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*HBO Europe's original television productions*

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## **From remade drama to original crime HBO Europe's original television productions**

Kim Toft Hansen, Anna Keszeg and Sándor Kálai

**Abstract:** In this article, we examine developments in HBO’s original European productions based on a quantitative overview of production from 2007 to early 2020. We supplement this overview with an analysis of the generic changes during the past decade as well as a practical producers’ approach to remakes. The intention is not to analyse the specific series’ content; rather, we scrutinize genre, talent and remakes through the perspective of the HBO brand and the creatives behind the series. The main empirical material for this article is interviews with key informants and an exploitation of online resources. Altogether, this establishes both a historical overview of the productions and an up-to-date idea of how the transnational institution considers its own local endeavours.

**Keywords:** HBO Europe, crime drama, remakes, talent development, video-on-demand, localisation, transnationalism.

There are at least three good reasons for considering HBO’s original European productions from the first original serial productions little over a decade ago until today. Firstly, we are now expecting the first real changes to the HBO brand after the AT&T acquisition of Time Warner, including the 2020 launch of the new HBO Max. Secondly, 2020 brings the renewal of the output deal between HBO and Sky on large parts of the European market with uncertain European output platforms for HBO’s productions as a contemporary result. Thirdly, 2020 brings along intensified competition from a range of new players on the global market, including Disney’s and Apple’s streaming services, which calls out 2020 as a quintessential year for fierce competition on the global streaming market. Since the market appears to be changing fast right now, it is timely to overview the past decades of HBO’s European TV drama activities.

HBO has produced 41 seasons of television fiction in European territories in little over a decade. Starting with the local Hungarian production of the tragicomic *Született lúzer* (*Born Loser*, 2007-8), HBO Hungary test-ran the localised production activities with two seasons of original fiction. At that point, HBO Europe had been active as a premium cable television service since 1991 in Hungary, and has since spread across different European territories (Imre 2019:

174-75). While *Born Loser* was a project by HBO Hungary, soon after HBO Europe started to instigate local productions of serial drama. Initially, these productions were remakes of popular television series from primarily Israel and Norway, but after three-four years of establishing local talent, HBO Europe ventured into original content created by local screenwriters in each available territory. In this transition from remakes to original content, we also see a gradual shift from privileging psychological drama (in casu remakes of the Israeli format *BeTipul*) and romantic drama (in casu remakes of the Israeli format *Matay nitnashek*) to producing localised television crime series, including remakes of two Norwegian series (*Øyevitne* and *Mammon*) and a loose remake of a Finnish series (*Helppo elämä*). Altogether, this decade-long process discloses steadfast local talent development as well as a maturing creative television industry that, according to Steve Matthews, HBO Europe’s VP Executive Producer of Drama Development, at the early stage had strong production services, but the screenwriting talent was slightly “undeveloped” (Matthews 2019). Overseeing the complete portfolio of original serial content production, it is possible to extract quite a range of interesting development perspectives.

In this article, we analyse developments in HBO’s original European productions based on a quantitative overview of production since *Born Loser* until the most recent premieres of the Croatian miniseries *Uspjeh (Success, 2019)* and the transnational co-production *The New Pope (2020)*. We supplement this overview with a perspective on the generic changes during the past decade as well as a practical producers’ approach to remakes. The intention is, then, not to analyse the specific series’ content; rather, we intend to approach genre, talent and remakes through the perspective of the HBO brand and the creatives behind the series. The main empirical material for this article is interviews with key informants and an exploitation of online resources.<sup>1</sup> These interviews were conducted from 2018-19 and reflect a contemporary production model for HBO Europe. The online resources supplementing and underlining the points made represent a more cross-temporal view on single series or general institutional perspectives on HBO’s European brand, including HBO Europe’s articulation of local European identities in a transnational media environment. Altogether, this establishes both a historical overview of the productions and an up-to-date idea of how the transnational institution considers its own local endeavors.

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<sup>1</sup> The informants have approved all quotes from interviews conducted by the authors.

## **Transposing the HBO brand to Europe**

Scholarly work on HBO is expansive, and it is a well-established perspective that the TV institution “transformed the creative landscape of television during the first decade (1995-2004) of TV’s current digital era” (Edgerton 2008: 8). Both new technology (cable and satellite distribution) and content (the quality TV brand) made the service provided by HBO stand out in the increasing competition to such an extent that Dean J. DeFino would stress that HBO have had an overall impact on television content worldwide, the so-called “HBO effect” according to DeFino (DeFino 2014). However, as DeFino also points out, HBO has been comparatively late in adopting digital distribution of content. Writing in 2014, at a point when Netflix was conquering the digital television market, he could safely claim that HBO has “so far shown no signs of giving up the cable/satellite infrastructure for a web-based distribution model” (ibid.: 202). The result is, now, that we speak about “the Netflix effect” rather than HBO impacting the media landscape (McDonald and Smith-Rowsey 2016).

On the one hand, DeFino is right in stressing that HBO’s digital distribution model developed comparatively late and perhaps rather as a *reaction* than an innovative technological move. HBO’s European activities started as a pre-internet cable channel in Hungary and has since maintained a wide-ranging exposure of linear television products, both in the US and in its Eastern European territories. According to Amanda D. Lotz (2017), 2015 market characteristics still showed that the monthly profit pr. subscriber for HBO was still many times higher than that of Netflix. On the other hand, HBO instigated digital distribution already in 2001, and has slowly developed its brand in most territories with supplementing digital services like HBO Go and HBO Nordic. DeFino refers to this strategy as HBO’s “wait-and-see” approach, and compared to other digital streaming services, HBO has patiently established their brand as localised content, including locally produced television series since 2007. This may be understood as innovative and far-sighted in relation to Netflix, premiering its first European production, *Marseille* (2016) significantly later than HBO. Contrary to DeFino’s position, Aniko Imre maintains that “HBO’s virtual map of European “territories,” parceled up by nations and regions with a well-calculated recognition for the need to cater to national and regional identities, has brought to life a kind of e-EUtopia under the umbrella of a corporate brand” (Imre 2018: 52). In other words, she claims

that HBO has succeeded, at least in Central and Eastern European territories, in establishing “a digitally connected communication network” (ibid.: 54).

Imre’s broad cultural conclusions may appear slightly wide-ranging, and she disregards that HBO in 2017 held, in the whole EU, a market share of no more than 1%, while Netflix held a staggering market share of 47% of VoD (Video on Demand) subscribers and Amazon Prime a 20% market share (Grece 2017). The fact that Sky Atlantic carries much of the content commissioned by HBO may account for some of the differences in market position, but Sky holds no more than a 4% market position in the EU. Measured as a mere market share, HBO is nowhere near the regional impact of Netflix, but if we take these figures into account it still becomes remarkable that HBO has, to some extent, been able to uphold a cultural pole position, indicating that the HBO brand has penetrated the mindframe of users, critics and academics. Basically, in Europe the brand HBO and the cultural impact seems to outweigh the market penetration of the brand and subscriber availability of the HBO product.

HBO’s quality brand is still an active ingredient in HBO’s activities on the European market, including HBO Nordic’s original programming activities. Hanne Palmquist, commissioning editor and VP, Original Programming at HBO Nordic, stresses that the ambition is to:

“commission original, genre-redefining and thought-provoking content – as is often associated with HBO series: We aim for innovative, edgy, surprising stories that will engage the audience and leave a mark long after the show has ended. As an SVOD service with a Nordic/European audience as first and second priority we can do other kinds of shows than if you were to speak to a broad national audience. We may allow ourselves to be more non-conventional.” (Palmquist 2019)<sup>2</sup>

Such a framing of HBO Nordic’s activities clearly resonates with the wide-spread corporate branding of HBO as edgy content (nudity, violence, strong language). As HBO Europe’s EVP of Original Programming and Production, Antony Root says upon the disclosure of HBO’s first Nordic original television series: “Clearly we want to do shows that are unique and reflect the

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<sup>2</sup> After the deadline of this article Palmquist has been signed as the Head of Scripted-Nordics and Managing Director of the Endemol Shine Group production company Filmlance.

HBO brand that stands for authenticity, point of view, authorial voice” (Pham 2016). This perspective is also reflected in our interview with Steve Matthews that, in addition, also stresses the need to have an original voice in order to get attention on a saturated market:

“There is so much stuff. So for us, or certainly for me personally, it makes us think hard about genre versus local content. HBO exists by taking risks, by taking genres and flipping them. Nobody knew the surprise and nobody watched *The Wire* for about five years. In terms of the noisy amount of stuff out there, it reminds us that the banner headline of the HBO philosophy is quality. We do less than a lot of other companies, so what we do better be good, better be very well made, and should really be pushing some envelope or another. That reminds us to not retreat to genre and bland cop shows. I think we keep pushing to find new stuff, but never quite forgetting that people like murders. That game about the commercial versus the artistic, genre versus non-genre, internet versus the local, is what we spend more time thinking about than probably anything else.” (Matthews 2019)

The now former creative executive of HBO Hungary, Gábor Krigler, stressed HBO Europe’s role in creating content that works well locally, but at the same time it should also have the potential to reach an audience outside the local territory:

“I think every creator is lying if he says he is making something for a narrow audience. This is also important for us, especially because we are working with budgets that are outstanding in Hungary compared to others. The purpose of such an investment is to make the final result interpretable in other countries. I think we can all say, on behalf of all the creators, our ambition to tell a story that is not only valuable but enjoyable beyond our borders.” (Klacsán 2016)

In other words, the intention has clearly been a transfer of the HBO brand and HBO’s edgy quality to European territories, but at the same time the institution has sought out localised content for this production model with attention towards local trends and styles. As we shall see below, this has also affected the strategy of developing content and genres for the overall and diversified European territory.

### Three phases in HBO’s European portfolio

In the period 2007-2020, HBO Europe produced 38 seasons of drama: 36 seasons has been developed for Eastern Europe (Hungary, Romania, Czech Republic, Poland and Croatia) and two recently for Scandinavia (Norway and Sweden), highlighting these Eastern European territories as the main focus. In addition, we also include the US-European co-productions *The Young Pope* (2016), *Chernobyl* (2019) and *The New Pope* (2020). The result is a portfolio consisting of 25 European titles in total, including three season series for six of these titles and remakes of the same formats in the four territories Hungary, Poland, Romania and Czech Republic. Today, *Born Loser*, the first original European HBO production, has disappeared from the HBO portfolio and appears now only freely accessible through the Hungarian video-sharing platform Videa. Although branded as an HBO production, bearing some traits of quaint narrative style and a clearly localised story, the subsequent strategy of HBO Europe, the series appears to be a stepping-stone towards a more targeted development model from 2010 and onwards.

Based on our overview of HBO Europe’s original productions, we distinguish between three phases or trends during the last decade: 1) *Remakes and talent development* (2010-14), 2) *Crime and the rise of original HBO productions* (2014-2017), and 3) *Territorial expansion and ensuing co-productions* (2018-) (figure 1). The first period in HBO’s European history (2010-2014) sees the launch of HBO’s original programming in Eastern Europe with several local versions of two Israeli series, the psychological drama *BeTipul* (2005-8), which HBO remade as *In Treatment* (2008-10) in the US, and the romantic drama *Matay Nitnashek* (2007), which ran considerably longer, especially in Poland, in the remade versions. As the first series launched by HBO Europe in Eastern Europe, the *BeTipul* format exists in Romanian (this was the first series launched in Eastern Europe at the end of 2010), Hungarian, Czech and Polish versions. From 2010 to 2019, a total of 16 seasons based on these formats were broadcast in Eastern European territories, making the formats *BeTipul* and *Matay Nitnashek* a through-going trend since the new developments of HBO Europe’s local productions from 2010 and onwards. As we return to below, these format adaptations strategically sought out local audiences while at the same time developing local talent for television production.

Original title	English title	Local territory	Year	Genre	Production	Remake/original	On off/season	Episodes
Született lúzer	Born Loser	Hungary	2007	Dramedy	HBO Holding Kft. New Balance Kft.	Original	Season 1	8
Született lúzer	Born Loser	Hungary	2008	Dramedy	HBO Holding Kft. New Balance Kft.	Original	Season 2	12
In Derivá	In treatment	Romania	2010	Psychological drama	HBO Commission	Remake of BeTipul (Israeli series)	Season 1	45
Terápie	Therapy	Czech Republic	2011	Psychological drama	HBO Commission	Remake of BeTipul (Israeli series)	Season 1	45
In Derivá	In treatment	Romania	2011	Psychological drama	HBO Commission	Remake of BeTipul (Israeli series)	Season 2	35
Társas játék	When Shall We Kiss	Hungary	2011	Romantic drama	HBO Commission	Remake of Matay nitnashek (Israeli series)	Season 1	13
Bez tajemnic	Without Secrets	Poland	2011	Psychological drama	HBO Commission	Remake of BeTipul (Israeli series)	Season 1	45
Terápia	Therapy	Hungary	2012	Psychological drama	HBO Commission	Remake of BeTipul (Israeli series)	Season 1	40
Társas játék	When Shall We Kiss	Hungary	2012	Romantic drama	HBO Commission	Remake of Matay nitnashek (Israeli series)	Season 2	13
Bez tajemnic	Without Secrets	Poland	2012	Psychological drama	HBO Commission	Remake of BeTipul (Israeli series)	Season 2	35
Hoříci keř	Burning Bush	Czech Republic	2013	Historical drama	HBO Commission	Original	One off	3
Terápie	Therapy	Czech Republic	2013	Psychological drama	HBO Commission	Remake of BeTipul (Israeli series)	Season 2	35
Bez tajemnic	Without Secrets	Poland	2013	Psychological drama	HBO Commission	Remake of BeTipul (Israeli series)	Season 3	35
Râmâi cu mine	Shall We Kiss	Romania	2013	Romantic drama	HBO Commission	Remake of Matay nitnashek (Israeli series)	One off	13
Umbre	Shadows	Romania	2014	Crime	HBO Commission	Based on Small Time Gangster (Australian series)	Season 1	8
Wataha	The Border	Poland	2014	Crime	HBO Commission	Original	Season 1	6
Terápia	Therapy	Hungary	2014	Psychological drama	HBO Commission	Remake of BeTipul (Israeli series)	Season 2	35
Až po uší	Head over Heels	Czech Republic	2014	Romantic drama	HBO Commission	Remake of Matay nitnashek (Israeli series)	Season 1	13
Aranyélet	Golden Life	Hungary	2015	Crime	HBO Commission	Based on Helppo elämä (Finnish series)	Season 1	8
Mammon	Mammon	Czech Republic	2015	Crime	HBO Commission	Remake of Mammon (Norwegian series)	One off	6
Pakt	The Pact	Poland	2015	Crime	HBO Commission	Remake of Mammon (Norwegian series)	Season 1	6
Aranyélet	Golden Life	Hungary	2016	Crime	HBO Commission	Based on Helppo elämä (Finnish series)	Season 2	8
Pustina	Wasteland	Czech Republic	2016	Crime	HBO Commission	Original	One off	8
The Young Pope	The Young Pope	US/Italy/France	2016	Drama	HBO/Sky Atlantic/Canal+ co-production	Original	One off	10
Pakt	The Pact	Poland	2016	Crime	HBO Commission	Remake of Mammon (Norwegian series)	Season 2	6
Valea Mută	The Silent Valley	Romania	2016	Crime	HBO Commission	Remake of Øyevitne (Norwegian series)	One off	4
Wataha	The Border	Poland	2017	Crime	HBO Commission	Original	Season 2	6
Umbre	Shadows	Romania	2017	Crime	HBO Commission	Original (format Australian)	Season 2	6
Terápia	Therapy	Hungary	2017	Psychological drama	HBO Commission	Remake of BeTipul (Israeli series)	Season 3	35
Až po uší	Head over Heels	Czech Republic	2017	Romantic drama	HBO Commission	Remake of Matay nitnashek (Israeli series)	Season 2	10
Aranyélet	Golden Life	Hungary	2018	Crime	HBO Commission	Based on Helppo elämä (Finnish series)	Season 3	8
Hackerville	Hackerville	Germany/Romania	2018	Crime	HBO/TNT co-production	Original	One off	6
Ślepnać od światła	Blinded by the Lights	Poland	2018	Crime	HBO Commission	Original (adaptation from novel)	One off	8
Uspjeh	Success	Croatia	2019	Crime	HBO Commission	Original	One off	6
Bez vědomí	The Sleepers	Czech Republic	2019	Historical drama/spy/f	HBO Commission	Original	One off	6
Fremvandrere	Beforeigners	Norway	2019	Crime-comedy	HBO Commission	Original	Season 1	6
Gösta	Gösta	Sweden	2019	Dramedy	HBO Commission	Original	One off	12
Chernobyl	Chernobyl	US/UK	2019	Historical drama	HBO/SKY UK co-production	Original	One off	5
Umbre	Shadows	Romania	2019	Crime	HBO Commission	Original (format Australian)	Season 3	7
Terápie	Therapy	Czech Republic	2019	Psychological drama	HBO Commission	Remake of BeTipul (Israeli series)	Season 3	36
The New Pope	The New Pope	US/Italy/France	2020	Drama	HBO/Sky Atlantic/Canal+ co-production	Original	One off	9

Figure 1: European serial fiction productions by HBO 2007-20.

The intermediary phase (2014-2017) is marked by maturation of the local industries and the subsequent launch of more ambitious and complex serials, now moving away from the previous mentioned genres towards especially the crime genre. Nevertheless, HBO continues the logic of format adaptation as they produce Czech and Polish remakes of the Norwegian scripted crime format *Mammon* (2014-16) and a Romanian remake of the Norwegian crime series *Øyevitne* (*Eyewitness*, 2014), altogether also indicating the international impact of Nordic Noir at this time. Nevertheless, even if the series are based on foreign formats, they would increasingly distance themselves from the original versions and develop highly localised adaptations of the plots and themes. As pointed out by Caius Dobrescu and Roxana Eichel, the adaptation of *Eyewitness* “to Transylvania follows a double logic: 1) scouting for land- and cityscapes resembling the original Nordic setting and 2) embedding the plot and its toleration agenda in new and distinctive socio-cultural milieus” (Dobrescu and Eichel 2020: 48). As a result, during this phase we see the drift towards local original productions, where the Polish *Wataha* (*The Border*, 2014-) and the Czech *Pustina* (*Wasteland*, 2016) still clearly bears influential traits from the

popular Nordic Noir style (Hansen 2020). The Romanian series *Umbre* (*Shadows*, 2014-) holds a threshold position, as the first season was loosely based on the Australian crime-comedy *Small Time Gangsters* (2011), while the subsequent seasons are originally scripted Romanian content, altogether stripping away the comedic aspects of the Australian series. Something similar can be said about the Hungarian series *Aranyélet* (*Golden Life*, 2015-18), bearing an influence from the Finnish series *Helppo elämä* (*Easy Living*, 2009-11).

Alongside an increasing international competition, HBO has for the past few years been seeking out new ways to produce content and engage audiences in and outside Europe, cuing a new trend and tendency in HBO’s European enterprises (2018-). While Jean K. Chalaby (2016: 170) refers to “cost-effectiveness and risk-management” as benefits of format trade, Eva Novrup Redvall (2018: 140) also points out that “the obvious benefit of co-production is the financial pooling and the risk-sharing” in co-producing expensive serial drama. For HBO, this is already indicated by the US/Italian/French co-production *The Young Pope* (2016) as well as HBO’s strategic use of local European production services for large productions such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-19). However, during the past years HBO has shown an increasing interest in international co-productions in Europe, which now includes the co-production between HBO Romania and the German pay TV channel TNT on *Hackerville* (2018), the HBO US and Sky UK co-production of *Chernobyl* (2019) and the US/Italian/French sequel to *The Young Pope*, *The New Pope* (2020). Co-producing with Sky in Europe is a new variety of and a direct result of HBO’s programming deal with Sky. As part of this new European trend for the institution, HBO has started to expand outside the initial Eastern European territories and outside the territories not covered by Sky. Firstly, the branch HBO Nordic, which covers Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark, has released its first local series, including the Swedish dramady *Gösta* (2019) and the Norwegian crime-comedy *Fremvandrerne* (*Beforeigners*, 2019), while the local branch HBO Adria, covering Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, has released their first local production, the Croatian *Uspjeh* (*Success*, 2019). As a result, the new phase from around 2018 has shown HBO’s territorial expansion in Europe through new local productions and transnational co-productions.

### **Filling the gaps and the return of the miniseries**

Before the launch of HBO’s local European productions, Al Auster highlighted that in order to “understand HBO’s success, one must observe a system that has developed a strong counterprogramming strategy, created by a series of gifted executives [...], that filled the gaps that the other networks have left” (Auster 2005: 245). Essentially, Auster refers to both a US context where “the major networks’ dramatic series had settled, with rare exceptions, into a routine of family-cop-doc-lawyer shows” (ibid.: 238). In other words, Auster’s point mainly addresses the edgy content and the high production value of the American series like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). While this also applies to the local series produced in/for European territories, the notion of ‘filling the gaps’ in a European context has also been a geographical strategy. HBO Europe’s programming deal with Sky and the comparatively late arrival of original Nordic content is a result of these territories’ strong televisual output, including strong public service traditions, while the Eastern European, at the historical time of HBO’s entry, was marked by what Aniko Imre refers to as “illiberal political conditions in the post-socialist Eastern European region” (Imre 2019: 170). The slow increase of the geographical presence of HBO in Europe also partly implies the production logic that Auster refers to when he states that “HBO actually functions more like a studio than a network” (Auster 2005: 227). On the one hand, just like in the US, the subscribers’ money frees the company from advertisers and sponsors, and allows its series to find an audience without the risk of an immediate cancellation. On the other hand, setting up local offices around Europe while employing a few central executives (i.e. Antony Root, Steve Matthews and Jonathan Young) presents an opportunity for HBO to ‘import’ the overall development strategies from the US conglomerate, while at the same time cater new local talent as well as hiring in significant creatives in the various local territories.

In the first of the above presented phases, HBO hired the award-winning film director Ildikó Enyedi to direct 45 of 110 episodes of *Terápia* (2014-17), the Hungarian remake of *BeTipul*, while also producing Agnieszka Holland’s Czech miniseries *Hořící keř* (*Burning Bush*, 2013). Her affiliation to the Polish director Andrzej Wajda and her internationally acclaimed film career cement her status as a European auteur director, while also directing episodes of several noteworthy both European and US TV series, including David Simon’s HBO series *The Wire* (2002-08) and *Treme* (2010-13). In this way, Holland should be considered an important link in

the implementation of HBO’s production logic in Eastern Europe. Today, it has become much more common for film directors to also direct TV series, and HBO Europe continues to hire acclaimed film directors for new miniseries, such the Bosnian director Danis Tanovic, who won an Academy Award for the *Ničija zemlja* (*No Man’s Land*, 2001), as the director of the Croatian series, *Success*, and the Swedish director Lukas Moodysson to create and direct the series *Gösta* (2019). Using well-established film directors in making television is one obvious way to create local content with an international appeal.

As pointed out by Auster, up until the late 1990’s “the miniseries genres [...] had, with rare exceptions, been abandoned in favor of less costly programming.” However, HBO changed this by using the miniseries as “a magnet for talented producers” (2005: 237). As we see above, this strategy has been directly imported to the European context, and throughout the past decade since the beginning of strategic development of European content, we may see this affect the length of the series produced for European territories. In the first phase, the series holds an average of 29 episodes pr. season, while the second and third phases show an average of 9-10 episodes, respectively. In other words, as part of the shift towards increased production value and generic shifts towards crime dramas, we see a two thirds decrease of the number of episodes in less than a decade. In fact, the latest phase also includes the final 36 episode season of the Czech remake of *BeTipul*, and if we subtract that season from recent tendencies in HBO’s European productions, the average length falls to only a little more than seven episodes per season.

This tendency towards fewer episodes per drama not only signals the attraction of well-known film directors; it indicates the rebirth of the miniseries on the European continent. Executive producer Steve Matthews highlighted a few reasons behind this drift towards the miniseries:

“Firstly, it’s partly financial. We would rather have three series of six episodes than one series of twenty in terms of marketing. Secondly, the longer it is, the harder it is. Particularly in Central Europe the feature, from my idea of it, is quite well-soaked into their heads. They have a tendency, if you are not careful, to see the world as a miniseries and as a single ark with cliffhangers but essentially one story. My personal belief is that six is the max you can play. The more you have, the harder it gets. You

see a lot of things on TV where I think it would have been better if it was two episodes shorter, particularly some adaptations actually.” (Matthews 2019)

In other words, the miniseries may attract established talent, it is easier to finance, write, produce and, in the end, it is also easier to market. This brings us to HBO’s strategies in talent development.

### **Remakes as/and talent development**

By way of Dean J. DeFino’s analyses of the US HBO institution until the early noughties, it becomes clear that the above described European strategy follows an American precedence: “While HBO has drawn on established talent, it has also been a proving ground for young writers, producers and directors who have since spread their talents - and aspects of the so-called “HBO style” - across the channel spectrum” (DeFino 2014: 8). This includes their European activities too. DeFino uses Matthew Weiner as an example, starting as a screenwriter for *The Sopranos*, later as an executive producer, and eventually as the creator of the AMC series *Mad Men* (2007-15). Especially in the Eastern European territories, HBO has used a combination of well-established talent from national film production and new talents for the creation of television serial content.

In our interviews with Anna Závorszky, executive producer for HBO Hungary, and Alina David, executive producer for HBO Romania, they both accentuated HBO’s high-level cultural and productional position in Eastern Europe, but indicated the lack of professionals in quality serial television production, enticing a great interest in educating a new generation of talents. In an interview at New Europe Market 2018, Steve Matthews (2018) described the virgin status of these territories at the arrival of HBO, but at the same time stressing the rewarding side of talent development:

“You’re trying to find directors and writers and particularly writers who are ready to step up to the next level. The reward is that when it works, it’s so fresh [...]. We’re by definition often working with young writers. When I can bring to them and help them in the areas where they may lack a little bit of experience, then they push back with

the rawness of talent and something to say, then you get something that grows organically”.

In our interview with Matthews, he highlighted that doing remakes is no longer part of the strategy as they have now moved directly into original productions, also in new HBO territories such HBO Adria:

“We really don’t want to do that anymore. It was good to start with because of the lack of knowledge about what the writers could do, but we’ve been doing it long enough now. The thing that everybody knows naturally is that there is no shortage of writing talent in Romania or Hungary, just a little bit of shortage of experience of how to shape it. So we should know how to do it now. As a business model, it means we got to receive checks rather than write checks. Remakes are just not going to be as punchy in the distribution market and it is more fun to make up our own stuff. So when we moved into Adria and the Balkan area that was a point when we constantly said we would do this from scratch, we will not bring in any format. And we try very hard not to bring in British or American writers, we have a couple of consultants now and again, but we try very hard to help the writers get there themselves if we possibly can.” (Matthews 2019)

Asked about the pool of talent during New Market Europe 2019, Gábor Krigler, former executive producer for HBO Hungary, replied critically to the notion that Eastern Europe is a less talented territory than elsewhere: “I don’t think it’s a fair question. There are talented people everywhere. The stories that come from here they are amazing” (Krigler 2019). In other words, the discourse around the pool of talent is significantly changing. However, going beyond the mere shifts from using remakes to making originals allows us to see how HBO’s Eastern European activities display at least two creative sources for discovering new television talents.

Firstly, national theatre industries have had a significant impact on the casts for many HBO productions. In fact, *BeTipul* is originally a highly theatrical format with very few locations, encouraging the four Eastern European remakes to use actors recognized as a certain “actor of the nation” for the central role. Besides being a well-known international actor, Karel Roden is known as a Czech film and theatre actor and has been awarded the Czech Lion Award

(film) and the Alfréd Radok Prize (theatre). The Polish actor Jerzy Radziwiłowicz works at the National Theater of Warsaw and is a recognized translator of the playwright Molière. Besides being an international supporting actor, the Romanian Marcel Iureş is a two-time UNITER-awardee and played a major role in the Romanian alternative theatrical movement. The Hungarian Pál Mácsai is the director and founder of the Örkény István Theater. Behind the camera we find a similar trend: e.g. producing *Golden Life*, HBO employed István Tasnádi as a scriptwriter from the theatrical scene where he is also an acclaimed theatrical director. Because of the size of the local markets, one central reason for such collaboration between the industries is the difficult career opportunities if you focus only on film and television production. However, the embedded political criticism on the theatrical scene in Eastern Europe is significantly more critical than the tone in local television productions, and this may have benefited theatrical players as a voice for HBO’s edgy interest in displaying local social, political and economic problems and controversies. Interestingly enough, associating the theatre industries is no new way to find talent when there is an artistic lacunae; early silent film industries used the same method to find casts for the boom of film production around 1910, while early television industries in the 1950’s and 1960’s used the same strategy.

Secondly, the interaction between film and television production is a strong way to find well-developed profiles as well as establishing new talent. Local film industries has been an obvious place for HBO to scout for well-established talents, which we already stressed above in relation to directors Enyedi, Holland and Tanovic. Although the cross-over from film to TV failed in the case of *Born loser*, with directors such as György Pálfi (European Film Award) or Barnabás Tóth (Oscar shortlist for the best Foreign Film in 2020), the Romanian new wave, with a range internationally award-winning directors, was a serious source of inspiration for *Shadows*, a series written and partly directed by Bogdan Mirică, who broke new ground in the Romanian new wave with his first feature film *Dogs* (2016) and triggered the FIPRESCI prize at Cannes. As Steve Matthews indicated in the above quote, the feature film is a very conspicuous mind-set for the Eastern European creatives, and for that reason talent should not be developed as such, as it merely needs a gentle nudge and framing in the direction of creating serial television content. In the Nordic region, HBO also sought out already acclaimed film directors, Lukas Moodysson and Jens Lien, for the first two Nordic originals *Gösta* and *Beforeigners*.

Developing new professionals especially and directly for the creation of televisual content is, however, not only the US HBO strategy; it has also been a very salient aspect of establishing HBO on the European continent. Directors Zsombor Dyga and Áron Mátyássy steadily developed their directorial profiles on *Golden Life* during the production, and continued to work on televisual content since the ending of the three seasons of the series. Already before working with HBO, the Polish director Kasia Adamik had a name in Polish film and television as mainly an episode director in a country with a considerable local production for television series compared to Hungary and Romania. She entered HBO Europe as an episode director on the third season of *Bez tajemnic* (*Without Secrets*, 2011-13), the Polish remake of *BeTipul*, and became the main director of *The Border* after Michel Gazda’s conceptualising direction of the first four episodes. After that she was the main director on the first Eastern European Netflix production, the Polish series *1983* (2018).

However, the most profiled example of talent development may be that of Gábor Krigler. In the European context, Krigler shows a very similar example as Matthew Weiner in the US. In relation to HBO Europe, Krigler started as one among three screenwriters on *Born Loser*, venturing into *Társas játék* (*When Shall We Kiss*, 2011-13), the Hungarian remake of *Matay nitnashek*, as one storyliner out of eight screenwriters. While co-writing this series, HBO hired Krigler as creative executive for HBO Hungary, executively producing *Terápia* (*Therapy*, 2012-17), the Hungarian remake of *BeTipul*. Eventually, he co-created *Golden Life* for HBO Europe, and in 2019 he launched his own production company Joyrider holding “a non-exclusive development deal with HBO Europe” (Briel 2019). HBO Europe usually commissions series locally, but in order to do so, they have a need for local production companies and services, and hiring and developing local talents through remakes has been a strategic method to reach this point. Besides using screenwriting competitions, as pointed out by Steve Matthews (2018), doing remakes became a laboratory of talent development with a gradual passage into original content development. In the above mentioned *Therapy*, a greater narrative autonomy was achieved in the second season, while complete autonomy applies to the third season. As for *Shadows* and *Golden Life*, only the plot trigger was adopted from the format, as the writers were free to develop new characters and storylines.

Altogether, in Central and Eastern European territories, HBO functioned as a possibility to break through what Petr Szczepanik refers to as “East-European ceiling.” His perspective is so-called minority co-productions, i.e. “a financial definition that frames co-productions from the perspective of the co-producer that provides less than the largest share of financing.” According to Szczepanik, collaboration and minority co-productions “promise to break away from the prevailing conditions of international production [...] that segregate local workers from high-level positions in the professional hierarchy, cut them out of the creative decision-making process and divest them of any say in the development stage” (Szczepanik 2018: 154). Essentially, HBO’s local productions in Eastern Europe do not fall under the category of minority co-productions, but HBO’s strategic talent development, e.g. the progression/professions of Gábor Krigler, indicate a similar local effect, as production companies like Joyrider may end up producing local content for HBO in the end, and as a consequence have a clear-cut creative say from early development stages.

### **Increasing attention towards the crime genre**

After the early formation phase where remakes were the overall trend in HBO Europe’s productions, one genre appears to take over. In this sense, remaking two Norwegian crime series in the Polish, Czech and Romanian territories holds a threshold position as it breaks free from the stronghold from the Israeli psychological and romantic dramas and moves towards crime drama, but at the same time HBO maintains a remake and format import strategy. Not counting the ‘originality’ in the format adaptation of *Small Time Gangsters* in *Shadows* and *Easy Living* in *Golden Life*, the first original ventures into the crime genre were *The Border* and *Wasteland*. On the one hand, these series indicate the powerful impact from Nordic Noir in this period with *Wasteland* also being incredibly influenced by *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*, 2007-12). As indicated in the above overview of HBO’s European productions, besides the continuation of the remakes from the first phase, a few historical dramas and the Swedish comedic drama *Gösta*, everything else is crime drama.

Asked about the omnipresence of the crime genre, Steve Matthews replied:

“I mean that is in no way a conscious strategy. We don’t go out looking for crime, but they tend to come in. I wonder what would happen if you took the BBC’s output

and worked out the same proportion for them [...]. But I think there is a lot of it, and if you include gangsters you’re probably right. There is no conscious strategy, but I don’t see any reason why crime as an engine will go away from television series in any big hurry.” (Matthews 2019)

In Hungary, two perspectives motivated the increasing attention towards crime fiction. Firstly, HBO Europe organized a screenwriting contest in 2014 receiving around 400 scripts with an overwhelming majority of crime stories (Krigler 2016), indicating a general bottom-up interest in the genre in the region. Secondly, HBO Hungary’s Anna Závorszky highlights the crime genre’s potential to focus on local problems as a main incentive to produce crime dramas. The genre works well on television, according to her, as “it can sustain attention during several seasons. We suggest that it’s time to re-think the genre, but it’s not conceived as a mission. What is important to me is how I can reach catharsis, and the crime genre allows us to reach a cathartic attitude by emphasising that nowadays our region has these kinds of problems” (Závorszky 2019). She also mentions the genre’s capability to travel outside the national borders as a prime motivation for creating crime stories, but still maintains a position where the genre needs spinning in order to reach an audience, which point is also highlighted by Matthews in our interview with him. Krigler goes as far as saying that “Probably in this region people could start dwelling not too much on gangster stuff. I think that’s a little bit overdone” (Krigler 2019). Using the crime genre appears to be a careful balance between a recognizable plot engine, local sensibilities, new spins of the genre and an international interest in crime stories. HBO Romania’s Alina David refers to HBO’s priority to reach generic complexity on each local market, and in Romania, the crime stories aimed towards a representation of a multilayered geographic reality from the capital in *Shadows*, to Transylvania in *Valea Mută* (*The Silent Valley*, 2016) and *Hackerville* (2018), to Moldavia in the upcoming HBO series *Tuff Money* (David 2019).

Above, we have pointed out generic features of Eastern European HBO crime dramas, but also through the format imports we are able to detect local differences. A geographical and topical separation from the original format in the Eastern remakes has been crucial. In the case of the Czech series *Mamon* (*Mammon*, 2015) and the Polish *Pakt* (*The Pact*, 2015-6) - both variations of the same Norwegian series - some universal plot elements (e.g. the sibling rivalry, broader family tensions and a larger conspiracy theory) were adapted to the local context, but in

both series the storyline centers on the investigation made by a journalist interested in uncovering corruption, including an investigation of his own brother. Other series in the Eastern European region are also format adaptations, but in line with Závorszky’s point about social issues in crime fiction, a main characteristic of the remakes is that they adapt the stories to the local cultural context, dealing with important social issues such as minorities (Roma communities in *Golden Life* and *The Silent Valley*), homosexuality and gender issues (*The Silent Valley*) or social stratification (*Golden Life*).

The situation is somewhat different for HBO in the Nordic region. Here, the crime genre has great popularity among audiences, and both public and private broadcasters and streaming services produce a great range of shows that may be associated with the generic variation referred to as Nordic Noir. At the time when HBO Nordic started to produce originals for the region, Antony Root stated that “I think it’s a brave broadcaster or producer who just falls into the slipstream of Nordic noir, 7-8 years into its success. I am not saying we would not do crime, but I think one has to be clever now about the genre one chooses because Nordic noir is very well established and some people might say it has peaked.” (Pham 2016). Commissioning editor Hanne Palmquist (2019) also referred to the crime market in the following way:

“You do need to stand out in order to grab the audience, even though it looks like the market for crime shows is still insatiable. HBO Nordic’s first Norwegian original *Beforeigners* expressively utilizes the Nordic Noir style, however more as an engine to tell a bigger, mix-genre story that is inspired by the European refugee situation. The re-definition of or the extended version of the crime genre gives you the opportunity to come up with new and fresh that the audience can relate to, however also enjoy for being surprising and carrying a message.”

*Beforeigners* spins the genre into a parodic mode, dwelling with a range of recognisable both narrative and stylistic traits from Nordic Noir, including an obvious spoof of the character relationship between the detectives in *Bron|Broen* (*The Bridge*, 2011-18), but at the same time the series maintains a serious discussion about integration policies.

Anna Batori also refers to a “post-2010 proliferation and dominance of the crime genre in the region’s quality television”, i.e. the Eastern European region, and finds this to be “a

surprising and unexpected turn.” She refers to how crime films in the socialist period “were mediators of the central ideological message and mirrored a false political context where criminality was considered to be basically non-existent.” For Batori, this attention towards crime dramas in the region “signals a new start for Eastern European media and collective remembrance”, which once again dwells with the genre’s ability to pinpoint social issues. She continues:

“What we witness this way, is the birth of a new post-socialist televisual collectivehood that translates and locates the American genre into an Eastern European social reality by reworking its specific historico-political trauma and collective problems, while focusing on the disintegrated institution of the family as a metaphor of the post-socialist, neoliberal crisis. (Batori 2018: 38-9)

On the one hand, Batori’s point illuminates how the genre works well as a symbol of the public debate possible in popular culture. As Batori also points out, the genre leaves open an opportunity to depart from the ideological structures of the socialist period, but at the same time criticise “the impotent institution of the police” and “the omniscient control of a businessman” in a capitalistic, neoliberal market place. On the other hand, Batori overlooks the important intermediary position of the Nordic crime tradition imported to Eastern European territories in the same period, and with that also a genre bearing social indignation and strong criticism of the neoliberal breakdown of the Nordic welfare state (Nestingen 2008). In fact, what appears to have been lost, if one should trust the ideological framework of Nordic Noir, is the collectivehood of the welfare state, which indicates that the generic conventions imported to the Eastern European territories in the post-2010 dominance of the crime genre has been reworked through the machinery of the Nordic crime genre.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have shown how HBO Europe transposed the US production model to the Eastern European territories, provided a content overview of HBO’s European activities in the period since 2007 until early 2020. Here, we have stressed how HBO strategically sought out well-established talent and used remakes as a production method to develop virgin production cultures, now clearly maturing into an international content provider of local and global TV

dramas to be reckoned with. During the history of HBO’s European presence we have outlined a noteworthy ‘take-over’ of the crime genre and analysed this as both an import from the successful Nordic region as well as a salient critical voice in a post-socialist era. In this way, this indicates local TV drama as a potential voice of cultural exchange as well as the crime genre as a very important generic model for voicing social debates and international interest in local issues, stories and common transcultural features where differences and similarities may be articulated.

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