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# NEWS AND TRUTH OR: FOLK AND FOLKLORISTIC REPRESSION OF TRUTH IN NEWS

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The task of the ethnologist and the folklorist is not only to gather and transmit information from far away or nearby, but to see and interpret the meaning of the told and the untold as the experiences, to give voice to those that are inaudible, to see their own repressions reflected in the narrations of others.

My contribution refers to a dilemma which affects anthropologists as well as folklorists. Their intention is to interpret the narrative knowledge of people. But they have to do this from a society, that has lost the specialties of narration or oral discourse - also in its scientific communities.

Why does it seem impossible to overcome the non-reciprocity that characterizes mass media society in our own communications with each other? Is there a specific critique of modern society that includes a critique of behavior in its scientific communities? This critique points to the loss of the "relational voice", of multivocality, of orality, it points to the loss of a meaningful whole in shared experience and, as a consequence of this, the loss of narrative knowledge.

As Lyotard claims, narrative knowledge is based on the combination of "Sprachspielen" that constitute the social tie. The combination of "Sprachspiele" blends and structures their plurality in a thick web, thus acquiring a meaning going beyond that of the sum of its parts. Shared culture and tradition demand a threefold competence, and, as a consequence,

narrative roles become interchangeable. Narrative knowledge depends on the shared experience of narrator and audience. Both can potentially also become the object of narration. Lyotard calls this kind of knowledge "thick". He writes: "This points to the obvious, that the tradition of the narrations is also the tradition of those criteria that define a threefold competence of the ability to speak, to listen, and to act. This competence balances the relationship of the community both to itself and to its environment. A cluster of pragmatic rules, that constitute the social tie, is being transmitted alongside the narration" (Lyotard 1986:71f.).

What I want to emphasize is that in "thick" narrative knowledge, truth is always shared truth.

And this highlights the dilemma of the anthropologist. He owes his position to the elaboration of scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge has displaced orality, multivocality, narrative knowledge, the experience of wholeness and of culturally shared truth in favour of a falsification of the truth conveyed by narrative knowledge and in preference of the most recent information on mere details, produced by diverse scientific disciplines.

On the other hand, the anthropologist - and the ethnologist and the folklorist as well, as I do not believe that one should make a difference here - has chosen to approach the narrative knowledge of others, their "argument of images" of the whole (Fernandez 1986), in a process of understanding. He wants to deliver a "thick description"(Geertz 1983) of the meaning that informs the expressions or texts of their shared experiences. But is this possible merely by so-called "phenomenological reduction", without taking into account one's own levels of experience in temporarily sharing the community of others, without taking into account one's own everyday involvement in narrative knowledge - or in what is left of it? Is it possible without taking into account the context, that is, the world view or ideology of the group under research? Is it possible without portraying the plurality of expressions that interdependently interpret the meaning of the thought experiences and lived experiences that make up one life world? Is it possible to understand without taking into account the threefold competence of speaking and listening and acting? And last not least, is it possible when leaving the small community and trying to understand the communicated meaning (or "truth) of complex societies to integrate all these levels of experience?

This task demands an integration of the humanities, perhaps in the kind of open-ended discourse that postmodernism is highlighting. However, both in society and in the scientific community, we are progressing further towards an increasing multiplication of fragmentary "facts", a burst of so-called "true" information about mere details. Have we

lost the power of thick description because we have lost the social tie of narrative knowledge? We have offered the "relational voice" to the "knowing voice" of partial truth (see Marcus/Fischer 1986; Stewart 1987; Greverus 1988).

In his paper "News and Folklore", Elliott Oring refers to some of these dilemmas that folklorists have to solve.

He emphasizes the relationship between the content of legends and of newspaper stories as news. And he also emphasizes the folklorist's "failure" in comparing "News and Truth" in both contexts. Both - the category of legend as well as the category of newspaper story - are a function of the credible. However, for the folklorist, a legend is defined by its incredibility and irrationality. It is the folklorist who creates the genre and the compartment to collect and conserve it in. But is it really - as Oring proposes - "the fundamental skepticism of the folklorist that finalizes the category of legend"? Or is it rather his going along with the progress of civilization? That is, to divide and to compartmentalize, to collect and to quantify, to know and to dissociate, and also, to ideologize, aestheticize, and nostalgize a selected set of texts quite apart from their hidden truth, that is, their contextual meaning as expressions of the others' experiences. This, I believe, is where folklore departed from anthropology. Is there no reconciliation possible?

A reconciliation would mean for folklore to acquire a holistic perspective, to attempt contextual understanding.

I want to give an impression of what the understanding of Max Weber's "gemeinter Sinn" (intention, meaning) could mean when applied to "legends" produced in a community of narrative knowledge within modern society. Gisela Welz has done field research in a slum of Brooklyn, New York. Her objective is the highly complex strategy of street life as an ecological arrangement in the life world of lower class residents. In this perspective, all types of expressions of their shared experiences, all "texts" become meaningful: imprints on the built environment, play and ritual, drug dealing and storytelling as well as simply "hanging out on the street". In this context, the (urban) "legend" or story is only one text among many, but the "street corner rap sessions", the spontaneous communicative events that produce these legends go to the core of thick narrative knowledge as threefold competence:

"Looking for coherence in this street corner rap session, it is to be found both within the story, linking the narrative elements in a meaningful way, and beyond the story, integrating the storytelling situation, the narrator, her listeners, and the story itself in a coherent pattern." (Welz 1989: 127). In Lyotard's terms, the narrator, the "narratair", he-who-listens-to-

the-narration, and the narration (which includes the narrative performance) refer to a shared knowledge, to a shared "truth". What is being told is news, but the credibility of news has been developed within this street corner society as "historical experience", as it is embedded in the "collective memory" (Halbwachs 1967) of this specific cultural ecosystem: it is the "argument of images" of this specific whole. To understand this dimension of the legend is not synonymous with falsifying the "truth" of what was told, nor does it imply that one should collect different versions of the story in order to prove that it is folklore, it simply means to see it in the context of people's interpretation of their own world.

In this instance, the life world is a small one of marginality, pervaded with actual risks and dangers. The story that had been told was a crime story, highlighting actual locales of danger in the community, and presenting a happy ending for the narrator herself to whose aid an unknown savior had come.

Elliott Oring points out that the newspaper stories he refers to share a special characteristic: they are about the violation of "a boundary between wild and civilized domains". This violation seems to be the essential ingredient of all telling of and listening to stories. Maybe there is a dialectic between "fascinans" and "tremendum" (our own not excluded), to use Rudolf Otto's terms of the emanation of the numinous (Otto 1929). But our aim is not so much to look for equivalence in stories' contents as to look for equivalence (or difference) in meaning. What is considered "wild" and what is considered "civilized" in shared knowledge? How do people signify these categories? And which "news" are significant enough to interpenetrate their own stream of interpretations, concerned with their own life world?

And now, allow me to shift my focus to the "life world" of modern anthropologists, ethnologists, and folklorists. All of them are both listeners to stories and story-tellers. And all of them are drawn to the "wild", the non-domesticated, the uncivilized. It is their "collective memory" - to search for the exotic in primitive and peasant societies or for "wild" stories of hazard and danger on the margins of the civilized world which are to be found in folk narrative and now also in mass media. They listen and select, they collect and select, and they tell and inform, and select.

Recently, or so it seems to me, there is an increase in selecting and textualization instances of crime, of danger, of "wild" exotism. It is a special kind of "science fiction" in "the sense of 'something made or fashioned', the principal burden of the word's Latin root," as James Clifford put it. However, he continues to say: "But it is important to preserve the meaning not merely of making, but also of making up, of inventing things not actually real" (Clifford 1986:6).

Are folklorists and anthropologists, then, inventing those worlds that are both dangerous and fascinated with dangers, are they inventing those areas at the margins of the wild and the domesticated that they describe? And if this is the case, why do they invent them?

I believe it would be altogether too easy to attribute this to the demands of the audience and to the profit motive - even if this may sometimes be true, as with Castaneda's series of seven volumes (Castaneda 1973ff.), but I doubt that this was what made him write the very first volume. Duerr's "Dreamtime" (1978) with its focus on the margins of the wilderness became a bestseller (curiously, it was the only book written by a German anthropologist that I found on the bookshelves of anthropological departments in the United States), but again: was it written only with the audience in mind? To call these books fictions or inventions of the wilderness may not raise empiricist hackles in the scientific community. But what about the new "science fictional" interest in cannibalism and headhunting (Arens 1979, Brown/Tuzin 1983, Rosaldo 1984, Sagan 1974, Sanday 1986, Thomsen 1983) and its similarity to modern crime novels? What about the striking interest that draws European ethnologists and sociologists to a phenomenon like the Sicilian Mafia (Blok 1981, Correnti 1987, Giordano 1986, 1990, Hess 1970, Raith 1983)? What about a convention theme called "The Ethnology of Dangerous Situations" (Gefahrenzonen 1988)? And what about Oring's selection of danger-oriented stories from news papers, and Brunvand's 1981 collection of legends, each one more horrifying than the last.

But are all these texts part of the actual life worlds of middle class anthropologists and folklorists, or is it merely a selection done by armchair professionals (an armchair selection even when collection occurred in fieldwork) who express a longing for their "roots" of searching for and transmitting this "firsthand" knowledge of the incredible, the unknown, and the strange that they found in the other's "wild" worlds far away from their own life world? And by doing so, they also become an important information source for the mass media. They share with mass media the "knowing voice" of segmentalized information. Oring is right in stating that "the values of folklorists and the newspaper are one".

Oring urges us to adopt a new critical concept of folklore: not to look at marginal processes, but "to discover a way to look at the center of things without losing a distinctive 'folkloristic' perspective". But what is that perspective? The dilemma, as Oring explains it, is a schism between acknowledging the importance and validity of the values of folklore expression and the inability to actually apply those values. In my terms, this is the schism between searching for the "relational voice" and relying on the "knowing voice" for discussion and writing. It is also the dilemma that

comes from looking for narrative knowledge and at the same time, both seeing themselves as being uninvolved in "the center of things" (which is also emphasized by Oring who writes "folk are everybody") and abstaining from an inter textual and contextual perspective, the latter being indispensable for glancing behind the curtain of expressions in order to understand how others and we ourselves socially construct our world, our hopes, fears, repression, and projections.

In the case of the interpretation of the rap session, to understand the text was to understand the appropriateness of the narrator's fears within the frame of reference. As fear-inspiring situations go, this was only a small and limited one, but for the people concerned, it was at the very center of things. And by expressing their narrative knowledge in performance, these inner city residents perhaps fall prey to repression and projection less easily than we so-called intellectuals who are aware of worldwide hazards and catastrophes and strive to repress this knowledge the same way we try to repress our lonely individual fears. We do so by hiding them behind projections to the fears of others, or by utilizing what Schechner (1982) has called the postmodern play of *maya/lila* - toying with fragments - just beyond the "catastrophic modernity" (Heinrichs 1984). To be riding on the hedge, like Duerr who positions himself right on the boundary between the wild and the civilized domain means: not to be involved, not to share in any reciprocal community of ergic rights and plights (see Greverus 1989).

To collect and to circulate old or modern "wild" stories by means of mass media (from books to TV.) and also by means of the "knowing voice" of science appears to be a privilege of ludic activity enjoyed by sophisticated journalists, folklorists, and writers alike. It implies narration, devoid of the social tie of narrative knowledge, but allowing a glimpse into the wilderness beyond the boundaries that encircle both the armchair worlds of the internally divided scientific community and the privacy of the home worlds.

But "are the most important things in life plays, are they of ludic character", as Fügler quotes the "postmodern" crime writer Anthony Burgess?

In his article "A postmodern play with the paradigm of the literary Apocalypse", Fügler continues: "Only in indulging in the ludic, man can distance himself from the constraints of necessity, and the only way to encounter danger (if at all) is from that distance" (Fügler 1986, 352f.). Is it really? Or does this mean to be deluded by the Apocalypse? What Günther Anders (1983/84) calls "Apokalypse-Blindheit" implies more than the refusal to acknowledge man-made hazards, it means the cultural lag between the development of productions (also dangerous productions) and the paucity of images and feelings to deal with them. Anders also claims the

necessity of developing human sensibility and imagination for a proper understanding of culture as the environment man fashions for himself - much in the same way that Geertz demands "thick description". And yet, it goes beyond Geertz, who claims that his imagination allows him to understand the other from a distance.

Anders demands a new holistic sensibility, holistic in the sense of acknowledging one's own role as an interdependent part of the whole. Anthropologists and folklorists in particular are confronted with this urgent task: not only to inquire into the thick narrative knowledge that is constituted by the shared knowledge of others, but to invest their imagination in the (perhaps hidden) truth that we and the others share. I believe that this truth contains our apocalyptic fears and hopes as well as the individual repression of these fears and hopes by means of projecting them onto the fears and hopes of others.

Devereux (1973) demanded to make fear into an investigative method. Is this what Oring means when he demands "to gaze at Medusa without being turned into stone"? And if this is true, what then is the method? I think that, for the anthropologist, it implies to look behind the curtain of fears, both told and untold, both his own and those of the others. The violators of the boundary between wild and civilized domains are not only leopards, tigers, bears, alligators, and bees straying into our domestic and domesticated spheres. Rather, the actual dangers are those that civilization inflicts on itself. The violation is within: it is cancer, heart disease, and AIDS, it is in car accidents, paralysis, alcoholism, and rape; it is pollution of the ecosystem and nuclear contamination and the ongoing brutality of wars around us.

How do all of us - not just us scientists - handle those dangers, how do we repress and project in our everyday lives? Why do we keep listening to and narrating alligator stories and remain silent in the face of brutal worldwide hazards that pervade our times (see Greverus 1990)? These are the Medusa! Our task is not only to gather and transmit information concerned with segmentalized facts and stories from far away or nearby, but first, to see and interpret the meaning of the told and the untold as the experiences, interpretations, and expressions of different people in different contexts (ourselves included), and then, - and this is indispensable if our writing is to have any rhetorical and critical force - to give voice to those that are inaudible - the repressing ones, the projecting ones, and the speaking ones. We have to give them voice against the invisible but very authoritarian and audible voice of political and economic progress on the one hand and people's appeasement on the other.

Anthropologists need to forge their own fears into a method by seeing their own fear of the invisible voice (Greverus 1988) of abstraction



and bureaucracy in progressive society, by seeing their own repression reflected in the narrations of others. This is shared experience. But it does no longer create shared knowledge in the sense of the threefold competence of speaking, listening, and acting. Especially acting is no longer in our power, and also the facts of "being acted upon" are no longer in our reflective competence.

Only perceiving this will give rise to potent criticism. The urban environment - as well as the rural and the lost "wild" environment - contain other hazards and dangers than the news of alligator pets in the water-closet imply.

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## VIJESTI I ISTINA, ILI: FOLKLORNA I FOLKLORISTIČKA REPRESIJA ISTINE U VIJESTIMA

### SAŽETAK

Antropolozi, etnolozi i folkloristi teže tumačenju pripovijedanja ljudi, ali sami pripadaju društvu koje je izgubilo smisao za pripovijedanje i usmeni diskurs, društvu u kojemu istina više nije zajednička istina. Znanost odbacuje usmenost, višeglasje, iskustvo cjeline, traži najnovije obavijesti o samim detaljima uz pomoć raznovidnih znanstvenih disciplina. Takvo bi se stanje možda moglo promijeniti združivanjem humanističkih istraživanja u otvorenom diskursu kakav je načeo postmodernizam. Ipak, i u društvu i u znanstvenim krugovima i dalje se gomilaju fragmentarne "činjenice", bujaju tzv. "prave" informacije o mnoštvu pojedinosti. Suvremeni antropolozi, etnolozi i folkloristi ujedno su i slušatelji i pripovjedači priča. Sve njih privlači "divljina", nepripitomljenost i neciviliziranost. Njihova je "kolektivna memorija" potraga za egzotikom u primitivnim i seljačkim društvima, ili za "divljim" pričama o pogibelji i opasnostima na marginama civiliziranoga svijeta, što se sve može naći u narodnim pripovijetkama i (danas) u sredstvima javnog priopćavanja. Oni slušaju i biraju, skupljaju i biraju, oni priopćavaju i obavještavaju - i biraju. U posljednje vrijeme biraju sve više primjere zločina, opasnosti, "divlje" egzotike.

Pitanje je zašto i dalje slušamo i pripovijedamo priče o krokodilima, a šutimo o suvremenim brutalnim pogibeljima širom svijeta?