

Familiar, Much Too Familiar...

HBO's Hungarian Original Productions and the Questions of Cultural Proximity

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“Why do we have to import stupid things from abroad when the supply is good enough at home?” That was the conclusion of a review published by a leading Hungarian internet portal, discussing the local version of *Married... with Children* in 2006 (Szabózé 2006). The critic’s sarcastic remark clearly illustrates typical beliefs regarding television, scripted formats, and adaptation, and describes the cultural climate around Hungarian screen production at that time. Sitcom as the leading genre of mainstream television fiction is nothing more than lazy entertainment. Domestic adaptations and local versions of fashionable products from the international market are doomed to failure, due to the lack of local talents and the problems and limits of adaptability. We are surrounded by stupidity – why to add any more? It would be easy to attribute the tone of the review to the cynicism of the trend-setting portal and its journalists, or the overall sense of belatedness and underdevelopment of Hungarian popular culture. I would rather use this quote as a simple marker of ambiguity regarding the uncontrollable flow of hybrid media content and the sign of uncertainty about the evaluation of local content and cultural proximity. The distinction between and the segmentation of ‘local’, ‘domestic’ and ‘global’, ‘non-local’ or ‘basic’ is almost impossible, and no format bibles or license agreements can solve (at best, they can only reduce) this problem. It is not surprising that the term complexity appears so often in discussions of the global flow of television formats. As Tasha Oren and Sharon Shafaf argued in the introduction of their edited book on the subject: “No televisual shift has so shaken traditional scholarly models as the explosion in the first decade of the second millennium of global television format circulation” (Oren – Shafaf 2012: 2). While format trade itself has a long history, even the new era of format frenzy, which began in the 1990s, has lived different stages and can be discussed along with varied types and genres of formats (Esser 2013, Moran 2013, Ellis – Esser – Gutiérrez Lozano 2016). Jean K. Chalaby, examining the ‘late rise’ of scripted formats in the overall history of format trade, highlighted “that their adaptation is more complex than for other genres. The knowledge transfer cannot be as perfunctory as with formulaic formats, and with the reception of scripted entertainment being always uncertain, the risk remains substantial.” (Chalaby 2016: 4) This complexity and unpredictability is an obvious challenge for the scholarly analysis of scripted formats, especially in the case of transnational adaptations or television series remakes (Fickers – Johnson 2010, Perkins – Verevis 2016, Bondebjerg 2016, Wells-Lassagne 2017). The situation will be even more complex when it comes to a region undergoing fast and hectic transformations, such as Eastern Europe. The robust legacy of socialist television is not a closed part of the past, nor is the period of the post-socialist transformation which is often interpreted as an emblematic example of rapid Westernization. Furthermore, the ‘illiberal revolutions’ of the 2010s can be interpreted as a kind of reversal or de-Westernization (Štetka 2012). These challenges highlight the need for a nuanced and multidirectional understanding of the dynamics of changes, as these histories and transformations are barely linear (Barra – Classen – de Leeuw 2017). However, it is reasonable, to begin with the master narrative of the transformation, as it was described by Sylwia Szostak in the Polish context (Szostak 2012, 2016). Szostak, discussing the changes and transformations in the field

of Polish scripted dramas, argues that the direction of change leads from imported content to original domestic production. She argues that the development and maturity of the television market resulted in the growing market share and the importance of domestic content. "American shows started losing prominence in the Polish prime-time schedules in the mid-2000s, giving way to domestic TV fiction in the most prominent positions on Polish TV screens." (Szostak 2012: 167) This is a trend that, in her opinion, is taking place in Eastern Europe similarly to what happened in Western Europe in the 1990s. Szostak emphasizes that with the help of domestic content broadcasters can reach an audience that is otherwise (with imported dramas) would be difficult to reach. Thus, these market dynamics could improve the creativity of local filmmakers. "Producing fiction genres similar to those previously imported from America, provides the viewers with a familiar viewing experience to the one they became accustomed to in the 1990s when TV fiction was dominated by imported American product. But, more importantly, this programming strategy is an attempt to compete with cable channels, and their American fiction offer, for Polish audiences – particularly the advertiser-coveted 16-49 demographic. Poland is not unique in this respect, as Western European broadcasters and producers similarly rely on American genres and have for quite a while now." (Szostak 2012: 176)

Improvement, gradual change, import, evolution, knowledge transfer, cultural proximity and the preference of domestic content: these are all recurring topics of the discussion of format transfer and the market dynamics of emerging territories. The master narrative of the transformation draws a clear line from the shortage of domestic fiction to the evolution of the market, even glancing at the chance that Eastern Europe will be the new terrain of innovative ideas where new talents will come up with unique and innovative formats and concepts. The endpoint of this narrative (which is unquestionably the wishful narrative of local showrunners) that Eastern Europe will be the next goldmine of global formats (like Israel and Scandinavia was in the 2000s) and global markets will be flooded by original series and concepts which were developed here (Nadler 2008).

This article will discuss the process whereby, in addition to operating as a subscription movie channel in Hungary and Eastern Europe, HBO started to produce its original local content in the region. While the description will be linear and may look straightforward, I aim to highlight the complexity of the process. With the examination of HBO's activities in Hungary, I would like to focus on coincidences, trials and errors, successes and failures, to demonstrate the complexity of the problems of cultural proximity. I assume that the localization of the production (development and production of original content) and cultural proximity do not always go hand in hand. The belief that the original domestic series will necessarily be the 'culturally most proximate' is not always true. Cultural proximity, familiarity, identification, and recognition is an intricate question, with a lot of entangled aspects from the production, cultural and political embeddedness, generic and textual specificities (localization and adaptation of the stories, conflicts, and characters) and reception (audience demand for domestic content). HBO's Eastern European activities should not understand within a one-directional and asymmetrical core-periphery model (adapting Western concepts and workflow to Eastern Europe), but as a dynamic, interconnected and multi-directorial process within which both a leading multinational/global media company adapts itself to the local and global environment while introducing a new content development and production system in the transformative television and media system and creative industry of Eastern Europe after the political changes.

HBO in Eastern Europe

HBO has been present in Eastern Europe since the end of the Soviet bloc, but the motivations of the company's global expansion in the late 1980s were mainly market-driven factors, not pure political

issues. As the American domestic market has reached the limits of its growth in the mid-1980s, HBO began to look for opportunities for international expansion (Mesce 2015). Thanks to the changing policies of trade openness and global commercial and financial liberalization of that time on the one hand, and to the political changes and democratization in Latin-America, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe on the other, new areas opened for international expansion. Western Europe could have been a natural target and expansion destination for HBO, but other service providers, especially Canal+, already had strong positions in this area. However, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Eastern Europe, with its newly opened market and ongoing democratization, was a great opportunity. Yet, fragmented national markets and high satellite broadcasting prices, which would have been a problem in Western Europe, were also a challenge in Eastern Europe. That is why instead of satellite transmission HBO opted for the not so up-to-date terrestrial microwave transmission (therefore, the company used the same technology and echoed the way it started in the States in the early 1970s). HBO's first base in Europe was Hungary, where experiments with community-based cable television began in the mid-1980s (Szekfű 1989), and a joint venture company between UIH, Time Warner and US West was formed in 1991 (Kovács 2016).

It is needless to mention that HBO's international expansion of the early 1990s is part of the transformation and globalization of media industries: since the Time Warner merger in 1989, the newly merged company entered many international ventures both in television and film production, distribution and exhibition (Havens 2006). The launch of HBO in Hungary on September 28, 1991, was just a few days before the launch of HBO Olé (already prepared with the success of Spanish-dubbed films within the US Spanish-speaking audience from the previous years (Sinclair 1998)), the company's Spanish language version, provided to Latin-America and Caribbean territories. Also, part of the company's international extension was the launch of its Southeast Asian division in 1992 (as MovieVision which was rebranded to HBO Asia in 1995 (McIntosh 2008)).

The launch of the first HBO channel in Europe, in Hungary in 1991 was followed by the second in the Czech Republic, founding HBO Europe's predecessor under the name HBO Central Europe. In 1995 Walt Disney entered in joint-venture, and in 1996 HBO was launched in Poland (1996), then in Slovakia (1997), Romania (1998), Moldova (1999), Bulgaria (2002), Croatia, Slovenia (2004), Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro (2006) and Macedonia (2009).

Scholarly discussions of HBO's dynamic activities and changes (from being a subscription-based channel to its emerging original productions) and the company's brand development (repositioning itself as a unique provider of quality content, representing the "aristocracy of contemporary TV culture" (Akass – McCabe 2018)) usually focused their attention on the American (and partly on the Asian) market (Leverette – Ott – Buckley 2008, Edgerton – Jones 2008, Newman – Levine 2011, DeFino 2013). However, it is clear from these analyses and the debates about 'quality TV' that the definition of the term is not evident – even if we didn't mention the questions of globalization, cultural exchange and different local contexts regarding 'quality' (Akass – McCabe 2007). Indeed, as Milly Buonanno argued, debates over 'quality TV' should not focus only on American networks and series, as there are different alternative discourses of quality and television (and consequently 'quality TV') outside the US (Buonanno 2013). Eastern Europe, with its post-socialist legacy and cultural-political dynamics, provide a special field of examination (Havens – Imre – Lustyik 2012, Bardan 2012). As we have seen, HBO has been present in the region (and in Europe) for decades, however, not as a producer of original content, but as a subscription channel. Although the company's emblematic slogan (It's Not TV. It's HBO) was used in Eastern Europe, HBO's activities in the region were taken rather as premium and not 'quality' service. The local reception of HBO's original series (such as *Sex and the City* and *Sopranos*) was not necessarily and strongly connected to

the company's brand, as these series were discussed rather within a more general label of American screen production. Thus, the original production was crucial in the process of the development and transformation of brand identity in the region.

Although television (as opposed to politically committed art cinema) did not enjoy high prestige in the cultural elite during socialism, television and authorship were not mutually exclusive concepts (Imre 2016). Many acknowledged Eastern European directors were active in the television (yet these productions are often excluded from the discussion of their oeuvre), and this can even provide an opportunity for bringing together 'quality TV' discourse and author theory, as it was the case with Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Dekalogue* (Talarczyk 2018). After the political changes, in the hectic years of marketization and the transformation of the whole cultural ecosystem, television was everything but the basis of quality and culture. In the late 1990s, when the Western discourse on 'quality TV' was on the rise, Eastern European intellectuals were crushed by the appearance of commercial TV and tabloid press. In addition to this moral panic, public service television did not experience its best years. Constant financial problems, mismanagement, and debates over political issues made it hard, if not even impossible, to focus on the redefinition of public service values, and to produce and promote original content – for example, serial fiction. In the 2010s, and especially in the new illiberal democracies of Eastern Europe, overall skepticism and mistrust in public values and institutions, the loss of credibility of the public service media and of the cultural elite has resulted such a vacuum, that for some critics and for some parts of the audience, HBO's local productions can be received and welcomed as examples of public service content and representatives of cultural nationalism (Imre 2018). In the span of ten short years, HBO's transnational activities have undergone a major transformation, almost as profound as the transformation of Eastern European mediascape and society.

Natural Born Losers

As we have seen, for more than a decade HBO has been known as a premium subscription channel in Eastern Europe. It was the 2000s, in the years of the continued expansion of American quality TV and the international breakthrough of European and transnational series (Bondebjerg 2015, Bondebjerg – Redvall – Helles 2016) that the scene has begun to transform, and HBO Central Europe turned toward local production. The testing ground was Hungary. In 2007, not even a year after the release of *Married... with Children* in Budapest, importing "Western stupidity" to the Hungarian television market, HBO launched its first Hungarian production, a morbid anthology series, *Natural Born Losers*. The ten-minute long episodes revolved around weird and absurd cases that could have been rewarded with the so-called Darwin Award. Each independent episode focused on a sensational and foolish action, based on bad decisions and stupid judgments, showing the limitlessness of human nonsensicality. The twelve-minute-long parts (two of these episodes were screened at the same time, during prime time on Sunday evenings) presented freaky stories of Hungarian peasants brewing brandy at home, portrayed a doom of a boy who wanted to scare his friends dressed as a mummy, showed the story of a man who built the perfect trap system around his house and introduced an angry old man whose enthusiastic dog brought back the discarded grenade. The episodes were quite different in style, their connecting point was the use of black humor and the same extra-diegetic storyteller. Each episode began with a sequence that showed how 'universal' these local stories are: the radar picked up a point on the globe, zoomed in and presented the exact location and time of the event. Although the stories covered very different territories and cultures, the whole concept could be understood as a satirical action enlarging and exaggerating a distinct local topic: mocking human stupidity (laughing at those who are even more stupid than "us"), ridiculing death and selfishness.

Even though the series had no noticeable critical and audience reception and can be considered a smooth failure, it was an important entry point to the local film industry for many energetic and young filmmakers. All the leading screenwriters of the episodes have gained important positions in the next decade: Gábor Krigler became a key figure of HBO's local production, Bálint Hegedűs and Balázs Lovas became heads of Script Development at the Hungarian National Film Fund. *Natural Born Losers*, in terms of production and development, was much closer to the standards and production culture of that time Hungarian film industry than to HBO's production model. The filmmakers were given quite a degree of freedom and HBO's creative control was not particularly strong. Furthermore, since it was an anthology series (thematically linked, a series of standalone episodes), script development and narrative structure did not present as much of a challenge as in the case of contemporary complex (television/series) narratives. *Natural Born Losers* can thus be interpreted as a trial-and-error example, the first step in a learning and development process.

Documentaries: from the porn industry to social engagement

The making of the anthology series *Natural Born Losers* was a single and distinct experiment and was limited only to Hungary. Elsewhere in the region, HBO began its original production with documentaries. Although the predominant interpretation of HBO's local documentaries is that the company (especially in Hungary in the 2010s within a government-controlled public media environment) became a unique supporter of independent documentaries and helped to escape documentaries from the influence of state control and ideology (Imre 2018), this might be appropriate for the mid-2010s. HBO's early Hungarian documentaries tried to apply the model of the company's controversial and provocative documentaries from the late 1980's which (like *Eros America* and *Real Sex*), dealing with sex and taboos, tested the "limits of explicitness" and gave HBO the aura of free and liberal expression (Mascaro 2008). The very first Hungarian documentaries, *The Pierre Woodman story* (A Pierre Woodman-sztori, András M. Kovács and Péter Szajki, 2009) on the casting sessions of a successful porn producer, and *Miss Plastic – The Beauty of the Scalps* (Miss Plastic – A szikék szépe, Dávid Spáh, 2009) about the very first beauty conquest, organized for those who has plastic surgery, fit well into the sensationalist approach but were not more daring (only a bit more eccentric) than that time mainstream local commercial television. Indeed, these provocative and piquant topics were in a distance from the tradition of local documentary traditions and were not well received by the audience. In the following years HBO made serious changes in the profile of their documentaries, and, instead of provocative and eccentric topics, focused on emotionally captivating stories with stronger social relevance. Still, these documentaries, portraying dramatic individual stories with high emotional frequency and being quite dynamic in style, were also different than mainstream, classic Hungarian documentaries and their talking head-style and direct social commentary (Stóhr 2016, Imre 2018).

The case of HBO's original documentaries from Hungary demonstrates how the intervention of a multinational/transnational company on the regional market, besides providing important (and independent) financial sources and novel production and development know-how, might have unintentionally interfered with local traditions and standards. Furthermore, the limits of political criticism were shown by the production history of Eszter Hajdú's award-winning documentary, *Judgement in Hungary* (Ítélet Magyarországon, 2013). The film followed the trials of those Hungarian right-wing extremists who in 2008 and 2009 committed a series of attacks on random members of the Roma community, killing six people. Although there were negotiations about HBO getting into the film as a co-producer, in the end, the company withdrew from the project, due to its political directness (Hajdú 2016). Thus, HBO's local activities in documentaries might be an example of

balancing between public values, social consciousness, and careful political engagement. This is the tightrope dance which will be repeated with the company's domestic fiction series production – although with a different output.

Format adaptations

Shortly after the launch of the first documentary projects, HBO began developing local fiction content in the region. As a first step, after 2009, local production units have been set up in four regional countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Romania). As opposed to the production and development method of *Natural Born Losers* the new model was not given local filmmakers and new talents a free hand but based on the adaptation of tried and tested know-how – both in terms of production culture and content (Szczepanik 2016).

We have already discussed in the introduction of the master narrative of the transformation of television markets in the region from import to format adaptation and production of original content. HBO's activities by and large followed this schema, however, it happened at a much faster pace: it took less than ten years from the initial phase (when HBO provided premium Hollywood movies to the subscribers) via the format adaptations to the original productions. In this manner, the whole process might be interpreted from the point of view of autonomy, originality, and differentiation. However, this condensed transformation took place differently in each country's market. In order to see the inner dynamics and differences of the production workflow, it worth to have a closer look at the chronology of HBO's original productions at each Central European country:

	Czech Republic	Poland	Romania	Hungary
2011	Terapie (BeTipul)	Bez tajemnic (BeTipul)	În derivă (BeTipul)	Társas játék/When Shall We Kiss (Matay Nitnashek)
2012		Bez tajemnic 2	În derivă 2	Terápia (BeTipul)
2013	Hořící Keř/Burning Bush Terapie 2	Bez tajemnic 3	Rămâi cu mine/When Shall We Kiss	Társas játék 2
2014	Až po uši/When Shall We Kiss	Wataha	Umbre/Shadows (Small Time Gangster)	Terápia 2
2015	Mamon (Mammon)	Pakt/The Pact (Mammon)		Aranyélet/Golden Life (Helppo elämä)
2016	Wasteland	Pakt 2	Valea Mută/The Silent Valley (Øyevitne)	Aranyélet 2
2017	Až po uši	Wataha 2	Umbre 2	Terápia 3
2018		Ślepnąc od świateł/ Blinded by the Lights	Hackerville	Aranyélet 3
2019	Terapie 3 Bez vědomí/The Sleepers	Wataha 3	Umbre 3	

Table 1. List of HBO's format adaptations and original productions from the region (title of the source series in brackets, original productions highlighted by red)

In each market, local production started in the early 2010s and has been continuous since then, with one premiere each year. In three domestic markets (Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania), HBO began its original production with the adaptation of the Israeli series, *BeTipul*. The first big-budgeted production which was not based on the imported format was the Czech *Burning Bush*. It was followed by the Polish *Wataha* and the Czech *Wasteland* in the following years. The Norwegian political thriller, *Mammon* was the last show that has been licensed and adapted to different national markets in the region (Czech and Polish versions were made). From the mid-2010s, HBO only produced original local content (*Blinded by the Lights*, *The Sleepers*) or adapted a series, but only to one, given market (*Golden Life* for the Hungarian, *Shadows* and *The Silent Valley* for the Romanian). Furthermore, the making of the German-Romanian cyber-crime series, *Hackerville* (2018) is the first example for an HBO Europe co-production (with the German TNT Serie).

Petr Szczepanik characterized HBO's workflow as a two-tiered production strategy. The first layer is the production of "low-budget licenced series to test local responses to a property" (*When Shall We Kiss*, *BeTipul*), and the second is the big-budget event miniseries (*Burning Bush*) which represent the company's quality profile in the region (Szczepanik 2016: 98).

HBO's Eastern European series have tried to establish American and international standards for quality television in the region. Following the licensed series and adaptations, they focused on the improvement of local production, with special emphasis on script development. They work with local writers, but typically there is a lot of discussion with (and continuous reporting to) the company's executives in London. Meeting, negotiating and collaborating between different work cultures and languages is the basis and challenge of these productions – as well as international co-productions and service jobs. It is no coincidence that HBO, which does not have its own production department, committed Pioneer Production to produce the first local remake (*Shall We Kiss*), as Pioneer Production is a company with extensive experience in working with Hollywood films and series service jobs in Hungary.

Another decisive and novel factor of HBO's local development activity was the introduction of the writers' room practice, which was almost completely unknown in Eastern Europe (Szczepanik 2016, 2018). It is again something which is strongly connected to the questions of quality televisions, authorial filmmaking traditions, and cultural prestige, and might demonstrate how the interaction between these components is changing. Collective authorship and shared control had almost no tradition in the Eastern European film culture and not even in television production. These production practices have been appeared only with the launch of the commercial televisions in the late 1990s but were hardly comparable to the Western or American systems, which were also different (for example in the position and role of the showrunner). HBO's Eastern European productions basically followed the model in which there is a creative manager of the production, different from the director. However, the role and personage of the director is far from irrelevant. Indeed, it is also a special feature of HBO's regional practice that they usually pair renowned directors and talented filmmakers to be the directors of a series. Combining arthouse (and film festival circuit) reputation, cultural prestige and the dynamic attitude and worldview of a young filmmaker who is open to popular film culture: this is also an important component of the (re)definition of quality television in Eastern Europe (Imre 2018).

After the discussion of HBO's production activities in Central Europe and before entangled in the textual analysis of the series, a short introduction is needed to provide the contexts of Hungarian television series.

HBO's Hungarian productions and domestic screen fiction content

While HBO's local productions play an important role in the field and history of Hungarian screen fiction content, their importance and distinctive position cannot be traced back to a single cause. Cross-cultural program exchange and a heavy network of influences and interactions accompany the history of state-run, socialist television from the 1960s (Imre 2016, Mihelj and Huxtable 2018). Besides these close-knit systems of cultural borrowings and their overarching (post) Cold War history, and certainly besides the systemic transformation of the Eastern European state-run television industries into the liberalized, transnational digital global markets, fundamental changes in the production cultures and workflow have also profoundly affected the landscape, style, and milieu of Hungarian screen fiction content. Following the political changes, the opening of the markets and the flow of global screen content, Hungarian television producers and programmers in the 1990s resisted experimenting with previously proven formulas and genres. The launch of the commercial television channels in 1997 radically changed the screen market and industrial landscape, blasting two daily soaps to the top of rating lists. Among Friends (Barátok közt, 1998–) by RTL Klub, a Hungarian version of Fremantle Media/Grundy Television's traveling format, Neighbours, and For Better or For Worse (Jóban rosszban, 2005–) by TV2 brought the daily serial drama format to Hungary, contributing to the broadening of the knowhow and scripted drama contents in the Hungarian screen industry. In the following years, the Hungarian commercial television market was characterized by the sitcom versions, however, most of these experiments failed (as it was the case with the afore-mentioned Married... with Children in Budapest by TV2 in 2006–2007).

In the early 2010s, when HBO has begun to make adaptations of successful international series in Hungary, the domestic television market had ambivalent experiments with scripted format adaptations. While in the field of television dramas and scripted formats local sitcom versions defined the new era, the 2000s was momentum for domestic popular cinema as well. The changing landscape of Hungarian popular cinema was dominated by cultural borrowings, mostly local versions of romantic comedies and caper comedies (Varga 2017). Following the new film law in 2004 and thanks to the growing number of international service jobs (a tendency which will be booming in the mid-2010s), the Hungarian film industry experienced a major shift in the second half of the 2000s (Varga 2016). Thus, HBO's original productions did not arrive into an inhabited land, as they could build on a new generation of scriptwriters and filmmakers. If we want to describe the transformation of the Hungarian screen industry within the frame of a gradual process, the making of *When Shall We Kiss*, the Israeli-format dramedy is an important link between domestic sitcoms, romantic comedies and a new wave of domestic series. Though from the perspective and standards of quality television, it could have seemed strange and improper that HBO chose a romantic comedy as its first local adaptation, but considering the trends and dynamics of the local screen landscape, it was a cautious yet precise decision.

When Shall We Kiss: rendezvous with the ordinary?

The protagonists of *When Shall We Kiss* are young urban professionals and middle-aged characters who have problems in their workplace and family, and storylines revolve around relationship problems. The most common and general topic imaginable, indeed, but the series' wanted to portray commonplace relationship difficulties within the familiar, cosmopolitan backdrop of Budapest – different from how these topics were depicted in the sterile upper-middle-class milieu of that time local romantic comedies. Although parts of the original story and characters needed some fine-tuning (the protagonist in the Israeli version owns a flower shop, in the Hungarian version he is five-

ten years younger and has a more 'trendy' profession: having quit with advertising industry he runs a bike shop), these were not significant changes. Localization strategies concentrated on taking advantage of higher production value. Instead of uniform interiors (like in the case of sitcoms), the story broke out of closed situations and studio sets and turned forward the vivid, colorful streets of Budapest. Sunny exteriors and touristic places of the city played an important role (beginning with the series' cartoon-like title sequence), promoting the here-and-now familiarity of the story. Similarly, more nuanced characterization was also important. When Shall We Kiss revealed ordinary leads, far from the loud and blatant characters of the soap operas. Likewise, the series deliberately broke with the domestic trend of loser comedies of the 2000s, in which there were no classically comic characters, only exaggeratedly violent, macho and stubborn figures. When Shall We Kiss did not provide a distorted mirror to Hungarian society but confronted it with the image of normal or ordinary life, in-between the ideal world of soap operas and the dark naturalism of the black comedies and crime films. In the early 2010s when a growing number of the audience felt lost and felt that society has fallen apart, HBO's series was received as a proposal about how to be 'normal' (and how to deal with ordinary relationship problems) again. When Shall We Kiss introduced the confident middle-brow screen culture to Hungary and helped to reduce the aversion toward popular culture. The strengths of the series were not the standard 'quality' features of HBO productions, but the clever portraying the quotidian. The company's next local production focused more directly on the middle-class and tried to show how quality series would be adapted to Hungary.

Therapy: get to know yourself

The only series which has been adapted for all four territories covered by HBO Central Europe, BeTipul is one of the most prominent global success stories of global format adaptation, as it was remade in more than 15 countries (covering Latin-America, United States, Europe, Russia, and Japan (Lavie 2015, Perkins 2015)). The recognition and the glorious path of the series might be attributed to the strong high concept which is combined with relatively low budget feasibility. The story of the therapist and his/her (in the Russian version the protagonist is a woman) patients and the supervisor with different sessions on consecutive days of the week forms a focused, yet various structure. BeTipul is a smart example of a complex narrative as its modular structure cleverly mixes repetition and variety. Beyond this clear structure the series offer concentrated stories of human encounters, emotions and (inter)personal dramas, in a "tell, don't show" manner which is seemingly the opposite of the action-packed current style of serial narratives. However, Central European adaptation of the series provides a kind of cultural homecoming ("bringing back Freud home", to Central Europe, to the cultural and geographical birthplace of psychoanalysis). Furthermore, as psychotherapy was neglected over the decades of socialism (except in the late socialist period) after the political changes psychotherapy did not only had to regain scientific legitimacy, but it had to reinforce its public recognition and acceptance. The perception of psychoanalysis in Hungarian public opinion at the time of writing the series was still very controversial, many regarded it as a hobby for rich people. For this reason, the Hungarian version had to introduce and evaluate psychotherapy to a wider domestic audience. Therapy not only portrayed the method of the therapeutic sessions and the work of the therapist. It also showed what are topics, questions and emotional problems with which the patients turn to the therapist. Moreover, and this is an important social function, even the cost of therapy is revealed in the series, which (being not a small amount of money) showed that psychotherapy is still something that could be available by the middle class.

Also, middle-class and middle-brow associations were strengthened with the help of the casting, most importantly because of the choice of the protagonist. The lead actor is a key factor in the

atmosphere of the series, in each of its local version. This is no different in this case either. Each Central European version chose a well-known and acknowledged actor (usually with high theatrical credits), in order to channel the middle-brow aesthetics and prestige into the realm of the series. It worth to notice that in the Czech and the Polish version the protagonist is played by an actor whose credits include Hollywood films (Karel Roden, the dangerous enemy figure from *Hellboy* and *The Bourne Supremacy*, and Marcel Iures from *Mission Impossible*). As both actors returned to their home countries after their Hollywood films, their participation in the series has a sense of transnationalism, homecoming – reinforcing the non-conformist character of the protagonist. Additionally, their star persona (and screen personality) helps to combine the sense of middle-brow values and popularity. The Polish and the Hungarian version carried out it differently. The Polish version chose Jerzy Radziwiłowicz (known among others from Andrej Wajda's emblematic political-historical drama, *Man of Marble*), and the Hungarian version opted for Pál Mácsai, actor and director of one of the leading Hungarian theatres. Mácsai's intellectual appeal, calm and personal charisma proved to be an excellent choice. His cool, distant and enigmatic behavior is an important driver of the story.

When interpreting the series as cultural translations or borrowings, I consider the above aspects more important than the usual textual comparison (what were the most important changes of the original), while of course, it is also a relevant point of the analysis. Although the whole structure of the series focuses so much on human interactions and emotional encounters that national specialties or contexts do not seem to need so much emphasis, this is not the case. The source series itself is regarded to target the very heart of Israeli national identity and problems of masculinity via the ambiguous character of a "male warrior" (Harlap 2017). Season 1 of the Hungarian version begins with careful and small adjustments (the character of the fighter pilot is changed for a young CEO, who is, compared to the Israeli version, is not a that allegoric character). Second 2 move forward with the introduction of a new character, who is a member of the Parliament, and with the help of his story the series discussed the problems and memory of secret agents and the questions collaboration. Moreover, in Season 3 (now following the American adaptation, as there were only two seasons made of the series in Israel) the character of the elderly man of Indian origin was changed to Szekler origin in the Hungarian, bringing the ambivalent and moving question of national identity to the horizon of the series which until then was specifically urban (and in some sense cosmopolitan) in the selection of characters, topics, and location. This choice is even more important as the writers left out the gay character as they felt that is would be counterproductive in Hungary (Soós 2014).

Golden Life: it is not easy to live a decent life

HBO's first series, produced exclusively for the Hungarian market, was *Golden Life* (*Aranyélet*), adapted from the Finnish *Easy Living* (*Helppo elämä*). According to the creative head of the production, Gábor Krigler, earlier polls by the company showed that viewers were mostly lacking homemade crime fiction (Bodnár 2018). Indeed, Hungarian screen culture did not completely lack the genre, but remarkable productions were not made.

The series follows the lives of a family who owe their well-being to the father's low-profile criminal activities and his favors to a mafia boss. Even though the father decides to give up a criminal lifestyle, the family's well-being cannot be achieved without it – what the wife cannot accept at all. The series discuss diverging paths of the members of the family: who is trying to live a decent life, what to do with themselves when it comes to choosing between principles and values, family or wealth and self-

esteem. As a socially critical drama, *Golden Life* discusses the struggling of common people to survive and shows the series of everyday tricks and scams: the entrepreneur who builds a house with paper-weak walls, the bartender who pours water to expensive drinks in the tourist area bar, and the real estate agent who pulls off customers with a three-month deposit (Soós 2018). At the generic level (as crime or gangster narrative) *Golden Life* is a rise-and-fall story of a petty criminal who wants to quit, and a story of his son, who step by step throws himself into the vortex of crime.

This series became the most popular of HBO's local productions, the cult grew up mainly around Season 2. According to an HBO survey, more people watched the series than *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Westworld* together (Matalin 2018).

Golden Life openly presents a vast variety of social and political problems. This may be one of the keys to the effect of the series. The hit and hot topics of life in Budapest are discussed, perhaps all too clearly, as if one had to put together the most glaring cases in a single catalog. The series mixes elements and figures of current crime fiction (the dysfunctional family dynamics are taken from Italian-American gangster films and the issue of the reforming criminal; Soós 2018) and provides a whole list of outrageous examples of misconduct and social injustice from contemporary Hungary. Watching these situations, actions and characters, we can't forget the feeling that it is like reading the headlines of newspapers or internet portals. The filmmakers took care to hide telling motifs even in the background. In Season 1 an episodic character (a politician who is courting the protagonist's wife) has a fancy car with a Slovakian license plate, not a Hungarian one. The car only appears in one single shot and only in the background, yet, it is enough for those who are interested in details and politics, as this trick was often disputed in the newspapers at the time the episode was written. A lot of wealthy Hungarians would rather register their car in neighboring Slovakia, where they had to pay much less tax. Similarly, in Season 2 the son of the protagonist takes up a position in the university student government, and he can take advantage of this to do illegal business, which also reminds the audience of a well-known case. And these are only minor examples as the series is much more open about political corruption and the sticky business of Hungarian oligarchs (Imre 2018). The writers of the series have repeatedly stated that they often did not follow the news but wanted to make a strong narrative twist – but shortly after the finishing of the scripts, they were caught up in the reality. Stories, situations, events that they have just invented, echoed from the news (Rakita 2018).

As one critic summed it up: "*Golden Life* is overt and brave in its choice of subject matter and risk-averse, since it does not look so much behind Hungarian reality, but rather enhances and reflects the image about "Hungarian reality" that lives in people's minds – with a fun, enjoyable way." (Soós 2018: 34)

The novelty of the series is not only that it shows the life of the post-socialist new rich from within, but the way it presents an ambiguous rise and fall family story. Although numerous middle-brow novels portray the decades of post-socialist transformation in Hungary, films or series weren't very much about this topic. *Golden Life*, especially Season 2 which involves a plotline based on flashbacks from the early 1990s, showing the protagonists in their youth in the hectic early years of the post-socialist market economy, fills a gap. The series describes the working class-roots of the protagonist family and give a twist to the familiar patterns of dysfunctional family stories taken from Italian-American gangster films (Soós 2018). The mentality, worldview, and attitude of the Miklósi family, its frustrated relationship to work and money, is still the product of the socialist regime (Sepsi 2017). They came from low social backgrounds, and after the change of regime, they believed in the dream of "it will be better now" but had to realize that without fraud and corruption one cannot get ahead (Soós 2018). The combination of popular (genre) fiction patterns and social commentary is a

significant factor of the discourse over 'Quality TV'. This is where we should look again at the other HBO series from the region.

One of the highlighted aspects and features of HBO's original series is the "HBO-ification" of genres – the innovative use and transformation of generic patterns (Tait 2008). The making and use of genres is also an important question of HBO's Eastern European productions. While the first series took different genres (dramedy/romantic comedy, psychological drama, thriller), a variety of crime narratives have come to the forefront in recent years. Thrillers (*Wasteland*, *The Silent Valley*), political thrillers (*Mammon*, *The Pact*), action thriller (*The Pack*), gangster (*Golden Life*) or gangster-noir versions (*Shadows*); the supply almost completely covered the range of criminal genres and sub-genres. The influence of Nordic Noir seems obvious, especially in the case of the Czech *Wasteland*, with its spectacular sceneries, rundown industrial milieu at the Czech-Polish borderlands (Duryš 2018), as the impact of Nordic Noirs, combining crime narrative, social commentary, bleak atmosphere, and strong stylization, is an emerging trend in Eastern European popular cinema in the late 2010s. But beyond the influence of the Nordic Noir which has achieved massive success on the international market (Bondebjerg 2016, Hansen – Peacock – Turnbull 2018), and in that sense its Eastern impact might be the simple sign of the time, how regional screen culture rides Zeitgeist, it should be emphasized that this recent wave of crime narratives in Eastern European screen culture (including cinema, series and crime fiction) is also a sign of the serious need for new ways, modes, and narratives of social consciousness. Crime stories play a decisive role in the work of social self-awareness and imagination, in the presentation and shaping of the boundaries and mechanisms of the social imagination. HBO's Eastern European crime series undoubtedly rearranged and catalyzed the local and regional scenes of social commentary. These transnational series are exciting examples of re-understanding the post-socialist transformation, as they tell and create the founding myths of a new order and a new world (*Golden Life*, *Mammon*, *The Pact*) and also show the uncertainty of the neoliberal capitalism in Eastern Europe, with the help of bleak family dramas (*Golden Life*, *Wasteland*, *Shadows*, *The Pack*) (Batori 2018). The chances and possibilities for a decent life and the questions of enrichment and social elevation are two of the thematic motifs that play a key role in each of these series – and evidently, these are crucial questions of transforming societies.

Conclusions

Hungary served as the first base and headquarters for HBO's European expansion. However, Hungary was not only important because of the structure and organization of the company but it was also a testing ground (*Natural Born Losers*, the first HBO production in the region). Concerning HBO's local productions, we have seen that they both have common characteristics and local specificities: the way of the development of local and original productions in the countries of the region was not the same. One of the intriguing aspects of this differentiation is the fact that it was only the Hungarian market where HBO did not make an original series. Nevertheless, the scriptwriters and creatives around *Golden Life* often argued that it has been so thoroughly modified and remodeled that it no longer resembled the source – that is they treat it as an original, locally developed series. This excitement forward originality (home-grown products) nicely illustrates the complexity and ambiguity of innovation, cultural proximity, and cultural borrowings. An essential aspect of this question is the state of the given market, as in the case of Hungarian screen industry HBO's activities represented an important and influential alternative, transnational production system, compared to the local film and television funding and production mechanisms and systems. HBO was trendsetter not only regarding production methods but dealing with sensitive social and political issues. Following the buzz around Season 1, *Golden Life* was the savior of Hungarian quality screen culture,

providing a trendy crime narrative with cutting-edge spectacle and high production value – and performing sharp social and political commentary. Season 2 and especially Season 3 tried to take that direction further, even more sharply. A broad catalog of social and political problems that have arisen, perhaps just because of the familiarity, has been less disturbing and compelling. However, proving that popular culture and screen fiction ('Quality TV') might be a forum of legit and relevant social commentary, was a significant achievement. Similarly, three seasons of *Therapy* had a remarkable career and showed that the chain of human encounters and personal interactions can be work as pieces of a large-scale social puzzle or an imaginary map of social imagination. HBO's Hungarian series has taken on a huge, sometimes too massive, task. The seriousness of the challenge shows that it is essential to discuss not only the series themselves and their success or failure but also about the cultural milieu in which a series could have such a large-scale mission.

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