

Zita, Antonín

Summary

In: Zita, Antonín. *How we understand the beats : the reception of the beat generation in the United States and the Czech lands*. First published Brno: Filozofická fakulta, Masarykova univerzita, 2018, pp. 178-180

ISBN 978-80-210-9048-4; ISBN 978-80-210-9049-1 (online : pdf)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/138856>

Access Date: 19. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

SUMMARY

The book documents the reception of the Beat Generation writers and their work in the United States and the Czech lands, that is Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, in two different time periods – the 1950s/1960s and from the early 1990s up to now. Subsequently, by analyzing the differences and similarities between the receptions, the text comments on how an understanding and subsequent interpretations of a text are formed.

The Beats initially elicited strong responses, both favorable and unfavorable. In their home country they were often seen as representing the ethos of the young generation, which also meant that many saw them as a dangerous threat to the whole society. The Beats, with their focus on the Other America and their portrayal of drug use or homosexuality, certainly stood out in the literary production of the time. Subsequently, this led to extremely polarizing views of the Beats in which their writing often took a back seat. As a result, the Beats were often viewed as a social phenomenon rather than writers. In contrast, their readers in Czechoslovakia saw in the Beats something extremely uncommon in their own society: critical voices uninhibited by overt ideological allegiance. The general critique of the Beats – the criticism of conformity, consumerism, oppressive behavior, or institutionalized thinking – was for many truly inspiring and has left a lasting impression in the country.

Despite various controversies and difficulties, the Beats are currently more popular than at the time of their writing. American audiences hail the Beats for standing against the conservative mores of McCarthy's America and for significantly altering the consciousness of future generations. They have become important cultural icons embodying various qualities and ideals such as non-conformity, anti-capitalism, or ecological advocacy. Similarly, the Beats have reached a similar

status in the Czech Republic, often being portrayed as embodying the American desire for freedom.

Nonetheless, the reception of the Beats in the two countries varies substantially, thus showing how context and existing discourse frame the subject. The discourse surrounding the Beats in the United States focuses on their history as voices of a generation, therefore emphasizing their impact on American society, which helps shape them into cultural icons as a result. In addition, the Beats were often read in the context of juvenile delinquency and teen culture, which negatively affected their reception. In contrast, the Czech reading of the Beats mostly lacks this generational reading, focusing instead on them as critics of both Capitalism and Communism; that is critics of ideologies and overt ideological representations. By employing a comparative approach to the study of reception, the book comments on the interpretive potential of literary works – the ability to manifest themselves in different cultural settings and on the different shapes the resulting manifestations can take.

The book consists of the following chapters. Chapter I introduces the Beat Generation, discusses the text's aims, and presents its structure. Chapter II provides an overview of the literary theory framing the research and the methodology used. Chapter III contextualizes the Beats by discussing the United States of the 1950s and 1960s. Chapter IV uses this context to document the initial reception of the Beat Generation in the United States; the chapter first focuses on reviews of Jack Kerouac's work, and then continues by discussing popular representation and the resulting stereotypes of the Beats. After commenting on the portrayal of William S. Burroughs, the chapter finishes by discussing academic poetry and the New Critics and their relationship to the Beats. The following chapter analyzes the current reception of the Beats by emphasizing popular representations, obituaries, and critical interpretations. By detailing some of the current scholarship, the text shows that a notion of "Beatness" is also present in some segments of contemporary Beat Studies. Chapter VI provides an introduction to the cultural and social life in Czechoslovakia, focusing mostly on the constraints imposed upon art by socialist realism and the historical developments of the period. Chapter VII provides a detailed account of the reception of the Beats in Czechoslovakia. It does so by first analyzing the essays in the literary journal *Světová literatura*, then continues by discussing the shift in rhetoric in these studies, and finishes with an overview of Allen Ginsberg's 1965 visit and the effects the Beats had on Czechoslovakia. The current reception of the Beats in the Czech Republic is the focus of Chapter VIII. The section first analyzes various introductory materials to Beat publications and then continues by focusing mostly on Lawrence Ferlinghetti's 1998 visit and a comparison between the Beats and the Czechoslovak underground. The nature of Czech scholarship is also discussed. Finally, Chapter IX summarizes and further elaborates on the findings of the preceding chapters; the major focus of the

Summary

chapter is the difference in popular reception of the Beats, the role of a “Beat” ethos in the enduring popularity of the Beats, and the paradox of the Czechoslovak reception – that the unfree conditions of Communist Czechoslovakia actually helped the Beats to obtain a substantially more positive early reception than they had in the United States.

The book provides an insight into the manner the discourses surrounding literary texts and their writers are formed based on cultural and historical background, existing discourses, or the reading strategies and assumptions of the audience.