

Flüchtigkeit fixieren
Capturing Ephemerality



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Capturing Ephemerality

Praxeological Modes of Materialising Periodical Literature

edited by

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on behalf of the research unit

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Capturing Ephemerality

When Margaret Beetham begins »Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre« by calling periodicals »among the most ephemeral of printed forms,«¹ she underscores ephemerality as a superlative condition—more than a descriptive trait, it becomes a constitutive principle of the medium itself. Yet subsequent interventions have cautioned against reducing periodicals to mere transience. James Mussell has argued that ephemerality is always bound to seriality: what appears fleeting in a single issue gains duration and coherence through repetition, continuity, and the promise of ongoingness. His reading of the editorial formula »in our last« highlights how periodicals continually re-activate their own past while deferring their end, thereby producing a temporality of not-ending that is specific to the serial form.²

Similarly, Evangelia Stead has shown that ephemerality functions less as an inherent quality than as a critical posture: the category of the »little« magazine or »petite revue« was historically tied to notions of precariousness, marginal circulation, and avant-garde experimentation. But precisely these conditions enabled such periodicals to perform distinctive cultural work, while the label »little« often condemned even long-lasting publications to an invariably ephemeral category. In this sense, ephemerality is as much a discursive construct as a material reality.³

The topos has, however, a much longer genealogy. As Moritz Neuffer recalls, the philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854), one of the central figures of German Idealism, briefly ventured into periodical publishing with his *Allgemeine Zeitschrift von Deutschen für Deutsche* (1813). In the preface to its first issue, Schelling described the »double-sidedness« of the periodical: it was supposed to depict its time, yet also to surpass it by mediating between the present and the future. From this vantage point, periodicals could not provide epoch-making insights in finished form; they could only present preliminary steps toward independent works that might one day achieve »perfection«. This early suspicion of the medium's provisionality, later echoed in the debates of the Young Hegelians, resonates with Ludwik Fleck's twentieth-century distinction between »journal science« and »textbook science«: ephemeral publication as provisional circulation versus stabilized knowledge.⁴

1 Margaret Beetham: Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre. In: Laurel Brake / Aled Jones / Lionel Madden (Eds.): *Investigating Victorian Journalism*. Houndsdale, Basingstoke & London: MacMillan 1990, pp. 19-32, here p. 19.

2 James Mussell: Repetition: Or, »In Our Last«. In: *Victorian Periodicals Review* 48.3 (2015), pp. 343-358.

3 Evangelia Stead: Reconsidering »Little« versus »Big« Periodicals. In: *Journal of European Periodical Studies* 1.2 (2016), pp. 1-17, here p. 4.

4 Moritz Neuffer: In Time: Periodical Theories and Philosophies of History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. In: *Journal of European Periodical Studies* 7.2 (2022), pp. 115-129, here pp. 119-120.

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that periodical studies has rarely treated ephemerality as a simple given. Rather, it has differentiated between its serial, economic, material, and epistemic dimensions, while also tracing the cultural discourses that shaped its valuation. Still, if ephemerality is indeed central to the ontology of the periodical, one must ask to what extent periodical studies has fully confronted its methodological and theoretical consequences. For even if the negotiations of ephemerality have been acknowledged in nuanced ways, they have only rarely been made the explicit focus of inquiry—and this, in a return to Beetham, despite the fact that ephemerality has persistently been attributed as a defining feature of the periodical form. This very ascription, whether or not it captures the actual conditions of production and reception, makes ephemerality itself a phenomenon of critical importance. What does it mean to take ephemerality seriously—not only as a label of transience but as a principle structuring material form, cultural temporality, and regimes of attention? Our very phrase »capturing ephemerality« thus gestures to a constitutive paradox: it designates at once the medium's internal negotiations between brevity and longevity, disappearance and continuity, as well as the scholar's attempt to stabilize, reconstruct, and measure the enduring cultural force of formats that often did not aim for permanence. To study ephemerality therefore means to engage with the recurrent negotiations that periodicals themselves enacted through serial form, while also acknowledging the paradoxical labour of scholarship that seeks to preserve what was often—but of course not always—designed to be provisional. These questions, foregrounded at the last conference of the »Research Group Journalliteratur«, form the point of departure for this volume.

Mild Ephemerality | Many Faces of Periodicals

If »capturing ephemerality« designates the paradoxical condition of periodicals as both fleeting and enduring, the question arises of how such ephemerality has been conceptualized in related fields of research. The study of ephemera has become a field in its own right, driven by significant collections, most notably John Johnson's famous collection of ephemera in the 1920s and the founding of the Ephemera Society in the 1970s. Michael Twyman has pointed out that it »would be helpful to have a word to describe the study of such documents [i.e., printed ephemera], if only to stress the distinctiveness of this particular category of printing; and I tentatively offer the term ›ephemerology‹ to define a parallel branch of knowledge or study comparable to bibliography, cartography, and musicology (in its graphic aspects).⁵ In recent years, this field of research has reflected on

⁵ Michael Twyman: The Long-Term Significance of Printed Ephemera. In: *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 9.1 (2008), pp. 19–57, here p. 31.

ephemera and related issues in many different ways. Gillian Russell, who explicitly adopts Twyman's term in her book *The Ephemeral Eighteenth Century: Print, Sociability, and the Cultures of Collecting* (2020), develops »ephemerology« into a conceptual framework for understanding Enlightenment print culture and the material practices of collecting.⁶ Her redefinition highlights ephemerology as a para-disciplinary formation situated between book history, media history, and cultural sociology, yet this renewed attention to the ephemeral has rarely intersected with periodical studies. Given that ephemerality is such an important aspect of periodicals, this lack of exchange between the two fields is all the more remarkable.

In contrast to many of the objects studied within ephemerology, periodicals are rarely marked by absolute transience. Their ephemerality is more moderate—neither negligible nor radical—and can be heuristically described as mild ephemerality. This notion does not define a fixed category but rather indicates a relative position: whether periodicals appear ephemeral depends on what they are compared to—or, perhaps more appropriately in their case, to which objects they are compared. Against the traditional, bound, and often costly codex-form book, a single issue of a periodical tends to appear ephemeral. Its temporality is closely tied to specific points in time: contents are typically aligned with a defined temporal span, and this specificity is mirrored in modes of production and distribution, including lower paper quality, more perishable bindings, and the absence of rigid covers.

The comparison with the book is therefore more than incidental: it has historically been the central benchmark against which the ephemerality of periodicals was perceived. At the same time, it is analytically problematic, since, as Gillian Russell has argued, »The success of the codex-form book as a building block of Enlightenment knowledge, commerce, and cultural life, and subsequently the institutions associated with the arts and sciences in the nineteenth century, was contingent on the ›ephemerisation‹ of other kinds of print«.⁷ This thesis is significant because it shows that in the course of this historical process of ephemeralization, everything that was not a book tended to be grouped together under the broad category of »periodicals«. In this sense, ephemerality was less an intrinsic property than a classificatory effect of privileging the codex. Yet within this large classificatory field there exists an enormous diversity: many serial works and journals were neither inexpensive, nor temporally restricted, nor reliant on cheap modes of (re-)production. One example that illustrates the diversity and specialisation within this field is provided by Jonathan Topham, who highlights how scientific societies in the late 18th and early 19th centuries sometimes published highly elaborate and costly prestige journals. For instance, *The Zoological Journal* (1823), printed in color using intaglio techniques on copper plates, and the early volumes of the *Transactions* (1835–1984) of

6 Gillian Russell: *The Ephemeral Eighteenth Century: Print, Sociability, and the Cultures of Collecting*. Cambridge Studies in Romanticism, vol. 129. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020, p. 2.

7 Ibid., p. 6.

the Zoological Club of London, which, due to their »luxurious qualities,« posed a financial challenge for the society.⁸

Taken together, these comparisons situate periodicals within a spectrum of ephemerality, stretching between the permanence associated with the codex and the radical transience of the »trivial paper things⁹ examined in ephemeroLOGY—tickets, advertisements, flyers, or handwritten notes. Approaching periodicals from this second perspective is particularly illuminating: it highlights their affinity to other short-lived formats while also showing how periodicals complicate the very notion of ephemera through their seriality, variability, and cultural afterlives. The etymology of the term »ephemera« reinforces this tension.¹⁰ The word is derived from (aspirated) Greek ἐπί and the Greek word for »day« (ἡμέρα). In entomology, it is used to describe insects that live for only a single day, while in medicine, it refers to a short-lived fever.¹¹ Daily newspapers may still align with this strict sense of »for a day,« but how should one position weekly, monthly, quarterly, or irregularly published periodicals under the same designation? Capturing ephemerality in the context of periodicals is thus also a matter of capturing the shifting classifications and perceptions that have historically defined them as »ephemeral.«

While the concept of *mild ephemerality* necessarily generalizes, it illustrates—through comparison with both books and ephemera, as well as through the contextualization of these comparisons—how the varying forms of ephemerality in periodicals must be approached with specificity. A central challenge in theorizing periodicals is therefore to do justice to their diversity of manifestations, a challenge that periodical studies shares with ephemeroLOGY. In addition to historical, country-specific, class-specific, and genre-specific tendencies in the formation of ephemerality, such aspects must also be related to periodicity and to the illustrated/non-illustrated dichotomy.

Illustrated periodicals, for instance, could only adhere to certain forms of periodicity, which often brought with them specific material manifestations of ephemerality. In the first half of the 19th century, illustrated periodicals were particularly constrained by the labor-intensive production of wood engravings, which subjected them to prolonged manufacturing processes.¹² This spectrum of *mild ephemerality* becomes even more tangible when one turns to illustrated periodicals, where the temporality of production was closely tied to material and

8 Jonathan R. Topham: Redrawing the Image of Science: Technologies of Illustration and the Audiences for Scientific Periodicals in Britain, 1790–1840. In: Gowan Dawson, Bernard Lightman, Sally Shuttleworth, & Jonathan R. Topham (Eds.): *Science Periodicals in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Constructing Scientific Communities*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press 2020, pp. 65–102, here p. 82.

9 Russell (s. footnote 6), p. 2.

10 See for a discussion of »ephemera« Maurice Rickards: *This Is Ephemera: Collecting Printed Throwaways*. London: David & Charles 1977, pp. 7–8.

11 Russell (s. footnote 6), pp. 2–3.

12 Andreas Beck: Crossing Borders between London and Leipzig, between Image and Text: A Case Study of the *Illustrierte Zeitung* (1843). In: *Victorian Periodicals Review* 51.3 (2018), pp. 408–433, here p. 409.

technical constraints. This can be seen as a milder form of ephemerality, particularly in cases where a magazine—such as the *Illustrierte Zeitung*—was produced for a wealthier bourgeois readership and, at least during the first half of the 19th century, was primarily purchased by this social group due to its high production costs. The illustrations were so costly and time-consuming to produce that the paper had to have a certain thickness to prevent the images from showing through. In illustrated periodicals from the era of wood engraving, one can observe blank spaces that were likely left intentionally for images—either to prevent the print from bleeding through to the verso or to allow for intentional overlapping of images from the front and back. However, these design considerations and layout adjustments also required additional time, further influencing the production process.¹³ While this should not be interpreted as a technodeterministic argument, it is important to acknowledge these influencing factors. Certain forms of ephemerality—such as the extensively illustrated, affordably priced periodical produced quickly using wood engravings—were essentially impossible until the advent of photomechanical processes.¹⁴ The difficulty in defining what exactly constitutes a *periodical* or a *magazine*, a challenge the research group »Journalliteratur« has also approached using the term *journal*, illustrates the extent to which ephemerality constitutes a defining characteristic of periodicals.¹⁵ Ephemerality can influence the value assigned to periodicals, both monetarily and culturally. It influences how they are typically stored privately and archivally, and ultimately, it also affects the amount of scholarly attention these periodical objects usually receive.

Such material constraints and design strategies remind us that ephemerality is never a merely technical given but also a matter of cultural coding. Considering current developments, it appears plausible to argue that many indie and arthouse magazines today emphasise their value by placing great emphasis on tactility and materiality, on thick spines, paper thicknesses and covers: These magazines also act as a periodically published material-phile counter-concept, a counterpart to digital ephemerality. The design and peritextual features of these magazines often anticipate or encourage their retention, thus contributing to their transition from ephemeral to collectible media forms. Strategies such as high-quality binding—offered to loyal subscribers via end-of-year advertisements in the magazine itself—, gilded edges, the publication of an annual index, and consecutive pagination subtly indicate the intended coherence of the publication and enhance its perceived value as a collectible object.

Such signals were already sent out by the immensely popular literary annual giftbooks of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. As periodical formats based on the year indicated in the title, they were subject to an automatic annual devaluation process; yet as elaborate, del-

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Tom Gretton: The Pragmatics of Page Design in Nineteenth-Century General-Interest Weekly Illustrated News Magazines in London and Paris. In: *Art History* 33.4 (2010), pp. 680–709, here 687.

¹⁵ Nicola Kaminski / Jens Ruchatz: *Journalliteratur – ein Avertissement. Pfennig-Magazin zur Journalliteratur*, Heft 1. Hannover: Wehrhahn 2017.



Fig. 1: VERGISSMEINNICKT EIN Taschenbuch für 1827. v. H. CLAUREN. Leipzig, bei Friedrich August Leo. | Urания. Taschenbuch für Damen auf das Jahr 1817. Mit zehn Kupfern. Leipzig und Altenburg: F. A. Brockhaus. | Frauentaschenbuch für das Jahr 1819 von de la Motte Fouqué. Nürnberg bei Joh. Leonh. Schrag. | Rheinisches Taschenbuch für das Jahr 1817. Darmstadt bei Heyer & Leske. | Taschenbuch für das Jahr 1820. Der Liebe und Freundschaft gewidmet. Herausgegeben von Dr. St. Schütze. Frankfurt am Main, bei den

icate, elegant and expensive printed products, often adorned with copperplate engravings by renowned artists, they simultaneously invited (preferably serial) long-term storage (Fig. 1). A century later, similar strategies characterised literary and art journals such as *PAN* (Berlin), *JUGEND* (Munich) (Fig. 2), and *DIE JINSEL* (Munich), whose ambitiously designed, colourfully printed covers drew attention to the magazine as an object worth archiving. In both historical and contemporary contexts, these practices illustrate that ephemerality is not only shaped by production constraints but can also be deliberately managed, aestheticised, and even inverted into durability and collectability.

Few other magazines make the dual orientation between ephemerality and collectability as materially observable as the British *The Daily Graphic* (1890-1926). Launched 4 January 1890 by H. R. Baines & Co., the newspaper was preceded by its weekly counterpart *The Graphic*, but for many years it used a double system of page numbering: continuous pagination for the annual volume and separate pagination for each issue (Fig. 3). In the period 1889-1900 this dual pagination is documented, pointing to a deliberate strategy to balance issue-based readership and volume-based archival coherence.

The *Daily Graphic* further illustrates the tension between ephemeral and durable modes through its production history. Its founder, William Luson Thomas, was himself a skilled engraver who had operated an atelier supplying illustrations to periodicals such as the *Illustrated London News*. When the *Daily Graphic* moved from woodcuts to pen-and-ink drawings and early halftone blocks around the mid-1890s, this shift marked a material inflection in the medium's visual logics. Advertisement content also played a



Gebrüder Wilmans. | TASCHENBUCH für Frohsinn und Liebe auf das Jahr 1827. Von Chr. Kuffner. WIEN Verlag des F. Pfautsch, Kurrentgasse No. 414. Leipzig, in der Buchhandlung des A. G. Liebeskind. | AGLAJA. Ein Taschenbuch FÜR DAS JAHR 1821. Siebenter Jahrgang. WIEN, gedruckt und im Verlag BEI JOH: BAPT: WALLISHAUSER. | PENELOPE Taschenbuch für das Jahr 1817. Herausgegeben von THEODOR HELL. 16r. Jahrgang. Mit Kupfern. LEJPZIG J. C. Hinrich'sche Buchhandlung. (Copies in private possession)

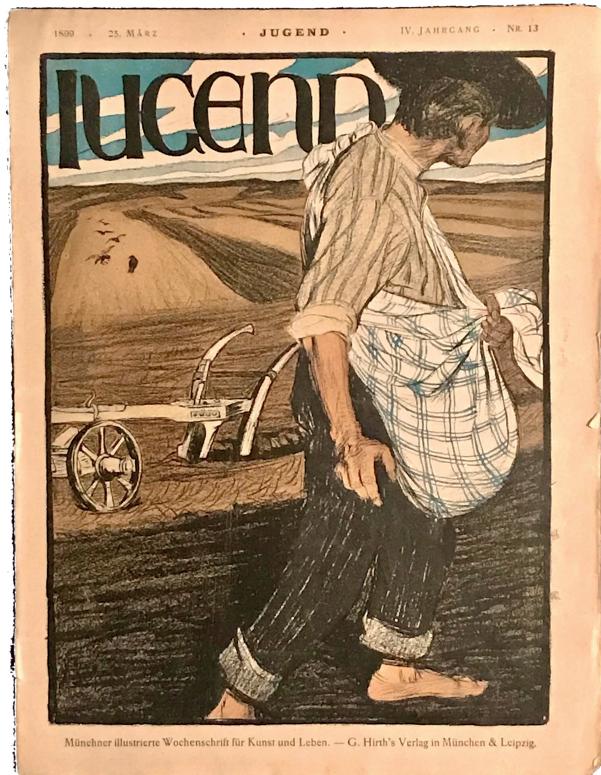


Fig. 2: JUGEND. Münchener Illustrierte Wochenschrift für Kunst und Leben. — G. Hirth's Verlag in München & Leipzig. IV. JAHRGANG. NR. 13. 1899. 25. MÄRZ. (Copy in private possession)

THE DAILY GRAPHIC, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 1896.

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Fig. 3: THE DAILY GRAPHIC, LONDON: THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 1896, NO. 2171—Vol. XXVIII. p. 10 / p. 1095. (Copy in private possession)