

## 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\*

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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 cramped 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 There**<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.