, this definition of realism allowing for many different stylistic sets to co-exist. Thus the concept of hesitation is present in this book “as a cultural-interpretive strategy that stands at the center of several realist theories of the cinematic medium.” (Strausz 2017, 18) At this point it has to be mentioned that, somehow similarly to the revaluation of Bazin's realism, the whole book offers a different interpretation of the realism of the New Romanian Cinema compared to the oversimplifying label of transparent realism that has been attached to it by the critical and scholarly reception. He considers that notions of transparency and immediacy are misleading entry points for understanding the radical novelty that New Romanian Cinema has introduced to world cinema. (Strausz 2017, 19) Despite the rejection of the term of realism, the concept of hesitation is in very close connection with outer social realities: thus the concept and the theory developed from it does not deny the overall impression of realism that everyone has watching contemporary Romanian films. The starting point is thus the unquestionable effect of realism, but Strausz is able to develop a concept that goes beyond its simple acknowledgement, and is also capable to reflect on some theoretical issues related to the (often ideologically charged) representation of reality.

After having acknowledged that, based on contemporary readings, even Bazin's realism can be understood as going beyond simply positing an objective, independent reality,

Strausz supports his approach by Lefebvre's and de Certeau's theories of space. He considers that due to the fact that the ontological questions of realism and space are closely related, the concepts of the production of space, lived space and rhetoric of space could be enlightening to the understanding of the issue of realism. After briefly presenting these two theories, Strausz concludes that, in the same way as for de Certeau, the experienced urban space's everyday uses evade a totalising discourse, the cultural strategy of hesitation is seen as moving, dynamic, as one that evades discursive control. His conclusion is that hesitation in this way becomes a realist-modernist strategy to depict social processes, identifiable throughout the history of Romanian cinema and screen media. (Strausz 2017, 20–26)

A surprising next step in this eclectic train of thought is an analysis of Velázquez's famous painting *Las meninas*, where the multiple and thus mobile vanishing points stay as examples of early strategies of hesitation. For Strausz this painting exemplifies well that images not only represent something, but they also produce it, and it demonstrates the interdependency of political control and its representation. (Strausz 2017, 26–30) In what follows a famous Romanian folk poem, *Miorița* and its interpretation by Romanian poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga is invoked as an example to show how “collective cultural imaginations repeatedly project spatial references onto cultural products.” (Strausz 2017, 31) This also becomes the starting point of a description of the modernist reconstruction of Bucharest that took place in the 1980s. Finally three terms from the postcolonial discourse are invoked in order to further strengthen the argument of the book and to root it in pre-existing theoretical narratives. First Strausz applies Oushakine's term aphasia, then moves to Joshua M. Price's term of bewilderment only to arrive to Homi K. Bhabha's interpretation of enunciation and performance.

Though all these theories and concepts seem adequate individually and Strausz manages to organize them as arguments around his central concept, at first glance they seem coming from too different backgrounds. One might ask, how a 17th century Spanish painting, a Romanian folk poem, Lefebvre and Bazin could be supporting in a coherent way one theoretical concept? The eclectic nature of this endeavour is even realised by Strausz himself when discussing the postcolonial context of his approach. (Strausz 2017, 42) However the conclusion of this train of thought is a clear and enlightening definition of hesitation: “Hesitation as a spatial act, and as such an artistic trope encompassing both narrative and

stylistic spaces, refers to the constant oscillation between the bottom-up and the top-down processes in the construction of social realities.” (Strausz 2017, 38)

In the case of such a concept two issues have to be clarified: its descriptive value and its exclusivity. The first one refers to question if the concept is really describing an essential characteristic of the body of works in question, and if yes, whether this is the case in all, or at least in most of the cases? In this regard I think that Strausz's study is convincing. The second issue, exclusivity refers to the excluding nature of the term: is hesitation an attitude relevant only to Romanian cinema, or can one find similar gestures and attitudes in several other national cinemas or individual oeuvres? This is important because if it is not exclusive, then the descriptive and historical value of the term comes seriously under question – however this issue is not discussed in the book *Hesitant Histories*, which, as its title suggests, also delivers a film and media historical reflection on Romanian Cinema. Strausz considers that hesitation is integral part of at least three types of screen-media texts in the history of Romanian film. Modernist hesitation is typical for the auteur films of the state-socialist era, where a modernist, self-reflective approach on the (im)possibility of true representation was a tactic of resistance in an authoritarian system. Legitimizing hesitation is considered to be relevant for the television broadcast images of the armed uprising of 1989, where the uncertainty and ambiguity of the events shown on screen influenced the events themselves, and more importantly, the dissemination of contradictory images was to the immediate benefit of some political actors, who were legitimized by these broadcast narratives and interpretations. Finally, performative hesitation is used to describe the strategy of the so-called New Romanian Cinema, emerged after the year 2000. The term performativity refers to the active participation of the viewer in the construction of social realities, following the logic of the social construction of space developed by Lefebvre. Hesitation from this perspective is the expression of vacillation between the different constructed versions of social reality. (Strausz 2017, 20)

After having detailed the theoretical position and background of the study, the next chapters discuss screen media texts from three different periods: from the state socialist era, from the 1989 revolution and from the period after 2000, when the group of films known as New Romanian Cinema has emerged. In all cases the discussion of the actual films is connected to the description of cultural, historical, political or even literary debates that shaped the common perception of actual and past events in Romanian society. Thus Strausz is

able to show how history and culture has been produced by different actors and texts, and is able to convey a broader landscape for the interpretation of the films. According to him hesitation as a term helps to map the movement in social space between various discursive subject positions that participated in the construction of the social real. (Strausz 2017, 51, 55–56) The biggest emphasis is of course on New Romanian Cinema, discussed in four thematically centred chapters. One focuses on the image of the state-socialist past; the second on the issue of mobility and the crossing of borders; the third deals with narratives placed in regulatory institutions like hospitals, prisons and convents; and the last one analyses films that focus on the changed/changing image of family, gender roles and the conflicts between generations. The least convincing part of the book is chapter 3 describing the so-called modernist hesitation of four pre-1989 auteur-films. The limited number of films brought into discussion questions the historical relevance of the research, whilst the interpretation of modernist self-reflexivity as being a specific type of hesitation theoretically shakes the grounds of the central concept of the book, as it seems to reach beyond the acceptable meaning of the term. In contrast, chapters 4 and 5 are truly enlightening, and offer a magnificent reading experience even for those who are familiar with Romanian historical events. The former one, dealing with the television broadcast of the Romanian revolution aptly demonstrates that “the chaotic and opaque nature of the events of the revolution was to a significant extent created through television broadcasts” through the hesitant nature of the image of history (Strausz 2017, 109, 111) – a situation that mostly benefited the first new political force appearing on scene those days. In all chapters one can notice the attentive phenomenological description of scenes, images and cinematic devices which are always carefully integrated within a theoretically grounded analysis. Thus the book is informative and helpful even for those who are not interested in the theoretical concept developed, but are looking for detailed, theoretically and historically informed analysis and interpretation of individual films. What seems to be missing from the study is a critical overview of the scholarly discourse on (new) Romanian cinema that is longer than one paragraph and that goes beyond the simple mentioning of some works and labelling them as “under-theorized”. (Strausz 2017, 5) Besides the description of the state of the research regarding the topic, such an endeavour would have offered the possibility for Strausz to position his approach compared to other studies of the field in the same way as he did it with the theoretical background of the central concept. The critical analysis of Dominique Nasta’s book (Nasta

2013), or the discussion of the term Romanian New Wave, preferred by Doru Pop (Pop 2014) compared to the label New Romanian Cinema used by Strausz and accepted by the filmmakers themselves would have benefited the argument. Especially Doru Pop's book could have been a good point of reference, because he – in a somewhat similar way to Strausz – uses a central term (New Wave) as a conceptual tool to assess contemporary Romanian cinema.

It seems important to note that compared to the authors of the above mentioned studies on Romanian Cinema, Strausz is not Romanian, and has never lived there – a situation that benefits his book on at least two levels. Firstly it makes him able to maintain a certain detachment from the events, actors, spaces and media products presented, secondly it offers a reading, analysis and interpretation that is accessible for audiences living far away from the historical and social realities of Eastern Europe or Romania.

Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen is a very well written book that contrary to its title is able to reach beyond Romanian cinema, as it offers valuable insight also for readers interested in cultural-historical film and media theory in general.

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**International Conference on Space and Cinema (28-30 November 2016, Lisbon)
Conference report**

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The three-days conference was organized by a research project entitled *Cinema and the World: Studies on Space and Cinema*, fostered by the Interart and Intermedia Studies Research Group at the Centre for Comparative Studies of the University of Lisbon. With around 60 participants and four keynote speakers – academics and artists, with a special participation of James Benning – the event aimed to map and interpret the cinematic representations of space, with special focus on contemporary, fragmented, shrinking perceptions of the world. The wide range of topics debated in parallel sessions, in English and Portuguese, included both historical and theoretical approaches of cinematic space: presentations dealt with the issues of classical film and inner spaces, geographical and phenomenological spaces in cinema, archival spaces, international spaces and exile, science fiction and mental spaces, queering spaces, cities and the urban space, memory and the ruin, body, space and perception, Female spaces of representation, cinema, architecture, the museum and (Dis)placing film genre.

While film historical and stylistical approaches included genre analyses of thrillers and noirs (e.g. the representation of interiors, houses, staircases and corridors in films of Hitchcock, von Stahl or Ozu), the theoretical spectrum consisting of anthropological, geophysical, architectural, political, phenomenological, psychological, psychoanalytical discourses focused on the constructedness of cinematic space that, as a flexible material, increasingly becomes itself a discourse on contemporary experiences, „senses” of space. This experience is mainly conveyed by a mapping impulse of images, along with dichotomies like home and exilic space, urban and rural, inclusive/exclusive space, place and space, mental and physical space. The great variety of examples and case studies, including Hollywood classical, American independent and documentary, South American, West, East and South European, Iranian and Japanese films were used to reiterate and reinterpret in a contemporary, rapidly changing political and ecological context concepts like home and domestic space, urban alienation, rural mysticism, collective memory and space, heterotopia, cinematic

mesography and subject construction, , landscape, non-place, spectral space, anonymous spaces, multiple spaces and embodied spaces.

Besides a smaller number of presentations dealing with formal aspects of cinematic space representations, the majority of topics raised the issue of identity, national, sexual or individual, mostly in a Third World, European, East-European and post-communist context. If we define identity, with Tom Conley, as "the consciousness of belonging, (a longing to belong) to a place and of being at a distance from it" we accept that place shapes identity, mainly confirmed by the films depicting the melancholic rootlessness of the migrant experience. In terms of European cinema, inexpressible spaces of otherness and isolation, mind-topographies of the unfilmable hallucinations, obsessions, dreams were discussed in a presentation on mental landscapes of Ingmar Bergman that became an imprint of European modernism. As another participant would argue, this style was reloaded later in films of Michael Haneke, mapping a European space going beyond the concept of national, in his preoccupations with European cultural memory.

Post-communist, Eastern-European, Balkanic cinema was well represented through interpretations of spatial constructions and identity performances in Baltic, Greek, Hungarian, Macedonian and Romanian films. Milcho Manchevski's films were coined for constructing a very specific image of place and national identity, also thematizing the absence of the "other", the Albanian Macedonians. The correlation between social space, architecture and crisis was identified in the neo-noir aesthetics of contemporary Greek cinema. Contemporary Hungarian cinema was represented by two presentations on sexual identity and space: dichotomies of rural / urban, inclusive / non/inclusive space were reiterated in the context of queer identity representations, while the quest of female identity was analysed as a spatial performance of mobility and stasis, both in the mirror of an altered notion of "home". Soviet urban architecture was interpreted as representative of spectral spaces and shared spaces of memory in Post-Soviet Baltic films, and inner framing solutions used in the representation of interior spaces in the Romanian Cristi Puiu's films were coined as a „cruel phenomenology of space”. The three keynotes and the invited artist reflected upon and completed the debated topics in a synthetic way. Teresa Castro (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3) in her talk *Cinematic Cartographies of Urban Space and the descriptive spectacle of aerial views (1898-1948)* demonstrated how the aerial point of view turned the modern metropolis into a quintessential cinematic object, also arguing that the pleasure of the cinematographic gaze lies in the

oscillation between visual and kinesthetic perception. Maurizia Natali (New York University), in her talk *Catalandia, the Cinematic Space of the Anthropocene*, explored the notion of Catalandia, a „hyper-object” that can be interpreted allegorically, ironically, politically and ecologically. As she argued, bringing examples from mostly science fiction and catastrophe-films, no art than film has pre-mediated the ruinous and spectacular space of the capitalist way of life. She interpreted Catalandia as the catastrophic cinematic mode of production of the Anthropocene (the two centuries long geological age in which destinies of life on earth have increasingly depended on our heavy anthropic footprint. Tom Conley (who delivered his talk in a video conference) added to these approaches a philological perspective with a presentation on relations between space and writing in literature, cartography and cinema, with special focus on examples from films of Jean-Luc Godard. The participation of James Benning, synchronized with screenings of his films at the Cinemateca Portuguesa represented an essayistic, philosophical discourse on most topics debated in the conference (space, time, memory, identity, race, gender), with special focus on duration, framing and contemplation. His films presented in the program of the conference – *One Way Boogie Woogie / 27 years later* (2005) – dealt with the work of time on space and human lives, while *Time After Time* (2016), a compilation of several of his films, made especially for this conference, explicitly thematized, as the chosen title suggested, the spatialization of time and dissolution of space into a temporal flow: the very essence of cinema.