

JUDIT ÁGNES KÁDÁR

*THE 1950S. PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2003 BIENNIAL
CONFERENCE OF THE HUNGARIAN ASSOCIATION FOR
AMERICAN STUDIES.*

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The essay collection entitled *The 1950s. Proceedings of the 2003 Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Association for American Studies* has been published by one of the most relevant centers of American Studies in Hungary and was edited by prominent experts on the field. Consequently, both the conference and the publication itself provides the public with a profoundly comprehensive, yet unique understanding of the 1950s' USA. What makes this collection of twenty-five papers special for the Hungarian public as well as for international readers is the particular Hungarian context from which most researchers had viewed the given time period. People of our fathers' generation as well as ours have cherished long untold questions related to the hard-to-comprehend complexities of reality in the 1950s not only in post-war USA but also in the troubled waters of post-war Hungary. Some authors have provided us with interesting insights into the socio-cultural and political background of daily life and arts, while others addressed more abstract issues that have proved to be truly important factors shaping daily reality.

Since the publication has been devoted to the memory of Robert Creeley (1926–2005), poet critic and late keynote lecturer of the conference, the publishers committed their work to an aesthetic heritage of the 1950s, too, in the course of which, as Creeley himself claims, too, the period of a significant collective change is investigated thoroughly from various historical, political, sociological, film and literary

perspectives. Both Creeley and Clive Bush highlighted the change of viewpoint reflected in poetry of the 1950s, especially in Allen Ginsberg's arts and underlined the exciting correlations between the social changes and those visible in poetry.

Discussing another major shaper of consciousness of the given period, i.e. Tocqueville, Matthew Mancini sums up the essential feature of the decade as follows: "The 1950s are often seen as a paradigmatic era of the Great Forces, a time when a devastated Japan and prostrate Europe left the world stage to two great antagonists, the United States and the Soviet Union; and when in the United States itself a kind of complacent mediocrity was said to characterize historical and many other kinds of scholarship about America (28)." On the contrary, the present book contains a number of invaluable scholarly essays that explore the daily reality as well as the relevant currents of thought in the 1950s, such as András Csillag's paper who raises the question of courage or collective responsibility with some regards to the news coverage of McCarthyism, the power and manipulation of/by the media. Csillag argues that "the media lived off the witch-hunters. The press flocked to McCarthy because he was bizarre, unpredictable, entertaining and always newsworthy (54)." He was manipulative but always accessible, a "political monster (55)" whose downfall was due to televised Senate investigations into the army. Similarly, Ágnes Kakasi's rather short but interesting treatise on propaganda films in Hungary and USA 1948–1953 underlines the non-artistic purposes of film makers who created movies as means of agitation against the "western enemy" with a rich hierarchy of good and bad characters and a "sub-textual message (112)" that in fact the reader might have been provided some more details of... Another thought-provoking essay in line with the above mentioned ones is Sarolta Marinovits's writing that contains interesting recognitions related to the correlations among 1950s family life, gender roles, social structure and prestige, class and literary interests. The author refers to the Pink Think movement, the ideological tuning of femininity and explains how it has changed the general *oeuvre* of the decade.

As for gender roles and public image making in the 1950s, the mention of one of the most charismatic personalities of the period is indispensable, and that is analyzed in Gyöngyi Fekete's great essay on the definition of gender with some regards to Elvis Presley, the King of pop music. Fekete argues that Elvis is a "renegotiation of gender (150)", an oscillating figure, a crossover between old and new generation concepts of maleness.

“Elvis became a potential role model for those seeking to experiment with new, or previously marginalized cultural forms [...] challenging some of the major American cultural myths and calling attention to their interconnectedness (154).”

Another essay that examines gender roles, their manipulation and the daily reality of the 1950s is Donald E. Morse’s “Sterile Men and Nuclear Vacuum Cleaners: The Atomic Bomb and Atomic Energy in the 1950s.” The telling title opens the stage for a very personal, often humorous and smart view on the shared inspirations, feelings, fears for millions related to the Cold War and its daily reality, the combination of satire and Dooms Day mentality that boils down to gallows humor in literature such as Pat Frank’s *Mr. Adam* (1946).

Much less on the humorous side, Géza Jeszenszky’s essay poses one of the most disturbing questions for many Hungarians in the last 50 years: “Did the United States let down Hungary in 1956?” As a fellow Hungarian and researcher of American culture, this question has popped up a number of times to me, too, not as an accusation of any sort but rather as a challenge to the international image the U.S. has created in the second half of the 20th Century. Another equally disturbing political issue is the infamous Imre Nagy funeral that Karl Beltinger analyzes on the basis of the general atmosphere of the period and people’s doubts and fallen faith in the fundamental legal and political institutions, as well as the mindscape of political manipulators, revolutionists and victims. Edit Zsadányi explains the latter and the problem of Americanisms in the 1950s in her essay on Erzsébet Galgóczi’s novel entitled *Vidravas* as follows: “The taste of America tastes diversely in different cultures. In Hungary, smoking an American cigarette had a unique meaning in the 1950s, which is hardly understandable from the present point-of-view. We still reproduce ways of thinking, patterns of behavior and problem-solving methods that root in the terror of the fifties. Though the traces of the fifties are still with us, we do not have the feeling of this period any more: the constant fear, the uncertainty, the irrationality of every day life (133).”

Post-war othering dissent in U.S. literature and films is explored in numerous papers, such as Irén Annus’s treatise on Pollock and McCartysm, the Other in the regime of the 1950s; two essays on Charles Olson’s poetry by Enikő Bollobás and László Munteán; Csaba Csapó’s writing on Zen Buddhism and Salinger’s religious mysticism, practice, experience over faith, illumination, revelation along with the American

context of Buddhism of the 1950s, calling for an exciting example of a short story entitled “Teddy”; two essays on the “ambiguous male” addressed in some Tennessee Williams dramas and their movie versions, with their possible sociopolitical implications: Réka Cristian’s essay, which highlights some textual strategies in Williams’s dramas, while Zoltán Dragon identifies the “blind spots”, the so-called “optical unconscious”, i.e. the strategy of absence enforcing the emphasis on the missing content, taboos, namely rape, homosexuality as perversion and nymphomania. Mária Kurdi calls attention to Lillian Hellman’s “critically under-read” *The Lark*, discussing McCarthyism, witch hunt and gender othering strategies and she claims that “The Lark reclaims the female heroine as an individual who ekes out a measure of freedom for herself to influence the ways she should be remembered and represented, focusing on the rights McCarthyism was shadowing (131).” This strategy of giving a different voice to previously unvoiced or manipulated voices from the past is quite similar to the story of Katherine Tekakwitha, the Mohawk Saint in Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* and many other pieces of historiographic metafiction.

Mentioning history, another important scholarly perspective also appears on the palette of the currents of thought related to the 1950s, and that is Daniel Boorstin and the Consensus School of historiography in Csaba Lévai’s paper, as well as Éva Eszter Szabó’s paper on Latin-American and U.S. relations of the 1950s, which is a logically constructed explanation of the development and context, pitfalls and cornerstones of U.S. foreign politics. Furthermore, the reader is also provided with an insight into national defense education by Sándor Czeglédi, who indicates how close-knit the relationship was between education policy and legislation in the decade, while Judit Szatmári calls attention to a less analyzed aspect of American culture of the 1950s, and that is the problem of American Indian policy and the so-called “citified Indians”, the relocation of Native Americans with all the concomitant burning issues of civil rights, financial (in)security and the achievements of urban Indian self-help groups.

As the reader can see, this publication provides us with a rich and colorful collection of scholarly perspectives on the 1950s’ USA as well as a few useful hints on U.S. and Hungarian political and cultural relations that all seem to make up for some earlier blind spots and obscure areas of the field.