Worlds of cultural journals: Editorial

Eurozine, Working Group on Periodicals Research
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Cultural journals have played a crucial role in the formation of the public spheres in Europe and beyond. Yet their future form and sustainability is by no means clear. Looking at journals’ history helps understand where they are headed. Introducing a new Eurozine focal point in collaboration with the Working Group on Periodicals Research.

Cultural journals – a somewhat awkward placeholder term for periodicals between the arts, the sciences and politics – have played a crucial role in the formation of the public spheres in Europe and beyond. From the scholarly journals of the Republic of Letters and the periodicals and pamphlets of the Enlightenment, to the revues of the ‘Age of the Press’, the theory journals of the long 1960s, and the zines of Underground and Punk, journal-making has been an important ‘cultural technology’ that has deeply influenced the way we argue, narrate, write and think.

While there is uncertainty about the future of the book in the digital age, journals have anticipated the ongoing transformation of public spheres and retained a strong presence in intellectual and cultural life. Nevertheless, their future form and sustainability is by no means clear, and it remains to be seen how the internet will change the relationship between periodicals, their readerships and broader public spheres. In order to understand where they are headed, it helps to look at where journals have come from and how their histories can be written.

Despite the historical importance of cultural journals, only recently have they become a clearly defined area of research. Today, intellectual historians, literary scholars and sociologists are asking what it means to write for a journal (as opposed to writing a book, for example), how groups form around journals, how journals shape and are shaped by intellectual history, and what conditions cause them to thrive or struggle. In focusing on their production as well as their reception, we gain insight into the social (mostly collaborative) and economic (often precarious) dimensions of journal-making. It becomes clear that no journal can be understood in isolation. Only by looking at a journal’s relationship to other journals can we learn about its influences and distinctions from other journals.

The Eurozine focal point ‘Worlds of cultural journals’ seek to explore relationships within
a transnational ‘ecosystem’ of cultural journals. Common to all the contributions is their
treatment of journals – political, cultural, artistic, literary or scientific – as media actors
in their own right. What may have been evident to their editors all along is still worth
emphasizing: that journals do much more than ‘carry texts’ or ‘mirror social change’. They shape the texts and images they contain; they influence intellectual communities
and movements; and they serve as a specific form of archive for social and cultural
transformation.

Contributions come from historians and literary scholars affiliated with the Working
Group on Periodicals Research and from Eurozine partner journals. They cover the
history of cultural journals in specific countries and regions (Poland, the Arab Middle
East), specific genres (feminist journals, journals of the New Right, architecture mags),
and specific challenges (What makes a good editor? The history and problems of
transnational journal networks in Europe). We hope that the focal point will strengthen
the conversation between journal editors and journal historians, as well as be of interest
to what any successful cultural journal depends on: its readership!

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