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Edlef Köppen, “The Magazine as a Sign of the Times” (1925)

In October 1924, Ullstein Verlag began publishing the monthly magazine *Der Uhu*; its circulation was around 100,000. Modeled on American magazines, richly illustrated periodicals of this sort were meant to combine easily digestible information with entertainment. They were not universally loved, however, and they provoked critiques like this one by Edlef Köppen. For critics, these magazines promised a loss of depth and posed a threat to book culture. As it turned out, however, glossy periodicals and entertainment magazines were just one component of a large press market. In addition to the feuilletons of respected dailies, which continued to thrive, a number of magazines had cultural and literary pretensions, such as *Weltbühne* and *Querschnitt*.

The Magazine as a Sign of the Times

The mark of our age is haste, hurry, nervousness. People have no time, indeed they flee the calm of contemplation; they reel recklessly through the streets with no intention of catching hold. The rhythm of life pounds short and hard: further—further! The consequence is in many respects superficiality.

This haste also appears in areas that by nature must really expect more: the domains of art. The enjoyment of art presupposes, alongside an intuitive grasp, a tranquil and concentrated focus, a surrender, a release of the self to be conducted beyond the borders of the palpable. (The creation of art presupposes the same measure of inner composure.)

But the preconditions are lacking. And if there is one thing right now that could be taken to be symbolic of this, then it is the appearance of all the magazines that have been flooding Germany for just about a year. One finds them everywhere, in every bookstore, even the good ones, in most reading halls, often even in very serious ones. They are spreading like pestilence. One publisher started, a few dozen followed and continue to follow suit. The magazine has become a concentrated sign of our times.

The father of the idea is America and England. Magazines have existed there for a quarter of a century. And from there Germany took over the schematic model.

What is their content?

Nearly all contemporary magazines print a rich abundance of illustrated material. The whole visual complex of the popular revue, the sort that all the larger theaters feel obliged to offer to their audiences at least once a year, reappears here either in cruder form or in a more blatant presentation. Legs or bosoms of naked girls play just as inexhaustible a role as the dress of an elegant woman, the cut of a so-called gentleman's suit. Images of famous contemporaries, photographs of boxers, horse races, domestic and foreign abnormalities join in the parade. The accompanying texts are "designed" with great skill; filled with more or less witty remarks, magazines of this sort supply up-to-date commentaries on the milieu and thus contribute to the public's "general education."—Yet, not satisfied with that, somewhere in the distance floats something like literary status as the final goal. The short story is celebrated. Three or four pages are devoted to novelistic sketches filled with suspense, once again lent a kind of palatability by proxy for the public through copious illustrations reminiscent of cinema placards. Amusing features, that is, playgrounds for wit and witticisms, and puzzles—oh, crosswords!—of all sorts strewn in. Short and sweet, the recipe is apparently borrowed directly from the *vox populi*: "Please Take One," already thoroughly typical, is the way the magazine is put together to gratify the widest-possible array of readers.

There might be nothing as such to object to here. What remains somewhat questionable, however, is the level of this gratification and its impressive generalization. It is doubtless in the nature of every periodical phenomenon—every "periodical"—to feature topics of the most complex sort, to which a frequently scanty discussion is attached. Nevertheless a serious publication proceeds with a certain skepticism in the selection and combination of appropriate material. The magazine—and not a single one can be completely excepted—pursues complexity with such an emphatic single-mindedness that it cannot but appear suspect: what is being cultivated here is nothing but exceedingly banal entertainment through the deployment of the crudest conceivable means. The motto here is to be informed about everything, but know nothing thoroughly. Every type of "literature" is to be represented; meaning, however, that they are noted only in their crudest instances and then graced with nothing but platitudes. One leafs through a magazine and doubtless comes upon so-called names among the contributors. One reads, and can really do nothing but conclude with astonishment and regret that the possessors of these names—and it has to be conscious on their part—have lowered the level of their work for the sake of the magazine business and a mass of readers who reject every good effort as boring. Exceptions must be admitted, but they are usually translations. Germans are apparently incapable of mastering the short story as, for example, a Kipling, a Bret Harte, and an O. Henry can; pithiness and artistic compression are replaced by flippancy, superficiality, and sloppiness.

Objections of a practical nature are finally coming from booksellers' circles. It is believed that there has been a noticeable decline in book sales since magazines made their appearance. There is something to that no doubt. For one mark—the usual price of a magazine—a good book cannot be produced; besides, the public is obviously being drawn suggestively into that *multa non multum* and supported in an unfortunate view: when I can buy so much variety for so little money, then I would not be satisfied with so little (for example, one book with "only one

work in it"). This view has recently taken on greater import since one publisher filled the columns of every one of its issues, alongside all the rest, with a complete novel.

Thus is the magazine a sign—and, as has been shown, a dubious sign—of our times.

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