

Elżbieta Durys
ORCID: 0000-0002-3545-3160
University of Warsaw

The potential of Nordic noir: *The Pustina* miniseries as an example of the transnational usage of the formula

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Nowadays, Nordic noir may not arouse such enormous excitement as it did a couple of years ago. It seems, however, that instead of ceasing to exist like many other cycles, strands or schools, it has modified the world cinema map in a significant way. The transformation of film noir, from which it originates, that has taken place recently is so significant that one should rather talk about a separate transmedia genre. An outline of its characteristics will constitute the first part of the article. In the second part, I would like to have a closer look at one of the more interesting examples of the use of Nordic noir conventions in television on the international level. I am referring to *Wasteland (Pustina)*, dir. Alice Nellis, Ivan Zachariáš, 2016), a Czech TV miniseries created by Štěpán Hulík and produced by HBO Europe. *Pustina* not only clearly proves the transnational character of the Nordic noir formula, but also its operational value in a culturally different context.

Nordic noir — what should be emphasized — did not appear suddenly in Northern Europe. Nor was the growing popularity of global noir¹ its only source. Outlining the characteristics of the genre, one should keep in mind three important issues. Firstly, Nordic noir is not limited to one particular material, since it is being developed as literature, TV series and feature films (more often made for small screens than for big ones), thus, can be considered as a transmedia genre. Secondly,

¹ Referred to also as neo-noir. See: D. Desser, “Global noir: Genre film in the age of transnationalism”, [in:] *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. B.K. Grant, Austin 2012, pp. 628–648.

it strongly exploits the literary tradition developed in the region, using it as a source of both materials for adaptations and an ideological background. Finally, it is created in a region that consists of several countries. Although they are often referred to collectively either as Nordic countries or as Scandinavian countries² and display many features that are convergent in their cultural and communicational characteristics, they nevertheless constitute separate socio-economic and political entities.

Before I turn to the genre description, I would like to discuss one more issue, which has undoubtedly played a significant role in its development, namely the favourable circumstances of the film industries in Europe. In the general public's consciousness, for years the Old Continent has been a domain of national cinema on one hand, and on the other hand, of art cinema with directors serving as auteurs whose works should be revered. This belief was officially sanctioned by the New Waves of the 1950s and 1960s that dominated the landscape of European cinema. As Thomas Elsaesser notes, there was a significant shift in the 1990s. While "national" still constituted the cinema of Europe, over time it became "a second-order concept ('post-national')".³ The foreground was taken over by different kinds of movies. Firstly, there are those films that problematize both regional and historical perspectives. Secondly, one can find those that use genre formulas, elaborated both on the ground of commercial cinema and television. Thirdly, there is — as Elsaesser puts it — the *cinéma du look*, i.e. the cinema that by "adopting the style norms of design and fashion", rejects realism, leaning towards "high concept advertising". And finally, there are festival films.⁴ Andrew Nestingen claims, however, that the changes that took place in contemporary European cinemas aimed at embedding particular productions in both the national and international contexts. They have also caused four different types of movies to emerge: global auteur cinema, medium-concept cinema, national art films and farce production.⁵ In the context of Nordic noir, Nestingen's idea of medium-concept cinema, i.e. the strand that uses American film genre formulas in European movies, seems crucial.

² Although these two names often are used — especially recently — interchangeably, the differences between them should be remembered. Scandinavia is a narrower term and denotes countries situated on the Scandinavian Peninsula, i.e. Sweden and Norway. Due to historical reasons, Denmark is also included in the Scandinavian countries group. This term — "Scandinavia" — connotes historical and cultural ties between those countries as well. The term "Nordic countries" has a broader meaning. Through the term itself ("nord" means "north") it refers to a geographical location and political sphere (the Nordic Council which was established in 1952). In this context, Nordic countries include, in spite of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, also Finland and Iceland. I would like to thank Katarzyna Dośpiał-Borysiak for the clarification.

³ T. Elsaesser, "Film festival networks", [in:] T. Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*, Amsterdam 2005, p. 82.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–83. See also: T. Elsaesser, "ImpersoNations: National cinema, historical imaginaries", [in:] T. Elsaesser, *European Cinema...*, pp. 69–79.

⁵ A. Nestingen, *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia: Fiction, Film, and Social Change*, Seattle-London-Copenhagen 2008, p. 55.

The term “medium concept” refers to one of Justin Wyatt’s notions. Describing changes that occurred in Hollywood in the 1970s and 1980s, he used the notion of “high concept” to expound on movies that could be distinguished through an easily identifiable guiding idea (“the hook”) embedded in a story told in accordance with the principles of classic dramaturgy (“the book”). The aesthetic side was to be meticulously elaborated to attract young viewers (“the look”). Marketing specialists had the opportunity to create licensed gadgets, comic books or games, both advertising the given movie and exploiting its merchandising potential.⁶ As one of the best examples of “high concept” Wyatt pointed out *Grease* (dir. Randal Kleiser, 1978). *All That Jazz* (dir. Bob Fosse, 1979), on the other hand, should be placed on the antipodes of “high concept” cinema. Wyatt labelled these kind of movies as “low concept”. They emphasized deepened and psychologically developed characters, oftentimes refusing the story a positive ending.⁷

While introducing the notion of “medium concept”, Nestingen focused on Scandinavian cinemas. His preliminary definition is as follows: “Medium concept can be understood as filmmaking that involves the adaptation of genre models and art-film aesthetics; an engagement with political debates, lending the films cultural significance; and that integrates with these elements a marketing strategy designated to reach a specific audience”.⁸ Medium-concept cinema should constitute a creative (in the spirit of art cinema) usage (but not transformation) of American film genre formulas. The objective is not only to attract both national and international audiences. These films should also (or even above all) engage in ongoing social and political debates and convey deeper cultural inconsistencies informing the given (national) culture.

Nordic noir as genre... a transnational one

Nordic noir as a separate genre within crime fiction emerged in the 2000s. It refers to novels, TV series and feature films,⁹ as Annette Hill and Susan Turnbull put it, “associated with a region (Scandinavia), with a mood (gloomy and bleak), with a look (dark and grim), and with strong characters and compelling

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53. See also: J. Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, Austin 1997, pp. 20–22.

⁷ J. Wyatt, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–8.

⁸ A. Nestingen, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁹ To discuss Nordic noir the notion of genre is being used. However, it should be remembered that one can talk about a genre in the context of novels or fiction films, keeping only in mind the fact that some of the scholars may object to it, claiming that it is too early to use this notion to describe Nordic noir. While referring to TV series, the situation gets more complicated. The TV series as such is a genre (along with other television genres like news, reality show or quiz show). So, in that sense, Nordic noir is a subgenre within a TV series genre. I would like to thank Agnieszka Smoręda for drawing my attention to this issue.

narrative”.¹⁰ The term “Nordic noir” was used for the first time by Sam Wollaston in a review of *Sebastian Bergman*, a two-episode TV series (created by Michael Hjorth, Hans Rosenfeldt, 2010), published in *The Guardian* in 2012.¹¹ It was quickly picked up by the media and used to describe and promote crime novels, TV series and movies produced in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, later also Iceland and Finland.

The term itself carries associations with American film noir, which emerged in the 1940s in the United States in response to social changes caused by World War II, the emancipation of women, as well as the crisis of masculinity (however, its identity as a cycle, strand, genre, style or worldview in American cinema has not yet been determined by scholars¹²). Patrycja Włodek says: “During this period [between 1941 and 1958 — E.D.] several hundreds of movies were made, permeated by a gloomy and pessimistic vision of the world, a mood of loneliness and despair and an atmosphere of moral ambivalence which was expressed by expressive visual style (i.e. low-key lighting, untypical framing) and subjective narrative, stressing flashback and mental states of the protagonists”.¹³ Despite misogynist connotations, reflected in the emblematic figure of femme fatale, within film noir there were also some interesting cycles of subversive dramas, known as gaslight melodramas, paranoid women movies, the prosecuted wife cycle or Gothic noir. Those movies dealt with women experiencing violence in their marriages that was officially sanctioned by patriarchal society.¹⁴

Despite its references to film noir, researchers stress the rhizomatic roots of Nordic noir, pointing to dynamically developing crime novels and TV series in the region. The international success of the Swedes, Henning Mankell (the inspector Kurt Wallander cycle of 1991–2013) and Stieg Larsson (*Millennium* trilogy of 2005–2007), as well as of the Norwegian Jo Nesbø (the Harry Hole series of 1997–2017) triggered the emergence and development of Nordic noir. However, it should be remembered that social and political commitment, which had influenced the popularity of the strand and is so symptomatic of it, can be traced in Maj Sjöwall’s and Per Wahlöö’s works.

¹⁰ A. Hill, S. Turnbull, “Nordic noir”, [in:] *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology*, <http://criminology.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264079-e-294> (accessed: 13.11.2017).

¹¹ S. Wollaston, “TV review: ‘The Kingdom of Plants’”, *The Guardian*, 26 May 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2012/may/26/tv-review-kingdom-of-plants> (accessed: 17.11.2017).

¹² See: M. Kempna-Pieniążek, *Neo-noir. Ciemne zwierciadło czasów kryzysu*, Katowice 2015; K. Żyto, „Film noir” i kino braci Coen, Łódź 2017.

¹³ P. Włodek, “‘Cold-noir’. Czarny kryminał i Skandynawia”, *Panoptikum* 17, 2017, no. 24, p. 128. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁴ P. Włodek, “Hollywoodzki gotyk i zamknięta przestrzeń ogniska domowego”, *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 79, 2012, pp. 62–78; H. Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film*, London-New York 2007.

In the 1960s and 1970s, this pair of Swedish writers changed the face of police procedural by publishing a cycle of ten novels titled *The Story of a Crime* (1965–1975). Until then, social and political issues tended to be avoided in crime fiction due to a possibility of impairing its entertaining function.¹⁵ Inspired by Ed McBain’s novels which they had translated into Swedish (the 87th Precinct crime series),¹⁶ as well as a profound change of political climate in Sweden (the decade of the 1960s is now perceived as the time of “political awakening” based on the increase of social awareness of its citizens),¹⁷ Sjöwall and Wahlöö focused on the exposure of the Swedish model of the welfare state in their *The Story of a Crime* series. However, it should be emphasized that they directed their criticism towards a departure from a real welfare state model to a capitalist one, with its, as Maj Sjöwall has put it in one interview, “cold and inhuman society, where rich get richer, the poor get poorer”.¹⁸

In Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s novels, Sweden — along with the character of inspector Martin Beck — was ranked as one of the main protagonists, presented as “both victim and villain”.¹⁹ George N. Dove wrote: “Sweden is represented as a land suffering from a malaise that manifests itself in high rates of unemployment and suicide, and in a general loss of a sense of values”.²⁰ Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s critique of society was profound and, in different parts of the cycles, focused on different spheres of the Swedes’ lives. They pointed out errors in the social policy increasingly focused on investments, profits, and gains at all costs, instead of caring for ordinary citizens. They noticed negative aspects in media development departing from a social mission towards sensationalism, scandals, and celebrity lives. International politics was also in the range of their criticism. They opposed the growing dominance of the United States and the attitude of the Swedish government towards hegemonic aspirations of that Western empire.²¹ Although police officers were main and recurring characters in their novels, Sjöwall and Wahlöö criticized the police as an institution too. While in their first novels police was inefficient due to a lack of equipment and people, and outdated and inappropriate procedures, in the subsequent parts of the cycle, errors at the organizational level resulted rather from the fact that it served the dominant classes.²²

¹⁵ K. Bergman, *Swedish Crime Fiction: The Making of Nordic Noir*, Milan 2014, p. 35.

¹⁶ Paula Arvas and Andrew Nestingen draw attention to that fact. Even though Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s novels are perceived as a specifically Swedish product, the authors were inspired by Ed McBain’s crime cycle. See: P. Arvas, A. Nestingen, “Introduction: Contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction”, [in:] *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, eds. A. Nestingen, P. Arvas, Cardiff 2011, p. 3.

¹⁷ K. Bergman, op. cit., p. 33.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁹ G.N. Dove, *The Police Procedural*, Bowling Green 1982, p. 218.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 218.

²¹ K. Bergman, op. cit., pp. 45–49.

²² Ibid., pp. 44–45.

In the novels of Sjöwall and Wahlöö, crime was often presented as a symptom of problems affecting society, not an aberration of the individual. The human side of the criminals was exposed. They were often ordinary Swedes, representatives of lower classes, victims of circumstances and of improper state management.²³ The emphasis on social and political issues became one of the hallmarks of Nordic noir, the other one being the figure of a detective. Inspector Martin Beck, created by Sjöwall and Wahlöö, is a withdrawn, middle-aged man. Initially tainted by numerous, minor health problems (introduced as the novel progresses), in subsequent parts the character more and more often struggles with depression, which largely results from problems he had come across while examining particular cases.²⁴ His still and pensive figure has become one of the visual motifs of the whole cycle.

TV series also strongly marked their presence in Nordic noir. Apart from adaptations of Henning Mankell's novels,²⁵ scholars name four titles: *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*, created by Søren Sveistrup, 2007–2012), *Livvagterne* (*The Protectors*, created by Mai Brostrøm, Peter Thorsboe, 2008–2010), *Broen/Bron* (*The Bridge*, created by Hans Rosenfeldt, 2011–) and *Den som dræber* (*Those Who Kill*, created by Elsebeth Egholm, 2011–) that constituted the genre and translated into its international success (especially the first and third of the listed above are crucial: *The Killing* and *The Bridge*).²⁶ For the most part, they preserved the social and political commitment symptomatic of Scandinavian crime fiction, often-times treating it as a separate plotline. Discussing the characteristics of Nordic noir TV series, Glen Creeber pinpoints the following features: “These dramas are typified by a dimly-lit aesthetic (hence its implicit reference to film noir) that is matched by a slow and melancholic pace, multi-layered storylines and an interest in uncovering the dark underbelly of contemporary society”.²⁷ Creeber stresses the “stark social realism” and a tendency towards focusing on particular characters. Recalling Karsten Wind Meyhoff, he says: “the characters are not ‘heroic or

²³ Ibid., pp. 42–43.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 36–37.

²⁵ In 1997–2007 Sveriges Television produced a TV series based on Mankell's novels. Rolf Lassgård played the role of Kurt Wallander in it. In 2005–2006, 2009–2010 and 2013 another three seasons of the TV series were screened, also in Swedish. This time Wallander was played by Krister Henriksson. Finally, in 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2016 BBC adapted Mankell's novels, this time in English, all together four seasons, with Kenneth Branagh in the leading role.

²⁶ G. Creeber, “Killing us softly: Investigating the aesthetics, philosophy and influence of ‘Nordic noir’ television”, *Journal of Popular Television* 3, 2015, no. 1, p. 22. This time inspiration also came from the US. After the great success of Lars von Trier's TV series *The Kingdom* (1994), producers from DR station went to Los Angeles and participated in the productions of such series as *NYPD Blue* (1993–2005) or *L.A. Law* (1986–1994). They not only got familiar with a new narrational technique (“multi-episodic series”), but also with new ways of productions (“the writers’ room”, “the showrunner”). Ibid., p. 23.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 22

morally superior’, but ‘are portrayed as ordinary men and women fighting ordinary problems in modern society’.”²⁸

The social plotline is strong enough to be distinguished as separate. Thus, researchers indicate a parallel to the criminal plotline developed in the whole series. In general, these TV series are not limited to one, criminal plotline, they combine a couple of different ones. In the case of *Forbrydelsen*, Creeber distinguishes three of them: “First, there is ‘The Crime Plot’, involving the brutal rape and murder of a young girl. Second, there is ‘The Political Plot’, set in motion when a local politician becomes a major suspect. Finally, there is ‘The Family Plot’, focusing on the girl’s friends and family and their reaction to her death”²⁹

One of the recurring motifs in Nordic noir, not stressed often enough by researchers, is violence against women. As Kerstin Bergman notes, in their novels Sjöwall and Wahlöö were sensitive towards women’s issues, showing that often they become victims of systemic oppression informing society in those days. However, in general, they were not too progressive. If there were female officers in an investigative team, their role was limited to auxiliary functions. There were not many marriages or relationships presented in their novels that can be considered equal. The roles performed by women were traditional ones. The first wife of Martin Beck, despite the fact that their marriage has broken down, still cooks, cleans, washes and irons for both of them.³⁰ The situation changed in crime fiction only at the end of the 1990s when writers such as Lisa Marklund appeared.³¹

The situation is different in TV crime series. Many of them feature a police-woman as the main protagonist and violence against women also becomes one of the crucial topics. Violence occurs and is presented on both the individual and systemic level. The brutal and serial murders of women are not treated as a pretext to initiate action and to show the ongoing investigation. On the contrary, they are a starting point for a systemic exploration of violence against and the exploitation of women in Western societies, oftentimes hidden under a surface of reverence and protection. In this way, a fundamental change occurs. While film noir (or actually hard-boiled detective) belongs to, as Thomas Schatz put it, “male” genres, in which conflicts that inform the story are externalized and solved with the use of violence,³² Nordic noir problematizes that issue and clearly shows that violence is not the solution but actually the source of the problem, transforming the whole noir strand.

Film noir was distinct due to its use of specific visual style and placing its action in big urban areas. Low-key lighting and night-for-night shooting trans-

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

³⁰ K. Bergman, op. cit., pp. 39–40.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 69–73.

³² T. Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*, New York 1981, pp. 34–36.

lated into the use of deep shadows, sharp contrasts and unusual framing, all symptomatic of film noir. Paul Schrader claims that it contributed to the meanings constructed by viewers. According to this critic and scriptwriter, film noir was the first genre to employ visual style in a creative way.³³ Nordic noir did not take over this way of thinking in a straightforward way. Rather, it created its own visual codes. As Creeber puts it: “Intense sense of place, their enigmatic and barren landscapes often seen as symbolizing the psychological mood of its frequently troubled detectives”.³⁴ Movies are “[...] set amongst eerie landscapes and grey foreboding skies that create a geographical and psychological terrain that is strangely Nordic in tone. Both also share a somber and pensive atmosphere with their monochrome color schemes and brooding rural scenery that attempt to expose the hidden worlds of their remote communities”.³⁵

All these allow to approach Nordic noir as a transnational genre. Its appearance and usage in different TV series, movies and novels indicates a possibility of adoption in other contexts and milieus. Glen Creeber points to three TV series that have employed the Nordic noir formula and gained international recognition. And he does not mean remakes, even though one has to admit their importance. Danish *Forbrydelsen* was transposed into the US by Netflix and screened as *The Killing* (developed by Veena Sud, 2011–2014). *Broen/Bron* was also adapted by Americans and shown under the title of *The Bridge* (developed by Meredith Stiehm, Elwood Reid, 2013–2014). However, it also had a British-French version (*The Tunnel*, written by Emma Frost et al., 2013–). The Russian version is being shown since 2017 and takes place on the border of Russia and Estonia.³⁶ BBC adaptations of Mankell’s novels were also significant. However, as I said, Creeber underlines the importance of original international productions that used the Nordic noir formula. He provides three examples of critically acclaimed TV series: British *Broadchurch* (created by Chris Chibnall, 2013–2017), British-Irish *The Fall* (created by Allan Cubitt, 2013–) and American *True Detective* (created by Nic Pizzolatto, 2014–).³⁷

Transnational usage... *Pustina*

The Czech TV miniseries *Pustina* (*Wasteland*) fits into this trend perfectly, using Nordic noir conventions in a thoughtful way, both in terms of visual style and plotlines. An important aspect of the use of Nordic noir conventions in the miniseries directed by Ivan Zachariáš and Alice Nellis is the introduction of so-

³³ P. Schrader, “Notes on film noir”, [in:] *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. B.K. Grant, Austin 2012, pp. 265–278.

³⁴ G. Creeber, op. cit., p. 22.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 27. Patrycja Włodek focuses on this aspect of Nordic noir. See: P. Włodek, “Cold-noir...”, pp. 137–142.

³⁶ A. Hill, S. Turnbull, op. cit.

³⁷ G. Creeber, op. cit., pp. 27–31.

cial issues. Two such issues are turned into separate plots developed throughout the whole series: the issue of gradual disintegration of the community caused by the 1989 transformation and violence against women. Their criticism is not limited to pointing out the systemic problems that constitute their source. Creators reveal how these systemic social problems translate into the everyday life of ordinary people, how they are gradually turned into passive creatures, accepting everything they encounter. *Wasteland* shows a state of indifference and apathy, caused by a prolonged functioning in conditions of deprivation and hopelessness. This was achieved by constructing well-developed and multidimensional characters that populate the TV series. In my analysis, I will focus on social issues portrayed in *Wasteland*, emphasizing the way that violence against women is problematized.

The eight-episodes miniseries takes place in a small town situated in the north of the Czech Republic, near the Polish border. The hopelessness of living in a town that fell into despair after the 1989 transformation is interrupted by the arrival of the Turkovo company that specializes in coal mining. It promises Pustina residents, who struggle with an extremely difficult financial situation caused by prolonged unemployment, a possibility of getting rich by selling their houses situated, as it was revealed, on rich coal deposits. The offer seems to be lucrative enough for people tired of living in poverty and they decide to organize a referendum to vote on it. Pustina's mayor, Hana Sikorová, a middle-aged woman who is raising two teenage daughters by herself, strongly opposes it. She tries to convince the residents to reject the offer. She claims that accepting it will plunge the community in chaos, cause disintegration and, as a consequence, push them to leave the land inhabited by their families through generations. Just before voting on the referendum, her younger daughter, 14-year-old Miša goes missing. The search for the girl and then — after the discovery of her body in a well situated next to a summer house inhabited by her father, Karel Sikora, who suffers from a mental disorder — the investigation conducted to determine the perpetrator, form the first, criminal plot of the miniseries. The other two plots have a distinct social character, marking *Wasteland* as a typical Nordic noir TV series. The second one focuses on the disintegration of the community, which, once struck and devastated, is only able to reunite for short periods of sudden danger. The third one deals with violence against women perpetrated in different ways and on different levels, both physical and emotional.

The police-investigation plot, despite uniting all eight episodes of the miniseries, is introduced as the last one from the three mentioned above. The law is represented by Capitan Rajner and his colleagues. There is nothing distinct about the almost 50-year-old Rajner. His squat figure and face prowled with wrinkles inspire confidence and sympathy at the beginning. With time, however, those feelings give way to a growing conviction about the lack of competence or even bad will on his part. It seems that Rajner has negative feelings towards the Sikora family. He treats Hana in a patronizing manner and rejects her observations and

suggestions, constantly stating that she should not interfere with the investigation. He tries to persuade Klára, the older of the Sikoras' daughter, into testifying against her father, suggesting that Karel must have abused the girls in the past. He is the one who finally finds Miša's body hidden in a well, but then he misleads the Sikoras, at first stating that the girl was sexually abused, and at other times saying that she was not.

Rajner rejects Hana's suggestions but at the same time he gets fooled by Lukás, Klára's boyfriend and a close family friend of the Sikoras. To avoid a police inspection of his car, Lukás makes up a story about a girl who allegedly saw Miša still alive on the Polish side of the border. Since the very beginning, Rajner follows every lead provided by Hana's opponents. First, he connects the escape of Filip Paskowski from a reformatory with Miša's disappearance, claiming that the girl escaped with him. It causes Miša to be misperceived as an irresponsible teenager who befriends juvenile delinquents (this is the way the story is presented by Marieta, one of the members of the City Council in Pustina and at the same time Hana's greatest enemy). Then, after Miša's keys are found in one of the mining pits, Rajner assumes that the girl committed the offense of entering a forbidden place and fell down by accident. Finally, after finding Miša's body in a well, he stubbornly tries to prove that her mentally instable father abused and murdered her.

Neither Rajner, nor his colleagues are able to solve the crime. When the investigation is stuck in a dead end, they remain idle, waiting for the events to unfold. When it turns out that the DNA samples collected from all the adult men living in Pustina do not provide a definite answer to the question of who killed Miša, Rajner wants to repeat the whole procedure instead of leaving his comfort zone of thinking, as suggested by Karel. Only because of Sikora's persistence, his unconventional interpretation of information obtained through the DNA tests, as well as through cooperation with Hana, the case is solved and the murderer caught. At the end, Rajner does not even dare to admit that the reason behind Miša's death was the acceptance of aggression and hatred towards women prevalent in the community. Police also cooperate with the establishment, meekly taking commands received from the head of Turkovo company.

In most cases, women are the ones who fall victim to murders in crime stories. Their dead, naked bodies, displayed on dissecting tables become the object of close scrutiny verging on voyeuristic fascination. Oftentimes negative aspects of patriarchy are revealed in crime stories that translate into the violence against women. However, repeatedly they get limited to a pretext that triggers the whole story. It seems that it is only in Nordic noir that the problem is approached and elaborated in a more systemic way. In the course of investigation, the causes of women's deaths are revealed to be rooted in hatred towards them instilled in the society. In addition to the problem of the disintegration of the community, the issue of violence against women becomes one of the main topics of *Wasteland*. It

should be emphasized, however, that this subject has been elaborated in a complex and not obvious way.

At the beginning, the main protagonist of *Wasteland*, Hana Sikorová, seems to be very successful. She holds the position of mayor in Pustina and she is the director of a children's day club, financed by European Union funds, which were applied for and obtained by Hana herself. Her financial situation is good enough for her to perform the function of mayor unsalaried. Hana is an educated, strong and independent person. She earns her own living, is socially active, runs the family home and raises two daughters by herself. She is the one who does not get fooled by the owners of Turkovo company and their offer. She sees clearly that the only thing they want is to get to the coal seams situated right beneath the town. Hana also has some ideas of how to lift Pustina and its inhabitants from the collapse caused by the transformation of 1989 and the destruction of the industry that followed (the basis for living for Pustina residents used to be provided by a paper mill and a pig farm). Instead of being proud of her, people in Pustina turn against her. Noticing the growing negative feelings directed towards Hana, at some point Klára asks her mother a question that seems symptomatic: "Do you realize how many people you have upset?". At the end of the miniseries, Kuba, who killed Miša, says: "I have to tell her [his mother — E.D.] that it is this bitch's, Sikorová's fault. All the people in Pustina hate her".

Miša, therefore, is treated objectively, as a vulnerable spot through which her strong and powerful mother can be hurt. The withdrawn, introvert and extremely sensitive girl who expresses herself mostly through art (all the walls in her room are covered with her drawings) becomes an easy target. The lack of knowledge about her — no picture with her face fully visible can be found for the purpose of her search, as well as no one actually knows who she really is — is turned against her. Miša is suspected of befriending juvenile delinquents, recklessness, committing minor offences and taking drugs. After the initial excitement caused by an unhealthy fascination with a crime, the Pustina residents lose their interest in solving the mystery of Miša's death. They quickly return to their problems. In spite of Hana's suffering, they also indulge in the entertainment provided by the Turkovo company to bribe them before the referendum.

The systemic dislike or even hatred towards women is also revealed in the series in everyday situations. The boys in the reformatory keep pornographic journals hidden among their things, saying that they need them because of psycho-sexual hygiene. They prepare a performance for one of their friends, Tibor Balok, who turns 18. They dress up as promiscuous women with overtly exposed breasts and buttocks, dance around him and rub their bodies against him while he sits in the middle of the circle. The crucial moment of the show is a feigned striptease. The most disturbing in this respect is, however, the motif of a prostitute who works at a car park situated next to the border crossing with Poland. She provides her services in car cabins, she uses handkerchiefs for intimate hygiene, doing it

almost in public due to a lack of proper space. Her clients abuse her. In one of the scenes, a truck driver removes the condom while having sex with her, exposing her health and life to danger.³⁸ Her panders, instead of taking care of her properly, mock her and make fun of her. When she needs their help, they purposefully delay their arrival to punish her for a mistake she made in agreeing to have sex with Karel in his cottage. In the first episode, oblivious to her professional experience and tempted by a higher rate, she agreed to his conditions and went with him. Being in a state of mania, Karl Sikora took her to the summer house, where he had lived since the separation with his family. On the spot, he raped her several times behaving brutally, not responding to her protests and the requests to stop.

An important aspect of the systemic violence (both physical and emotional) against women in patriarchal society is the violence of women against women. The most emblematic in this respect is the figure of Markieta Masarova. This 40-year-old mother raises her son by herself and is the owner of a grocery store that supplies many residents of Pustina. She also serves as a member of the community board. In the course of the miniseries, she turns out to be an avid supporter of the idea of selling land to the Turkovo company, and thus of the destruction of both the town and its community. However, Markieta's activities are not limited to discussions and attempts to persuade people to accept Turkovo's offer. She actively participates in the creation and dissemination of rumors directed against Hana and her family. All the information that reaches her, she interprets in such a way as to slander and put Miša, Hana, and Karel in a negative light. Thus, she acts as the typical woman in patriarchal culture. Deprived of agency and possibility of expressing their opinions directly, they adopt a passive-aggressive attitude and tend to use gossip, denigration, and incitement to reach their goals. Markieta's hatred towards Hana, cultivated for years, seems unfounded. It is this hatred that Markieta's son, Kuba, names as a reason for the murder that he had committed.

The plot of the destruction of a community — the third plotline in *Wasteland* — was most often indicated as the main one in the series by its creators and highlighted very often during the interviews.³⁹ It is also interesting in the context of the development of popular Czech cinema after 1989. Francesco Pitassio claims that one of its characteristic features is “a focus on closely packed social groups that endure the external circumstances that affect them”.⁴⁰ Many movies are popu-

³⁸ The woman reacts to this incident very nervously. Later on, it is revealed that she had already suffered from a venereal disease.

³⁹ Compare: “Štěpán Hulík ve Dvaceti minutách Radiožurnálu”, 26 October 2016, http://www.rozhlas.cz/radiozurnal/dvacetminut/_zprava/1663859 (accessed 26.12.2017); “Pustina ukazuje krutý život na vesnici, kde panují nepřijemné vztahy, přibližuje osmidílné drama Petra Špalková”, 7 June 2016, http://www.rozhlas.cz/radiozurnal/host/_zprava/1630522 (accessed: 26.12.2017). I would like to thank Michał Rauszer for the help with finding those materials and with translation.

⁴⁰ F. Pitassio, “Popular nostalgia: On alternative modes of popular cinema in post-1989 Czech production”, [in:] *Popular Cinemas in East Central Europe: Film Cultures and Histories*, eds. D. Ostrowska, F. Pitassio, Z. Varga, London-New York 2017, p. 226.

lated with ordinary people, average residents of cities and towns. In the face of historical events, they turn towards privacy and concentrate on their survival. They manage to do it, because, in spite of all the adversities, they stick together, helping each other. Thus, they perpetuate the myth of the strength and durability of communitarian tendencies among common people in the Czech Republic. Those movies are often tainted with a tragicomic tone. The introduction of comic elements provides a relief, both for protagonists and viewers. *Wasteland* breaks that trend both by departing from such an image of community and by a rejection of comic elements. The community gets disintegrated due to the attitude of its members. The light that gets so visible in the last episodes is not able to brighten the depressing overtone of the whole series.

Pustina is quite an old town situated at the border with Poland. The settlement pattern there resembles the villages founded by Saxons in Transylvania. Houses, situated close to each other with courtyards surrounded by tall walls, look as if they could be easily turned into a fortress when attacked by enemies. It connotes a community with strong local government traditions, based on equality of participants, both in decision-making processes and sharing responsibility.

These traditions are still visible in the approach to the issue of purchasing Pustina's land by the Turkovo company. Voting on the decision to hold a referendum among the residents is preceded by a general meeting during which all the people have an equal right to express their opinion. Despite these traditions, the familiarity resulting from living in a small community for years and mutual acquaintance, the community breaks down. What is emphasized is that the reason behind its disintegration is not the tough communist rule in Czechoslovakia, but the economic collapse and poverty resulting from it that was brought by the transformation of 1989. The paper mill and pig farm that provided the main source of employment in Pustina ceased to work a long time ago. People who lost their jobs as a result of the transformation — as in most similar cases in the region — were not provided with any assistance. Hana Sikorová seems an exception. As the only one, she was able to take advantage of the EU funds and open a day care centre for children in Pustina. During the general meeting of the residents she stresses that she also has other ideas for development. However, the vision of fast enrichment, promoted by the spokesmen of selling the land to Turkovo, wins. Tempted by the easy money, people have not only turned away from Hana but also rejected their past and traditions. It is hardly surprising. The lack of employment, poverty, a feeling of being forgotten (even the police station was closed in Pustina) resulted in a general sense of stagnation, hopelessness, and depression. As one of the inhabitants says at some point, two decades of capitalism have done with Pustina what four decades of communism failed to do, i.e. to completely destroy the community. The creators conveyed that disintegration masterfully, focusing on everyday relations among people. They still help each other in emergency situations but are unable to think in terms of the whole community and its good.

When Pavel Abrhám's little daughter is missing, they instantly gather and offer their help with the search. When Vasíček finds Hana unconscious, drenched, lying on the street at night, he stops his car and takes her home. However, Markieta Masarova, Pavel Abrhám, and Petr Krušina, without any doubts, sell Pustina to the Turkovo company, knowing that it means it will be razed to the ground. When Jitka Vasicková finds out that her younger son, Lukasz, produces drugs she is only interested to know whether he takes them himself. She tries not to notice the fact that he hurts other people who live in their community. Kuba murders his classmate without any scruples, just because his mother does not like her mother. He proudly says that he, as an underage person, cannot be held legally responsible for that. Pustina's residents very quickly forget about Miša's death and the prolonged investigation worries them only because they will receive money only after it is closed. It seems that the most depressing scene of this plotline is not the one when Hana and Klára leave the town sealed with yellow tape, but the one when Hana, tormented by the indifference of her former friends and colleagues, votes for selling Pustina's land to the Turkovo company during the referendum.

The word "wasteland" ("Pustina") means (1) "barren or uncultivated land", and (2) "an ugly, often devastated or barely inhabitable place or area".⁴¹ At the beginning of the miniseries, the name of the town only indicates its economic situation. Gradually, however, it turns out that it also reflects the internal state of its inhabitants and the whole community. The third meaning of the word "wasteland" gets therefore thematized: "something (such as a way of life) that is spiritually and emotionally arid and unsatisfying",⁴² foreshadowing the town's inevitable end. Although Pustina as a place is very picturesque, the areas devastated by open coal mining are stressed in their characteristics and used as visual motifs throughout the whole series. The opening sequence that starts each episode consists of static shots that present different sections of Pustina and the main protagonists. They were taken from different episodes and arranged in such a way that it emphasizes loneliness, depression, emptiness, disintegration, and helplessness. Even though the action takes place in February and March (Miša went missing on 23 February), the miniseries was shot in November.⁴³ It is reflected in the monochromatic color schemes. The visual pattern used in the whole series is dominated by dark and gloomy colors, i.e. brown, grey, and dirty beige. In the first part of the series (episodes 01–05), there is no sun, the sky is constantly overcast and clouds are very low. Every now and then it rains or drizzles.

The shots presenting Pustina in its function are not limited to providing information on location. They also reflect the atmosphere prevailing in town. Given this, there is one more interesting device used throughout the whole miniseries.

⁴¹ "Wasteland", Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wasteland> (accessed: 17.12.2017).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The last three episodes, that take place in May, were shot in May.

From time to time there are scenes inserted in the story which show the mining areas surrounding Pustina. Open-pit mining, used as a method of extracting the mineral, causes irreversible changes and a complete devastation of the landscape. Interestingly, in these shots and scenes the camera does not expose the thoughtlessness of human policy towards the natural environment. On the contrary, the camera appears to be transforming the barren landscape and huge machines working there into breathtaking graphic compositions distinguished by a purity of form and a well-thought-out arrangement of lines.

Conclusions

Introducing the notion of medium-concept cinema, Andrew Nestingen emphasized that in this type of texts the formulas elaborated in American cinema are used for creating “an engagement with political debates”. If we treat Nordic noir as an example of medium-concept cinema, two issues should be noticed and underlined. Firstly, the way in which this involvement in socio-political issues that bother the given community is presented. It should not only be treated as a background for the investigation. On the contrary, it should form a separate plot line. What is more, creators may introduce more than one plot of this kind. Secondly, in Nordic noir, violence against women inscribed in patriarchy is problematized. Thus, a significant shift can be noticed. Film noir, as a prototype of Nordic noir, is considered as “a male genre”. It means that cultural conflict is externalized and solved with the use of violence. Nordic noir shows, however, that violence is actually the source of the problem and using it is destructive, even if for a good cause.

Wasteland, as I tried to demonstrate, is an interesting example of the usage of Nordic noir. It also proves the transnational potential of the formula. Creators embedded the story of a murder committed on a 14-year-old girl in a different socio-cultural context. They employed the key elements of the genre, adjusting them to a different social context in a very elaborate way. They considered the topic of the disintegration of the community as the most important and crucial one for understanding the reasons behind the pointless crime. They render it through the plot, protagonist characteristics, as well as the visual style. It should also be stressed that, in doing that, they went against the current tendencies prevailing in Czech film, striving to emphasize the communitarian aspects of Czech society. Besides the investigation plot and the plot dealing with the disintegration of the community, there is a third one in *Wasteland*. It concerns violence against women and makes the Czech miniseries appear in tune with Nordic noir conventions. It should be stressed that the creators presented the problem not only through the circumstances of Miša’s death, but also conveyed it through the hidden violence directed towards her mother. In an elaborate and refined way, they exposed the connection between femicide and ecocide.

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The potential of Nordic noir: The Pustina miniseries as an example of the transnational usage of the formula

Summary

The article discusses *Wasteland* (*Pustina*, dir. Alice Nellis, Ivan Zachariáš, 2016), a Czech TV miniseries created by Štěpán Hulík and produced by HBO Europe, as an example of the transnational usage of Nordic noir formula. In the article, Nordic noir is recognized and presented as medium-concept cinema (Andrew Nestingen). The outline of its characteristics and the analysis of

its rhizomatic roots constitute the first part of the article. The second is devoted to *Wasteland*. Three plotlines are identified and highlighted as crucial for Hulik's miniseries: the crime and investigation plot, the violence against women one, and the disintegration of the community one. Their analysis is complemented with characteristics of the visual style employed in *Wasteland*.