

**Nagel, Alexander and Christopher S. Wood. *Anachronic Renaissance*. New York: Zone Books, 2010. 455 pp, hb \$39.95. ISBN: 978-1-935-40802-4.**

“I saw everything but comprehended nothing,” states Herman Melville’s intrepid voyager observing the religious rituals of Polynesian inhabitants. In this story, Melville points to the intricacies of religion, travel, colonization, and their relationship to the emergence of print media.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to guidebooks, plaques and inscriptions, tourists today have seemingly complete access to see and to comprehend everything. But what was travel like in the world before print, and how did the inhabitants and travelers of Western Europe comprehend their local and far-flung buildings, paintings, and artifacts before the “standardization” of printed texts and guidebooks?

In their recent contribution to Renaissance studies, Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, authors of the book *Anachronic Renaissance*, focus on temporalities. Yet the issues raised within their twenty-eight chapters have contemporary implications that go beyond questions concerning late-medieval and Renaissance periods. The underlying assumptions of their book touch upon issues such as pilgrimage, tourism, travel, and how these have become commodities in the West. Preceded by their article “Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism” (2005), the title of this new book and its earlier article imply a certain focus: works that construct a sense of temporalities that is neither within the present nor the past. An example here would be a painting of St. Augustine in which his study is a fifteenth-century humanist studio.<sup>2</sup> Through various late-medieval and Renaissance understandings of time, the authors attempt to explore both the beliefs of pilgrims and the incredulity of humanists who believed or doubted that the Virgin’s house could fly and position itself as a shrine in the Southern Italian city of Loreto and be worthy of veneration even though constructed of materials obviously not from the historical period of the Virgin’s life.

One of the pleasures of reading this book is the attention that it brings to objects and buildings often overlooked in surveys of Renaissance art. Here is a study of works that range from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century but pivot around the 1480s and the 1490s: devotional prints, Renaissance mosaic-work, geometric patterning of Cosmatesque pavements, the *titulus* of Christ’s cross, medal portraiture and an assortment of idiosyncratic and important reliquaries and relics, from houses to paintings. The authors interweave these “lesser-known” works with canonical Netherlandish paintings, such as Jan van Eyck’s *Three Marys at the Tomb of Christ* (1425-1435), iconic architectural structures from the Dome of the Rock to Bramante’s *Tempietto* (after 1502), and Raphael’s wall paintings in the *Stanza della Segnatura* (ca. 1510). The Renaissance built by Nagel and Wood is a dynamic world of “global exchange” (receptions of Islamic architecture and Byzantine icons in the West), competing ideologies found in the philological concerns of Renaissance humanists, and the forceful relationship between medieval forms and the developing Antique style in Italy, exemplified in their readings of Alberti’s *Tempio Malatestiano* (1450’s) and their refreshing and provocative revisiting of the interplay between Romanesque and Gothic architecture in Netherlandish painting.

Nagel and Wood build their infrastructure with two categories, “substitutional” and “performative.” They compare substitutional works to the “Ship of Theseus.” In this “thought experiment,” the Ship of Theseus is constantly rebuilt, so that the original material of the ship is gradually replaced, while the ship maintains the titular inscription

of Theseus's ship. The ship's name identified the ship, not the material of its construction. Like the Ship of Theseus, "substitutional" objects, such as devotional icons or religious edifices, exist in a chain of substitutions. For example, an icon of the Virgin and Child might have no material relationship to the icon of the Virgin and Child mythically painted by St. Luke, but like the Ship of Theseus, the icon maintains its "identity" as a devotional icon of the Virgin and Child.

The authors contextualize material substitution within a famous reading of medieval typology of the *figura* by Erich Auerbach, in which a historical event in the present is absorbed and understood in relation to a historical event in the past, both legitimizing each other as events within the Christological understanding of time that will only be fulfilled by Christ's *parousia*.<sup>3</sup> The Sacrifice of Isaac in the Old Testament was a *figura* for the Sacrifice of Christ, both events *figuras* for the final Resurrection. This understanding of time runs counter to a chronological understanding of time, in which events unfold along a linear timeline. Against these substitutional works, Nagel and Wood posit the "performative," which is a "caesura" on the linear timeline. The works that structure Nagel's and Wood's book embody a play between the "performative" and the "substitutional" strategies of artistic making. This tension creates a series of works that are "anachronic," or express their temporal instability, caught between the typological thinking in *figuras* and the march forward of the chronological timeline. So far, this summary of the book conveys almost as much as the article published in *Art Bulletin* in 2005, which is in fact only an introduction to Nagel's and Wood's project.

Like many of the painted architectural structures that trace ruin and rebuilding under discussion in *Anachronic Renaissance*, the thrust of Nagel's and Wood's project maps out the disintegration of "substitutional" thinking. The brilliance of this book is its dedication to the careful unfolding of substitutional thinking, and to its eventual erosion as a mode for understanding not only time but also material works. Indeed one may be tempted to criticize the authors for having only paid attention to one mode of "temporal" thinking – the *figural* typology – but that is to miss the strength (and blindspot) of this argument. This book traces the end of substitution and the introduction of terms that are very important for contemporary discussion of art, *trace* and *difference*. In the early sixteenth century, substitution was replaced by citation, exemplified in the continual copying and reinsertion of Michelangelesque figures in compositions. For the authors, it was the development of print culture that led to the replacement of substitution with citation.

The mastery of their own craft allows the authors to present, in a captivating and persuasive argument, a ground plan for understanding an earlier and a later mode of artistic production, substitutional versus citational, and binding these modes to the seismic epochal shift introduced by print culture. It is hard to imagine other modes of early-modern artistic production and another cause, besides print, of the movement away from substitutional thinking in material objects. Yet like a Palladian plan, the neatness of their schema shows aberrations in execution.

Interestingly, Nagel and Wood provide only one version of the Theseus myth. In the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes told another version of the story of Theseus's ship. Like Nagel and Wood, Hobbes used the myth to explore a crisis in substitution and "identity." For Hobbes, there is no linear progression of substitution. By accident, two forms of the same identity exist at once. While the parts of the ship are gradually

replaced, a man collects the discarded materials and stores them away. One day, the man reconstructs another ship from the collected pieces. Then, as Hobbes states, “there would have been two ships numerically the same, which is absurd.” Hobbes reverts to the metaphor of the human body in order to determine which is the actual ship of Theseus. His conception of identity relies on ideas of motion, which developed in the seventeenth century with the work of Galileo and Descartes: “Also, if the name be given for such a form as is the beginning of motion, then, as long as that motion remains, it will be the same *individual* thing; as that man will always be the same, whose actions and thoughts proceed all from the same beginning of motion, namely, that which was in his generation.” Hobbes concludes, “so that a ship, which signifies matter so figured, will be the same as long as the matter remains the same; but if no part of the matter be the same, then it is numerically another ship: and if part of the matter remain and part be changed, then the ship will be partly the same, and partly not the same.”<sup>4</sup>

Hobbes’s parable reveals a crisis in substitution; two replicas of the same object with the same name cannot exist at once and maintain the same identity. There can only be *one* Ship of Theseus. This crisis in substitution is caused not by Hobbes’s relationship to the development of print and artistic developments, but by contemporaneous philosophical debates regarding the question of motion. Prior to Galileo and Descartes, it was thought that bodies inclined to rest and were only put into motion by force. One of the revolutions of the seventeenth century was to understand motion and rest as equal *states*, and to consider bodies in motion rather than rest. Of course, one might very well argue that Hobbes’s version is a product of the seventeenth century and not applicable to questions of fifteenth-century substitution.

Yet as Nagel and Wood point out, things often existed in twos: “two tombs of David, two temples of Solomon, two huts of Romulus, two authentic frontal images of Christ – the Veronica and the Mandylion – two sites of the Last Supper, two sites of the Praetorium two houses of Caiaphas, two Via Dolorosas, and two places called Emmaus.”<sup>5</sup> For Nagel and Wood, through the *figura* typological thinking, these two bodies reinforced each other; they did not cause the crisis in identity experienced by Hobbes’s ship owner. And yet can Hobbes’s demand to have the authenticated “one,” the determination of which ship is Theseus’s, only be traced to the print “revolution”? No doubt, as Nagel and Wood discuss, developments such as the art market, which in turn raised questions of forgery and authorship, helped to lay the foundation for a crisis that sought to identify the “authentic one” among the many copies. By noting Elizabeth Eisenstein’s work on print (without taking into consideration its reception and later work on early print cultures) and using the “art market” to explain the disintegration of substitutional thinking, the authors show their blindspot.<sup>6</sup> While print and the art market undoubtedly played a major role that the authors persuasively describe, nevertheless, as Hobbes’s parable reveals, there were other profound questions (problems?), both philosophical and theological, that made it impossible to think *figurally* about material objects, and in turn led to crises in substitutional thinking and material object’s inscriptions. The impact of the Reformation and the ensuing revolution in thinking about the Eucharist remains glaringly absent for the authors’ discussion of the substitution’s cessation to citation.

Finally, it is interesting to consider the role of substitution within today’s larger, more politically-weighted monuments, which in turn points towards the politics of substitution

in earlier epochs. I would argue that there are contemporary examples of substitution, such as the UNESCO's rebuilding of Mostar Bridge in Bosnia or the declaration of the rebuilt central Warsaw as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Both these monuments retain no material relationship to the prior structures and are authenticated through "inscriptions."<sup>7</sup> A consideration of the politics at play in these two UNESCO World Heritage Sites recalls the greater complications that participated in the circulation of Byzantine icons in the West, representations of Dome of the Rock in Western painting, and the figural programs connected with imperial conquests of the New World. The authors point towards these "Renaissance" politics in graceful and well-footnoted prose, acknowledging the political motivations of "rediscovering" a certain relic or erecting a certain monument; but the reader feels disappointed that the intelligence of these two authors was not more deeply applied to other ramifications and considerations for thinking substitutionally. Indeed the contemporary examples of substitutional monuments that they provide, such as Thoreau's house, remain safely embedded within the humanist realms of art and poetry.

One wonders how, like the roots of tourism within pilgrimage, the substitutional paradigm persisted beyond its original religious structures. *Anachronic Renaissance* presents an interesting starting point to consider not only the uncomfortable feeling of encountering the UNESCO-Disneyfication of tourism but also the interweaving of secularization and substitution that often, like the preservation of well-visited monuments, may act as a euphemism for nationalism and commodification. When substitution persists in the absence of the *figura* – I call this a secularized substitution – what understanding of material objects in time does this beget? Unfortunately this is not an anachronic, but a present question that remains outside the authors' own artistic-historical concerns, which (like the temporality of the works under consideration) appear to the reader belated and overly-narrow as they are bound to the Renaissance and its artistic-historical receptions.

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## Notes

1. Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (Stillwell, Kansas: Digireads.com, 2008), 125.
2. Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, "Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism," *Art Bulletin* 87.3 (2005): 403-415.
3. Erich Auerbach, "Figura," *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11-78.
4. Thomas Hobbes, "Identity and Difference," *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. Sir William Molesworth, vol. 2 (London, 1839-1845), 136-138.
5. Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, 266.
6. See, for example: Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and the Eighteenth Centuries*, trans.

Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1994); Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800*, trans. David Gerard (London: N.L.B., 1976); Brian Richardson, *Printing, Writers and Readers in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

7. It's uncanny how the language of the UNESCO charters resonates with the questions and language among fifteenth-century humanists, in their search for "authenticity." See, for example: Christian Cameron, "From Warsaw to Mostar: The World Heritage Committee and Authenticity," *APT Bulletin* 39.2/3 (2008): 19-24.