

TANIA ØRUM AND JESPER OLSSON (eds.):

A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1950-1975.

Brill Rodopi: Leiden and Boston 2016. Pp. 857.

ISBN 978-90-04-31049-0.

The present book is part of the series *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries*, which is a subseries of *Avant-Garde Critical Studies*, published by Brill Rodopi. *A Cultural History* will eventually have four parts; one volume (1900-1925) was published in 2013 and a next one (1925-1950) is expected to come out in 2019. The volume under review deals with the years 1950-1975 and is a brick of a book (both in terms of size and weight) of more than 850 pages. In fact, both the sheer scope and the high number of articles (almost 90 [!], if I am counting correctly) tempts me to make some exaggerated statement, such as that the volume is, in effect, yet another book series within a book series. In any event, it contains an enormous wealth of information and can be regarded as a sort of comprehensive encyclopaedia (in a good sense of the word) of the Nordic avant-garde of the given period. The focus is truly pan-Nordic: both Finland and Iceland receive a fair share of attention.

According to the webpage Brill.com, the series *Avant-Garde Critical Studies* 'welcomes interdisciplinary research on literature and the arts

in the avant-garde period', and this volume is no exception to this policy. In fact, *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries* in its entirety is an interdisciplinary project. It is 'not just another art history or literary history,' as the Preface makes clear, emphasizing the fact that the series 'includes all the arts' and that it discusses them 'within a broader cultural context' (p. xv). The series is also transnational in that it points out the many cross-border connections between various artists and artist groups, not only within Northern Europe, but also between the Nordic countries on the one hand and, for example, the United States or France on the other. In other words, the series emphasizes avant-garde networks.

As far as the theoretical point of departure is concerned, the editors have not adopted any narrow definition of the avant-garde: '[W]e do not presuppose any theoretical consensus. Several notions of the avant-garde are introduced and discussed over the many pages of this cultural history' (p. xviii). This seems to have been a wise decision, in general terms. However, when reading some of the individual contributions, one cannot sometimes help thinking that some of the statements about the avant-garde character of a particular phenomenon can also be related to the competing term 'modernism.' Are avant-garde and modernism the same concept? Does it matter? The book itself seems to indicate that it does, because some of the contributors actually use the term 'avant-garde' in opposition to 'modernism': such is the context of, for example, the expressions 'the elitist pretensions of much modernist art' (p. 426), 'a break away from modernism and its cult of the art work' (p. 472) and 'the modernist dogma of the autonomy of the artwork' (p. 633). Since the two terms are so interrelated, it would have been reasonable to include an initial definition of their mutual relationship in the Preface.

After the Preface comes the Introduction, written by Tania Ørum. Her long text (pp. 1-46) is truly excellent; it provides the reader with an in-depth survey of the given period, both in historical and theoretical terms. She makes an important distinction between two lines of development of the post-war avant-garde, the 'expressive/expressionist' and 'constructivist', and claims that the respective adherents of these two aesthetic tendencies 'regarded each other with considerable hostility'

(p. 29). The remaining part of the book is divided into seven main sections: 'Paradigmatic Images of Scandinavia,' 'Cultural Politics and Institutions,' 'New Cultural Geographies,' 'New Technologies and New Media,' 'Performative Strategies,' 'Interventions into Everyday Life' and 'The Avant-Garde between Market and Counterculture.' As these titles indicate, the organization of the book is thematic, not chronological. The nature and quality of the individual contributions vary. Some articles are relatively long, others very short. Some analyse a certain phenomenon as a conceptual problem, others are nothing but simple historical surveys.

As already mentioned, the book discusses 'all the arts,' from film to architecture. This wide range has its pros and cons. The volume might disappoint those readers who are only interested in their narrow field of specialization. However, those readers who approach the book with an open mind will certainly learn many new things that might enrich their overall view of the avant-garde and related phenomena. Still, given the high degree of specialization in today's academia, it is difficult to imagine a reader who would read every single article in this book with equally close attention. I should also mention that the volume as a whole is not as interdisciplinary and 'cross-aesthetic' (p. xvi) as it aims to be: some articles do discuss interdisciplinary issues, but others only focus on a single art category or genre. As a whole, then, the book may be interdisciplinary by virtue of containing articles from many different aesthetic areas, but not necessarily on account of all-pervading 'cross-aesthetic' inquiry.

It is impossible to sum up in one paragraph all the significant observations that this rich volume makes about the avant-garde of the given period. I will therefore mention just a few selected phenomena that the book, in my opinion, makes more evident than others: in the years 1950-1975 the barrier between high and low culture substantially eroded, new media and broadly available technologies (radio, TV, tape recorders, portable cameras) had a strong impact, fusional forms of art proliferated, art moved out of the institutions into the public space and the idea of artwork as object was undermined as artists began to focus on art as event. To conclude, I must point out that enormous editorial care went into the making of this volume; the book is basically

free of misprints and the quality of the English language in all of the contributions is very high.

MARTIN HUMPÁL

CHARLES UNIVERSITY, PRAGUE