

The voice of art history: Nikolaus Pevsner's work for the BBC

Review of:

Pevsner: The Complete Broadcast Talks. Architecture and Art on Radio and Television, 1945–1977, by Nikolaus Pevsner, edited by Stephen Games, London: Ashgate Press, 2014, 578 pp., 1 b & w ill., £90 hdbk, ISBN: 9781409461975.

Pevsner: The BBC Years. Listening to the Visual Arts, by Stephen Games, London: Ashgate Press, 2015, 412pp., 6 b & w ill., £85, ISBN: 9781472407672.

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In a career spanning two countries, two cultures and five decades, and as a pioneer of numerous fields, from mannerism, to the Modern Movement, to English art, Leipzig-born art and architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983) earned himself a reputation both as an expert and as a polymath, and (to quote broadcaster and essayist Jonathan Meades) assumed the place in British culture of a 'secular saint'.¹ However, there is an inherent fragility in this position of outsider: in spite of being acclaimed as a national institution, Pevsner met with only partial acceptance from the establishment. As the solidity of his expertise was over-stretched by the scope of the subjects he tackled, the patron saint of art history in and of Britain often became a likely target of iconoclasm.

Pevsner himself acknowledged the fact that after his dismissal from the University of Göttingen in 1933 on the grounds of his Jewish origins, the career that he attempted to rebuild in England had necessarily been *ad hoc*. In one of the radio talks featured in the collection under review, he stated: 'My own work, you can take it from me, is entirely eclectic and yet seems to meet a demand.'² This talk was given in 1952, after enough time had passed to allow the émigré scholar to take stock and realise that the professional trajectory that he had hoped to follow in Germany had not only been geographically diverted, but was also taking him further and further from his goal of specialising in a particular topic. Specialisation was, to Pevsner, the hallmark of the true art historian, and he admired those of his colleagues who had succeeded in becoming experts in their domains and had done so in another cultural context, such as Rudolf Wittkower or Ernst Gombrich.³

On the other hand, following in the tracks of his mentor at the university of Leipzig, Wilhelm Pinder, Pevsner saw himself as a populariser, and multiplied his activities to such an extent that the contemporary press often commented that each of these projects, taken individually, would be enough of a career for a single scholar. Encompassing and characterising his work, or as biographer Susie Harries

¹ *Bunkers, Brutalism and Bloodymindedness*, directed by Francis Hanly, presented by Jonathan Meades, BBC 4, 16 February 2014.

² Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Reflections on not teaching Art History', in *Pevsner: The Complete Broadcast Talks*, Stephen Games, ed., London: Ashgate, 2014, 199-205, 204.

³ As Pevsner explained in his RIBA acceptance speech in 1967, see Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Nikolaus Pevsner 1967 Royal Gold Medallist', *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, vol. lxxiv, 1967, 316-318.

puts it, quoting Walt Whitman (whom Pevsner himself used to describe William Morris' output), the task of 'containing multitudes',⁴ became a historiographical challenge, taken on in the essay collections *La Trama della Storia* in 1992 and *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner* in 2002.⁵

Another strand of the research on Pevsner complemented this collective scholarly endeavour, as several heretofore unpublished manuscripts were edited and made available: 'The Modern Movement in Britain', published in 2007, was originally written for a special issue of *The Architectural Review* in the late 1930s, exploring the British response to modernism.⁶ It was meant to end with a section on 'the British synthesis', offering a more positive assessment on architecture in Britain than Pevsner is usually credited for. The book *Visual Planning and the Picturesque* (2010), based on ideas developed in the 1940s and 1950s, revealed his interest in the townscape movement.⁷ Finally, in 2012, the publication of a 1946 report on a mission of experts in Germany's British occupation zone gave an insight into Pevsner's contribution to the transfer of the principles of German design into British practice.⁸ These publications prompted successive shifts in the perception of his artistic and, more particularly, his architectural discourse.

The texts compiled and edited by Stephen Games for Ashgate constitute yet another layer in Pevsner's palimpsest of work and could also motivate such a shift. A selection of these talks – recorded for the BBC between 1945 and 1977 – were published in 2002 by Methuen, but Games now proposes a fully comprehensive edition and an accompanying essay. *The Complete Broadcast Talks* and *The BBC Years* represent a hybrid of the two strands in Pevsner's historiography identified above: taken together, the two books aim both to introduce a new source to Pevsner's bibliography and to interpret its main implications for the reassessment of the art historian's impact on British culture. *The BBC Years* is announced as 'a historical analysis' of Pevsner's collaboration with the BBC, envisaged as a 'test case'⁹ both in art historiography and in media studies. Not only does this project give access to all the scripts still available, it also uses numerous extracts of the correspondence between Pevsner and his various co-workers.

Pevsner was already known to have made constant reassessments of himself, regularly stating the principles along which the discipline could (or rather, to his mind, should) evolve and be reformed in Britain. In the foreword to *Academies of Art, Past and Present* (1940), he delivered his *credo* as a scholar, active in the society to which he belonged: 'The historian can no longer shut himself off from contemporary

⁴ Susie Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life*, London: Chatto & Windus, 797.

⁵ Fulvio Irace (ed.), *Nikolaus Pevsner: La Trama della Storia*, Milan: Guerini, 1992 and Peter Draper (ed.), *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner. British Art and Visual Culture since 1750, new Readings*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

⁶ Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Modern Movement in Britain', *Twentieth Century Society 8. British Modern: Architecture and Design in the 1930s*, 2007, 11-39.

⁷ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Visual Planning and the Picturesque*, edited by Mathew Aitchison, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010.

⁸ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Geheimreport Deutsches Design: deutsche Konsumgüter im Visier des britischen Council of Industrial Design (1946)*, edited by Anne Sudrow, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012.

⁹ Games, 'Introduction', *Complete Broadcast Talks*, 5.

needs. Everywhere he finds himself entangled in topical questions, or pushed aside into academic seclusion. Is it not one of the most urgent tasks for the twentieth century historiography to reconcile scholarship and direct utility?'¹⁰

This statement provides a possible point of entry for reading the collection of short, eclectic texts in *The Complete Broadcast Talks*. Diverse though they are, their versatility illustrates Pevsner's urge to shape a discourse on art, architecture and design, nourished by his demanding academic training in German universities, and to adapt this discourse to his environment and to a new medium, in order to make it appealing, popular and, above all, useful.

Following his arrival in Britain in 1933, Pevsner showed an impressive flexibility when facing new formats and professional disruptions, building his career through unplanned opportunities, primarily as a means to make a living for his family. He accepted an assignment from the Department of Commerce at the University of Birmingham, a role that fell somewhat outside of his academic comfort zone, he wrote articles for the *Architectural Review*, and went on to become editor of the review and of the *King Penguin* book collection during the war. He worked where he was needed, defending his belief in the necessary engagement of the historian of art and architecture with society.

We see these structural issues feed into his scholarly output: for instance, his most famous monograph, *An Outline of European Architecture*, was conceived in the internment camp of Huyton in the summer of 1940, as an alternative to the research that he could not continue without access to his library and relevant documentation. The result was praised as a combination of scholarship and clarity that launched the popularity of the study of architecture in Britain.

The circumstances of Pevsner coming to work with the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1945 (his name was suggested by his Hampstead neighbour, Geoffrey Grigson)¹¹ are similarly anecdotal, yet this collaboration, in retrospect, seems like an ideal match, since Pevsner's *credo* of a useful scholarship echoed the BBC's post-war agenda as set by its first director, Lord Reith: to become a public service dedicated to the enrichment of the nation's intellectual and cultural life. To fulfil this role, it also had to solve the conundrum presented by a growing interest in the visual arts among the British public. As pointed out by art critic Eric Newton in a 1946 essay written for the journal *BBC Quarterly* and reproduced in full in the volume *The BBC Years*, the key to talking about art using a medium that deprives the broadcaster of a visual reference is to 'create an emotion in [the] listener's mind', without being 'emotional', in order to convey 'the intellectual side of the fine arts'.¹²

Pevsner, whose historiography was aligned with the theory of *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte* (art history as history of ideas) developed in the Vienna school of art by Max Dvořák, seemed particularly apt to achieve this balance: for instance, in a 1949 talk on German painting, an extract of Albrecht Dürer's diary (the painter's reaction to the death of Martin Luther in 1520), served to elucidate the creative process: 'Here for once we hear Dürer's passionate faith

¹⁰ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Academies of Art, Past and Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940, viii.

¹¹ As told in Cedric Barfoot, (ed.), *'My Rebellious and Imperfect Eye': Observing Geoffrey Grigson*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002.

¹² Quoted in Games, *BBC Years*, 107-108.

spoken out which otherwise we can only feel in his works, and in the works of the other great painters of his generation'.¹³ Using a literary source to talk about painting, Pevsner illustrated his view that the interpretation of visual arts was intrinsically connected to that of the whole culture of a time or of a region. One way to talk about the history of art on the radio was thus to explore this connection and to put the emphasis on the historical context rather than the aesthetic effect.

As suitable for radio as his particular blend of art history might appear to have been in theory, Pevsner nonetheless had to comply with the specific demands of the 'talk', a genre with an inherent collaborative element. Thus, even on topics tackled elsewhere in his bibliography, Pevsner's radio broadcasts were subjected to several interventions, from their conception all the way through to the rewriting that occurred immediately before recording, and his auctorial voice was attuned to the needs of prospective listeners. This raises questions of primary importance, on the nature of authorship and on the process of the popularisation of knowledge, and leads to a paradox: could it be that Pevsner reached his largest audience through texts that least reflected his views on art and architecture? When reading the radio talks, another mediation that needs to be taken into account is the context of reception, conditioned as it was by the imperatives of a broadcasting schedule, i.e. the position of Pevsner's talks between other programmes.

Between 1945 and 1977, Pevsner was involved with a group of collaborators, of which the producers Basil Taylor (1922-1975), Anna Kallin (1896-1984) and Leonie Cohn (1917-2009) are singled out as the ones who helped to shape his broadcasting persona and who channelled his academic expertise into broadcasting material. Through working for the Third Programme (launched in 1946) with Basil Taylor, whose brief as the producer of the series 'The Visual Arts' was 'to invite clever minds to explore ideas entertainingly',¹⁴ Pevsner had a chance to search for his radio voice, conceived as a compromise between erudition and pedagogy. Like Pevsner, Anna Kallin was also of Russian-Jewish origins; 'a fearless exile', she united 'a British conception of public service with the Russian conception of the intellectual as a moral authority'.¹⁵ From 1958, Pevsner worked mainly with Leonie Cohn, another Jewish émigré, who was an expert in contemporary art and architecture.¹⁶

The main task of Pevsner's producers was to remind him of the requirements and specific nature of his radio broadcasts, particularly when dealing with the fields in which he was undoubtedly an expert. In preparation for the talk 'Gothic - Early to High', Cohn challenged him in a letter for assuming that his audience were familiar with common architectural terms: 'You tell us something *is* Gothic - or very Italian, say - without giving us the criteria by which you have judged it.'¹⁷ Thus, through his broadcasting work, Pevsner was invited to reflect on the language of the history of architecture and to make his talks into a platform, to share the current debates animating his discipline with a broader audience. In response to Cohn's comments, he introduced these debates into his scripts: 'When

¹³ Nikolaus Pevsner, 'German Painting of the Age of Reformation', in *Broadcast Talks*, 90-93, 90.

¹⁴ Games, *Broadcast Talks*, 42.

¹⁵ Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998, 204.

¹⁶ Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner*, 611.

¹⁷ Leonie Cohn to Nikolaus Pevsner, 26 April 1968, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading.

does Romanesque end, when does Gothic start? What is Early Gothic, what is High Gothic, what is Late Gothic?',¹⁸ justifying the very purpose of art history as a discipline: 'I *do* believe that a history of art which is more than cataloguing and more than [personalities] *must* come to terms with styles'.¹⁹

The 1955 Reith lectures on 'The Englishness of English Art'²⁰ are the most famous moment in Pevsner's broadcasting career. A recurring theme in the series, which began in 1948, was the cultural and intellectual place of the nation. The speakers (including Bertrand Russell, Robert Birley and Robert Oppenheimer) often chose to discuss the expression of the British nation in science and politics. Pevsner attempted to apply this postulate to the field of art, in which the national consciousness was underdeveloped, and to trigger enthusiasm among his listeners for what was still broadly considered to be a 'minor school'.²¹

In the Reith lectures, the listing of characteristics organised in terms of dual polarities (whether of concepts: irrational and rational, Decorated and Perpendicular architecture, or of artists: Turner and Constable, etc.) is reminiscent of Heinrich Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History (Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe)*. However, Pevsner's approach does not make any claim to be a rigid system, but rather functions as a framework in which the essence of English art can be explored, always morphing *between* a set of polarities. Rather than in the book version in which it sometimes became stilted, the exploratory nature of this proposal for a geography of art, of which Pevsner admits in his introduction talk that it is not immune to contradictions, translates well into the transitory medium of radio, through which his ideas remain suggestions and incentives for the audience to interrogate their own relation to their national artistic heritage. Mark Cheetham's interpretation that 'there is something "English" about [Pevsner's] art theory that goes beyond its intended objects of study'²² is all the more legitimate when applied to the broadcast talks.

The collection also contains an important set of talks in German, recorded for the BBC's international programmes. Although most of them are unfortunately missing, the remaining scripts will certainly highlight the transnational dimension of Pevsner's work and his active role as a mediator between Britain and Germany. In 'New Trends in Architecture' (1957), proposing himself as a successor of Hermann Muthesius, he sought recognition for the domains in which, in his opinion, British architecture could act as a model, i.e. the garden suburbs adapting the principles of the picturesque to modern needs,²³ a conviction reiterated in 'Bauen und Planen' of 1959: 'We have as much to learn from you as you from us'.²⁴ Pevsner

¹⁸ Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Gothic - Early to High', in *Broadcast Talks*, 490-497, 490.

¹⁹ Pevsner, 'Gothic - Early to High', 497.

²⁰ Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Geography of Art', 254-261, 'Hogarth and observed Life', 261-268, 'Reynolds and Detachment', 268-275, 'Perpendicular England', 275-282, 'Blake and the flaming Line', 282-289, 'Constable and the Pursuit of Nature', 289-296 and 'The Genius of the Place', 307-315, in *Broadcast Talks*.

²¹ Roger Fry, *Reflections on British Painting*, London: Faber & Faber, 1934, 21.

²² Mark Cheetham, *Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism in Britain: The 'Englishness' of English Art Theory since the Eighteenth Century*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, 116.

²³ Nikolaus Pevsner, 'New Trends in Architecture', in *Broadcast Talks*, 340-344, 342.

²⁴ Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Bauen und planen', in *Broadcast Talks*, 382-386, 382.

appears to have developed a broadcasting persona that allowed him to confidently direct his voice back towards his country of origin, as the advocate of an international dialogue between cultures.

While the publication of the complete radio broadcasts is evidently an important contribution to the exploration of the way in which the history of art, architecture and design interacts with mainstream culture, and in spite of the very instructive way in which the several successive versions of the scripts are presented on the page in *Complete Broadcast Talks*, the editorial decision to spread the information over two books makes them slightly impractical as a pair. For example, each talk is preceded by a short introduction, the content of which is sometimes repeated almost verbatim in the accompanying essay, creating unnecessary redundancies. On the other hand, variations and corrections in the talks are listed, not in the book of collected scripts, as one might expect, but in an appendix of *The BBC Years*.

The latter book, though brimming with anecdotes and testimonies gathered over a long period of time, lacks a clear structure and thus fails to offer a coherent overview of the topic under discussion (nominally: Pevsner at the BBC). Moreover, the reader is left with the same impression as that conveyed by Rosemary Hill in her review of the biography *Pevsner: The early Years*, that Games wrote in 2010: when relating facts taken from Pevsner's life, Games comes across as 'determined to put the worst construction on everything'.²⁵ A case in point is a passage of the chapter entitled 'The changing character of the BBC' in which Pevsner's relationship with his future wife Carola Kurlbaum is presented in such a heavy-handed style that one cannot help but feel uneasy ('Pevsner soon found that his sexual insecurity made him dependent on a girl who disappointed him intellectually'²⁶).

The BBC Years actually seems to be following a rather disconcerting agenda: discrediting Pevsner's achievements (to quote one of many similar formulations: 'his talks typically lack any apparatus of values and habitually lose their way'²⁷) and even his personality (in the interpretation of his correspondence with producers, he comes across almost systematically as haughty and rude). Although Pevsner is permitted a sense and aptitude for beautiful phrases, the content of his interventions is constantly undermined: they amount to 'a series of suggestive noises, not always transparent in their meaning but enjoyable for their sentiment and sound value'.²⁸ Refraining from putting a scholar on an academic pedestal is a healthy reflex when researching their historiography. However, *The BBC Years* has missed an opportunity to assess Pevsner's radio talks fairly as an important component of his popular legacy and instead seems to have tipped over into unintentional iconoclasm.

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²⁵ Rosemary Hill, *The Guardian*, 10 July 2010.

²⁶ Games, *BBC Years*, 238.

²⁷ Games, *BBC Years*, 178.

²⁸ Games, *BBC Years*, 218.

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Pevsner: arpenteur des arts (Démopolis, 2015) and she translated Pevsner's *The Englishness of English Art* into French (Vendémiaire, 2016).

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