

Pevsner: The Complete Broadcast Talks, Architecture and Art on Radio and Television, 1945-1977

edited by Stephen Games

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Nikolaus Pevsner did more than anyone else in twentieth century Britain to develop art and architectural history, through his research and writings and his interest in building this fledgling discipline. He also wrote the prototypical design history: his *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* of 1936 (reissued by MOMA New York as *Pioneers of Modern Design* in 1949) was the first attempt in the English language to trace the origins of Modernism, drawing a line from William Morris to Walter Gropius. Although subsequent commentators have deconstructed or debunked it, *Pioneers* presented a model that many historians in the field built on. As such, Pevsner's impact on the broad field of visual studies has been extraordinary.

Edited by design historian Stephen Games, who has devoted many decades to studying the life and work of Pevsner, *Pevsner: The Complete Broadcast Talks* brings together transcripts of more than a hundred broadcasts on art, architecture and town planning that he gave between 1945 and 1977. It provides an intriguing survey of the cultural mores of the post-war period, from just before the end of World War Two to the two decades after. This work substantiates an earlier, slimmer Methuen volume of 2002, also edited by Games,

not only more than doubling the number of talks, but also accompanying each with enlightening commentaries that benefit from the enormous amount of research Games has carried out into Pevsner's life in the intervening period.

Discussions of academic influence have often come to the fore in appraisals of Pevsner's work: the impact art historians such as Jakob Burckhardt and Heinrich Wölfflin had on him, and Pevsner's own effect on subsequent historians, such as his petulant PhD student at the Courtauld Institute, Reyner Banham. So it is fitting that Games groups the broadcasts in this volume into chapters structured around BBC producers' influence on output. Pevsner worked with three producers in particular: Basil Taylor, Anna Kallin and Leonie Cohn. As Games (previously himself a BBC producer) explains, each had a particular role in shaping the content and delivery of Pevsner's programmes. Games' commentaries describe the origins of Pevsner's broadcast work and how the broadcasts were produced within the context of an evolving BBC.

Games observes the way in which Pevsner's style and content developed in each distinctive period: from the ill-judged attempts at popularism of his early broadcasts from 1945, to the more assured style of later talks. We can see Pevsner positioning himself as 'outsider' – 'I have not been to a public school, nor to Oxford or Cambridge' (199) – and using broadcast as a medium through which to attack establishment institutions such as the Royal Academy as an irrelevance. Pevsner's extraordinary polymath knowledge is ever apparent: his ability to speak with authority on any subject from Victorian ecclesiastical architecture to contemporary public housing; from public planning to art history, contemporary

architecture to industrial design. At times we also see Pevsner using broadcast as a medium through which to develop the academic field. In a broadcast of October 1952 he acts as apologist for the discipline of art history, a subject still in its infancy in post war Britain, but having matured from its infancy in the 1830s in his native Germany.

Each of the radio broadcasts in Games' volume were scripted and rehearsed and, particularly in Pevsner's earliest talks, the pace was slow and plodding. This cannot have made for electrifying listening but means that they are a useful record of events or exhibitions that are little known, providing a glimpse into visual histories that might otherwise be lost. One example is his broadcast on the *Daily Herald* Modern Homes Exhibition of 1946 (which, by staging a homes show in this year, had stolen a march on its right-wing competitor the *Daily Mail* with its better-known and long-established Ideal Home Exhibition).

One of the most stimulating aspects of the transcripts is the read-across to Pevsner's ideas as expressed elsewhere. It is fairly well known that the BBC broadcast Pevsner's Reith Lectures in 1955 with their discussions of art, architecture and town planning, formed the basis of his extraordinary published statement of national identity in culture the *Englishness of English Art* (1956). But beyond this example, Pevsner was using broadcast as a way of experimenting with new ideas and developing a public voice. The subject of his programmes - about Picturesque and ruins, for example - were paralleled in his articles and editorials for *Architectural Review* magazine. Transcripts such as his discussion of the Interbau Exhibition in Berlin of 1957 also give us a sense of

how Pevsner, who was naturalised as an English citizen in 1946, negotiated his identity as English and German.

Beyond adding to our knowledge of Pevsner, these broadcasts provide a useful building block in our knowledge of the evolution of British arts broadcasting. Pevsner, in his first radio broadcast of 1945, acknowledged that radio was lacking as a medium for describing visual things nearly a decade before TV had become anything like a ubiquitous medium. Despite this, he pioneered radio broadcast for art and architecture. By the 1960s architecture and design broadcasting would be revolutionised by TV series such as Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* (1969) and its riposte, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), but the success of programmes such as these were built on a public platform whose principal architect was Pevsner.

If the idea of *zeitgeist* (or 'spirit of the age') was a dominant theme in the writings of Nikolaus Pevsner, the current *zeitgeist* appears to be for reappraising and republishing his life and work. The last four years have seen the publication of many works devoted to him: a manuscript held by the Getty archives (now keeper of the majority of Pevsner's papers) published as *Visual Planning and the Picturesque* (Getty, 2010), Stephen Games' biography of Pevsner's early life (Continuum, 2010) and Susie Harries' acclaimed full biography (Pimlico, 2011). This fascinating volume of broadcasts joins these earlier works. A companion volume to this, on Pevsner at the BBC, again by Stephen Games, is also due for publication in March 2015.

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