Twentieth-Century British Periodicals: Words and Art on the Printed Page, 1900-1999

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On 4 July 2017, 37 periodicals scholars, art historians and enthusiasts gathered at Reading's historic Museum of English Rural Life for a packed day of presentations spanning the twentieth century. The conference, organized jointly by Kate Macdonald (University of Reading) and myself, was borne of both frustration and curiosity: a frustration at the lack of opportunities to share work on popular (not just modernist) periodicals, and a curiosity in who was working on what periodicals and using what approaches. We felt that there must be other scholars, archivists and collectors engaging with twentieth-century British periodicals of all kinds, but often working between the cracks of, or even outside, different disciplines. We thus devised a one-day symposium which could bring together a diverse array of literary, media, music, art and design historians with those from outside the academy to share their research.

The conference aimed to expand the conversation about British periodicals in two ways: firstly, to move beyond the modernist 'little' magazine and consider popular magazines, newspapers, zines, women's magazines, specialist trade journals, and more; secondly, to consider the whole of the twentieth century, allowing us to see how social, technological, economic and cultural change affected the publishing industry. In particular, we were keen to turn our attention away from the writers publishing in magazines and illuminate the people working behind the scenes: the editors, publishers, designers and artists, as well as the readers. Our subtitle, Words and Art on the Printed Page, was also an important nexus: we were interested to see how scholars from different disciplines were reading the complex and shifting interplay between text and image at all levels of a magazine, whether on the cover, in

advertisements, in illustrated fiction or in photo stories. How did interactions between word and image affect meaning-making in these publications?

These were grand aims, but my expectations were met and indeed exceeded. I was delighted by the range and diversity of work taking place on twentieth-century British periodicals, my only gripe being that I had to miss half the presentations because of parallel sessions. Across 28 presentations, delegates were introduced to at least 60 different periodicals, around half of which were entirely new to me. From Jo Darnley's talk on *Women's Outlook* to Marjorie Gehrhardt on *The Red Cross Journal*, Herbert Pimlott on *Marxism Today* and Nicola Baird on *Ray: An Art Miscellany*, we heard engaging introductions to hitherto neglected magazines. Other presentations studied a range of titles under a particular theme, whether the role of the woman journalist in trade journals like *Woman Engineer* and the *Nursing and Midwife's Journal* (Sarah Lonsdale), the evolution of the county magazine (Andrew Hobbs), the range of periodicals published during the First World War (Kate Macdonald) or the use of punk aesthetics in fanzines such as *Sniffin' Glue*, *Sideburns*, *Jamming* and the memorably named *Oh Cardiff, Up Yours* (Adam Harper). Modernist magazines were represented, but deliberately restricted to a single panel: while two of these speakers (Brittany Moster and Alex Nica) considered more well-known periodicals (*Rhythm, Adelphi, Blue Review*), the focus on advertising and illustrations within these titles provided a fresh perspective, and one that spoke well to the other presentations.

This sense of dialogue shaped the entire day, not just between different magazines and the approaches taken to them, but also between disciplines and time periods. There was no sense of division between the pre- and post-1950 papers, or those specializing in the visual, musical or literary. Specialists in different periods and disciplines attended panels indiscriminately, producing unexpected questions and discussions. In the 'Modernists' panel, for instance, musicologists in the audience added an extra dimension to the discussion of

John Middleton Murry's conception of *Rhythm*, and how it might have shaped the design and flow of the magazine. In panels with papers that spanned the whole century, surprising and illuminating crossovers emerged. In the 'Feminisms and sex' panel, Emma Liggins's work on debates about sex, celibacy and birth control in the correspondence pages of the *New Freewoman* from 1911-1912 was juxtaposed with Elizabeth Lovegrove's investigation into problem pages in teen magazines from the 1950s onwards such as *Boyfriend, Jackie, Bliss*. While the nature of discussions about sex changed according to time and intended readership, both researchers showed the crucial role that twentieth-century magazines played not only in shaping broader debates about sex and what is 'normal', but also in providing spaces for women to share their experiences with, and learn from, each other. The panel's final paper, Laurel Forster's exploration of art in the magazines of the Women's Liberation Movement, further emphasized the importance of dialogues between the early and late twentieth century by showing that magazines like *Spare Rib* explicitly drew on the imagery and iconography of the first wave, including Sidney Paget's illustrations of Suffragettes.

Throughout the day, a range of themes and issues began to emerge: sex, gender, class, work, professionalism, the relationship between politics and aesthetics and art and commerce, the influence and use of technology, the role of distribution networks, and the British periodical's international links. Many papers acknowledged and explored the collaborative nature of periodical work, attempting to investigate the 'behind-the-scenes' figures and networks instrumental in producing these titles. Fiona Hackney, one of our two plenary speakers, gave a fascinating and wide-ranging talk that explored the increasingly integrated relationship between advertising and editorial in interwar 'service magazines' such as *Modern Woman*, *Woman* and *Home Chat*. Advertising, she noted, was viewed as 'one of the most interesting and suitable careers for women', giving the example of advertising firm W. S. Crawford's 'Women's Department' led by Margaret Havinden. Other papers considered

the dual and often contradictory role played by editors, whether Murry as a scholar-publicist and artist-businessman (Brittany Moster) or Flora Klickman of the *Girl's Own Annual* as an astute business woman and self-designated 'healer of the nation' (Jayne Shacklady). In her engaging exploration of *Good Housekeeping* and *Harper's Bazaar* (UK), our second plenary speaker, Alice Wood, also considered touched on editorial interventions, arguing that the 'editorial framing' of Virginia Woolf's story 'In the Looking Glass' in *Harper's Bazaar* (January 1930) worked to sidestep a potential clash between the story's and the magazine's values. This reading, alongside explorations of stories and articles by figures such as Storm Jameson, Rose Macaulay, Gertrude Stein and Vita Sackville-West, prompted questions about terminology: how do we describe the experimentalism we see in these magazines? With their mix of highbrow, middlebrow, popular and avant-garde features, such pieces – and indeed these magazines – elude easy categorization.

Methodological questions like those raised by Wood were at the heart of many papers, whether voiced explicitly or not. Those papers that engaged most actively with the conference's word/image theme seemed to experience quandaries over how to read a magazine's literary and artistic material in tandem. Alex Nica's close reading of text and woodcuts in 'Tales of a Courtyard' in *Rhythm* led to a lively discussion, in which some audience members argued that the woodcuts had been placed deliberately, and others that they had been situated indiscriminately. When studying such historical artifacts, it is difficult to identify editorial intention: those working at the opposite end of the century, however, often had more direct links to a magazine's producers. Joel Lardner noted the importance of speaking to the team behind the skateboarding magazine *R. A. D.*: their use of photocopiers to create abstract patterns might appear deliberate, but Lardner's interviews with the producers revealed that apparently experimental features were sometimes mistakes. That is not to say, however, that all those working on late-twentieth-century print culture had access to such

insights: Adam Harper noted the difficulties of working with indie fanzines, many of which were produced at home in small runs, undated, unsigned and without copyright. The practical difficulties of working with anonymous or hard-to-trace contributors and networks were shared by many of the speakers, yet I was surprised to see that almost all of the papers were exploring undigitized periodicals (the notable exception being Luci Gosling's examination of illustrations for the 'Big 8' *Illustrated Newspapers* titles at the Mary Evans Picture Library, most of which have yet to receive sustained critical attention). Such investigations must bode well for the future of modern periodical studies: despite the considerable barriers to working with undigitized material, these scholars and archivists were compelled by enthusiasm for their subject to proceed regardless.

More than anything, it is this sense of enthusiasm that has stayed with me over the two months since the conference. In his recent article on the state of modern periodical studies, Patrick Collier argued that the 'way to forge modern periodical studies into a coherent field' is by

> treating the periodical — and the larger field of periodicals — as "an autonomous object of study" to the greatest degree possible. The place to do so — the place where it is still possible — is at the start, when you sit down with a periodical that speaks to you, long before your findings have to be framed so as to address the field's grand concepts. […] It will mean attempting, as a heuristic, at least, to withhold judgment and read the contents of a periodical, for as long as possible, in the fashion recommended by Margaret Cohen: as a strange object whose codes exceed the ones we are equipped to see, as a potential source of new critical inquiries and conversations rather than as a window onto preexisting, valued critical categories.[i]

As Collier himself acknowledges, these are laudable but difficult aims: the structure and traditions of disciplines like literary studies, not to mention imperatives from funding bodies, lead to established routes for demonstrating a work's value that cannot (yet) accommodate such speculative approaches. In other words, periodicals can end up being used as primary texts that offer an apparently unmediated 'window' on already 'valued critical categories'

like gender, class or the development of literary modernism. That is not to say that such work is not important: periodicals can undeniably offer new perspectives on these existing categories, challenging and nuancing the understanding we have from other media. I was particularly intrigued, for instance, by Sarah Lonsdale's observation that there was a split between older and younger generations of women journalists, in that the latter did not want to write about domestic matters. Such an observation adds to and complicates our understanding of interwar gender roles. Yet some of the most exciting papers at the Twentieth-Century British Periodicals conference were those at that initial, nascent stage, where their reading had not been mapped onto pre-existing categories. These scholars were, in Collier's terms, sitting down with a periodical that spoke to them, and trying to work out how to read it. Joel Lardner's intensely personal presentation particularly struck me in this respect: he recalled how, growing up in the UK's East Midlands, *BMX Action Bike* was his first introduction to punk aesthetics. This experience prompted him to begin researching the magazine and its predecessor, but he openly acknowledged that he had yet to identify a clear methodology. Far from being a drawback, this was the paper's strength: he was reading the periodicals *as* periodicals, as 'strange objects' that he had yet to pin down. Equally, Andrew Hobbs's emerging work on the county magazine and its codes of location and identity brought out a strong discussion on the new methodologies and subject mapping that periodicals studies require.

This, for me, was the real value of this conference: it gave scholars and enthusiasts a chance to share periodicals as artifacts in their own right, and allowed everyone to be enthusiasts. While not all presentations focused on the periodical as, to quote Collier quoting Scholes and Latham, an 'autonomous object of study', the periodical *form* – whether front covers, advertisements, correspondence pages, problem pages, illustrated articles and fiction or editorials – remained front and center. There were blind spots: we did not have any papers

representing the many hundreds of Standard Illustrated Popular Magazines, as catalogued so memorably in Mike Ashley's *The Age of the Storytellers: British popular fiction magazines 1880 – 1950* (2006), or any magazines we might describe as 'pulps'. Genre magazines — detective, science fiction, the western — and newspapers were also under-represented, excepting those in Paul Charbel's discussion of political cartoons. I also wanted to see more attention paid to the relationship between word and image: the fact that many papers sidestepped this issue, focusing on word, or image, suggests that there is more work to be done here, especially in terms of developing approaches and terminology. At the same time, however, I was introduced to new categories of magazines like trade journals or those run by societies. Helen Glew's talk on *Opportunity: The Organ of the Federation of Women Civil Servants* and *The Woman Teacher* raised issues I hadn't thought of before: as she noted, there was an intriguing dynamic between the paid editor of such titles and the society running them. Little nuggets of this kind left me not only with a list of editors, artists, periodicals and essays to look up, but also with questions about my own critical practice upon which to ruminate. How I can I pay more attention to this dynamic between the editor and the concerns of the publisher in my own work? What *were* the concerns of the publisher, and how might I find out?

As the evening sun filtered through the bushes surrounding the Museum's herb garden, though, I had more immediate concerns on my mind: relishing this opportunity to talk with fellow magazine fans. It may have just been the effect of the post-conference Pimms, but as I chatted excitedly with fellow delegates I was struck by a lack of the usual conference chat about the dire state of academia. All participants were genuinely passionate about modern periodicals and their burgeoning research field: long may this continue.

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[i] Patrick Collier, "What is Modern Periodical Studies?" *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 6, no. 2 (2015): 109.