REPRESENTATIONS OF 'THE WEST' IN THE ROMANIAN IMAGINARY BEFORE 1989. POST-COMMUNIST TRANSFORMATIONS OF COLD WAR MYTHOLOGIES[1]

Abstract: *The present paper proposes to examine various, more or less idealized, constructions and perceptions of "the West" in the Romanian imaginary during the Cold War period, pointing to the complex relationship between political/economic constraints under Communist rule and the emergence of (salvation) myths. Exploring Cold War mythologies, my paper captures the progression from the "Americans are coming" myth to the fantasies of emigration to America and the flight into the imaginary. This is what historian Lucian Boia calls the "compensatory role" of the imaginary in periods of crisis, in a disappointing, meaningless real world. On the other hand, the paper highlights the subversive function of the imaginary, showing how the silent, long-term process of imagining the prosperous, free West, constantly undermined the totalitarian regime's efforts to control and indoctrinate the population. My study also looks at the post-communist transformations of the salvation myths and escapist fantasies, using as case study Cristian Nemescu's film* California Dreamin' (Endless) *released in 2007. Finally, my paper points to the clash between the "emotional" construction of history based on distorted, mythological versions of events, and true history. At the same time, it considers the potential use of the imaginary as a sensitive barometer of the historical evolution.*

Key words*: communism, salvation fantasies, capitalist myth, flight into the imaginary, American dream, emotional construction of history*

We live in a concrete reality, but we also live in our own world of representations, projections, illusions. After all, as historian Lucian Boia insightfully remarks, the imaginary says more about man than the traditional history of "real" facts. It is, in a sense, more real than reality; the truly important things are in our minds and souls.[2]

The communist myth, utopia and attempt to reinvent the world; the capitalist myth and the fascination with western capitalism; the end of the world; the desire, in periods of crisis, to find an escape, a new salvation path – all these belong, after all, to the imaginary. The present paper proposes to examine various, more or less idealized, constructions and perceptions of "the West" in the imaginary of ordinary Romanians during the Cold War period, pointing to a complex relationship between the political/economic factors under the communist rule and the emergence of the (salvation) myths. The mythical image of "the West" reflected the Romanians'/East Europeans' fascination both with a prosperous Western Europe and with the U.S. and the "American way of life". My study also underlines the role that these "myths of the West" played in the opposition to the efforts of the totalitarian regime to indoctrinate the population.

The paper looks at possible causes and contexts that led to the emergence of idealized images of the West in the Romanian imaginary: the "arrival of the Americans" collective psychology phenomenon; the rise in the Romanians' expectations in the nineteen sixties and early seventies and the subsequent betrayal of their hopes by the

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[2] See *Pentru o istorie a imaginarului* (*Pour une histoire de l'imaginaire*, trans. Tatiana Mochi) by Lucian Boia, preeminent Romanian historian whose main research interests are the history of ideas and of the imaginary, the study of ideologies and of historical and political mythologies

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communist regime; the economic crisis of the eighties leading to an increased frustration with the regime; the totalitarian tactics of indoctrination and social control. In the conditions of economic failure and communist constraints, the West, with its affluence and freedom, became a sort of "Paradise on Earth" (Petrescu, 2008: 214) in the Romanian imaginary, western consumer goods (that the regime obstinately banned) became "cult" objects for many Romanians, and western cultural products (rock music, American movies) reaching Romanians mostly through unofficial channels (Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, or the informal videocassette networks), revived the American myth.

The first part of my study discusses the "Americans are coming" myth, a popular theme in our recent past, one that has shaped the imagination of thousands of Romanians, being yet another source of frustration under the communist rule – that of the Americans' failure to "come here" after the Second World War. The second part analyses the "myth of the West" in the nineteen sixties and early seventies – a period of relative liberalization and consequent rise in ordinary people's expectations (the so-called "golden epoch" of the Romanian communism). This section refers to the main features of communist consumerism, to the way that a majority of the population embraced consumer culture based on glimpses of the life in the West. Finally, the third part addresses the period of severe, progressive economic decline from the mid-seventies to the late eighties and the idealization of the "capitalist" West in the Romanian imaginary in reaction to the "shortage economy" (Kornai qtd in Petrescu, 2008: 210).

I will also consider the post-communist transformations of the salvation myths and escapist fantasies, using as case study Cristian Nemescu's film *California Dreamin' (Endless)* released in 2007 and based on a true story: the long-delayed and accidental "arrival" of Americans in a small Romanian village in 1999, during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. Nemescu's film not only traces back the origins of the salvation fantasy but also examines what happened with it after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

In the communist era, the Romanians constructed an imaginary America as a symbol of democracy and freedom in contrast with the economic and political constraints they were subjected to. Indeed, America has never been just a geographical place; the European imagination had already invented a dream world, a mythical West, long before America was discovered. Thus, America has been for many Romanians and Eastern Europeans a set of projections, a wide projection screen for dreams, fears and fantasies, an object of fascination, a promise and a state of mind rather than a real country. During the communist years in particular, we could talk about "an American absence filled with symbolic meanings" which kept alive Romanians' hopes that one day the Americans would come and liberate them (Drăgan, 2010: 131).

"*Vin americanii*!" ("The Americans are coming!") was a slogan used in Romania in the 1940s and 1950s, reflecting the hope that a new world war would break out and an American-led invasion of Eastern Europe would overthrow the Soviet-backed, communist-dominated government that came to power in early 1945. This slogan encapsulated a whole national psychology of waiting for a form of salvation, for a salutary (military) intervention from the outside.

This notion of America as a liberating force helped sustain an anti-communist resistance movement in Romania after 1945. The groups of "partisans" withdrawn in the mountains and the civilians who helped them were prepared to eliminate communist officials as soon as the war began and to take control of their particular region. In this scenario, the Soviet troops would also be driven out by the U.S. Army with help from

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the local resistance. These hopes and scenarios were accompanied by a whole spiral of amplified and amplifying rumors, more or less connected to reality. For example, the mountain groups placed great hope on the parachutes from the western planes, anxiously waiting for money, food, arms, and munitions. It is not clear whether these parachutes ever reached the partisans or the peasants and shepherds who supported them, but they had great symbolic value, being associated with signals that America was about to start the assault against communism (Barbu, 2006: 47-50).

Indeed, although the resistance groups' efficiency and capacity of changing Romania's political situation proved limited in the absence of a massive western support, the existence of these "freedom fighters" hidden in the mountains fed the ordinary Romanians' salvation fantasy and played an important symbolic role: it meant that there was still hope, that America had not forgotten the Romanian people. It may have been only in their imagination, but many Romanians believed these groups had close links to representatives from Washington and that an action leading to the breakdown of the communist rule was only a matter of time. Western radio stations, Voice of America, BBC, and Radio Free Europe, did maintain for long the hope in an American intervention to free Eastern Europe (*ibidem*: 51).

As shown in a January 1946 article of *Viaţa Românească*, a popular magazine of the time, the belief in the American arrival had remained the only thing that kept Romanians going around the end of the war. They even came to see the bombing of Bucharest in 1944 as a sign that the Americans (and along with them, salvation) were close. *Viaţa Românească* presented, in a hyperbolic, exaggerated manner, the "benefits" of Bucharest bombing as part of the Romanian collective psychology of waiting for the American Savior:

> Aceste bombardamente sunt singurele mele momente de fericire plină şi intensă. […] De atâta vreme aşteptăm şi mai toţi dintre noi credem că aşteptăm zadarnic. […] Şi iată că totuşi ceva a venit. Avioanele acestea. Aparent distrugătoare, ele aduc in fond mântuirea. Fiecare bombă americană este aruncată în serviciul înaltelor idealuri de omenie, libertate, respect pentru demnitatea şi securitatea omului. (These bombings are the only moments of full and intense happiness. […] We've been waiting for so long and most of us think we have waited in vain [...] But look, something *has* come. These planes. Apparently destructive, they in fact bring salvation. Each American bomb is dropped in the service of high ideals of humanity, freedom, respect for human dignity and security.) (qtd in Barbu, 2006: 110, my translation)

After 1945, the same promise of salvation fueled rumors of a new and imminent war; invasion rumors were often very precise, specifying the date and manner armed intervention would take place, the number of planes involved in bombing strategic targets in Romania and driving out the communists etc. Voice of America reports were amplified and distorted, resulting in desired, imagined but, unfortunately, unrealistic solutions. For instance, the Americans' "presence" was often associated with the hope that King Michael and the historic political parties would return to power. The rumors circulated fast, from person to person, from town to town, building an imaginary world as an alternative to that offered by the communist regime; they rather reflected the people's hope for a change than the reality of the American foreign policy with regard to Eastern Europe (Barbu, 2006: 80-83). All these are versions of the mental constructions well known to those living under the communist regime, showing the play between reality and fantasy in Romanians' perceptions of America, the "numerous

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inter-connections and permanent exchanges" (Boia, 2006: 25) between these two realms.

Gradually, anticipation and waiting gave way to resignation and disappointment. After the failure of the United States to intervene during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Romanians started to doubt that the arrival of the Americans was a realistic scenario and to realize that Americans would not "come here" after all. As historian Florin Constantiniu notes,

> Un ciudat fenomen de psihologie colectivă a fost credința puternică și durabilă a opiniei publice că Occidentul și, în primul rând SUA, vor sfârși prin a smulge România de sub cizma sovietică. 'Vin americanii!' a fost expresia care a sintetizat o atitudine politică și o stare de spirit. Ele au rezistat tuturor dovezilor de dezinteres al capitalelor occidentale față de țările rămase după 'cortina de fier' și abia după zdrobirea revoluției ungare de către Armata Roșie în 1956, sub privirile pasive ale Occidentului, est-europenii și, între ei, românii, au inceput să se smulgă dorințelor luate drept realitate. (A strange phenomenon of collective psychology was the strong and enduring belief that the West and above all the USA would pull Romania from under the Soviet boot. 'Americans are coming' was the expression that summarized a political attitude and a state of mind. They resisted all proof of disinterest in Western capitals toward the countries left behind the 'Iron Curtain' and only after the Hungarian revolution was crushed by the Red Army in 1956, under the passive gaze of the West, did Eastern Europeans, among them Romanians, begin to abandon their wishful thinking and face reality.) (2011: 440, my translation)

Indeed, after 1956 fewer and fewer Romanians continued to believe in an American intervention meant to overthrow the communist regime. Gradually America became more than the symbol of a political alternative, coming to be identified with a lifestyle; the famous American way of life, associated with freedom and affluence, would represent from then on the central element in the perception of the United States behind the Iron Curtain.

In addition to that, as the communist regime in Bucharest after 1958 embarked on an "independent path towards socialism", distancing itself from Moscow, Romania was timidly opening to Europe (Petrescu, 2008: 199). What followed, therefore, from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, was a period of closely watched ideological relaxation (which actually had nothing to do with democratization). But this period of apparent, relative liberalization allowed for the transgression of regional borders, despite the communist regimes' attempts to freeze the peoples and cultures of Eastern Europe. "Shopping tourism" to the "West", a form of communication with the West, did in fact increase in the 1960s, both people and especially objects beginning to flow across and thus undermine the carefully constructed and powerfully policed borders (Urry, 2000: 41). The amount of information and consumer goods "from the outside" increased and many Eastern Europeans, especially the young people, began to adopt elements of western lifestyle. The books, the movies, the magazines, the music, the clothes were small fragments of the Occident which made the young people from behind the Iron Curtain feel closer to their western counterparts (Barbu, 2006: 73). It was during that period that an idealized image of Western Europe (synonymous with the affluent West, of which Western Germany became the epitome from the mid-1960s on) and of the United States started to develop among the ordinary Romanians, despite the sustained efforts at indoctrination pursued by the Communist Party's propaganda machine. At the same time the events in Czechoslovakia during the "Prague Spring" and the reforms of

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1965-1968 – a rise in living standards reflected in the regime's program of apartment building, in the increased sales of cars, TV sets, refrigerators and vacuum cleaners, a relaxation of the ideological controls governing popular entertainment that allowed Romanian television to show western movies and series, the opening of a Pepsi-Cola bottling plant in Constanța in 1968 as ultimate symbol of concessions to western "capitalism" – all these created an atmosphere of optimism and an expectation of even broader liberalization (Deletant, 2006: 166-68).

But the door closed, gradually at first, in '69-'70, and completely in the summer of 1971, and a long, grey period, a climate of intolerance and economic decline followed. The regime launched a large-scale offensive designed to annihilate this spirit of freedom inspired by "the West", the dream, the promise, and the fascination with whatever came from the West. On the other hand, the economic failure of the eighties increased the idealization of the western consumer goods and subsequently of the capitalist West by a majority of the population. In fact, despite restrictions of consumer demand under communism, this fascination with western taste, these desires for the objects of the West – "cult" products such as video cassettes and American movies, western books, blue jeans, American jogging shoes, which marked the sophistication of the "West" and the presumed failure of the "east" (Urry, 2000: 42) – may have played a greater role in the implosion of state socialist systems of Eastern Europe than any other political ideology. Indeed, as Katherine Verdery remarks, the obstinate consumption of western products took on a political dimension, turning into an expression of dissent: "You could spend an entire month's salary on a pair of blue jeans, for instance, but it was worth it: wearing them signified that you could get something the system said you didn't need and shouldn't have" (Verdery, 1996: 29). These were forms of protest in which people used (western) consumption styles to assert a resistant identity, to differentiate themselves in the face of the communist regime's relentless pressures to homogenize everyone's capacities and tastes into a grey, undifferentiated mass. This consumer desire and taste for "the good life" were actually kept alive and amplified further by the regime's deprivation policies. Western goods became standards of quality and symbols of a dream world; their consumption turned into bond-making rituals:

> Those who received parcels from the West used to invite their relatives or friends to the 'ceremony' of parcel opening to admire the colorful labels and nice packaging, but essentially to have a taste of good life. Brand names such as Fa and Lux (toilet soap), Adidas (sport equipment), Toblerone (chocolate), Kent (cigarettes) and Rifle (Italian made blue jeans) were synonymous with the affluent West. Western products were so desired that average Romanians developed strange habits. If they could procure from the black market a bar of scented soap, say, a Fa soap, which was produced by the Henkel Group in West Germany and whose advertising slogan read: 'Your daily luxury!', they did not use it, but placed it inside a wardrobe to scent their clothes. (Petrescu, 2008: 214)

The idyllic image of Western Europe was constructed mainly around the mythic image of the affluent West Germany, for which ordinary Romanians developed a deep fascination. Romanian youngsters wanted to dress "after the Neckerman catalogue" for special occasions such as weddings, christenings or proms; they would browse through the pages of the West German catalogue to find what was new "in the West" in terms of clothing, sporting equipment, photo cameras, audio and video devices. The younger generations, therefore, received the true education precisely from the artifacts of western popular culture that the totalitarian regime obstinately banned or jammed: the blue jeans, by far preferred to the uniforms that the regime imposed on its

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citizens, the videocassettes and the American movies brought from abroad and stubbornly watched during almost "conspiratorial gatherings" of friends, the music and the popular magazines, the anxiously expected radio shows such as Radio Free Europe and Voice of America. They avidly listened to the late night rock music programs from Munich based Radio Free Europe (RFE) which transported them, temporarily, to an imaginary free world.

In the seventies and eighties the fantasy of emigration to America or to the Western Europe occupied the Romanian imaginary to an extent comparable to that of the "the Americans are coming" myth of the forties and fifties. For those who could not leave the country the ultimate refuge was the flight into the imaginary, the mental escape and the various ways of evading the increasingly unbearable reality – through western music, reading, yoga, bridge, collective viewing of American movies (Barbu, 2006: 73-74). This is what Lucian Boia calls the compensatory role that the imaginary plays in a disappointing, meaningless real world. Especially during periods of crisis, the imaginary and its manifestations are summoned to compensate for the disillusionment and lack of horizon, to protect against fears, and invent alternative solutions and meaningful spaces (Boia, 2006: 26).

The development of large informal, underground networks of viewing western, primarily American, Hollywood-produced, movies on videocassettes heavily contributed to constructing a mythical image of the West, in particular an idyllic image of the "American way of life". If the myth of the arrival of Americans faded into disillusionment, it could be said that the Hollywood movies revived the American myth (Petrescu, 2008: 218).

Cristian Nemescu's film *California Dreamin' (Endless)*, released in 2007, looks at the transformations of the collective American dream after the collapse of the East-West political divide (Chivoiu, 2011: 56). The central image of the film is that of a train which crosses Romania carrying a troop of American marines who accompany a transport of NATO strategic communications equipment to Kosovo's 1999 conflict area.

The train is stopped in the Bărăgan Plain, in a small village called Căpâlnița, by Doiaru (Răzvan Vasilescu), the chief of the railway station. We learn through black-and-white flashbacks that Doiaru's family awaited the coming of Americans at the end of World War II, but it was the Russians who arrived first, in 1944, and took away Doiaru's parents because they owned a factory which "made some things for the Nazis". Although his parents tried to comfort him – "Don't be scared. Before we return, the Americans will be here" – little Doiaru knew on that day that it was the last time he would see them. And the first Americans to arrive in the village after WWII (too late for Doiaru) are the very soldiers on the train in 1999. Now Doiaru wants payback and blocks the train for five days invoking the lack of some custom papers. He tells Captain Jones (Armand Assante), his unexpected American guest: "I wait for the Americans to come much time. To save us from Germans, Russians, Communists, and Ceausescu. It's funny you come here finally. […] It's simple. Papers, Americans go. No papers, Americans don't go".

Thus the Americans find themselves trapped in the isolated, God-forsaken village: "so we are stuck here, in the fold of the map, in the middle of Romania", Captain Jones remarks. The fold implies closure, absence, lack of control over circumstances (which was the Romanians' condition under communism). But the roles and power forces are now reversed. Doiaru is in control now, Căpâlnița is his station. The Americans are made to directly experience what it is like to live in "a fold of minor

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history", to be unable to move, while having somebody else decide for you, be it the world powers or a totalitarian regime, or simply a person (Schwab, 2009: 109).

In the meantime Căpâlnița wakes up from its quotidian economic and social apathy. Everybody in the village seems to partake in a generalized hysteria at the news that a NATO train with Americans and military equipment has arrived in Căpâlnița. Their presence in the village is seen as a historical moment; from quasi-marginal, Căpâlnița becomes a hot spot on the political map. The American presence awakens a dormant hope in a salutary intervention from the outside that will cure communist and post-communist plagues (Chivoiu, 2011: 54). Their arrival is equated with a promise of salvation – from corruption, poverty, unemployment, chaos, lack of perspectives, and from Doiaru's power and "dictatorship" over the village, from specters of Communism and of the Cold War which resurface in post-communist Romania. Everybody sees in the American presence a source of opportunities: the mayor regards the Americans as potential economic investors in the economically dead village; the high-school girls are anxious to be "freed" from Căpâlnița and marry American soldiers. Monica herself, Doiaru's daughter, hopes to escape the closed horizon of her village where nothing ever happens; she dreams of an ideal world, of crossing the Atlantic and making a life in the land of all possibilities.

The mayor invites the American guests to the 100th anniversary party of the village – although it had already been celebrated a few months before. The party is an opportunity for the villagers to say "what we want and who we are" and for the mayor to put his little kingdom on the map. The villagers' familiar perception of the Americans is the result of the latter's being "part of the Romanians' most intimate, most secretly nurtured wishes" (Schwab, 2009: 109). Moreover, the inhabitants of Căpâlnița have already adopted the American culture and consumption styles that have fascinated Romanians for so long.

They are proud of their local (Romanian gypsy) Elvis singing *Love Me Tender*; they have their Slobozia Eiffel Tower and their "Dallas" with the replica of the Texan ranch in the vicinity of the village. These are simulacra of places and characters which, in this way, become accessible to them, turning their obscure rural dwelling into the very center of the world. In fact, people re-create here a small Las Vegas, a version of America itself as a land celebrating simulacra (*ibidem*: 110), as a culture fascinated with "authentic copies".

As shown throughout the paper, these mental constructions and simulated versions of the world (of America, in particular) are subversive and undermine totalitarian practices. Yet, on the other hand, individuals may be inescapably caught in their own perspective on things; they create a fantasy and come to fully identify with it. The fantasy of the American salvation is such an instance of emotional construction of history, which renders people unable to have a correct relationship with history. This is illustrated in *California Dreamin'* by the disillusionment with the American dream as seen from Căpâlnița and in the light of Doiaru's story which is so similar with the Romanians' consuming waiting for the Western Savior. First of all in Nemescu's film, the Americans came too late, after the appeal of the expectation had long worn off. Second, they bring nothing from the expectations invested in their eventual coming and they leave behind tears and disappointment (on the part of their rejected teenage lovers), street fight and death (their promised intervention in the conflict between Doiaru's people and his opponents never happens).

The clash between distorted, mythological versions of the events and true history is also illustrated by the Romanians' failure to fully grasp the context of Stalin,

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Churchill and Roosevelt's agreement at Yalta in 1945. The Romanians were waiting to be saved by a nation whose president – reluctantly, it is true – left the Eastern European countries (even if he thought it would be a temporary situation) in the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. The Romanians' hope for salvation may seem naïve in the context of power decisions taken at transnational level.

Still, salvation fantasies seem irresistible. Ends of the world, millenarianisms, utopias, apocalyptic moods, saviors and providential characters, occult practices – all these emerge and populate the collective imaginary when people are disappointed and desperate in face of the "real" history. Thus the imaginary can be used as a very sensitive barometer of the historical evolution (Boia, 2006: 26).

If there was a myth of salvation through communism, if the salvation through capitalism seems to have failed, too, one could ask: What is the next salvation myth? Or rather, what will *really* save us? Perhaps we wait in vain for salvation from the outside unless we save ourselves from the inside, unless we do some mind and soul searching. Perhaps what will really save individuals and nations is a genuine self-examination and reflection on life, a return to God. As André Malraux, France's great novelist and former minister of culture, famously predicted: the twenty-first century will be spiritual or will not be at all.

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