

From ‚urban legend‘ to conspiracy rumor. The politics of modern myth formation

The essay project wants to question the subject matter of established urban legends regarding their sociopolitical relevance. To that end, their narratological and media sociological operating mechanisms are examined in equivalence to currently circulating „Verschwörungsgeschichten“ (Butter 2018) in social networks. Since the 1930s, urban legends have been a much-discussed object of folk narrative research, despite, or precisely because, they not only exhibit ontological problems of truth but also ontological problems of structure. On the one hand, they spread like rumors in accordance to the so called FOAF-Model (friend of a friend), which, firstly, worsens the source situation and, secondly, emphasizes the ‚audience effect‘, i. e. the audience’s significance. On the other hand, in this genre of modern myth the real is blended with elements of the collective unconscious (Petzoldt 2002). Urban legends deal with the present in the mode of the past; on one side by referring back to handed down (lack of) knowledge, on the other side by updating their subject matter thematically and formally to the new crises and media of the present. By mainly narrating experiences of loss, erecting dichotomies and mobilizing affects, modern myths are culturally fabricated expressions of fear, too. This is mostly expressed by xenophobic narratives („The foreign neighbors have eaten my pet!“), homophobic AIDS-rumors („AIDS-Mary,“ deliberately placed AIDS-pathogens in food and public commodities) and conspirative stories of contaminations of all sorts (contaminated drinking water, chemtrails etc.). In spite of that, a decidedly political positioning has so far stood behind their mediatization as a pop-cultural phenomenon, which could have contributed to the popularization and normalization of racist, antisemitic and sexist positions. The essay project wants to closer examine these issues.