

Vashegyi, Ágnes. Kisantal, Tamás and Anna Menyhért, eds. *Művészet és Hatalom. A Kádár-korszak Művészete* [Art and Power. Art During the Kádár-Epoch]. Budapest: L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2005. Pp. 190. AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 5 (2012): <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-5-2012>

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*Művészet és Hatalom. A Kádár-korszak Művészete* [Art and Power. Art during the Kádár-Epoch] is a selection of papers presented at a conference under the same title on October 1 and 2 in 2004 at the Petőfi Literary Museum in Budapest in association with the József Attila Kör [Attila József Circle]. Although the book was published a few years ago, in 2005, its importance lies in the cultural studies approach used that presents a process of memory reconstruction in contemporary Hungary. The editors of the volume, Tamás Kisantal and Anna Menyhért, organized the essays about the Kádár era in three main categories, starting with “Irodalompolitika és irodalmi élet a Kádár-korszakban” [“The Politics of Literature and Literary Life during the Kádár-Epoch”], then “A művészi megszólalásmód és a politika—Képzőművészet, színház és film a Kádár-korban” [“The Modes of Artistic Expression and Politics—Fine Art, Theater and Film During the Kádár-era”], and finally “Mátyás királytól a rockzenéig—A korszak tömegkultúrája” [“From Mathias Rex to Rock Music—The Epoch’s Mass Culture”], all of which orient readers to specific topics. More precisely, the topics include literature, theater, film, architecture, popular music, and aspects of mass culture. All-in-all, the material of the volume is rather heterogeneous, which alludes to, although without explicitly emphasizing, the heterogeneity of Kádár’s reign from November 4, 1956 until May 22, 1988, during which period he occupied the position of the general secretary [viz. First and Chief] of the MSZMP [Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party] and also served as the Prime Minister of Hungary. The authors of the essays represent both the older generation of Hungarian academia who lived and experienced the Kádár-Epoch and also much younger scholars who most likely have encountered the era through the recollections of others. This intergenerational approach offers a fascinating perspective for the scholars involved in the creation of the volume and for the interested readers. My review offers a rather selective introduction to the volume by highlighting a few of the articles with a particular attention to literature.

The title of the opening essay of the volume, “Cipő fűzővel: A hatalom és az irodalmi elit a hetvenes években” [“Shoe with Laces: Power and the Literary Elite in the Seventies”] by Éva Standeisky, a political history professor, contains a double entendre that alludes to the political and economic constraints of the era’s literary scene. The laces may symbolize the bars on a prison window and a shoe that may be left unlaced, that is, left to its own worth without any enforced bind. In turn, Standeisky points to a self-propagated ambivalence in Party politics with reference to literature because, traditionally, writers and poets played a significant role in keeping the nation’s conscience alive in politics and culture, which during the pre-1989 years was the domain of the government. In order to eschew a cultural crisis in literature, politicians afforded many of the literati with leniency who often had its eyes on Western and alternative influences. Standeisky explains how by luring writers and poets, such as József Darvas, Gyula Illyés, Tibor Déry, Imre Sarkadi and Erzsébet Galgóczi among others into the ranks of Party membership the Socialist Party cultural leaders admittedly shifted gear from force, fear mongering and incarceration of the challenging literary figures to the clever tactics of “ostor és mézesmadzag” [“whip and carrot”] to keep them at bay, a technique that benefited both groups (14). Divergent expressions of the cultural mode of production from alternative, avant-garde to socialist realist merits were played out in a dynamic public domain under the permissive gaze of the

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government. Standeisky argues that the elevated position which the literati elite attained for themselves was rather an illusion; most of them, while believing that they were independent agents of their own beliefs more often than not succumbed to Party ideologies and praxis. We learn from the essay that writers who were seeking recognition felt inclined to associate themselves with the superstructure, and in turn, the power elite took them under their guardianship while also playing the different camps against each other.

Veteran literary scholar, Dávid Szolláth's paper engages the identity struggles of Erzsébet Galgóczi. His reading of Galgóczi's correspondence and diary entries from the early 1950s until her death in 1989 portrays the figure of a writer with a social conscience. Galgóczi envisioned an imaginary community of Hungarians as represented by communist writers. However, this imaginary community was forged and upheld by the kind of Party ideology and praxis, which could be turned against each other. Gleaning from the author's notes, Szolláth suggests that Galgóczi saw her role as a writer not only in being the voice for the entire community but also a subjective voice of a woman, furthermore, a lesbian woman author. Taking on these multiple roles proved to be a formidable task for Galgóczi and she experienced conflict. As Szolláth explains, Galgóczi's difficulties occurred due to incompatible expectations that rose from the various positions she held in society, both in the public and private spheres. Her conflict as an author rose from her position as a working-class author ["munkásíró"] and the burden of such status in the political sphere whereby she came to recognize the enemy of the state in herself. The role of the working-class author for Galgóczi meant a metamorphosis from peasant to worker and from worker to a writer who holds power to forge a better future for the community at large. A similar transmutation from a working-class woman author to a feminist lesbian author proved to be, however, a more challenging mission. It was this inquisitively searching voice of whether to take on responsibility for the people as a whole or for the individual author only which had given impetus and focus in Galgóczi's oeuvre.

Péter Szirák analyzes the Hungarian-Jewish hyphenated identity in the Kádár-Epoch, pre-facing his essay by referring to how to be Magyar and Jewish at once, which had become a paramount necessity of encompassing dual identities by the early 1900s. However, the subsequent policies of discrimination, anti-Semitism, and the Shoah of WWII obliterated any such relations and brought on a deep chasm between Magyars and Jews as social groups, along with self-tormenting schisms and alienation to the individual. The political power shift in Hungary after 1945 implemented a muted but all the more forceful assimilation of the Jews which Kádár's reign exacerbated with an international overtone, prohibiting most discourses about Hungary's role in the Holocaust. Kádár's state propagated blank communist identities that were neither Hungarian nor Jewish. This dogma put into practice had led to changes in Hungarianness and Jewishness that eradicated earlier alternatives or semblances for the individual and for the larger community in both groups. While under Kádár's reign one did not talk about "Jews," nevertheless in some important works the Holocaust were discussed, argues Szirák, as in Mária Ember's *Hajtűkanyar* [*Hairpin Bend*] (1977), Imre Kertész's *Sorstalanság* [*Fatelessness*] (1975), and Péter Nádas's *Egy családregény vége* [*The End of a Family Novel*] (1977). The responsibility for Jews in Hungary that the Kádárist state refused to take on, literature took up in an effort to find and renew ideals and practices of Magyar-Jewish identities and symbiosis. Another important work, László Márton's 1988 *Kiválasztottak és elvegyülők* [*The Chosen Ones and the Mixed Ones*], offers a "Jewish identity-renaissance" ["zsidó identitás-rencházsa"], explains Szirák, which fosters mutual tolerance and responsibility as a spiritual catharsis while bemoaning the regime's failure to offer reparation for the catastrophes (63). Szirák emphasizes Márton's plea to restore Magyar-Jewish

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identities not by abolishing the differences between Jews and non-Jews but by re-creating a community of fate [“sorsközösség”] based on mutually agreed upon differences without fear or a sacrifice of one’s conscience. Szirák in his article illustrates how collective memory hereby encompasses both historical and autobiographical memory, which relies on tropes as artefacts of literature serving as witness to the era.

Kádár’s socialism had culminated in paradox not only in its political ideology and what it carried out on the platform level as the practice of the socialist Party but in culture, that is, in mass culture. Socialist art was destined to create a new human being, better people for a better world, and thus its role was to become an entity from pleasure to usefulness. The younger generation scholar, Bence Tordai’s article in the last section of the volume engages the reception of the Kádár-Epoch’s mass culture from many carefully chosen angles, examining what should have existed according to the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party doctrines and what really played out in culture. Tordai reads archived files of the Party which reveal a continuous softening of dogma about culture that considers its most important task being to satisfy working Hungarians’ tastes and needs, often at the expense of allowing petit-bourgeois or kitsch influences to creep in while hiding behind slogans of the democratization of culture. Writers and artists were all familiar with the rules of the game inside a relatively sheltered domain of the super structure of society that combined both high and mass culture. As Tordai argues, the state was continually running out of its power to keep up with a balance of what socialist culture could offer to its people and what people actually wanted and created. The picture of a barren battle rises from the state files for Tordai and thus, he turns to the articles by Kádár’s chief Party ideologue on culture, György Aczél. Aczél’s comparative analyses about mass culture in socialist Hungary and in Western bourgeois societies reveals a warning about the collapse of Kádár’s politics of culture due to its ever-extending arms’ length liberalism. The seemingly invincible program of planned socialist progress lay sandwiched between the emergent mass or popular culture and the tumultuously simmering and alternating realities of subculture from avant-garde fine art, to the folk dance house movement, dissident sociological literature, and alternative rock music. Looking back from the rear-view mirror of history, Tordai talks about seeing an emancipated zone of culture and art which did not recognize itself in Kádár’s era. Culture and art strengthened each other paradoxically, leaving gaps for interpretations and definitions of mass culture and high culture. The game that took place in the superstructure was played out between *art* and *power*.

*Művészet és Hatalom. A Kádár-korszak Művészete* attempts to make sense of the heterogeneity of János Kádár’s socialist state by linking art and power as sometimes antagonistic and other times each other’s affirming entities. The essays featured in the volume are contextualized in the sort of historical memory that can be recalled, restored, and reinterpreted through our re-reading with the privilege of hindsight.