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Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature and Cultural Diplomacy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

Greg Barnhisel's book comes amid a wave of activity in Cold War literary and cultural studies over the last six years or so. This scholarship includes various innovative studies of narrative in film and fiction, several reconsiderations of American Cold War culture using global and imperial frameworks, and continued interest in the institutional histories of Cold War cultural production by scholars such as Hugh Wilford and William Maxwell.<sup>1</sup> This monograph belongs to the latter group, taking as its subject not individual texts or artworks but rather the uses to which they were put by the various institutions that waged the cultural Cold War, from government agencies and programmes through to purportedly independent publications. As Barnhisel acknowledges in his introduction, there is a rich tradition of scholarship on this subject going back as far as the Cold War itself, including most famously Frances Stonor Saunders' 1999 book, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, recently reissued with a new introduction<sup>2</sup>. While Saunders' popular account constituted a kind of hardboiled detective narrative, delving into the murky world of covert CIA funding for culture and deeply invested in the personal dramas of its protagonists, Barnhisel's work is more scholarly and dispassionate. Culpability is no longer an issue. Given that high culture was used as a propaganda weapon by a number of parties in the US during the early Cold War, he aims to offer a historical account of how and why this process took place, and of the institutions that produced it. Chapters on the government programmes for the promotion of literature and the arts respectively are followed by case studies of *Encounter*, the transatlantic

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<sup>1</sup> On Cold War narrative, see for example Daniel Grausam, *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Steven Belletto, *No Accident Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War American Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). On global and imperial frameworks, see for example Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2010); Andrew N. Rubin, *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture and the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012). For recent institutional histories of Cold war culture, see Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Readers Framed African American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, second edition with new introduction (New York: The New Press, 2013).

cultural periodical secretly funded by the CIA, and *Perspectives USA*, the brainchild of New Directions editor James Laughlin, funded by the Ford Foundation. A final chapter on the coverage of arts and literature offered by the radio station Voice of America concludes the book.

The greatest strength of the study lies in its impressively detailed archival research. Barnhisel cites papers, letters and reports from numerous collections in reconstructing the negotiations and tensions surrounding cultural diplomacy in the early Cold War, for example over the display of abstract modernist painting in the US pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958. The picture that emerges is far more conflicted than previously understood, the idea of an easy establishment consensus over Cold War modernism replaced by a tangled network of competing and contradictory views on modernism's value, nature, and uses. Miscommunication and crossed-purposes abound, in particular between those like James Laughlin, with a genuine if naïve commitment to aesthetic autonomy, and those who cared little or nothing for literature and art but merely wished to extract from them whatever propaganda value they could. Barnhisel does take up the hoary question of CIA interference in *Encounter*, and the conclusions are interesting: the magazine's editorship was unruly and independently-minded, despite its CIA paymaster. The trickier task that remains is to address just why it was that the CIA never *needed* to intervene, and how it was that a relatively small group of Anglo-American intellectuals could be collectively relied upon to produce Cold War propaganda without censorship or direction from above. Autonomy, it must be concluded, reproduces its own invisible limits. Another welcome aspect of the book lies in the attention it gives to Soviet culture during the period, which has the effect of placing the development of US cultural trends in comparative perspective and thereby understanding American Cold War modernism in its relation to practices such as socialist realism. Though more could have been made of this angle, it nevertheless went some way to mitigating the persistent failure by the scholarship on US Cold war culture to take the art and literature of the Soviet Union into account.

For intellectual and cultural historians of the Cold War there is much in *Cold War Modernists* to learn from. For scholars of Modernist Studies, however, the case is less strong simply because of the decision to understand Cold War modernism not as a question of aesthetics but as “the deployment of modernist art as a weapon of Cold War propaganda” (28). This is a study of modernism that effectively follows the government agencies of the early Cold War in being more interested in its use than in the artists and artworks that produced it. There is, accordingly, no sustained account of interpretation, but only of historical utility. This is not in itself a criticism, but it does impose certain limits on the analysis. William Faulkner’s extraordinary fiction, for example, is not as important here as his rather hackneyed Nobel Prize address. The version of modernism that receives the most attention, in other words, is also the least interesting one, a version flattened by bureaucrats and propagandists. There is a historical truth here, but it is a partial one. The reluctance to grapple with form, I think, is why the book tends to deal by turns either with modernism or cultural diplomacy but rarely with both together. The chapter on Voice of America, for example, is fascinating for its account of how US culture was presented for consumption by audiences behind the Iron Curtain, but its author has to admit that VOA’s treatment of modernist art was “to be frank, banal and unremarkable” (247). On the other hand, the chapter on *Encounter* has an interesting thesis on how the magazine articulated a particular elegiac vision of modernism, but attention to *Encounter’s* propaganda function becomes correspondingly attenuated in the process. The deeper critical narrative of what happened to modernism in the United States after World War Two goes well beyond questions of cultural diplomacy, and requires analysis not just of modernism’s propaganda function but of its commodification, the very process that enabled the gestures of aesthetic autonomy themselves to be instrumentalized and packaged. It is a narrative that is glimpsed in the book during commentaries on Cold war ideology, but which remains for the most part subterranean.

Nevertheless, there is enough original research in *Cold War Modernists*, especially in the final two chapters on *Perspectives USA* and *Voice of America*, to ensure that it becomes an

important source for scholars and students of Cold War culture. The account it offers of cultural diplomacy in the Truman and Eisenhower years is both thorough and illuminating, offering a rich new account of a story we thought to be familiar.

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