Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov – Special Issue
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 12 (61) – 2019
https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pcs.2019.61.12.31

Modern Mythologies, Crime Narratives, and Developmental Contradictions: Nordic Noir in the "Transylvanian Alps"[1]

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The Nordic Noir wave created a connection between a) a distinct poetics of space, atmosphere and couleur locale, b) major lines of expansion of cultural tourism and of the experience and hospitality industries connected to it, and, last but not least, c) the social problems derived from long-term developmental a-symmetries. On the basis of the transposition of a Norwegian crime series format in a Carpathian-Transylvanian setting, the essay evaluates the measure to which the transfer of Nordic Noir visual aesthetics and poetics of plot could also determine the translation of the agenda of tourism entanglement and social responsibility of Scandinavian crime genre series.

Key-words: *Nordic Noir, Film Studies, Romanian Television Studies, Social Imaginaries*

1. Introduction

"Nordic Noir" as a crime series brand achieved prominence through a triangulation of perspectives, and respective interests. Their global expansion was mainly based on a synergy of evolutions within a) film and TV industries, b) tourism, experience, and creative industries, and c) the development agenda of different municipalities and regions. This intersection of trends and projects generated a poetics of natural and social locations synthesized by Anne Marit Waade and Pia Maibrit Jenssen from the Aarhus University: "Nordic noir uses recognisably *Nordic* phenomena, settings, light, climate and seasonal conditions as well as language(s), characters

[1] This publication 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. The publication reflects only the author's view and the Agency and the Commission are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

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and themes such as gender equality, provincial culture and the social democratic welfare state." (Waade & Jensen 2013, 119)

An interesting effect of Nordic Noir treatment of landscape and social imaginaries was the media mainstreaming of marginalized areas and communities. The visual rhetoric developed by Scandi crime (another moniker for the same phenomenon) projected an attractive aesthetic aura on isolated places relatively disconnected from touristic circuits. In spite of their foregrounded criminal plots, the series have successfully generated a general fascination with "Nordism" on, for instance, unknown Scandinavian mountain areas.

In this essay, we will follow the consequences of the crossing between Nordic Noir aesthetics and policies of mountain locations and Transylvania, another mountainous universe equally divided between actual geography and European collective imagination. We will begin with a short overview of the styling of this region of present-day Romania by national and international tourism media, with a short note on how its symbolic capital was co-opted by film industries over the last decades. Eventually, we will focus on the study of an obvious case of interpenetration between the Nordic Noir fictional universe, as instantiated in the Norwegian series *Eyewitness*, with the equally land-, media- and mythical scape of Transylvania, explored by *Silent Valley*, the Romanian adaptation of the Scandinavian crime narrative.

We will try to evaluate the measure to which the mapping of Nordic Noir visual aesthetics and poetics of the plot on a Transylvanian space could also determine the translation of the social and moral agenda of Scandinavian genre series. We will conclude by hypothesizing on the odds of such crime fictions contributing to problematize, inspire or accelerate local development in Transylvania.

2. Transylvanian Mediascapes

Along the line of horror, actual Transylvania hosted trend-setting vampire productions such as Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (1991), but also small budget B movies, such as *The Jester from Transylvania* (2016). Producers of *noir* could have been expected to follow track, not only because of the "natural" connection of Transylvania to dark atmospherics and mystery. Touristic acumen has become a major asset for crime/noir location managers (White and Frew 2013) and Transylvania acquired lately a considerable symbolic capital as a touristic destination, due to its cultural patchwork, biodiversity, preservation of traditional and ecological lifestyles. For this combined reasons, *Lonely Planet* promoted it as a

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2016 top touristic destination (O'Hare and Delgrossi 2016). Biodiversity and heritage are also the reasons behind the active international promotion of the region by HRM Prince Charles, who acquired properties in the eastern part of the province and encourages local ecological small industries (Brunt 2019, zalan.transylvaniancastle.com). The same discourse has been appropriated by local public and private operators in the field of cultural tourism (e.g. Romanian Friend 2018), and provides the rationale for regional development projects sponsored by the European Commission (e.g. EC Project 2015). A revealing analysis of Transylvanian mediascape focused on the case study of a Szekler village can be found in Keszeg, 2015.

The nexus of Transylvanian attractions is compatible with the conditions that generated elsewhere a boost in crime/noir films and series. Its ethnic diversity, Romanian, Hungarian, German, Roma, offers generous opportunities for distilling the *couleur locale* that, according to an influential school of thought in production studies, explains much of the success of Nordic Noir (Toft Hansen & Waade 2017). Landscape is also widely perceived as an essential ingredient for the success of Nordic Noir, and for the global mimetic emulation it sparkled – and from this point of view the province is especially bidding, fore and foremost in the area of the Southern Carpathians, known as the Transylvanian Alps (Lotha 2011). To this we could add the dramatic potential of the lingering ethnic tensions between Romanian and Hungarians, on the one side (Turda 2001), and of the social tensions (inequality, corruption, delayed development, trafficking) that usually brand Romania in the European press (BBC News 2013).

In what follows, we will try to expose the degree to which these intersection of favouring landscape, mediascape and ideoscape factors is (or isn't) turned into a production and local developmental asset, on the basis the transposition of a Norwegian Noir series format in a Carpathian-Transylvanian setting.

3. (Dis)Locating Scandinavian crime-landscapes

Valea Mută/Silent Valley was produced for HBO Europe by Castel Film Romania in 2016. The cast and crew were Romanian, with the exception of the HBO Executive producers Antony Root, Steve Matthews, and Jonathan Young, but the format was imported. The 4 episodes series is an adaptation of the 2014, 6 episodes *Øyevitne*/*Eyewitness*, created and directed by Jarl Emsell Larsen, produced for the Drama department of NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation). The series is part of a wider experiment of HBO-Europe with industry professionals in Eastern Europe, and it bears the marks of a pioneering enterprise. With it we witnessed the

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first attempt to transmogrify Transylvanian "dark" into Scandinavian "noir." This fusion seems to be quite naturally inserted into the process of global, or at least Transatlantic expansion of Nordic crime formats, since the Romanian remake was launched almost simultaneously with the American (the 10 episodes *Eyewitness*, produced by Adi TV Studios and Universal Cable Productions for USA Network).

The original Norwegian series tells the story of two male adolescents engaged in a homoerotic affair, who, hidden in an isolated mountain cabin, witness the murder of several gangsters, among which a police informer. The perpetrator will turn out to be the corrupt newly appointed leader of a national anti-drugs elite squad. The plot evolves through successive complications due to the inhibition of the two protagonists to testify out of fear of having their relationship exposed. Secondary plot-lines present the dealings and clashes of two criminal organizations: an aboriginal "Aryan" biker gang, and Muslim immigrant drugs traffickers of uncertain ethnic origin (labelled as Turks by the outsiders, they obviously speak a Slavic language that rather identifies them as Muslim Bosnians).

The Romanian adaptation follows a double logic: it scouts for land- and cityscapes evocative of the original Nordic setting, but, on the other hand, it entangles the plot in new and distinctive social-cultural milieus. Both adaptation strategies are explicitly addressed by Johnathan Young, the HBO producer, in a promotional interview:

> The central conflict is easily recognizable, but the context is quite different. The problems raised [allegedly: sexual orientation and race] have a different resonance in Norway, compared to Romania. Part of the family dynamics is unique in the Romanian version, the use of language is different, and locations bring a fully different dimension to the series. You cannot have a successful adaptation if you don't get to fit the characters to the local context, and screenwriter Christian Barna and director Marian Crișan did exactly this, while preserving the Norwegian format. Therefore, we are persuaded that *Silent Valley* has a distinct voice and we hope that the men and women who created the Norwegian series will be proud of the new course taken by their production (Andronache 2016).

In spite of Young's insistence on locations that "bring a fully different dimension to the series" the setting seems to have been selected so as to be evocative of the pristine natural environment of the Norwegian location. The original series was set in Mysen, a rather isolated community, even if situated not far from the capital city of Oslo, that got city status only in 1997. Analogical location determined the option for the Transylvanian Alps, and for the city of Brașov – even if, unlike Mysen, the

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latter is a major city already inserted in European and international routes. It is likely that the fictional and touristic aura of the region also played a role in the decision, even if not explicitly evoked by the producers and promoters of the series. The potential of associating Nordic Noir with Transylvania couldn't have escaped a consummated producer like HBO executive producer Jonathan Young, who began his career as location manager (Serial Eyes 2019). The Romanian director of the series, Marian Crișan, also stated that location

> was one of the things that attracted me to this project. It announced the opportunity of filming in the mountains, in the Brașov area, and it has been a pleasure and a challenge to identify the locations and shoot. Brașov is a very visual city, and the surrounding mountain areas seemed exactly what we needed for *Silent Valley* (Ștefan 2016).

The involvement of Marian Crișan with crime drama in Transylvanian mountain locations was anything but circumstantial. He had already experimented such locations before, in the 2015 feature *Orizont/Horizon*, also an adaptation, but of a different kind: it provocatively transports in a contemporary context the plot and characters of *Moara cu noroc/The Lucky Mill*, a 1881 novella by the classical author Ioan Slavici. Actually, according to Andra Radu, the Romanian producer of the series, Crișan's previous Transylvanian project was determining for his selection, since "there aren't many directors to have made thrillers in Romania, and Marian had just finished *Orizont*." (Marinescu 2016)

Orizont already suggested, even if in a convoluted way, a connection between the noir genre and tourism. Its title alludes to the name of a mountain motel whose owner is pushed towards a tragic ending for himself and his family by his gradual involvement with a criminal network. Just like in Nordic Noir movies, the criminal intricacies of the plot are meant not to discourage visitors but, on the contrary, to subliminally prompt their curiosity. The crime format distillates fear and turns it into excitement, while the noir touch projects an aura of mystery over a subliminally touristic land/media-scape. The connection to tourism and to the "tourist gaze" (Ury 2002) is equally obvious in *Silent Valley*, which, for instance, uses as "breakers" panoramic views of the city of Brașov directly replicating the stereotypical representation of the city touristic visual discourse:

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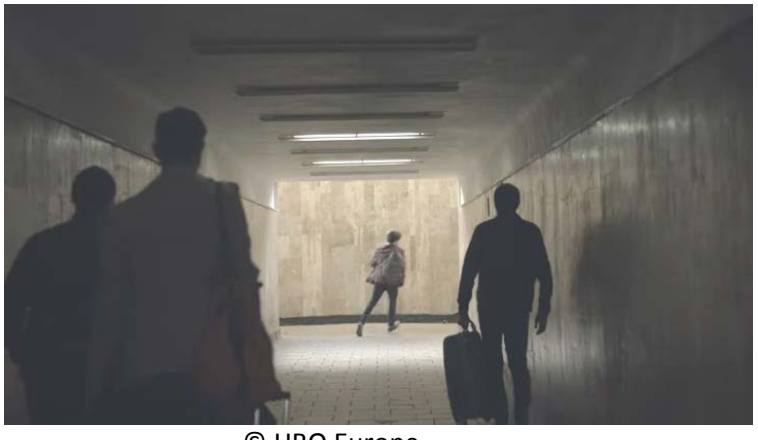


Promotional image with one of the most frequently used "breakers"
© HBO Europe



Panoramic image of Brașov on influential tourism site
© romanianfriend.com

On the other hand, the city-scapes were chosen in order to avoid the clichés that package Brașov as a touristic hotspot. Usually, the city is represented through its old centre that still preserves the imprint of its German medieval founders. *Silent Valley* almost completely eliminated such iconic locations, while exploring new sources of creating dark atmospherics – e.g. a tunnel that serves as one of the exits of the city's main railway station:



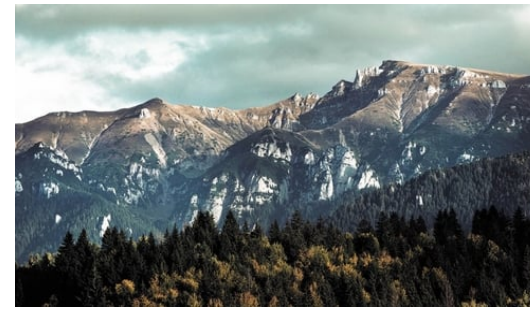
© HBO Europe

A major concern of locations management has obviously been to find, so to say, "Norwegian wood," i.e. mountain forest-scapes to punctuate and contrast the urban side of the plot. The choice of the natural settings is consonant to one of the dominant Romanian identity discourses, that posits the country on the European

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tourism market as a reservoir of virgin forests and wildlife. One of the most ambitious attempts of this kind is the widely advertised documentary *Untamed Romania*, sponsored by the local branch of French retail group *Auchan* (Bunea 2018):





Stills from the award-winning international documentary *Untamed Romania*
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Subliminal touristic discourse permeates, for instance, key sequences of the final episode of *Silent Valley* presenting a trucks and jeeps chase through the Cheia mountain pass, in the relative vicinity of Brașov. The association with drug trafficking gives the scenery a criminal, apprehensive aura, but on the other hand the scene might be connected, in the audience's latent memory, with the touristic trope launched by *Top Gear* of Romania as a country of spectacularly challenging mountain roads (Dobie 2018):



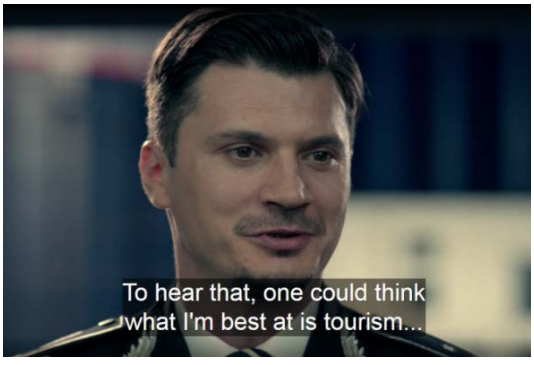
Cars and trucks chase in Cheia mountain pass
©HBO Europe



Transfagarașan Road on *Top Gear*
©TopGear

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The ambiguity implied by the connection between noir movies and tourism is ironically thematized in a sequence where the alleged apex predator of the series, a high-ranking special force officer gradually revealed as a merciless criminal, casually comments on the wide international exposure resulting from his CV that has just been presented to his new team:



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4. Travelling Noir and Transylvanian Human Geography: Ethnic- and Social-Scapes

If in point of landscape the producers opted for resemblance with the original series, the ethno-scape devised by the series is much more innovative. Traditionally Brașov is presented as a place of interference between Germans and Romanians – with a tendency of underrepresenting the Hungarian and Jewish contributions, which in fact let an indelible mark on the profile of the city. Nevertheless, the Hungarian and Jewish heritage fares better (e.g. by stressing the convenient fact that Brașov is the birth place of Brassaï, the French photographer of Hungarian-Jewish descent), than the Roma community, which usually is completely omitted by the touristic packaging of Brașov, as it is in general in the Romanian public sphere (on this, see Szeman 2018). The producers radically redesigned the ethno-scape by ignoring the historically significant German element (or Hungarian, for that matter), while emphasizing the sociologically significant (see Fleck and Rughiniș 2008) presence of the Roma community and culture:

> "We wanted to make a series that talks about prejudice, about the power of self-expression" explained Jonathan Young, who revealed that in the production being filmed these days in Brașov the bikers gang featured in the original series was replaced by "elements connected to the Roma community." (Constanda 2016)

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Actually, the biker gang was not simply replaced, but conflated with Mafia which gives the exotic flavour of the Norwegian series. There are no bikers gang in the Romanian production. On the contrary, *Silent Valley* creatively parallels the would-be Turkish, in fact Bosnian ethnic mob, and especially their way of speaking by mingling scraps of their native language within their otherwise fluent Norwegian. In the Romanian adaptation, the slot of minority exotic language is replaced by Romanes, one of the local varieties of Romani, a language which "is not the same as Romanian and not a Romance language" (Hubschmannova, Kalinin and Kenrick 2000, 11). The use of the Romanes is a most original innovation of *Silent Valley*, probably the first Romanian production consistent in undertaking this linguistic turn.

Nevertheless, even if the Roma characters are presented as an element of exoticisation, with a certain dark-tourism touch (tentatively reminding that Gypsy magic has always been insidiously connected to Draculean-Transylvanian themes), the obvious effort of the producers is to avoid stereotyping and to main-stream the image of this disenfranchised community. The strategy is to factor in visual and attitudinal tropes that allude to the highly prestigious Nordic cultural and natural universe. For instance, the Roma community on which the plot is premised belongs to a neo-Protestant denomination. On the one hand, this mirrors the real-life conversion dynamics of Roma population in Romania (which intensified spectacularly over the last decades (Fosztó 2009, 167-208; Biţiş 2017). On the other hand, it creates a contact, a cultural chime with the subliminally-Norwegian landscape. A visit made by the woman prosecutor who is the lead investigator on the multiple murders that sets the story in motion to the father of the victims exposes the austere white, pointed church where the latter preaches the Gospel. The integration in the mountain-scape of this building suggests the stoic distinction and laconism of the tall and dry old man devastated not only by the fact that his elder sons have lost their lives, but by the intimation that they have previously sold their souls to a local mafia boss. Background and character allude to the imaginary construction of the human geography of Scandinavian countries.

The producers act as gatekeepers, counting, to a degree, on the influence of Scandinavian stereotypes and *couleur locale* on the domestic public, while simultaneously trying to create analogies between representations of the local cultural/mental landscape and a Scandinavian/Western sensitivity and value system.

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On the one side, the series presents the polarisation of Romanian society, blending representations of middle-class residential areas and interiors that discreetly allude to standard Scandinavian design, with realistic representations of poor Roma neighbourhoods and dwellings:






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On the other side, spatial strategies are instrumental to rendering the internal polarization of the Roma community, a polarisation understood not only in terms of economic, but also of moral status. The aggressively opulent quarters of the mob boss Nicu Jartea is contrasted with the dignity and austerity of the Roma preacher Cristodor Ceprache:




© HBO Europe

Another layer of location strategies is connected to institutional and governance spaces. Following both the Norwegian original and an archetypal pattern of investigation series, *Silent Valley* exploits the tensions between two levels of the public force: the Directorate for Investigating Organized Crime and Terrorism, which is a real state agency, versus the regular police. The opposition between the two is distilled in the sharp contrast between the fair-haired, blue-eyed prosecutor Elena Zamfir, and the dark complexion and outfit, both reminding of Dracula, of Robert Dima, the brilliant and charming but essentially corrupt and cynical DIICOT commander. Their personalities impregnate the headquarters they supervise, which themselves replicate the opposition between light and darkness, thereby visually suggesting radically opposed modes of silence (we should not forget the title: *Silent* Valley) – one connoting the fullness of humane emotions, the other, the void of ambition and greed.




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An interesting detail, in point of problematizing space and location, is the map of the city of Braşov in the back of commander Dima. Its complete abstraction, which would hardly make it useful for real police work, may suggest the appropriation of territory by a malefic character, on whom thespian Emilian Oprea confessed that he wanted to bestow the vibe of a predator (paginadeseriale 2016). But, involuntarily, the image could also be expressive of a certain lack of finesse in rendering the texture of Braşov locations (of which an idea could be derived, for instance, from the mental maps of the city realised by Romanian-American sociologist Sorin Adam Matei 2006).

5. Mountain (Crime) landscapes and developmental imagination: A perspective for Transylvania?

The Nordic Noir wave created a connection between a) a distinct poetics of space, atmosphere and *couleur locale*, b) major lines of expansion of cultural tourism and of the experience and hospitality industries connected to it, and, last but not least, c) the social problems derived from long-term developmental a-symmetries. The association of Northern Europe with the theme of underdevelopment and lack of economic perspectives might surprise those familiar with the myth of Scandinavia offering the highest possible satisfaction to the highest possible number. The Nordic area is usually identified with the success story of the welfare state. But we have to take into account that development and underdevelopment are relative indexes and that disparities that might seem minor, "natural," or go unnoticed in poorer countries might be perceived as intolerable in affluent ones. Moreover, we have to consider the studies that present growth as a hardly homogenous process, pointing to so-called "pockets of poverty" may be detected at the core of highly developed countries or regions (Van Kempen 1997).

The fact that mountain regions became part and parcel of the representational canon of Nordic Noir sheds light on a somewhat paradoxical conjunction of strategies. On the one hand, there is the staging of a space, partly real, partly imaginary, associated with leisure and with the industries and (basically hedonistic) technologies of experience. On the other hand, there is the accrued attention to fellow citizens (or human persons in general) that have been socially and economically left behind. The ethos conveyed together with the landscape poetics by Scandinavian crime series is that the aesthetic experience of natural or social-cultural virtual habitats can and should be associated with social awareness and care. Nordic Noir aesthetics can be seen as a mediation between freedom understood as a personal exercise of the pleasures of imagination (of which the

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simulated fear and suspense of crime plots are natural parts), and freedom understood as ethical responsibility towards one's fellows, no matter how close or distant in terms of ethnicity, gender, or social status.

In the study of *Silent Valley* we tried to follow the manner in which this special alliance could be translated in another TV production culture, in another mountain area, the one of the "Transylvanian Alps," and in a different ethno-social landscape. A significant difference seems to come from different levels of sensitivity to the dire consequences on development of spatial isolation/dis-connectedness (consequences analysed in Soja 2010). While the Norwegian series, set in a rather marginal and isolated area, seems pervaded by the awareness of this disparity, the main location of the Romanian version is one of the most important touristic cities of Transylvania. Nevertheless, our analysis has revealed that, profiting from the crime/noir plot, but also from landscape poetics, the focus of the Romanian series also slides toward a destitute area in the neighborhood of the city of Brașov, and from a plot line centered on well-to-do middle class characters, to the complex social and cultural issues of the marginalized Roma community.

Silent Valley is not significant because of its public impact, which wasn't massive neither in point of the number of visualizations, nor form the perspective of generating a public debate. This limited impact actually points to the experimental character of the whole project. It is noteworthy that, in its attempt of transferring Nordic Noir to a Romanian context, HBO did not resort to the symbolic capital and to the touristic infrastructure of Transylvania. All these are left to loom in the background, while the foreground is gradually occupied by the severe contradictions of social development. For creating productive links between film industries, cultural tourism and development processes, even remotely reminding of the successful Scandinavian precedent, local communities and governments must learn to think out of the box. *Silent Valley* can be seen as representing, be it in a derivative to involuntary manner, a call to reflecting on the ways in which fiction in general, and crime narratives in particular may ignite and nurture developmental imagination.

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