

Ten questions to a periodicals expert

Matthew Philpotts is senior lecturer in German language and culture at the University of Manchester. In 2009 he published the book *Sinn und Form: The Anatomy of a Literary Journal*, together with Stephen Parker. For *TS* he answers ten questions on his work in periodical studies.

1. WHICH MAGAZINE WOULD YOU HAVE LIKED TO HAVE BEEN AN EDITOR OF?

Easy. One of the first literary magazines I worked on as a post-doc was *Die literarische Welt*, the weekly Berlin literary newspaper founded by Ernst Rowohlt and edited by Willy Haas in the late 1920s and early 1930s. As soon as I read it, I was grabbed by the energy and immediacy of its contents and by the tangible sense of agency it provided for its editor, especially at a time of such radical social, political, and cultural upheaval. To have had the opportunity as editor to capture the mood of the times in print, to try to mediate between the political and aesthetic extremes that characterised Weimar Germany, and to have a platform from which to make your own interventions must have been exhilarating.

2. WHAT IS THE ODDEST MAGAZINE YOU HAVE EVER ENCOUNTERED?

The specialist trade press in the UK is famously eccentric and obscure in the magazines it produces. How can you not subscribe to *Potato Storage International*?

3. WHICH MAGAZINE THAT IS NO LONGER AROUND DO YOU MISS MOST?

Like many other childhood objects, magazines can evoke a really powerful sense of nostalgia. I'm sure many of them are still around in one form or another, but I miss the countless comics, football and music magazines that punctuated those years for me. Maybe that's not so very different from *Die literarische Welt*: the fascination for periodicals comes from the way they define, and are defined by, the times in which they are read and produced. Sometimes that's political, sometimes personal.

4. HOW AND WHEN DID YOU GET INTO PERIODICAL STUDIES?

In one way or another, literary and cultural periodicals have been a consistent strand in all the major research projects I've completed since I was a postgraduate student. At that time I was looking at the cultural politics of the two twentieth-century German dictatorships. Viewed from that perspective, literary magazines become fascinating sites of often simultaneous conformity and resistance, part of the complex cultural reality that undermines simplistic notions of totalitarianism or dictatorship. After that, I worked on a periodization project where we used three groups of German literary journals as a synchronic corpus to identify the dominant cultural values which were being promoted and negotiated in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Finally came the history of *Sinn und Form* that we completed almost three years ago. But it's only since then that I've really discovered periodical studies as a research area in its own right. Without knowing it, I've been working in that field for fifteen years now!

5. WHY SHOULD WE READ *SINN UND FORM*?

For the same reason that we might read any good literary journal – for the quality of the writing. That quality stretches across pretty much all the genres, but poetry and the essay have always been particularly important for *Sinn und Form*. Of course, it also serves as a remarkable document of GDR history, a periodical generously funded by the East German socialist dictatorship, but that was given an unparalleled freedom to secure and maintain an international reputation. As a result, it was frequently pushing the boundaries of what was politically acceptable, trying to reconcile the constraints of domestic cultural policy with its own reputation. That makes for a fascinating story, as does its survival and success after the collapse of the GDR itself. Not many other cultural institutions survived with their East German leadership intact. That *Sinn und Form* managed that feat says much about the active role it took in the late 1980s and early 1990s in breaking the cultural taboos of the GDR.

6. WHICH MAGAZINE EDITOR DO YOU IDENTIFY MOST WITH?

I have a theory that academics have a great deal in common with the editors of literary magazines in the way that we have to balance such potentially contradictory competences and dispositions. In both cases, that's an enormous challenge. A great literary editor has to combine poetic sensibilities with business and managerial acumen, not to mention resilience and leadership qualities. Anyone who has tried to appoint a senior academic knows how rare it can be to combine successfully the intellectual credentials of an outstanding researcher with leadership and management skills, not to mention the capacity to engage and communicate with students. So part of me identifies with all the editors I've studied. And above all with their struggles and failures...

7. IS THERE A FUTURE FOR THE PRINT MAGAZINE?

I think so. Of course the function of the print magazine will change, but the material dimension of the magazine will always mean that the printed object retains a role alongside the electronic. Or maybe I'm just a naive nostalgic.

8. DO YOU EVER DREAM OF MAGAZINES AND IF SO, ARE THOSE PLEASANT DREAMS?

Oddly enough, I can honestly say that in all the years of studying and researching magazines I've never had a dream about one. At least not that I remember. If I did have such dreams, it goes without saying that they would be nothing but pleasant.

9. WHICH MAGAZINES DO YOU HAVE A SUBSCRIPTION TO?

Through the digital wonder of JSTOR and Project Muse, I have an ongoing subscription to thousands of academic periodicals, available to me wherever I am and at no personal cost. We've come to take that for granted, but it's still pretty remarkable.

10. WHAT ARE YOUR AMBITIONS WITHIN THE FIELD OF PERIODICAL STUDIES?

I'm looking forward immensely to the first ESPRit conference in Manchester in December 2011. It will be a great opportunity to establish and formalize a network of periodical scholars across Europe to work on specific themes and issues. Out of that I would love to help develop a large-scale comparative project on European cultural journals, perhaps investigating their active role at threshold moments of cultural crisis and change. But above all, it's the theoretical and conceptual issues around periodicals that fascinate me, and I think there is still tremendous scope to contribute to periodical studies in that particular way. It would be nice to be able to look back and think that in some small way I had made a contribution of that kind.