

Lost in  
eternity





# Lost in eternity

By Peter Biella & Iván Drufovka





**ID:** September 18, 2008

–Hi, Iván. It's Peter? How are you?

–I'm fine...and yourself?

–I'm fine, thanks. So I have

a question. Would you be interested in shooting a film in Romania? It's about a village called Măgura. Near Bucharest.

–Yes, well, it sounds good... and what is the film about?

–Mm well beauty, poetic fences and animals.

–Beauty... poetry? That's nice. I mean, what's the story?

**PB:** Iván has been making programs for *The History Channel* and *Arts & Entertainment*: they say if you don't have stories and a message people won't watch. I have been making ethnographic films for other anthropologists. We are not quite so rigid.

**ID:** And I was also wondering – but I didn't say it to Peter out loud right away on the phone – like,

are we going to have characters to tell us something about themselves, or the country's history? Are we going to explore what people lived through under communism and twenty-four years of Ceaușescu's brutal dictatorship? Are we going to have a case study of a family and its history?

–No, Peter answers me. No story this time. Just images of the village. The images will guide the film; we'll follow them.

–Mm. Right, okay. When would we go? For how long? Who are we working for?

–... Summer 2009... 3 weeks... European Union. Douglass Bailey, Department chair at my university...

–Let me think about it. I'll call.





Of course I wanted to go. All the details were arranged. Like our other films, Peter would shoot and I do sound. We would co-weave, co-direct, co-edit with or without a message.

My uncertainty never exactly went away. No story to follow... no knowledge what the film was going to be about. Beauty and poetry, yes, but aren't those cultural abstractions, culture-specific abstractions? How are we going to make a film without a verbal narrative, without social conflicts to expose, with no on-camera expert to give us the answers to the human drama?... No narrative arc – no “Problem, Elaboration, Resolution”? Windows? Plum wine? “It's very Romanian”? Okay, all right.

Saturday, May 16, 2009, 9:30 AM, my plane lands at Heathrow Airport, London, United Kingdom. I started up through security carrying my sound gear and the Mac computer for editing the unknown film. At customs every cable, battery, and connector was meticulously inspected. The computer was turned on, the sound mixer was turned on. What is the equipment for? Why am I travelling to Romania? I answered all of their questions politely. I had had no questions, and I had had no trouble getting on the plane in Philadelphia. Just be patient. Running through my bag the officer finally found the microphone boom pole. She began to inspect it, and pulled it out, collapsed. Collapsed, it's about three feet long.

She had never seen a boom pole in her anti-terrorist training. With her permission, I took out the microphone, connected it to the front of the pole. Doing so, I explained that you extend it over your head so that you can reach the source of sound without getting the mike in the way of the camera. Then I showed her - I snapped it out about nine feet over her head.

At that instant two policemen dove on me - one yanked the pole out of my hands – the other held my arms. They thought it was a weapon -- (I was going to microphone the officer). Now there were four of them - a customs supervisor arrived. Still remaining sort of calm, I said that recording sound was my livelihood and that without my boom pole I would have to find a Romanian broomstick as a substitute!

**PB:** Iván and I have been making movies together since 1985. Our first one was in a Costa Rican rain forest, and we did buy a broomstick in Costa Rica then because we didn't have anything else. But life has been good and twenty-five years later we have been able to afford to buy the real thing.

**ID:** All calm again, the supervisor smiles persuasively and tells me that I cannot carry the boom inside the plane because it could be used as a weapon. One of the less sympathetic officers takes this as his cue and throws my (\$200) instrument into the trash. I must have flinched or made some kind of face because the supervisor took pity and proposed that if I wanted to I could go back into the terminal, get a carrying case of some kind for the boom, and have the airline store it in the baggage compartment along with everything else.

I decided not to argue – well, I couldn't argue since I was powerless. Strangely, though, they had made me feel like a criminal, a boom pole terrorist. How could anyone believe that my 28-ounce hollow tube was a weapon of mass destruction!. An officer escorted the boom – and me – to the airline booth where, without blinking an eye, they gave me a plastic bag to put it in. My fear of doing sound with a broom stick for the second time in my life faded as the bag slowly disappeared on its way to Romania, bumping down into the dimness of the airline terminal bowels.

**PB:** It's not that stories don't happen – there's one born every minute. This was one at Heathrow before we even got started! But how could I tell a story about Romania? What I know about Eastern Europe I learned mostly in fairy tales, including those in the *New York Times*. I could appreciate what I saw, be sensitive... artistic... about it, but my research is in East Africa. Had I ever met a Romanian? Yet, with a camera I can make good things out of fences and windows. Anyway, maybe 'beauty' isn't just a culture-specific abstraction, after all. It would be interesting to explore that.

**ID:** I sat down to wait and six hours later Peter arrived from San Francisco. We decided not to talk too much about the film. We let the three and half hour flight to Bucharest fly away in the drowsiness of the long day of travelling across continents. Images of the Ceaușescu regime wandered in my sleep and I wondered if we would be confronted by the echoes of its horrors in the landscape of the people's soul.



Măgura by day...labyrinth?

Landing at 11:35 pm, we cleared customs –boom pole intact. Our ride was late, no problem, but it eventually arrived with the archaeologist Pavel Mirea who had agreed to help us.

We arrived at the Măgura home of Florentina and Nicu Chelu about 2:00 am. They were very welcoming – especially Florentina – and after food and drink we deposited our gear, were shown the bedroom and our rather small bed, and wished goodnight, and we slept well.

Until a few moments later when the morning started at 5:00 am with the symphony of the roosters crowing to each other as if gossiping about my boom pole and the new day's plans. Crowing would be one of the relentless sounds throughout the weeks in the Teleorman River Valley, throughout the film, regardless of climate, position of sun or location. It was the national anthem.

From our first early morning in the village of Măgura, from Sunday to Sunday to Sunday to Sunday, we heard our hostess relentlessly circling outside from one end of her property to the other. Drawn in tow always was Petra, her mother-in-law, who came to be our friend. For hours, Florentina's hoe slap-chipped the new creases in the soil for each tomato seedling; then she had to call the



Florentina in charge

chickens, ducks and turkeys to be fed, hurry the husband, bawl out the dogs. All the living beings – plants, animals, humans, even filmmakers – awaited her word, needing to receive our orders of the day from her, expecting her to wake us from our dreams. It was as if without her none of us could ever be a part of the eternal scheduled landscape.

Our names joined the ranks of ducks and chickens, all of us a part of Florentina's daily cry: "Peter and Iván, breakfast is ready!" [*Peter și Iván micul dejun este gata!*] "Peter and Iván, lunch is ready!" [*Peter și Iván, masa de prânz este gata!*] "Peter and Iván, dinner is ready!" [*Peter și Iván, cina este gata!*] "Peter and Iván, do you want coffee?" [*Peter și Iván, vrei cafea?*] All very loud! And so on. Yet not even the volume could stop us from understanding her communication,



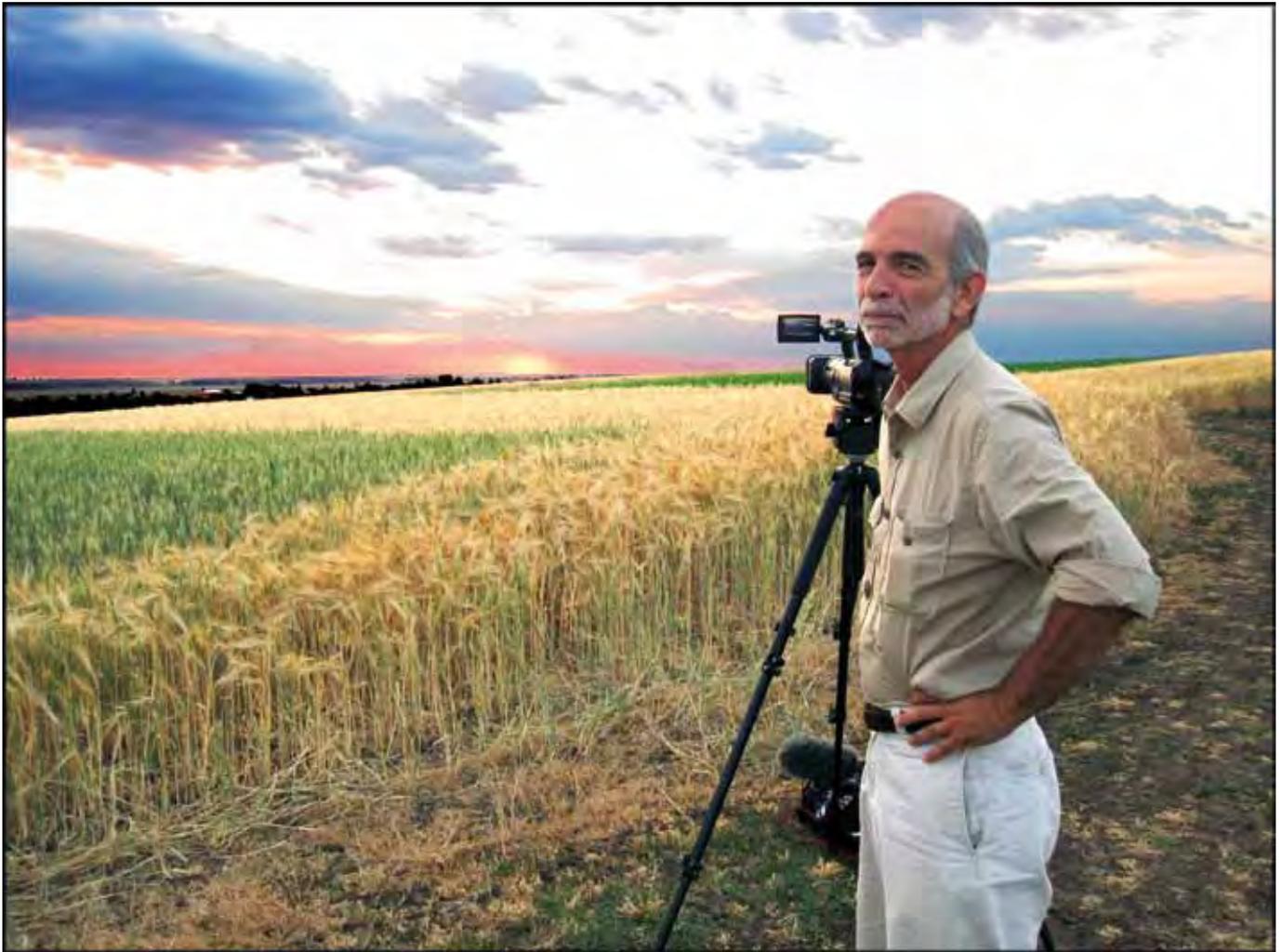
Ivan and Neighbours



Teleorman River Valley - Neolithic and Iron Age sites abound

not our ignorance of Romanian, not the fact that we were still full from the last gigantic meal, not even Florentina's complete disinterest in the fourteen hours of lovely footage we shot in her tomato garden, her home and her village. Her meals were delicious and plentiful, but the kitchen was a forbidden zone. I tried a dozen times to assist in the cooking, but as with every other space in her realm, there she insisted on total control. Nothing seemed ever to stop with Florentina, or her husband, or Petra, or the boy who drove us through the fields, the widow down the road with whom I sat.

First morning, breakfast – raw tomatoes, hard-boiled eggs, cucumbers, peppers, bread, cooked ham and coffee. We ate, then organized our space: computers and backup drives unpacked and plugged in. We decided to take the day off – at least to rest, and take a walk around.



Peter spending time with eternity

The village is a labyrinth of dirt roads, pathways, fences, fields. Houses of different shapes and colours, set at each side. Some of the village's inhabitants walked. A few moved by automobile and others navigated the roads in horse-drawn wagons.

We dawdled through the countryside, high sun frozen, surrounded by golden light of every hue. We saw the hills with green and summer wheat weaving stalks to the rhythm of the wind and song of the birds. An old man and son proudly driving their truck-tire carriage, transporting hay. We saw children running every direction, laughing. People of all ages walking toward the village store, which was just a few steps from our new home. At a distance labourers cutting hay and feeding more animals.

Forever animals everywhere. Shepherds calling to each one of them by name, buffalo or goose, walking nose-to-toe, all guiding their keepers, feeders, eternal beings. An old woman gathering her train of chicks. A gypsy-driven covered wagon, laden with wares. In these images and sounds – an instant of the landscape of the thread of our weaving of *Eternity* born in Măgura. A single space in time, grain of sand, embracing epochs of catastrophe without their horrors, those to remain hidden behind the faces and beneath the topsoil, the calamitous stories and messages of history that were not this time invited to the film.



Links, nodes and labyrinths in *Eternity was Born in the Village*

Tuesday, 08 February, 2011 16:28  
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**Re: Lost in Eternity, Take 2**

**Stephen Mills**

To: Peter Biella, Ivan Drufovka

Cc: Douglass W Bailey

Dear Peter & Ivan,

Thank you again for your essay for the Magura project book, it makes a great contribution. We are now working on its layout in the book.

Having read it more thoroughly, there is a point I would like to discuss with you.

It concerns the part of your essay telling the story of the microphone boom incident at Heathrow. Apologies, I am undoubtedly missing something here, I appreciate the story-telling value but I am not sure how this is relevant to Magura and the project's work there. To help me with this, would you be kind enough to let me know a bit more on how it contributes and why it is important to include it? It is our intention that the book be very much focussed on Magura.

Hope that is OK? I look forward to discussing this further with you.

Best wishes  
Steve

Dear Steve,

Ivan and Peter have read your email and we've agreed to write you a joint letter in reply.

Concerning the deletion / transformation of the section on the boom pole in Heathrow. Of course, this is the most curious part of the essay, and it did not emerge by accident. There are two parts to the reason why we both think it belongs there – first, because of the film's mild attack on "narrative theory" and the dependence on story in literature; and second, because of the *Eternity* film's serious interest in what might be called theological questions of eternity and infinity.

We fear that if you are not sympathetic to what we are saying, expanding on our ideas will not help, so we're going to keep this short.

The essay is playful, like most of the film. It contrasts *Eternity* with films made for *Arts & Entertainment* and *The History Channel*. These channels and regular TV films are obsessed with story, storyline, plot points, characters, three-act structures and all the other elements that make *Avatar* structurally almost identical to *Tootsie*. In such films, one develops a theme in which a character is presented with a crisis of his or her own design, tries to solve the crisis and in doing so develops a deeper crisis, and then resolves both in an unexpected and elegant way.

Stories are entrancing because they keep the audience safely ensconced in the plot while also guessing madly and being confounded and then satisfied when the original premise and problem persist transformed and are resolved in that same old beautiful way.

*Eternity* does not do this – it follows a vignette structure with occasionally reemerging faces. It only gives a sense, not a story, of a village. It flies in the face of expectation. As such it calls the animosity of some viewers and the praise of others.

The film and the essay do sustain one character, an appreciation of the labyrinthine mixtures of the past and present, the roadways, the cattle paths and the airline contrails. Our essay begins in the labyrinth of our script, then the labyrinth of Heathrow's terrorist-fearing vortex, the labyrinth of the Măgura city map and the labyrinth of the film. Thus Heathrow in the essay is a stand-in, a metaphor, a *mise-en-abysme* of all that the filmic labyrinth offers.

We might add that the boom pole story does also echo in a more standard narrative way with the entire essay – and the entire film. I refer to the fear of boom pole terrorism and the terror of the Ceaușescu regime. There is a Kafka like quality to the boom pole story that could not be unfamiliar to anyone who has lived a lifetime in Romania. And, though, as we say in the last line of the essay, that horror was not this time invited to the film – still its omni-presence could not be denied any more in Măgura than in dear old London.

This point is not overtly made in the essay, and, likewise, in the essay's labyrinthine tale about making the film we never arrive at the destination of the film making. The essay, like the film, teases, and gives vignettes and offers tastes. The essay pretends to begin a vast novel with the plot-line hook of terrorism in chapter 1, which then vanishes into air and turns out to have as little pertinence to anything as does the waddling of geese or the seemingly endless amount of time that it takes to boil an egg. These motifs are both plot-non-elements to which the film pays inordinate attention. (Note, too, that the boom pole does reemerge in the essay, re-voiced, like a labyrinth of sound– in the photo of Ivan).

Furthermore, the essay makes quite a point about the omnipresence and in a particular sense the irrelevance of stories. In honoring the task of narrative-bating undertaken by this film, we authors of the essay disavow telling the story of making a film that doesn't tell a story. Citing boom poles, we gaily acknowledge the presence of stories, their universality, but emphasize the fact that they can be and will be topsy-turvied here.

Let us turn briefly to the second point, the non-linear, eternity-baiting angle of our decision to include the boom-pole non-story. The film is based on the premise that "eternity is born in the village." As such, the film proposes that there is such a thing as eternity, that we mortals can know it pretty well by its traces in villages (perhaps also elsewhere) and that, as Blake says, it is found in an hour. But this hour (or 40 minutes in our case) is as thoroughly out of ordinary time and place as one might expect from anything as elusive and ephemeral as eternity. An essay about a film about a forever time-not-now deserves to begin with a tale of an anywhere place not-here. What after all is the meaning of infinity in a grain of sand except that every-which-part is always already the same – Heathrow or Măgura?

The essay is like reverse engineering the film's computer code. You take the film apart and see that it is about the non-place ever-time, with Iron Age (way back when) and Tuica (just right now), with socialists selling their wares (right up here) and customs officers scaring the bejesus out of us (way down there) yet still finally, as befits a democratic nation guided by law, letting it be possible.

Perhaps the reader is not ready to see what we're getting at, or simply thinks we have not got at it; perhaps the reader is not ready to attribute some kind of spiritual/theological motive to what appears to be a trivial digression about an over-zealous customs officer. But at least we have told you what we were trying to do, shown you the reason we chose a seemingly outrageously non-pertinent incident on which to hang our hats and hang our case for *Eternity*.

P and I