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Introduction to *The Naked Communist: Cold War Modernism and the Politics of Popular Culture*

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Végső, Roland K., "Introduction to *The Naked Communist: Cold War Modernism and the Politics of Popular Culture*" (2013). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 100.

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Introduction

Those familiar with the history of American anti-Communism will immediately recognize that I borrow my title from Cleon W. Skousen's *The Naked Communist* (1958).¹ The book belongs to the same genre as J. Edgar Hoover's better-known classic, *Masters of Deceit* (1958), and it presents to a general audience a history of Communism in conjunction with the practical knowledge necessary to fight its expansion.² For Skousen, an ex-FBI agent, the nakedness of this Communist has a precise meaning. As he explains in the preface, the book "attempts to present the Communist in his true native elements, stripped of propaganda and pretense. Hence the title, 'The Naked Communist.'"³ The title refers to the "naked truth" itself, which is expected to come about as the result of a successful critique of ideological mystifications and which offers pure presentation in place of deceitful representations.

But when I quote Skousen's title, I intend to repeat it with a significant difference. As Skousen's own career shows, the first revelation of truth leaves something to be desired. In 1970, he authored the companion piece to *The Naked Communist* under the title *The Naked Capitalist*, in which he argued (in the form of an extended review of Carroll Quigley's *Tragedy and Hope*) that the Communist conspiracy was a mere tool in the hands of an even bigger conspiracy run by rich capitalists.⁴ Of course, this shift from the Communist conspiracy to something resembling contemporary theories of the New World Order might appear to be a historically predictable move. But we could also interpret the "naked capitalist" as the answer to the inherent ambiguity of the "naked Communist," since it replaces an unstable earlier version of the truth with a new kind of certitude.

2 / INTRODUCTION

Thus, the irony of Skousen's title is that it presents an unstable figure of ideological demystification which leads to secondary acts of demystification. From the perspective of the second book, the nakedness of the Communist does not refer to the direct revelation of "truth" but to yet another seductive illusion that was first mistaken for a truth. The inherent danger of such demystifications is that they threaten to open up an infinite series of further demystifications. Hence the necessarily double figure of the naked Communist: it is simultaneously an object of knowledge and an object of desire. As an object of knowledge, it functions as the central figure of a potentially infinite discursive machine whose objective is the dissemination of anti-Communist knowledge. As an object of desire, however, it functions as an agent of seduction. It puts an end to the potential infinity of demystifications by introducing the possibility of "truth" into the domain of mere knowledge. This distance separating *The Naked Communist* from the *The Naked Capitalist* provides us with a first definition of ideological truth: truth occurs when a desire for truth interrupts a potentially endless series of demystifications.

Unlike Skousen's title, therefore, mine intends to evoke both of these meanings as it tries to call attention to the internal dialectic of ideological knowledge. But I evoke here the figure of the naked Communist as one possible historical manifestation of a general problem of modernity. My argument is based on the assumption that the political ideologies of modernity were determined in a fundamental manner by four basic figures: the world, the enemy, the secret, and the catastrophe. Whereas the "world" names the totality that functioned as the ultimate horizon of modern politics, the three other figures define the necessary limits of this totality. The naked Communist is an easily recognizable figure of this "enemy" whose identity was determined in a fundamental manner by the secrecy that was associated with it and the global catastrophe that it threatened to bring upon us.

Although these four figures have formed a number of different historical constellations, I try to highlight their enduring presence in the modern imagination through the detailed analysis of one concrete historical example: American anti-Communist politics of the 1950s. Within this historical context, my primary objective is to describe the internal mechanisms of what we could call an "anti-Communist aesthetic ideology." By "aesthetic ideology," I mean a specifically modern invention that names the complex relation between art and politics in our age. This is why I argue that in order to understand the politics of literary modernism in the United States, we have to analyze the terms of its institutionalization during the 1950s by the discourse of "Cold War liberalism." In this liberal discourse, however, anti-Communist popular culture emerged as a political "symptom" of modernism for two reasons: on the level of politics, Cold War liberalism

strove to define itself as the opposite of conservative anti-Communism; on the level of aesthetics, its fundamental gesture was the rejection of mass culture in the name of modernism. It is in this sense that I call anti-Communist popular culture the ideological “other” of modernism.

By focusing on the problem of “aesthetic ideology,” I aim to reverse the logic of some of the by-now familiar canonized readings of Cold War culture. Scholars of the liberal “end of ideology” consensus of the 1950s are always quick to point out that the depoliticization of the aesthetic field in fact served clearly definable political purposes. But what is usually missing in these accounts is a reflection on the contrary movement: after the apolitical has been revealed to be political, we must also acknowledge the fact that the allegedly political is structured by a set of apolitical assumptions. This is why, as I will argue, our relentless search for the “political unconscious” must also be accompanied by the equally rigorous search for the “aesthetic unconscious” of seemingly innocent political statements.

* * *

The first half of *The Naked Communist* is devoted to the theoretical and historical foundations of my reading of anti-Communist fictions. Based on an interrogation of the concept of “aesthetic ideology,” I argue that the historical problems discussed in later chapters can be interpreted in terms of a “post-Althusserian” theory of representation.⁵ I argue that representation must be understood as a form of *division* introduced into a terrain of ontological inconsistency. But the effects of this division can be experienced as a meaningful totality only if an act of *exclusion* clearly establishes the limits of representation. Due to this exclusion, therefore, ideological identification is always marked by a number of inherent limits. The articulation of these limits is essentially an “aesthetic” issue in the sense that they define the basic coordinates of a field of experience, which can then emerge as a field of representation. Politics is, thus, essentially aesthetic in nature to the degree that it is the communal management of these inherent limits.

After the theoretical introduction, I examine anti-Communist aesthetic ideology in two steps: first, I analyze its political (Chapters 2 and 3) and then its aesthetic (Chapter 4) components. In my second chapter, I concentrate on the instances when the American anti-Communist discourse of the 1950s provides a reflection on the limits of representation. I examine the recurrent rhetorical and discursive strategies of official American anti-Communist politics. As I argue, Cold War anti-Communism primarily legitimized itself by reference to a number of privileged moments when representation reached a certain limit. In Chapter 3, I examine the three

most important figures marking these limits: the unreadable *enemy* (a radical formal indeterminacy combined with the most rigid determination of content: we cannot identify the enemy by external traits, but we know for sure what the enemy wants); the *secrets* of the national security state (most important: the secret of the A-bomb as an American property); and the absolute *catastrophe* (caused by the enemy who stole our secrets). The enemy, the secret, and the catastrophe mark the moments when representation reaches a certain limit and, therefore, it is by reference to them that this discourse establishes the proper domain of representation.

In Chapter 4, I show that it is more than just a coincidence that this politics and its theory of representation coincide with the institutionalization of a certain modernist aesthetics in which literature as such is theorized as the probing of the limits of representation. This modernism, however, is based on the exclusion of “popular literature” as mere propaganda from the field of high art. Therefore, I argue that according to the basic coordinates of anti-Communist aesthetic ideology, anti-Communist popular fiction occupies a paradoxical position: although this ideology claims that art as such is anti-Communist, it reduces anti-Communist art to a contradiction in terms by excluding it from the field of pure art.

In the second half of *The Naked Communist*, I examine the way the culture of anti-Communism defined the “world” as the ultimate horizon of political imagination. As I argue, the constitution of this new totality depended on a threefold articulation: it had to define the unity (“one world”) as well as the internal (“two worlds”) and the external limits of the world (“three worlds”). In the last three chapters, I show that the primary function of nuclear holocaust novels was to establish the unity (or the “oneness”) of the world, whereas spy novels and popular political novels about the Third World established, respectively, the internal and external limits of this totality. These three genres allow me to demonstrate the way the necessary limits of representation are thematized in popular fiction. These last three chapters contain parallel examinations of popular fiction and the critical category of modernism as it was employed in the 1950s. Through this series of juxtapositions, I examine the ways in which both “high art” and its “other,” mass culture, participated in the very same cultural work on establishing the legitimate limits of representation. Thus, the last three chapters follow the same structure and can be broken down into the four sections. First, I examine the idea of the world in relation to the given genre discussed in the chapter. Next, I explore the relation of modernism to the foundational ideological figure of the examined genre. This is followed by a brief overview of some of the most popular texts of the given genre. Finally, I conclude these chapters with a reading of particular authors.

Chapter 5 explores the historical ties between modernism and the rise of atomic holocaust fiction. It argues that catastrophe functions in both as a fundamental aesthetic and a political figure for the unrepresentable. In Chapter 6, I continue my parallel examinations of popular culture and modernism by highlighting the figure of the secret. In my discussion of the modernist poetics of difficulty in juxtaposition with contemporary spy fiction, I concentrate on the motif of the stolen secret. I argue that the ideological function of modern spy fiction was to legitimize political secrecy, which immediately divided the world into two complementary units: the public domain of representative democracy and its necessary supplement, the world of secrecy. In the final chapter, I discuss the relationship between the aesthetics of modernism and the politics of modernization. Through a reading of the popular political novels of the 1950s, I examine the “global imaginary” of middle-brow anti-Communism.