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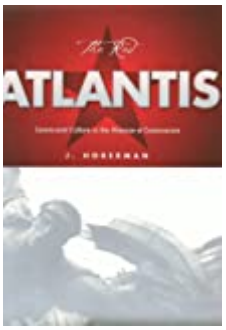

J. Hoberman. *The Red Atlantis: Communist Culture in the Absence of Communism.* Philadelphia, Penn: Temple University Press, 1998. i + 315 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56639-643-1.

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The Berlin Wall as Art?

The title of J. Hoberman's book, *The Red Atlantis: Communist Culture in the Absence of Communism*, baffles the critically intelligent reader. Questions come to mind, overshadowing the substance of the book itself. And that might be serendipitous because the substance of the book is in the realm of the idiosyncratic.[1] Hoberman, a *Village Voice* film critic and an adjunct professor of cinema at Cooper Union, seems to prefer an esoteric writing approach that is perhaps more suitable for *avant-garde* intellectuals sipping *caffe latte* at Greenwich Village poetry readings than for a general audience wishing to gain a better understanding of the past. In the acknowledgments section of *Red Atlantis* a total of sixteen editors are given credit for "assigning and shaping" the eight essays that comprise the book, but Hoberman has no one to blame but himself for a project so lacking in unified coherence.

The reader would have to be Hoberman in order to fully appreciate (and fully understand) the focus of *The Red Atlantis*. Was communism *ever* a reality anywhere? The answer, of course, is negative. If this is Hoberman's belief, then we can conclude that his book is simply about Marxist-inspired art culture from its inception to the very present. However, if Hoberman views the Soviet past as communistic, then his book could be about: (1) Soviet art culture after the Cold War, or possibly (2) Soviet art culture after the communistic visions of grandeur lapsed into societal stagnation. Hoberman mostly reflects on "communist culture" preceding the end of the Cold War, but perhaps this is only background leading up to the time of "absence of communism." Since his commentary on "communist culture" includes both the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, the reader must wonder if Hoberman classifies art culture of the Warsaw Pact nations as being "Soviet." Ambiguity prevails. Overall, there is an absence of meaning in Hoberman's phrase "in the absence of communism."

As for the meaning of "Red Atlantis," it is apparently a metaphor for the "lost [ideological] continent" of the Soviet Union. Or perhaps it signifies the mythic aspect of communism, as in its quest for a utopian society. Whatever Hoberman has in mind, it is linked with the Soviet Union. The book, for example, devotes only a short paragraph to the "communist culture" of China (p. 15). Like-

wise, "communist culture" of the Western Hemisphere is virtually ignored. With the exception of the joint USSR-Cuba film "I Am Cuba" (1964), Castro's Cuba is overlooked. And neither is Nicaragua under the Sandinistas considered – Sergio Ramirez, a Sandinista leader and former vice president (1984-1990), published novels which might be regarded as "communist culture."

For Hoberman, Soviet Socialist Realism is the definitive form of "communist culture," a sentiment far from unique. He uses the term "culture" as works of art (cinema, architecture, literature, and the arts) rather than the anthropological meaning. Film, not surprisingly considering Hoberman's expertise, dominates the discussion. (But popular films such as the twelve-hour *Seventeen Moments of Spring* [USSR, 1975], starring Vyacheslav Tikhonov, are ignored.) For the uninitiated, the reading can be difficult to follow because Hoberman writes as if he is under the assumption that every reader has viewed all of the Soviet and Eastern Bloc films at least a half dozen times. The author also examines how Jews were portrayed in Soviet culture, focusing on films such as *Jewish Luck* and *Commissar* (pp. 69, 90).[2] Also, a chapter is devoted to the writer Victor Serge.

The author is sometimes very generous in a strange way in how he defines art. For example, if it were not for an encounter with Hoberman's book, the reader might not have ever realized that the Berlin Wall is art. The first sentence in the introductory essay, beginning a reflection on this idea, sets the general tone of the book's profoundness (as well as readability): "Once upon a time, this Thing ('breathtaking,' Dutch architect Rem Koolhaus wrote, 'in its persistent doubleness') was the irreducible brute fact of our political universe" (p. 3). The Berlin Wall as art, as Socialist Realism? This is irreducible nonsense. Perhaps Hoberman rates the barbed wire fencing that surrounded the gulag compounds in Siberia as art as well. Hoberman would have us imagine that the Berlin Wall is the Eastern counterpart of Christo's "Running Fence." Indeed, Hoberman does refer to Christo (pp. 7, 270n10).[3] Perhaps very soon, in a tit for tat response, a Marxist as humorous as Hoberman will write an essay on the American art produced during the Cold War, focusing on the interstate highway system while noting its "persistent doubleness."[4]

But was the Berlin Wall an irreducible brute "fact" of "our" political landscape, as Hoberman maintains? Or was it something much, much less? It could be argued that like the colossal statues and paintings of Soviet Socialist Realism, Western political discourse exaggerated and magnified certain perceptions. (We can call such discourse Democratic Realism.) The Berlin Wall was a colossal *metaphor*, the metaphor being larger than the actual "Thing" itself. Some of Hoberman's reflections in *The Red Atlantis* are a remnant of ideological pretensions. As the former guard dogs automatically trace where the wall used to stand, walking the "crazy zigzag" contours as if still on patrol duty (p. 10), so the author unthinkingly follows the worn path of the Cold War. Hoberman writes, "The one hundred miles of concrete slabs and stamped metal fencing ten to thirteen feet high ... was the Iron Curtain made material" (p. 4). Here he should have paused and questioned where the notion of the "iron curtain" originated. Although popularized by Winston Churchill, the concept of an iron curtain began in the mind of the Nazi propagandist, Joseph Goebbels.[5] Hoberman, in short, is the artist of political Othering.

Socialist Realism, according to Hoberman, is an art that is "the most totalizing and the most monstrous"(p. 13). Also, it is "goofy idealism" (p. 16) and just plain "grandiose" (p. 21). The irony is that the author's hyperbole is imitative of Socialist Realism itself, except Socialist Realism attempted to be more positive. It could be countered that Capitalist Realism of Madison Avenue is "the most totalizing." Hoberman briefly touches on Capitalist Realism, but without giving any acknowledgment to Michael Schudson (p. 38).[6] Certainly advertisements appear in more places than the propagandized art of Socialist Realism ever did. Hoberman pronounces his verdict with such ease–"most totalizing"–but the discriminating reader must ask, "Who is Hoberman to make such a claim? What is his authority? Where is his proof?" This is not a letter to the editor he has written, but supposedly a work of scholarship. A chapter of Hoberman on Socialist Realism hardly pays the dividend that can be gained by reading a sentence or two from Vasily Grossman[7], or even Northrop Frye.[8] Socialist Realism was nothing more than Socialist Romanticism. Could not Socialist Realism be viewed as an aspect of "revolution from above"?

In Chapter Two he provides an interesting analysis of the antithesis of Socialist Realism: "Realist Socialism" (pp. 45-65). But the Realist Socialist art Hoberman has chosen to focus on is that of the Eastern Bloc. The reader wonders if Realist Socialism was ever a factor in the Soviet Union. Hoberman writes, "Socialist Realism conjured up that which was acknowledged but did not yet exist. No less paradoxical, Realist Socialism sought to reveal that which existed but could not be acknowledged" (p. 49). Could *any* dissident art be considered Socialist Realism then? Hoberman does not offer an answer.

Chapter Six ("History of Communism in Twenty-four Scenarios") offers a short review each on the following movies and in the following order: *October* (USSR, 1928), *Aelita* (USSR, 1924), *We the Living* (Italy, 1943, 1968, 1988), *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (USSR, 1982), *The Shining Path* (USSR, 1940), *Mission to Moscow* (USA, 1943), *The Russian Question* (USSR, 1947), *The Red Menace* (USA, 1949), *The Confrontation* (Hungary, 1969), *Angi Vera* (Hungary, 1979), *The Witness* (Hungary, 1969, 1979), *Larks on a String* (Czechoslovakia, 1969, 1989), *This Can't Happen Here* (Sweden, 1950), *The Hijacking* (Czechoslovakia, 1952), *Red Planet Mars* (USA, 1952), *Silver Dust* (USSR, 1954), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (USA, 1956), *I Am Cuba* (USSR-Cuba, 1964), *One, Two, Three* (USA, 1961), *Time Stands Still* (Hungary, 1983), *When Joseph Returns* (Hungary, 1975), *Red Dawn* (USA, 1984), *The Oak* (Romania, 1992), and *Garden of the Scorpions* (Russia, 1991). While it is certainly good to have a resource that lists and summarizes such films, the reader nonetheless wonders how this ties in with the book as a whole. And why are American Cold War films included?

Chapter Seven ("My Nuclear Family") is a fiction piece about Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. *Ya ne ponimaiu* is what comes to the reader's mind. What *is* this book about anyway? Part of the short story on the Rosenbergs is the author's imagining their trips to the New York World's Fair during the summer and fall of 1939. There they get to visit the Soviet pavillion and here is the link to Socialist Realism. But the reality is, this is nothing more than the author being self-indulgent. Imagine if every scholarly work concluded with an offering of the author's unpublished fiction! Perhaps for a change in style W. Bruce Lincoln can conclude his next book with a short story on Tsar Nicholas' last day in Yekaterinburg.[9]

In musing on whether or not there were pre-Soviet antecedents for Socialist Realism, Hoberman considers various things. For example, icons and Potemkin villages, and so on. At one point he uses the Marquis de Custine's bigoted travelogue as an authoritative source on Russian culture–e.g., Russia has names for things that do not exist in its territory: "society," "civilization," "literature," "art," "sciences," etc. (p. 21). We might wonder if Hoberman has ever heard of the Russian writers Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, both who died prior to the publication of Custine's *Empire of the Czar: A Journey Through Eternal Russia* (1843). Also, we might ask Hoberman if he has ever heard of Mikhail Lomonosov (d. 1765), the writer, chemist, astronomer, and founder of the University of Moscow.

Although Custine is not a major aspect of *The Red Atlantis*, the very fact that Hoberman approvingly cites him speaks volumes about Hoberman's anti-Russian sentiments. There is a subtle mockery in his book, as exemplified by the first and last sentence of the chapter on Socialist Realism: "There is a specter haunting modern art" (p. 13) and "The frozen music of its photographed dreams is what passes for Socialist Realism" (p. 42). One almost expects the next page to be a photo of Reagan, riding a rearing white horse, like the Lone Ranger, on top of the Berlin Wall!

The Red Atlantis will be good to cite in a footnote if someone is drafting an essay on Socialist Realism. For the fiction writer who wonders how to portray historical figures, then the chapter on the Rosenbergs is highly recommended. If a teacher is preparing for a class on the Soviet Union or the Cold War, then the listing of films in the chapter "A History of Communism" might prove a good reference tool. Other than that, it is a very disappointing book. Every copy in circulation will certainly be a first edition.

Notes

[1]. Robert H. Johnston, of McMaster University, reviewing Hoberman's book in *Library Journal* (November 1, 1998), writes: "This is a highly idiosyncratic work, one which appears appropriately in a series entitled 'Culture and the Moving Image' " (p. 109).

[2]. Adam Shatz, "Lost Culture," *Dissent* (Spring 1999), in reviewing Hoberman's book suggests that the heart of *The Red Atlantis* is its "tender exploration of the Jews' long romance with communism–and of communism's lesser-known, and shorter-lived infatuation with the Jews" (p. 118).

[3]. The artist Christo [Christo Javachaff] was born in Bulgaria in 1935. He lived in France from 1958 to 1964, and then moved to the United States. Perhaps, then, his art is not truly representative of the West. One wonders if Hoberman thinks that the Berlin Wall is the inspiration of Christo's earthworks. Christo's "Wrapped Reichstag"–the wrapping of the Reichstag in Berlin in sheets of aluminum-coated polypropylene–could suggest a connection, but probably not. Is Christo's art somehow influenced by Socialist Realism, in terms of size and spectacle? If so, then should it be considered communist art in the absence of communism? Christo is not a communist, obviously, but at the same time it is paradoxical to speak of communist art in the absence of communism.

[4]. The French postmodernist Baudrillard regards a major aspect of the real America as "the America of the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways." His description of the American highway does indeed make it seem like an art, perhaps like a community play in which movement is the only meaning to be found. (See Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner [London and New York: Verso, 1988], pp. 5, 52-55.) Hoberman, unfortunately, lacks the supreme originality of Baudrillard. The Berlin Wall as "communist art" is, more to the point, Reaganesque in mentality.

[5]. Goebbels, shortly after the Yalta conference, wrote, "If the Germans lay down their arms, the whole of eastern and southeastern Europe, together with the Reich, would come under Russian occupation. Behind an iron curtain, mass butchering of people would begin, and all that would remain would be a crude automation, a dull fermenting masses of millions of proletarian and despairing slave animals knowing nothing of the outside world." See John Kenneth White, *Still Seeing Red: How the Cold War Shapes the New American Politics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 23-24.

[6]. The concept of Capitalist Realism comes from Michael Schudson, *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984).

[7]. According to Vasily Grossman, *Forever Flowing*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York and London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972): "The [Socialist Realism] literature which called itself 'realistic' was just as formalized and imaginary as bucolic romances of the eighteenth century. The collective farmers, workers and rural women of Soviet literature seemed, in fact, to be close kin to those beautifully built villages and those curly-headed shepherdesses who played on pipes and danced in the meadows among pure-white lambs bedecked in sky-blue ribbons" (p. 102).

[8]. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structures of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), describes Socialist Realism as "kidnapped romanticism, celebrating the glories of de facto power, slightly disguised by harmless criticism and by talk about a continuing process of building socialism" (p. 165).

[9]. The recent biography on Reagan has been criticized for introducing fiction in what was supposed to be a work of history. I am referring to Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1999). Is this a new scholarly standard Hoberman approves of?

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