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Closing in – Literary criticism in Norwegian radio (NRK), 1925–2010

Literature has played an important role in Norwegian radio since its inception. My thesis explores the literary criticism broadcast by Norsk Rikskringkasting (The Norwegian Broadcasting Company, NRK), with emphasis on the influence of radio's technological and rhetorical foundations on literary criticism as a practice and as an institution. The thesis will be structured chronologically, with the aim of establishing an overview of 1) the literature referred to and reviewed, 2) which programs covered literary topics, and 3) the contributors who played important roles in literary programming.

This overview will be combined with a media historical account of radio's development from collective technological experiment to the dominant national mass medium, then to a medium amongst many, up to today, where the national broadcaster simultaneously publishes its content on several media platforms. There are currently no such historical overviews of Norwegian broadcasting and its literary content, which calls for a quite traditional presentation of the topic within the thesis. At the same time, besides this narrative of the literary content of the institution NRK, I will attempt to describe the media-specific rhetorical evolution of literary criticism on the radio. This development is tentatively expressed in the concept *the sound of literary authority*, which will be described in a series of closer examinations of practices of literary criticism in the NRK.

Radio held a unique position as the first medium that could reach anything approaching a complete national community, and in a far more accessible way— at least for those with receiving equipment—than written media. This calls for a broad selection of research materials in order to depict literary culture's encounter with broadcasting. That is to say that the position of the entire literary institution in radio will be considered in the thesis. Accordingly, I operate with a wide concept of literary criticism that will include, in some historical periods, programmes for entertainment, pedagogical, or informative purposes in addition to those primarily concerned with the aesthetic evaluation of literary works.

The conceptual grounding for this approach is an understanding of the NRK as a *critical institution*, i.e., an institution that through its entire literary practice contributes to the visibility of certain forms of literature and the formation of a canon. This relates to an understanding of the history of literary criticism as a part of the history of literature itself. This wide-ranging approach will, however, be narrowed down slightly as we close in on our present time, as it is primarily during the 1980s that the practice we today recognise as literary criticism became a regular feature in the NRK: an overtly argumentative and evaluating practice.

Throughout the thesis I describe the development of literary criticism in radio since the establishment of the organisation of the medium in Norway in 1925. How has our way of *talking about* literature changed? At the basis of the question lies a material

understanding of the media, inspired by studies such as “No Sense of Place” by Joshua Meyrowitz<sup>1</sup> and in a Norwegian context “Talerens troverdighet” [The credibility of the speaker] by Anders Johansen.<sup>2</sup> Both emphasise how technological developments have led to a more intimate experience of public appearances. This diverts slightly from other, more ideologically and politically inspired, theories of the development of public space. Compared to political journalism, relatively few studies have been conducted on the sections of our public sphere dedicated to culture, especially from a perspective that emphasises the technologies of media. It is important to consider how such a cultural public sphere differs from that of politics. In what way have the forms of cultural life changed, and how have these forms been influenced by the ideologies of cultural life? Considered alongside familiar descriptions of political public life, this may reveal important information about the internal rules and structures of the cultural public sphere and how this common practice has influenced our relationship with literature throughout the period.

My hypothesis is that literary criticism and the literary conversation has changed less, and at any rate at a different pace, than the political public sphere during the period described. This development is due to a number of factors, but I will contend that a major reason for this is an institutional conservatism in the literary field that distinguishes literary practice from its surroundings. Literary talks and conversations remained more “literal” than other forms of radio content. However, at the same time one will find that a number of the progressive movements had their own specific styles within radio broadcast literary criticism. This leads me to describe forms of literary criticism as taking place in a situation defined by conflicting tensions, with influences from technological, social, political, and aesthetic tendencies playing an important role. The analysis of broadcast criticism will in turn shed light back on these tendencies. A recent literary trend makes for an interesting situation; the popularity of the autobiographical novel in Scandinavian literature has been linked to the increasing intimacy of the public sphere generated by technological developments.<sup>3</sup> Spoken literary criticism presents the critic in quite a different way than written criticism, presenting the critic with a specific rhetorical situation: addressing listeners, not readers, using the human voice instead of the written word. What happens to literary criticism that is part of this phenomenon when it must address a literature that more or less overtly comments on it?

As a participant in the larger research project *The History of Norwegian Literary Criticism 1870-2000*, my thesis is positioned within a clearly defined national framework. Available research on similar subjects in other countries, such as Todd Avery’s account of the activities of the Bloomsbury group in the BBC,<sup>4</sup> will of course be important grounds for comparison to better describe the particularities of Norwegian practice. But not many similar studies exist; transmedial studies of literary

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Meyrowitz: *No sense of place: the impact of electronic media on social behavior*. Oxford 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Anders Johansen: *Talerens troverdighet – Tekniske og kulturelle betingelser for politisk retorikk*. Oslo 2002.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Jon Helt Haarder: *Det særlige forhold til vi havde til forfatteren – Mod et begrep om performativ biografisme*. In: *Norsk litteraturvitenskapelig tidsskrift* 8 (2005), p. 1–14.

<sup>4</sup> Todd Avery: *Radio Modernism: literature, ethics, and the BBC, 1922–1938*. Aldershot and Burlington 2006.

culture and radio tend to focus mainly on literature as radio content, not the tradition of commentaries on literature.

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