

Will Norman

Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*

Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam (eds.), *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment*

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Référence électronique

Will Norman, « Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam (eds.), *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment* », *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 1 | 2015, mis en ligne le 05 février 2016, consulté le 14 mai 2016. URL : <http://transatlantica.revues.org/7373>

Éditeur : Association française d'études américaines (AFEA)

<http://transatlantica.revues.org>

<http://www.revues.org>

Document accessible en ligne sur :

<http://transatlantica.revues.org/7373>

Document généré automatiquement le 14 mai 2016. La pagination ne correspond pas à la pagination de l'édition papier.

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- 1 The 2013 publication of a new edition of Frances Stonor Saunders' 1999 book *The Cultural Cold War* offers us an opportunity to reconsider its place in Cold War studies both when it first appeared and in the 14 years since. The story it told, of a group of intellectuals and intelligence professionals who together fought a cultural propaganda war against communism between the end of World War Two and the late 1960s, was not in itself a new one. Indeed, the final stages of her book narrate how the sordid details of this "consortium" were made public by a series of revelations across the U.S. media in 1967, culminating in the confirmation by ex-CIA agent Tom Braden in the *Saturday Evening Post* that the agency had funded large swathes of apparently autonomous cultural activity and were, as he wrote, "operating or influencing international organizations in every field."¹ Later that year, when Christopher Lasch's excoriating article for *Nation* labeled the phenomenon "the cultural cold war," it was already ossifying into a coherent narrative of deception and hypocrisy by the intellectual establishment, which resonated with the countercultural currents of the moment.² Just over twenty years later, Peter Coleman's 1989 history, *The Liberal Conspiracy*, retold some of this story from an insider's perspective, focusing on the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the organization through which the CIA had covertly extended its operations into the cultural sphere. Coleman had served as editor of the Australian journal *Quadrant*, one of the many publications that subsisted on CIA money, and by his own account his history was committed to a rehabilitation of the Congress, discredited as it had been since the revelation of its backer. Saunderson's *Cultural Cold War*, then, when it appeared another decade later, represented a return to the 1960s narrative of betrayal, but with a fresh sense of indignation brought by a new generation. Saunders was 33 when it was published, and brought a certain zeal to her mission "to record those dead spots" of history muffled in official accounts. *The Cultural Cold War* turns, ultimately, on a contradiction that lies at the heart of much scholarship on midcentury art and literature. As she writes almost exactly midway through the book, with an indignation hard to muster for most contemporary literary scholars: "How could art be autonomous on the one hand and, where convenient, pressed into political service on the other?" (211). The fudging of this question by a generation of intellectuals, its elision or deliberate misconstrual, is her true subject.
- 2 One of the most important things that has changed between the book's original publication and its reissue is that this generation has now passed away. It is one of the most valuable features of *The Cultural Cold War* that it draws heavily on interviews conducted by the author with individuals actively involved with the events it narrates, from *Encounter* editor Irving Kristol and Tom Braden himself to Diana Josselson, wife of Michael Josselson, the mastermind behind the entire operation. The personal voices provided by these interviews, along with selected quotations from private correspondence, are what give the book its special drama as well as its critical purchase. Diana Josselson, we discover at one extraordinary moment, believed the Cold War to be "like the French Revolution or the Oxford Movement. That's what it felt like" (129). Such moments are more than comic, for they serve as a salutary reminder of the ideological delusions under which key figures in the cultural Cold War labored in their day-to-day experience. "What it felt like" is an important subject we would be foolish to ignore if

we are to conceptualize that relationship between the nebulous institutions that bear agency in the cultural Cold War and the fraught individuals who made them possible.

3 Saunderson's new preface, the only fresh material added to the 2013 edition, situates the book's research and composition at the precise moment when the generation of Kristol, Josselson, Braden et al. was in its twilight. She recalls with barely-concealed pride the stir that *The Cultural Cold War* created on publication – a flighty walk-out by Henry Kissinger during a radio discussion, the rejection of the manuscript at a late stage by the publisher worried that it was unfairly judgmental about the United States, and even the threat of a brawl at one publishing event. Those anecdotes already belong to history, and to a moment when the stakes, both political and personal, just ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, were still high. Now, with the book's key sources passed away and the dramas of midcentury largely beyond living memory, they seem strangely implausible. In another sense, though, our estrangement from the structures narrated in *The Cultural Cold War* is due not to the distance we feel from them, but to their extreme proximity. At one moment we hear Mary McCarthy's voice in a letter to Hannah Arendt: "The great effort of this new Right is to get itself accepted as normal . . . and this, it seems to me, must be scotched, if it's not already too late" (174). The fact is that, despite the revelations of late 1960s and the rise of the New Left, it was too late and is still too late today. As Saunders herself explains, the cultural Cold War did not simply end because of the revelations – rather it shamelessly continued. The myth of an autonomous and disinterested culture existing separate from the interests of capital, tenuously maintained during the Cold War, seems now hopelessly dated. As Saunders recounts in her new preface, the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown told her at a 2007 reception that he "read the book with great interest and thought that a program of cultural warfare would be a very good thing" (xiii). The misunderstanding is symptomatic of how the book's expose of manipulation has become, in the era of undisguised political spin and mass surveillance, rather humdrum.

4 Despite this problem, the melodramatic spirit of the narrative quickly becomes infectious. Peter Brooks' classic formulation of the "melodramatic imagination" in the "nineteenth-century" novel is apposite here, for Brooks claims that melodrama "strives to find, to articulate, to demonstrate, to 'prove' the existence of a moral universe which, though put into question, masked by villainy and perversion of judgment, does exist and can be made to assert its presence and its categorical force among men."³ For the key characters in Saunders' account, the cultural Cold War was often imagined in precisely these terms, and its worst deceptions justified through reference to an ultimately Manichean vision in which "neutralism" (the attitude of wavering liberals) could be unmasked as Communist villainy and a universe of moral justice made accessible to those with the will to act on their convictions. Thus did the most ardent Cold Warriors in the book – Melvin Lasky, Sidney Hook, Diana Trilling – conceive of their place in the world. James Burnham, we discover, even extended this melodramatic logic to nuclear weapons, among which he discerned "good" and "bad" atom bombs. If this were all, *The Cultural Cold War* would remain an entertaining if unsophisticated account. Saunders' achievement, however, is to frame the melodramatic imagination of the midcentury intellectual establishment with the conventions of another genre, the hardboiled detective story. Just as in classic hardboiled fiction the ethical contours of modern America are gradually flattened in the course of the plot to the point where the innocent and guilty become indistinguishable, so in the drama of *The Cultural Cold War* do all the supporting cast become ultimately complicit in maintaining the grand conspiracy. "Not all of them were 'witting' in the sense that they were active participants in the deception," Saunders admits, "but they all *knew*, and had for some time" (332). Ultimately it is only such fine distinctions of omission and inaction within the broader parameters of institutional complicity that the detective is left to make in the Cold War world.

5 Special mention must be made, however, of Nicolas Nabokov, cousin of the more famous Vladimir, and the inaugural President of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Nabokov represents in this narrative a prototype for the kind of player that came to thrive later in the era: charming, duplicitous and self-promoting, a talentless composer who was nevertheless

perfectly adapted for success in the postwar cultural field by virtue of his access to prestige and his understanding of the rules of the game. Saunders is clear that he knew his congress was a CIA front from the beginning, and enjoys relating his blithe response to the 1967 revelations: “Many of us suspected some sort of funding of this kind and it was the ‘talk of the town’ in many capitals of Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa. The point is not the funding, but what the congress has done” (333). *The Cultural Cold War* reminds us insistently, and I think rightly, that the funding *is* the point, or at least an important part of it.

6 The book’s original UK title, *Who Paid the Piper*, foregrounds better this argument that unless we begin to understand cultural labor in the post-1945 period as part of a large and complex economic system, and the artwork itself as a certain kind of commodity, then our analysis will always be circumscribed by the same ideological limits that the Cold War intellectuals mistook for the horizon of morality. Saunders argues, albeit indirectly, that what is needed is a rigorous analysis of how the production and consumption of a magazine like *Encounter* was determined by the larger institutional framework within which it sat. Such an analysis would not be interested in transparent ideological messages handed down directly from paymaster to editor to reader (this crude fantasy, incidentally, was precisely how many U.S. intellectuals conceived of communist publications). Rather it would need to grasp how a certain set of values and taboos comes to permeate, in barely discernible ways, a cultural institution of this type; a theory of cultural bureaucracy, in fact. These considerations take us beyond the Cold War itself as critical paradigm: as early as 1944, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills was already articulating the need for just such a theory:

7 When irresponsible decisions prevail and values are not proportionately distributed, you will find universal deception practiced by and for those who make the decisions and who make the most of what values there are to have. An increasing number of intellectually equipped men and women work *within* powerful bureaucracies and *for* the relatively few who do the deciding. And if the intellectual is not directly hired by such organizations, then by little steps and in may self-deceptive ways he seeks to have his published opinions conform to the limits set by them and those whom they do directly hire.⁴

8 Mills, in his own way, had conceived the critical project demanded by *The Cultural Cold War* before the fact, and there is no clearer description than in Mills’ work of the way intellectuals relinquished their autonomy in midcentury United States as a kind of coping mechanism when faced with massive structural shifts in the cultural economy. Nevertheless, *The Cultural Cold War* advocates in its own journalistic manner a sociology of literature, of the kind that has in fact become mainstream in post-1945 literary studies since its first publication. This is not to suggest that there are not important questions to which Saunders is largely indifferent. T.J. Clark’s point in *Farewell to an Idea*, published in the same year of 1999, that the cultural history of the Cold War tells us much about what Abstract Expressionism meant to the Cold War, but nothing about what the Cold War meant to Abstract Expressionists, is to be taken seriously. The task, easier said than done, is to jettison neither hermeneutics nor sociology, but instead to hold them in dialectic tension.

9 Amid the slew of more recent scholarship on the Cold War by Americanist literary scholars comes the volume of essays, *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment*. The editors themselves have both published excellent books on the subject in recent years: Daniel Grausam’s *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (2011) and Steven Belletto’s *No Accident Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War American Narratives* (2012). As they write in their introduction, the field remains in flux partly because of the way in which “the full cultural impact of the Cold War remains unprocessed” (3) in our early twenty-first century, and the book can be understood not only as a “reassessment” of earlier scholarship, as indicated by its title, but also as an attempt to settle and establish certain methodologies for dealing with a historical period that looms so large for us. Indeed, as Christine Hong argues in one of the best chapters of the book, there are some for whom the Cold War past, as in Faulkner’s famous pronouncement, is “not even past,” especially in view of the continuing war between North and South Korea. It is notable, however, that the legacy of scholarship on the cultural Cold War, either in the form

of Saunders' book or that of more recent ones by Giles Scott-Smith and Hugh Wilford, plays no part in this collection. Although the volume opens with William J. Maxwell's discussion of covert surveillance of black writers such as Lorraine Hansberry by the FBI in the early Cold War, concerns about the relationship between individual writers and Cold War institutions are explored only in oblique ways thereafter.

10 Rather, it is Alan Nadel's 1995 book, *Containment Culture: American Narrative, Postmodernism and the Atomic Age*, that provides the most common critical reference point. Nadel's appropriation of containment from Cold War geopolitical discourse as a flexible spatial metaphor with which to describe the period's narrative arts resonates throughout the essays found here, particularly in the widespread interest in allegorical readings of science-fiction, evident in the chapters by Andrew Hoberek, Leerom Medovoi and Nadel himself, who rounds off the collection. In several senses, then, though the collection tries to free itself from the pervasive influence of Nadel's work and to move "beyond" containment, it nevertheless ends by returning to him. While the idea of containment itself is evoked and questioned at several points in the collection, nevertheless Nadel's characteristic methodology, of searching for parallels and correspondences between political discourse and fictional narratives in order to reveal deeper ideological structures at work, persists. This version of the "hermeneutics of suspicion," as Paul Ricoeur termed it, is visible in Hoberek's detailed reading of Frank Herbert's 1965 novel *Dune* as allegorizing both W. W. Rostow's modernization theory and the recovery of putatively lost agency by the U.S. middle class. The strength of Hoberek's chapter lies in his detailed understanding of U.S. foreign policy after 1960, and more importantly in the way his reading of *Dune* drives through the novel's positive allegory of modernization theory under Kennedy to uncover a residual (if unintentional) critique of its necessary violence. Comparably, Medovoi's slightly conventional reading of *The Puppet Masters'* dramatic conflict between humanity and extraterrestrial slugs as allegorizing a certain U.S. conceptualization of totalitarianism, is embedded in a wider critical discussion of race and biopolitics that transforms and augments it effectively. The arguments of Hoberek and Medovoi should prove significant in that they provide a much-needed and convincing way of moving forward our understanding of U.S. Cold War ideology as constituting very singular historical form of imperialism. In both cases, though, what is missing is an account of popular culture during the Cold War era, and in particular an account of science fiction's generic status within that culture. Sci-fi's particular amenability to allegorical interpretation must itself come under interrogation, as must its own distinctive institutional practices of production and consumption, in order to fully grasp what is at stake in such scholarship. Nadel's analysis of *Starwars'* revivication of serviceable U.S. frontier mythologies for the Reagan era is less original in its conception, even if certain other elements of his argument, such as his tracing of Yoda's wisdom to cod-Emersonia, are striking. It does, however, fold an attention to questions of genre into its analysis, which takes it some way towards explaining the films' undeniable importance to late-Cold War culture.

11 Among the other contributions, Daniel Belgrad's essay on "Democracy, Decentralization and Feedback" is the most ambitious, proposing as it does a kind of grand narrative for thinking through the spatial dynamics of Cold War culture on several levels, from pedagogical and environmental theory to avant-garde aesthetics and metaphysics. "Once recognized," Belgrad claims, "the image of a decentralized system held together by feedback loops can be identified as a key component of the democratic vista from the 1940s through to the 1970s" (59). Original and stimulating though it is, the chapter does sometimes threaten to become unmanageably nebulous as it moves through Gregory Bateson's anthropology to John Updike's short stories via the music of Max Neuhaus and John Cage. The essay does provide fascinating readings of its key texts with an attention to form that is generally absent elsewhere in the volume, and they echo each other in beguiling ways that will doubtless be developed in future work. What can be said at this point is that the feedback loops he identifies throughout Cold War culture suggest a sense of movement and fluidity that is unavailable to the inherent rigidity of the containment paradigm, and which therefore seems better placed to account for some of the more experimental aesthetics of U.S. Cold War culture. The relationship between high and

low, such a prominent feature of early-Cold War debate and the cause of much anxiety among the New York intellectuals, is not addressed at any length in this collection, and yet implicitly the variation of methodologies deployed in the volume does to some extent acknowledge if not replicate that great divide between avant-garde and kitsch that Clement Greenberg, Dwight Macdonald and others described in the period.

12 Elsewhere in the collection, an essay on the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby by Catherine Gunther Kodat complicates some of the received views on homosexuality and the closet during the Cold War, though it must also be remembered how unrepresentative New York, his social class, and the intellectual milieu he moved in were, in the context of the nation as a whole. Karen Steigman's chapter addresses Joan Didion's *The Book of Common Prayer* through Gayatri Spivak's notion of "critical intimacy," an attempt to foster the possibility of critique from within moments of complicity. Part of Steigman's target here is Didion's reputation as a conservative in thrall to a Conradian vision of imperial romance, and despite both her elegant commentary on the novel and the generative potential of Spivak's critical theory, it remains as yet unclear exactly how our sense of Didion's reputation is to be revised. More successful, I think, is Christine Hong's turn to the Korean peninsular in seeking out defamiliarizing perspectives on the orthodox narratives of Cold War history. Richard E. Kim's 1964 novel *Martyred*, about the rollback operation during the Korean war, provides the focus for an engaging argument about the changing status of "truth" under the pressure of modern psychological warfare. Hong's interest in the temporal and spatial disjunctions entailed by viewing the Cold War from one of its "hottest" moments drives a reevaluation of the relationship between counterintelligence and literature, in which novels "become the continuation of espionage by other means," and can even "secure and undermine political terrain long after the era of formal occupation is over" (157).

13 In conclusion, we might note the strangeness of a situation in which the topic of Cold War literature and culture can be discussed in such detail with such little reference to the Soviet Union itself, to Soviet writers, painters and cultural institutions, or to the Russian literary tradition. The Soviet Union remains in both of these books a curiously abstract and even marginal entity, and a more properly comparative American literary studies, which at least takes Soviet literary culture seriously, or which systematically thinks through the reception of Russian literature by U.S. writers in the period, would be welcome. Such an undertaking would necessitate the overcoming of several obstacles, not least of which the rarity of adequate disciplinary training in both literatures, itself in some senses a hangover from the Cold War. For the moment, however, one of the more significant achievements of this collection is to be found in the various means by which it comes ultimately to insist on a polyvalent transnational framework for understanding American literature in the Cold War era.

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Notes

1 Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, New York, The New Press, 2013, 335. All further citations to this volume are given parenthetically in the text.

2 Christopher Lasch, "The Cultural Cold War," *Nation*, September 11, 1967, 198-212.

3 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985, 20.

4 C. Wright Mills, "The Social Role of the Intellectual," in *Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz, New York, Oxford University Press, 1963, 298.

Référence(s) :

STONOR SAUNDERS, Frances, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, New York, The New Press, 2013, 427 pages, ISBN-10: 1595589147, 20 € / 17 € BELLETTTO, Steven and GRAUSAM, Daniel (eds.), *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment*, Iowa City, Iowa University Press, 2012, 256 pages., ISBN-10: 1609381130, 60 € / 50 \$

Pour citer cet article**Référence électronique**

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Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam (eds.), *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment* », *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 1 | 2015, mis en ligne le 05 février 2016, consulté le 14 mai 2016. URL : <http://transatlantica.revues.org/7373>

À propos de l'auteur

Will Norman

University of Kent

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