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Beyond Historicism

The Secret Presence of the Middle Ages

To what extent do medieval phenomena still exist in our present without being perceived as *historical*?

Closing date: 10 October 2012
For details and conditions see www.tinyurl.com/Essaypreis2012

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Essay Prize in Medieval Studies

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Call for Papers

Is history shrinking? Researchers in the fields of social sciences and cultural studies have recently come to observe a global tendency: with the end of the 20th century, our relationship with the past has begun to change fundamentally. Sociologists, for instance, have detected a “de-temporalization of history” (Hartmut Rosa), tracing this development to the dynamics of acceleration and the multiplication of social change in modern life. With the “chronotope of historicism” on the wane, the border between present and past is becoming increasingly permeable: historical distance, it seems, is dissolving into an increasingly “broad present” (Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht).

This change of perception affects our relationship with the Middle Ages in particular; after all, their baffling mixture of overtly marked historicity and oblique omnipresence permeates our present like few other periods. Today, medieval architecture can just as readily be found in historical city centres as it can be on the ahistorical sets of Harry Potter; modern life-style and wellness guides draw their inspiration from religious and medical texts of medieval monastic life; knights with swords and armour take their place on the battlefields of online role-playing games among a host of other fantasy characters as a matter of course. In more than 30 German cities, women now live together in communities modelled after those of the medieval Beguines; the 13th century roots as dwelling for a Christian sisterhood are by no means detrimental to their attractiveness as contemporary, emancipated forms of living.

With the rapid spread of audiobooks we suddenly find ourselves experiencing literature in a manner surprisingly similar to that of the medieval semi-oral tradition; we do not, however, consider this development a “return to the Middle Ages.” Apocalyptic scenarios re-emerge in literature and film as well as in scientific prognoses of today, displacing expectations of open future and progress and thereby re-introducing structural aspects of the medieval world view – though ecological and demographic catastrophes have long since taken the place of a Final Judgement in our imagining.

Such phenomena seem to undermine the marked historicity of the Middle Ages. If the “simultaneity of the sequential” can be regarded as a key feature of how modern history has been experienced (Reinhart Koselleck), the combination of marked historicity and unmarked presence puts the Middle Ages beyond the reach of attempts at ordering even more fundamentally.

It is the aim of this essay prize to support students’ research into medieval culture and to honour particularly original ideas. The entry is **open to every student (including PhD-students)** who may apply with a previously unpublished essay answering the following question:

To what extent do medieval phenomena still exist in our present without being perceived as *historical*?

Conditions

All essays, written in **German or English**, must **not exceed 55,000 characters** (including spaces) and must be submitted to Bent Gebert (bent.gebert@germanistik.uni-freiburg.de; Deutsches Seminar der Universität Freiburg, Platz der Universität 3, 79085 Freiburg, Germany) before **10 Oct 2012**. Please attach a valid copy of your certificate of enrolment. By submitting their contribution, participants agree to a possible publication afterwards. Every competitor may hand in one essay only. **The best 10 essays will be awarded book prizes with an overall worth of € 1,700.** Sufficient quality provided, successful contributors will be offered the **prospect of publication of the winning essays** by our partner, Rombach publishing house.

The jury consists of members of the University of Freiburg Centre for Medieval Studies. The jury reserves the right to not award the prize at all or not for all places.

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