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# Hungary's image in Hollywood movies and its possible impact on tourists and film-investors

Árpád Papp-Váry

Budapest College of Communication and Business, Nagy Lajos Király útja  
1-9., Budapest 1148, Hungary

apappvary@bkf.hu

## Abstract

The television-series *Sex and the City* helped a great deal in motivating tourists to return to New York City after the events of September 11. The Australian "country-image center" supported the campaign of the movie *Australia* with 20% of its annual budget, 6 million dollars. On the other hand, no one asked *Borat* to "popularize" Kazakhstan, in fact their president protested directly at George Bush.

But what is with Budapest, Hungary and the Hungarians? Not so many people worked on this question yet, while it significantly contributes to the country-image. This essay collects and analyses the effects of Hungary's appearance in international movies. The analysis is divided into five groups:

- When the film was shot here, but Budapest appears as Berlin, Rome, Paris, Moscow, or Buenos Aires (*Spy Game*, *Munich*, *Red Heat*, *Evita*, *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*).
- When the shooting and the story also took place in Hungary (*I Spy*).
- When Hungary appears in the movie, although it was not shot here (*MacGyver* – *Thief of Budapest*, *The Transporter 3*).
- When none of the previous cases happens, but one of the characters is Hungarian (*Casablanca*, *The Whole Nine Yards*, *Iron Man*, *Die Hard 3*).
- When the characters speak Hungarian, but it sounds as a nonsense language (*Blade Runner*).

After all this, the essay is looking for an answer to exploit all this: on one hand on the level of the "film-tourists", on the other hand from the point of view of the film-investors. At last it provides an answer to the question: why shoot a film in Hungary?

**Key words:** country image, tourism, film tourism, Hollywood

## 1. World conquering Australia.

Nearly six hundred million people, it is the estimated number of the potential tourists who could be reached with the articles, news, and reports about the movie called Australia.

Tens of millions saw the movie. As of November 2009 the film's revenues reached a total of \$211 million, although its budget was \$130 million [1]. In addition just in the US, 1,739,700 DVDs were sold.

The truth is that the producer could not have made a bad decision picking one of the most popular actresses, Nicole Kidman and actor Hugh Jackman. Although the movie is too long (165 minutes) which did not help the story, nevertheless the beautiful landscapes did have a big success. So did the film's advertising campaign featuring the country's name in capital letters, promoting the country itself as well.

Tourism Australia sponsored the movie campaign, with \$6 million from their \$32 million annual budget. The aim of this film was similar to that of *Crocodile Dundee* earlier, to increase the number of tourist. Although at that time (in 1986) this was not done consciously. However, at this time (in 2008) they made postcards, invitation cards, maps, brochures all in order to help travel agencies to promote their Australian offers along with the movie. Unfortunately the global financial crisis had just begun around the time of the premier, but the long term results could still be positive. One such result is a 17% growth in the number of visitors of the official website of the country, [australia.com](http://australia.com). The campaign has also led to forty international team of journalist visiting Australia to demonstrate the effect the movie had [2].



**Fig. 1. The movie is just as much a country image film as it is an adventurous story**

## 2. Undesired country promotion: Borat and Brüno.

The movie, which produced an even higher gross amount than Australia, with 260 million US dollars was a film about Kazakhstan. The Kazakh government did not sponsor it, in fact they specifically protested against it. The movie – “Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan” definitely did not represent Kazakhstan in a good way. One of the legendary phrases of Borat is: “Although Kazakhstan a glorious country, it have a problem, too: economic, social, and Jew.”



**Fig. 2. The Kazakh government did not sponsor the movie but protested against Borat because in had portrayed the country as an underdeveloped and primitive place. The various scenes of the movie portray an underdeveloped and primitive place – these scenes were shot in a small village in Romania.**

In September of 2006 when the President of Kazakhstan Nurszultan Nazarbayev met with US President George Bush, one of their meeting items allegedly was about ‘Kazakhstan’s country image after Borat. Furthermore they started a few million dollar campaign called ‘Kazakhstan in the heart of Eurasia’. Later the Kazakhs also realized – according to rumors by pressure of the President’s daughter – that this movie is not just parody of Kazakhstan but also parody of USA. In addition, there was a big advantage: the film got the attention of those who never heard about the country [3]. Sacha Baron Cohen after playing Borat’s character, returned to the big screen as Brüno, the Austrian gay fashion designer. According to Brüno every Austrian’s dream is “finding a job, buying a dungeon, and starting a family”. This

was probably a reference to kidnap victim Natascha Kampusch who was held captive four eight years in a cellar, and to Josef Fritzl, who has been convicted of imprisoning and raping his daughter in a cellar in Amstetten, Austria, for 24 years, during which time she bore seven of his children.

### **3. Hungary and Hungarians on the Hollywood screen**

But what is with Budapest, Hungary and the Hungarians? Not so many people worked on this question yet, while it significantly contributes to the country-image. This essay collects and analyses the effects of Hungary's appearance in international movies. The analysis is divided into five groups:

- When the film was shot here, but Budapest appears as Berlin, Rome, Paris, Moscow, or Buenos Aires (Spy Game, Munich, Red Heat, Evita, Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam)
- When the shooting and the story also took place in Hungary (I Spy)
- When Hungary appears in the movie, although it was not shot here (MacGyver – Thief of Budapest, The Transporter 3.)
- When none of the previous cases happens, but one of the characters is Hungarian (Casablanca, The Whole Nine Yards, Iron Man, Die Hard 3.)
- When the characters speak Hungarian, but it sounds as a nonsense language (Blade Runner).

### **4. Budapest as an alternative of Berlin, Rome, Paris, Moscow, Buenos Aires**

'West Germany 1976' said the narrator in the Spy Game (2001), and the Hungarian audience laughed out loud, because on the screen they showed the Szabadság Bridge and the yellow tram on it – a typical Budapest picture. Brad Pitt's train also arrives at the Nyugati railway station (Budapest) which appeared as part of Berlin. Then we see the Danube river bank, the surrounding area of Astoria (hotel in Budapest) and sometimes in the background the St Stephen's Basilica and the Buda Castle. The square of the 56ers (earlier called: Felvonulási tér) was the famous Checkpoint Charlie crossing point in the movie. In Steven Spielberg's 'Munich' which portrays the 70s' it was Rome



that Budapest substituted. It was here that the first member of the Palestinian terrorists, the bombers of the 1972's Munich Olympics was liquidated. Then the story continues in Paris, but actually we are still in Budapest, in Aulich Street, next to Szabadság square and in this part the Germans detonate a bomb which kills the next terrorist. Budapest in winter is capable to stand-in as Moscow – at least Arnold Schwarzenegger was hunting the gangsters here in the 'Red Heat' movie. It was also in this film that he walked into the Moscow police station which was actually at the National Gallery at Buda Castle. But Budapest also served as the alternative version of Buenos Aires in the movie called 'Evita'. The Argentine flags and Spanish captions covered and disguised most of the recognizable buildings. The costal capital feeling was created by palm trees at the Szabadság square and Alkotmány Street also. The above-mentioned movies were blockbuster films. Their incomes were the followings: 'Munich' \$131 million, 'Evita' \$142 million and the 'Spy Game' movie had \$143 million [1]. On the other hand, the number of tourists has yet to grow because of the movies. As discussed in chapter 9, the potentials of film tourism in Hungary are far from being fully exploited. Nevertheless, the movies shot in Hungary are good references for new productions – more on this in chapter 10.



**Fig. 3. Budapest appearing as Berlin, Rome, Paris, Moscow and Buenos Aires**

In this category it is worth to mention one more film, although this was made by Bollywood rather than Hollywood. However, on the poster of the 1999 Indian film called 'Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam' the Chain Bridge of Budapest was seen. In addition one third of the film (nearly one hour) took place in Hungary. There were scenes from the sky of the Citadella, the House of Parliament, Széchenyi Thermal Bath, the St Matthew's church



and the Heroes's square. The Indian boy and girl visit Budapest – they travel by taxi through the Chain Bridge, on the embankment, they travel by yellow tram, have lunch on the Columbus ship and they even take part in a traditional gypsy party. During all this time the locals speak to them in Hungarian. Only the story takes place in Italy! However, this “trick” was probably not recognized by the Indian viewers.



**Fig. 4. The Chain Bridge can be seen on the poster of the Bollywood blockbuster – while the movie is full of Hungarian scenes – yet the public thinks the story takes place in Italy**

### **5. The leading character: Budapest**

According to the above mentioned we could even think that Budapest did not come out just as Budapest in the Hollywood movies, but there is an example for this as well. The film 'I spy' with Owen Wilson and Eddie Murphy takes place in the most beautiful places of the capital. It is said to have been the producer, Andy Vajna's dream to show as much as possible of the beauties of Budapest. He managed to show the following: the Buda Castle, the National Gallery, the Chain Bridge, the cable car, the Gellért Hotel and Spa. Some of the shots were done at night, when the city is perhaps even more beautiful. In addition, one of the actors, Owen Wilson, says some Hungarian sentences (or some words) in the movie. And although 'I Spy' was a fiasco, according to the news there were always a lot of interest for Budapest after the protocol screening. It's worth to mention that Andy Vajna as a producer also had an important role in bringing the movie 'Evita' and 'Red Heat' to Budapest.



**Fig. 5. Eddie Murphy and Owen Wilson with the Chain Bridge – The ‘I Spy’ was not only shot in Budapest, but the plot also takes place here**

#### **6. Stand-ins for Hungary: stories taking place in Hungary, but shot abroad**

Although only for a few stock photos and videos, but the view of Budapest appears in ‘Transporter 3’. The scenes were not shot here, however the whole movie is reminiscent of the 80s’. The dialogue in which the Transporter, Jason Statham enters coordinates into a GPS says a lot more. When the GPS displays Budapest as the destination, Statham asks his partner: “What is in Budapest?” The answer: “Goulash and beer.” This is much more fortunate than a similar situation when Bucharest comes out later as a destination and Statham’s lady partner says: “Romanian wine is not that good.”

#### **7. Representation of Hungary in the Hollywood movies**

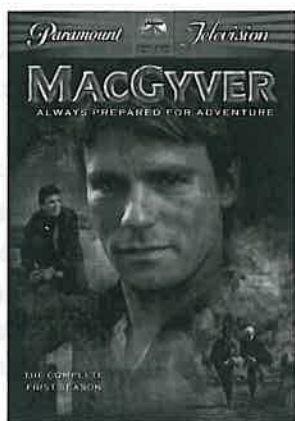
Although the Hungarian “Borat” does not exist yet, we can hardly state that the Hungarians appear as positive characters in the Hollywood movies. It is fortunate that Casablanca, the classic film, gave a positive Hungarian model, that of Victor László.

But let’s go back to movies that came out recently. In one of the blockbusters of recent years, in the ‘Ironman’ the main character is captured by Hungarians. According to the memorable scene the terrorists say: “Mi folyik odabent! Kezeket fel!” (English translation: “What’s going in there? Hands up!”) The helper of Ironman replies: „He is speaking Hungarian”! Then he shouts: „Egy perc!” (meaning: “one minute please!”)

Mathias Targo, the freelance terrorist in ‘Die Hard 3’ becomes

known not only to have worked for Iranians, but also to have served in the Hungarian military as well. Bruce Willis plays the role of the Hungarian Jimmy 'the Tulip' Tudeski in 'The Whole Nine Yards' who can hardly be regarded as a positive character. In the movie 'Usual suspects' the Hungarian mafia gets a key role, however they are less successful in drug smuggling, and they get cheated.

Of course there is also another way to portray the Hungarians. In the TV series 'Married with children' Al Bundy says: It is enough to speak with a little Hungarian accent and you can be a fortune-teller. In Stephen Kings' 'Thinner' in one scene a gypsy camp can be seen where everybody speaks Hungarian.



**Fig. 6. From a MacGyver episode we get to know that “Budapest is as gipsy as dog has fleas.”**

In one of the episodes of the legendary MacGyver-series shot in 1985, called the 'Thief of Budapest' we can learn that “Budapest is as gipsy as dog has fleas. They have no papers, no address, they change their names.” What is more, they are jailed (not because of the Hungarian Police Officer but his Russian boss), so it is no wonder that they want to escape from the country. And then comes the strangest car chase scene of all times in Budapest: MacGyver and the Gypsies are escaping in three Mini Morris, through the city, and after arriving at the end of a long tunnel they get to Austria and everybody becomes free. (This scene is also very special because it was adapted and purchased from the 1969 film 'The Italian Job')

## **8. Hungarian speaking film: when Hollywood became Hungarian**

It is very rare but happens that the character is not Hungarian, but suddenly starts to speak Hungarian. Among these the greatest classic is perhaps *Blade Runner* in which Harrison Ford is arrested in Hungarian: „Monsieur, kövessen engem, bitte!” (meaning: Sir, you will please come with me now!” Then comes a dirty word: „Ló..., nehogymá’! Te vagy a *Blade Runner*!” (In English: “Ah, don’t shit me, man, you are the *Blade Runner*.”

## **9. Successful film tourism**

The latter example is one that only Hungarians would pick out, so it hardly has a great impact - the director must have entertained himself. But in the previous categories the portrayal of Hungary and Hungarians can have a great impact.

According to a research a successful film results in an average 54% rise of tourism in the next 4 years following the premier [4]. We don’t have to go far: ‘*The Da Vinci Code*’ has helped mainly Paris, while ‘*Angels & Demons*’ has increased the number of tourists in Rome. A lot of people visit Petra in Jordan because of the 3rd part of the *Indiana Jones* trilogy (‘*The last crusade*’) or they pay extra for setting a foot in all the places in Venice, where the professor did.

According to a survey done in 2004 for 10% of all the visitors to New-Zealand it played an important role that some of the scenes of the ‘*Lord of the Ring*’ was shot on the island [5]. They were especially interested in Matamata, the home of the hobbits. It is interesting that there is only one letter difference in Matmata in Tunisia – where certain scenes of ‘*Star Wars*’ were shot, and it has been attracting tourists ever since.

A good movie can help in a crisis as well: after September 11<sup>th</sup>, the terrorist attack ‘*Sex and the City*’ played an important role in bringing back tourists to New York. Today there are several travel agencies organizing trips to popular places of the characters of the film. Needless to say the interest is enormous: there are bookings from as far as Japan and Singapore, even though in the latter the series was banned because of its explicit nature [3].

Nevertheless, film-tourism is not a novelty. According to Sándor Tibor, associate professor of the Tourism department of Pannon University,

million USD. The Stern studio was built in Pomáz, where the ballet 'The Nutcracker' was directed by Andrew Konchalovsky. And last, the Asztra studio in Mogyoród is also one to mention.

"Finding each other" can happen in one of two ways: 1) the foreign production firms contact the Hungarian partners, with the aim of filming in Hungary. 2) Hungarian production firms (about 10-15), with good relationships abroad continually look for productions in Hollywood and also in European countries, which could be filmed in Hungary. These offices are specialized, meaning that they usually keep in touch with only one country. Due to this, there is one company who brings movies from England, one from America and one who specializes in bringing films from France into Hungary [9].

In the case of the first group (when the foreign firms think of Hungary as location) web pages, which were made exactly for foreign movie-makers can help them a lot in their inquiries. [Filminhungary.com](http://Filminhungary.com) [10] introduces itself like this: "If you would like to shoot a movie in Hungary, but do not know where to go, you will find all the necessary information in our website." The site lists the most famous films, which were shot in Budapest, or somewhere else in Hungary. On another page, [budapestfilmoffice.hu](http://budapestfilmoffice.hu) [11] inquirers can browse among numerous shooting locations in various categories: educational institutions, vehicles, cities/city-centers, etc.

In the case of the second group (when the Hungarian partner takes the initiative) there are two good examples, "lobby-trips" that happened recently. In 2008 a delegation organized by the Korda studio went to Hollywood. The aim of the trip was to show the American producers during 5-6 presentations the advantages of shooting in Hungary. The presentations seemed to be successful: all of the big studios were presented in some way (Warner, 20th Century Fox, Miramax, etc.) and approximately 40-50 people attended these meetings. Production firms, with big projects (exceeding 1.5 billion forints (7,5 million US dollars) in the Hungarian shooting costs are meant here) are continuously calling the Film Office with movie-plans [9].

In 2009, between the 16th and 18th of April the Association of Film Commissioners International organized a fair in Santa Monica, in the USA about movie-shooting locations where Hungary took part as exhibitor.

Along with all of these, the "position of the stars" is not so favorable these days: in 2008 the strike of the scriptwriters and actors in Hollywood,

and the Moratorium about the support system in the EU made the situation harder, and now there is the global economic crisis [3].

Good news on the other hand that on January 15, 2011, the Hungarian government appointed Andrew Vajna as government commissioner in charge of the Hungarian film industry. He is responsible for the strategy of the Hungarian Film preservation and development.

### 11. What in favour of Hungary?

There is one important argument for Hungary – which was not mentioned in the previous chapter, but the others have already introduced it. This is that we have excellent outdoor shooting locations. Especially loved are the Castle of Buda and the National Gallery, the banks of the Danube River, the Chain Bridge and its area, the Hungarian State Opera House, and the East- and Western Railway Stations. On the other hand, it is interesting that the Parliament or the Heroes Square rarely appear in movies – perhaps they are too distinctive characteristics of Hungary.

At the same time the classical houses in Budapest built around the turn of the 19th and 20th Century, are especially suitable to replace practically any European city. To make it look according to the desired decade is relatively easy as well. Movies or scenes taking place in Vienna, Berlin, Paris or London can be shot in the Hungarian capital; only the best streets have to be chosen for the purposes. The trick by which a street in Budapest can become a street in London is in the details, for example the type of cars in the streets, the view of the street, the various flags and signs on the walls of the houses [9].



**Fig. 7. Hungary is especially suitable and cost effective for films about the Second World War. On the above picture we can see the famous Checkpoint Charlie**



Hungary is especially suitable and cost effective for films about the Second World War. On one hand, because the VIII and IX districts still have lots of buildings awaiting demolition, these buildings are perfect to portray the ruins caused by the war. On the other hand, we have cars and trucks of this era in a very good condition. But here is a trick also of course: one car can be used 5 times in a movie with 3 different registration plates. In a troop carrier convoy each vehicle turns back and stands in the line again to grow its length [12].

At last, the high level of the Hungarian intellectual capacity must be mentioned as an argument for Budapest. Directors, cameramen and the other members of the film-making staff (lighting, stage-building, and production designing) are becoming more and more highly qualified specialists. Among them many (to mention some: István Szabó, Lajos Koltai, Elemér Ragályi, Gyula Pados) are working abroad. Now there are fewer problems with language as well, as the Hungarians speak English at an increasingly better level. Although the technical vocabulary of the Hungarian-film originates from the German language, the effects of the American dominance of the past twenty years led to changes in the Hungarian technical language and English words are widely used.

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