BOOK REVIEW

'Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, & American Cultural Diplomacy': the arsenal of ideas

Duquesne University professor Greg Barnhisel skillfully shows how modernist art and literature was used to influence the Cold War game

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By Glenn Altschuler

During the 1950s, novelist William Faulkner traveled abroad frequently as part of a diplomatic initiative sponsored by the United States Information Agency. Along with warnings about the prospects of nuclear war with the Soviet Union, Faulkner endorsed individualism, creativity and democracy.

Asked about problems associated with American troops stationed in small countries during a visit to Iceland, Faulkner said: “Is it not better to have American forces here in the name of freedom than a Russian one in the name of aggression and violence?”

As Duquesne University English professor Greg Barnhisel reminds us, Faulkner’s forays as a cultural ambassador were part of a conscious strategy by Cold Warriors inside and outside the U.S. government.

Their intention was to use modernist art and literature to demonstrate to audiences around the globe that American culture was superior to the “socialist realism” and suppression of expression practiced in the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites.

In “Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, & American Cultural Diplomacy,” Mr. Barnhisel describes the initiatives designed to defend, defang, and disseminate “modernist” works and the rhetoric used in them.

Mr. Barnhisel asserts that they influenced public opinion, redefining modernism as an affirmation of bourgeois liberal values and reducing its associations with radicalism. The strategy, he claims, “may have even helped win the cultural Cold War.”
Making good use of archival sources, Mr. Barnhisel provides an engaging and informative survey of State Department-sponsored art exhibits and book programs; Encounter magazine (which was secretly funded by the CIA); Perspectives USA, a short-lived literary journal, backed by grants from the Ford Foundation, and headed by James Laughlin, whose family’s Pittsburgh company, Jones & Laughlin, was one of the largest steel producers in the United States; and radio broadcasts of the Voice of America.

Mr. Barnhisel demonstrates that, albeit in different ways, these projects sought to counteract commonly held beliefs that the United States was an aesthetically barren, exclusively technological, mechanical and materialistic civilization.

Mr. Barnhisel is more persuasive about the intentions of these projects than about their impact on Cold War-era audiences. A scrupulous and skilled scholar, he includes some evidence that complicates or even undercuts his thesis.

The treatment of literary modernism in the book programs of the State Department and USIA, he acknowledges, was “tentative and at times incoherent”; a narrative for grounding freedom, individualism, and cooperation between private industry and government was rarely created. Moreover, Congress, and in particular Sen. Joseph McCarthy, pressured officials to exclude ideologically problematic works and authors with leftist leanings, and to rely instead on 19th-century classics.

The contributors to Encounter, Mr. Barnhisel writes, were ambivalent about modernism. They often presented it as a “once great movement now running on fumes,” surviving principally as a set of formal devices and narrative strategies. And under Mr. Laughlin, Perspectives sought to reinforce modernism’s highbrow associations while avoiding “militant politics.” Mr. Barnhisel seems to agree that Perspectives had little effect on European intellectuals.

Finally, Mr. Barnhisel characterizes the coverage of modernism by Voice of America as “relatively scanty.” As presented in VOA news and feature programming, he adds, American modernist art was “banal and unremarkable.”

The broadcasts rarely explained why a listener “would find modernist experimental art interesting or even different from the styles that preceded it.” In its essence a propaganda operation, the Voice of America used modernism as a prop, to foster goodwill toward the United States and erode confidence in Soviet culture.

Clearly, government officials viewed art and literature as Cold War weapons. They mounted and underwrote exhibits, conferences, radio programs, book translations, and literary magazines that portrayed American artists as talented innovators, who prospered in an environment in which the individual is sovereign. With modernism less and less regarded as subversive and seditious, modernists could be included, along with traditionalists, in initiatives that sought to contrast American values with
those of the Evil Empire.

Modernism probably did not provide all that much help to the United States in winning the cultural Cold War, whose outcome, by the 1950s, was not all that much in doubt. In any event, as Mr. Barnhisel indicates, by the ‘60s younger artists were abandoning modernism, and its insistence on order and coherence, for the postmodern proposition that “there are only stories in the world,” a proposition of dubious value to government officials.

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