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Delightful Horror

Urban Legends Between Fact and Fiction

As a starter let me give two examples of the kind of narratives I want to discuss:

> (1) A recently divorced man went to a singles bar, where he met a beautiful woman. They became friendly and ended up going to his place, where they made love all night. The man woke up the next morning, and she was gone. He went into the bathroom. Then he looked at the mirror. Scrawled there, in bright red lipstick, was the message, 'Welcome to the world of aids!' (Jüngst 1999: 95).

> (2) During the early eighties, a Polish scientist and his wife left their country and began a new life at Saarbrücken. The first years were hard for the young couple. They had little money and both of them had problems with the German language. The wife used to buy victuals at a super market nearby. Instead of fresh meat she always bought canned meat which was less expensive. After a while the scientist earned more money and hence the wife began to buy fresh meat only. One day the woman at the till asked her: 'Did your dog die? You don't buy dog food any more' (Brednich 1991: 98; my translation).

These two stories are chosen from anthologies with texts called 'urban legends' (sometimes they are also referred to as 'contemporary legends', or 'urban myths'). Bearing this name in mind, we tend to read these texts as 'legendary' narratives that relate ficticious stories of events which never happened. But what if somebody told you these stories as factual accounts of events that really happened to the friend of a friend: wouldn't you believe them to be true – or at least consider seriously the possibility of their truthfulness? Before entering in a discussion of this question, I want to introduce in more detail the kind of narrative I am seeking to analyze.

Urban legends do not fit into the common range of 'literature'. Hence they are scarcely dealt with in literary studies. In everyday conversation, however, such stories are enormously popular. Everybody knows some urban legend in one variant or another. Anthologies of such legends have been bestsellers in many languages throughout the last two decades. In the United States in particular, the five anthologies of urban legends published by Jan Harold Brunvand between 1981 and 1993 reached a wide public. Their titles are telling: *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, *The Choking Doberman*, *The Mexican Pet*, *Curses! Broiled Again*, and *The Baby Train*. Likewise, in Germany

four anthologies published by the ethnologist Rolf-Wilhelm Brednich between 1990 and 1996 became major successes on the book market: *Die Spinne in der Yucca-Palme, Die Maus im Jumbo-Jet, Das Huhn mit dem Gipsbein*, and *Die Ratte am Strohhalm*.

Urban legends typically relate strange, horrifying, desastrous events which happened to the friend of a friend of the narrator. They confront the reader with stories about vanished hitchhikers who turn up dead, venomous spiders hidden in inconspicuous yucca palms, or sexual encounters with strangers leading to infection with HIV. Urban legends are situated in our contemporary everyday world. They deal with the things we like to eat and drink, with relatives and friends, with our pets and cars. They occur at places where we live and where we go on holiday to, at the schools, universities and companies we work at. They are connected with the activities which we earn our living by. They happen to people like you and me. Although the events related in urban legends are extraordinary and sometimes seem to be even impossible, they are meant to be true. They are told as if they were a truthful account of something that really happened.

Although spread also by mass media such as newspapers, television, radio and internet, urban legends originally circulate in informal conversations between friends. This informal character of their circulation raises a methodological problem for the research on urban legends. For academic purposes usually we deal with urban legends as written texts as they are compiled in the anthologies edited by Brunvand and Brednich. The editors, however, tend to rephrase the verbal material they have collected. Hence the written text found in the books cannot be taken as a word-by-word rendering of the authentic oral performance. In general, the editor will eliminate repetitions, correct syntactical imperfections, skip allusions to the specific context of utterance, etc. He may add explanations in order to make up for the missing gestures, emphases in intonation and other elements which are essential for oral communication. Because urban legends properly belong to an oral frame of communication and should not be understood as written texts we cannot entirely rely on their printed textual details. That is why the pragmatic or contextual dimension of these texts must be taken into account, even if we have to rely, for practical reasons, on the written texts as provided by anthologies. We must imagine the context of casual talk in which they occur and possess their full significance.

A second methodological difficulty regarding the specific oral features of urban legends consists in the fact that even if we manage to document authentic instances of such legends in oral communication, we will never find a single text which remains literally stable throughout different occasions of delivery. Instead, every time an urban legend is told the narrator is likely to rephrase the words of the story according to his own predilections.

Given these problems, how are we to grasp what is common and essential to all the variants of an urban legend? Now, what is rather stable are not the words of the story but the story itself and some more general features of its narration. Therefore, I will consider not so much the individual wording but rather more general structures.

The narrative structure of urban legends, in the authentic context of casual oral communication, typically consists of three parts:

(a) The narration begins with a claim for credibility. Our knowledge about the world derives from many different sources, including mass media, academic discourse, and direct personal experience. Unlike these sources of knowledge, the reliability of the facts conveyed by urban legends is limited to the vagaries of oral communication. The narrator informs you that he has heard the story from a friend of his who has a friend who experienced the story personally. Thereby the narrator establishes the truth of his story first of all by reference to a witness of the events. Needless to say the witness is never present at the moment when the urban legend is told. The proof of the story's truth is, so to speak, always two or three instances away. This initial assertion of the truthfulness of the narration is such an apparent feature of urban legends that they have been called 'foaf-tales', with 'foaf' standing for 'friend of a friend'.

A noteworthy implication of this truth-claim is, by the way, that for an urban legend in order to be effective its identity as an urban legend must remain unknown to the hearer. As soon as you become aware of the imaginary character of the story, its impact on you gets lost. An urban legend is truly alive only as long as it has not been discredited as a true account and recognized as a ficticious legend instead. As soon as it is classified as an urban legend – that is, as what it actually is – its original power vanishes. The genre of the urban legend is, so to speak, structurally pseudonymous. It shares this feature with another non-literary speech genre – the lie: In order to be effective, also a lie must not be recognized as such by the hearer. That is why urban legends collected in anthologies like Brunvand's and Brednich's (or in academic essays) have, in these secondary contexts, lost most of their *original* appeal. (Needless to say, there may be, and obviously are, many other reasons why we enjoy reading urban legends while being aware of their true character.)

(b) The second part of the threefold narrative structure of urban legends includes the presentation of the story's setting. It provides an orientation as to the place and the time where and when the events took place. The setting always evokes a common situation of everyday life: giving a hitchhiker a lift, dancing in a disco, eating out in a Chinese restaurant etc.

(c) The third part of the narrative relates the irruption of something unexpected into the everyday situation: The hitchhiker vanishes from the

backseat of the car; in the disco somebody hits you with a needle and poisons you with HIV-infected blood; the Chinese restaurant is shut down a few days after your visit because it served rat's meat. This part of the narration transforms an ordinary situation into a strange or ugly or horrible state of affairs. It makes up the reason why the story is told – it provides the point of the story.

So this is the basic narrative structure of an urban legend: firstly, truth claim, secondly, everyday situation, finally, catastrophe. Such a simple structure can be told in very few words. This is probably a major reason for the success of urban legends in the hurried life style of contemporary culture. Most of us have lost the ability and the lack of opportunity to tell long and complicated stories in extended conversations. But everybody can easily remember and reproduce the fundamental structures of urban legends.

Now let me elaborate a bit on the first part of the three-part structure of urban legends, i.e. on the question of credibility. As indicated above, the proof of the story's truth is always two or three instances away. Usually, when listening to an urban legend you don't explore the possibility of checking its truth. But if one indeed tries to check it, a significant mechanism of deferral or postponement is generated. Let me illustrate this mechanism with the following story:

> (3) "I'd like some information," a male caller told the Dallas News City Desk some weeks ago. It seems he'd heard about a woman who had gone to a local discount store to look at some fur coats imported from Mexico. When the woman put her hand in the coat pocket, she felt a sudden, sharp pain. A few minutes later her arm supposedly had started turning black and blue. 'Well,' the man continued, 'they rushed her to the hospital. It seems that pain was a snake in the coat pocket. The woman's arm had to be amputated.' The reporter said he'd check the story.
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> About that time a woman called with the same story, only she'd heard the woman died right in Presbyterian Hospital's emergency ward. Presbyterian Hospital said it had no such case on record.
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> 'My brother is a doctor,' another caller explained. 'He's on the staff at Baylor Hospital and he was present when they brought the woman in.' Baylor Hospital said it also had no such case on record. Neither did the police or the health department. The doctor was questioned, he said it wasn't actually he who was present but a friend. The friend explained he wasn't present either, he had just overheard two nurses talking about it.
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> After about 10 calls from other 'interested' persons the fur coat turned into some material that had come in from India. A man gave the name of the insurance company which was handling the case. The insurance man said it wasn't actually his company but his next door neighbour's cousin's company. The story spread through the city and seemed to be the main topic of conversation at cocktail parties and bridge games. Finally a caller came up with the victim's name. The News called and the 'victim' answered the phone. She said she had never been in better health. Someone must have had her confused with someone else, but she had heard the rumor. Only she heard the snake was found in a basket of fruit. The neighbor's cousin's insurance company was located. He said the only snake bite victim he knew of was his daughter and that had happened on a family hike the summer before.
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> The managers of the two discount stores most frequently mentioned in the rumor said the story is one that has been travelling across the country. Both noted that neither store even sells fur coats. The doctor who was actually supposed to have performed the surgery said he was a pediatrician and never did surgery [...] (Jüngst 1999: 21–3).

This story illustrates very well the mechanism of deferral which arises as soon as you try to check the truth of a given urban legend.

So much for the basic structural properties of urban legends. Now what about its functions? Do urban legends possess specific and identifiable social or psychological functions? This is a difficult question because to my knowledge there are no empirical studies that provide any pertinent answers. The following functions, however, may often (if not always) be attributed to the narration of urban legends:

(a) Firstly, urban legends perform an exhortative function because they provide *admonition*. They relate deviations from everyday situations which end up in desaster. In the world of urban legends, every step whatever small off the beaten track of standard behavior encounters severe punishment. Very often this track is defined by a rigid morality: 'don't look for one-night stands'; 'don't masturbate'; 'don't buy flamboyant clothes like furs' – this is the kind of lessons told by urban legends. As Jens Förster explains in his essay included in this volume, cognitive psychologists distinguish between two basic motivational orientations, 'promotion' and 'prevention'. Promotion designates a general cognitive attitude that focuses on ideals, whereas prevention focuses on oughts like duties, responsibilities and obligations. With regard to this distinction, the narration of urban legends seems clearly to serve a preventional orientation. It establishes boundaries of behavior and threatens you with terrible consequences if you dare transgress.

We should add, however, that there are many urban legends where the basic deviation cannot be understood as an infringement of moral standards. Some of the most common themes of urban legends include desasters which arise from contacts with things or persons alien or foreign to the actors involved in the event. In such cases, the underlying admonition includes messages like 'don't trust strangers'; 'don't eat foreign food'; 'don't go abroad'. To be sure, admonitions of this kind do not pertain to the realm of morality proper. Nevertheless, they do contain strong evaluative elements because, by way of exemplification, they prescribe certain ways of social behavior and castigate others.

(b) A second function I propose to attribute to urban legends is the production of emotional *arousal*. Urban legends relate human desasters. More precisely, they relate stories where people who transgress moral standards or familiar ways of behavior are invariably castigated according to an atavistic conception of punishment which seeks for a retribution which is physically harmful. In the end it is always the 'delinquent's' body that becomes injured, infected, mutilized, or annihilated. Now desasters, as long as we read about them without being personally involved, can be most entertaining – they arouse a sentiment of delightful horror.

An explanation for this phenomenon (certainly not the only one) may be the following. In modern civilisation, the exertion of physical violence is not in the hands of the individual but is conceded to institutions like the police or the armed forces. Our possibilities of dealing with conflicts are to a large degree limited to interactions which take place in a symbolic fashion. We are not allowed to let our aggressions materialize in physical action. Sometimes, though, we certainly wish we could – especially when we see other people acting out things which are forbidden or which we do not dare perform ourselves. Urban legends provide us with examples of misbehavior castigated staunchly as well as violently.

(c) There is a third function connected to the narration of urban legends: making sense of contingency. Its explanation requires a more extended elaboration. For this, let's have a look at a sample text:

> (4) One day the children were playing without the mother watching them. The elder sister cut off her younger brother's penis because she was so jealous of his having a penis. The mother then wanted to drive her son to the hospital. When she drove the car back out of the garage, she run over the sister and killed her (Brednich 1990: 87; my translation).

Basically, this story consists of two events: the cutting off of the brother's penis by his sister and the overrunning of the sister by the mother. What is so special about this little story? Why is it being told? At first sight you might tend to say: because of the brutality, just in order to satisfy sensationalist demands. This is probably true, but it is perhaps not the most important aspect of the story. The story's power derives from the fact that the events are intertwined with each other in a special way. Let me illustrate this by considering a story which is very similar to the urban legend of the brother and sister:

> (5) One morning the father slaughtered a pig. His children watched him when he was doing this. In the afternoon, one child said to the other: 'Let's play slaughtering: You be the pig and I the butcher,' and thrust a knife into the other's throat.
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> The mother, who was sitting upstairs bathing her youngest child, heard the screaming of the dying child and ran downstairs. When she saw what had happened, in her desperation she pulled the knife out of the child's throat and thrust it right into the heart of the other child who had played the butcher. Thereafter she ran upstairs again in oder to look after her youngest child; this, in the meantime, had drowned in the bath-tub. The mother became so horrified she wouldn't let herself be consoled by the servants and eventually hang herself.
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> A few minutes later, the father, who had been working on the field, came back home. When he saw what had happened, he became so sad that he died of grief a little after (Grimm 2001: 452; my translation).

Surprisingly enough, this story has been published as a fairy tale. The German original is titled "Wie Kinder Schlachtens miteinander gespielt haben" ('How children played butcher with each other'). It was published in the first edition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* edited by the brothers Grimm in 1812. The text has not been included, however, in the following editions of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, probably because it did not fit into the fairy tale style increasingly rarefied by the Grimms along the seven editions which they published until 1857. In the butcher story, as in the case of the urban legend of the mutilation by the sister (4), we are confronted with horrible events. But again, the mere brutality of the content may not be the story's essential feature. Instead, its power derives from the way the events are interrelated. Narratologists tell us that in a good narrative the events should not simply follow one after another in a chronological order; they should also follow *because of* each other. They should not only be correlated by temporal succession, but also by causal connection. Otherwise, we wouldn't have a satisfactory story line but only a contingent sequence of independent episodes which do not make up a well-composed narrative.

In the case of the butcher story, we have a series of events which, obviously, follow each other in time. Moreover, some of the events are connected by causality: the children play butcher *because* they watched their father slaughtering a pig; the mother stabs one child to death *because* she is in a state of shock after seeing her other child slaughtered; the youngest child drowns in the bath-tub *because* the mother has left it unobserved; the father dies of grief *because* he sees his whole family annihilated. On the other hand, some events occur without any necessity. Why is there a knife lying around when the children decide to play butcher? Why is the mother bathing the youngest just at that very moment the other children play butcher downstairs? The answer to this is very simple: these events are completely accidental, they happen by chance. There is no necessity or probability inherent in these narrated events. But despite its contingency the entire plot of the butcher story somehow does not seem to be accidental. It is as if the events altogether fitted in to build up a specific meaning which confers an apparent necessity even to those events which, from an empirical point of view, lack any causal necessity or probability. All events lead up to a higher end which is the complete annihilation of a family. The butcher story establishes a world

where nothing seems to happen by accident because every single element of the plot fits into the general scheme.

Let us return to the urban legend (4) about the mother who ran the car over the daughter who had mutilated her brother. As a I indicated above, there are only two events, the brother's mutilation and the daughter's being run over. Again, from an empirical point of view, these two events follow each other accidentally. There is no indication in the narrative that the mother wanted to run her daughter over. On the other hand, the two events taken together gain a specific connection. The narration establishes a kind of moral order. It relates an archaic story of crime and punishment: The daughter gets run over not only *after* she mutilated her brother. She seems to be hit *because* she had mutilated her brother. It is *as if*, behind the desastrous accident, a teleological intelligence lurked establishing a just world in which every crime receives its proper punishment. It is no longer a world governed by blind contingency but by intentional teleology. I call the justice exemplified by this story 'archaic' because it doesn't correspond with our modern conceptions of crime and guilt. To our eyes, the daughter cannot be punished because she is a child and therefore her action cannot be taken as an intentional act of a responsible agent. Our conception of crime is based on the conscious intention behind the criminal act and consequently on the responsibility of the agent. The morality which we find exemplified in the urban legend is archaic because it is a morality of deeds instead of intentions. It does not matter what the agent intended to do – the only thing that matters are the effects which he or she has effectively produced.

To sum up: As to possible functions of urban legends, I suggest to distinguish at least three, i.e. admonition, arousal, and the production of (mythical) meaning in a world of contingencies. Let me finally illustrate these three functions with a last example:

> (6) In the late seventies, I worked in a hospital in Schwelm in the Bergisches Land. There I heard from the nurses the following story:
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> An older man from Schwelm, whose wife stayed at a health resort, felt very lonely. He had heard that you could satisfy your sexual desires by using a vacuum cleaner. He took off the vacuum's hose and inserted his penis into the suction slot without knowing that right behind the slot there was the engine's fan. Instead of experiencing sexual delight, he castrated himself (Brednich 1991: 96; my translation).

This story provides examples for the three social functions which we have listed.

- First of all, the text urges you not to masturbate. In ancient times, different kinds of punishments threatened the miserable creatures who dared commit such acts. The church warned them that they were to loose their spiritual salvation. Doctors advised them that their brain would soften or that their spinal cord would dwindle. Nowadays, it is up to urban legends like the one quoted above to demonstrate the unpleasant consequences of such acts. The logic operative in the story of the unhappy man from Schwelm is synecdochical. It presents a single case in order to denounce something more general. 'Don't masturbate' is the underlying moral message of this text.
- Furthermore, to hear about such a crude punishment certainly is entertaining in the sense that it evokes emotional arousal in the listener.
- Finally, there is a kind of mythical balance operative in this legend. As in the case of the story (4) about the girl who mutilates her brother, it is a story about crime and punishment. The man from Schwelm, however, is not simply punished for his crime; moreover, the punishment destroys the very same organ which committed the crime. The kind of criminal law effective here is an archaic one based on material equivalence of crime and retribution, as it is famously worded in the Bible: "And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (*Exodus* 21: 23–25). Thus a mythical sense of equivalence emerges from a seemingly arbitrary coincidence of contingent facts.

There is yet another feature of urban legends illustrated by the miserable fate of the man from Schwelm. It concerns the veracity which these texts claim to possess. Indeed one of the most interesting features of urban legends is their status with respect to the distinction between fact and fiction. Usually we tend to conceive of this distinction as a clear cut dichotomy: texts are either *factual*, i.e. meant and read as truthful accounts of events that really happened, or else *fictional*, i.e. meant and read as ficticious renderings of imaginary events. Urban legends confront us with stories which belong to a grey area in-between this dichotomy.

At first sight, however, given their authentic frame of casual and oral communication, they appear to be meant as true. The narration of an urban legend typically begins, as indicated above, with an assertion of truthfulness and a claim for credibility. Urban legends are intended to be understood as true accounts of events that really happened. To be sure, these texts in this respect provide a wide horizon of varieties that range from the narration of probable events up to sheer unbelievable stories; but it is essential for the specific force of urban legends that the mere possibility (if not probability) of the events depicted is observed. Thus even in the case of the miserable gentleman from Schwelm we cannot exclude the possibility of its being true

– although his fate appears rather grotesque. Yet the editor informs us that it has been indeed possible to verify its truthfulness by providing the pertinent hospital's documents (see Brednich 1991: p. 96).

Hence the possibility of being true is an essential feature of urban legends. On the other hand, as our text (3) illustrates, the proof for the presumed truthfulness is never there – it is always deferred. In this respect, urban legends provide an interesting example for a general feature of our experience of the everyday world. We tend to think that, ideally, for any statement that refers to our reality it is in principle possible to decide on its truth or falsity. Whereas Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his posthumous notes on the concept of certainty (*Über Gewißheit*), distinguishes two types of propositions about the world. On the one hand there are propositions which we call 'true' ('wahr') because we can prove them to be true. On the other hand, there are propositions the truth of which seems quite evident to us, although we cannot come up with direct proofs for their truthfulness. What is more, we don't even feel obliged to prove them – we just take them to be 'certain' ('gewiß'). With respect to this distinction between truth and certainty, Wittgenstein maintains that, in everyday life, there are always situations where we don't carry on the search for proofs anymore, and at this point only the certainties remain. Now as we have seen, it is not necessary for urban legends, in order to be effective, that their truth be proven. They contribute to the realm of unproven certainties we live by.

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