

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SIERANEVADA (2016)

CRISTI PUIU

Auteur Born in Bucharest in 1967, Cristi Puiu is one of the most talented and promising of the Romanian New Realism film directors. One of his first movies, *Dough and Stuff* (2001), won several awards at international film festivals – The Trieste Film Festival, the Angers Film Festival, the Buenos Aires Film Festival. He received the Goppo award for *Aurora* (2010) and was awarded the Silver Hugo Award for *Sieranevada* (2016). For *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* (2005), he received the *Un certain regard* award at the Cannes Film Festival.

Film Released in 2016 in Cannes, Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada* was mainly produced by Mandragora Production. The producer was Cristi Puiu's wife, Anca Puiu, and the director of cinematography was Barbu Bălăsoiu. It has a running time of 173 minutes and its budget was 1.4 million Euros. The music producer was Bojan Gajic.

Cristi Puiu said that the name does not mean anything in particular, other than that it is a take on complicated, hard-to-understand movie titles.

The movie presents a tumultuous day in the life of a typical middle-class Romanian family, focusing on the relationships among the family members and on their worldviews as revealed in the dialogue. It is filmed in a very large apartment, which was rare in communist times in Romania and only very well-off families could afford one. Almost the whole movie is filmed in this apartment. Thus, we can infer that the social class under scrutiny in this movie is the upper-middle class.

Background The movie takes place three days after the terrorist attack at Charli Hebdo, in Paris, which becomes one of the topics of discussion in the movie. Extrapolating from here, we realise that the movie is a commentary on the precarity of life, on the values that still uphold it, and on death. In an interview, Cristi Puiu said that he wanted to explore in his film the theories and mentalities that arose in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

The whole movie diegesis centers around a *parastas* (a Romanian religious ceremony which makes offerings for the dead). It is based on the idea of Resurrection and the clothes offerings which are made are meant for the resurrected body of the deceased. Therefore, when Gabi wears Mr Mirică's suit, he embodies the idea of resurrection.

CHARACTERS

Lary	A doctor, Mrs Mirică's son
Laura	Lary's wife
Mrs Mirică	The matriarch of the family
Relu	Lary's brother
Sandra	Lary's sister
Gabi	Sandra's husband
Ofelia	Mrs Mirică's sister
Toni	Ofelia's husband
Sebi	Toni and Ofelia's son
Cami	Toni and Ofelia's daughter
Mrs Eva	A friend of the family
Simona	The girl who buys the <i>parastas</i> suit

SYNOPSIS

Sieranevada (2016), an example of Romanian New Realism, is about a day in the life of the Mirică family and some of their friends. The occasion for the gathering is Mr Mirică's *parastas* (funeral ceremony in which food and clothes are offered to the dead) and the whole family reunites in Mrs Mirică's home. A large part of the movie will take part in this apartment, a typical upper-middle-class Romanian flat. The movie has a preamble, where we see Lary, Laura and their daughter on the streets of Bucharest amid the deafening sounds of the car honks. In the opening scene, Laura and Lary are having a fight and we can witness each of these character's personalities: the former feisty and assertive, the latter phlegmatic and noncommittal.

They go into the apartment, where the whole family is waiting for them and for the priest. Everybody is beginning to feel hungry and Lary remarks that everyone will feel better once they have had something to eat. But the promised lunch is delayed *ad infinitum* by the lateness of the priest who is called to bless the food and by a series of unfortunate events: Laura insists that she go to buy food from the supermarket, Cami brings in a drunk friend, which disturbs everybody, especially the old ladies, Sandra and Mrs Eva have a fight over communist ideology, Ofelia spills hot soup on Mrs Eva's dress, which throws the latter into a tantrum, and they realize that the suit that had been bought for Sebi does not fit him.

Ofelia's husband, Toni, arrives and verbally attacks the family, Ofelia and Tony have a 'moment of truth' fight, Ofelia feels sick, Laura gets blocked in a parking lot and Lary has to rescue her and, at the end, Cami's friend throws up again. Through this web of incidents and dramas, we can hear the director's laughter through tears as he objectively portrays the problems and vagaries of contemporary Romanian family life.

SCENES

Husband and Wife Argue In the first scene of the movie, Lary and Laura are driving their car and having a fight over Lary's having bought a Snow-White dress instead of a Cinderella dress for their daughter's school festivity. Laura claims that the child cannot possibly wear the same dress as another girl in the show, especially since that kid's parents had been working as immigrants in Spain, while Lary thinks this to be a matter of no importance. He is more preoccupied with the loose adaptation Disney has made of the Grimm Brothers' story.



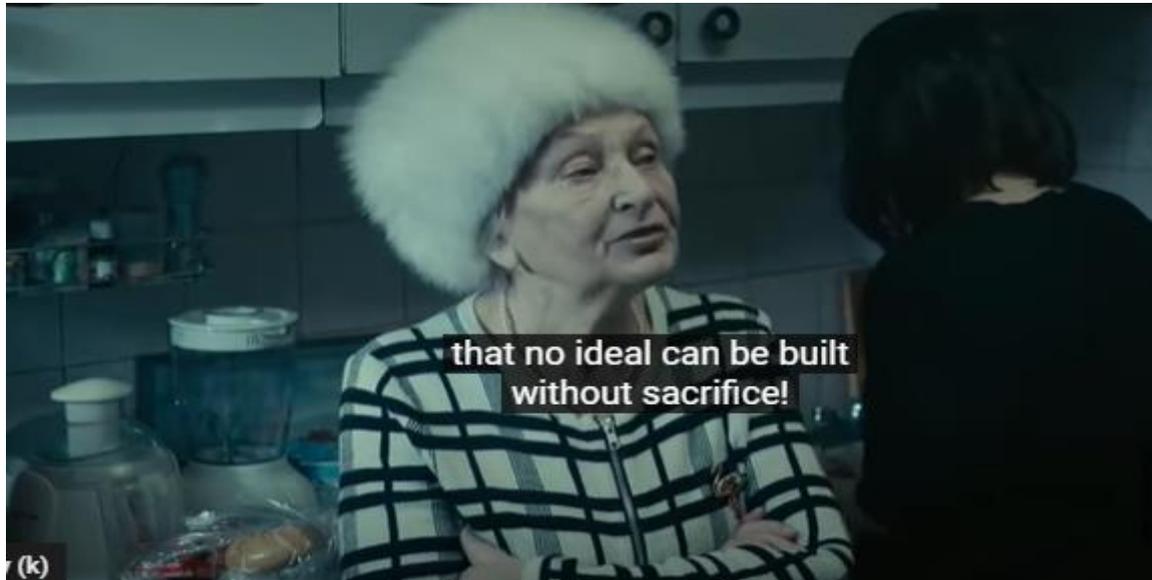
The Exercise Bike Lary, whose profession is a doctor, has now moved on to selling medical equipment. Consequently, he buys his mother an exercise bike, which he begins to set up. While calmly sewing, his mother asks him why he bought her such an object, wondering, at the same time, why he looks so tired and upset. Lary does not respond. Instead, he gets mad when he notices that one important part of the device is missing. His mother deflates the tension by asking him if the bike has a horn.



The Drunk Friend Right in the midst of the Mirică family commemoration ceremony, Cami arrives with a dead-drunk friend. Lary carries her in his arms and takes her to a room where she will trouble no one. The family is shocked and mad and Cami is duly reprimanded. However, they all gather to help the girl in need and give her a sleeping pill so she can recover. Cami is told to sit with her friend in the room and never leave the room, which she, naturally, will not do. Everybody is worried that the girl might be really sick and that she might die, but Lary assures them that she is just very, very drunk.



Sandra and Mrs Vera Argue As the priest continues to be late and the guests get hungrier and hungrier, all sorts of incidents ensue. One of the most ostentatious is the fight between Mrs Vera and Sandra. Mrs Vera is belligerent and stands up for the Communist regime, while Sandra is an avid anti-communist. Mrs Vera's words are harsh and she never lets her grip off Sandra, who starts to cry. Sandra feels betrayed when Lary comes in and mockingly takes Mrs Vera's side. At the end, he tries to explain to Sandra that Mrs Vera is old and hardly knows what she's speaking about, but Sandra remains unconvinced.



The Priest Shows Up When the priest finally arrives, he says his sermon and blesses the food and the clothes prepared for the offerings. At the end, the priest addresses Lary, whom he considers the intellectual and man of the family, to tell him about an incident. Once, while he was in a taxi, whose driver was, in his own words 'a more gypsy-like kind of man', the driver started asking him about the Second Coming. Puzzled by the question, the priest tried to give an informed answer, namely that we will know of the Second Coming by the fulfilment of the prophecies. However, the driver persisted and asked 'what if Jesus has already come and we do not even know it?' This question threw the priest into a terrible state, making him cry. That evening, he had a revelation: what had happened with the taxi driver was that he had been tempted to doubt the Second Coming of Christ! As the priest tells his story, everyone in the Mirică family is listening politely but, as we can infer from their silence, the priest's words do not reach them.



The Traditional Rituals continue - Wrong Suit After the priest leaves, another incident happens in the Mirică family. Mrs Mirică notices that the suit, which she had asked Simona to buy so that Sebi might be able to wear it for Mr Mirică's *parastas* (a detail which she had forgotten to mention) is six sizes larger than Sebi's size. The scene is comical because we see Sebi wearing the oversized trousers while the women are desperately trying to fix them somehow. Mrs Mirică tells off Simona for her blunder and Simona apologizes and promises to mend the trousers, which she does.



Toni's scerets Not a moment of respite for the Mirică family, as, in the midst of blunders, small fights and heated arguments, Toni, Ofelia's husband, makes an appearance. From previous discussions, we know that he has been aggressive towards Ofelia and now we see him as being aggressive towards everybody in the house. At the beginning, he denies all accusations, claiming that he is innocent but, when his wife starts dropping names of his mistresses, he asks: 'Who told you?' Confronted with the evidence of his cheating, he is eventually reduced to silence.



Larry and his wife continue to argue - The Parking Lot Incident When all the clamour and drama finally seem to be settling down, Larry receives a phone call and says he will be away for ten minutes. The phone call is from his wife, who had gone to the supermarket to buy food and is now having problems with her car because someone has blocked her way out of a parking spot. She'd started honking, so the driver would come over and take away his car, which stirs the anger of the neighbours who are mad at her parking on their reserved spot. They all swear and curse and are even physically aggressive so that, when Larry arrives, he almost gets into an altercation with one of the men. When the blocking car is removed, Larry tells Laura a story of when he and Relu were kids. Relu, he says, told a fantastic lie when their father had caught him smoking. After this, Larry tells Laura that his father had also cheated on his mother. While telling this story, Larry cries and confesses to Laura that he cheated on her just like his father on his mother.



The Ceremonial Dinner At the end of the movie, we see Larry, Relu and Sebi finally sitting around the table and eating. But the rest of the family are not there as one final incident has happened: Cami's friend has thrown up yet again. Larry and Relu are laughing heartily, and Sebi is slowly joining in, after being greeted with 'welcome', which mimicks the ceremony in which the receiver of the clothes gift is saluted. (The man wearing the deceased man's clothes comes in and greets everybody, who greet him in return, giving the audience the eerie feeling that the dead man might still be there). Sebi is wearing Mr Mirică's suit and we get a hint that that might be the final encounter between the deceased father and his two sons.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Lary – Lary is a middle-aged doctor and the son of Mrs. Mirică. He is married to Laura and is the character around whom all the other characters gravitate. He has a realistic and grounded perspective on life, without lacking sensitivity. Most of his remarks are peppered with irony, which gives us an insight into his profound spirit and intelligence.

Pragmatic Lary has a pragmatic worldview, based only on scientific facts. When talking about the World Trade Center bombings, he is inclined to believe the official version, dismissing all conspiracy theories that Sebi is trying to present. He takes on the realistic perspective on things, based solely on fact and not mere conjectures or 'suppositions' as he calls them himself. He is the one who is called to solve all the crisis situations, including the one when Cami brings along a friend in a drunken state. He also resolves the conflict with Toni and saves his wife from an issue she has for parking her car in the wrong place. He is respected and loved by his whole family, who listens to him, and looks for his advice.

Caring There are moments when Lary displays a great tenderness, the most conspicuous of which being when he tells the story to his wife about his brother Relu's early smoking. He cannot help crying, perhaps for his dead father, perhaps for the loss of youth, perhaps for his own sins. He narrates the events with a lot of affection and we can tell he loves his brother and whole family a lot. But, through the narrative, we can also guess at childhood issues which must have affected him and his brother.

Ironic Lary has a peculiar sense of humour, as though he were observing the scenes happening in his family from a distant vantage point, in a detached and phlegmatic manner. At the end of the movie, when they are finally starting to serve the meal and are interrupted by Cami's friend throwing up yet again, both he and his brother, Relu, start laughing. When Sebi comes back in, they greet him with 'welcome' just like their mother had taught them to greet him upon entering wearing their late father's suit.

Laura - Laura is Lary's wife. She is a beautiful young woman who seems overwhelmed by her family responsibilities and throws a fit on every situation, be it minute or significant.

Elegant Laura is an extremely elegant and feminine character, both through her posture and her clothes. Moreover, her attitude towards her husband is delicate such as in the moment when he confessed to having cheated on her. At which, she says – 'That's all?...I'll need a few days to reflect on what you just said'.

Intense However, in other situations, Laura is extremely intense. When the movie begins, she is scolding Lary for buying their daughter the wrong dress for her school festivity. She is making quite a big fuss about it, while Lary is without reaction.

Biased Although Laura appears only at the beginning and end of the movie, we get enough information about her character. When she makes a scene about her daughter's dress, she says that she cannot possibly wear the same dress as a classmate of hers, whose parents were working immigrants in Spain. In this scene, we witness a biased and snobbish Laura, she passes judgments on people based on their social status.

Relu – Relu is a captain in the Romanian military and Lary's brother. He seems to be the most fair of all the characters in the movie. He has the most objective viewpoint of all the characters in the movie and tries to see both sides of the coin.

Impartial Of all the characters in the movie, Relu is the one who tries to maintain the most objective and fair position. He counters his brother when the latter dismisses Sebi's conspiracy theories, stating that he believes that Sebi does have a point when he says that more research should be made into these situations and that the real reason for the lack of interest on the part of people is fear.

Reasonable Every time there is a conflict, Relu tries to solve it. He does not have the force of conviction that his brother, Lary, does. Although he is a military man, he argues that the military should be allowed to do politics and wonders why this isn't the case. He states that all he does is his job, goes on the front and tries not to get killed. But, in one of the most compelling of his interventions, he says that when he watches TV in his home at night, he cannot help but feel afraid.

Easy-going – Relu has a calmness that seems to characterize only him, a certain peace of mind that no other character in the movie has. When he argues, he does so with tranquillity and assuredness.

He never loses his temper and is more inclined to laugh with his brother at the silly situations that arise, rather than get into a fight. When he takes Sebi's side, he does so in an easy-going manner but with assuredness.

Sandra – Sandra is Lary and Relu's sister and Gabi's wife. She has just had a baby and she is very involved in the household. Sandra is anti-communist and very sensitive about the topic of communism. She is assertive and does not accept other people's opinions easily.

Assertive Whenever Sandra gets mad, there is no way anyone can make her change her mind. While she is the first to welcome Toni in their home, after she learns what he has done – that he has cheated massively on his wife and had gotten into a fight with one of his mistresses' husband – she is the first to ask him to leave the house.

Anti-communist Sandra is clearly an anti-communist, as we can tell from the scene of her argument with Eva. Later in the movie, we learn that she and her husband had been in the University Square where students were beaten by the miners who had come to Bucharest to reinstate a communist regime. She is adamant about her convictions, bringing to the fore the many crimes and atrocities committed by the Communists in Romania.

Mrs Mirică – is Lary, Relu and Sandra's mother. She is the head of the house now that her husband is dead. She is clearly the head of the household, but she also has a tender side, displaying her affection towards her children and sister.

Indomitable Mrs. Mirică is the matriarch who tries to keep a strong hold on her house, despite the many incidents that occur. When Toni arrives, she tells him off and is not afraid to tell him the truth about the sorry situation to which he has brought her sister, Ofelia. She confronts Toni with courage and has an assertive attitude when telling him the truth.

Motherly Mrs. Mirică is a very motherly woman, she takes care of everything in the house, from the cooking, to preparing the clothes, to bringing in the priest for the commemoration ceremony. She clearly has a weak spot for Lary whom she forgives, even if he upsets her at times. She shares with her son the sense of humour, as in the scene when he brings her the medical equipment and she asks if that bike has a horn.

Ofelia – Ofelia is Mrs Mirică's sister, an elderly woman whose husband cheats on her and abuses her. Throughout the movie, she cries a lot and feels weak, showing a fragile side. She is the typical victim who apologizes even when she is the one who is attacked.

Weak In all the scenes in which she appears, Ofelia is presented as a weak character, living as though in the shadow of her sister. When her husband comes over and she finally confronts him about his affairs, she says she needs her sister to be by her side. She cries all the time and says she wants to kill herself.

Victim Ofelia, as her name suggests, is the typical victim of an aggressive and abusive husband, who does not have the nerve to stand up to him and end a disastrous relationship. Instead of imposing herself, she cries and feels sick. The only time when she confronts her husband, asking him about the names of various alleged mistresses, she asks everybody to forgive her at the end.

Toni – Toni is Ofelia's husband. He is an abusive and aggressive man, with low moral standards.

Aggressive As soon as he arrives, Toni manages to make a scene, stopping everybody from eating and screaming and shouting and even being offensive towards the host, Mrs Mirică. He provokes her by asking her to reveal the truth about him, in the hope that he might learn what his wife already knows about him. With his daughter he is equally aggressive, threatening to beat her 'until her teeth fall off her mouth'.

Fearful – However, when he sees that his wife is feeling sick, he fears she might have an aneurysm or fall into a coma, so he begs Lary to let him stay, no matter what. He even apologizes for his rough and rude behaviour, admitting that he has wronged the family by behaving the way he did. He continues, saying that he will stay in a corner, on a chair, just to be allowed to stay next to his wife.

Simona – Simona is the young woman who buys the ceremonial suit for the deceased Mr Mirică. She is the invisible type of woman who somehow manages to help with everything.

Submissive Simona never takes up an argument and she tries to calm everyone down whenever they get carried away. When Mrs Mirică scolds her for buying a suit six times larger than what they need, she apologizes and sets out to mend the suit. Because of her submissive attitude and almost invisible presence, she is deemed stupid by Mrs Mirică. She helps with the cooking, the cleaning, the setting of the table, the suit mending, but she never participates in the family's conversations.

Caring Simona has a very caring and sweet side as we can see from her behaviour and from the brief conversations she has with Lary. In a way, we could say she is a foil to Lary's wife, as we notice her having a quiet and caring conversation with him, immediately after his wife's fit of nerves and impatience.

Gabi – Gabi is Sandra's husband and a doctor, like Lary. He is very similar in some ways to Lary as we can notice from his remarks, which are equally ironical and sarcastic.

Smart We can tell Gabi is very smart, from his shrewd interventions and well-founded arguments. For instance, when he and Lary talk to Sebi about the 9/11 events, he founds his position on the realism of having been there and having seen nothing strange other than the bombings themselves. He equally mocks Sebi for his way of interpreting the events.

Resourceful Gabi also manages to solve some of the problems which appear. For instance, when Toni makes a scene and nobody is able to calm him down, he shuts him up by saying that Toni will wake up his baby daughter, Irina, if he continues shouting.

Sebi – Sebi is Lary's younger cousin, an idealist who is interested in the internet and conspiracy theories. He is not obtrusive and lacks the amount of persuasion Lary has.

Idealistic Sebi has strong conspiracy theory convictions as we can tell in the scene where he tries to argue that 9/11 was a CIA setup and that there is much evidence to support his claims. However, his position is somewhat questionable since he bases all his claims on information that he found on the internet. He is keen on proving his point by showing his cousins pictures and movies from the internet, but both Lary and Gabi mock him.

Unobtrusive In spite of his strong convictions, Sebi is quite unobtrusive, being careful not to offend anyone and showing submission towards his mother and aunt. When his father shows up, he leaves the house and sits on the steps upstairs, waiting for his father to leave.

Cami – Cami is Gabi's sister and Ofelia's daughter. She is a student who likes to party and brings a drunken friend to the house right on the day of her uncle's commemoration ceremony.

Rebellious She is the typical rebellious young woman, who gets into a fight with everyone in the family, the typical black sheep. Accordingly, she is consigned to the room with her friend who is asleep, to take care of her and stay away from the vexed family.

THEMES

Family relations In a way, *Sieranevada* is an X-ray of family relationships in post-Communist Romania. With a keen attention to detail, Cristi Puiu exposes all the flaws and shortcomings of family life through the various couples and intergenerational relationships in the movie. The first couple we are presented with are Lary and Laura, who seem to have a good husband and wife relationship with the small problems of couples fighting over menial matters such as the daughter's dress for the school festivity. As Laura is feisty and we see her having things only her way, and Lary not opposing much, we wonder about the wellness of their marriage. Then we learn that Lary has cheated on Laura, which complicates things. Another similar couple plagued by cheating are Sandra and Gabi. In one of their fights in the kitchen, Sandra shows her suspicions towards Gabi's night shifts. The older couples, Ofelia and Toni, and also Mrs Mirică and her late husband, have had the same problems. As for the intergenerational and inter-family relations, they are at times caring, at other times abrasive. Thus, Cristi Puiu seems to be implying that there are many issues plaguing the contemporary Romanian family due to the clash between old and new.

Worldviews A very interesting and subtle theme in the movie is that of worldviews. This matter is treated from several perspectives, as articulate by the characters in the movie. The main idea is that there is not one single unifying claim on truth. The movie displays the whole spectrum of views from the most pragmatic to the most idealistic. This theme is present in almost all the conversations, from the mere perspective of whether or not to buy the right dress to the question of whether 9/11 was a

real terrorist attack or not. Other matters addressed include who is to blame in the crises which have appeared. For instance, Mrs Mirică, after taking her sister's part, says that Toni is also right in a way. This problematization complicates the narrative structure of the movie and gives poignancy to the dialogues. It creates clearcut characters and also advances a varied and generous perspective on life.

Rituals Not incidentally, the whole action of the movie takes place around a *parastas*, a ritual commemorating a dead person. The deceased man in the movie is Mr Mirică. On this occasion, we witness several traditional Romanian rituals, such as food serving and eating, types of dishes (cabbage rolls, borscht – sour soup – beef salad, etc). The family and guests gather around a big table and eat that food. For this purpose, a priest is called, who reads a sermon and blesses the food and clothes especially purchased for the one who is commemorated. Interestingly enough, in the movie, both the old and the young take part in this ritual, even if they believe in it or not. Quite comically, when the priest arrives, Mrs Vera places herself at the front of the line to receive the blessings, although she had previously criticized the Church and proclaimed her communist atheism.

Old vs. New Cristi Puiu also focuses on the clash between the old world and the new world through the intergenerational gap. While the young are pragmatic, hooked on their phones and the internet, the elderly are keen on preserving past traditions and relationships. This clash climaxes in the fight between Sandra and Mrs Vera when the latter tries to impose her communist views on the former, focusing on the benefits of the communist regime for the country. At this point, Sandra starts crying but this doesn't stop Mrs Vera from her banter. The two worlds, however, sometimes overlap, if only humorously, as we can see when Sandra is pleased that Mrs Vera gets burnt with the hot soup. 'There is a God', she says.