



## “Conrad Hilton, *Be My Guest* and American Popular Culture”

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### ABSTRACT

Hotels are popular settings in European and American literature. They fire readers' imagination and many of them have a personal relationship to hotels. These institutions are not only alive in the realm of literature but are real existing buildings which have become fixed parts of modern society. Conrad Hilton (1887–1979), founder of the international hotel chain of the same name, was very aware of the glamorous aspects of his field of profession and published his experiences in the autobiography *Be My Guest* (1957). One copy of the book was placed in each room of the Hilton chain. Due to this Hilton was reaching an enormous audience which inspired other writers to fictionalize Hilton and turn him into a character in their own books. In this paper I will show how Conrad Hilton achieved world-wide fame, partly with the help of his life account. Furthermore, the methods will be explained that he used to present himself as a prototypical American of the Cold War era. I will then focus on two fictional texts, Arthur Hailey's novel *Hotel* (1965) and the TV-show *Mad Men* (2007) by Matthew Weiner, which both incorporated Hilton as a character, yet in very different ways. The aim of this article is to show the potential of celebrity autobiographies to inspire other cultural creations and how authors react very differently to these texts according to their own socio-historical background.

### SUMMARY IN GERMAN

Hotels sind ein beliebter Schauplatz in der europäischen und amerikanischen Literatur. Nicht zuletzt, weil jeder Leser eine persönliche Vorstellung und oft auch Beziehung zum Hotel hat. Denn Hotels beflügeln nicht nur die Fantasie von Schriftstellern, sie sind real existierende Orte, die fester Bestandteil unserer mobilen Gesellschaft sind. Conrad Hilton (1887–1979), Gründer der gleichnamigen internationalen Hotelkette,

war sich der Faszination seines Berufsfeldes sehr bewusst und veröffentlichte seine Erfahrungen in einer Autobiographie mit dem Titel *Be My Guest* (1957). Ein Exemplar davon lies er in jedes Zimmer seiner zahlreichen Hotels legen. Dadurch erreichte sein Lebensbericht eine ungeahnte Reichweite, die andere Schriftsteller dazu inspirierte, Conrad Hilton zu fiktionalisieren und in ihren Texten als Charakter auf sehr unterschiedliche Weise zu verwenden. In diesem Artikel möchte ich darlegen, wie Conrad Hilton nicht zuletzt durch seine Autobiographie zu einer internationalen Berühmtheit wurde und welche Methoden er verwendet, um sich klar als prototypischer Amerikaner der Kalten-Kriegs-Ära zu positionieren. Im weiteren werden zwei fiktionale Texte, der Roman *Hotel* (1965) von Arthur Hailey und die Fernsehserie *Mad Men* (2007-) von Matthew Weiner, hinsichtlich ihrer Verwendung Conrad Hiltons als Antagonist bzw. Protagonist analysiert. Ziel ist es dabei zu zeigen, welches Potenzial eine Prominentenautobiographie zur Inspiration für künstlerisches Schaffen in sich tragen und wie unterschiedlich Autoren auf Grund ihres gesellschaftshistorischen Hintergrundes auf diese Texte reagieren.

**Keywords:** Conrad Hilton, Hotel, Celebrity Autobiography, Cold War, Arthur Hailey, *Mad Men*.

## INTRODUCTION

Early this year, German television channel ZDF broadcast one of its famous 3-episode, made-for-TV movies, *Das Adlon*. The story of this world famous German hotel told over several decades, focusing on the atmosphere and details of hotel life was a great hit with critics and viewers. The mix of auto/biographical facts from the owner's family, combined with a fictional plot fascinated the audience. Supported by the German Emperor, Lorenz Adlon opened the eponymous hotel in 1907, providing the perfect stage for Prussian high society. Yet, Adlon is not the only hotel man who made it on TV recently. In the highly acclaimed TV show *Mad Men*, Matthew Weiner, the creator of this hit series, presented his own, American, hotel mogul Conrad Hilton. In 1958, Hilton opened one of the first Hilton International Hotels in West Berlin not far from the Adlon. *Mad Men*, which is also highly praised in the European press,<sup>1</sup> is currently broadcast in German free TV in its fourth season on ZDFneo. "It's my purpose in life to bring America to the world" (Meroney 2009) says Conrad Hilton, played by the actor Chelcie Ross, to Don Draper in the AMC success TV-series *Mad Men*. For this 1960s inspired show Conrad Hilton, "a real business man" (Meroney 2009) as the *Wall Street Journal* headed a profile of him on account of his role in the show, is a reality-based character and plays quite an important role in six episodes of season three. But what made Hilton

still such an icon that a TV-series would take an interest in him as a character in the year 2009? Some of it can be accounted for by the dazzling personality of Hilton. He achieved a level of popularity in America that encouraged people to give him a role in a *Batman and Robin* comic strip (making him an ally to those two super heroes) (Hilton Worldwide 2012). He was guest in several TV-shows, as, for instance, in *What's my line* where he was the mystery guest. Hilton made it twice on to the cover of *Time Magazine*, which awarded him with the title of "Innkeeper of the world" (cover of *Time Magazine*, July 19, 1963). He was even honored by his home state of New Mexico with a Conrad Hilton Day. I argue, however, that the roots for most of the success of Hilton in popular culture lay in his autobiography and how it presents him as an American icon. In this article I focus on Conrad N. Hilton's autobiography *Be My Guest*, published in 1957, examining what kind of strategies he used in his life narrative as well as in its publication process to present himself as the quintessential American. In addition I will show how the success of Hilton's life account encouraged writers to use his text as an inspiration for their own works of art. Two cultural texts will be used to support my reasoning, the novel *Hotel* (1965) written by Arthur Hailey and the TV-series *Mad Men* (2007 to present) created by Matthew Weiner.

The genre of life writing has been popular in American culture since the beginnings of the American Colonies. With *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791) the genre even found entrance into the literary canon where it was later joined by other famous life accounts, as, for instance, by Henry Adams and Walt Whitman. Since the 1970s many scholars, who do research in the field of autobiography, have pointed out the strong tie between life narratives and American culture. For Robert F. Sayre the fascination of life narratives in American studies derives from the historical bond between America and the autobiography (1980, p. 147). Sayre compares the writing of an autobiography to the building of an American "House" of civilization. The house analogy fits very well when one discusses the life account of an hotelier. Sayre furthermore states that "[...] the achievement of [American] autobiography is different from the autobiographies of other nations simply in the degree to which Americans are and are not different. [...] American autobiographers have generally connected their own lives to the national life or to national ideas". Quoting F. Scott Fitzgerald, he suggests they display a distinctive "willingness of heart" which makes them really American (Sayre 1980, p. 149). America here is seen as a place that offers opportunities and rewards to those brave enough to dream of a better life. This is the vision that the writers want to achieve: "a sense that an American life should not be confining, that it ought to be adventurous, open, and free" (p. 165).

THE ORIGINAL: *BE MY GUEST* BY CONRAD HILTON

Even the greatest critics of Conrad N. Hilton have to grant him this “willingness of heart” which enabled him to develop from a traffic-and-trader’s son in the Territory of New Mexico to a multi-millionaire and one of the most influential business men of America in the 20th century. Conrad N. Hilton was born in San Antonio, Socorro County, Territory of New Mexico, in 1887 and died 1979 in Santa Monica, California, and is the founder of the Hilton Hotels Chain. Hilton Worldwide owns almost 4,000 hotels in 84 countries and is one of the largest private companies in the USA. In his autobiography he connects himself closely to his understanding of American nationhood and his hotels are for him tools to fulfill his mission of bringing America to the world. Two biographies, showing his importance and that of his hotel for America, were published in his life time. “[T]o set down [his] personal recollections and philosophy”, he himself added two autobiographies. I will focus on his first autobiography, *Be My Guest* from 1957.

While he was not the first hotelier to publish the story of his life’s success,<sup>2</sup> Hilton’s text appears to be more readable and his position in American high-society of the 1950s and 1960s makes it more interesting than those of other corporate bosses. Furthermore, his strategies are quite unique as I will explain in the following.

In *Be My Guest* the reader can find at least three “classic” American topoi that Hilton uses to present himself as a true American: the topos of the American Dream, the topos of Manifest Destiny and Expansionism and finally, fitting the historical context, the topos of Anti-Communism and almost aggressive patriotism. These topoi will be analyzed in detail in the following.

From the first chapter onwards Hilton invokes the importance of dreaming to his life’s success. At the moment of his greatest success, the silver anniversary of his beloved Waldorf-Astoria, he gives “thanks, not for the Waldorf, but for the All-American right to dream with the actual possibility of seeing that dream come true” (Hilton 1957, p. 22). Throughout the book, his dreams increase with him growing up. While at the beginning his dreams are still limited to his home town of Socorro, at the end he titles chapters with the statements “The Sky Is The Limit” and “Horizons Unlimited”, testifying to the bigness of his dream. His formula to success he boils down for his sons (and the reader) to: “You had to dream! [...] [I]t’s where I started” (p. 21). In addition to the repetition of the importance of dreaming, he again and again points out that this dreaming is tightly connected to America, this nation for which he feels an “almost boyish love” (p. 21). The reason for this love “isn’t because she [America]

doesn't ask for sacrifices[,]” but because the American way of life “offered me the freedom to crawl back up and eventually push out my horizons as far as my vision and strength would carry me” (p. 23). This patriotic passion encouraged him to spread American culture across the globe, a point that I will discuss later.

In addition to stressing the importance of dreaming, Hilton also employs representational techniques derived from famous American autobiographical and fictional models, such as Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*. Benjamin Franklin is often called the epitome of the self-made man and functions as a role model for achieving the American Dream. Horatio Alger's fictional self-made man, on the other hand, provides the fictional fantasies of this dream. Alger is the author of about a hundred formulaic novels for boys that always focus on a young poor protagonist who rises in society through bravery, honesty and hard work. The phrase “from rags to riches” famously derives from Alger's fourth novel *Ragged Dick*, published in 1868. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson state in their book *Reading Autobiography* the “contemporary fascination with life narratives derives [...] from the power of an ideology of individualism and its cultural hold on us – and Americans in particular are attracted to Horatio Alger-esque fantasies of the self-made individual” (Smith and Watson 2001, p. 109). Even though Hilton does not directly refer to Horatio Alger or his *Ragged Dick* stories in the text he clearly uses some of Alger's narrative strategies to shape his life account. He puts special focus on his rugged individualism and emphasizes his rise from (almost) rags to riches by returning to his humble beginnings as the son of a pioneer in the Territory of New Mexico. His rough westernness and his lack of formal education is something he plays with while never letting it appear to be a disadvantage. Furthermore, he repeatedly invokes the importance of honesty and honest behavior in his text as it is one of his special ingredients of his recipe for success. Aware of the risks of being too candid, he states: “If, in the course of my own life, I have lost some small things by carrying my regards for the truth to an excess; [...] I can only believe I have gained greater things by it than I have ever lost” (Hilton 1957, p. 53). Thus for him, as for *Ragged Dick*, honesty carries great weight. This is, furthermore, meant to convince the reader of his perfect suitability as a morally acceptable role model. It might, however, also seem too good to be true, a consideration which will be discussed later in connection to Hailey's parody of Hilton in *Hotel* (1965).

In addition to this fictional role model, Hilton also seemingly cross-references his text with Benjamin Franklin's autobiography. Similarly to Franklin, it was not so much his own sons that Hilton wanted to instruct with his text (they had already grown into manhood and were very successful

themselves); rather, it was mostly written for the new generation of young people willing to enter the world of professional hospitality.<sup>3</sup> This didactic purpose can be seen in the last nine pages of Hilton's life narrative. Here he presents his so called ten "ingredients" to live a successful life, because to him "There Is An Art To Living" (Hilton 1957, p. 279):

Find your own particular talent

Be Big: Think Big. Act Big. Dream Big

Be Honest

Live with Enthusiasm

Don't let your possessions possess you

Don't worry about your problems

Don't cling to the past

Look up to People when you can – down to no one

Assume your full share of responsibility for the world in which you live

Pray Consistently and Confidently.

This catalogue reminds one of Franklin's 13 virtues. The purpose here is quite similar to the one 200 years before, to instruct younger generations of upstanding Americans to become successful members of society. Hilton explains each ingredient from his point of view and sometimes stresses their Americanness by using quotes and examples from famous Americans like Frank Woolworth and President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Here again we find the topos of the American Dream which runs like a red thread through the whole text.

The second American topos which Hilton employs in his autobiography, is Manifest Destiny, the belief that US expansion is God-given, just, and inevitable. Here it is expressed in the rightness of the expansion of the American way of life to all nations of the world. For Hilton the American way of life is deeply rooted in its economic system of free capitalism. His conviction of the rightness of capitalism can be seen, for example, in his professional development. On his way to finding his calling he tried out the professions of salesman, politician and especially banker, the most capitalist profession of all. Only seemingly by a stroke of fate (at least this is how he describes it in his text) he found that his talents lay in the field of commercial hospitality. Yet, he displayed a more capitalist attitude towards hospitality than most hotel owners had before him. He reduced "waste space" (p. 113) in all of his hotels (even in the Waldorf-Astoria), meaning space that is not yet used commercially to its fullest; as, for example, he closed the dining room in his first hotel to move in beds and he opened his lobbies for rented out shops.

After recovering from the worst blows of the Great Depression (where he indeed went broke) he uses New Deal methods and the spirit of American capitalism to return to the path of success by buying Depression

“White Elephants”, hotels that became ownerless or went into the hands of inexperienced people. Tied in with his capitalist methods is also an expansionist streak. While before the Great Depression he manages to build a little hotel chain across Texas, after it he builds a hotel empire across the whole nation. The profitability of his chain is based to a measurable degree on mass purchasing and a certain standardization which makes each hotel easily recognizable as a Hilton. With the help of the State Department and the Department of Commerce Hilton’s company then also crosses national borders. This move is founded on strong economic and ideological notions because the Departments

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suggested that the Hilton organization could make a substantial contribution to the government program of Foreign Aid by establishing American-operated hotels in important world cities. These hotels could stimulate trade and travel, bringing American dollars into the economies of the countries needing help. Besides, and this pleased me most especially, they felt that such hotels would create international good will. (p. 233)

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The fitting visual representation of Hilton’s expansionistic vision for his hotel company is the map that hangs in his office “with the flags of Hilton National and International flying gaily across the world. The red flags for hotels in operation. Blue for those under construction and already contracted for. Green for hotels projected for the next five years” (p. 261). This map is the symbol of Hilton’s expansionism. Moreover, that he compares the negotiation of buying the Waldorf-Astoria with the purchase of the Alaska Territory and the Louisiana Purchase (p. 223) shows how strongly Hilton connects American master narratives, especially the topos of Manifest Destiny, with his life writing. Hilton’s pride in his achievements becomes obvious in the quoted passages above. Also obvious is that with his hotels and their corporate identity he follows another, grander plan, which leads to the last topos discussed here: Anti-Communism and patriotism.

Conrad Hilton sees himself at the forefront of the fight for world peace and against communism as each of his hotels is “a ‘little America’”, seen “not as a symbol of bristling power, but as a friendly center where men of many nations and of good will may speak the language of peace” (p. 265). Similarly to the Truman Doctrine in 1947, Hilton portrays the US as the ‘friendly’ power that will act as policeman of the world for all countries endangered by communism. In his autobiography he even enters a little dialogue between himself and Lenin to strengthen this point: “Lenin, the high priest of communism, had once declared: ‘We are fighting capitalism, the free, republican democratic capitalism included, and we realize, of course that in this fight the flag of freedom will be waved defiantly

against us". (p. 261) Hilton's answer is: "We humbly believe, [...] that our Hilton house flag is one small flag of freedom which is being waved defiantly against Communism exactly as Lenin predicted. With humility we submit this international effort of ours as a contribution to world peace". (p. 261) For Hilton the fight against communism is not only an economic one, even though he calls the Berlin Hilton "the fruits of democracy displayed in their [communists'] own backyard" (p. 237). It is also a religious fight between the Believers (in his eyes all world religions; Christian, Jews and Muslims) versus the Unbelievers, that is, the communists: "The essence of Communism is death of the individual and the burial of his remains in a collective mass. [...] In this struggle for freedom, at home and abroad, our greatest weapon [...] will be our love of, and faith in, God" (p. 269). It might not come as a surprise then to learn that Hilton was a strong believer in the Catholic faith and "started every single day on [his] knees in church" (p. 150).

The strongest expression of Hilton's patriotism and the clearest attack on communism can be found in his one creation, his prayer "America on Its Knees", which he himself deemed to be his greatest achievement and "the proudest experience of my life" (p. 274). It was published nationwide on July 4, 1952 in famous magazines like the *Life* magazine, because Hilton "felt the need of re-expressing the belief of America's founders in prayer as a vital force in national life" (p. 273). While the prayer itself is quite humble, its short prologue in the ad depicts Hilton's attitude clear. The one-page advertisement states:

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#### AMERICA ON ITS KNEES

.....not beaten there by the hammer & sickle, but FREELY, INTELLIGENTLY, RESPONSIBLY, CONFIDENTLY, POWERFULLY. America now knows it can destroy communism & win the battle for peace. We need fear nothing or no one... ..except GOD (*Life* magazine, July 7, 1952).

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Hilton was not the only American of his time that felt this way. To display his attitude so publicly did certainly not hurt the reputation of the Hilton Hotel Corporation. As Annabel Jane Wharton writes, "Conrad Hilton regularly substituted prayers for advertisements" (Wharton 2001, p. 140). How successfully he portrayed himself as an American patriot is shown in the occurrence he describes two pages later which can be seen as direct consequence of his campaign. Here Hilton proudly reveals that in February 1953 he "was privileged to play host to five hundred men" who attended the first annual Prayer Breakfast at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC, the guest list including President Eisenhower and several other men "who directly or indirectly guide the destiny of our nation at home and abroad" (Hilton 1957, p. 275).

Hilton's autobiography is very much embedded in the historical site of the 1950s and its sometimes rabid anti-communism in America. He clearly represents his time and his profession which is probably the reason why he was chosen to become a character in the AMC success TV-show *Mad Men*, which prides itself on being very historically accurate in their depiction.

As mentioned above, Conrad Hilton was not the only hotelier to publish his autobiography. Even though he puts much effort into his depiction of himself as the quintessential American, his text and he himself might have vanished into oblivion without a necessary broad readership. In the following I will show how Hilton secured himself a large audience and how this strategy allowed him entry into the works of other writers and into popular culture.

From the point of view of Autobiographical Studies Hilton's life account presents a special specimen due to its peculiar distribution method. Explaining the importance of the addressee, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write that "[t]he self-narrator whose story is published cannot know who in fact her readers [...] will be" (Smith and Watson 2001, p. 68). In Hilton's case, however, the fascinating aspect is that he knew who would read his book. This is already shown in his acknowledgement in which he writes "My greatest debt, however, is to each individual who has ever been my guest in any hotel – whether in Cisco, Texas, New York or Istanbul – and to all those who will be my guests in the future. Without each and every one of them there would be no story to write" (Hilton 1957, p. 4). This gratitude is based on more than just the loose assumption that a former or future guest might pick up the book in a book store. The reason for this is that Hilton had one copy of his autobiography placed in each and every Hilton hotel room around the globe right next to a copy of the *King James's Bible* as Annabel Wharton points out in her book *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture* (2001, p. 199). That this procedure is still the case and can be seen in online blogs about literature and hotel stays, as most people who have reviewed *Be My Guest* online have picked it up by chance while staying in a Hilton hotel and due to lacking reading material.<sup>4</sup> This form of distribution has reached and still reaches a number much higher than any that could ever be achieved by even the best PR-campaigns. If people like the book or not, most read it through and are influenced by it in some way.

Due to its omnipresence in Hilton hotel rooms the outward appearance of Hilton's book also gained a certain amount of fame which justifies a short description of it here. At the moment there are two kinds of covers on the market. Even though they differ in color and style, they are similar in what they are displaying. On both covers we see the "benign" face of

Conrad Hilton smiling at the reader with the Waldorf-Astoria, "the greatest of them all" (Hilton 1957, p. 160), in the background. The goal of this image is to simultaneously display his achievements and his humbleness as a born Westerner with Stetson in hand. This image leads to Hilton's representation in popular culture and literature.

The two texts that I will focus on now, Arthur Hailey's *Hotel* and the TV-series *Mad Men* by Matt Weiner, have in common that both show direct connections to Hilton's autobiography, *Be My Guest*. Yet, the depiction of Conrad Hilton in the two texts could hardly be more different. Reasons for this can most likely be found in the personal attitude of the artists when it comes to the topics of capitalism and anti-communism, as well as in the different time periods in which their texts were created. I will now discuss them chronologically here.

#### CRITICISM IN THE 1960S: CONRAD HILTON IN *HOTEL* BY ARTHUR HAILEY

Not all representations of Hilton in popular culture were of a positive kind. In 1965 Arthur Hailey published his novel *Hotel*, which became a world-wide bestseller and was made into a film and a successful TV-series. The book focuses on the daily occurrences in the St. Gregory hotel over the course of a week. This grand old hotel is, due to similar old-fashioned methods, close to bankruptcy and in danger of being sold to the sterile O'Keefe hotel chain. The owner of this chain, Curtis O'Keefe visits the hotel with the clear purpose of buying it and turning into another standardized accommodation block. At the end the hotel is saved from this fate by an eccentric millionaire, while O'Keefe is humbled by the consequences of a terrible elevator accident in the St. Gregory hotel which is the climax of the book. Arthur Hailey modeled the antagonist of his story, Curtis O'Keefe, only "thinly disguised" (Wharton 2001, p. 190) on Conrad Hilton and the presentation of himself in his autobiography. A short quote shows that quite effectively because as O'Keefe enters the St. Gregory Hotel, a hotel which he wishes to buy, a staff member asks: "'Excuse me, sir, Mr. Curtis O'Keefe?'" The hotelier nodded, with a hovering half smile, his face composed, the same face which beamed benignly from a half-million book jackets of *I am Your Host*, a copy placed prominently in every hotel room of the O'Keefe chain" (Hailey 1974, p. 90). The similarities to Hilton's *Be My Guest* are very obvious. The title of O'Keefe's autobiography seems synonymous<sup>5</sup> with that of Hilton's own life account, the cover representation fits to a T and even Hilton's distribution technique is included here. Hailey was famous for diligently researching his topics before starting

to write. For *Hotel* he is said to have read 27 books on the hotel industry to present a depiction which was supposed to be as realistic as possible (O'Donnell 2004, p. 2004). The parody of Hilton does not stop here. Before O'Keefe even enters the hotel we learn more of his peculiar behavior through the narrated gossip of the hotel employees:

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Curtis O'Keefe, he [Peter McDermott, assistant manager and main protagonist of the novel] remembered, was notably devout – at times, some said, to the point of ostentation. The hotelier prayed frequently, sometimes in public. One report claimed that when a new hotel interested him he prayed for it as a child did for a Christmas toy; another, that before negotiations a private church service was held which O'Keefe executives attended dutifully. The head of a competitive hotel chain, Peter recalled, once remarked unkindly, 'Curtis never misses an opportunity to pray. That's why he urinates on his knees' (Hailey 1974, p. 87).

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The comment at the end is a particularly biting satire and shows the narrator's, if not also the author's, dislike of Hilton. From the autobiography it is known that Hilton prayed regularly during business negotiations, though not to that extent. This religious element is stressed several times more in the story, as in "[a] he did most mornings, Curtis O'Keefe showered first and prayed afterwards" (Hailey 1974, p. 167).

Another typical characteristic of Hilton that is ridiculed in the book is his weakness for beautiful women. Hilton at one point was married to Zsa Zsa Gabor, the famous Hollywood diva. In the novel this background information is picked up and transformed in the following way: "O'Keefe was seldom without a feminine escort on his travels, the composition of the escort changing frequently" (p. 86). His current one is a girl called Dodo, blond and beautiful, but somewhat dumb, of whom an O'Keefe Hotels manager declared: "'Her brains are in her tits; only trouble is, they're not connected'" (p. 91). Yet, as we learn shortly afterwards, O'Keefe already thinks of dispensing with Dodo soon, after arranging for her to get a supporting role or two in Hollywood (p. 91). Again, the portrayal does not shed a friendly light on Hilton. It uses information from his autobiography but stylizes it in such a fashion as to fit the negative image O'Keefe will portray.<sup>6</sup>

For large parts of the book this character functions as the stereotypical ruthless super-businessman, yet he is more than just a stock figure. Hilton's fictional alter-ego is also used as a critical comment on big business and the tense political situation of the 1960s. As a final point, I want to discuss one more passage which very clearly shows how diligently Hailey used Hilton's life account for the creation of his character O'Keefe and how he expresses his criticism through the depiction of the businessman:

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Curtis O’Keefe had never understood the point, which his critics made, that it was possible to travel around the world, staying at O’Keefe Hotels without ever leaving the U.S.A. Despite his attachment to foreign travel, he liked familiar things about him – America décor, with only minor concessions to local color; American plumbing; American food and – most of the time – American people. O’Keefe establishments provided them all (p. 275).

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This quote comes quite close to Hilton’s dream of planting a bit of America everywhere around the world with his hotels. Also, the issue of standardization, an important aspect of the Hilton hotel chain, is picked up here. However, in Hilton’s life account more thought is given to the particular region the hotels are built in than the quote above allows. The arrival of O’Keefe marks the entrance of faceless, heartless and unscrupulous big business in the old-fashioned world of the St. Gregory Hotel:

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“You can sum it up in three words”, Curtis O’Keefe declared, “what the public expects nowadays from a hotel: an ‘efficient economic package’”. But we can only achieve it if we have effective cost accounting of every move [...]; [...] which means automation, eliminating people and old-style hospitality wherever possible (p. 142).

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Chain hotels are seen as the incarnation of evil business in the novel. In his vision of the hotel of the future, Hilton states in *Be My Guest* that prices need to be watched and mass purchasing is a key to profit, but adds that “comfort and warmth are not [to be] sacrificed” (Hilton 1957, p. 258). He even advocates “individual personality, geared to the demands of its particular city or country” (p. 259) in future hotels. Wharton comments on the contrast between the old-fashioned but original St. Gregory Hotel and the streamlined O’Keefe hotels:

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In the novel, traditional values associated with individualism – acted out in the refined desires of the consumer and acknowledged by the manager – are coded in the spatial opulence of the St. Gregory. In contrast, the Modernity of the O’Keefe hotel represents the corporate uniformity that is expected by its banal patrons (Wharton 2001, p. 191).

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The text reveals a deep fear and distrust of big corporations and early globalization. Hilton, as one of the first business leaders working towards the goal of connecting the world via one company, seems to be a fitting representative onto whom those fears could be projected. To a certain extent *Hotel* is in this an archetypal text of the 1960s. In the book big business is seen as evil, overly-confident patriotism is viewed very skeptically, racial tensions are an important part of the plot and the situation of women, alternating between sex kitten and equal partner, is also highlighted.

To sum it up, from the above-mentioned quotes it is apparent that O'Keefe is a satirized version of Hilton's own portrayal in his autobiography. In *Hotel*, which was published only 8 years after Hilton's autobiography, it becomes clear that the image Hilton creates for himself, based often on coalescing clichés is not taken favorably by everyone. The power of big business, which he represented, scared people. This made it possible for Hailey to create a convincingly menacing antagonist for his novel, modeled on Conrad Hilton.

#### SATIRE AND IDOLIZATION?: CONRAD HILTON AND *MAD MEN*

Matt Weiner, the creator of the TV-series *Mad Men*, has a different approach to Hilton, as can be seen in the way he incorporated the hotelier in his show. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* Weiner describes his growing fascination with Conrad Hilton after Hilton executives presented him with a copy of *Be My Guest*, since they believed in the potential of Hilton as a fictionalized character for the show set in the 1960s. In order to create this reality-based character the show's creators consulted Mark E. Young who is the director of the Hospitality Industry Archives at the Conrad N. Hilton College (Mayock 2012), which keeps all of Hilton's public and private papers. Dr. Young gives Chelcie Ross, the actor who plays Conrad Hilton, a "nine out of 10" for his portrayal of the hotelier and adds "I like the show because, as a historian, I see that they try to be as historically accurate as they can be" (University of Houston 2009).

Season three consists of 13 episodes, 12 of them written or co-written by Matt Weiner (AMCtv 2009). Six episodes of season three include "Connie", as he is mysteriously introduced in the third episode, "My Old Kentucky Home". In these six episodes "the charismatic character [becomes] something of a father figure for Don Draper" (Ryan 2009). Business mogul Hilton is used to convincingly explain the break between Don Draper, the star of this show, and Sterling Cooper, the advertising agency for which he works. Draper wants to win the Hilton Hotels account and even commits himself to a personal contract with Sterling Cooper, against his better judgment, to get it. Hilton's terminating his arrangements with Don after the acquisition of Sterling Cooper by a rival becomes known, then leads to Draper's leaving the company and starting an agency of his own.

During his first appearance in "My Old Kentucky Home", "Connie's" identity remains mysterious. Yet, the first conversation between Draper and the mysterious gentleman already reveals important information on his identity as the viewer learns that Connie is from "San Antonio, New Mexico, before it was a state" (Episode 3, Season 3, *Mad Men*). Furthermore, he is Republican, an old romantic and less polished than the society

people from the East depicted in this episode. All this information is in accord with the content of Hilton's autobiography. The act of giving these verifiable facts of "Connie" is especially noteworthy, since the family history of Don Draper is shrouded in mystery till the end of Season 3. Later, when the two men meet again in the Waldorf-Astoria, it is revealed that "Connie" really is Conrad Hilton (Episode 6, Season 3, *Mad Men*).<sup>7</sup> Yet, besides the confirmation by name, many additional details in the show make clear that the person, Conrad Hilton, was closely researched and his autobiography well-read. In a night-time phone call to Don, Connie asks him "Do you ever pray on a difficult project? [...] You know, God speaks to us. We have an impulse and we acted on it" (Episode 9, Season 3, *Mad Men*).<sup>8</sup> And in the same conversation the fictional Hilton adds: "It sounds like pride, but I want Hiltons all over the world, like missions. [...] America is wherever we look, wherever we are going to be" (Episode 9, Season 3, *Mad Men*). Here, the idea of little Americas, in form of Hilton Hotels across the world, is picked up as well as Hilton's religious conviction. In a meeting a night later, Connie combines again religious fervor with patriotism when he explains his vision for America to Draper: "This country is a force of good because we have God. Communists don't" (Meroney 2009).

The TV-show makes Don Draper react to Hilton's vision, when he presents his pitch for the advertisement account, saying: "Now, there is one word that promises the thrill of international travel with the comfort of home, Hilton" (Episode 9, Season 3, *Mad Men*). This slogan connects not only to Hilton's autobiography but also reminds one of the above cited quote from Hailey's *Hotel* where Hilton's preferences of all things American are expressed.

It is certainly interesting that Weiner decided to incorporate a real life person to such length in his show.<sup>9</sup> While one can only speculate about the reasons, my suggestion is that in the TV show Conrad Hilton is not only used as a reference point to fit the style and to serve the obsession for historical validity, but he presents an interesting alternative to Don Draper's way of dealing with his still shady past. Hilton shows Don a different option of handling his problematic background, not seeing his poor origin as a hindrance. By functioning as a kind of father figure in Season 3 the character of Hilton gives Draper the chance to show a side of him that up to this point was hidden: a man who wants recognition by someone he accepts as his equal. This rebuff from Hilton teaches Don a lesson about big business and standing on your own two feet. He implements it and opens an agency of his own.

To conclude one can state that, on the one hand, Hilton is presented as a down-to-earth, hearty paternal figure to Don in *Mad Men*. On the

other hand, he is shown to be a shrewd and cunning business leader who never loses sight of his own goal. In the *Wall Street Journal*, Hilton's depiction in *Mad Men* is summed as follows: "To many viewers Hilton may seem unusual—and he does represent a refreshing break from Hollywood's negative depictions of corporate businessmen" (Meroney 2009). In contrast to Hailey's depiction of Hilton, in this fictive version of the 1960s he is presented as a rough but honest businessman, a person people wish for in today's uneasy economic situation. Despite the satirical elements, the depiction of Hilton seems to disclose a certain grudging admiration of Matthew Weiner for this man's achievements and the period that he influenced: "There were people like Hilton [...] and I love what he was about" (Weiner in Meroney 2009). Furthermore, actor Chelcie Ross, who portrayed the influential hotelier, explains his fascination of Hilton by saying:

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They don't get into it on the show but Conrad Hilton's private life was just about as rocky as Don's. He left behind women, he worked all the time. But his zeal for what he's doing relates to his business and his belief in God and America and what it can bring to the world. He feels that's his mission – to bring America to the world, and he has bought into it 100 percent (Ryan 2009).

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This sums up quite nicely that buying into America one hundred percent is always an ambiguous undertaking. It can make you an iconic figure and larger than life, or the arch-enemy as seen in the two different depictions of Hilton discussed in this article. With his autobiography *Be My Guest*, Hilton has set himself a monument that seems, at the moment, to be as lasting as his hotels built in stone.

Life writing was and still is immensely popular in American culture, as a look into any American book store will prove. Like Benjamin Franklin, Conrad Hilton used this genre to present himself as a successful businessman, a man with ambitions and visions which he wanted to pass on to future generations. Autobiography enabled him to present himself as true American, Hilton could construct his self according to his wishes. *Be My Guest* is an interesting example of how autobiographies can expand their sphere of influence beyond their own period, their genre and even the written medium, as *Mad Men's* depiction of the hotel man shows. Hilton's account of his life still has a strong appeal with today's writers. The fascination of Americans with self-made millionaires and their rags-to-riches stories is a love story that will not end in the years to come. Yet, as we can see Hilton's life account can be and has also been used to level criticism against the attitudes and ideology for which he stood. Seen from this view point *Be My Guest* provides rich material for further texts and discussions.

This January, the first German hotel of the luxurious Waldorf-Astoria brand, a member of Hilton Worldwide, opened in Berlin, exactly 120 years after the birth of the original one. Maybe we will find a book in the night stand there from whose cover the friendly smiling face of Conrad Hilton greets us. It just might inspire new texts.

## NOTES

- 1 Referring to *Mad Men*, *The Guardian* enthusiastically writes: "the future of American film is on television," (David Hare, "Mad Men: the future of American film is on television," *Culture. The Guardian*. Sept 8, 2010. Web.)
- 2 Several other famous hotel business leaders have done the same as, e.g. J.W. Mariott, Jr., *The Spirit to Serve* (1997), and Kemmons Wilson, founder of the Holiday Inn hotel chain, *Half Luck and Half Brains: The Kemmons Wilson, Holiday Inn Story* (1996); one might even speak of a possible subgenre of hotel autobiographies.
- 3 Cf. Franklin and the book printer apprentices, Sayre 1980, p. 158.
- 4 Don: "I found this book in my room during my latest stay at a Hilton. It is a great book. While it is intended to be Conrad's biography I found it contained many great anecdotes for life and solid principles for running a business. Great book" (Goodreads.com 2008).
- 5 One might, however, detect that while Hilton's title sounds like an invitation, the fictive title of O'Keefe's text appears to be more commanding, even menacing.
- 6 In the end of the novel, however, O'Keefe is partly redeemed when he realizes his true feelings for Dodo and stays with her, even though she was severely hurt by the dramatic elevator crash.
- 7 That "Connie" is based on Conrad Hilton has been discussed at length in blogs previous to the disclosure, which allows the assumption that Hilton's life story is known well enough to have people draw this conclusion.
- 8 This closely resembles a statement from Hilton concerning the negotiations of the Waldorf, where he writes "I still knew a visit with God in prayer was the best investment a man could make – and the one thing I couldn't do without" (Hilton 1957, p. 239).
- 9 In an interview Weiner admits that he was not sure to what extent Hilton would play a role in Season 3. He knew he wanted to incorporate him as a character and after selecting Chelcie Ross for the role was convinced that he could pull it off (Jace Jacob, "Mad Men Postmortem," *The Daily Beast*. Nov 9, 2009. Web.).

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### SHORT BIO

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