

## BOOK REVIEWS

### ***RUSSIA IN THE MICROPHONE AGE: A HISTORY OF SOVIET RADIO***

**1919–1970, STEPHEN LOVELL (2015)**

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 256 pp.,

ISBN: 9780198725268, h/bk, £35.00

*Reviewed by Stanislaw Jedrzejewski, Kozminski University*

When discussing work on the history of media, one cannot ignore the name of Asa Briggs, recently deceased British historian. Paddy Scannel (2002) has mentioned the numerous difficulties Briggs experienced when he started working on the history of broadcasting in the United Kingdom. At that time, there was no general model for writing a history of the media and Briggs, who wanted to take into account all aspects of British radio and television including domestic and foreign radio, television, regulations, technologies and the organization of production, ran into major problems trying to arrange a consistent narrative. There was also a danger of getting lost in the details at the expense of the overall perspective, nor was it easy to find a place for the historical analysis of programs and their impact on modern society. Briggs wanted to avoid a 'presentism approach', which interpreted past events in terms of modern values and concepts, and ended up adopting a perspective point of view.

In *Russia in the Microphone Age*, Stephen Lovell, a historian from King's College London who specializes in the social and cultural history of Russia and the Soviet Union, solves many of Briggs's dilemmas. But the historian who decides to write a history of Soviet media faces another difficult task: in addition to the known difficulties of reaching the source, s/he must exercise criticism and caution as he or she tries to separate those Soviet sources which serve current policies related to propaganda and indoctrination from what is real. I think that Lovell avoided all the traps he could have fallen into.

Unlike many other works by historians who wrote about the media, Lovell's study covers analysis of the content of Soviet radio programmes and

their reception while raising issues of technology. He also includes institutional considerations and analyses of broadcasts related to art. The last chapter, being perhaps the most interesting, contains an analysis of radio genres and audiences from the post-war Soviet Union era.

Since its inception, radio in Soviet Russia and then in the Soviet Union was regarded as an instrument of propaganda; indeed, radio was one of the first objectives of the Bolshevik coup in 1917. From the first days of the revolt, the Soviet government invested in the development of the new medium. Scientific institutes were developed (especially the most famous M. Bonch-Bruевич Radio Laboratory in Nizhnii Novgorod), where research was targeted at increasing the range of broadcasting and refining techniques for receiving, involving the work of many outstanding professional radio technicians. Because radio sets were still very expensive and unavailable to many people, huge megaphones were installed in high-traffic areas, squares and intersections, and wired receiver points (in Russian *tochka/terelka*) were established in many places. This is why Lenin referred to radio as a 'spoken newspaper'.

Through its dissemination it became clear that radio as a mass medium expressed, above all, the views and expectations of the authorities. In this sense, throughout its history (especially in the years 1930 to 1970), Soviet radio served to mobilize the masses and change consciousness. Something that is not generally written about is how radio encourages the cultural participation of audiences. According to Lovell, the main mission of radio 'was to broadcast not only the voice of authority but also that of "the people"' (11). Whether they liked it or not, radio journalists, producers and artists were constantly witness to opposing versions of orthodox Marxism-Leninism from the spontaneous (though only during recording) expression of views of its listeners. Their task was therefore to find a style and form of communication that would be politically and ideologically correct while at the same time attractive to the listener. Being under the constant pressure of censorship by Communist Party officials must have certainly been a challenge.

Based on the analysis of an impressive variety of sources (including interviews with people remembering the 'golden age of radio' in the Soviet Union), Lovell arrives at the conclusion that until the 1960s radio programs were heavily layered with rhetoric. After that, political control over the radio, although still overwhelming, ceased to be total. Paradoxically, the advent of new technologies reduced the risk of making errors that could have serious political implications. Lovell writes: "Developed socialism" had its established idiom of "good news" journalism as well as established and well-loved formats in areas such as literature and theatre, sport, and children's broadcasting' (11).

Lovell closes his story at the moment when Sergei Lapin took the helm at state radio and television. His name is connected with the end of the de-Stalinization era, initiated by Nikita Khrushchev and his 'cult of personality and its consequences' speech, presented at the XX Congress of the Communist Party. The decade of the 1960s ends an era where the radio was dominant. At the stage in history when television arrives with full force, the rhetoric of Soviet culture (and propaganda) becomes audio-visual. Finally, in his epilogue Lovell covers the period after the fall of The Soviet Union in 1991 with the relatively brief tenure of Boris Yeltsin and the beginning of the Putin era.

Stephen Lovell's excellent book methodologically and structurally refers to the work of Asa Briggs and is the first full history of Soviet radio, written in English. It should interest not only radio historians, but also all those who are interested in the history of social dimensions in the media.

## REFERENCE

Scannel, Paddy (2002), 'History, media and communication', in K. B. Jensen (ed.), *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research. Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies*, London: Routledge, pp. 200–01.

E-mail: [sjedrzejewski@kozminski.edu.pl](mailto:sjedrzejewski@kozminski.edu.pl)

### **JOHN VASSOS: INDUSTRIAL DESIGN FOR MODERN LIFE, DANIELLE SHAPIRO (2016)**

Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 296 pp.,  
ISBN: 9780816693412, p/bk, \$35.00

*Reviewed by Bill Kirkpatrick, Denison University*

Seeing this study of the life and work of pioneering industrial designer John Vassos, your initial thought may be, 'I've never heard of this person'. As you follow his career through the book, that thought is likely to turn to, 'How come I've never heard of this person?' Vassos was never quite as famous as, say, Apple's Jony Ive, but he was a reasonably prominent designer, author, and illustrator in his day, and Danielle Shapiro persuasively argues for his importance to radio and television history, as well as to the growth of industrial design.

As RCA's chief consultant from the 1930s through the 1960s, Vassos probably did as much as any individual to shape the look and feel of media technologies in the twentieth century. His 'functional modernism' was expressed in radios and televisions characterized by clean lines, well-placed and tactilely informative controls, and deco-inspired styling that incorporated modernist touches without becoming too radical for the average living room. From the graceful curve of the 96X radio to the elegant louvers of the TRK-12 television, Vassos' creations were beautiful, innovative and user-friendly. Shapiro vividly describes these designs (complemented by generous illustrations) and explains why they worked aesthetically and practically.

Radio scholars will appreciate Vassos's numerous contributions to media history: his early championing of Bakelite and push-button tuning; his radio-themed murals in Philadelphia's WCAU building; his design for the 'Living Room of Tomorrow' at the 1939 New York World's Fair, which helped fairgoers imagine integrating television into a modern middle-class lifestyle; and more. Nor does broadcasting begin to exhaust the list of Vassos's accomplishments, which stretch from subway turnstiles to harmonicas to the interior of Nedick's hotdog stand. Shapiro exhaustively mines Vassos's papers to discuss this work in the context of his design philosophy, his negotiations with clients, and his ambivalent embrace of twentieth-century American culture.

Although marketed as a biography, the focus of the book is squarely on Vassos' work. The subtitle signals Shapiro's goal of situating Vassos' career within a cultural history of 'modern' American life. Radio scholars, of course, are familiar with the rhetoric of radio and modernity. Shapiro deepens our

understanding of that relationship by detailing connections among modernism as an artistic style, industrial design as a modern profession emerging from and accelerating mass culture, the promotion of a 'modern' domesticity that rearranged class and gender relations along with the furniture, and, at the centre of it all, the radios and televisions that symbolized, mediated, and produced modernity for twentieth-century Americans.

Shapiro's most significant argument is that Vassos, who was deeply concerned about 'the mechanization and monotony of modern society' (30), sought through his radios and televisions to help users overcome the fear and alienation he believed endemic to life in the twentieth century. He prioritized ergonomics and legibility, for example by separating the tuning and listening functions of the radio and obsessing over the look, feel, and placement of knobs. Modernist touches like aerodynamic streamlining and cubist shapes were evident but toned down for mainstream consumption so that the radios, televisions, phonographs, etc. suggested modernness while remaining easy to use and – significantly – easy to integrate into the home. Rather than rejecting modern life altogether, he used industrial design to make it more livable.

The book is highly accessible and inviting; as a non-expert in design history, I was never confused or impatient with the details. Of course, that strength also impacts the book's value to different audiences: by splitting the difference between biography and cultural history, and between design history and media studies, the book is bound to leave readers, whatever the interests that brought them to it, wanting more. This is not a criticism of Shapiro or her project, but rather a heads-up: readers of *Radio Journal* are likely to want more radio history than the book provides. For example, I couldn't get enough of Vassos's negotiations with RCA executives and wanted much more about the back-and-forth between Vassos and the company's engineers. I also wish the cultural history aspects of the study, on the whole, had been fuller and deeper.

Even on its own terms, however, *John Vassos* would have benefited from a more critical editor to catch some troublesome assertions. For example: '[T]he New York World's Fair had promised a future where new technologies would improve citizenship and national strength. The war years caused a shift. Private reward became more important than public gain as the war's end ushered in an era of suburban consumerism' (186). Even as transitional shorthand, that's problematic historiography: mistaking corporate promises for actual social attitudes, treating 'private reward' and 'public gain' as straightforward (and necessarily antithetical) concepts – and suggesting that an entire society could suddenly care more about one than the other. Fortunately, the majority of the book establishes Shapiro as a thoughtful analyst and careful researcher, and the valuable historical insights far outnumber and outweigh the few lapses.

Ultimately, the book's greatest value to radio scholars will be as an adjunct to work in a number of emerging trends, including increased attention to affect and phenomenologies of listenership; the rise of dis/ability as a lens on media usage and history; and, in studies of podcasting and other digital shifts, explorations of technological interfaces and user experiences in audio consumption. By way of an introduction to a remarkable designer, Shapiro has provided a useful history of industrial design for media scholars and a strong case for greater consideration of aesthetics and design as we seek to understand radio as a material and cultural object.

E-mail: [billkirkp@gmail.com](mailto:billkirkp@gmail.com)