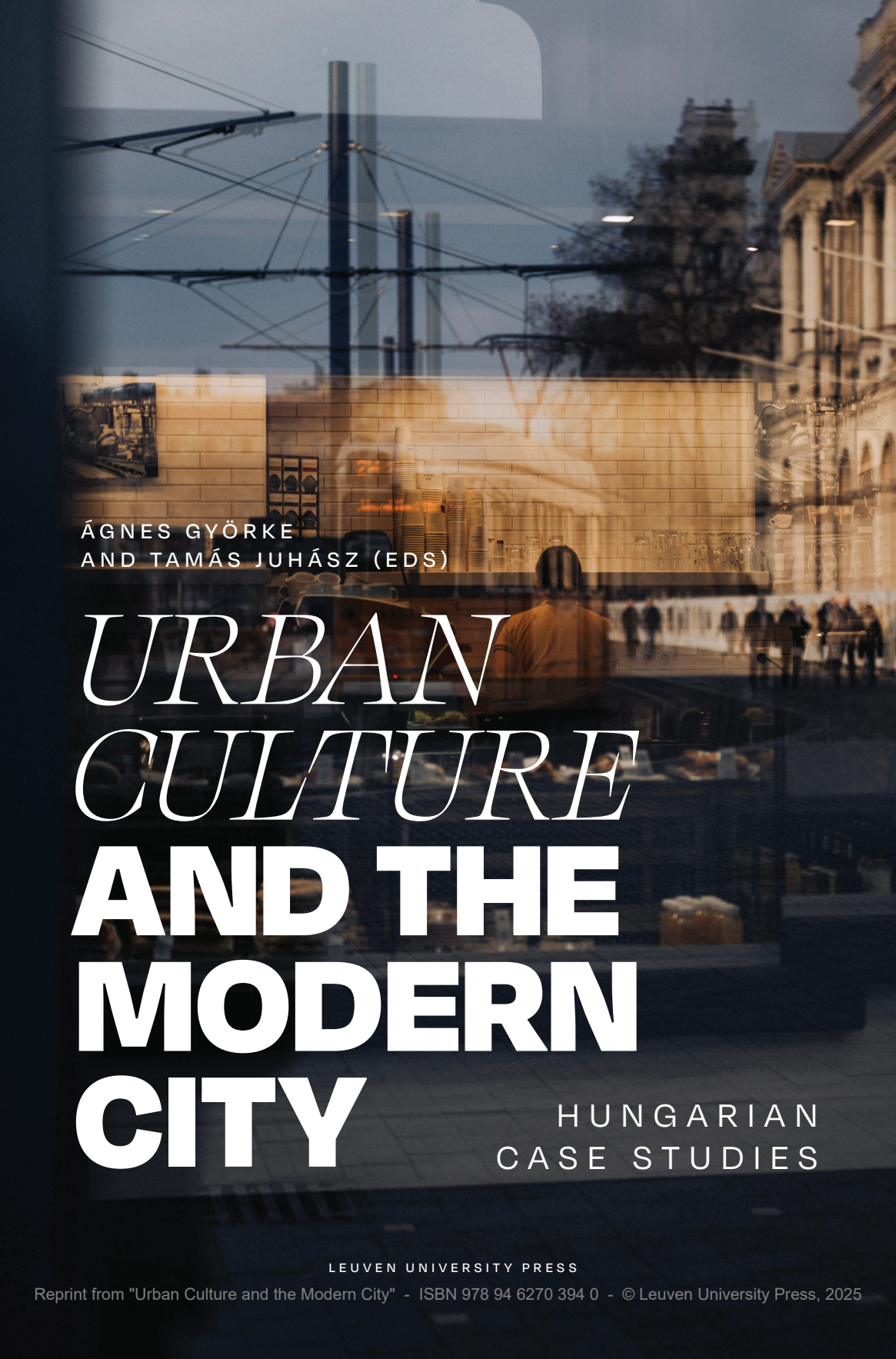




ÁGNES GYÖRKE
AND TAMÁS JUHÁSZ (EDS)

*URBAN
CULTURE*
**AND THE
MODERN
CITY**

HUNGARIAN
CASE STUDIES

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

Reprint from "Urban Culture and the Modern City" - ISBN 978 94 6270 394 0 - © Leuven University Press, 2025

Urban Culture and the Modern City

Hungarian Case Studies

Edited by
Ágnes Györke and Tamás Juhász

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

The publication of this volume has been supported by the research fund of Károli Gáspár University



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Minderbroedersstraat 4, B-3000 Leuven / Louvain (Belgium)

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ISBN 978 94 6270 394 0

eISBN 978 94 6166 539 3

<https://doi.org/10.11116/9789461665393>

D/2024/1869/1

NUR: 600

Cover design: Anton Lecoek

Cover image: Budapest, Hungary – Photo by István Szitás, Unsplash <https://unsplash.com/photos/RLb8ARQevcs>

Typesetting: Crius-Group



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Budapest in Noémi Szécsi's *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire*

The Grand and the Peripheral

ÁGNES GYÖRKE

Noémi Szécsi's *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire* is a magical realist vampire story set in Budapest after the collapse of communism in the Eastern European region. Published in 2002, the novel was Szécsi's literary debut, which made her name well-known in Hungary. The English translation came out ten years later, and it is Szécsi's only book that has appeared in English translation until the present day,¹ despite the fact that she received the European Union Prize for Literature in 2009.² The narrator of the novel is Jerne Voltampere, a young vampire of ambiguous gender, who lives in Budapest with her grandmother, a 235-year-old deadly and beautiful predator. Jerne's tale is closely intertwined with the experiences of the post-1989 generation in Hungary: her narrative showcases a perspective characterised by a search for new identities after the collapse of communism in the region and depicts the Hungarian capital as a city that, after decades of isolation behind the Iron Curtain, is connected to the global world behind the country's borders in countless ways.³

Noémi Szécsi is a unique author who does not belong to any clear-cut group of writers. Her narratives, including *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire*, *Nyughatatlanok* (The Restless) and *Mandragóra utca 7* (7 Mandrake Street), showcase a peripheral angle of vision (Bódi 126), which is akin to the disposition of the writer: Szécsi often speaks about herself as an 'outsider',⁴ although she is usually listed among the most significant contemporary Hungarian writers and plays a central role in the literary scene. She belongs to a younger generation of post-1989 women writers, along with Krisztina Tóth, Edina Szvoren, Andrea Tompa and Noémi Kiss,⁵ for instance, but at times she has claimed that 'women's writing' is too narrow a category to describe her work.⁶ Apart from her obvious interest in women's history and gender, the city and urban life are also recurring themes in Szécsi's writings. *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire*, *Kommunista Monte Cristo* (Communist Monte Cristo) and *Mandragóra utca 7* (7 Mandrake Street) are all set in

Budapest, and her non-fiction books also explore female identities in the modern Hungarian metropole.⁷ Szécsi's debut, in fact, portrays Budapest as a post-socialist city in transition from communist totalitarianism to neoliberal market capitalism, which is also dominated by memoryscapes of nineteenth-century urban grandness. Despite its focus on post-1989 Budapest, however, *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire* does not engage with the communist past in detail. I would claim that the main concern of the novel is the disparity between the contemporary capital, allegorised by the young and hesitant Jerne, and the fin-de-siècle metropolis, which comes alive through Grandma's grand tales. As my reading will show, through the playful treatment of this disparity, the novel challenges dichotomous narratives of cultural memory from a peripheral angle of vision.

On the Periphery: Szécsi's Vampires and Eastern Europe

First, a few words about the title of the novel. Both Grandma and Jerne are Finno-Ugrian vampires, who, unlike the legendary Dracula, live in a modern city. The world they evoke is, therefore, at once atavistic and modern. It is also a markedly Eastern European world: though popular all over Europe, the vampire legend has been imagined as a tale from this region, especially due to Count Dracula, Bram Stoker's Transylvanian vampire, who had an unprecedented impact on the popular imagination.⁸ The 1931 film adaptation of Stoker's novel, starring the Hungarian actor Béla Lugosi, has further supported the analogy.⁹ Since Eastern Europe is often seen as a semi-peripheral, mysterious location due to the 'nesting orientalisms' (Bakic-Hayden 918) that characterise Western perceptions of the region, it is hardly surprising that it has become the principal home of vampires in literary and cinematic narratives.¹⁰ The English translation of Szécsi's novel is still marketed as 'the first Budapest vampire story from the country of Béla Lugosi' (*Finno-Ugrian*) on Goodreads. Furthermore, as Szécsi points out, the main inspiration behind the novel was a BBC documentary on Hungarian music, in which the presenter was talking about vampires in Budapest for some curious reason.¹¹ Perhaps this explains why *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire* plays with this orientalist tradition in a postmodern fashion, transforming it into a sarcastic tale of modern and urban, Finno-Ugrian vampires.

The term Finno-Ugrian is also significant. It refers to languages that have developed from the same proto-language spoken by tribes around the Ural Mountains in prehistoric times (Saarinen 12). Hungarian is a Ugric language, while Finnish and Estonian, for instance, belong to the Baltic-Finnic group. Szécsi's vampires are Finno-Ugrian since Hungarian is a rather belittling designation for Grandma, whose identity, unlike that of Jerne, is grandiose. In a memorable epi-

sode, she explains it to her granddaughter that presenting herself as a Hungarian vampire would be too vulgar: 'Just think of how some arrogant Anglo-Saxon vampire would react if I presented myself as a Hungarian vampire. There'd be a polite nod. "I see. And where is Hungary exactly? Budapest or Bucharest?" But Finno-Ugrian: that arouses instant respect and lends me an aura of the exotic' (23). Apart from reflecting on how little 'Anglo-Saxon vampires' know about Central and Eastern Europe, the use of Finno-Ugrian instead of Hungarian reveals Grandma's inferiority complex, which is masked by her narcissistic grandiosity. This term, then, not only subverts the myth that vampires bred in the Transylvanian mountains, it also sheds light on Grandma's need for grandness and the repressed feelings behind this need.

Nevertheless, Finno-Ugrian as a reference point at about the turn of the twenty-first century is rather unique: the term hardly offers a tangible basis for identification in the post-1989 world. By using Finno-Ugrian instead of Hungarian or Eastern European, however, Szécsi's novel elegantly avoids the debate on the cultural and political identities of Eastern Bloc countries, which has dominated the discourse on this region since the mid-1980s.¹² Instead of locating Hungary within its Central European context, understood as 'a realm inhabited by the same memories, the same problems and conflicts, the same common tradition' (Kundera 201), *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire* relies on a category that cuts across the division created by the Iron Curtain and evokes a much more distant historical frame. This also suggests that the traumas Hungary experienced in the twentieth century, the loss of historical territories, the Holocaust, and communist totalitarianism, are not in the focus of this novel: the two historical moments the narrative foregrounds are the fin-de-siècle and the post-1989 period, which frame the traumas of the twentieth century as gaps in the narrative.¹³

I would claim that the position outlined above is akin to the peripheral perspective of an elegant outsider, which is at the heart of Szécsi's novel. The very idea of making main characters vampires helps showcase urban life from a peripheral angle, since vampires are outsiders by definition, as Ágnes Orzós points out,¹⁴ whose concept of time and earthly life are radically different from that of ordinary human beings. However, the two vampires do not allegorise the same peripheral angle of vision in Szécsi's novel: Grandma, as her very name implies, always wants to be at the centre of grand events; it is Jerne, the narrator of the novel, who is drawn towards the peripheral and the mundane. Not unlike other dualities in *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire*, the two vampires are rather mirror images of each other: Grandma is grandiose and old, Jerne is timid and young; Grandma has superb social skills, Jerne has no idea about etiquette; Grandma is a violent femme fatale, Jerne's gender is ambiguous; and so on. While Grandma's reminiscences are related to the heyday of Budapest at the fin-de-siècle, when

the Hungarian capital was a significant city at the heart of Central Europe, Jerne's tale focuses on the search for new identities in post-socialist Budapest after 1989. Therefore, though less visibly and in a more playful fashion than the political discourse, the novel does engage with the question of post-socialist Central Europe: by appropriating the vampire myth in ways that subvert stereotypical perceptions of the region, Szécsi's novel creates its own tale of modern Budapest from a peripheral angle of vision.

Two Tales of the City: Fin-de-Siècle Grandness and Post-Socialist Consumerism

Let us take a closer look at Grandma's and Jerne's view of the Hungarian capital. Jerne, the tongue-in-cheek narrator of the novel, makes sure that Grandma's memories of fin-de-siècle Budapest are presented in an entertaining way, lending a sarcastic tone to the discourse of the 'glorious nation' in the novel. Her own narrative of post-socialist Budapest, which offers a contrast with Grandma's memories in terms of confidence, emotion and ambition, is equally ironical: it evokes the voice of a hesitant new generation, which is clearly aware of the limits of its vision and place in the world.

Grandma's Memoryscapes and Urban Grandness

Grandma is portrayed as an advocate of pre-First World War Hungary on the very first page of the novel:

I could call my grandmother cosmopolitan, since she has visited virtually every corner of the globe and everywhere felt immediately at home. But not every citizen of the world is likely to use a china tooth mug decorated with a map of Greater Hungary and the irredentist slogan 'Transylvania is Ours!' Because that's what my Grandmother is like. (3).

Greater Hungary refers to the Kingdom of Hungary before 1920, when Transylvania, home to more than 1.6 million Hungarians at the time when it was acquired by Romania, was still part of Hungary.¹⁵ Grandma is a nationalist, who proudly claims Transylvania, especially since Transylvania is the legendary home of Dracula. However, considering her worldly experiences, Jerne also calls her cosmopolitan, and this is not only due to her fondness for subverting binary opposites in a postmodern fashion.¹⁶ Grandma's attitude evokes the milieu of nineteenth-century Budapest, which was also profoundly cosmopolitan at this



Fig. 9.1. Hero's Square in Budapest¹⁷

time, yet which was becoming more and more nationalistic by the turn of the century (Gyáni, *Identity and the Urban* 5; Gyáni, *Budapest* 46; Vaderna 305).¹⁸ Thus, it is hardly surprising that Grandma is a 'cosmopolitan nationalist', whose real interest is grandiosity and glamour.

The location of the vampires' flat recalls memories from the same period: Grandma and Jerne live near City Park, where Hero's Square was built at the end of the nineteenth century to commemorate the settlement of Hungarians in Central Europe (Fig. 9.1). Jerne's attic room window looks out onto the park directly:

From the window of my small attic room I could see the bare trees bathed by the light of the rising sun. For this nation the City Park in Pest commemorates the most glorious days in its history. Here, in 1896, the Hungarians celebrated what some scholars said was the thousand-year anniversary of their ancestors in their present-day homeland (the exact month and day they've still not managed to work out) (5).

The location has not been chosen by accident: 'Grandma has lived in the area around City Park before, at the time of the millennial celebrations' (6).¹⁹ As she is 235 years old, she has been 'alive' since about the 1760s, witnessing the birth of the modern metropolis in the late nineteenth century. Vajdahunyad Castle (Fig. 9.2) is another emblematic building in the park that recalls this period: no wonder that Grandma is 'unwilling to lodge anywhere but her old haunts around the park' (6). The urban memoryscapes of this neighbourhood, which, following in the wake of Kapralski,²⁰ I call spatial manifestations of ordered cultural



Fig. 9.2. Vajdahunyad Castle in Budapest²⁴

memory, mark the glorious days of Budapest as a Central European city. At this time, Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy: the city prospered, coffee houses opened, its literary culture flourished.²¹ It is this period Grandma feels close to, the time when the Hungarian capital was a significant city in Europe, comparable to Vienna. It was also this period that witnessed the Magyarisation of multicultural Budapest and the growth of national superiority,²² which directly contributed to the ethnic tensions that led to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914. Grandma's choice of neighbourhood, then, is associated with mitteleuropäische urban culture: it evokes a sense of national grandness before the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the traumatic events that unfolded in the twentieth century.

It is not only late nineteenth-century Hungarian culture that interests Grandma: as a proper cosmopolitan vampire, she often reminisces about her grand entrée to London society in the 1890s. Jerne presents the story of her life in Victorian London as follows:

Grandma was fêted as a Rumanian baroness by London society in the 1890s, she had been engaged to an English aristocrat. [...] At that time Grandma went by the name Lamia Constantinescu. A permanent bloodsucker. So: Miss Lamia was invited to a party, which was made all the more glamorous by the presence of Oscar Wilde. (59)

Betraying her nationalist principles as soon as a different opportunity arises, Grandma poses as a Romanian vampire in London, perhaps to make the impression that she belongs to a more prestigious tradition of literary vampires.²³ Her identity is nationalistic and highly opportunistic: it is based on the need to make an impression and lacks real integrity. Apart from showcasing yet another instance of the postmodern game, however, the episode also reveals that *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire* imagines urban cultures in a translocal context: the portrayal of city life is not based on the traditions of a single nation in the novel. The narrative moves through and beyond local spaces, and this constant movement forms identities that have emphatically local attributes yet are construed vis-à-vis the global flow of ideas.

The Finno-Ugrian Vampire, in fact, abounds in references to English-speaking literary culture. Apart from Stoker's *Dracula*, which is Grandma's favourite reading, her library contains 'Sherian LeFanu's *Carmilla*, the collected poems of Coleridge, including "Christabel", as well as Keat's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" in an anthology; Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* [...]' (58). Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, published in 1872, influenced Stoker's *Dracula* (Milbank 13), which came out in 1897. These literary works do not only situate Jerne's narrative in the context of English-speaking

literary culture; they also evoke a tradition of strong and dangerous female figures: Carmilla is a female and lesbian vampire; Geraldine in Coleridge's poem is also a demonic figure whose relationship with Christabel is homoerotic (Grossberg 145); Keats's beautiful and merciless lady is both seductive and unearthly. Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, a popular series that Szécsi lists among the main inspirations of the novel,²⁵ also has homoerotic themes, which reflect 'the principal violation of social norms' (Keller 13). In other words, these references evoke a seductive, homoerotic world, which is based on the demonisation of femininity and the figure of the vampire as a sexual outsider.²⁶ The allusions also help contextualise Grandma's merciless nature and Jerne's nonbinary gender identity. Therefore, references to English-speaking literary culture do not simply offer a contrast to Finno-Ugrian 'identities' but are integrated into the very identities construed in the narrative.

Nevertheless, Szécsi's novel relies on Hungarian vampire legends as well: the story of Elisabeth Báthory. After her sojourn in Victorian London, Grandma shows up in Vienna, choosing 'her victims under the cognomen Elisabeth Bathori... *Wiener Blut*, *Wiener Blut*' (60). Elisabeth Báthory (in Hungarian: Erzsébet Báthory) was a renowned Hungarian noblewoman born in 1560, who, according to legend, has tortured and killed hundreds of female servants and bathed in their blood, which helped her stay young and beautiful. Taking 'blood baths' is Grandma's favourite pastime in Szécsi's novel as well, and she has also refused to age in the past 235 years, which is an obvious reference to the legend of Báthory. Báthory's tale was first put down by a Jesuit monk called László Thuróczi in 1729, long before historians started to research her story (Várkonyi 8). Her legend also became popular in London: a book entitled *Treatise on The Vampires of Hungary and Surrounding Regions* by Augustin Calmet was published in 1759 (Várkonyi 6), which, no doubt, contributed to demonising perceptions of the region. Although the current historical consensus is that Báthory was probably a victim and 'the bloody orgies in the caves of Csejte are the products of Thuróczi's fantasy' (Várkonyi 40, my trans.), her legend still lives on in literary works and films.²⁷ Szécsi's novel relocates Báthory's story in the urban setting of Vienna: the reference to Strauss' 1873 waltz, 'Wiener Blut', which literally means 'Vienna Blood', evokes Viennese ballroom culture and connects Grandma's vampirism with this elite, urban, late nineteenth-century world.

Jerne's narrative of Grandma, then, evokes national grandiosity through late nineteenth-century urban memoryscapes, and it does so in a postmodern fashion. References to fin-de-siècle London, Budapest and Vienna create a narrative world that is markedly translocal, not unlike allusions to English vampire stories and the legend of Báthory. This approach, as Lena Mattheis points out, relativises the perceived importance of metropolises by definition (Mattheis 487) as it puts the emphasis on connections instead of singularities. Therefore, translocal references

playfully destabilise the national grandeur Grandma's memoryscapes enhance. Furthermore, they also subvert orientalist perceptions of the region, which is still imagined to be the home of vampires: far from representing 'Béla Lugosi's country', Grandma's and Jerne's identities are formed through translocal dialogue between the vampire stories of the English-speaking world and Hungarian legend.

Jerne's Peripheral Vision and the Post-Socialist City in Transition

The extravagant moments Grandma experienced in world cities are contrasted with Jerne's grey life in post-1989 Budapest on many levels. She is a young adult at the turn of the twenty-first century, who already had opportunities earlier generations living behind the Iron Curtain could only dream of. She has studied in Britain, for instance, in a 'small and undistinguished collage in a small town in the south of England' (14) called Winterwood. Jerne is sent to this small and insignificant place to study literature, which already prepares her for the life she is going to live in contemporary Budapest. The place is fictional: it evokes the atmosphere of magical forests in fairy tales and is clearly connected to Jerne's dedication to become a story writer. After returning to the Hungarian capital, she starts to work as a copy editor at a small publishing house called Elektra and Co, yet her sole aim is to write animal tales. Her narrative of contemporary Budapest, which is devoid of any grandiosity, revolves around these simple and mundane events, offering a peripheral vision of the post-1989 city.

Jerne's story abounds in everyday experiences that characterise the post-1989 period. The time of her narration becomes clear only at the very end, when she dates her tale on the last page: 'Budapest, June 2001' (232). However, references to the post-socialist period appear throughout the narrative. The way she describes their flat, for instance, immediately evokes this era:

So, giving the lie to those vaunted vampire legends, we don't live in some ruined castle. These days even vampires try to find sensible solutions and who wants to spend a fortune on gas, water, and electricity? The house where we have a top floor flat has every modern convenience and is in an excellent condition, thanks to the house representative's contacts and string-pulling. The plaster is not peeling off, the walls are not covered in saltpetre and the balconies don't need shoring up from the outside. (6)

The reference to the price of heating, the condition of houses and the informal network the representative needs to fix things recall the legacy of communism: nothing works without contacts in the world Jerne describes. The episode, then,

not only holds a crooked mirror to Grandma's recollections of late nineteenth-century Budapest but also establishes a contrast with the myth of vampires living in prestigious Gothic castles.

Urban sites of contemporary Budapest are grouped around three main themes in Jerne's narrative: we see her home and the private sphere; public places such as streets and parks; and her two workplaces, the publishing house and a vegetarian restaurant. These sites are not only markedly different from the historical locations that dominate Grandma's memories, but they also seem to be akin to the places that appear in paradigmatic urban novels published recently, such as Teju Cole's *Open City*. Cole's novel portrays New York through the eyes of Julius, a psychiatrist who walks on the streets as a flâneur²⁸ to escape the pressures of neoliberal work culture²⁹ and his repressed memories. He is drawn to the arts and the world of music, not unlike Jerne, who is only interested in literature and children's tales. Both characters live in a world that is dominated by consumerism and leaves no room for such marginal interests as literature and the arts. Jerne, however, a post-1989, Central European vampire, is just becoming acquainted with the principles of market economy that has characterised Julius's New York for decades. Yet the locations portrayed in her tale, not unlike her unmarketable vocation, shed light on a world in transition, that refigures the human as human capital' (Huels and Smith 2).

Jerne's workplaces, for instance, showcase the impact of consumerism in post-1989 Budapest. Though it is clear from the beginning that Grandma is extremely rich, Jerne has to work since 'vampires need some kind of a job as a cover' (8). Grandma, of course, makes sure she has low paid, menial jobs, just to help her see where she belongs. As a recent graduate with a degree in literary studies, Jerne receives two offers: translating romantic novels or correcting spelling mistakes in horoscopes. Since she finds the language of romantic books repulsive, Jerne chooses the second option. Her second workplace, nevertheless, is even worse. The restaurant that employs Jerne is vegetarian, but instead of spreading love and tolerance, it is a racist and hypocritical place. Jerne must work with a cook, for instance, who 'could not abide Romanians, Arabs, Chinese or Gypsies' (140). To keep appearances, the restaurant subscribes to both right- and left-wing newspapers, as expected from a democratic company, yet this openness is only for show: 'Our eatery subscribed to all the important party dailies, because our clientele attracted plant-eaters of every political hue' (148). Not unlike Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen*, a London novel that explores the invisible work of migrants in the kitchen of a glamorous hotel, Szécsi's narrative portrays the phony world of consumer culture, which advocates the ideology of openness, yet which, in fact, is only driven by material interests.



Fig. 9.3. City Park in Budapest³⁰

The locations of Jerne's workplaces are also telling. Whereas the publishing house was close to City Park (Fig. 9.3), which Jerne crossed as she walked to work every day, the restaurant is located on a crowded street in central Budapest. Jerne's walks in City Park are described several times in the novel. In one episode, for instance, she speaks about the puzzling happiness she feels when walking home through the park: 'So I set off home. For some obscure reason I felt that life was smiling at me. Perhaps it was that little chemical manipulation in the morning, or the glittering snow crunching underfoot in the several degrees of frost, or the sunshine and the clean, fresh air that created this illusion' (113). Whereas City Park reminds Grandma of the millennial celebrations of 1896, which evoke strong and vibrant feelings, Jerne's narrative creates a palimpsest of this nostalgic past: her tale of the park reveals a mundane, everyday world, where she can experiment with latent sensations and fuzzy feelings. The location of her second workplace is, however, more disappointing: Jerne must wind her way through busy streets to get to the restaurant, which makes her feel the limits of her trajectories more acutely. The difference between these spaces, in fact, sheds light on the main transformation the novel explores: the changes in Jerne's everyday life reflect the ways in which post-socialist Budapest is turning into a 'post-industrial hell' (138) in the second part of the novel.

Jerne's tale, then, may be read as the Bildungsroman of the generation that came of age after 1989. Szécsi herself claims that the novel follows this pattern:

'In *Finno-Ugrian Vampire* I used the patterns of the *Künstlerroman*, the *Bildungsroman* and vampire fiction' (Orzóy). Jerne is killed in City Park in the middle of the novel by her vampire lover, whose kiss, as tradition holds, initiates a transformation in being. This kiss, which has sexual connotations throughout the novel, makes Jerne immortal, and it also transforms her into an adult, who is called 'grown up' (139)³¹ thereafter, not unlike Budapest after 1989. Her story of the contemporary city transforms Budapest into an urban palimpsest by re-inscribing a mundane, transforming world upon Grandma's grand and solid memoryscapes, and this makes her narrative translocal not only in the spatial but also in the temporal sense of the term. Through this re-inscription, Jerne's tale also challenges established discourses of cultural memory, as the next section of this paper will show.

'Thirling' Dichotomous Narratives of Cultural Memory

Two dichotomous discourses of cultural memory emerged in Hungary after the collapse of communism. The first is a right-wing narrative, which focuses on the loss of historical territories after the First World War and the atrocities committed by the communist regime in the post-1945 period. This narrative, as Tamás Kisantal point out, sees Hungary as a "glorious nation" that was mortally wounded' (Kisantal 49), since the body of the country was truncated by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 and Hungarians were repressed by the communist dictatorship after the Second World War (Kisantal 49). The second narrative is a leftist interpretation that rejects the theory of victimisation and represents twentieth-century Hungarian history 'as a story of victims and perpetrators' (Kisantal 49) in a more balanced manner. However, this approach focuses mostly on the Holocaust and communism (Kisantal 49), refusing to engage with the trauma of Trianon precisely because the right-wing narrative has monopolised commemorative practices (Kisantal 49) and used them for political gain. While the heart of the first narrative is the idea of a lost paradise, primarily, Transylvania, and it is based on a distinctly rural vision, the second one is associated with an urban and cosmopolitan disposition.

In Szécsi's novel, both discourses are evoked yet neither is seen as a viable alternative. Grandma's vision seems to echo the right-wing narrative, especially due to her infatuation with Greater Hungary, while Jerne's ironical tale is more akin to the leftist interpretation since she rejects national grandiosity and feels more at home in the mundane city. However, her postmodern, self-reflexive narrative does not offer a self-confident alternative to Grandma's nostalgic grandness, and it is precisely through this refusal that a third option emerges in the novel. Jerne is aware of the limits of her vision, including her cosmopolitanism,

which she describes as an elite disposition of urban, well-to-do people who live in an intellectual bubble. As she proudly announces in the first chapter, for instance, she has never been beyond the city limits of Budapest:

[I]n this country there is no point in living anywhere but the capital, Budapest. I really don't understand what the other eight million Hungarians are doing down there in the countryside. I've never been beyond Budapest's city limits, or at least not further than the airport, but to my mind those country folks must surely all be wallowing around in the mud and dreaming of one day moving up to the Hungarian metropolis. (6)

Jerne's account of her life in Budapest suggests that *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire* reflects on the limits of the cosmopolitan vision. Her view of Budapest is clearly cosmopolitan, yet instead of viewing the capital as a role model, she parodies the attitude of the cosmopolitan, liberal elite. Not unlike the novels that Linda Hutcheon has called 'historiographic metafiction',³² Jerne's narrative presents every tangible attitude and certainty as an experiment that runs against its own limits. Intellectual elitism, for instance, which is at the heart of Jerne's identity and writerly ambitions, is made fun of several times in the novel. Her choice of pretentious words, for example, is a constant target; the main character of her animal tales is called 'Initiative', which infuriates his friend (whose own music band, ironically, has an equally foreign name: 'Coitus Interruptus'): 'What? You've got a degree in English or something? It really pisses me off when you parade your knowledge of languages. Why can't it have a proper Hungarian name?' (20). Jerne ridicules contemporary intellectual trends in a similar vein when she recounts her days in the English college at Winterwood:

Thanks to the international character of the student body I learnt how to swear in French and I have ever since vented the frustrations occasioned by minor irritants in this language, so I don't like to utter obscenities openly. So sometimes I say: 'what a load of Lacan'; 'a positive pack of Derrida', and, if I stub my toe on a piece of furniture I exclaim: 'Foucault!' (14)

The young vampire's narrative parodies the superfluous nature of transnational academic discourse, making fun of the most prominent postmodern thinkers. Not unlike her critique of cosmopolitan Budapest and her own ambitions to become a writer, this irony also targets the very narrative she is creating, which is a textbook example of postmodern writing.

Jerne's self-reflexivity also makes the 'thirling' of politicised memoryscapes possible. The novel seems to suggest that instead of elitism and grandiosity, a

more self-reflexive and grounded attitude towards the past would help foster an alternative to polarised discourses of cultural memory. Both the elitism of nationalism, which is based on repressed inferiority, as Grandma's story has shown,³³ and the elitism of cosmopolitanism, which results from taken-for-granted privilege, are parodied in the novel. In other words, *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire* reflects on the limits of its own elitist world view and points towards a new alternative precisely through this self-reflexive critique. This new alternative, I would claim, is akin to cosmopolitan feminist approaches, which also foreground the question of privilege as they advocate a more grounded and embodied form of cosmopolitanism in the contemporary world (Vieten 3; Fitzgerald 80–1; Györke 238–9).

Szécsi has published a collection of short stories titled *Rohadt Állatok* (Rotten Animals) recently, which returns to some of the question addressed in her first novel. The volume, which bears the title of the book Jerne wrote and even contains a short passage from it, might be read as a metacommentary on *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire*: it presents Jerne's 'unmarketable work', twelve animal tales Szécsi wrote since 2004 (Greff). The stories seem to be political allegories, reminiscent of Orwell's *Animal Farm*,³⁴ yet the characters do not clearly stand for identifiable politicians. Rather, they allegorise different attitudes towards power and authority in an unmistakably Central and Eastern European context. One thing is clear, however: in these tales, the hesitant promise Jerne represented in Szécsi's first novel has less and less viability. Instead of the young post-1989 generation searching for its voice we see corrupt animals and consumerism in full swing: stories abound in references to populist 'statesman', greed, political talk shows, beauty culture, corrupt companies and so on. In other words, the more we see of the twenty-first century, the less likely it is that Jerne's timid generation will be able to offer an alternative to Grandma's opportunistic nationalism.

To conclude, *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire* portrays Budapest after the collapse of communism as a city in transition, which is contrasted with memoryscapes of the late nineteenth-century capital. The disparity established between the fin-de-siècle metropolis and post-1989 Budapest showcases a clash between nineteenth-century urban grandness and the post-socialist period. Jerne's ironical narrative views Budapest from the vantage point of the post-1989 generation and exposes the incongruities that characterise Grandma's nationalism in the novel. Her translocal tale puts the emphasis on connectedness instead of singularities and prefers the mundane over the spectacular. I have argued that Jerne's vision, which is based on a grounded cosmopolitan attitude, might be able to offer an alternative not only to Grandma's grandiosity but also to dichotomous narratives of cultural memory, which became dominant in post-1989 Hungary. However, as Szécsi's recent volume shows, the attitude Jerne represents in *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire* has less and less potential to survive in a world dominated by the 'passionate intensity'³⁵ of rotten animals.

Notes

1. The novel was published by Stork Press in Peter Sherwood's translation. Apart from *Finno-Ugrian Vampire*, one short story from *Rohadt állatok* (Rotten Animals) came out in English translation, 'The Year of the Mole-Rat' (trans. Peter Sherwood).
2. Szécsi received this prestigious award for *Kommunista Monte Cristo* (Communist Monte Cristo) (2006), a historical satire that tells the story of a vegetarian butcher, who is also a devoted communist. However, this success was not enough for Szécsi to 'get through to Europe's literary circles' (Wojtusik 173).
3. Ed. note: for more about representations of post-communist Budapest, see György Kalmár's and Eszter Ureczky's chapters in this volume (Kalmár, 'Three Postcards of Budapest: Paradigms of the Urban Imaginary in Post-communist Hungarian Cinema'; Ureczky, 'Old City: Ageist Crime and Transgenerational Care in Kristóf Deák's *The Grandson* [2022]').
4. Szécsi has described herself as an outsider in an interview: 'I like being an outsider, because I want to keep the privilege of an observer, I want to keep the distance' (Orzóy).
5. On contemporary Hungarian women's writing see my article 'Contemporary Hungarian Women's Writing and Cosmopolitanism'.
6. In a 2010 interview, Szécsi claimed that the notion of 'women's literature' might not serve the interests of feminism: 'It is a disadvantage for me, as I feel excluded from "the great tradition". It is important for women writers to gain more space – this is needed by the overwhelmingly female readerships as well – but it would be silly to divide readers into two groups' (Farkas, cited in Várnagy 28–9). In a later interview, however, she situated her work in a transnational female literary tradition: 'I used to read mainly Hungarian literature up until the age of 18, but as soon as I could read in English and in Finnish I was mesmerised by British and Scandinavian women writers. So as a "conscious reader" I looked for different attitudes from our very political, masculine, "heavy" literary tradition' (Orzóy).
7. Szécsi has written two volumes of non-fiction with art historian Eleonóra Géra: *A budapesti úrinő magánélete, 1860-1914* (The Private Life of the Lady of Budapest, 1860-1914), which came out in 2015, and *A modern budapesti úrinő, 1914-1939* (The Modern Lady of Budapest, 1914-1939), which was published in 2017.
8. According to Alison Milbank, Stoker relied on Irish tradition when he construed the figure of Dracula, even '[t]he anthropological sources used by Stoker take Ireland as analogous to Transylvania' (20).
9. As Arthur Lenning points out, 'Lugosi was not an average Joe or a humble scientist, but the distilled essence of our romantic, Promethean passions. In a prosaic world, his demonic, ominous presence was a unique form of poetry' (4).
10. The first literary vampires were, in fact, German: according to Heide Crawford, *Heinrich August Ossenfelder Der Vampir*, published in 1748, was the first instance of vam-

- pire literature, which was followed by several prose works that feature vampires in the early nineteenth century (xii). These literary works, according to Crawford, were inspired by the collection of folktales by Austrian Emperor Charles VI (xii).
11. 'The late 90s – I started to work on the novel in 1999 – were the time of the Hollywood adaptations of some vampire classics, like Ann Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Or you could watch a vampire parody in the cinema (*From Dusk Till Dawn*), but my main inspiration was a BBC documentary on Hungarian music which I saw on TV in Helsinki: I couldn't grasp why the presenter was talking about vampires in Budapest' (Orzóy).
 12. Dissident public intellectuals argued that nations such as Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia 'belonged to the Western sphere of civilization' (Bottoni 5), and, therefore, were not really part of Eastern Europe. Milan Kundera, for instance, a famous representative of dissident intellectuals, claimed that Central European countries belonged to the Eastern world politically yet were part of Western Europe culturally (Kundera 192).
 13. This, of course, does not mean that Szécsi is not interested in the history of the twentieth century; for instance, her 2006 novel, *Kommunista Monte Cristo* (Communist Monte Cristo), offers an artistic interpretation of communist ideology in twentieth-century Hungary.
 14. According to Ágnes Orzóy, 'Jerne is a good writer and a good narrator because she is an outsider: Being a vampire, she doesn't understand much about human emotions, sensations, history and other "unnecessary" complications of human life, which make her comments on these topics absolutely hilarious' (Orzóy).
 15. Hungary, having fought on the side of Central Powers, lost approximately two-thirds of its territory and one-third of the Hungarian population was forced to live outside Hungary after 1920 (Györke and Bülgözdí 8). Approximately 1.66 million Hungarians and 2.82 million Romanians lived in Transylvania before the Treaty of Trianon according to the 1910 census. See Varga 141 and Nyárády 647.
 16. Several critics consider Szécsi's narratives textbook examples of postmodern fiction; see Kántás 107; Lengyel 122; Németh 246.
 17. Photo by Mario Esposito, <https://unsplash.com/>, under Creative Commons CC-BY-SA-3.0 licence.
 18. This is due to the Magyarisation of multicultural Budapest after 1873, when the modern city was formed by an act that unified Pest, Buda and Óbuda and became the symbol of the Hungarian nation (Gyáni, *Identity and the Urban* 5). Prior to this, as Moritz Csáky remarks, different languages flourished in the city: 'Between 1825 and 1849, 951 books were written in Hungarian, 524 in Latin, 327 in German, 312 in Serbian, 90 in Romanian, 81 in Slovak, 45 in Croatian, and 40 in Hebrew of the 2157 published items' (cited in Vadera 305).

19. Ed. note: for more about the significance of City Park at the turn of the twentieth century, see Márta Pellérdi's chapter in this volume ("You'll Never Walk Alone": Ferenc Molnár's Budapest in *Liliom* and *The Guardsman*).
20. Kapralski defines memoryscape as 'a memorial landscape – both material and symbolic – through which "collective memory is commonly spatialized" [Muzaini and Yeoh 345] (150): Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's work, I use the suffix "-scape" to imply several characteristics of memory's relation to space: its fluidity, its relativity based on perspective, and its imagined quality. In spite of all its materiality, the tangible landscape of memory is constituted in dialogue with the imaginations of those who refer to it. This inherent ambiguity of the concept allows it to account for the complicated interplay of things and words, which only together for our frames of remembrance' (Kapralski 150).
21. Szécsi called this period the 'golden age' of the Hungarian capital in her contribution to a book on Budapest ('2008: Budapest Noir' 427).
22. According to Marius Turda, the narratives that presented these nations 'as culturally superior and predestined to preside over other national groups [Romanians, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, and Poles]' (2) mainly reflect the appropriation of Western European theories of race and superiority (9).
23. However, Stoker's *Dracula*, the novel that most famously made Transylvania the home of vampires, was published in May 1897, and at this time Oscar Wilde was already in France after two years of imprisonment in Britain for homosexuality (Ellmann 528).
24. Photo by Jacques Dillies, <https://unsplash.com/>, under Creative Commons CC-BY-SA-3.0 licence.
25. Szécsi started to work on the novel in the late 1990s, which 'were the time of the Hollywood adaptations of some vampire classics, like Ann Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*' (Orzóy).
26. For more about the connection between vampirism and nineteenth-century sexology, see Zsolt Bojt's "People do not, as a rule, believe in Vampires!"
27. Such as Peter Sasdy's *Countess Dracula* (1970) and July Deply's *The Countess* (2009), among others. See Várkonyi 11.
28. For the analysis of Julius' walk in the novel, see Pieter Vermeulen's 'Flights of Memory'.
29. I understand neoliberalism as a 'pro-business "secular faith"' (Huels and Smith 2), which manipulates and uses individuals as marketable human capital. For a more extensive analysis see Huels and Smith 1–18.
30. Photo by Krisztián Kormos, <https://www.pexels.com/>, under Creative Commons CC-BY-SA-3.0 licence.
31. The word used in the Hungarian text is 'major' ('nagykorú' [139]), which suggests that Jerne is 18 in the second part of the novel.
32. Linda Hutcheon calls those postmodern novels historiographic metafiction which 'are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Midnight's Children*, *Ragtime*, *Legs*,

- G., *Famous Last Words*' (5). Historiographic metafiction, in other words, is characterised by a 'theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past' (Hutcheon 5, italics in the original).
33. On nationalism as a response to interiorised inferiority, see Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. As Fanon points out, the inferiority of the native in the colonial situation leads to violence, which is a form of self-assertion: 'The Algerian's criminality, his impulsivity, and the violence of his murders are therefore not the consequence of the organization of his nervous system or of characterial originality, but the direct product of the colonial situation' (309).
 34. Apart from Orwell's novel, Szécsi lists Yrjö Kokko's *Pessi ja Illusia*, Kenneth Graham's tales and Aesopus' fables as her main sources (Greff).
 35. W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming': 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity' (Yeats 187).

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