Andrea Kollnitz, Per Stounbjerg, Tania Orum (eds.), A Cultural History of the Avant-garde in the Nordic Countries 1925-1950 (Leiden: Brill, 2019) | 1

As a reviewer you sometimes see amazingly ugly books. Without sense and understanding of the context, papers are compiled and issued without supervision by the publishers. Reading such anthologies is a real torture, at least for the reviewer. Now there is one pleasant exception. Hjartarson, Professor in Reykjavik for Comparative Culture and Literary Studies, together with his three other co-editors from Sweden and Denmark, has succeeded in creating some kind of an encyclopaedia of modern cultural history in Scandinavia after the First World War. The book is part of a series of, currently, three works: beside the present volume, a work of the same name by Tanja Orum for the years 1950-1975 and by Hubert van den Berg for the period 1900-1925. However, this connection is hardly made clear in the present volume, although one can understand the meaning of the book only in connection with the other two volumes.

The book is divided into six parts, with a total of more than 50 authors. The first part deals with exemplary cases, such as European cinema and its influence on the work of Viking Eggeling of the Swedish Arts, which produced only one film (Symphony diagonale, 1924), but had a significant influence on the English and American film avant-garde, which is hardly known today. Then the Stockholm exhibition of 1930 was celebrated as a breakthrough for functionalism and modernism in Sweden. The influence of African art on the Danish avant-garde is illustrated by the Kjermei collection. Afterwards we go to Finland, to Alvar Aalto and his early work. The central role of Cobra in Scandinavia is illustrated by the example of Asgar Jorn and his idea of the human animal.

The second section examines the developmental tendencies and directions of the early avant-garde. The section begins with an analysis of Quosego, a Finnish-Swedish art magazine in existence from May 1928 to April 1929. Then Bjerke-Petersen’s 1934 monograph on Surrealism is put to the test, a first introduction to Surrealism in the Nordic language. Denmark is the next country when it comes to the Danish art magazine Linien. After Sweden, a profound analysis of the Halmstad group of artists, whose surrealist concepts had an impact reaching as far as Paris, is carried out. The Danish group Helhesten was similarly influential, with immediate effects on the Icelandic art scene in the form of Svavar Gudnason. The situation of female artists in Scandinavia within the avant-garde is also examined. The dock, an art exhibition from 1930, comes up once again with regard to Otto G. Carlsund and Art concret. The section concludes with a depiction of the post-war avant-garde in Denmark.

The third part deals with transmissions and implementation of the avant-garde idea from the continental European area into a Scandinavian formal language. For example, the path from surrealism to Danish literature via Jens August Schade is presented. Similarly, Bertolt Brecht traces the path that he took while in exile in Denmark, Sweden and Finland. Kurt Schwitters was also in exile with numerous consequences for the Scandinavian literary world, above all because of his exile in Norway. Similar contours can be seen for the Bauhaus, African art around 1930, and modernism in Finland, especially between 1922 and 1939.

The fourth part deals with institutional-framework conditions for the avant-garde in Scandinavia. Here you will find contributions on radio experiments by Emil Bonnelycke or on the pioneering work of Nyriki Tapiovaara in cinema, followed by an analysis of new classical music in Norway. The significance of the platform Unionalen for the Scandinavian art scene from 1927 onwards is also acknowledged, as is the artist group “Färg och form”. The contribution to the avant-garde strategies in Denmark and the local artist scene between the wars should be particularly emphasized.

This broad representation continues in the fifth part, which deals with aesthetic experiments, both in the avant-garde film scene of Denmark and Sweden, in the Danish theatre and in the Finnish-Swedish literary scene. The sixth part then deals with ideologies and arguments at the end of the twenties, also with regard to the emerging totalitarian trends in Germany and Italy. One contribution deals with Judaism and its significance for the Swedish music scene. Another article describes the influence of Bauhaus on Scandinavian design. For Iceland this is proved in the confrontation with “degenerated” art in 1942 debates. The influence of Wilhelm Freddie on the upcoming sexual revolution is also exciting to read.

The book leaves the reader with high respect and numerous questions. What is meant by “Nordic States”? Is there really a Scandinavian cultural area? What connects Faroer and Iceland with Finland, Sweden and Denmark? As the present volume shows, Iceland is rather monolithically separated from the rest of Scandinavia. And even more: what should be meant by the term “cultural history”, as the authors claim in the title of the book? The voluminous book contains a kaleidoscopic mix of thought fragments and names from music history, literature, the visual arts, film, photography, dance, architecture, design. It is not

really clear how connecting red lines can be drawn through these different genres. In addition, there was a total failure in the years 1925-1950, as stated in the introduction. Many of the art genres mentioned were meaningless when it came to Nordic states in the period mentioned. As the contributions show, the focus is often more on small groups or individual protagonists who, coming from Scandinavia, had and expanded contacts with international leading figures. And this leads to the last question, that of the avant-garde. What's that supposed to be? Who gives you the right to count certain creative people as avant-garde and others as not, without revealing your understanding of avant-garde?

Such a book and series cannot answer the questions raised. The value of the book lies in the search for individual gemstones, thought fragments, trouvailles on individual actors of the art scene at that time. In this respect, it is really fun to immerse yourself in the book and to profit intellectually from the many ideas about individual creative people. In this respect, reading this book is strongly recommended to all culture lovers.