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PROJECT

Popular Antiquities: The Sunken Cities (Folklore and Folk Art Reassessed)

I propose a reinterpretation of early modern European culture (fifteenth to eighteenth centuries) based on local legends and so-called folk art. These underexploited and not unproblematic bodies of material will yield an unfamiliar picture of the collective memory and vernacular or unofficial dreams and fears. Cognizant of the historiographical and ideological hazards, I will work along the borderlands between literary history and art history, tracking symbols, motifs, plots, characters, and etymologies. Encoded in the legends are troubled, clouded recollections of the European past; preoccupations with suffering and conflict, with secrecy and access to knowledge; anxieties about food and climate; erosion of confidence in rituals, sacrifices, curses, and incantations; suspicions that the past was fuller and more real than the present; and the persistence of incompletely mourned pasts and undead bodies.

At the core will be abyssal, speluncar, and hypogean imagery, for example the many local legends involving doomed cities sucked back into the earth or the waters. The legends interpret dimly recalled records of catastrophe and accidents in moral terms: a "people's morality" and a people's eschatology emerges outside of Christianity. There is often an anti-establishment or socially subversive quality to the legends. The unburied past reproached elite, promulgated histories, just as folk art reproached the authored yet rule-based art cultivated in the art academies. I present the vernacular material with its negative aura not as low or underdeveloped culture but rather as a form of counterculture, as a riposte to and parody of emerging academic, clerical, and bureaucratic narratives and archives.

Recommended Reading

Wood, Christopher S. *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Nagel, Alexander, and Christopher S. Wood. *Anachronic Renaissance*. New York: Zone Books, 2010.

Wood, Christopher S. *A History of Art History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.

A New Approach to the European Local Legends

The local legends of premodern Europe were short, unsophisticated, one might say "homemade" stories about inexplicable and uncanny incidents. They relayed hearsay and news as well as local oral (or oralized written) traditions about the past. They often drew upon a repertoire of conventional ghostly characters, or *topoi*: revenants, poltergeists, water-spirits, changelings, dwarves and elves, werewolves, and the like. Completely absent from the narratives is the Christian Church and its clerics.

The legends are neglected by all the disciplines: by historians because they seem so untrustworthy as evidence of actual practices or "beliefs," and by literary scholars because they are so artless and plain.

The legends, or *Sagen*, are not to be confused with Grimm's fairy tales (*Märchen*). The narratives I am dealing with do not deliver satisfying plots, nor do they offer clear, edifying lessons or convertible wisdom. Instead they mostly recount failures, misunderstandings, and disappointments.

Many such legends were transferred into writing and in fact directly into print in the 16th and 17th centuries. These were later gathered, adapted back into pseudo-oral form, and reprinted by the Brothers Grimm (1816, 1818) and others in the 19th century.

I seek to develop a new way of reading these philological *Sorgenkinder* that instead grasps them as narrativized representations of encounters between ordinary people and extraordinary phenomena (whether real or fictional is irrelevant). My thesis is that the *topoi* served as a commons, and as a medium, for reflection on the experience of running up against the outer edges of existence: what it would feel like to encounter the living dead, or an outlaw; to face sex with a stranger, or discover an infant endowed with knowledge. The narratives picture the bodily and affective experience of the unwanted confrontation with alterity. As such the stories may be assigned a leading role in the prehistory of modern narrative fiction.

Wood, Christopher (Princeton,2023)

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Wood, Christopher (Princeton,2021)

A history of art history

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Wood, Christopher (New York,2020)

Anachronic renaissance

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Wood, Christopher (México,2019)

The crime of passion

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Wood, Christopher (Petersberg,2018)

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Wood, Christopher (Bielefeld,2018)

Unter Einfluss

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Wood, Christopher (Baltimore, Md,2017)

Figure and ground in Goethe's Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre

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Wood, Christopher (New York, NY,2010)

Anachronic Renaissance

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