

## Cristian Nemescu's California Dreamin'

---

### A Cinematic Radiography of a National Dream

by Oana Chivoiu



*California Dreamin', source DVD*

#### **Summary:**

The article explores the interplay between history and personal stories in Cristian Nemescu's film *California Dreamin' (Endless)* and discusses the idea of an American dream as seen from a post-Communist Romanian village.

#### **Author:**

Oana Chivoiu is Ph.D. candidate at Purdue University (Department of English, Theory and Cultural Studies). She writes her dissertation "Dis/Placing the Crowds: The Engagement of Victorian Novels in Crowd Management".

#### **Keywords:**

American dream, post-Communism, Romania, history

#### **Quotation:**

Chivoiu, Oana (2011) "Cristian Nemescu's California Dreamin' (Endless): A Cinematic Radiography of a National Dream", in: *manycinemas* 1, 54-65

*“And the Americans never got here until  
the day before yesterday”*

“The Americans have come” is a phrase that proliferates in different variations in Cristian Nemescu's film *California Dreamin' (Endless)* (Romania 2006). Telephones ring, high school girls whisper and pass notes under the table during class, anonymous pedestrians spread the news that a NATO train with Americans (and military equipment) has arrived in Capalnita, a village in the South of Romania or in “a fold of the map” as Captain Jones (Armand Assante) puts it. While everybody in Capalnita seems to partake in a generalized hysteria, at Bucharest the event is handled with bureaucratic indifference and negligence. When the American military convoy heading to Yugoslavia during the Kosovo war is unexpectedly sidetracked in Capalnita for five days over custom paperwork issues, their presence in the village is seen as a historical moment. Capalnita's quotidian economic and social apathy is momentarily put aside. From quasi-marginal, Capalnita becomes a hot spot on the political map.

*California Dreamin'* is a film that belongs to what is known as the new wave in Romanian cinema, a generation of internationally acclaimed young Romanian directors. Nemescu was the youngest of this generation that includes Cristi Puiu, Cristian Mungiu, Catalin Mitulescu, Radu Muntean, Corneliu Porumboiu. Their films reflect on the horizons of the post-Communist Romania, a world that continues to be resurfaced by the specters of Communism and Cold War. *California Dreamin'* traces these specters back to their inception through the narrative of Doiaru (Razvan Vasilescu), whose story, fragmented by flashbacks from his past, conflate



*California Dreamin', source DVD*

with a present history. At the confluence of these narratives of past and present, Nemescu situates the major narrative and cinematic drive, also nicely embedded in the title of the film - a Romanian projection of an American dream. At one point, Doiaru confesses to his unexpected American guest that he has been waiting for the Americans to come for more than fifty years. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes transparent that this psychology of waiting for a form of salvation developed during the Communist regime is a collective/national one. The American presence in Capalnita awakens a collective identity based on the recognition of a dormant hope that a salutary intervention from the outside will cure Communist and post-Communist plagues. Aspirations to political alliances beyond the sphere of influence of the Eastern block secured America a privileged position in the Romanian collective imaginary during the Communist regime.

Nemescu's artistic platform was "to bring the film back to the story" (Lupsa 2007) and take it away from the Romanian tradition in which the story was silenced by metaphors and symbols used as responses to the Communist ideology that conditioned artistic expression. Nemescu wrote with Tudor Voican the screenplays for his last three films. They both shared an artistic interest in storytelling: "In Romania anything can be turned into a story. Without social critique. Without anti-government message. Without hatred. Without superiority. With honesty. With understanding. With love" (Nemescu qtd. in Lupsa 2007). From this list, humor is missing. It is an element that balances the tragedy and the absurd of the story from *California Dreamin'*. Nemescu's artistic grace in grasping the interplay between history and personal histories is comparable to the sophistication of Jiri Menzel's from *I Served the King of England* (Czech Republic 2006) or that of Philip Kaufman in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (USA 1988) and Lev Schreiber's in *Everything Is Illuminated* (USA 2005).

*California Dreamin'* is Nemescu's debut feature-length film and, unfortunately his last one, as he died at the age of twenty seven in a car accident along with Andrei Toncu, the sound editor of the film. *California Dreamin'* was in post-production stage at the time of the accident. Despite the unintended open-endedness, which was adopted as a parenthesis to the title (Endless), the film was accepted to enter the Cannes Film Festival and won

the “Un Certain Regard” prize in 2007. Pascale Ferran, then-jury president of the festival praised *California Dreamin’* as being “far and above, the most lively and liberated film proposal we've seen in our ten days here” (Festival de Cannes 2007). The director Corneliu Porumboiu described Nemescu’s cinematic style as poetic realism and described him “the most eclectic director of the young generation” (qtd. in Lupsa 2007).

What happens with the collective American dream after the collapse of the East-West political divide? Does it lose its appeal as the context that shaped it disappears? Or is there an afterlife to it that outlives the already remarkable longevity of the fantasy? Apparently Nemescu's film not only traces back its origins but also contemplates its post-Communist transformations. *California Dreamin’* is prefaced by a series of black-and-white shots that ground the narrative in the political history of World War II when Romania, then-allied with Germany, is bombarded by American troops in an effort to loosen this political alliance. The opening shots place the story in May 1944 and introduce the protagonist Doiaru, as a young child along with his parents and grandfather in a perfectly domestic and bourgeois setting in the capital city of Bucharest. When an American bomb penetrates the dining table of the family, literally takes the stairs to end up in the basement, without exploding, the narrative is fast-forwarded and relaunched fifty five years later on the backdrop of Kosovo war, which finds Romania in a political alliance with NATO and Doiaru face-to-face with a long-delayed and accidental arrival of the Americans.

History is indeed in the making in the village of Capalnita where the course of the American military intervention in Kosovo is altered as well as the potential outcomes of the American presence in Yugoslavia. When the American convoy stationed in the village finally leaves, it is too late for the purposes of their military mission. The Kosovo war was over two days after their arrival in Yugoslavia. Capalnita thus becomes a site that plays a central role on a larger historical scale. Concomitantly however, we are reminded of the utter marginality of the place, which upon the arrival of the Americans, turns into a carnivalesque universe where everything is upside down. The stationmaster Doiaru whose corruption is infamous and controls the entire economy of the village, decides to act according to the law on this occasion

and requests the American convoy to present transit documents in order to pass through the village. Having only a verbal permission from the Romanian authorities and Doiaru's adamant compliance to the Romanian transportation law, the Americans remain in Capalnita where the locals see their presence as a rich source of opportunities. Each of the five days of their stay in Capalnita has a corresponding segment in the film.



*California Dreamin', source DVD*

The mayor (Ion Spadaru) envisions the Americans as potential economic investors in the economically dead village of Capalnita. He splurges on organizing a duplicate centenary anniversary of the village for the Americans. He tries first to convince the people of Capalnita that it is their civic duty to offer hospitality to the American guests. The people of Capalnita, as camera's long shots of the village document, are unemployed, poor, walking the streets purposelessly or filling the bars to kill time. The high school girls see the American soldiers as romantic venues to escape from Capalnita. The workers from the only and usurped local factory hope that a strike under the eyes of the American soldiers will force the mayor to solve their issues and salvage the image of Capalnita as a place of economic stability.

History is also in the unmaking in Capalnita, the village that celebrates its centenary twice and turns history into a derisory fact. The village is a site where the course of history has been detoured from its initial course and rewritten according to Doiaru who has a different idea about the passage of the Americans through the village. He uses his bureaucratic power to stop the passage of the American convoy. His decision is a reactive gesture to a traumatic and unfinished personal history that also involved Americans but

half a century ago in the context of WWII. The screenplay of *California Dreamin'* is based on a true story that has been slightly changed to accommodate an in-depth look at the emotional and cultural construction of history.

From other short black-and-white interpolations we find out that Romania's alliance with Russian forces, which happened in August 1944, turns young Doiaru into an orphan as the Russians take his parents prisoners because their factory was delivering orders for the Germans. Doiaru's parents go to prison with an impossible promise to their son; a promise that neither they nor young Doiaru believe in but refuse to accept and continue to wait: "Don't be scared. Before we return the Americans will be here". Doiaru is raised by one of his uncles somewhere in the countryside where he remains to live his entire life with a vague nostalgia for Bucharest, which he hopes will be a destination for his daughter Monica (Maria Dinulescu). She is the only emotional attachment he is left with after the loss of his wife at his daughter's birth. Monica is a teenager and wants to be independent as much as Doiaru fears it.

The story of Doiaru's loss of family and city life echoes a deep feeling of regret and failure that matches only his corruption that apparently knows no limits. Doiaru's corruption represents not only a form of survival in the legislative chaos of the post-Communist society but also a radical disillusionment with life. Doiaru has lost everything and fears nothing except Monica's leaving with the Americans, which proves to be practically impossible. The course of his dealings at the railway station is influenced by how he feels about Monica's fling for Sergeant David (Jamie Elman) one of the American soldiers from the NATO convoy blocked in Capalnita. At one point, when he is considering accepting bribe from a high official for allowing the train to leave Capalnita, he sees Monica and David kissing and decides against it: "Until I see the custom papers, this train isn't going anywhere. Clinton himself can come down here. [...] No one is leaving. Not you, not the Americans. You're all staying here with me". Doiaru's emotional reaction echoes the latent sense of loss from childhood that is about to reach explosive proportions at the thought of Monica's leaving with the Americans. With the arrival of the American soldiers, we find out that in

Monica's escapist fantasies America is a destination: "You see, Dorel, if you don't let me go to them, they come to me."

When the camera takes a long shot of the unexploded bomb and a longer close-up to read the fabrication details at one of its ends: "Made in USA Assembled at Newport Military Facility California", we know that in Nemescu's cinematic universe the bomb and California are uncanny moments. They are about to introduce the story of an American dream as seen from the remote village of Capalnita where the arrival of the American convoy is welcomed as a long-expected presence that brings with it a promise of salvation. Salvation from corruption, poverty, chaos, lack of perspectives, and most importantly, Doiaru's influence. The bomb functions as a metaphor for the narrative drive in the story – both latent and dynamic just like Doiaru's waiting for the Americans to come. The mayor has somewhat more realistic expectations when he involves Captain Jones and his soldiers in plotting a street conflict to eliminate Doiaru.

As getting rid of Doiaru would mean a free pass for the American train, Captain Jones assures the mayor that he can count on his intervention. The American intervention in the actual conflict never happens as the convoy gets all the custom paperwork in order and leaves Capalnita. Doiaru reacts emotionally to either Monica's actions or to anybody who challenges his authority at the station. This makes him unpredictable and vulnerable altogether. The American presence triggers an emotional explosion for Doiaru. His actions are similar with the long-delayed explosion of the latent American bomb that landed fifty-five years ago in the basement of the building where Doiaru family was living before the WWII. The plot reaches its climax with the explosion of the bomb. This speeds up the closing of the plot with Doiaru's death in a local street conflict and the departure of the American convoy. How is the film closing Doiaru's American dream? What is left of it and how it outlives Doiaru through Monica's decisions? These questions are only partially answered, as the film remained unfinished.

Between the two unfeasible options – the fantasy of American salvation and living in Capalnita, the film suggests a more viable and realistic option – Bucharest, where Monica lands as student after her father's death.

Monica follows her father's desire and makes a symbolic return to her father's childhood city. In *The Future of Nostalgia* Svetlana Boym explains the dual nature of nostalgia that is visually explicit in cinema:

*A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface.* (Boym 2001: xiii-xiv)

The temporal double exposure in *California Dreamin'* contemplates the connections that bridge or suspend the temporal distance of fifty-five years in protagonist's life. The two ends of this distance are incidentally two wars: WWII and the Kosovo War which, translated into Doiaru's existential equation, represent his orphanhood and his death. The black-and-white episodes that interpolate the plot consistently have a dreamlike quality – minimal verbal expression, visual contemplation of objects (little Doiaru's toy plane, the radio set spreading war news, the breaking of the family china under the American bombardment) and spaces (the family living room, the stairs of the building populated with evacuees, the basement, the familiarity and coziness of the neighborhood) and emotional intensity. A particular attention goes to faces (little Doiaru's vexed and hopeful expression at the departure of his parents to prison, the sadness and dignity of his parents betrayed only by the mother's swollen eyes from crying, the resilience of the grandfather) body movements and physical interactions (the last embrace of the family in complete silence) which are represented as moments of stasis, of acute nostalgia. Despite the fact that these episodes have Doiaru as protagonist, we do not see nostalgia as part of his emotional investments. These episodes carry an emblematic quality; they could be the story of many others who had been orphaned or displaced by WWII and whose current actions and emotions continue to be shaped by the traumas they have been through.

As seen from Doiaru's vantage point, the past is the site of trauma that left him an orphan and deprived him of the possibility to establish nostalgic connections with his childhood. The nostalgic undercurrent of *California Dreamin'* is sustained through the mutually dependent narratives of past and present. The linearity of the plot grounded in the present is fragmented by black-and-white episodes; they offer a key to understanding its



course and motivation. The present is resurfaced by the past and indicates Doiaru's inability to reconcile with his loss. Doiaru is not constructed as a nostalgic character as far as his relationship with the past goes. On the contrary, his cynicism and obsession for controlling everything anchor him in the present. Doiaru's character is structured around a deeply grounded fear of any form of loss that he might suffer. A form of nostalgia comes into place when Doiaru envisions possible losses – emotional and economic primarily; his nostalgia is future-oriented. His Achilles' heels are two. He fears his daughter's growing independence and the decrease of influence he has over her. Another vulnerable spot is the economic monopoly he holds on the black market of Capalnita, which is literally controlling the entire economy of the village. Nostalgia is not a viable way of coping with the loss because of the traumatic way in which the loss happened. The proximity of loss and trauma make nostalgia a dead end or as Doiaru's daughter confesses a repetition that does not do more than illuminate the same facets of truth: "My Dad's told me this story 1,000 times since I was little."

Aside from using black-and-white flashbacks to cultivate a nostalgic mode, Nemescu creates linkages among images of apparently mundane gestures that have acquired a high condensation of meaning in light of WWII. For instance, the opening shots of Doiaru family at the table, with the father listening to the radio for vital information about the war, the grandfather impatient to eat the soup before the bombs hit are replayed when the camera steps into Doiaru's kitchen to find similar coordinates. This domestic image is associated with the inception of trauma. At the other temporal end, the radio is on and transmits political information about the ongoing war in Yugoslavia. Doiaru either cooks or sits at the table eating with the appetite



*California Dreamin', source DVD*

of his grandfather. The radio is a source of information and a vocal companion for Doiaru's solitude. The radio set that we see in the opening shots was a vital conduit to reality during WWII. In the closing shots we see a similar radio set in a coffee shop in Bucharest, where Monica meets an old friend from Capalnita. The radio set plays only an aesthetic function that distances it from its once-vital utility in domestic spaces. The recurrence of images of domestic functions, hypostases, and objects can be seen as symptoms of the trauma whose aftermath continues to interrupt the present in varying degrees of emotional intensity. Performing these stylistic repetitions is a reminder of the primal relation we establish with images.

Waiting for the Americans has something from the absurd and emptiness of waiting we see in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The Beckettian Godot is an abstraction that has an amazing power over Vladimir and Estragon whose lives are literally confined and consumed by the wait. Nemescu's Godot is anchored in history and is as abstract as Beckett's. Doiaru's Godot are the Americans who, as he confesses to Captain Jones, came too late: "You know what Jones? I wait for the Americans to come much time to save us from Germans, Russians, and Communists, and Ceausescu. It's funny that you come here finally. Better later than never." They showed up eventually, after the appeal of the expectation has long worn off and Doiaru understood the futility of his hope. They never brought his parents back from the Russian prisons. They became NATO partners and political allies only late - after the fall of Communism. Doiaru's Godot is a source of consistent disillusionment, which endorses him as a genuine Godot. The Americans do pass through Romania on their way to Yugoslavia during the Kosovo war but bring nothing from the expectations invested in their eventual coming.

For Doiaru it is an existential need to confront his Godot. For this reason he designates by proxy that Americans impersonate the Godot he has been waiting for so long. It is an absurd and irrational gesture that masquerades Godot into a presence and magnifies the dimensions of Doiaru's need to cope with his loss. Doiaru needs to take revenge and curse the Americans; this is apparently what has remained from his American dream. The arrival of the Americans grants Doiaru the possibility to have a closure to his

life-long wait and vent a tremendous emotional burden. The Americans are as eager to leave the village and complete their mission, as Doiaru is reluctant to facilitate their departure.

The juxtaposition of five days with fifty years of wait documents that time presents different dimensions for the two parties. For captain Jones time is synonymous with capitalism and is measured in terms of productivity, military rigor, and pride. At the other pole, the film documents a time that searches for its measure in a post-Communist world haunted by unemployment, migration of work force from the countryside to the city and abroad. The time in the village of Capalnita is still in a raw form that has not been accorded with a distribution of work and leisure.

Walter Benjamin explains that the victors write history (1969:256). History writing is an act of power and the past a battlefield. It involves ownership of the past. Doiaru and Captain Jones are symbolically competing over who gets to write a page of history in the Kosovo war. Captain Jones wants to follow a linear narrative of military pride thoroughly scripted in advance. As it appears, from this narrative a significant detail is missing – transit documents, which Doiaru uses as a pretext to make a narrative detour and claim authority and ownership over writing this moment. He has the law on his side and a powerful emotional drive. Doiaru literally sidetracks the narrative of the American mission in Yugoslavia to rewrite it. In doing so, he alters the course of events and temporarily suspends military actions of the American soldiers in Yugoslavia. Doiaru's intervention is small on the larger scene of the war. It also seems that Doiaru does not rationalize the scope of his intervention despite the fact that unlike others, he presents some political insight and opinions visible especially in his conversations with Captain Jones. Nemescu explores the emotional construction of history rather than a political consciousness that might be associated with Doiaru. He pays close attention to Doiaru's decision-making process and never fails to show how Monica's, which happen under his eye in such key moments, shape his reactions. The story of Doiaru's last five days of his life has two important closures – one is the confrontation with what is left from his American dream; the other one, which comes right before his death, is the news of Monica's decision to go to Bucharest to study at the university.

*California Dreamin'* highlights the futility of the Romanian American dream as seen from Capalnita and in light of Doiaru's story. Between the American dream and the reality seen from Capalnita, the film contemplates the horizon of expectations that the post-Communist Romanian metropolis has to offer to younger generations whose aspirations are not defined against the Communist legacy of their parents. In the final scene, which we do not know if it is the final Nemescu envisioned for the film, we see Monica as in Doiaru's dream – a mature and diligent student in Bucharest building a future away from Capalnita, which with the violent death of her father has become a site of trauma and loss, just like Bucharest was once for his father.

### **References**

- Benjamin, Walter (1969) *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, New York: Schocken.
- Boym, Svetlana (2001) *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books.
- Festivale de Cannes (2007) "California Dreamin" by Cristian Nemescu Wins the Un Certain Regard Prize. Available at [tp://www.festival-cannes.fr/en/article/55652.html](http://www.festival-cannes.fr/en/article/55652.html) [Accessed 10 March 2011].
- Lupsa, Cristian (2007) "Nemescu – Life as a Film", *Esquire*, Available at <http://www.esquire.ro/articole/reportaje/nemescu-viata-ca-un-film.htm> [Accessed 15 March 2011].

### **Filmography**

- California Dreamin' (Endless)*, Romania, 2006, dir. Cristian Nemescu, Romanian.
- Everything Is Illuminated*, USA, 2005, dir. Lev Schreiber, English/Russian/Ukrainian.
- I Served the King of England*, Czech Republic, 2006, dir. Jiří Menzel, Original: *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*, Czech.
- The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, USA, 1988, dir. Philip Kaufman, English.