

## Review

Stephen Parker & Matthew Philpotts, *Sinn und Form. The Anatomy of a Literary Journal*. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2009. 396 p. ISBN 978-3-11-021785-8, € 99,95.

In 1948, Johannes R. Becher and Paul Wiegler founded *Sinn und Form*, which appears up to this day as the organ of the Berlin *Akademie der Künste*, and keeps attracting the interest of German literary researchers. The main focus of this research has so far been dedicated to the earliest phase of the journal, during which Peter Huchel acted as editor. Stephen Parker above all has dedicated numerous papers to *Sinn und Form* since 1992 and examined individual phases and aspects of its history (e.g. Bertolt Brecht's relations to the journal or its profile during Wilhelm Girnus' aegis as editor-in-chief). Thus it can be assumed that the appearance of Matthias Braun's book *Die Literaturzeitschrift 'Sinn und Form'. Ein ungeliebtes Aushängeschild der SED-Kulturpolitik* (Berlin: Edition Temmen, 2004) conflicted with Parker's own ambitions of publishing an extensive history of the periodical. However, to put it in Bourdieusian terms (the theories of whom mark the methodical point of departure of the book discussed): the struggle for position does naturally not only take place within the literary field, but also within

the field of academic research. With Parker and Philpotts' thorough 'Anatomy' of *Sinn und Form*, the evident result of such a struggle for position has now been published, five years after Braun's publication. Since Parker and Philpotts' study is by no means the first 'comprehensive, book-length history of *Sinn und Form*,' as is claimed by the authors in order to differentiate themselves from Braun's work, which is merely cited as a simple 'documentation', a review of it can hardly avoid comparing the two books.

The fact that Parker and Philpotts' analysis does not stop at the political *Wende* of 1989-1990, as Braun's does, but continues up until the journal's present day with Sebastian Kleinschmidt as editor, matters little in such a comparison. What is far more striking is the methodological difference. Braun arranges source material conventionally within the context of historiographic narration and at times lets it speak for itself *in extenso*, above all in the independent and extensive appendix. Even if Parker and Philpotts' reproach that Braun had only delivered 'the most perfunctory analysis of *Sinn und Form* as a literary and cultural journal' seems a bit harsh, their own claim seems much more ambitious. The authors aim at raising the scientific examination of *Sinn und Form* to a more sophisticated level by tying the

instruments of periodical research more tightly to the context of contemporary theoretical debate than is the case in Braun's rather factographically oriented study. The theoretical basis for this enterprise is provided by Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, the terminology of which is adopted by Parker and Philpotts for their examination: 'In particular, our central aim is to offer an explanatory analysis of the notable success and longevity of the journal, of its capacity to accumulate and preserve significant sums of [...] "symbolic capital".'

The authors are well aware of the difficulties resulting from the application of Bourdieu's field theory to the literary system of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) with all its heteronomous constraints. Obviously, the object of analysis differs strongly from the structures which Bourdieu describes in *The Rules of Art*, namely the development of the literary field in nineteenth and twentieth century France. For example, there was no such thing as a 'relative autonomy of the field' within the surveillance society of the GDR and its centrally planned economy. Parker and Philpotts acknowledge that: 'Of course, *Sinn und Form* could not escape all the restrictions imposed by the SED' and dedicate a chapter to the relations of the 'Literary Field' and the 'Field of Power.' They speak of an 'international literary field', that sets the context in which the journal – which was received far beyond the borders of the GDR and the reunited Germany respectively – had to be seen. While this is perfectly justifiable as far as *Sinn und Form*'s international readership is concerned, the question remains whether there can be anything like an 'inter-

national literary field' and how it could be analyzed more precisely as a social space with its vast variety of actors, in order to serve as a practical category of analysis and thus be more than just a metaphor. The problem is even more pressing given that Bourdieu designed his field theory primarily to analyze singular *national* (or even regional or local) fields.

Nevertheless, it remains a definite advantage of Parker and Philpotts' study to put more emphasis on the reception of *Sinn und Form*, while Braun's study concentrates mainly on the activities of the editors and their contacts or conflicts with state power. Their interest in the structure of the journal as a 'Fractal Text' allows Parker and Philpotts to examine the paratextual frame, which is set by the category of the 'Thick Literary Journal'. This is where Philpotts' 'theoretical interests in the function and typology of literary journals' come into effect. Further chapters deal with the institutional anchorage of the journal at the Berlin *Akademie*, the habitus of the editor-in-chief playing the role of a 'symbolic banker', and the social capital of the *Sinn und Form* 'Salon', established by the circle of contributors. Continuously, singular exemplary issues are examined and related to each other in close readings.

In sum, Parker and Philpotts do not – as opposed to Braun – present us with a simple retelling of the journal's history, but offer examinations of a journal's central aspects and the history of its reception as well as its socio-political context, arranged in seven chapters that repeatedly change in focus and perspective. Only in their entirety do they demonstrate *Sinn und Form*'s specific profile across more than sixty years of its existence.

It seems that the reason why the authors refrained from presenting us with a chronological history of the periodical, even though Parker states in the preface to have collected the results of his research in the Berlin archives after the collapse of the Wall ‘within a very substantial chronological manuscript,’ again lies in the need to differentiate from Braun’s competing work. Still, the question remains if such a chronological structure would not have been more adequate to the self-defined aim of a field-analytic study to portray the ‘success and longevity of the journal’ *Sinn und Form*. That way, the groundbreaking changes of the cultural, economical and political structures that took place in a divided and finally reunited Germany along the years might have been shown more concisely. After all, the book begins with a compact introductory chapter about the first phase of the journal’s history with Peter Huchel as editor, in which all the aspects that are treated individually in the course of the book, are collectively examined and thus illuminate the journal’s profile in a clearly defined focus on the years 1948-1955. By refraining from this form of presentation in the analysis of the remaining development of *Sinn und Form*, the total result appears to some degree disjointed, zooming in and out of times and events.

Parker and Philpotts’ attempt to lay

‘the foundations of a new and systematic approach to *Zeitschriftenforschung*’ by using Bourdieu’s theory remains nonetheless commendable for transcending the boundaries of a field of research that mainly relies on a solely descriptive and bibliographical, more often than not undifferentiated methodology with a tendency to do nothing more than registering empirical facts. In this regard, Parker and Philpotts’ study sets a good example for future analyses of periodicals: the book provides plenty of stimulus to applying unconventional means to seemingly well-known - objects.

Those who instead prefer to enlighten themselves quickly (and thoroughly) on the individual historical phases of *Sinn und Form* up to 1989, including the changing political influence by the SED regime, can still reach for Matthias Braun’s well-informed chronicle, which is by no means replaced but complemented and decisively enriched by Parker and Philpotts’ more differentiated approach. Whoever devotes himself to the history of *Sinn und Form* will not be able to avoid studying both works intensively.

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(Translated by Gerhard Scholz)