

Exemplary stories¹

Véronique Champion-Vincent



Abstract

The article analyses phenomenon of the “exemplary stories” — apocryphal anecdotes often told at parties as realistic stories which supposedly really happened, but which are in fact variants of socially quite widespread, sometimes even international folkloric narratives. Also labelled as urban/contemporary legends, this type of narratives is discussed in wide theoretical and disciplinary context, including their itinerations in the modern mass media (especially newspapers) and popular literature. Finally, social and cultural functions and meanings of these apocryphal stories are presented.

Keywords

exemplary stories, urban legends, contemporary legends, rumors, anecdotes, fait divers, contemporary folklore, oral culture

There is a game that helps to pass time at parties, too often monotonous: one must be on the look-out and note, amongst the anecdotes narrated, the “exemplary stories”. One becomes rapidly a specialist of the subject; one is then alerted by the teller’s assurance, by the fact that the story is presented as having happened to a friend of a friend or yet to people the narrator cannot name through discretion, by the too perfect characteristics of the anecdote, and especially by its punchline, so elegant that — as the wedding cakes of the professional cooks — “it looks too good to be true”.

Without being directly linked to precise events rumors, that generally concern ambiguous or problem-ridden sectors of social life, run around town. They are generally anecdotes, told as true, attributed to the narrator or to people close to him. They are listened to in variable ways: at one extreme like jokes — anecdotes of which everyone knows that they are not true but that are being told because they sum up and schematize in two replicas complex and jumbled situations — at the other extreme as legends, stories of which all listeners (in the days when legends were told) forget that they are probably not true. I shall call this type of tales *exemplary stories* since they point to an implicit moral.

Exemplary stories are parables, more or less transparent. Like the *Mythologies* (1970) described by Roland Barthes in his analyses of the media they tell more than it seems at first. One enters a universe of intermingled episodes in which true meaning appears through evasions. Often concerning problem sectors, exemplary stories symbolize and sum up ambiguous situations, of which they implicitly propose an interpretation, from which they “naturally” draw a moral. A few examples?

1 Author’s translation (1987, revised in 2018) of “Les histoires exemplaires”, published in *Contrepoint* 22–23, 1976: 217–232.



Exemplary stories, the anecdotes telling how poor people (Algerians or coal miners from Northern France) arriving from their huts or shacks into the new lodgings they have been conceded by a naive administration (unwary of their real needs and desirous to change them in spite of themselves, says the implicit moral) do not know what to do with the bathtubs they see for the first time and fill them with couscous or coal. I have heard those anecdotes, told by bourgeois of Northern France in the early 1950s, then by Frenchmen living in Algeria “pieds noirs” in 1954.

Exemplary stories, those cock-and-bull stories exposing secret networks of white slave-trade. Powerful traffickers are everywhere, a continuous distrust is imperative, just judge for yourself:

A poor old lady who a charitable young girl visits regularly asks her to carry a letter to a certain address (and not to send it by post to save the stamp's money). On the way, the young over-trustful Samaritan meets her father to whom she shows the envelope. This clairvoyant man realizes that the envelope is empty and the story fishy; he therefore accompanies his daughter to the said address. As soon as the bell has been rung a grabbing hand comes out, ready to grab the innocent.
(Heard in Northern France in the 1950s)

An evening at the theater: a respectable mature couple offers to a young girl queuing for cheap top galleries a seat in their box: the friend who should have joined them cannot come and the seat is offered free. Devoid of mistrust she accepts... And does not decline the drugged sweets that are offered to her at the beginning of the play. Asleep, the innocent victim is carried away in the deserted corridors by the diabolic couple when a friend arrives miraculously and saves her in extremis.
(Heard in Northern France in the 1950s)

In a clothing shop (shoes, gloves, lingerie or simply women's clothing) patrons are put to sleep, either by the contact with shoes or gloves or by a sweet and carried away through secret exits hidden in the fitting-rooms towards subterranean networks leading to Buenos Aires (until the 1940s) or to Arab palaces of oil emirs (still popular).
(This last type of anecdotes has proliferated in Orléans in 1969, the shopkeepers accused being then Jewish. However, I have heard it several times in the 1950s in Northern France, about shopkeepers from Lille or Roubaix who were not then presented as Jewish)

The aim of this paper is to present some thoughts on exemplary stories, to emphasize their diverseness and to try to explain the survival, at first sight stupefying, of those tales who seem to be nothing but absurdity, silliness, spitefulness.

EXEMPLARY STORIES AND NEWSPAPERS

Were they only transmitted orally, exemplary stories would know a more modest development. However, they are frequently relayed and enlarged in mass literature and

the press, popular press mostly. The newspaper is a mirror. It accounts for facts and events, but reflects also our thoughts, dreams, desires, beliefs, myths. Exemplary stories are often diffused in good faith by journalists who honestly think they really happened. The experienced reader recognizes thus anecdotes — funny or tragic — that he sees to reappear at regular intervals, sometimes in slightly variant forms. Thus the funny anecdote (published in the popular daily *France-Soir* in March 1973) telling how a Tel-Aviv housewife, coming home in the afternoon, sees a pair of naked masculine legs sticking from under the bathtub in her bathroom. Convinced those legs belong to her husband, she dares an audacious caress. Surprised, the plumber (for it was him, called by the husband, wife unsuspecting) starts, bangs his head into the bathtub and passes away. Panicked, the housewife calls an ambulance. The stretcher bearers laugh so hard, when they hear the story, that they let fall the poor unconscious man... whose leg is then broken. Who doesn't feel he knows this story already, especially its conclusion too perfect to be true? I've heard it orally, in 1976, told by a journalist specializing in human interest stories, with a kitten which the husband was trying to catch under the bathtub and who (the husband being undressed as the night was hot) had unvoluntarily effected the bold caress. The stretcher bearers and their leg-breaking hilarity remained unchanged.

Everybody knows the story of “the stolen grandmother” that, as a child, I heard attributed to a rich family of Northern France, city of Roubaix. It was during the German occupation and the separation of France between an occupied and a free zone. Having driven for a holiday in the free zone, the family suddenly sees the grandmother pass away with a heart attack. Panicking at the idea of red tape, they decide to bring her back surreptitiously and hide the body in the trunk. Those emotions have made them hungry: they stop for a picnic in the woods, get away from the car and on their return find it stolen. No more grandmother, no more body, no more inheritance.

This story was in the fifties the theme of a French movie *L'armoire volante* (*The Flying Cupboard*, director Carlo Rim) and pursues a brilliant career, In *France-Soir*, in five years, two versions of the anecdote have been published as true. One shall note the absence of names, the Swiss source of the first version, the embarrassed introductive first lines of the second version:

Thieves have taken away the body of the campers' grandmother

*How shall we bring grandmother home? The answer given to this question by a couple of young Swiss campers was to bring about the dismaying adventure told by the German language daily *Emmenthaler Blatt*, printed in Lagnau, Bern canton.*

Grandmother was dead. She had joined her granddaughter and her husband on the Mediterranean Spanish coast. Everyone was sleeping under the tent. One day, though, the old lady had not awakened. She had succumbed to a heart attack. What was to be done? To declare the death to Spanish authorities? But from here to Switzerland, with two borders to cross, innumerable formalities and big expenses were to be anticipated. The young Swiss chose the simplest solution to wrap the grandmother's body in the tent and secure the “wrap” on the car's roof.

The crossing of the first border offered no difficulty but, night coming, a hotel had to be found, the tent being unusable on account of grandmother. The car stayed on a park-





ing lot. In the morning, frightening discovery: all the camping gear, grandmother included, had disappeared. The young couple did not dare to alert the police. They waited to be back in Switzerland to tell their misfortune. Researches were started right away but there is little hope to find the old lady's body.
(France-Soir, 10th September 1970)

Nan's body was on the car both are stolen.

From informations supplied by the inhabitants of the Mourillon neighborhood, city of Toulon, the district attorney, M. Routain has asked the national police to investigate a very strange case: a grandmother's body would have been stolen with the car on which it had been tied up, wrapped in a mattress, to bring her back home. But the police has not yet succeeded to identify the protagonists of this strange story. Grandmother has been stolen, or rather grandmother's body. On Xmas morning.

On Dec 24th, therefore, grandmother's children vacationing in the mountains and grandmother (aged 90) being in trust of her granddaughter, the granddaughter's fiancé came at home:

- We'll celebrate at my parents'. I'll drop by to pick you up on this evening.
- You don't think of it! Who will look after grandma?
- Bring her along!

The idea was judged excellent. The grandmother came in the young man's car and the evening was great fun. Grandmother took part in the general gaiety, drinking and feasting within the limits (or about) allowed by her great age. However, after midnight, she was tired.

- She can't be driven back now, said the granddaughter.
- Doesn't matter, you'll both sleep here.

Everybody went to bed. In the morning, grandmother did not wake up. Grandmother was dead.

- What will dad and mom say? cried the young girl.

The fiancé, a cool-headed man offered:

— We'll drive her back, put her to bed and you'll only have to phone to your parents: "Grandmother is dead, come back."

Alas, rigor mortis is no vain expression. Grandmother could no longer enter the car. The resourceful fiancé decided:

- Let's wrap her into a mattress and tie her on the roof-rack. No sooner said than done; a few minutes later the strange convoy reached Le Mourillon.
- Quick, let's unload grandmother, begged the young girl.
- Let's be careful and first make sure no one is in the way, objected her companion, the shrewd young man indeed.

No one was. But when they came downstairs the car, and the mattress, and grandmother had disappeared.

Since then, no news.

(France-Soir, 14th January 1965)

The tale I shall now tell is a more recent example of an exemplary story still in full evolution. It has been published in 1972, by a well-known columnist who seems to

have been fooled. In his weekly column “Au fil de la semaine” (Events of the week), the editorialist from *Le Monde*, the reference daily of intellectual France, Pierre Viansson-Ponté commented the facts of the week and moralized about them. The main facts of that week were the trial of the Clairvaux killers² and the Bruay case.³ After commenting on those two criminal events, the columnist tells us an anecdote:

An elegant dinner in Neuilly, posh suburb of Paris. One of the invited couples has left for the evening its two children alone at home: the boy, who is ten, will watch over his little sister who is four. Let him open to no one, go to bed at nine he has promised — and (in case anything happens) the phone number of daddy’s and mummy’s friends is written by the phone. At ten the phone rings: it’s the little boy. Half laughing, half crying, very excited: “Daddy, a burglar came. I’ve killed him”. The father thinks of a tale, is amazed, tries to calm down, but alarming details come up: “Yes, it’s true. With your gun, in your desk drawer. A big man, with a mask on his face. He is here, in the drawing-room, on the carpet”. At last, the father worries: “I’m coming right away”. The thief is indeed there, on the drawing-room carpet, in a stream of blood, dead as a door-nail. When he had rung insistently, the little boy had come behind the door, hesitated, awaited for a while. Curiosity had been stronger. As soon as entered, the intruder had shaken him: “Where does mummy put her money? And daddy?” Trembling, but resolute the little boy had shown him the drawing-room’s secretary: “Mummy, it’s here. Daddy, in his office. I will take it for you”. While the burglar rummaged about the secretary’s drawers, he had taken out of the office the 6.35 that his father had been careless enough to show him and, as in a game, as on TV, had loaded it, come back on tiptoe and shot at the figure leaning over the secretary. The man had fallen. Then the little boy had telephoned.

It is not all. The police arrives. The body is turned up, its face discovered. A cry: it was the son (22 years old) of the friends at whose house the parents were dining. This happened a few weeks ago. There was no complaint, the action of justice was stopped, the case

-
- 2 The Clairvaux killers were two convicts, sentenced to long-term, who had tried to escape from the jail, slitting open the prison nurse’s throat with a knife after having kept her as hostage for several hours. Both were condemned to death and executed, though only one had committed the murder.
 - 3 In April 1972, a young miner’s daughter had been found dead and raped on a vacant lot close to her parents’ poor tenement home, close also to the garden of Monique Mayeur, rich shop owner, mistress of a celibate and shy fortyish notary (this typically French provincial character is a leading citizen, member of the social elite) who frequented prostitutes and lied about his comings and goings that day. There were no definite charges, but a small leftist judge, le Juge Pascal, sensed the good story, kept talking to the press about horrid bourgeois morals, accused and jailed the notary. In this poor mining town, it was little poor victim vs big bad rich killer and the story became big news all accross France. The case was later taken out of the leftish judge’s hands, the notary freed after six weeks in jail (and he later won lawsuits against the newspapers and magazines who had presented him as the killer), a young friend of the victim’s family confessed the murder to the police, and then retracted. The case has never been tried and the vicitim’s family, convinced of the notary’s guilt regularly and unsuccessfully filed petitions for its revision for several years.





has been closed. The family spoke of an accident and, to close friends, of a suicide. The little boy is spending splendid holidays with his sister.

This news item has figured prominently in the press. It is news of today, cynical and cool as this era (...) This sinister and true story, where childhood is not innocent and the adults are all guilty, cannot make us proud of this society that is ours.

(Le Monde, 2nd-3rd July 1972)

At first glance the anecdote seemed imaginary, but its appearance in respected columns raised problems. From the appearance of this imaginary anecdote have sprung the investigation and reflections presented in this paper. The investigation I have conducted with “authorized sources” that could be found: the press and the police. First I’ve asked questions to journalists. However, shyness prevented me from approaching the item’s author, Pierre Viansson-Ponté, mainly political chronicler, author of several books on the Fifth Republic’s policy. I just couldn’t figure how to tell to this important figure: “Well, I think you’ve been fooled”. No one took the anecdote seriously: its source was pure hearsay and no other newspaper picked up the story.⁴ One year later, a well-known Parisian press correspondent of Australian origin, Sam White, published in the column “My Paris” that he was writing for an ephemeral magazine a paper denouncing the anecdote:

I would have been happy to be able to believe this story told by Le Monde but for a small fact that shook my faith: to tell the truth, that story, I had already heard it in my youth, in Australia. At that time, in that country, it had an anti-Catholic turn and denounced the formidable power of the Catholic Church in Melbourne, a mainly protestant city. In the Australian version, the unfortunate father was a promising member of the Labour party and it was Dr Mannix, formidable archbishop of Melbourne, who had used his influence in his favour, to hush up the scandal.

(Paris-Paris, June 1973)

The investigation in newspapers and magazines was negative. Another authorized source is the police: criminal news are announced or corroborated by the police. In Paris then, to a special body of journalists accredited with the police *préfecture* and called the “*préfecturiers*”. From personal oral interviews with *préfecturiers*, I gathered that this “murder” was never announced by the police. I had a phone interview with the public relations attaché of the Paris police, Mr Lespinasse. He was certain the anecdote was untrue: the police had never been called on the scene. After the article, numerous cross-checks — with doctors, clinics, hospitals had been made by the police, anxious to exonerate itself from the article’s implicit accusation of having hushed up a scandal out of consideration for a rich and powerful family. All those cross-checks had proved negative: “and a body simply doesn’t disappear like that”. The police source was negative too. One can’t prove nothing happened, but it’s highly probable.

⁴ Except for the *Canard Enchaîné*, satirical political weekly that told the story briefly on the 5th July 1972, two days after publication, in its echo column.



After “authorized sources”, there were “other sources”. I have behaved somewhat obsessively, telling the anecdote to everyone I met. I introduced my story by relating first exemplary stories whose falsity is well-known, such as miners’ bathtubs full of coal, or white slave-trade anecdotes. An investigation on an exemplary story while it is spreading is very unsettling; at practically every encounter, I received the answer “but that story is true. I’ve been told it by ...” Checks made at my insistence have always shown the tale’s source to be “a friend of a friend”.

The exemplary story has many variants: the age of the young killer could be 12, 14, 8 (10 in the source article). Sometimes the burglar was only wounded, sometimes he was dead, the anecdote is always very precise in the spreader’s memory but not, however, dated or localized (always “good” locations, though: Neuilly, Passy, Boulogne). All social sets participate in the diffusion and people who would never have dined together knew participants of this dinner. In my unsystematic investigation I have met more than twenty friends of participants in that banquet. All ages too: the story is mostly told by 40–50 years-old, but one of the tellers heard it from adolescents who had told him they knew the murderer. Nobody seemed to remember the article.

After some changes, this tale became a script. A TV movie inspired by it was shown in February 1974. I interviewed the script-writer; novelist Andrée Chédid, who told me she’d heard the story “at a dinner-party” (of course). In the TV adaptation the young burglar was only wounded, and the story centered on the relationship that was created, during later common holidays, between burglar and shooter.

This anecdote lends itself so “naturally” to moralistic developments — morals get worse and worse nowadays, crime lurks and may spring up in the best families — than one wonders if it has not been built on purpose, creators and diffusers being equally unconscious of this fact. Born from the press, or at least wrought large by it, the anecdote of the elegant dinner and young delinquent has become a literary theme, after a career in word of mouth.

Newspapers also relate exemplary stories without being their dupe, but to denounce them. They mostly denounce anecdotes of a racist character. Thus, in 1969, the press has denounced the explosion of white slave-trade rumors that took place in Orléans. Its intervention was provoked by the racist aspect of those rumors and started by the complaints filed by the Jewish shopkeepers victims of those tales.

Likewise, the exemplary story of “the rat bone”, aimed at exotic restaurants, circulated in 1972 in France, in 1973 in Germany. It was analyzed and denounced by Pierre Viansson-Ponté in his *Le Monde* column “Au fil de la semaine” (Events of the week):

Last year, in the spring time, the rumor went accross France in a few weeks, from North to South, from Strasbourg to Brest. Oh, it was by no means an “important” story. The anecdote was always the same and, of course, the teller affirmed, in good faith, to have heard it from someone who knew personally the victim of the misadventure.

A patient, suffering on the morning following a dinner in a restaurant, goes to his dentist who pulls out of his jaw a strange little bit of bone. So strange that the conscientious dentist has it examined immediately a laboratory, who concludes that it is definitely a fragment... of rat bone. The dentist telephones his patient immediately. A complaint is filed. The police search the incriminated restaurant and finds in the kitchen a refrigera-



tor full of dismembered rats. South of the Loire, where stories are easily embroidered, the unfortunate diner had nearly choked on the whole bone, stuck accross his throat, he had been carried to hospital and the police had found a rat-farm in the restaurant's cave.

In France, last year, the restaurants thus denounced were always Vietnamese and/or Chinese. Then the same campaign appeared in Switzerland. (...) Now, in Western Germany, foreign restaurants, mostly Mediterranean or exotic flourishing in the last years, have suddenly been deserted by their clientele. (...) Commendable efforts have been made to fight what appears to be collective hysteria. (...) But there is nothing to be done. *Vox populi* answers to everything. (...)

At one year's interval, in France and then in Germany, the same absurd story has spread like fire, bringing immediate, concrete, measurable consequences, provoking a brutal change in the habits and behavior of hundreds of thousands of people, clients desert the denounced restaurants. It is there that the anecdote takes its size than it can scare, that it gives cause for thought. (...)

One can wonder if, in the case of the rat bone, amongst all the nauseating bubbles it brings to the surface of the swamp, there is not — beyond naivety, silliness, greed, malevolence — the old xenophobic feeling, applied in France to a well-defined category of foreigners judged intrusive and presumed mysterious, in Germany to all those Mediterranean and Asiatic sub-men, dedicated to the service of the Aryan who, yesterday... Let's not go too far. If the fable seems exemplary it is first because of the dark poetry than the happy cities of the twentieth century beget secretly. It is also because the strength of this rumor, at the time of TV, radio, popular press, should be a subject of meditation, not only for sociologists but also for mass-media specialists and render them more modest. It is at last by the unsuspected or forgotten pitfalls, the archaic trenches that undermine collective consciousness under the crust of our comfort and self-assurance and suddenly reveal themselves to our stupor, under our steps, within ourselves.

(*Le Monde* 10–11th June 1973)

INTERPRETATIONS OF RUMORS BY SOCIAL SCIENCES

How can we interpret those stories? They are evidently a category of rumors and rumors have been the object of many studies. Very different specialists have been concerned with them: “Historians and jurists, concerned with the reliability of the testimony; psychologists concerned with perception and recall; psychiatrists concerned with the expression of repressed impulses in communicative acts; and sociologists and psychosociologists concerned with group problem-solving, public opinion and reactions to disasters” (*International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1968, 13, *RUMOR*: 576–80).

I shall not try, in this paper, to account for all the theories exposed by those specialists. However, I shall note briefly the points of view of the main disciplines upon the central problem of rumor content formation.

The social psychologists' point of view is quite rigid. They have wanted to fight the alarmist rumors than circulated during the war in the USA and have therefore polarized upon their inaccuracies. In series of experimental studies, they conceive



of rumor as a message given at the start and study the deformations brought about by the chain of oral transmission. Model of this kind of studies, Allport & Postman's book *The Psychology of Rumor* (1947) points three types of deformations: the tales are refined (and some features are kept and enlarged), are levelled (shortened, impoverished) are assimilated (drawing nearer to the cognitive habits, stereotypes, expectations of the tellers). Those formal, common sense findings appear a little short these days. Another social psychologist, Festinger, has given up all consideration of inaccuracy to study in his *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957), the mechanisms that bring a person to accept an uncheckable information (this is Festinger's definition of information carried by rumors). Will be accepted, or made-up, the news that reinforce the opinions and beliefs of the individual and correspond to his state of mind. However, the links that unite opinions and beliefs to the stories carried by the rumors remain difficult to precise. Furthermore, one does not see what brings one to want to communicate, transmit, spread the reassuring information.

Putting the accent on active elaboration processes rather than on passive diffusion processes, psychoanalytic studies (it is nearly always the same text that is cited, a study of Jung (1922) upon the diffusion of a rumor in a schoolgirls' group) have underlined the importance of phantasms, desires, anxieties and hostilities that find an indirect expression in the transmission of rumors.

For sociologists, the rumors should not be considered as a message deformed by a faulty transmission but as the results of social interaction processes. Finding themselves in ambiguous situations, or in situations upon which they do not have enough information to be able to interpret them, men and women pool their resources to make reasonable estimations, unite their information, interpret them according to their presuppositions and... build up rumors. Shibutani's *Improvvised News* (1966) which presents this theory defines rumor as: "A form of recurrent communication in which men in an ambiguous situation try to build a significant interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources".

The social interaction theory accounts certainly more exactly than the too static approaches of social psychologists of the majority of rumor processes linked to an unusual event, to a crisis situation. However, it does not apply well to exemplary stories, whose links with events are very loose. What "pooling of intellectual resources" can explain the rat bone, the bathtub full of coal, the elegant dinner and young delinquent? And to what "ambiguous situation" respond these stories who live a long subterranean and slow life and of which, when they explode, nobody knows why it's here rather than there, today sooner than tomorrow?

The rumors of the type "exemplary stories" have been studied in the collective book directed by Edgar Morin *La Rumeur d'Orléans* (1969) which analyzed the explosion of white slave-trade stories denouncing Jewish shopkeepers that took place in Orléans in 1969 and that I have mentioned earlier. This book studied in depth the motives of the creation and proliferation of this phantasmatic tale in a French provincial town and underlined the importance of archaic dreams and myths in modern imaginary. One found in this book a new approach to the problem of content formation of exemplary stories' type of rumors, lying beyond the psychoanalytical approach (too centered on the individual) and the social interaction approach (too centered on



the event). Edgar Morin has shown that social interaction processes can be applied to phantasms, that the repressed can correspond to expectations and worries that are those of the *Polis* [city], of the group, and not only to individual drives or wishes.

The point of view of social anthropology, I have found in the paper of P. A. Lienhardt *The Interpretation of Rumour* (1975) who discusses fantastic rumors, his examples being mainly picked up in the Middle East region in the 1960s. He stresses that the social psychologists and the social interaction theory forgets that fantasy is an important characteristic of many rumors, told also for entertainment. His perceptive interpretation is best cited: “Rumours of the more fantastic sort can represent, and may generally represent, complexities of public feeling that cannot be readily made articulate at a more thoughtful level. In doing so, they join people’s sympathies in a consensus of an unthinking, or at least uncritical, kind. And perhaps this explains why the word rumour has a bad connotation that goes beyond mere foolishness. It suggests a surrender to the irrational. Rumours which produce integration in terms of feeling without thought are the voice of the mob before the mob itself has gathered”.

Within the fantastic anecdote, logically opposite dimensions that simultaneously exist in collective consciousness can be reconciled in a metaphoric expression that unifies the public that spreads them. The fantastic dimension is certainly important in the exemplary stories, with their crazy touches: fixed subterranean passages, rats lining the fridge of the malevolent restaurateur...

THE NATURE OF EXEMPLARY STORIES

To understand the reasons of the persistence, at first sight anachronistic, of exemplary stories one should — it seems to me — consider a discipline of the social sciences not cited by the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, folklore, and interpret them as a type of oral literature, as a collective creation, as an outline of legend. One should not believe, and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep (1912) has told it in *La formation des légendes*, that the blossoming of legends is a phenomenon of the past “legends are born daily”.

From this point of view, it appears that it is vain to be indignant about the survival of exemplary stories. They still exist because they fill functions that have not been taken over by the development of structured information means. French essayist Jean Paulhan in *Le bonheur dans l’esclavage* (1954) has said that erotic novels are the grown-up’s fairy tales. Exemplary stories are the parables, legends and anecdotes of today. They often take rough and fugitive forms, akin to the literary type of the anecdote.

Folklorists have noted that, in the semi-literary compilations of anecdotes called *Ana*, there is a continuous displacement of themes, the same trait of generosity, silly remark, cynical answer, being attributed to successive well-known personalities.

With some fittings — often mere concessions to today’s mood — one finds ancient themes in our stories. The “rat bone” brings us back to persistent popular reactions in front of ancient epidemics, here summed up by historian Lucien Febvre in *La Terreur* (1962): “All epidemics induced fears. The popular masses react likewise



through the ages. First, belief in a plot. The plague does not spread naturally. It is spread by disseminators: in the Middle Ages Jews, accused of poisoning fountains. Later, during religious wars, Protestants. Sorcerers too, of course. And then, as times flows towards us, the rich.”

Is not the “rat bone” a feeble echo of those ancestral fears, exotic restaurateurs having replaced the fountain-poisoning Jews?

The “elegant dinner and young delinquent” is also a variation on a classical theme, that of the “tragic mistake” relating violent acts between close kin, some of them criminal, that don’t know of the tie that link them. In the 1972 version, those family ties are weakened and turned into friendly ties uniting people of the same social circles.

The “tragic mistake” is sometimes told as anecdote. Thus, in the work of 19th century social historian Maxime Du Camp *Paris, ses origines, ses fonctions, sa vie dans la seconde moitié du XIX^{ème} siècle* (1893) I have found, in the part presenting crime, an anecdote curiously close to the 1972 version — but with no regret for the young delinquent: “Education, training, the good examples offered by family are least on some natures that vice has bent from childhood. One has not forgotten the name of this rich goldsmith who, realizing he was often robbed, lies in ambush close to his cash-box, shoots at a man who was opening the safety lock and recognizes his son in the dying thief”.

French Nobel Prize writer Albert Camus has cited a more elaborate version of the “tragic mistake” in his novel, *l’Etranger* (*The Stranger*, 1941) and made it the main subject of his play *Le Malentendu* (*The Misunderstanding*, 1944). In *The Stranger*, no moralizing commentary, but a bare presentation that stresses the metaphysic connotations of this anecdote that deals with destiny.

(The hero, in jail, reads over and over the story of the Czech)

Between my mattress and the bed’s plank I had found an old newspaper piece, almost stuck to the fabric; yellow and transparent. It told a story whose beginning was lost but that must have happened in Czechoslovakia. A man had left his Czech village to make a fortune. Twenty-five years later, rich, he had come back with a wife and child. His mother and his sister kept an inn in his native village. To surprise them, he had left the wife and child in another inn, had gone to his mother’s, who had not recognized him when he had entered. By joke, he had the idea to take a room. He had shown his money. In the night, his mother and his sister had murdered him with a hammer and thrown his body in the river. In the morning the wife had come and had revealed the traveller’s identity. The mother had hanged herself. The sister had thrown herself in a well. I must have read this story thousands of times. On one hand it was implausible. On the other, it was natural. Anyhow, I thought the traveller had deserved it and one must never play games.

The “tragic mistake” has frequently been cited in those ancestors of the newspapers called in France “canards” or “occasionnels”. Those non-periodical news-sheets related extraordinary news. In his book on the “canards”, *Nouvelles à sensation, canards du XIX^{ème} siècle* Jean-Pierre Seguin (1959) cites several of them, kept in the collections of Bibliothèque Nationale:



- a 1618 sheet, printed in Paris, titled “Admirable and prodigious story of a father and mother who have murdered their own son without recognition. Happened in the city of Nimes in Languedoc last month of October”
- a 1848 sheet, printed in Toulouse, tells the same story, attributing it to “A young soldier of the army of Italy and Mexico”
- a 1881 sheet, printed in Angoulême, tells the story as having happened to “André the mechanic and his daughter, murdered by his father and stepmother”.

Jean-Pierre Séguin wrote to Albert Camus about the coincidence of tales and asked him his source. Camus answered that he just remembered to have read the story, in an Algiers newspaper “more than twenty years ago. It was very hot, and probably summer, season of hoaxes”.

Sometimes, it is easier to talk of a legend, object of belief, about an exemplary story. I am thinking of the white slave-trade rumors that reappear regularly with a set of characteristic traits: subterranean passages mining the city; sweets or shops permitting the kidnapping; shops of lingerie, shoes or women’s clothes. The antisemitism of those rumors seems to be secondary, their first form being — so to say — fetishist. Those rumor explosions appear on a background of vague fears and beliefs. Disappearances do exist, and though the police tell us most of them are voluntary, a doubt lingers on. Most people admit that there is prostitution under pressure, but that this pressure is exerted by pimps towards women (and men) they know and have a hold on, via seduction, drugs, debts, fear. However, in France, respectable associations with the slightly outmoded title “for the protection of the young woman” exist, whose well-thinking animators are convinced that the kidnapping of unknowns on an industrial scale does exist as a mean to foster prostitution. Those animators have done a lot to spread their convictions: speeches, leaflets, booklets. One must admit they do not accuse shopkeepers but “ignoble networks of pimps”. On this uncertain background, where police and social workers disagree, the legend adds, embroiders, creates. The pimps they are known, named, denounced: they are those shopkeepers you meet in town every day. The victims? They are (or could be) all the young girls of the city. And danger comes closer, is more precise, while the baddies’ means get bigger: sweets and shots of a magical efficiency, subterranean passages, etc...

Anecdotes or legends, the exemplary stories are also comical. The comic generally connotes a transgression, a deviance towards morals as in the plumber’s story.

ACTUALITY OF THE EXEMPLARY STORIES

Anecdotes, legends, jokes are universal, timeless. However they present characteristic traits according to the societies and periods in which they incarnate themselves. Exemplary stories belong to our time by three sets of traits, they:

1. *develop in symbiosis with journalistic myths and popular literature*
2. *model themselves on “faits divers”*
3. *are spread by appropriation*

1. SYMBIOSIS WITH JOURNALISTIC MYTHS AND POPULAR LITERATURE

*Il me faut pour tenir le coup/ Une histoire à dormir debout
(To keep it up I need/ A cock and bull story)*

Author Interpret Guy Beart: *Rotatives* (Printing Presses).⁵

Many authors have stressed the magical nature and function of the press. In some of its sectors it is phantasms that are manipulated and there are no checkable or controllable information. In the realms of spying, of the supernatural, of the private life of the Olympians — the beautiful people, all news are mythical or hypothetical. Magazines and tabloids are specialized in the creation and exploitation of those pseudo-news. They constitute excellent relays and inspire exemplary stories, just as do the pseudo-news reports exploiting these fields that appear as books aimed at a large public.

Let's take the legends on white slave-trade. The very expression is a journalistic creation and the theme of white slave-trade has been a great one for the popular press. In 1885, in London, the *Pall Mall Gazette* published one of the first pseudo-news report known on this theme. The horrific story told: buying in London a 13-year old virgin then exported to Brussels, capital of continental vice, had been pre-arranged by a journalist looking for sensational, with the help of pious women fighting vice. The journalist was exposed, condemned to three months in jail. The articles sold very well and were reprinted in pamphlet form as "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" (Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud*, 1972).

A pseudo-news report is probably at the origin of the Orléans rumor, explains Edgar Morin (1969). A typical anecdote appeared in a book translated from English and published in France in 1969 *L'esclavage sexuel* (*Sexual Slavery*) by Stephen Barclay. It told of an industrial saving in extremis his young wife, drugged in a clothes shop in the city of Grenoble. This anecdote was told as news in the tabloid weekly *Noiret Blanc* without localization. For the police, that article's publication coincided with the rise of the rumor, a week later, in Orléans.

In many exemplary stories one finds themes borrowed from 19th century serial novels, especially the theme of the fake universe: shops that open upon the mysterious subterranean passages that mine the city; mysterious and evil "Them" who protect and manipulate the shopkeepers that purvey women and the rat-loving restaurateurs. With exemplary stories one enters in the world of generalized and permanent plot, in which some super powerful pull the strings.

2. MODELING UPON *FAITS DIVERS*

Another trait brings the exemplary stories into the 20th century: they do not refer to the supernatural (and here, from a comparative point of view one can think of another set of oral literature, the legends of saints' lives in the Middle Ages, full of ref-

5 www.youtube.com/watch?v=pY0Ql57AfNc



erence to the wonderful, the supernatural) but conform to *faits divers*.⁶ They are, one could say, models, essence, synthesis of *faits divers*. And it is quite probable that some exemplary stories have developed from real events.

Exemplary stories and *faits divers* connote ruptures in relation to the norm, social, moral or natural. Both can spring in the most varied fields as explains French sociologist George Auclair (*Le Mana quotidien*, 1970): “This rupture can take the most varied forms: from the unusual to the transgression of human (or divine) laws; passing through the extraordinary, the monstrous, the peculiar, the exceptional, the phenomenal, the rare; arousing laughter, indignation or anguish.”

Just like a *fait divers*, an exemplary story is more or less “good” according to the importance of norms or taboos it breaks, and to the extent of its possible resonances. Thus, the exemplary story of “sold water” is good because of the sacrilegious behavior, presented as an example of harshness, of peasants selling water during the disaster of 1940 to civilian refugees or of French colonials selling water during the Algerian war to the French soldiers who had come from France to protect them. Isn’t it sacrilegious to try to sell the most necessary commodity, symbol of life, present in all nature, water?

Around a good *fait divers*, far away echoes and resonances appear, myths and legends agglutinate if the event “takes” well. In the French weekly *Paris-Match*, journalist François Caviglioli has well analyzed this aspect of *l’affaire de Bruay* (The Bruay Case) that shook all of France in Spring 1972:

Since the notary, M Leroy, and his fiancée Monique Mayeur are practically considered innocent, the town of Bruay is dispossessed from its sorrow. It is a town that has been brutally deprived of this part that had helped it sit: hope of getting even and its persecuted defensor, Judge Pascal. [after the crime, in April 1972] This town discovers its two enemies: a house and a man. The house is Mrs Mayeur’s white villa, after the crime it is the ogress’s castle. The ogre, like all ogres is fat, bald, secretive. On the evening of the crime he ate two pounds of ground steak. He is the notary, the only rich man in town, the one who steals the poor’s money. One day, it had to be expected, the bread of the people was not enough for him, he started to devour their children. (...) It was a fairy tale full of horrors but that avenged many a misery. Now it’s over. Isolated in fog and freezing rain, the inhabitants of Bruay’s mining tenements are nothing but abandoned men. Without ogre, without ogress, without that miraculous nightmare that helped one to stand life. The notary will remain the notary, the miners will remain the miners.
(*Paris-Match*, 5th May 1973)

Indeed, the demands of the imaginary, the laws of fiction orientate the perception of *faits divers* as much as they command the building-up of exemplary stories: “The new, the peculiar, the unexpected only happen within the mold of tested schemes, are

6 This expression, whose equivalent does not exist in English, concerns human interest stories, news items that do not concern politics but fall within the general informations category: murders, sudden deaths, natural disasters, unimportant events one might say. *Faits divers* belong to the repetitive realm of chronicle, not to that of history.



only perceived through conventional oppositions of which often mass literature has given a stronger and more definite model. It is not fact that overpasses fiction, but fiction, the demands of the imaginary, that cut up and articulate facts so as sometimes to change them into dreams with the alibi of reality.” This remark of George Auclair about *faits divers* applies very well to exemplary stories, often better explained by reference to a literary pattern than by reference to reality.

Thus, many of them appear as rhetorical exercises, built around a maximal opposition, turning around the theme of the limit of, the maximum, the utmost:

- the limit of bad luck is to have a leg broken by a stretcher-bearer.
- the limit of greed is to sell water.
- the limit of horror is for a patron to eat a rat... And for a restaurateur to traffic in rats.
- the limit of administrative insensitivity is to send home in a hamper a war veteran amputated of arms and legs without having warned his family of his sorry state (The story ran across the U.S. in 1945).

3. SPREADING BY APPROPRIATION

This is the third set that attaches the exemplary story to actuality. The exemplary story teller differs from the teller of a good *fait divers* because he appropriates the anecdote, placing in the circle of his kin or friends. Thus, the anecdote of the runaway (or stolen) grandmother: whether it really happened once or was invented from the start does not really matter. The fact is that the gruesome humor of this tale (excellent *fait divers* considering the importance and number of the norms it breaks: reversion of the respect due to old people, family, bodies; death in public). A taboo event, always noted — is such that an unfinished process of diffusion through rumor has started, which newspapers sometimes echo, I heard the anecdote, as a child, during the 1940s in Northern France; twenty years later, it is in Switzerland, twenty-five years later in the south of France.

Appropriation is a classical reinforcement process, the anecdote thus told becomes more interesting since it concerns more. However, it is a lie, often unconscious. Appropriation can be defined as a weak form of mythomania. This mythomania is, of course, a reaction and compensation, lying makes up for the humiliations and disagreements of real life. But semi-controlled mythomania, limited to certain fields, is also a creation: lies are the poetic corner in a dull daily routine. It is difficult to go beyond these generalizations and to clarify the motivations of such an “unavowable and unavowed” behavior.

The text of Fedor Dostoyevsky I am going to quote struck me as putting great light on this phenomenon; one finds in it a sharp and straight analysis of the reasons for controlled mythomania, an ironic and indulgent apology of the uses of lies in social life.

(Versilov, father-hero of *The Adolescent* discusses rumors with his young son after he has listened with sympathy and feigned interest to an implausible anecdote told to him by the adolescent’s lodger, a miserable failure):



(Versilov) This story... it's what there is of most ignobly patriotic in tales of this kind. But how could I stop him? You've seen, he was swooning with pleasure "and the thing reached the authorities" then his whole soul was singing "reached the authorities". In those pitiful circles those anecdotes are necessary. They have a lot of them, especially because of their intemperance. They have learned nothing, do not know anything exactly. Well, outside card-games and their jobs, they want to talk about something human, poetical. (...) Talking nonsense, he satisfies his love for his fellow-being: he wanted to please us. His patriotic feeling is satisfied too: for example they also have this anecdote telling that Zavalov (well-known Russian industrialist) was offered 1 million by the English if he would agree not to brand his own products.

(The adolescent) God, I know this anecdote.

(Versilov) And who doesn't? While telling you his tale, he knows, too, that you have certainly heard it already but he tells it nevertheless, voluntarily fancying that you don't know it. (...) All those anecdotes are the limit of bad taste. But you must know that this type of bad taste is more widely and more deeply spread than we think. The desire of lying to please one's fellow being, you will meet even in the best circles for we all suffer of this intemperance of feeling. But in our circles, the stories are different: what is being told about America, for example, and about politicians! I belong myself, I must admit, to that type of men and have suffered from it all my life. My friend, allow men to lie to you a little: it is innocent. Let them even lie a lot. First you will prove your delicacy and, in exchange, one will let you lie too: two huge advantages. One must love one's fellow being.

Controlled mythomania is more frequent than is thought generally. It is often limited to a precise field. Thus, when conversation concerns the supernatural, rational people make strange disclosures, affirm weird things. A touching case is that of my charming old aunt who then relates with convincing conviction extraordinary anecdotes of spells, ghosts, charms which she attributes to friends of which she gives the names. However, the amateur of fantastic tales recognizes easily the best short stories of Claude Seminole, Jean Ray, Sheridan Le Fanu, etc...

General societal factors explain the rise of controlled mythomania: frustrations grow as societies become more complex, more anonymous, more bureaucratized and as traditional values collapse.

MEANING OF EXEMPLARY STORIES

Like the myth, the proverb, the fable or the parable, the exemplary story includes two levels of meaning. There is what is being said, the anecdote explicitly told, that can be compared to the statement of the proverb, to the tale of the myth or of the parable, to the story of the fable. And what is not being said but constitutes the real message of the story, such as the hidden meaning of the proverb or of the myth, implicit in these two types as well as in the exemplary story, or such as the unveiling of the parable or the moral of the fable, who are explicit. As well as those other forms of double meaning, the exemplary story is a word that carries weight, that imposes strongly its implicit conclusion.



Behind an anecdote's alibi, exemplary stories allow to express repressions: they will frequently bear upon themes that correspond to problems refused or repressed by collective consciousness. Two levels of repression can be identified. First the feelings, desires, anxieties, fears of which there is no clear consciousness: the fear of modernity for example. Second the feelings one identifies but whose expression is censored by the group: in the old days, the world of sex; today racist feelings, expressed in exemplary stories through anecdotes that justify those feelings in a round-about way.

What are the hidden truths proclaimed by the exemplary stories, what are the morals of those legendary parables? Conservative and chauvinistic themes abound in them: distrust, hostility, hatred towards foreigners and change find themselves "naturally" justified. Anxiety is easy to detect: worry in front of accelerated changes, fear of the new, the unknown; the whole leaves an impression of uneasiness, of anguish. Most often there is not "a" moral, but a complex set of implicit thoughts behind exemplary stories. Contradictory feelings are expressed by them. Such is the case for the white slave-trade anecdotes who permit to "say" at the same time one's refusal of modern evolution, that of feminine fashion especially, and one's frightened attraction towards the delightful dangers of the abysses of vice.

Exemplary stories celebrate the wonders of chance and destiny: the deceived father killing his "thief-son" or "war-prisoner" mistaken by chance:

Coming home without warning after four years as prisoner of the Germans, he finds the house empty and an infant in a cradle. Overcome with fury he throws the baby by the window. Arriving soon after the tragedy, his wife explains she was minding today the baby of a neighbor.

(The story, that ran through France in 1944–1945 "told" the anger of those who had been in such a situation for good and "advised" them to be moderate)

The success of an exemplary story generally implies that it covers a large range: expression of repressed feelings, attractive or distressing; revival of themes developed by journalistic mythology and mass-culture; rupture of norms or of taboos with many resonances. The "best" are those who partake more or less of all those dimensions.

LITERATURE

Auclair, G. 1970. *Le Mana quotidien. Structure et fonction de la chronique des faits divers*. Paris: Édition Anthropos.

Barthes, R. 1970. *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil.

Du Camp, M. 1893. *Paris, ses origines, ses fonctions, sa vie dans la seconde moitié du XIXème siècle* (Vol. 3, 13). Paris: Hachette.

Festinger, L. 1957. *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Festinger, L., Riecken, H. H., Schachter, S. 1956. *When prophecy fails*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Febvre, L. 1962. "La Terreur" in *Pour une histoire à part entière*. Paris: Sevpen.

Jung, C. J. 1922. "A contribution to the psychology of rumor" in *Collected Papers on Analytical Psychology*. London: Baillière, Tindall and Cox.



- Lienhardt, P. A. 1975. "The Interpretation of Rumour". Pp. 105–131 in J. M. Beattie, R. G. Lienhardt (eds.) *Studies in Social Anthropology. Essays in Memory of E. E. Evans-Pritchard by His Former Colleagues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morin, E. 1969. *La Rumeur d'Orléans*. Paris: Seuil.
- Paulhan, J. 1954. "Le bonheur dans l'esclavage". Preface to *Histoire d'O*. Paris: Tchou.
- Seguin, J. P. 1959. *Nouvelles à sensation, canards du XIXeme siècle*. Paris: Colin.
- Shibutani, T. 1966. *Improvised news. A sociological study of rumor*. New York: Irvington Publishing.
- Van Gennep, A. 1912. *La formation des légendes*. Paris: Flammarion.

Véronique Champion-Vincent is French anthropologist and folklorist, former researcher at the CNRS and the Maison des sciences de l'Homme, specialized in the sociological approach to rumors and urban legends. She is the author of *Organ Theft Legends* (2005), *La société parano; théorie du complot, menaces et incertitudes* (2007), *100% rumeurs ! codes caches, objets pieges, aliments contaminés... La verite sur 50 legendes urbaines extravagantes* (2014, with Jean Bruno Renard), and many other books and scholarly publications.