

# Is There Such a Thing as a Hungarian Nordic Noir?

## Cultural Homogenization and Glocal Agency

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This article is part of “DETECT. Detecting Transcultural Identity in European Popular Crime Narratives”, a project that has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 770151

### Abstract

In Hungary, the last few years were witness to an increasing appropriation of Nordic Noir aesthetics. Books, films and a television series were written and produced under a ‘Scandinavian’ crime label on this small-scale market, adapting, relatively late, the bestselling genre of the last two decades. Our aim is to situate this tendency in the context of Hungarian creative industries by underlining the most important discursive elements involved in the remediation of Hungarian crime stories within a “network of similarities” (García-Mainar 2020) with Nordic Noir. An investigation of the paratexts of these cultural products sheds light on the main idea behind the creation of those different mediatic appropriations: in Hungary, a market where the crime genre has had, and still has, a difficult and

discontinuous affirmation, adopting the label of a globally successful (sub)genre may help crime fiction through its process of cultural institutionalization.

**Keywords:** Nordic Noir, appropriation, creative industries, glocality, paratexts

In this article, we explore the trajectory of the Nordic Noir subgenre in the context of its Hungarian adaptation and appropriation. The following case studies prove that, in a given geographic cultural market, the Nordic Noir label provides an opportunity for a transnational relocation of a recognized local form. The double localization of a cultural product produces a structure of systemic ambiguities which has peculiar consequences in the context of different cultural and industrial realities. In contemporary cultural and creative industries, such processes are fairly common. Discussing changes in visual culture, curator and art theoretician David Joselit has proposed the notions of “buzz” and “image explosion” to refer to the value of saturation of a cultural phenomenon, described as “a dynamic form that arises out of circulation. As such, it is located on a spectrum between the absolute stasis of native site specificity on the one hand, and the absolute freedom of neoliberal markets on the other” (Joselit 2013). Similarly, Nordic Noir acts not simply as a buzzword (Seppälä 2020, 255), but rather as a buzz itself, an explosion of texts with different media and cultural features. Many different analytic patterns were used to describe the international circulation of Nordic Noir. The creation of a geographically fixed generic label went hand in hand with the evolution of various transmedia cultural forms, suggesting not so much a homogeneous concept, but rather a “network of similarity”, a notion coined by García-Mainar in 2020. Reframed as network of similarity, Joselit’s concept of buzz describes “a radically different type of adaptation, constituted by diffuse networks of influence that can only be traced through similarity and where conscious authorial intention is replaced by complex webs of cultural intercommunication emerging in the shape of thematic and aesthetic coincidence” (García-Mainar 2020, 158).

Given Nordic Noir’s international success, its circulation has been characterized by many different patterns, and yet, all of its

multiple variations prove that it is as much a social as an aesthetic construct. The term “genre awareness”, introduced by Yves Reuter in his book on crime novels, confirms that a genre exists as such only when it is aware of its institutionalized nature. That is to say, alongside with a textual dimension (meant as the consolidation of thematic and structural elements referring back to previous texts belonging to the genre) there is always a social dimension (genre-specific conditions of production and reception, specialized critiques, awards) to the making of a genre (Reuter 1997, 10). To avoid any essentialist misconception, we would like to point out that the late appropriation of the global, and mainly Anglo-American, Nordic Noir frenzy (Forshaw 2013) has contributed, in Hungary, to the emancipation of crime narratives in general. The main reasons behind our concerns with any all-encompassing definition of the Nordic Noir concept lie not only in its generic instability, but also in a consideration of the discursive panorama of both the academic and everyday uses of the term. We are not the first ones to notice that the various scholarly investigations of the concept have created an extraordinarily dense discursive field, where the reiterations of the definition have only added new layers to an analytically weak notion (Toft Hansen and Waade 2017, 6). In order to facilitate orientation on the scholarly map of current perceptions of Nordic Noir, we distinguish three major discursive levels in the semantics of the expression, and namely: the first level defines it as a style “that can be adapted and appropriated” (Seppälä 2020, 257); the second one considers it as a cross-media brand, a label that is open to appropriation and circulation across various international cultural industries (Toft Hansen and Waade 2017, 4–9, 300–302); the third one interprets it as a genre and, more specifically, a subgenre, which narrows down the *noir* genre to one of its geographic versions (Stougaard-Nielsen 2017, 14–16).

Having in mind the methodological limitations implied in every effort of classification, we would like to underline that the three meanings sketched above are not completely independent from each other. However, they are recognizable enough to help us highlight the history of the Hungarian appropriation of Nordic Noir. The effort to re-read some of the canonic texts of the Nordic Noir genre according to this three-folded discursive approach allows a classification of recent Hungarian Nordic Noir productions based

on the analysis of their paratexts. Even the tenseness of the expression, 'Hungarian Nordic Noir', points out the difficulty behind the appropriation: how can a geographically determined cultural construct travel to other cultural destinations without losing its own distinctive features? Our main thesis tries to deal with this ambiguity by proposing that the appropriation of Nordic Noir on the Hungarian market operates according to a double-layered adoption of the global-local dialectics.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, Nordic Noir is a notion that proves useful to implement international tendencies into the Hungarian cultural industries. The brand value of Nordic Noir allows artistic representations of Hungarian criminality to gain an international status. On the other hand, when the brand value is confronted with local creative labour and stylistic solutions, the analytic inaccuracy of Nordic Noir acts as an agent of dissent, and its generic and stylistic values slip apart. The case studies we are going to discuss below prove that there are as many Nordic Noirs on the Hungarian market as the number of its appropriations and the number of key speakers who were responsible of creating the paratexts to those products. Or, to put it differently, the notion is so multifaceted that the plethora of its definitions end up dissolving in scarcity: in practice, as we will see in the following, there is no such thing as a 'Hungarian Nordic Noir.'

### **2019: A Year of Nordic Noir in Hungary**

Investigating the connection between the global presence of the noir genre and its local and regional settings, Eva Erdmann (2009) noticed that in many cases the location where the crime takes place appears to be more important than the crime itself. According to this reading, when readers and spectators consume crime fiction, their attraction is first captured by the location and the ways in which it is presented and designed. As the brand concept of 'Nordic' Noir underlines, the genre was born out of a kind of an ethnographic turn, which has facilitated its cross-media explosion (Toft Hansen and Waade 2017, 1–4). In Hungary, the adaptation processes matured in the last few years. Accordingly, this period saw an increasing appropriation of the Nordic Noir stylistic features in the realms of film (with Károly Ujj Mészáros's *The Exploited*, also known as *X*, 2018, and Béla Bagota's *Valan*, 2019), television (with *Alvilág*, lit. Underworld, 2019, a series again directed by Ujj Mészáros) and

literature (with two novels by respectively Ákos Szelle, *Sebek a falon*, lit. Wounds on the walls, 2019, and Zoltán Kőhalmi, *A férfi, aki megölte a férfit, aki megölte a férfit*, lit. The man who killed the man, who killed the man, 2019). All of these works were written and produced under the Scandinavian noir<sup>2</sup> label, adapting, relatively late, for this small-scale market, some characteristic features of the best-selling genre of the last two decades. One of the books is written by a well-known Hungarian stand-up comedian (Zoltán Kőhalmi) and is an ironic presentation of Nordic Noir's generic clichés, so much that the appropriation appears at the same time as a form of criticism.

In order to point out what the label stands for in this particular cultural environment, we need to give an overview of how Hungarian cultural products came to be influenced by the Nordic Noir aesthetics. We must emphasize that the appropriation of Nordic Noir is a very recent phenomenon, manifesting as a trend only around 2018. Given the fact that Scandinavian crime fiction became an international trend after being rebranded as Nordic Noir in the late 2000s, the Hungarian market lags at least one decade behind the global tendencies (Badley et al. 2020, 2; Forshaw 2013, 16–20; Toft Hansen and Waade 2017, 105). However, the average duration of financing and producing a movie/book in Hungary as well as the multiple responsibilities held by the filmmakers and the writers who have authored the most important appropriations of the Nordic style testify that the creative journey towards the genre dates back to the beginning of the 2010s<sup>3</sup>, so that only the release of the products seems in fact outdated. One of the main differences that characterize small-scale markets as compared to large-scale ones is that the former requires the author/director to hold multiple synchronous obligations, in contrast to the latter, which instead allows the possibility to specialize in single tasks. These differences are linked to two specific risks of small markets as qualified by Hjort: the risk of mono-personalism on the one hand and the risk of wasted talent on the other (Hjort 2015, 53–54). The accuracy of the small-scale market concept in relation to the Hungarian case was discussed by Andrea Virginás, who concluded that the decrease in the number of films produced annually in Hungary through the last decade shows that the country's cultural production increasingly accommodates with this specific category (Virginás 2014, 66). Ba-

láz Varga, the author of a monograph on the Hungarian film industry in the period of the political-cultural transition, distinguishes three specific problems of the Hungarian movie market, which he terms “traps of visibility.” The first of these problems has to do with the chances that the success achieved by a local film on the national market obscures other local productions (in the case of Hungary, Varga elaborates, there are only a few successful national productions, usually comedies, but still, their overexposure do not incite the spectator to go and watch other Hungarian films). The second trap has to do with the (very low) visibility of European films on the European market compared to North American productions. The third problem has to do with the low visibility of nationally successful films on the European market (a Hungarian comedy or detective film is not as accessible in other European countries as are, for instance, French comedies or British gangster films). Hence, according to Varga, locally produced genre films have just a chance to succeed – and that is on the domestic market (Varga 2016, 20-22).

Situating the ‘Scandification’ trend in the context of Hungarian creative industries thus helps us understand the most important cultural reasons behind this phenomenon. An investigation of the paratexts<sup>4</sup> of the above-mentioned cultural products (Kääpä 2020, 113-133) in our final paragraph will shed further light on the meanings and uses of these different media appropriations: in Hungary, a market where the crime genre has always had, and still has, a difficult and discontinuous affirmation (Kálai 2014), adopting the label of a globally successful cultural phenomenon can effectively contribute to the institutionalization of crime fiction as a whole.

At the same time, the curious thing about Nordic Noir is that a cultural variation has succeeded in becoming a (sub)genre, so the appropriation of its style and formal features will always fluctuate between glocal agency and cultural homogenization. For a small cultural market, the international recognition of a local literary model, such as has happened to the Nordic Noir, is at once an inspiration (what happened to them can happen to us) and a threat (authors and directors risk remaining simple copycats). This ambiguity can be observed behind each of our case studies.

By the same token, the global reception of the genre within the contemporary traditions of cultural studies shows that all critical

interpretations of the Nordic Noir phenomenon have focused only partially on the texts and more on issues of production, readership and representation. Many studies – including studies about manuscripts published in lesser spoken languages that became global bestsellers (Steiner 2012, Berglund 2017, Nilsson 2016), about the logics of location and cultural tourism (Toft Hansen and Waade 2017), about the glocalizing aspects of the crime genre (Bondebjerg and Redvall 2015, Hedberg 2017), and about questions of market value (Toft Hansen and Christensen, 2018) – have all confirmed that, beyond its aesthetics, Nordic Noir has a strong productional imprint. As for its generic formula, it seems so recognizable as to allow a well-known cultural journalist and promoter of crime fiction such as Barry Forshaw to publish, as early as 2012 with Palgrave Macmillan, a critical essay entirely devoted to Nordic Noir and to later include the genre in what he has called ‘Euro Noir’ (Forshaw 2014). Consequently, Nordic Noir became a generic label which translates easily into common knowledge and brand value.

### **How Small is the Hungarian Cultural Market?**

To understand the place of the five above mentioned cultural products in their autochthonous market, we have to situate each of them in the context of their respective cultural industry. Although Hungary is certainly a small market when compared to other European countries,<sup>5</sup> its cultural products have been often categorized as objects of prestige consumption, as becomes obvious when considering the names of such internationally acclaimed film directors as Béla Tarr, Miklós Jancsó, Ildikó Enyedi, or the Oscar-winner László Nemes Jeles, and authors such as Imre Kertész, Péter Nádas, Sándor Márai. Given this critically acclaimed cultural tradition, the Hungarian cultural landscape is still dominated by a tendency to disregard the products of popular culture, such as genre narratives and formats. In terms of production, this translates into an ambiguous attitude towards mainstream trends: while marketing professionals have a predilection for popular labels, professional critics are concerned with the standardizing effects they have on the appreciation of the single works. In terms of cultural consumption, the gap between professional and everyday reception is quite significant, since important Hungarian cultural critics still adopt a view on popular cultural products that echoes the rather harsh ap-

proach of the Frankfurt School towards mass culture. In addition, the power dynamics of academic literary studies is still ruled by methods focused on the close reading, textual analysis and interpretation of ‘high-brow’ works.

As for the Hungarian publishing industry, according to the data of the Hungarian National Institute of Statistics, the period of the political transition from real socialism to capitalism was characterized by both a fallback in the number of prints per title and a parallel growth of the number of published titles. Nowadays, only 3.8% of the publications are printed in at least 5,000-10,000 copies, while 0.2% reach 20-30,000 copies and 1.2% do not exceed the limit of 10-20,000 copies.<sup>6</sup>

Year	Number of titles	Number of titles: fiction	Number of copies	Number of copies: fiction
2018	13,128	3,813	31,084,000	8,791,000
1990	8,322	1,560	125,741,00	47,009,000

Fig. 1. The Hungarian publishing industry in 1990 and 2018.<sup>7</sup>

The translation of Nordic crime novels into Hungarian started at the end of the 2000s. As it developed into a successful business, several publishing houses became specialized in the publication of Scandinavian crime fiction. However, one single company emerged as leader in the field, namely Animus, founded in 1991 and already a thriving business thanks to its edition of the Harry Potter series. The first Nordic Noir novel published by Animus was an Icelandic title, the fourth chapter in Arnaldur Indriðason’s detective Erlendur series, *Grafarþögn* (2001; English translation: *Silence of the Grave*, 2005; Hungarian translation: *Kihantolt búnök*, 2007). Indriðason was chosen because he was the first non-English speaking writer to have won the Crime Writers Association’s Gold Dagger award (Marosi 2019). After the publication of a Jo Nesbø book in 2008, in 2009 Animus issued the Hungarian translation of Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* trilogy, which resulted in a substantial increase of the company’s sales. The list of the authors published by Animus since then is quite impressive: Camilla Läckberg, Lars Kepler, Jussi Adler-Olsen, Yrsa Sigurðardóttir, Hjorth-Rosenfeldt, and Håkan

Nesser are just a few. Interestingly, alongside these and other nordic authors, the company's *Skandináv krimik* (Scandinavian crime fiction) series also hosts a French crime novel, Olivier Truc's *Le dernier lapon* (2012; Hungarian trans. *Sámándob*, 2015), also labelled a Nordic Noir. It was in this context that, in 2019, Animus published a psycho-thriller by a Hungarian author, Ákos Szelle's *Sebek a falon* (lit. Wounds on the wall), expressly marketing the book as a Hungarian Nordic Noir novel.

Animus publishes 10–14 titles annually, and a quarter of its revenues come from crime novels (Marosi 2019). Its bestselling novels can reach several tens of thousands of copies, which is quite a remarkable number on the Hungarian book market. Several other Hungarian publishers have published works by Scandinavian authors: Scolar (Arne Dahl and Karin Fossum), Cartaphilus (Lars Kepler), Libri (Erik Axl Sund or Mons Kallentoft), Athenaeum (Carin Gerhardsen, Samuel Carin Gerhardsen, Samuel Bjørk), but only Animus has made Nordic Noir into a publishing strategy. According to the company's editor in chief, their best-selling novels (i.e the Harry Potter novels) have reached some tens of thousands of copies (Marosi 2019). According to the data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, only a few other Scandinavian crime novels have reached similar figures: this is the case of both David Lagercrantz's sequels to Larsson's Millennium series (*Mannen Som Sökte Sin Skugga* / *The Girl Who Takes an Eye for an Eye* / *Mint az árnyék*, all editions 2017; *Hon som måste dö* / *The Girl Who Lived Twice* / *A lány, aki kétszer élt*, all editions 2019) which reached respectively 17,000 and 13,000 copies, and two of Jo Nesbø's Harry Hole books (*Tørst* / *The Thirst* / *Szomjúság*, all editions 2017; *Kniv* / *The Knife* / *Kés*, all editions 2019), each reaching 15,000 copies.<sup>8</sup>

Zoltán Kőhalmi, the author of the successful Hungarian spoof of Nordic Noir, *A férfi, aki megölte a férfit, aki megölte a férfit* (lit. The man who killed the man, who killed the man) is a well-known stand-up comedian who transferred his popularity into another cultural field. His publisher, Helikon, does not specialize in crime fiction, although it recently acquired the rights to Agatha Christie's novels. Kőhalmi's book is a parody of the Nordic Noir genre, which highlights the writer's expectation that his readership is well familiar with the genre's conventions. With 20,000 copies sold in 2019, the novel became a relative success, although it still lags behind the

figures achieved by another famous stand-up comedian, Tibor Bödőcs, whose parody book that mocks the work of classic Hungarian writers (*Addig se iszik*, 2017; lit. He doesn't drink until then) sold up to 70,000 copies and is considered the main competitor to Kőhalmi's work.

In the field of cinema, a most significant event in this period was the establishment of the Hungarian National Film Fund in 2011, first chaired by Andy Vajna – a Hungarian-born producer who built his career in Hollywood. During his presidency (he died in 2019, when the film financing system was in the process of being redesigned) a centralized and script-oriented movie-financing system came into being. Between 2011 and 2019, seven to eight feature films were funded annually by the Hungarian state. For 2018 and 2019 – the years when the two cases discussed below were produced – the Hungarian Film Fund lists 26 titles (which include co-productions and TV movies)<sup>9</sup>; four of these are labelled as thrillers, of which only three are productions made for the big screen and only two deal with contemporary events. We will thus focus on these two films, which represent in fact the totality of Hungarian non-costume crime movies produced in 2018 and 2019. Interestingly, they both reveal the crucial influence of Scandinavian noir.

*The Exploited*<sup>10</sup> was made by Károly Ujj Mészáros after his first successful work for the big screen, *Liza, a rókatündér* (*Liza, the Fox-Fairy*, 2015), a fantasy-romantic comedy. Following the unanimous success of *Liza*, the director expressed his wish to make a movie in a completely different register, anchored in contemporary Hungarian realities, stressing that Nordic Noir would be a perfect model for his project. In this case, as we will discuss later in more detail, Nordic Noir stands as a synonym for an existential crime story. By contrast, in the case of *Valan*<sup>11</sup>, the directorial debut of Béla Bagota, the relation with Nordic Noir emerges from the choice to set the story in Transylvania, a region of Romania with an important Hungarian minority. This region, which carries particular exotic connotations in the Hungarian collective imagination (Feischmidt 2005), had to be represented paying attention on its peculiar local features, and the approach of Nordic Noir helped the director meet these expectations.

The television series *Alvilág* (lit. Underworld) also has an interesting production story.<sup>12</sup> Developed in the same period as the two

above mentioned films (it was announced in 2018 and broadcast in the first half of 2019), it was produced by the foremost private broadcasting company in Hungary, RTL Klub. After being auditioned as a candidate for directing *Aranyélet / Golden Life* (2015), a critically acclaimed crime television drama produced by HBO Europe, which was eventually directed by others, Károly Ujj Mészáros was chosen by RTL Klub to develop *Alvilág*, which is now considered one of the best examples of the current revival of Hungarian serial production. In fact, since the second half of the 2010s, Hungary has witnessed a growing interest in the production of television series, after a period when only daily soap operas were commissioned. Until then, the only player on the market of high-end quality dramas had been HBO Europe, whose crime production *Aranyélet / Golden Life* went remarkably well in 2015 on streaming television. Following the success of HBO series, private broadcasting companies started to be interested in producing high quality TV drama. *Alvilág* is a result of this tendency. To date, however, it remains the only example of a quality crime series produced by a Hungarian broadcast company. Its modest audience shares seem to prove that the public of Hungarian broadcast television is not that interested in crime stories. In fact, *Alvilág* never reached the shares obtained on the channel by comedies or soap operas, and even *Aranyélet / Golden Life* proved a flop when broadcast on the second most important Hungarian private broadcasting channel, TV2. Nevertheless, *Alvilág* is available on RTL Klub's streaming platform and, according to the producers (Heszler 2019), it has managed to find its audience in this context. To complete our quick survey of Hungarian TV crime series, it is important to observe that no crime series were produced by PBS television channels between 2018-2019, and only the most important commercial broadcasting company took the risk to produce a crime series for the small screen.

Even though *Alvilág* is an adaptation of a Dutch series (*Penoza / The Black Widow*, 2010-2017), its advertising campaign emphasized the Nordic Noir influence (Sergő Z. 2019), which supports our thesis that Nordic Noir has become an institutionalized genre on the Hungarian market, creating a cultural logic that allows a dialogue between production and reception. As our next examples will make even clearer, the generic, stylistic and brand value of the concept are

all equally important to shaping the ways in which it is used in different media contexts.

### **Nordic Noir, an (Almost) Empty Signifier?**

In the title of an interview with Ákos Szelle, the writer of *Sebek a falon* is labelled “the author of a Hungarian ‘Scandinavian’ crime novel” (Fráter 2019). This is an obvious example of how the relation with the generic features of Scandinavian crime fiction is used in paratexts to draw attention to Szelle’s novel. Since the book is published by Animus, it is actually not the novel’s uniqueness that is highlighted, but, rather, its possible assimilation into the Nordic Noir brand represented by the publisher. Although not included in the *Skandináv krimik* (Scandinavian crime fiction) series, the book can be linked to it through different paratextual elements: the black, red and white colours in the cover may recall the design used for Jo Nesbø’s books. Moreover, the back cover, after providing a short summary of the story, makes the connection overtly explicit: “This psychothriller by Ákos Szelle evokes the creepy atmosphere of Scandinavian crime fiction”.

In his interviews, the author points out the paradox of this situation: “While I was writing, it never occurred to me that I was writing a Hungarian Scandinavian crime novel” (Fráter 2019). Despite the author claims not to have been familiar with Nordic Noir (although he says he had seen films – such as the *Millennium* trilogy and the *Department Q* film cycle – and TV series – such as *The Bridge*), the publishing house decided to market his work as a ‘Hungarian Scandinavian’ crime fiction, rather than simply Hungarian. Szelle states to have read Nordic Noir novels after finishing his book, which means that any similarity can only be constructed retrospectively. In a podcast, the interviewer and the writer list a series of generic features characteristic of Scandinavian crime fiction: a general mood of hopelessness, social problems, confinement, the milieu and the weather conditions, the detective (struggling with his own problems), violence, and psychological elements (secrets, traumas) (Oláh 2019). All these features – which in fact may be considered as common to all noir fiction – are assimilated here into one of the genre’s cultural forms. Moreover, it is assumed that these concepts are part of a common knowledge. It thus appears that the marketing logic behind the book’s circulation is more interested in

assimilating Szelle to a *brand* rather than creating a conceptual consistency between the text and other examples of Nordic Noir. For this reason, we consider that the discursive model of Nordic Noir as brand value is the most important element, in this case as well as in the case of the book market in general.

Let's now turn to discussing Zoltán Köhalmi's work, *A férfi, aki megölte a férfit, aki megölte a férfit*. Thanks to the author's wide popularity as a stand-up comedian, the publication of his book was accompanied by several interviews, each of them addressing the author's relation to Scandinavian crime fiction. The book's title immediately indicates that it is a parody of the Nordic Noir genre, a concept reinforced by both the name of the fictional city in the subtitle (*Avagy 101 hulla Dramfjordban*, lit. Or 101 corpses in Dramfjord) and the image on the cover, which represents the author in a snowy landscape with fishes. The brief text on the back cover, written by András Cserna-Szabó – a well-known writer and the novel's editor, who also serves here as a kind of guarantee for the book's quality – functions as a guideline for the reader. Three authors are mentioned in Cserna-Szabó's presentation, each one representing a different tradition: Jenő Rejtő<sup>13</sup> for the humor, Italo Calvino for the postmodern approach, and Jo Nesbø for the crime genre. Köhalmi's book is actually a metanovel: not only are the characters aware that they are fictional, but they also know their task is to represent the figures of the publishing industry (the editor, the author or the publisher) as the criminals. The author obviously presumes that the readers are familiar with the clichés of the genre.

In his interviews, the author revolves around several recurring themes: the figure of the alcoholic and antisocial detective, childhood traumas, social criticism, and extreme methods of killing. Köhalmi's description of these clichés are as funny as the novel itself: "Overall it might not be true, but it occurred to me that, in classical crime novels, one sinner is sought among the normal ones, and in the Scandinavian crime fictions, the question is more which of the many burdened, perverted lunatics has just committed the crime. The investigators do not solve the case because they have such incredible abilities, or because they are so terribly dedicated to the task, but simply because the investigation comes to them as yet another difficulty in their unfortunate life, and there is no one other than them to solve the case anyway" (Hercsel 2019). Unlike Szelle,

Kóhalmi did serious research on the genre. For example, answering the question: “Do you often read the type of novels parodied in the book? Do you read a lot of Scandinavian crime stories?”, he replied: “I read them, yes, so I also felt obligated to analyze them, but for me the unique sun in this sky is Jo Nesbø. I’ve read others too [...], but they’re not that good. And it became a separate genre on TV, with *The Bridge* and its thousands of mutations, and those that just look like *The Bridge*. But for me, in a sense, everything comes from *The Bridge*” (Herczeg and Sarkadi 2019). This is a good example of a tie-in: a well-known public figure adopts a well-known literary genre for writing his first novel, the success of which reinforces both brands, that is, that of the stand-up comedian and that of the genre at the same time.

Linda Hutcheon (2000) has proven the important role that parody has played in the construction of artistic modernity. Hungarian literature has a strong tradition of copying and reworking texts in the high-brow canon (Balogh 2018), a practice initiated in 1912 by Frigyes Karinthy (a sort of father-like figure for Hungarian humorous literature) with the publication of his book of parodies, *Így írtok ti* (lit. Here’s how YOU write). Kóhalmi’s novel is part of this tradition. As he explained in one of his interviews (Herczeg and Sarkadi 2019), his project originated more than a decade ago, when he wanted to write a book, ironically called “All the books”, composed exclusively of parodies of different genres, with the ambition to obliterate all the books ever written before. Of the stories included in this project, his publisher especially appreciated the one shaped in the fashion of Nordic Noir, so Kóhalmi decided to turn it into an independent book. And yet, the ironic idea of a sort of an all-encompassing literary algorithm is more attached to the parodistic tradition of Hungarian literature than to the genre of Nordic Noir. This particular cultural context allows Kóhalmi to play with Nordic Noir as an easily imitable stylistic frame. The appropriation of Nordic Noir as *style* underlines the author’s attempt to reconstruct crimes linked with politics, Satanic youth movements and coffee-fetishism.

In the realm of audio-visual production, a stronger generic awareness can be observed. This is where the discourse of the Nordic Noir as a *genre* is the most inspiring, given the crucial role that film noir has historically played in the film industry. However, a paradoxical situation can be pointed out: while both Ujj Mészáros and Bagota

have no doubt something original to say about Nordic Noir beyond its mere existence as a commercial trend, the label is generally brought up more in the discourse of professional critics and journalists than in the wider marketing strategies of the production companies (Nordic Noir is not mentioned in the commercial paratext, although it surfaces in the press material). At the same time, since movies and TV series attract larger audiences than books, and especially crime and thriller novels, the adoption of a 'Nordic' style has an obvious use value for the purpose of addressing a specific market segment (Seppälä 2020).

Discussing the *Alvilág* TV series, producer Péter Kolosi labeled the show as "dark crime." When asked for an opinion about the series's poor performance in terms of viewers ratings, he declared that the mainstream Hungarian audience is not prepared for that type of storytelling (Heszler 2019).<sup>14</sup> Expressing his view on Scandinavian crime narratives, the series' director, Ujj Mészáros, explained that both *Alvilág* and his earlier film, *The Exploited*, were based on the same creative inspiration drawn from the Nordic generic model. In both cases, he observed, the aim was to recreate the kind of existential investigations into human nature, the sense of loneliness and transience that characterize the works of Nordic Noir (Varga and Pozsonyi 2018). For Ujj Mészáros, this existential approach is the main reason for adopting this narrative model (Seppälä 2020).<sup>15</sup> From a production point of view, a strong similarity between the movie and the series is that both involve the same group of actors, starting with the creator's wife, Móni Balsai.<sup>16</sup> With her rather humble or ordinary appearance, portrayed as the wife of a Hungarian mobster in the series and as a policewoman in the movie, the actress embodies the director's choice to introduce an inconspicuous female character in the underworld as a reference to the Nordic Noir genre. Other elements that evoke the Nordic narrative and visual style include the strong psychological profiling of the characters, an interest in underlining the systemic, structural problems with Hungarian law enforcement, the overpoweringly grey panoramas and landscapes of Budapest, and a lack of summery scenery (Papp 2018; Benke 2018; Becságh 2018).

In the case of Béla Bagota's film *Valan*, the critical discourse is dominated by the idea that this is the first ever 'Transylvanian Scandinavian' noir (Inkei 2019). While the main Nordic ingredient in

*The Exploited* appears to be its existential approach, the most characteristic marker of 'genre awareness' in *Valan* according to film critics lies in its use of locations. One of Bagota's main objectives was indeed to situate his fictional universe within the specific "cinematic geography" (Toft Hansen and Waade 2017, 28, 40–42) of Transylvania. Set in a mining town plagued with unemployment, corruption and religious fanaticism, the movie had a relatively positive reception in Hungary because of its accurate portrayal of local realities: "The artificial recreation of the industrial town of Balánbánya, with its defunct character, added a lot to the atmosphere. The site provides criminals with a gloomy space, the residents are fighting for a living, and no one really lives in the abandoned buildings" (Jánossy 2018). Some elements that are repeatedly mentioned in the film reviews are the director's willingness to thoroughly reconstruct social reality, an interest in portraying a multilingual and multiethnic community, the snowy landscapes and panoramas, and the problem-oriented approach to the criminal investigation. Bagota has declared to have had an unwavering interest in directing crime stories ever since he started his studies in filmmaking (Varga and Horváth 2018). In his case, a broader generic interest in crime narratives is the point of inception for the making of his first feature film as a director, and the Nordic Noir specificities emerge as a consequence brought by the unfamiliar location, which was not in the script's first draft. Not coincidentally, in one of his interviews the director coined the term *Transnoir* (Transylvanian noir) to both label his movie and characterize it in relation to Nordic Noir (Soós 2017).

### Conclusions

The adaptation of the Nordic Noir concept in the context of Hungarian cultural industries has proved to be a case of infinite mirroring between the global and the local. There are four main takeaways from our research. Firstly, the main difference in terms of adaptation and appropriation between the different creative industries is the productional rhythm specific to each market, which has a strong influence on the specialization mechanisms of a given industry. The process of appropriation produces ambiguous results, in that, while the brand value of Nordic Noir seems to reinforce the simplistic idea of the subgenre as a stable entity, creators coming

from different fields use particular interpretations of the concept and highlight different problems behind the adaptation process. Nordic Noir is at once existential crime drama (Ujj Mészáros), easily localizable crime drama (Bagota), a receptacle of imitable stylistic features (Kóhalmi). In the case of Hungary, the relatively late frenzy surrounding Nordic Noir is deeply rooted in market-specific productional processes. Applying our three discursive categories, we have pointed out how the book industry made the most use of Nordic Noir as a brand, the film industry of Nordic Noir as a genre and a popular comedian of Nordic Noir as a style. The second element to be underlined is the role played by Nordic Noir as an enduring, extremely popular international trend in helping crime fiction to stay relevant as a generic label in both the Hungarian book market and other creative industries. The third element to be emphasized is how the same label conveys different meanings and expresses different positionings and motivations: from a weak connection motivated by a strategic consciousness, such as in the case of Szelle's book, to the specific locational interests of much critical discourse, our research suggests that the Hungarian reception of Nordic Noir is multilayered. Moreover, while the interests of the market dictate the use of Nordic Noir in a culturally homogenizing manner, authorial appropriations tend to act in the name of a glocal agency. Finally, trying to respond the question in the title, we argued that, while there might not be any such thing as a 'Hungarian Nordic Noir', the cultural and industrial processes behind the construction of this 'empty signifier' demonstrate the different ways in which an international cultural label can translate into homogenization and of diversification at the same time.

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### Notes

- 1 One of the first articles comparing a Nordic Noir work to a Transylvanian-Hungarian thriller made by a British director was published by Andrea Virginás (2013). The article does not deal with the concept of Nordic Noir, but Virginás states that, compared to other, culturally more grounded movie genres, crime movies in general are more likely to facilitate cultural exchange.
- 2 Despite the difference between Nordic Noir and Scandinavian crime, in this article we will use the two terms as synonyms given that there is practically no reflection on the distinction between the two in the Hungarian reception.
- 3 This is the period when the reception of Nordic Noir started in Hungary, Stieg Larsson's trilogy having been translated in 2009 and the works of Jo Nesbø since 2008.
- 4 As Genette explains, the role of the paratext is "to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book" (Genette 1997: 1). Stanitzek adopted the system of Genette to films (Stanitzek 2005). For the relation between paratexts and book marketing, see Squires (2007: 75-85).
- 5 There are four measures qualifying a market as a small one. The Hungarian market can be considered small according to three criteria: population (the country counts 9,7 million inhabitants, and there are around 15 million Hungarian speakers in the world, less than the population of Mumbai); geographical scale (93 km<sup>2</sup>); per capita income (49th country according to worldometers.com). As for the fourth element, being ruled by non-co-nationals over a significant period of time, Hungary's position inside the Communist bloc has to be taken into consideration, cf. Hjort 2015: 50–51.
- 6 KSH, "A szépirodalmi művek megoszlása példányszám-kategóriák szerint (1990-)", accessed May 10, 2020, [https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat\\_eves/i\\_zkz005.html](https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_eves/i_zkz005.html).
- 7 KSH, "A kiadott könyvek és füzetek jelleg szerint (1990-)", accessed May 10, 2020, [https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat\\_eves/i\\_zkz003.html](https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_eves/i_zkz003.html).
- 8 KSH, "Kiadott szépirodalmi, ifjúsági és gyermekirodalmi könyvek", accessed May 10, 2020, [https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat\\_evkozi/e\\_zkz001.html](https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_evkozi/e_zkz001.html).
- 9 NFI, "Játékfilmek 2019/2018", accessed May 10, 2020, <https://nfi.hu/hu/kereses/legfrissebb/jatekfilmek-2019>.

- 10 The news announcing the production of this movie on the webpage of the Film Found mentions that the movie is inspired by Scandinavian crime stories. NFI, “Új kezdetek, izgalmas folytatások: ők forgatnak 2017-ben”, accessed May 10, 2020, <https://nfi.hu/hu/hirek/uj-kezdetek-izgalmas-folytatások-2017-ben-keszulo-magyar-filmek>.
- 11 Produced between 2017 and 2018, the movie was framed as a Scandinavian Noir from the beginning. Debrecen Nagyváradai Értesítő, “Mától látható a magyar mozikban a Valan – Az angyalok völgye”, accessed May 10, 2020, <https://denagy.hu/ajanlo/matol-lathato-a-magyar-mozikban-a-valan-az-angyalok-volgye/>.
- 12 AJ, “Megérkezett az Alvilág, az RTL Klub vadonatúj sorozatának első előzetese”, accessed May 10, 2020, <http://sorozatwiki.hu/hirek/megerkezett-az-alvilag-az-rtl-klub-vadonatuj-sorozatanak-első-elozetese>.
- 13 Jenő Rejtő (1905-1943) is the best-known figure of Hungarian popular literature.
- 14 Kolosi’s opinion is reflected in the production strategy of the channel, which has made two rural comedies and one dramedy since *Alvilág*.
- 15 In an interview the director references the two last episodes of the second season of *The Bridge / Broen / Bron* (2011–2018), which he considers to be a perfect portrayal of human solitude in the face of death, describing the series as an existentialist drama (Varga and Pozsonyi 2018).
- 16 Mészáros and Balsai claimed in several interviews to be both avid consumers of Nordic Noirs, which for them are about much more than just finding a murderer (Varga and Pozsonyi 2019; -béla 2019). In another interview Balsai underlines the fact that the success of Nordic countries in creating crime fiction may be explained with the increasing specialization of the field, where the authors are given the opportunity to focus on the same topics for a longer time than in Hungary (Jánossy and Inkei 2019).