Greg Barnhisel. *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. xii, 322p., ill. ISBN 9780231162302. US $40.00. *Cold War Modernists* argues that modernist affirmations of aesthetic freedom and autonomy were appropriated by a variety of state agencies in the service of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. With chapters focusing on painting, literature, journalism, and radio, Greg Barnhisel comprehensively chronicles this process, showing how the more subversive and radical components of the interwar avant-garde were deliberately suppressed, making modernism safe for the ideological purpose it would serve as a potent weapon in the cultural Cold War. As Barnhisel succinctly states in his introduction, “Cold War modernism redefined modernism as an affirmation of Western bourgeois liberal values that were considered particularly integral in the American self-construction” (10-11).

This introduction and the first chapter, “Freedom, Individualism, Modernism,” present the major players – both individuals and state agencies – that deployed modernism in the service of cultural diplomacy, as well as the central ideologies on which they relied to convince their audiences that modernism represented American values. Barnhisel introduces us to an impressive array of diplomats, bureaucrats, and cultural entrepreneurs, including Nelson Rockefeller, Archibald MacLeish, Thornton Wilder, and James Laughlin, who forged an alliance between modernist experimentation and American liberalism that became crucial to the ideological battle with the Soviet Union for the hearts and minds of the European left. These figures worked across a variety of powerful institutions, from the United States Information Agency to the Museum of Modern Art to the Rockefeller Foundation, which integrated modernism into their ideological agendas. At the core of these agendas were the classically American values of freedom and individuality, which were figured as constitutive of modern art in the postwar era.

Barnhisel illustrates this thesis across a series of media, starting with painting in chapter 2. As Serge Guilbaut established with his groundbreaking *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983), painting, and in particular Abstract Expressionism, was central to America’s emergent cultural diplomatic efforts in the immediate wake of World War II. Barnhisel adds depth and perspective here, documenting the powerful public-private partnerships that were forged in the service of accommodating modernist painterly technique to American mainstream taste. Chapter 3 focuses on books, documenting the degree to which literary modernism was more resistant to easy ideological appropriation than painting.
Chapters 4 and 5 examine two magazines, *Encounter* and *Perspectives USA*, that were supported by the CIA through the Congress for Cultural Freedom and which depoliticized modernism, transforming a series of radical movements into a series of representative techniques. Finally, in chapter 6, Barnhisel turns to radio and the Voice of America which, he claims, “closed the deal on Cold War modernism” by - somewhat ironically - reducing it to an essentially middlebrow phenomenon.

Meticulously researched and elegantly written, *Cold War Modernists* is an important contribution to the discussion of cultural diplomacy that was inaugurated by Frances Stonor Saunders’ *The Cultural Cold War* (2000). Barnhisel convincingly establishes that a wide variety of individuals and agencies placed modern art in the service of cultural diplomacy during this period. My principal reservation concerns terminology: the various aesthetic movements we now call “modernist” did not identify themselves as such. Rather, the term “modernism” emerged afterward as a way of retrospectively understanding what they shared. Thus, one can legitimately ask whether Cold War modernism isn’t – simply – modernism.

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