Transforming the American Hard-Boiled Hero: Linda, the Tough Female Sleuth in Socialist Hungary

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In 1983, Hungary was shocked by a completely new phenomenon, a crime television series starring an amateur female sleuth called Linda. Detective series were not entirely new to TV spectators in the late 70s and the early 80s, who—apart from serial adaptations of Agatha Christie and Georges Simenon—were familiar with Western series with a more or less contemporary setting like *Charlie's Angels, Petrocelli, Starsky and Hutch, Columbo, Kojak*, *The Saint*, as well as German series like *Derrick*. It should not be surprising then that with the regime becoming more permissive and a growing variety of films from the West, the Hungarian copies of western heroes could be created. In 1980 Kojak reappeared in *Kojak in Budapest* (1980), and *Piedone* (Bud Spencer) in *Ötvös Csöpi* (1982) detective television series. The popularity of these copies might point to the fact that Hungarians were already open for their own heroes as well who, despite their Eastern European roots, possessed Western competence. However, a crime production with a female detective in a socialist country seemed not only daring but ideologically problematic too. One could say that it was daring because of the main character being a woman with an unlikely expertise in taekwondo and problematic because of the prevailing ideology and its influence on the genre.

When it comes to a detective story in a socialist context, several questions arise. Is there such a thing as socialist crime fiction at all and if there is, according to what factors do we categorize works born in the context of state socialism? Do we refer to them as socialist crime fiction because they were written or made during that particular period or are there any other possibilities to approach them from a different

perspective? These are the questions which Csaba Horváth and Zsófia Szilágyi bring up in a discussion, entitled "Crime comes from outside", in the 2009 thematic issue of the journal *Kalligram*. Horváth attempts to give an overall definition for the sub-genre in question saying that "any work can be labelled as socialist crime fiction if any of the values of the dominant ideology is embodied in it" (Horváth–Szilágyi 112). If we accept this umbrella term definition of 'socialist crime fiction,' we might come up against the fact that it narrows down the prospects of analysing certain productions and characters, especially the more problematic ones. The tradition of classic crime fiction demands that the detective stand out from the crowd for his extraordinary qualities, which is a difficult proposition to implement in a socialist context as collectivism always prevailed over individualism, severely restricting space for individual ambitions. For this reason, the possibilities to be different were almost non-existent, and even if difference was seen positively in the genre the creation of an individual hero found only ironic, humorous ways of representations, such as Kántor, the alsatian[1], or Linda, the karate detective, says Zsófia Szilágyi in the above mentioned interview of the *Kalligram* magazine (113). Finally, Horváth and Szilágyi conclude that Kántor (and his master) and Linda are only slightly different from the others since they are also part of the socialist system of crime investigation, and they go on to identify this as the basic problem with socialist crime fiction. The core feature of socialist crime films and TV series is reflected in the ideological interpretation of crime implying that "there is no big difference between burglars, swindlers or killers, since anybody committing a crime is deviant" (113). This claim is undoubtedly true if socialist crime fiction has to be defined only in terms of the characters' attitude to crime.

However, if further aspects of the sub-genre were to be analysed, a wider scope of approaches could be provided, as I hope to show through an analysis of the *Linda* television series. Linda's figure and the series too—a typical product of the late socialist culture of the 80s—became a box office hit not only in Hungary but in other socialist countries too. I propose that Linda would not have been so successful if she had been an authentically socialist character type. Today, however, the series and its heroine—the objects of ideological debates at the time of their first

[1] Kántor and his master were the heroes of a successful 1970s book series by ex-policeman Rudolf Szamos and went on to become a popular television series in 1975–6.

appearance—are an inextricable part of society's collective memory of late socialism. This collective memory is embodied in certain iconic objects, such as Linda's moped or her clogs, which are inseparable from the objectified representations of that particular cultural context. Sándor Horváth claims in *Kádár Gyermekei* that communities that remember the socialist era form their identities based on their past habits of consumption and its cultic objects (Horváth 124). This embodied collective memory, however, appears to be an obstacle in the way of investigating Linda as a non-integrated socialist character.

If we recall the circumstances among which the first episodes were made, we may get to see Linda from a different point of view. When György Gát, the producer of the *Linda* series, approached the Hungarian Television with the first synopsis in 1983, he found no support and was even told what follows: "…a karate film in socialism! What kind of capitalist folly is this? Forget all about this stupidity!" ("Moziban" Index.hu). Finally, after trying for a long time, he was given permission to shoot the first three episodes. *Linda* was an overnight success and several further episodes were shot until 1989, seventeen in total. The capitalist folly made quite a splash and the *Linda* films enjoyed an uninterrupted presence on the screen throughout the decade and well after.

The huge success cannot be explained by a single reason. The present essay focuses on Linda, the female detective of the crime series, arguing that one cannot (unproblematically) absorb the first Hungarian female detective into the collective memory of late socialism without any difficulties. Although the producer, György Gát, has said several times that he created Linda on the basis of Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee, I suggest that Linda's character could also be examined as a female hard-boiled detective. Such a comparison will justify my assumption that Linda, the karate detective owed much of her success to the fact that the series imported a western ideal into Eastern Europe, which problematized rather than intensified her conformity to socialist ideology.

To understand the eccentricities of the hard-boiled female figure as well as the transformation of the traditional elements of the genre, one might begin by summarising some of the relevant features of hard-boiled crime fiction. Besides being authentically American, hard-boiled crime fiction has another remarkable characteristic, which is that the process of detection is also "the very determination of the hero's identity as a unified subject: as a man" who goes through "an emphatic process of masculinisation", says Frank Krutnik in his book *In a Lonely Street* (42).

The masculine presence manifests itself in the macho language use, called 'tough talk,' and for this reason "there tends to be established a closed circuit of male-male communication" (Krutnik 43), physical violence, the valuation of male bonding over heterosexual relationships, and unquestioned male superiority over women. Women are usually treated either as *femme fatale* which is the threatening, dangerous, predatory type or simply as erotic objects (as in the two founding classics, Chandler's *The Big Sleep* or Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* as well as their film adaptations). Although the representation of women is ridiculously schematic, the female (or feminist) reaction was rather late to come. The first author to create a female private-eye was P. D. James, who wrote *An Unsuitable Job For a Woman* in 1972, featuring London private detective Cordelia Gray. According to the critics James's book, which did not intend to subvert or invert the hard-boiled pattern, is significant because what she "does is adapt a pre-existing, distinctively female pattern to a revised version of the imported hard-boiled detective novel, laying the groundwork for future women writers" (Reddy 101). Reddy also explains that one can recognize the influence of "Jane Austen's compelling depictions of intelligent, resourceful young women coming to maturity in a society that asserted the only suitable destiny for a woman to be marriage and motherhood" (101).

The young Cordelia encounters only negative examples and is told several times what not to be. This is a recurring element in female private-eye stories regardless of the characters' geographical location, and female sleuths did not make their appearance until the 1980s when the best known literary representatives of the profession (the private eyes of Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, and Gillian Slovo) established their reputation. Paretsky's V.I. Warshawsky, Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, and Slovo's Kate Baeier appeared almost at the same time occupying a fairly masculine position through their profession and endowed with what can be called masculine qualities. Although in Hungary, where both of P. D. James's Cordelia novels appeared in translation as early as in the 1970s, Paretsky's and Grafton's more radical books (more radical in terms of gender politics) were not published until well after the millennium, and even now only a handful of their books are available in Hungary (a fact probably not unrelated to the conservative retrenchment in gender politics that Hungary has witnessed after the political transition). It is, thus, an unexpected and rather interesting coincidence that the *Linda* series came out only one year after Paretsky and Grafton created their respective

detectives. Despite all of her ridiculous characteristics, the appearance of the first socialist police detective was as revolutionary as that of her western colleagues.

This revolutionary advent of the socialist female sleuth is all the more interesting because, as Éva Bánki says in her 2009 essay "A meghalni nem tudó bűn" (Evil cannot die) that in Hungary the crime genre could not become successful because "there was no tradition of individualist ethics" (87). Not denying this, we must not forget two facts: one is that women, regardless of the ideological background, and despite the false socialist rhetoric of emancipation, encountered more or less the same obstacles, which the feminist movement was fighting against in the West. The other reason for the similarity can undoubtedly be found in the social, cultural process of westernization going on mainly in the field of consumption and entertainment in the 80s. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe the changes in consumption, it has to be noted that western lifestyle and material environment, which were familiar from television, (not the least from popular American and German crime series), as well as the easing of restrictions on traveling to non-socialist countries, made the West more tangible and real. These two motives are interrelated in each *Linda* episode; in fact, the series seems to work its way through the dangerous and at the same time attractive scenes of popular culture: night bars, the pop music industry, sex-tourism etc., all of them originating in the West.

As I have already suggested, the female detective was also problematic for inherently generic reasons: in the Chandleresque tradition, women are always vicious and immoral, not much more than a slightly updated variant of the *femme fatale*. In *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir*, Julie Grossman deals with the term and its inflexible use. Although she does not study female sleuths in her book, her suggestion to use "*femme moderne*" instead of *femme fatale* is worth considering as the former term could extend the scope of analysis with view to female roles (Grossman 23). For our purposes, this is especially intriguing since in some episodes of *Linda*, such as *Erotic Show* (1989) or *Haunting Spirit* (Hazajáró lélek, 1989), Linda has to play the role of a typical *femme fatale*, an effort which, if only as a result of physical features of the actress taking Linda's role ends up as a rather lame caricature. This phenomenon is reflected on in the second episode, *The Photo Model* (A fotómodell, 1983), when Linda says: "With my looks I cannot be a prostitute!" If this option is out of the question, there is

always crime investigation as a way of self-realization. Nevertheless, because the female detective cannot become a sexual object, similarly to her western counterparts, Linda has to fight not criminals in the first place but her male colleagues. Although all the men in the series are very far from the masculine ideal of the tough, hard-boiled type and would seem to belong to a comic tradition (for example the two police officers, Kő and Handel, who cannot stop eating), they do try to assert their masculinity by deprecating women and labelling Linda unsuitable for the job. When Linda starts her career as a trainee at the Homicide Investigations Unit, where the policemen are all incapable of solving any kind of crime, she finds herself in the crossfire of sexist discourse and masculine oppression. In *The 18-Carat Goldfish* (A tizennyolc karátos aranyhal, 1986) for example, they intentionally hide a serious case from her; in *Oscar Knows* (Oszkár tudja, 1983), her boss, Gábor Eősze, sends her to work with the following words: "If you ever get into trouble, I will remove your knickers and spank you!"; in *Angels in Soccer Shoes* (Stoplis angyalok, 1989) Handel says that "witches really do exist," referring to Linda and in *Haunting Spirit* (Hazajáró lélek) her boss sends her to the disco adding that this is a task that suits her well. These examples illustrate how much Linda's male colleagues reject her involvement in criminal investigation. This feature reminds us of P. D. James's *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* where Cordelia Gray, the private eye is told many times that the destiny of a woman is to be fulfilled elsewhere. According to Maureen T. Reddy, "the unsuitability of the job lies in its requirement of action and decision making and in its placement for a man, but not for a woman" (102). Linda resolves this issue in the third episode, *Oscar Knows* (Oszkár tudja), reversing the whole problem for her own benefit: "I have extraordinary qualities. I am a woman!"

Apparently, she can be much more useful for the police as a woman, as is obvious from all the false identities she assumes when she goes undercover, as a ballet dancer, a scuba-diver, a chambermaid, or a journalist. The fact that she is a woman cannot be doubted, although recalling what the female ideal of the 80s looked like, the choice of the actress is not at all obvious. Linda (Nóra Görbe) with her skinny body and short hair looks rather asexual or epicene; she is not masculine enough to be a man (though in her relationship she is obviously the dominant party), but she is too boyish-looking to be a woman. This characteristic, however, distinguishes her from the western heroines. Paretsky's Warshawsky, for example, is very conscious of her appearance, she likes

to wear fashionable clothes and shoes. Linda's clothes can also be described as non-feminine: when one thinks about the yellow raincoat, the colourful skirts or the white socks worn with the clogs; these added up to a unique and bizarre combination which no one used to wear in the 80s, certainly not in Hungary.

The uncertainty of the representation of the female body may be a half-conscious nod towards a Western trend in fashion and consumption. In the episode of *Dolls on Fire* (Tüzes babák, 1989), which is also one of the most exciting, Linda plays the role of a manikin in a shop-window. In the film Linda's body and doll-like face wonderfully fit in the line of the lifeless, skinny figures. We could also conclude that in this episode—in this fetishistic, yet asexual context—Linda's body comes to occupy a symbolic position associated with consumer culture: Linda as an object embodies one of the iconic objects of the consumer culture and becomes herself a potential victim as well—the culprit who is setting shop-windows on fire may also be regarded as a psychopathic socialist monster fighting a rearguard action. Linda transformed into a manikin also displays the spreading fashion trend as Jean Baudrillard points out in *The Consumer Society*, "The modern woman is both the vestal guardian and the manager of her own body; she is careful to keep it beautiful and competitive, however, beauty as such can only be slim and slender. It even tends...towards the scrawny and emaciated on the lines of the models and mannequins" (140–141).

In *Dolls on Fire* (Tüzes babák), downtown Budapest has gone through a spectacular change (the Linda-series always shows Budapest as a busy, modern city), the shop-windows are all aglitter and the stores attract the customers with fashionable, elegant clothes. This episode, then, not only brings the body-centered western type consumption into its focus, but also positions Linda ambiguously both as a representative fetishistic object of the society of consumption and—given her idiosyncratic no-nonsense style—as its critic.

In *Sisters in Crime*, Maureen T. Reddy reveals several similarities between hard-boiled heroines. "All the women detectives are urban dwellers, like Hammett's or Chandler's detectives" (95), none of them "ever needs rescuing; each rescues herself from danger" (113), and seeks to be independent: "the detective sees her work as more important than a social engagement" (106). City life and self-protection are tightly connected in hard-boiled crime fiction, but Linda unlike her western equivalents, does not carry a gun. Her taekwondo skills do not only

protect her from any danger, but by having this skill she proves to be much smarter and more successful than anyone else. Almost all of the episodes start with an action scene in which Linda eliminates some bad guys. This is the exceptional quality, which also makes it possible for her to loiter in the dark streets of Budapest or ride her moped. The moped, along with her skill in martial arts, suggests a symbolic potential too, as both might signify liberty and independence which are so important for hard-boiled heroes. Being in possession of these two attributes, Linda does not only ignore the restrictions imposed on her own mobility, but she can be free of the other police officers too. As Reddy claims, "the […] heroes of the hard-boiled detective novels always act in accordance with their own moral codes, which may be far from the dominant ideology or from legality" (116).

I have already mentioned that the female detective sees her relationship with men as an obstacle to her career and independence as Reddy describes it in the following passage:

> *Unsurprisingly, each of the heroes experiences the greatest difficulty in breaking free of the codes governing heterosexual relationships, with sexual involvement with a man always posing a threat to her independence, as the man eventually either perceives the detective's commitment to her job as an obstacle to be overcome or asserts his need to protect her in some fashion.* (Reddy 105)

Western female sleuths do not seek long-standing bonds with men. Although Linda has such a relationship with Tamás Emődi, which is inconsistent with the tradition, the connection (an everlasting engagement) is highly ironic and does not prevent Linda from demonstrating the kind of individualistic ambitions and lifestyle typical of hard-boiled heroines. I have alluded to a number of features that serve to ridicule the male characters in the series or subvert the symbolic hierarchy. We often see Emődi preparing for the night ahead, romantically sprinkling rose petals on the bed (*The Photo Model,* A fotómodell) while Linda is giving the treatment to some bad guys out in the street; in the *The 18-Carat Goldfish* (A tizennyolc karátos aranyhal) she threatens him with physical violence if he should ever try and contradict her again; in *Angels in Soccer Shoes* (Stoplis angyalok) the symbolic order is completely reversed as Linda protects her boyfriend from two attackers. It seems that the only beneficiary of their relationship is Linda, as she obviously uses her boyfriend for her own purposes, which always means work and solving the puzzle. Since Emődi is a taxi driver,

he usually has to drive Linda to places, but it also happens that he helps her as a secretary, or a photographer. One thing is sure though: her emotional needs are not met by sexual "relationships with men" (Reddy 109). In *Rebeka* (1986) Emődi explains to Linda that he wants a loving woman, a partner, children and a family when Linda responds, "Me too, but let me catch the bad guys first." Her answer can be seen as the socialist counterpart of her western female 'colleagues,' who also realize that "for the cherished independence to be preserved, the connection must fall outside the boundaries of those socially sanctioned relationships that have defined and oppressed women" (Reddy 105).

In hard-boiled detective fiction anything can happen to anybody anywhere; there is no safety, a fact that could also be attributed to the incompetent and corrupt police force. In a socialist country it was clearly impossible to suggest police corruption—that is one ideological boundary the series never crossed. At the same time, it is worthwhile to remark that unlike traditional hard-boiled narratives, *Linda* is basically a comic series which, however, does not only imply the absence of the metaphysical undercurrent of urban angst, but also hides a satirical potential: the police are not corrupt, yet it is gently but constantly mocked for its inefficiency. Generally, Linda does not co-operate with her colleagues and acts at her own convenience, a feature which takes us back to the starting point of this essay. I began by referring to the fact that the categorization of the *Linda* series as a typical example of socialist crime fiction becomes problematic not only if we view the series from a gender perspective, but also in terms of the relationship between the police and the detective. In the interview referred to above, Zsófia Szilágyi claims that the individualist detective cannot afford to distance herself from the police in socialist crime fiction because "it was not a wise thing to ridicule state institutions" (Horváth–Szilágyi 113). Linda's relationship with the police is quite a controversial issue because she seemingly co-operates with her anti-heroic comrades, but at the same time she does not obey her boss's orders. She does whatever she thinks is the right thing to do. In most episodes, the policemen are represented as floppy, incompetent figures, answering Sándor Horváth's description in *Kádár Gyermekei,* which characterizes the typical members of the socialist police force as officials "who, unlike the well-known stereotypes in western crime stories, do not work out on the streets, but sit in the office building" (Horváth 89). Even when they are not in the offices, they are usually eating and drinking beer. We might conclude that the representation of the professional police force

consisting of ridiculous and incompetent employees suggests a weakening of the ideological discipline.

By all accounts, if the police force could be portrayed in an ironic way, the persecution of crime was still going on within strict regulations. Despite all her eccentricities and individualism, Linda chases the same type of criminals as the state does. In the series, just like in the other popular 80s Hungarian crime series, the Ötvös Csöpi movies modelled on Bud Spencer's Piedone character, these criminal offenders are primarily foreigners, mainly Germans, Hungarian dissidents and rich people from the villas of the Buda side of the capital city, Budapest. The episodes create the illusion that the arrest of these kinds of people brings general satisfaction, and probably this is the greatest difference between *Linda* and the other female hard-boiled texts. The solution of the crime and the elimination of the criminals signify a reassuring denouement, the promising image of a sustainable egalitarianism and a just society that is re-established with every arrest made by the police.

All of these features can be noticed in the use of spaces. According to Sándor Horváth, "the police reports described the social spaces as those of a collision between chaos and order where the honest people fight with the hooligans" (Horváth 95). This is also reflected in *Linda*. At the beginning of each episode she usually walks in the street and encounters some bad guys who either want to mug or harass her. And then, the fight starts. It looks as if Linda's presence in the series gave an opportunity for the state to show the people what is the right way of using spaces and what is not. After beating up all the attackers, peace and order will be duly restored. Even though this detail might contradict my supposition that Linda is very much different from other socialist characters, in the present analysis my focus was her relationship to patriarchal socialist ideology and I also wanted to see whether she could be re-considered as a non-integrated socialist character.

The unexpected success of the *Linda* series shows that Hungary was already open for carefully curtailed and rewritten western type characters in the 80s. The independence and individualism of the female hard-boiled heroes as well as their fight against some politically less sensitive conventions (for instance, gender stereotypes) brought the coveted West a bit closer. Nonconformist characters were already tolerated, but we had to wait a long time for the traditional western type hard-boiled stories (in fact, ironically, in terms of gender politics, the 1980s was probably more welcoming to this kind of subversion than contemporary Hungary).

Although Linda will always remain part of the cultural memory of the Kádár era, she was never so obviously a product of socialism. The living conditions which are shown in the scenes of crime, in the fashionable districts of Budapest and in the western milieu of the capital city as well as Linda's confident, feminist presence and use of these spaces along with her taekwondo skills all contributed to the creation of a future image of Hungary. In *Linda* one witnesses the unique combination of the clichés of the socialist crime fiction and a gentle mockery of dominant political ideologies.

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1. A tizennyolc karátos aranyhal
2. Rebeka

Season 3, (1989)

1. Stoplis angyalok
2. Erotic Show
3. Tüzes babák
4. Hazajáró lélek