

Excursions

Volume 10, Issue 2 (2020) | Reflections



Cover photo: Cover Image © Photo by [Erik Eastman](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Reflecting About In-Sight

www.excursions-journal.org.uk

Reflecting About The Beginning on Excursions

(Issue 1.1, In-Sight, 2010)

Martin Paul Eve

Part of the Founding Board of Editors

Beginnings

Why do Ph.D. students setup and run new postgraduate journals? It's certainly not to bust open the prestige economy of academia and its attendant hierarchies of publication. For it would be most surprising if one of these titles rose to the highest ranks of academic prominence. We do not expect stellar international academics to contribute their most high-profile work to titles edited by those who have yet to gain the hallowed title of Ph.D. Such journals appear down the food chain. Publishing in one of these titles is not likely, on its own, to get you an academic job.

New journals also take a long time to establish; many commercial publishers will not know whether they will make an economic return on a new title for eight years – well beyond the length of a Ph.D. project. The continuity and sustainability of titles set up by those with only temporary bases at institutions intensifies the challenge of attracting top-flight work. Nobody wants to contribute their articles to a title that folds once the original crop of students has left.

Infrastructures at such titles can also be amateurish, in the sense of “shoddy”, rather than in its original etymology of “run by those who love it”. Ignorance of persistent identifiers (DOIs), digital preservation, XML typesetting with semantic embedding, ORCID, and licensing, to name but a

few areas, can make such journals fragile in the eyes of the highly professionalized research publishing community.

But there is an easy set of answers to my initial question that certainly informed why we wanted to establish *Excursions*: it was for freedom; it was to learn; and it was to publish.

Beginning with Freedom

“Play the game” is the advice oft dispensed to Ph.D. students who want academic jobs. Publish in the right places and don’t waste your time with extraneous activities. But what if the game is rotten and intellectually bankrupt? What if playing the game isn’t even enough? What if you get before an academic hiring panel and it turns out that everyone else had also just played the game? Playing outside the game starts then to look like the kind of free-thinking that we should actually want in academia...

We started *Excursions* back in 2010 because we wanted a publication that played beyond the rules of professionalization that otherwise governed our postgraduate lives. We wanted a space where experimental, interdisciplinary work could find a home. For, as one might imagine in the case of, say, religious history, the inter-discipline can find itself hated by both historians and theologians. If a world does not exist that will accommodate your thought, it is incumbent, I believe, upon you to build the world that you want.

Furthermore, we had the freedom to make the journal open-access from scratch. We had no desire to profit from our publishing activities and it became an activist effort in radical open dissemination. We were the class of individuals most likely to suffer an access deficit to academic titles if we did not land academic jobs. To work on a paywalled basis simply seemed untenable to us – not least also because of the technical overheads of implementing such a paywall.

There was also a freedom in ignorance – and putting this right through learning by making...

Beginning with Learning

There's a good saying that building something is the best way to learn. As the technician responsible for Excursions initial infrastructure, I had a steep learning cliff to climb to understand the myriad connections, systems, standards, and so forth that govern academic publishing.

Yet the challenges were not just technical, but also social. We had to learn how you run a peer-review process – how, in essence, you manage the time of busy academics who are volunteering their labour time and on whom you rely, for free. The social delicacy of this arrangement is hard to underestimate. We had to learn about third-party image rights. We had to learn about digital preservation. How do you get a DOI – that funny string of numbers like “10.20919/exs.1.2010.124” – and what actually are they?

These and many more were the issues that we stumbled upon in our productive ignorance and that have prepared me for my future work. I know a great deal more about the technical and social infrastructures that underpin the contemporary publishing landscape than most – and this, I believe, goes for everyone who worked on Excursions. Our beginning to learn was autodidactic, for sure, but it was all the more interesting as a result. A blog post that I wrote on “how to setup an open-access journal” at the time still lands me several email correspondences per month, a decade later.

Yet despite our use of the venue as a learning or self-training facility, Excursions persists...

Beginning with Publication

A core point about Excursions was that it was both external to and free from a university – and yet embedded within it. We were rigorously insistent, in the early days, on our autonomy in terms of visual brand and also the

(academic) freedom to act outside of explicitly sanctioned university processes (though we didn't break any university rules). We were adamant that Excursions must be more than a marketing exercise and recapitulation of our labour for the brand of the university.

That said, all good things – such as a Ph.D. – must come to an end. At the end of our studies, the initial core team had all gone their own ways. But we did not want Excursions to die. We used the institution, the university, as a vehicle for continuity. Through a rolling programme of overlapping editors, drawn from our connections within the university, we ensured social endurance of the title.

In particular, though, if based in humanities departments, technological continuity can pose the biggest challenge. It took a long time, even after the end of my Ph.D., for me to hand over the technical elements of Excursions, because there simply wasn't anyone else with the technical skills in the English department. In this instance, it became an imperative to get the title onto institutional servers, perhaps then surrendering some of the freedom that I earlier championed, but in the process ensuring the longer life of the title.

Excursions did not die because we left; it gained new beginnings, new afterlives that continue to this day, a decade later.

Beginning at the Beginning

Would I do it all again? I can't speak for the other founding editors and write here only in a personal capacity, but the one thing I take away, when I think back on the project, is that I worry I might not do it again, knowing what I know now. Well, isn't hindsight a beautiful thing? There are things I would have done differently, but the experiences, knowledge, and friends that I gained in launching Excursions persist to this day. A large part of my job at Birkbeck consists of running a major, award-winning, international open-

access publisher and technical infrastructure – so, in every sense, Excursions was the training ground where I cut my teeth.

In other ways, though, the beginning of Excursions was more radical than anything I have done since. We did it for its own sake, because we wanted to, and in the way that we wanted. It was “radical” in the etymology of “going back to the roots”, starting afresh, with freedom, and a joyful naivety. I say: grant us the continued naivety and freedom to start projects again, from scratch, making from nothing in precisely the way we want, to build new worlds.

Martin Paul Eve is Professor of Literature, Technology and Publishing at Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom.

To celebrate the beginnings of Excursions, we have chosen to reprint the Preface written by editor-in-chief Lindsay Smith

Foreword: In-Sight

As published in Issue 1.1: In-Sight (2010)

Lindsay Smith

“Well in sight” and “out of danger, as it were” are how, in a letter to his father, John Ruskin, Victorian theorist and polymath, aspires to render his work on Turner. As evidenced by the burgeoning project of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin was explicitly concerned with the pitfalls that faced a theorist of Turner’s paintings. Indeed, for Ruskin to champion what were, for many contemporary commentators, Turner’s indefensibly idiosyncratic images in paint was “burdensome” when it remained an interior process. Brought within sight, however, “all down on paper” and “out of mind”, Ruskin felt his work, comprising drawings as well as text, was miraculously saved from peril: made safe. Yet what might it mean to want to make writing visible for these reasons, to realise the visible existence of language, in its relation to visual images, as a form of refuge from the invisible?

There is perhaps more than meets a metaphoric eye in Ruskin’s desire for the object to be rendered visible in order for it to escape the “danger” of the mind. On another occasion he voices a striking wish to stain his pages ‘blood red’ in an attempt to lend to writing the visual intensity of painting, but also perhaps to keep a corporeal connection to the kind of

plenitude that figures the process of rendering visible itself: the very movement that creates an image. In presenting the perilous status – the danger – of invisible thoughts (interior images) Ruskin articulates a metaphysics of presence, reciprocally one of absence, that confronts those enduring questions of what it might mean to make visible, to create an image. In larger terms, we might further question Ruskin’s identification of visibility, as itself a form of safety, as producing the very condition of an image. Is it indeed the case that for an object to be in sight is invariably in some sense for it to be out of mind?

The image seems to be a way of marking such a potential separation between exterior and interior while belonging to both. Moreover, that condition of holding “in sight”, as a means of externalisation as belonging to the image, is realised in the easy conceptual slippage from “in sight” to “insight” - originally “internal sight” or seeing with the eyes of the mind, that later becomes a seeing into a thing or subject. To bring an object within sight is to affect the “inner eye”, to re-formulate the relationship of the visible to the invisible, presence to absence. Such a movement recalls Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1964, p. 187) emphasis upon the excursive power of visualisation, whereby “our power to imagine ourselves elsewhere [...] borrows from vision and employs means we owe to it”. But in a different way it anticipates Emmanuel Levinas’s theorization of a concept of “transparency” in the phenomenology of images. Levinas focuses on the term “resemblance” to show how in theories of the image “resemblance” itself emerges “not as the result of a comparison between an image and the original, but as the very movement that engenders the image”. For Levinas, the contemplation of an image does not involve “a movement through” it “into the world it represents”. Instead, “representation expresses just that function of an image that remains to be determined.” (Levinas, 1989, p. 135) Levinas’s designation of representation as articulating that function of an image that remains to be realised retrospectively throws light on what

Ruskin believes the promise of rendering visible might hold. For to want to have the object “in sight”, to visibly represent it, is in a vital sense to approach representation as “that function of an image” yet to be determined.

Lindsay Smith is Professor of English at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom.

References

- Cook, E.T. and Wedderburn, A. (eds.) (1903-12) *The complete works of John Ruskin*. London: George Allen.
- Levinas, E. (1989) ‘Reality and its shadow’, in Hand, S. (ed.) *The Levinas reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964) *The primacy of perception*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press.