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## Type and Stereotype as representations in *California Dreamin' (endless)*

In the Romanian historical context, the period from 1989 to the present is currently conceptualized as post-communist and it is talked about as a period of transition, as largely accepted in any post-communist concept, a transition from Stalinism to Capitalism. The loss of censorship of Film and Media in general changed drastically the role of the media in post-communist Romania. At a certain point in the evolution of the Romanian post communist society, the role of the media was perceived as being just one of the reinforcement of different types of social behavior. This fact explains in a certain way why, when a film like *California Dreamin'* appeared it raised a lot of controversial debates. As David Berry notices in his book *The Romanian Mass Media and Cultural Development*, the media, in general, was seen as politically influenced and corrupt, and the films in particular seemed to deal with a certain type of characters, a very stereotype way of approaching the Romanian post-communist society with its people. That is the topic of my presentation and specifically I will focus on the role of type and stereotype as representations in *California Dreamin'*.

My choice for this particular film is motivated on one hand, by the fact that it offers what I consider to be a realistic image of the Romanian post communist society

and on the other hand because of its recognized value outside Romania, as a winner of the prize *Un Certain Regard* in Cannes, which gives it a certain ambiguity if it is to consider that this world recognition was not quite identically reflected in the Romanian society, where it appeared to be pretty controversial. Also, as a Romanian I feel that I owe in a way a great deal to Cristian Nemescu, the maker of the film , who unfortunately died before the film was finished, so it is my own way of trying to thank him for the legacy he left us.

The action of the film is pretty simple: a NATO train with US soldiers and equipment, going to Kosovo, during the Kosovo war in 1999 is delayed by a railway chief in a Romanian village. The film explores the relations between the Romanians and the Americans during the days the train was stopped in the station, insisting on the socio-political dimensions of the Romanian life and the illusory horizon of the life overseas, created by all the frustrations the Romanians had during the communist regime. This allows the scenarist to create the plots, insisting on the relations between different characters. Since the social, political and cultural representation of the Romanian post-communist society seems to be what the movie *California Dreamin'* aims to do, it would be useful to analyze the role of the type and stereotype representations in order to have first, a better understanding of this film's complexity and secondly, an explanation for its different reception in the national and international media.

The "Stereotype" is a very powerful notion and there is a whole debate about its meanings and symbols. We tend to associate it with a negative connotation most of the times, and sometimes we seem to forget that it has also a usefulness necessity. The

definition of Walter Lippmann, I found it to be representative for the idea of the positive role of the stereotype as representation, still underlining its ideological implications:

A pattern of stereotypes is not neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a short cut. It is all this things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy.

As this definition shows, and also Richard Dyer in his article *The role of stereotypes*, there are four aspects of the stereotype that we need to consider to better understand its function in the social thought and also in the media fiction: it is an ordering process of the information that we receive from the world as part of the process through which a society makes sense of itself through generalities and patterns; it is a shortcut, or a very simple, short representation, capable of synthesizing complex information and strong connotations; it refers to the world as a projection of it; and the last but not the least, it expresses a general agreement about a social group. In this context, it is easier to understand what Richard Dyer said, that “it is not stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation, that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interests they serve”, so, the political power involved in their representation.

Bearing this in mind, we can turn towards *California Dreamin'*, trying to analyze the play of the stereotyped representation throughout it.

From the beginning we can see the way the organization of the information referring to the Romanian society, from the most insignificant character to the main one is reflected through stereotypes. In the center a whole gallery of stereotype characters is the railway chief, Doiaru. He is the stereotype of the corruption in Romania, the image of a largely vitiated system in which corruption, power games, people not capable of assuming responsibility are the key words. He is painted as a selfish character, capable of stopping a NATO train at his wish just because Romania is a country without a functional law system. But the movie succeeds in doing more than that for Doiaru: he is a very complex character, and his complexity is created through a black and white flashback from his childhood. This flashback has a psychological effect and explains Doiaru's reaction at the presence of the Americans. When he was a child, his parents who were owners of a factory, awaited the arrival of the Americans at the end of World War II. Instead of them, the Russians came and took his parents that he did not see again. The last words of the deported father, "The Americans will come and they will save us", mark definitively the spiritual evolution of the child. This flashback into Doiaru's psychology offers the elements for deconstructing his behavior to his wish of revenge against the Americans and also to bankrupt the local factory in order to buy it. It is what Freud calls, in his *A General Introduction to Psycho-Analysis*, traumatic neuroses, phenomenon which symbolically seems to extend to the whole society: "In the traumatic neuroses, especially in those arising from the terrors of war, we are particularly impressed by a self-seeking, egoistic motive, a straining towards protection and self-interest; this alone perhaps could not produce the disease, but it gives its support to the latter and maintains it once it has been formed" (Freud, 332). In this psychological context, it is not surprising

that we find Doiaru, years after this episode from his childhood, as a railway chief who acts like he is the owner of the train station, stalling from all the trains with the help of the chief of the Police (another symbol of the corruption in Romania) and blaming the gypsies for it. This scene is based on another stereotype: the discrimination against the gypsies. In the last couple of years, the international media was very active in “unmasking” and fighting against what they identified as being the discrimination of Roma people in Romania. It is a very delicate subject, because most of the Romanians feel the situation is not fairly described in the international media, and the way *California Dreamin’* treated this subject could be perceived as an offense, a way of keeping alive the stereotype of the discriminated gypsies, which does not really express the reality in the view of most of the Romanians.

Around Doiaru, Cristian Nemescu creates like in a galaxy of human micro universes, the symphomatique world of Capalnita, an ambiguous place, situated between rural and urban (the stereotyped micro image of Romania in-between spaces). It is a fascinated spectacle of stereotype human characters, like the mare, demagogue, helpless and stupid (stereotype of the helpless Romanian public system), the workers from the factory, who are always in strike (stereotype of the Romanian working class), the Spanish teacher, passionate for the soaps (stereotype of the Romanian educational system who lost its values), the high-school students with their limited aspirations (stereotype of the Romanian youth with its degraded values). Because of the way this world is created, the Romanian film critic Mihnea Columbeanu considers, in his article “*California Dreamin’*-Scoala Cehoslovaca Redescoperita” that Cristian Nemescu, through this movie:

could be considered as rediscovering the Czechoslovak School of movie, not through imitation or inspiration, but through real similarities with the humanity, atmosphere and content of ideas, having the same ways of expression, but wearing the mark of Cristian Nemescu. His personality is expressed before Capalnita appears. The first of the flash backs is filmed with an amazing accuracy, reproducing concrete and sober the imagistic conception of the 40's, not only through the black and white decision, but also through shots, lights and rhythm. Then, the scenes that introduce us into the present life, with the arrival of the equipment and of the American soldiers and their embarkation in the train, the USA anthem, create very clearly the image of the ironic style that is going to mark, through its savory and its uniqueness the whole movie(Columbeanu, 1).

The stereotype as representation is not used only to reflect the corruption of the political system. In the same sphere of the stereotyped representation of a post communist society, we have the corruption of the base social structure, the family, represented in *California Dreamin'* by the couple Doiaru/Monica, his daughter. The tension between the two of them is a metaphor for the tension of a society between two moments of crises of identity: the end of the communism and the period of transition that follows the end of the communism.

There is another stereotype that works towards the social construction of the post communist Romanian reality, and that is the stereotype of the love triangle Monica/David/Andrei. Here we have the stereotype of the poor Romanian girl, who lives in a small village at what it seems to be the end of the world, trying to get the attention of

the long dreamed American boy, David, who will fall in love with her, and will take her out of this small universe, into a dream world, *California Dreamin*, where all the dreams are possible. And as in any stereotype of a love triangle, we also have the playboy, David, who does not want anything else from Monica than to have some fun, since he already has a girlfriend back home, in USA, and also, Andrei, the smart, but invisible Romanian boy, who is in love with Monica, but who, because of his complexes, is too afraid to directly express his feelings.

Considering all these stereotypes, we do not have to let ourselves deceived by their simplicity. As T.E. Perkins notes in her article *Rethinking Stereotypes*, the often observed simplicity of stereotypes is deceptive:

To refer “correctly” to someone as a “dumb blonde”, and to understand what is meant by that, implies a great deal more than hair color and intelligence. It refers immediately to her sex, which refers to her status in society, her relation to men, her inability to behave or think rationally, and so on. In short, it implies knowledge of a complex social structure (139).

The same knowledge of a complex social structure it is implied through all the stereotypes *California Dreamin'* plays with. There is corruption, disorganization and chaos at all levels: political, economic, educational, working, military, but all these are in many ways expected in a society in transition from communism to capitalism, post-communism being understood as a phase of development that has no clear objective. Consequently, these stereotypes by expressing a general agreement about the way a post communist society functions, they come with a whole historical luggage inherent in their own signifier and which supposes social relations based on the search for legitimization,

as reflection of a period of disorientation and intense search for a national identity and also for social and political structures to fit these identity.

This value of expression of stereotypes makes necessary the distinction between social type and stereotype, since we do not want to fall into the trap of assuming that automatically any fictional representation based on the assumption of certain characteristic traits is automatically a stereotype and there is nothing more there. For this, Richard Dyer's discussion of type and stereotype can offer a direction:

In fictions, social types and stereotypes can be recognized as distinct by the different ways in which they can be used. This is most clearly seen in relation to plot. Social types can figure in almost any kind of plot and can have a wide range of roles in that plot (e.g as hero, as villain, as helper, as light relief, etc), whereas stereotypes always carry within their very representation an implicit narrative (The role of stereotypes, p.15).

Consequently, the difference between type and stereotype is based on the way they are used. They are similar in their iconographic representation, but if the stereotypes, through their implicit narrative are very limited, by opposition, the types are open and their use suggests a certain evolution, internally, as a character, and also externally, in their relation with other characters. Let's see how this evolution and passage from stereotype to type functions in *California Dreamin'*.

At the end of the movie we are in the point where all the tension between the characters converged towards what we expect to be a climax of a very destroying force. We have on one side, the mare, the workers and the villagers instigated by the Americans, gathering to fight against what captain Jones calls "the tyranny and the



oppression” of Doiaru, and on the other part, we have Doiaru about to fall in this trap. At this particular moment, before living to meet what he thought to be the gypsies that were styling from his trains, but what in reality was the group of people instigated by the Americans, Doiaru is told by Monica that she wants to go to the University, in Bucharest. It is the first step toward the evolution of Monica’s character, her transformation from the stereotype of the girl wanting to change her social status using as an intermediary in this process the rich American boy, to the social type of a girl who wants to succeed through her own forces, the girl strong enough to take in her own hands the lead of her future.

In the same category of evolution from stereotype to type we have also Andrei. The smart, sensitive guy, ruled by his complexes changes into a person strong enough to assume his condition and with that his love for Monica. In a very moving scene, a little surrealist in its realization, he confesses Monica the fact that he loved her for the last two years, and that he was the one sending her love messages all the time.

The complete transformation of the two characters, Monica and Andrei, is realized in what is supposed to be the epilogue of the film. Five years later, in 2004, we find Monica and Andrei meeting in a café place in Bucharest. The two of them are students, and their meeting lets us guess a certain emotion that could be identified with the beginning of a love story. Both of them were able to surpass the implicit narration of their first stereotype representation and to take it to another level. In fact, this opening of the stereotype into a social type at the level of the two characters, Monica and David, constitutes the key to deciphering what I believe to be the positive message of *California Dreamin’*, the evolution of the characters from stereotypes to types, evolution and passage that opens the space for hope.

It is not surprising for me that this is realized through Monica and Andrei. They represent the young generation, and the hope of the Romanian post communist nation lies with the youth. They are the ones who can find a way to legitimize themselves again, a way that is not the communist one, and also not the intermediary, transitional one either. They have to reconstruct themselves again, in a way to reinvent themselves again, and the positive implications of the message of *California Dreamni*' is the fact that even if it is a difficult process that involves casualties, it is not impossible, it can and will be realized by the young people, who will find themselves strong enough to take the lead of their future. In the same field of symbols, the death of Doiaru was necessary and quite part of the semantic construction of hope. He represented the mentality and the stereotype of all those who were waiting the rise of the post communist Romanian society with the help of the western powers. The leitmotif "the Americans are coming and they will save us" governed his entire life. Symbolically, the Romanian post communist society needed the death of those mentalities. As a society, you can not expect the others to come and save you, you need to find in yourself, in your own intern resources the power to surpass a period of chaos and disorganization, and *California Dreamin'* offers a moving representation of the search for national identity.