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Review of Sam Dolbear and Esther Leslie, *Dissonant Waves: Ernst Schoen and Experimental Sound in the Twentieth Century* (Goldsmiths Press, 2023)

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Dissonant Waves tells the life story of Ernst Schoen, a pioneer of early radio and the Leader of the Programming Department at Südwestdeutsche Rundfunkdienst AG (SWZ), the Frankfurt regional radio station. It also tells the story of his social milieu – musicians, artists, philosophers and writers which included Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and other well-known figures. The writers follow in the spirit of Ernst Schoen's experimental aesthetics, innovating the biographical genre by presenting a fragmented, non-linear narrative, especially in the first part of the book. For Flann O'Brien scholars and enthusiasts, the volume offers an insight into the avant-garde possibilities of mass communications media and radio in particular. Both Flann and Schoen challenged the distinction between high art and popular culture in their own ways and engaged in a search for new means of expression.

Dissonant Waves tells the life story of Ernst Schoen, a modern composer and a pioneer of early radio who served as the Leader of the Programming Department at Südwestdeutsche Rundfunkdienst AG (SWZ), the Frankfurt regional radio station. It also tells the story of his social milieu – musicians, artists, philosophers, and writers – including Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno.

This is a book for lovers of modernist art, in form as well as in content. The writers follow in the spirit of Ernst Schoen's experimental aesthetics by presenting a fragmented, non-linear narrative, especially in the first part of the book. This fresh approach to biographical writing seems to have been partially motivated by necessity – early radio programmes were not recorded, and many personal materials were lost when the Schoen family had to flee the Nazi regime. The resulting gaps and uncertainties are approached obliquely, through the traces they left in contemporary publications, personal documents, and public announcements. Instead of mourning what was lost, the authors treat the partial record as an opportunity to echo some characteristics of the radio medium in their writing. Short sections on different subjects are dedicated to events in Schoen's life, the programming he created, contemporary theories of radio, and the culture around it. Just like in modernist art, the reader is invited to fill in the gaps, notice recurring themes, and infer motivation and causes from objective descriptions. As the introduction explains, the authors aim to recreate for the reader the atmosphere of Schoen's pioneering work, which drew on the enormous power and possibilities of the new medium.

In many cases, this inventive style succeeds in highlighting the multi-faceted cultural atmosphere of the late 1920s and early 1930s, for example in its multi-layered use of the Eiffel Tower, which was built as a demonstration of modern engineering and later became part of the radio transmission infrastructure, both a medium and a message of the possibilities inherent in new technologies. This complexity informs the authors' reading of two photos of Schoen taken at the site in 1930 and 1949, which serve as a reflection on the advent and consequences of technology as well as Schoen's life. In other cases, the reader is left wondering why particular materials were included, for example the recurring description of advertisements in the radio yearbook. A few are clearly intended to illustrate the popular imagination around radio, such as the portrayal of radio as a magical ritual (45). Others, however, are simply described in a series (47–49), leaving the reader wishing for more guidance as to their import.

In the later part of the book the exuberance and fascination with the possibilities of a new medium are replaced by the sombre and more linear tale of persecution and exile. Following the accession of the National Socialist party to power, Schoen was immediately fired and shortly after, imprisoned. On being released he fled to England,

where the first victims of Nazi persecution were received with suspicion and prejudice. Schoen had lost not only his job and material possessions, but also his livelihood, his social circle, his career, and his cultural relevance. The book outlines how he never recovered from this loss. In later life he contributed to intercultural exchange and the promotion of avant garde works through production and translation, but he did not regain the institutional influence he had wielded as a young man. A recurring 'roll call' section at the end of several chapters relates the fate of his friends and colleagues who belonged to the same circles. These sections help to tell the story of a generation of intellectuals who dispersed throughout the world, their lives and relationships shattered by the force of historical upheavals.

Although no direct connection exists between Brian O'Nolan and Ernst Schoen, the book is of interest for Brian O'Nolan scholars and enthusiasts by offering an insight into the way avant-garde groups explored the possibilities of mass communications media, particularly the radio. As Tobias W. Harris's recent monograph *Flann O'Brien and the European Avant-Garde, 1934–45* (2025) has demonstrated, O'Nolan and his collaborators were familiar with the artistic milieu in which Schoen operated, either directly or through mutual sources of inspiration. Both O'Nolan and Schoen pursued the Dadaist impulse in challenging the distinction between high art and popular culture, as well as in the use of techniques such as assemblage and montage. Both brought an experimental spirit to media that appealed to a general audience – the newspaper and the radio respectively – and both played with the technical affordances of the medium to create new means of expression. To pick up just one interesting example, Schoen was interested in the potential of radio to encourage appreciation of modern classical music among a broad audience. He argued that simply positioning a microphone in front of the stage and broadcasting the result through the low fidelity radio equipment available at the time was insufficient to allow listeners at home enjoy the performance. Instead, Schoen advocated for radio adaptations that would fit the radio schedule and the medium's technical possibilities, thus creating the new form of 'radio opera', a novel type of musical composition he developed in collaboration with Bertolt Brecht, Anton von Webern, and others. It relied on scores specially written for the radio, studio recordings, and editing of short pieces rather than a live transmission. This hybrid approach is reminiscent of O'Nolan's adaptations of his own prose and theatre work for radio and television, which recreated the dynamics of the original by freely adjusting it to the possibility of a new medium rather than trying to reconstruct a precise replica.

Another parallel between O'Nolan and Schoen can be found in their effort to turn a one-way medium such as print, radio or television into a two-sided, albeit unequal, conversation by asking listeners to respond to various questions and competitions.

This approach draws on Brecht's idea of the need to empower audiences to criticise theatrical performances. Programmes on the Frankfurt radio asked audiences to send in questions or respond to quizzes. The use of a direct approach to the reader and the invitation to engage in conversation with the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns is well known, and it is noteworthy that O'Nolan suggested a similar concept for a TV advertisement for Guinness, where instead of the brief stories he had been asked to write, he proposed a radio sketch in the form of a fake quiz with wrong answers.[1] Although *Dissonant Waves* does not devote much space to the political background, it is important to note that for Schoen and his collaborators, the possibility of two-way communication with the public was tied up in a political agenda of mass education and cultivating a self-aware and critical form of citizenship. Schoen told Benjamin, his friend and collaborator, that his own artistic direction was created in opposition to the one-way imposition of culture on radio listeners in the form of lectures and lessons. Instead, Schoen suggested that audiences could be educated through a fusion of entertainment with progressive values: 'Give every listener what he wants, and even a bit more (namely, of that which *we* want)'.[2] In 'Reflections on Radio', Benjamin further explains that radio should teach audiences 'a new expertise' where listeners 'direct their reflections at their own real reactions, in order to sharpen and justify them'.[3]

When Schoen died in 1960, the death notice written by his wife described him as a victim of the Nazis, emphasising the decisive blow their coming to power dealt to his life. The absence of any reference to their presence before 1933 in the book is therefore striking. Schoen was a Jew in a prominent cultural position and part of a left-wing intellectual circle, while letters and written materials from the 1950s cited later in the volume indicate he was a committed communist, all of which would have made him a prime target for fascist and antisemitic attacks. The authors allude vaguely to attacks on the station and perhaps Schoen himself, but without any specifics to clarify the nature of these attacks. Moreover, the term antisemitism is never mentioned in the text. Racism is discussed only briefly. At one point, attacks on the dancer Henri Châtin-Hofmann are described as 'racialised' and 'racist' (31), using a language that is more commonly applied to people of colour, thus obscuring his Jewish identity. The racial motivation for Schoen's persecution is first mentioned in the context of his claim for restitution, as if it were only of bureaucratic relevance and not an ongoing

[1] Brian O'Nolan to Leopold Stork, 10 December 1961, in *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien.* ed. Maebh Long (Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 290; Brian O'Nolan to Seamus, 23 October 1953, *Letters*, 181.

[2] Quoted in Walter Benjamin, 'Conversation with Ernst Schoen,' in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, 397–402, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Harvard University Press, 2008), 398.

[3] Walter Benjamin, 'Reflections on Radio,' in *Selected Writings Volume 2, part 2, 1931–1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Belknap Press, 1999), 543–4.

discourse of hate that would have been highly present throughout his life in Germany. This silence is disturbing in its minimalisation of anti-Jewish racism, a trend that seems to pervade academic discourses nowadays. Furthermore, it creates a misleading image of a prelapsarian period of play and experimentation isolated from the gathering forces of totalitarianism, forces that the reader would be highly aware of, thereby creating an unnecessary ironic distance from the text and the violence of the period. The story of early radio in Germany thus becomes unmoored from the complexities of cultural production and conflicts over control of mass communications. This unfortunate omission obscures Schoen's own position within the German context, and more generally the political conflicts in which modernist aesthetics were developed, defended, and contested. To quote Schoen, '[t]o understand something historically [...] means to grasp it as a reaction, as an engagement' and therefore more engagement with the historical forces against which Schoen's work unfolded would have facilitated a better understanding of his achievements.[4]

[4] Quoted in Benjamin, 'Conversation with Ernst Schoen', 397.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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