

Will Norman, *Transatlantic Aliens: Modernism, Exile, and Culture in Midcentury America*

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REFERENCES

Norman, Will, *Transatlantic Aliens: Modernism, Exile, and Culture in Midcentury America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, 263 + xii pages, ISBN 9781421420943, \$ 45.00

- 1 The experience of transatlantic exile was freighted with emotional and political significance for those who fled the horrors of mid-twentieth century European imperialism, totalitarianism, and genocide. At the same time as they recognized the democratic possibilities offered by life in the United States, many exiled Europeans chafed against American mass culture and Cold War politics. *Transatlantic Aliens* is an erudite and invigorating study of seven cultural figures who underwent this troubled process: the intellectuals C. L. R. James, Theodor Adorno and Simone de Beauvoir, the writers Raymond Chandler and Vladimir Nabokov, and the artists George Grosz and Saul Steinberg. In undertaking a comparative analysis of their approaches to cultural politics in the period between the 1930s and the 1960s, Will Norman not only sheds new and perceptive light on the work of these important transatlantic émigrés, but also provides a cogent and innovative account of the politics of literary and artistic modernism in the early years of the Cold War.
- 2 Norman's central question is as follows: "what was the fate of European high culture in the United States at midcentury, and how did its representatives negotiate the dramatic shifts in the cultural field they entered?" (2) His answers destabilize the boundaries between national and transnational frames of analysis, between high and low culture, and

between modernist studies and American studies. In Chapter 1, Norman argues that the work of James and Adorno provides comparable insights into exilic experience because of the way they used European philosophy to analyse the alienating qualities of mass culture. The German theorist and the Trinidadian historian-activist both watched movies whilst thinking of Hegel and Marx, and shaped their views of the United States accordingly. George Grosz, on the other hand, is presented in Chapter 2 as a skilled mediator between the practices of European abstractionism, especially Dada, and those of commercial advertising. In drawing these disparate modes together, Norman argues, Grosz paved the way for the emergence of pop art in the 1960s. In describing Raymond Chandler as a “transatlantic modernist” preoccupied with hardboiled literary style, Chapter 3 posits that the novelist’s work negotiated “differences in cultural prestige” between his native England and his adopted home in Southern California (94). Chapter 4 sees Norman comparing the “intellectual road trips” narrated in de Beauvoir’s little-known memoir *America Day by Day* (1948) and Nabokov’s classic novel *Lolita* (1955). Again, the theme of alienation is key, this time because of the way memories of recent European history rendered the “darkness of the movie theater and the bright lights of the drugstore...disorientingly confused” (127). Finally, Chapter 5 sees Norman tackle Steinberg’s magazine illustrations and their relationship to the emergent discourse of the “cultural Cold War”. The Romanian cartoonist was able to mount a critique of US imperialism at the same time as he remained culturally invisible when compared to more famous midcentury artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. According to Norman, this was “Steinberg’s vanishing trick, in the sense that he was interested in becoming both present and invisible” (159).

- 3 The persuasive concluding argument of *Transatlantic Aliens*, which mobilises Raymond Williams’s concept of the “structure of feeling”, is that James, Adorno, Grosz, Chandler, de Beauvoir, Nabokov and Steinberg were not only drawn together by their shared experiences of European social crisis, but also by a world view, drawn from their forced migrations, that was “mobile and unstable, leading to double vision, interference, and feedback, the experience of the transatlantic uncanny” (197). From a methodological perspective, Norman’s best work comes in the chapters on Grosz and Steinberg, when he mobilizes archival material from the artists’ personal papers. These documents provide a depth of biographical insight that is not achieved in the rest of the book, where Norman relies on published editions of letters and diaries to make his case alongside close readings of various texts.
- 4 A more significant limitation is the book’s relative inattention to questions of race and ethnicity. Norman positions his work alongside the influential American studies scholarship of Michael Denning, Alan Wald and George Lipsitz, whom he praises for their “formidable archaeologies of socialist culture” in midcentury America (5). However, all three of these historian-critics, whilst centrally concerned with the proletarian experience, have also been finely attuned to the complex racial logic of American social relations. Put simply, in their work the politics of racial and ethnic identity are deeply embedded with the politics of social class. A comparable level of sophistication rarely appears in Norman’s work. This is particularly disappointing because, on occasion, he does demonstrate a keen eye for the racial dynamics of transatlantic émigré culture. For example, the chapter on Steinberg discusses the work he undertook for the US installation at the Brussels World’s Fair in 1958, entitled *The Americans*. As he worked on the project, Steinberg wrote to his friend Aldo Buzzzi to ask, “the subject is *people* in the

US. How do you draw the blacks?" (193) Norman makes imaginative use of this question, comparing Steinberg's work with Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) to demonstrate the significance of race to the artist's understanding of both the United States and his place within it as an alien European. However, there are numerous other occasions in the book where the opportunity to discuss questions of race and ethnicity seem obvious, but go untaken. The sections on James, for example, barely mention his location within the complex imperial networks of the Black Atlantic, the chapter on Chandler fails to discuss his routine use of crude racialized tropes to describe African Americans and Latinos, and at no point does Norman engage in sustained discussion of the question of anti-Semitism.

- 5 These are missed opportunities. Nevertheless, *Transatlantic Aliens* is an exceptional book. The intellectual and cultural history of midcentury America is well-trodden scholarly ground. So, too, is the study of American modernism. That Norman is able to make an original and important contribution to both fields is testament to his considerable interdisciplinary skill: he is dauntingly comfortable discussing politics, economics, art, fiction and theory, sometimes all in the same chapter. The picture of the émigré imagination that emerges is an intricate one: centrally concerned with questions of nationality, mobility, cultural prestige, and political engagement, his subjects negotiated their outsider status in ways that destabilized the power of the modern nation-state at the same time as they theorized the emergence of the United States as a global superpower. It was the deep contingency and uncertainty of these aliens' existence in both time and space that provided such concrete and penetrating insights into the development of modern culture on both sides of the Atlantic.

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