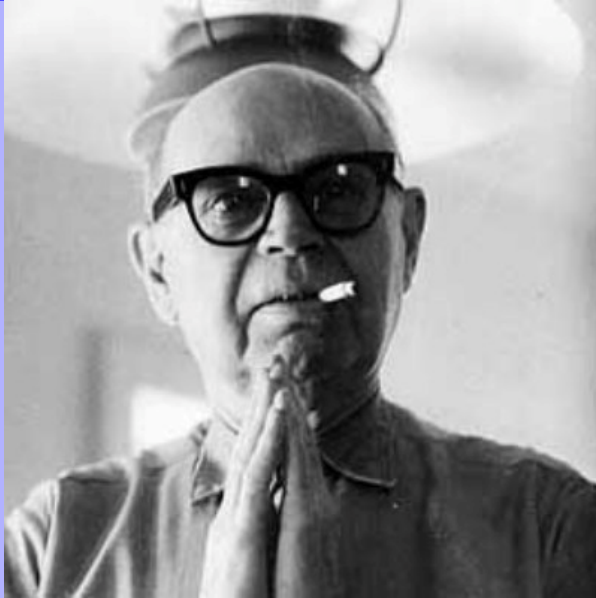


Poul Henningsen

1894-1967



Poul Henningsen (9 September 1894 to 31 January 1967) was a Danish author, architect and critic, and one of the leading figures of the cultural life of Denmark between the World Wars. In Denmark, he is often referred to simply as "PH".

PH was the illegitimate son of author Agnes Henningsen and satirist Carl Ewald. He spent a happy childhood in a tolerant and modern home which was often visited by the leading members of the Danish *literati*. Between 1911 and 1917 he was educated as an architect, but he never graduated and tried himself as an inventor and painter.

As an architect Henningsen was one of the most eager supporters of the functionalist ideal. His most valuable contribution was the so-called PH-lamp (constructed 1925), a simple lamp which used the breakings of light. It created the economic fundament of his later work.

During the 1920s Henningsen had his literary breakthrough. Between 1926 and 1928 he edited the polemic left-wing periodical *Kritisk Revy* ("Critical Review") in which he and his colleagues scorned old-fashioned style and cultural conservatism, linking these themes to politics. At the same time he began as a revue writer praising natural behaviour, sexual broad-mindedness and simple living. He was the man who made the Danish revues a political weapon of the left wing without giving up its character as entertainment (the so-called "PH-revues" of 1929-32). In 1933 he edited his most famous work *Hvad med Kulturen?* ("What About Culture?") a polemic, audacious and urgent criticism of Danish cultural life—its snobbishness and passion for the past—in spite of all the efforts of the Modern Break-Through. He tried to make parallels between prudery, moralising and fascist leanings, whilst he also accused the Social Democrats of lacking a firm and cohesive cultural line. This book gained him a reputation as a communist "fellow traveller". He took part in the anti-fascist propaganda, always trying to connect culture and politics.

Among his other initiatives of this period was *Danmarksfilmen* ("The Film of Denmark"), 1935, also known as "PH's Danmarksfilm". It is an unpretentious and non-traditional film portraying life in contemporary Denmark in a lively and slightly disrespectful way, with visual images supported by jazz rhythms. It was condemned and torn apart by most critics but has since been rehabilitated as one of the classic Danish documentary films. He also wrote some movie screenplays.

During World War II and the German Occupation of Denmark he kept a lower profile, and fled to Sweden in 1943, but tried to keep the spirit going with resistance poetry. After the war he dissociated himself from the communists, who criticised him for excessive humanitarianism in his attitude to the settlement with the Nazis and for his growing scepticism about the Soviet Union. However he kept writing and debating, and during the 1960s the new generation in many ways made him something of a guru. In his last years he became a member of the Danish Academy and supported the new movement of consumers.

As a political philosopher, Poul Henningsen is regarded as the man who completed the work of Georg Brandes. His political views can be criticised as somewhat superficial and light, but were more modern and less elitist than Brandes. Being a tease and a provoker, he often tried turning concepts upside down (like George Bernard Shaw), and the conclusions depicted in his screenplays and literary output might be both considered somewhat unjust and exaggerated. He was, however, a man of firm principles and ideals of a democratic, natural and tolerant society.

