

Ann Ardis, "Towards a Theory of Periodical Studies"

Roundtable opening statement

One of the questions Matthew poses in the proposal for this session is: "How can we construct typological and comparative categories that capture the full range of aesthetic, material, and social features of the periodical, the full variety of different periodical forms (e.g. weekly, monthly, quarterly), and the diversity of historical and national specificities?" At the risk of being cast as the contrarian in this session, I would argue that periodical studies are less well served by notions of typology than by three things: first, a willingness to pay careful attention to the historical constructedness of distinctions between "Literature," "periodicals," and "newspapers," a methodology and a sensitivity to hierarchies of textual form that is exemplified by the work of scholars such as Laurel Brake, Lee Erickson, and Patrick Collier; second, a willingness to embrace the "mundane specificity of historical practices" in print media (Uricchio 30), and to attend to media *in transition*, an emphasis which distinguishes the work of media historians such as William Uricchio, Roger Fidler, Lucy Delap, Maria DiCenzo, and Debra Rae Cohen; and, third, a willingness to supplement/complement the text-based close reading practices of literary studies with the object-based methodologies of visual studies, book history, and material culture studies—a post-disciplinary convergence of methodologies that I would argue is both enriching and invigorating current work on modernism and the media ecology of modernity.

I share Matthew's frustrations with the way in which periodical studies scholarship "continues to be dominated by discrete analyses of individual case studies, the contribution of which is largely empirical." I share as well his concern about the "disciplinary fragmentation" that is being enacted as "the recent surge in Anglophone Modernist studies has proceeded largely in isolation from the longer established work in Victorian Studies, not to mention the array of approaches to cultural periodicals in the literatures of Europe and beyond." However, I do not think that typological analysis is a necessary or adequate solution to this fragmentation of the research field. I say this based on my own research experiences with turn-of-the-twentieth-century magazines such as Robert Blatchford's *The Clarion*, A. R. Orage's *The New Age*, and *The Crisis* under W. E. B. DuBois' editorship as well as my experience editing collections such as *Transatlantic Print Cultures* and the recent special issue of *Modernism/modernity* on "Mediamorphosis." I worry, mainly, that any taxonomy or typology of periodical genres would assume or impose a kind of formal stability over time that the periodicals I am studying, for example, simply did not have. I worry also that such taxonomies can't account for the social dynamics and the professional and personal networks that evolved around specific periodicals—a set of issues that feminist scholarship on women's suffrage newspapers and periodicals, for example, has probed extensively (Delap, Green) and that research on African American periodicals is beginning to address more fully as well (Zachodnik). I worry, too, about the adequacy of text-based methods of generic classification for analysing the "dynamic conjunctions of written and visual" (Carroll 89) materials in the newly, and frequently hyper-visual, multi-media formats of turn-of-the-twentieth-century magazines. Formal analysis alone will not enable understanding of both the unique affordances and the deep cultural anxieties raised by the rapid expansion and transformations of print media during this period.

The contribution of periodical studies to a fuller understanding of the media ecology of modernity *depends*, I would argue, on scrupulous attention to both the materiality of print and its intermedial relationships with other communication technologies—even when, especially when, we

allow historical data to “disrupt and reconfigure” longstanding historical generalizations (Uricchio 30) and conceptual or theoretical or genre paradigms. But I certainly would not want to see a theory of periodical studies divorce or separate the study of periodicals from the study of *other* printed media. Instead, I value the contribution of periodical studies to the still broader field of “print culture studies,” a post-disciplinary re-orientation that Victorianists have staged very productively over the last ten to fifteen years. As Patrick Collier and I noted in our introduction to *Transatlantic Print Culture*, modernist studies has been slower to embrace this reorientation of critical practices: more reluctant to relinquish the “subjugation” of journalism (Brake’s phrasing) that was part and parcel of the professionalization of English studies in the early twentieth century; more wedded to the “rules of scarcity” that continue to organize literary reputation (Jaffe 1). As we also argued in that collection, micro-histories of specific periodicals can in fact constitute a means of attending to broad cultural debates—about the function of the arts in a republic, the intellectual “health” of “modern” culture, and the possibility of radical democracy in mass society. What interests me most about periodical studies in this regard are the opportunities it affords for attending simultaneously to both macro- and micro-level analysis: for addressing the dialogics of an increasingly complexly mediated, post-bourgeois public sphere *through* analysis of the “politics of the page” (George Bornstein’s phrasing), that is, through the study of literary artefacts in their original sites of publication. The periodical scholarship I most admire in turn-of-the-twentieth-century studies is very productively re-orienting the study of modernism through consideration of local as well as transatlantic and transnational print media ecologies. It is yielding provocative revisionary alternatives to prevailing conceptualizations of modernism’s counter-public sphere while deepening our understanding of both the “diffuse and messy particularities” of modern life (Olson, as quoted by Green 480) and the roles that magazines have played as “mechanism[s] for shaping and producing” subjectivities (Green, “Feminist Things” 67).

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