

Review for Dr. Deborah Jackson, Reviews Editor, Visual Culture in Britain

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Pevsner: The BBC Years – Listening to the Visual Arts by Stephen Games,

Farnham: Ashgate, 2015

In the past decade, scholars have increasingly become interested in analyzing the impact of broadcasting on Britain. Todd Avery's *Radio Modernism* looked at how the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) shaped the public sphere, during the years immediately following its inception in 1922, while others have looked at the impact of the BBC on visual culture, particularly on discourses around art and architectureⁱ. Shundana Yusaf's recent *Broadcasting Buildings* is amongst the excellent work with this focusⁱⁱ. While elsewhere, exhibitions such as Tate's 2014 *Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilisation*, curated by Chris Stephens and John-Paul Stonard, considered how Clark's 1969 BBC series *Civilisation* changed the nature of the arts debate, and how it added to the public's knowledge of subjects previously considered only for an elite.

The current volume - *Pevsner: The BBC Years* - is part of this engagement with the history of arts broadcasting. The companion to the recent *Pevsner: The Complete Broadcast Talks*ⁱⁱⁱ, this book is part of a series written by designer and

historian Stephen Games devoted to assessing the life and work of the German-British art historian Nikolaus Pevsner. Games's evaluation of Pevsner began in 2002 with publication of his volume of his BBC radio talks^{iv}. It continued with Games's 2010 biography, *Pevsner: The Early Life – Germany and Art* and Games has since continued painstakingly documenting Pevsner's life and work^v.

His latest volume exposes how Pevsner's thinking was tailored for the 'blind' medium of radio^{vi}. It tells the story of Pevsner's relationship with the BBC from 1945, when he made his first broadcast, through the high-point in the mid-50s when Pevsner broadcast his BBC Reith Lectures, through to the 1960s, when he made his final broadcast. This account needs to be read in tandem with the volume of Pevsner's broadcasts, elucidating, as it does, the background and context to those broadcasts, as well as explaining their content. These books are important in two ways: first, because they offer a fascinating insight into how Pevsner developed his ideas and, second, because they allow a glimpse into the culture of the nascent BBC, with all of its flaws, prejudices, and lumbering bureaucracy. As Games points out, when Pevsner delivered his 1955 Reith Lectures, the BBC was still the only radio broadcaster in the UK and television had not yet become a relevant competitor as picture quality was still poor, broadcasting hours were limited, two-thirds of households had still not bought their first TV set and commercial TV, launched only a few weeks before Pevsner's

first broadcast, could only be received in London. So BBC radio had a particularly firm grip on public culture^{vii}.

The first half of *Pevsner: The BBC Years* focuses on how and why Pevsner's broadcasts came about, the second on the contexts for the subjects he tackled in his talks. This is recounted in painstaking detail, which makes it a particularly useful reference, but not always an easy read. Similarly, the book includes a number of detailed appendixes, which will provide invaluable primary sources for those intending to pursue studies in this area. For those interested in interwar and World War Two émigré cultures, Games provides a detailed case study of an émigré adapting to British life in the 1930s, shedding light on the complexities of negotiating dual British-German identity, both for Pevsner himself and for those who encountered him. This was a time when xenophobia and racism were rife and when the nature of allegiance to nation was under constant scrutiny. As Games explains, initially Pevsner had no interest in assimilating into Britain, feeling under-appreciated and under-used in a country where satisfactory jobs were not forthcoming and while receiving unforgiving treatment from the authorities as an 'alien' in Britain. Moreover, after he arrived in Britain in 1933, Pevsner continued to be a vocal admirer of Hitler, applying to join Goebbels' *Reichskulturkammer* in 1934 and with a strong yearning to be a part of the National Socialist project to rebuild Germany. It was only later in the decade that Pevsner had started to assimilate into English society, while

continuing to feel a strong sense of loyalty towards his homeland.

Games's account provides an interesting insight into the extended cultural networks of interwar Modernism: the friends and neighbours linked by living in proximity in leafy north London and by a shared commitment to the common ideological project of Modernism, which have been written about in relation to émigré architects, artists and designers such as Wells Coates, Berthold Lubetkin and Ernő Goldfinger. These networks were extraordinary enabling mechanisms, allowing privileged cultural access. Pevsner, who settled in Hampstead, north London, also benefited from neighbourly networks; having poet and publisher Geoffrey Grigson as next-door neighbour. It was Grigson, himself a broadcaster, who introduced Pevsner to the BBC and who gave him the leg-up that allowed him to start his BBC career.

It is in this context that in 1945 Pevsner started to broadcast from the establishment's mouthpiece, the BBC. It is also with this awareness of the complex set of negotiations around nationality that we read about the BBC's invitation to Pevsner to broadcast his BBC Reith Lectures (the prestigious series created in memory of the BBC's founder Lord Reith). This was considered one of the highest honours the broadcaster could bestow, granted to Pevsner in 1954, at a time when the BBC was still very preoccupied with the question of what constituted 'appropriate' voices^{viii}. This did not usually include 'foreign' and,

particularly German ones. Pevsner was delighted to be invited to contribute to the series and the resulting talks, about the Englishness of English art^{ix}, enabled him to develop his interest in how national character was expressed in terms of art, relating it to language, topographies and climate. The seven programmes, which courted a vast listenership and an unusually spirited response, were praised by those convinced by his arguments and slated by others who were utterly repelled by them, as Games shows. The publication of the talks as *The Englishness of English Art* in 1955 was an important moment for the relatively embryonic discipline of British history of art and it is instructive to have a wider understanding of how the ideas encapsulated within it developed; not only within the academy, but in the wider cultural field^x.

This book, and its companion broadcast transcripts, are a very welcome addition to the literatures of post war British visual culture; providing much original material and signposting new directions for future research.

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ⁱ Avery, *Radio Modernism*.

ⁱⁱ Yusaf, *Broadcasting Buildings*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Games (ed) and Pevsner, *Pevsner: The Complete Broadcast Talks*.

^{iv} Games (ed) and Pevsner, *Pevsner on Art and Architecture*.

^v Games, Pevsner: The Early Life.

^{vi} Games, 2015, p.ix.

^{vii} Games, 2015, p.5.

^{viii} Games, 2015, p.104.

^{ix} It is possible to listen to Pevsner's seven Reith Lectures on BBC IPlayer at

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00h9llv>.

^x By Architectural Press in 1955.