

Denying Rumours

Jean-Bruno Renard

We can construct a typology of rumours – defined broadly as unverified news – according to their relation to reality after their degree of veracity has been established, at least in the current state of knowledge, by experts (historians, scientists, police officers, journalists, and so on). If a rumour turns out to be correct it becomes an item of *information*. If a rumour is untrue it comes into the categories of affirming or denying rumours. *Affirming rumours*, which are the most common type, state the reality of imaginary facts, for instance the rumour claiming that bananas from Costa Rica pass on to people flesh-eating bacteria that cause general necrosis. *Denying rumours*, which are rarer, deny the reality of established facts, for example rumours claiming that Elvis Presley is not dead or that Americans have never walked on the moon.

It seems useful to distinguish various terms indicating negation. Rumours will be termed *negative* when they state facts associated with fear or hostility, whereas positive rumours evoke happy, welcome events. French researchers, who assign colours to rumours, talk about ‘black’ rumours or ‘rose-tinted’ ones. Specialists agree that there are around nine black rumours for every rose-tinted one. Rouquette (1975, 1990) has thoroughly studied this ‘bias towards negativity’, which is one of the main features of rumours. I shall talk about *denying* rumours and ideas when they deny commonly accepted events. These rumours are not necessarily negative: for instance survival legends often express the wish that a loved person were not dead. Finally, among denying rumours and ideas, we shall reserve the word *negationist* for revisionist claims that the gas chambers did not exist, or that a Nazi did not plan to exterminate the Jews during the Second World War.

From Freud to Lacan, psychoanalysis has described the various forms of denial of reality: neurotic repression, psychotic denial and perverse rejection. To overcome the anguish of a psychic trauma subjects replace the reality denied with illusory or fetishistic realities (Freud, 1924, 1925; Michaux and Piret, 2000; Rey-Flaud, 2002). Psychiatry has identified a number of delusions of denial: denial of motherhood,

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denial of illness, denial of bodily organs (Cotard syndrome), etc. And social psychology has pinpointed denial of reality as one of the individual's defence mechanisms to maintain cognitive consistency. We should remember that for Festinger (1957) a state of cognitive inconsistency is created when subjects are confronted with opinions or events that contradict their system of representation of the world. In order to re-establish cognitive consistency subjects must modify their conception of the world or deny those external elements that are inconsistent, or else 'tweak' them to make them fit in.

I. Typology of denying rumours

1. *Survival rumours*

The psychological basis for these rumours is quite simple: we do not want to believe in the death of those we love or we fear the survival of those we hate. Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index* (1989) identifies two series of motifs associated with our subject: A570 '*Culture hero still lives*' and A580 '*Culture hero's expected return*'.

Historian Yves-Marie Bercé (1990) has shown that the recurrent theme of the 'hidden king' followed the same schema: the *disappearance* or mysterious death of a sovereign or future sovereign loved by his people is rapidly followed by a *crisis* (power vacuum, unworthy heirs, military disaster or socio-economic crisis); the people then start to believe in the sovereign's *survival* (a fabled survival such as sleep or eternal life or a rationalized survival when the king is imagined as captive, exiled or having retreated to a desert, hermitage or distant island); the people await the sovereign's *return* to bring back an era of happiness and prosperity; and finally it frequently happens that *pretenders* claim to be the departed king (they are treated as impostors if they are not recognized). Such was the case, across the centuries, with the German emperor Frederick Barbarossa, King Sebastian of Portugal, Prince Dimitri of Russia and the young Louis XVII in France.

Frederick Barbarossa, emperor of Germany, was ambitious to restore the German Holy Roman Empire. He drowned in a river in Turkey during the third crusade in 1190. A rumour claimed he was still alive, then a legend came into being that the emperor was living or sleeping by a miracle at the heart of the Kyffhäuser mountain in Prussia. The 17th-century German millenarians awaited his return and in the 20th-century Nazi leaders again referred to the legend. In 1578 King Sebastian of Portugal disappeared during a battle in Africa. His subjects long refused to believe he was dead: it was said that his tomb in Lisbon in fact contained the body of one of his soldiers who died in the fight. Then several people made claims to recognition as Dom Sebastian. In 1598 the mysterious death of Prince Dimitri of Russia triggered survival rumours and the appearance of a number of pretenders. Similarly in France in 1795 the ambiguous circumstances of the death and burial of the young Louis XVII at the age of 10 gave rise to survival rumours, which were spread by royalists, and to the emergence of pretenders such as the famous Naundorf. In April 2002 analysis of the DNA of the heart preserved as Louis XVII's proved that the Dauphin had indeed died in the Temple prison.

Despite advances in the dissemination of news and identification of people, the 19th and 20th centuries did not see the disappearance of survival legends.

Field-Marshal Ney was shot by royalists in Paris in 1815, but in 1819 in South Carolina a certain Peter Stuart, a teacher and drunkard, claimed to be Marshal Ney, who had been saved by a pretend execution organized by the freemasons. But no one believed Stuart, and this theory is unanimously rejected by historians.¹ We should note the connection between survival, plot and pretender.

In 1821, when the French heard Napoleon was dead, a section of the population in the countryside and provincial towns did not believe it. People thought this was fake news fabricated by the English and the French royalists. Rumours alleged that the emperor was not only alive but still on French soil, for instance in Lyon, or in Spain where he had joined General Riego's uprising against King Fernando VII. In the spring of 1823, when the events in Spain were over, rumours about Napoleon's survival and return flared up one last time. Then they died down, though once again in 1830 in Paris insurgent revolutionaries thought they recognized the emperor's silhouette in the crowd (Ménager, 1988; Ploux, 2003)!

Novelists, who draw on the same sources that create legends, have exploited the motif of Napoleon's survival (Versins, 1972: 360–6, 623). Some writers have imagined that a double replaced the emperor when he left for exile on St Helena, others have told of his escape. The most interesting work is Louis Geoffroy's *Napoléon et la conquête du monde* (1836). Published 15 years after the emperor's death, this fictionalized historical novel imagines Napoleon victorious, and not vanquished, before Moscow in 1812. Then he conquers the rest of the world and establishes a universal monarchy based on law and scientific progress before dying in 1832. In his preface Geoffroy explains what motivated him to write this grandiose epic:

It is one of the inevitable laws of humanity that nothing in it reaches the goal.
Everything remains incomplete and unfinished, people, things, glory, fortune and life.
Terrible law! It kills Alexander, Raphael, Pascal, Mozart and Byron before the age of 39.

...

How many people have sighed after those interrupted dreams, entreating Heaven to complete them!

How many, faced with those unfinished stories, have sought, not in the future or in time, but in their thoughts, some remainder and an ending that could round them off.

(Quoted by Versins, 1972: 365–6)

It would be impossible to explain better why survival legends arise.

Ludwig II of Bavaria was discovered dead from drowning on the banks of Lake Starnberg on 13 June 1886, a few days after being declared mad and shut up in Berg castle. Also found beside the lake was the strangled body of his doctor, von Gudden. This mysterious double death naturally gave rise to rumours, which were mentioned by French folklorists in the *Revue des Traditions Populaires* (Paris, 25 December 1886: 395–6) with the title 'After the drama the legend!' They say a section of the Bavarian population was convinced the king was still alive and had never been mad. He would return to get rid of the regency council, which had usurped his power. In the view of others the king really did die but was drugged and drowned by Dr Gudden at the instigation of the regency council. The conspirators were supposed to have got

people to believe that Gudden had died: a wax figure was placed in the coffin and the doctor went off to live in America. We can see that a survival legend may also deal with a hated character.

Albert Dauzat (1919) tells us that during the First World War there were survival legends about Pope Pius X and Lord Kitchener, the British war minister.

We all know that the obscure circumstances of the execution of Tsar Nicolas II and his family in Yekaterinburg in 1918 have thrown up survival legends: Nicolas II himself, his daughter Anastasia (a DNA analysis showed that Anna Anderson, who claimed to be the grand-duchess, was not a Romanov) and even the Tsarevich Alexei (Petrov, Lysenko and Egorov, 1998; Gray, 1998). In the 1930s a rumour alleged that an Orthodox priest of Russian origin who had settled in Alaska was in fact Rasputin, who had not died in 1916 (Stevens, 1989).

Emiliano Zapata, the charismatic Mexican revolutionary who was assassinated in 1919 at 40 years of age, was still the subject of survival beliefs in 1994 among veterans of the revolution: 'They insist that it was not Zapata who was killed but a comrade in disguise, that he went away to carry on other struggles and that he will return' (Daubert, 1994: 102). In 1994 the revolutionary would have been about 115: but the fervour of the Zapatista movement feeds the legend!

In June 1945, two months after Hitler's death, Marie Bonaparte wrote in her *Mythes de guerre*: 'It may even be that, though his death has been announced, a new legend, reborn from Barbarossa, will put him in the caves of some Kyffhäuser, whence he waits to re-emerge on some day of avenging glory. For killing the enemy is not enough to make him cease to exist: he survives in his legend' (Bonaparte, 1946: 9). The psychoanalyst was correct: rumours of Hitler's survival did surface. In 1945, difficulty in identifying a burnt body, the Russians' desire not to reveal where it had been buried to avoid any 'pilgrimages', and Stalin's cunning, which deliberately allowed doubt to hover over the Führer's death so that the West would be suspected of picking him up, all this made the survival rumours look likely. In the 1950s and 1960s, when it was revealed that Nazi leaders had fled to South America, it was assumed that Hitler might be among them and even that he had made himself unrecognizable with facial surgery. These survival rumours expressed the fear that 'the Beast was not dead' and haunted the imagination of the Allies or Nazi hunters. For their part some people who were nostalgic for the past or neo-Nazis hoped for Hitler's return. In 1963 an episode of the tv series *The Twilight Zone* entitled 'He's Alive' (scenario by Rod Serling) showed an American neo-Nazi receiving his orders from a mysterious figure who is no other than Adolf Hitler. A survival rumour becomes less and less likely the older the 'survivor' gets: today Hitler would be 116! That is why works of fiction now no longer imagine Hitler's survival but his clone, for instance in Ira Levin's astounding novel *The Boys from Brazil* (1976).

The rumour that James Dean had survived his terrible car accident in 1955 is the first in a series of survival legends concerning no longer just kings and political leaders but film or singing stars (even if some are given the title 'King!'). The reason why James Dean did not appear was that he was in no condition to do so: it was alleged that he was in a vegetative state in an Indiana hospital or living in hiding, disfigured and paralysed, on a farm near Los Angeles like the 'phantom of the Opera' (Morgan et al., 1988: 141; Carbone, 1990: 100–1). Similar rumours circulated after the

death of the singer Jim Morrison in 1971 (Morgan et al., 1988: 141–2) and that of Elvis Presley in 1977 (Morgan et al., 1988: 142; Stromberg, 1990). A survey conducted by the Gallup Institute in Canada in February 1989 revealed that 10 percent of Canadians were not sure whether Elvis Presley was dead (5% did not know whether he was dead or alive and 5% were certain Elvis was alive) (*FOAftale News*, 14 June 1989: 4).

It was claimed that President John F. Kennedy, assassinated in Dallas in 1963, was living but in a coma because of the bullet that had wounded him in the head (Morgan et al., 1988: 140–1). He was supposed to be being kept alive by sophisticated medical equipment in a top-secret wing of a Houston hospital. With the agreement of the CIA and FBI, Vice-President Lyndon Johnson announced Kennedy's death. There has also been talk of mysterious hideouts in Alaska or the Swiss Alps. When Jacqueline Kennedy married Aristotle Onassis in October 1968, a rumour alleged that the president, alive but paralysed, was on the island of Skorpios. A sensational Italian weekly's cover headline ran: 'Kennedy is alive but held prisoner by Onassis' (Carbone, 1990: 155).

2. Rumours of doubles

Rumours of deaths – which I classify rather among affirming rumours because they imagine an event – normally fade away when the person alleged to have died turns up. However, there are cases where the rumour is so strong that it suggests a denying idea: the person we see is not who they seem but a double.

The famous rumour about Paul McCartney, who was supposed to have died in a car accident in 1966, was accompanied by a rumour about a double to explain Paul's continued presence. It was claimed that when the Beatle was arrested in Japan in 1980 for possession of marijuana the police discovered his fingerprints did not match those in his identity file (Morgan et al., 1988: 139–40).

In 1976 a rumour alleged that Pope Paul VI, who was thought too conservative, had been shut up in the Vatican cellars and replaced by a double. In his *Lettre aux amis* (no. 21, May 1976) the Dominican Father Marie-Dominique Molinié denounced 'this senseless rumour, widespread in many countries, that the pope has been secretly replaced by a double who is the executive organ of three freemasons in his immediate entourage'.² This conspiracy motif of the pope replaced by a double can be found in fiction, for example André Gide's *Les Caves du Vatican* (1922) or Jean-Jacques Reboux's *Le Massacre des innocents* (1995). In general, the double theme is a powerful element in dramatic or literary plots.

It is likely, if not proved, that heads of state have had doubles for security reasons. In the 1970s it was claimed that Marshal Tito was in fact a double of the real Tito, who had died. In 2001 it was said that Boris Yeltsin had been assassinated for expropriating billions and had been replaced by a double. There was also talk of Saddam Hussein's double.

Conspiracy fantasies about doubles can be likened to a psychiatric disturbance called 'Capgras syndrome' (Capgras and Reboul-Lachaux, 1923; Christodoulo, 1977). This is a delusional belief where patients think that members of their family or circle have been replaced by impostors, or doubles.

3. Rumours about sexual identity

Rumours about sexual identity allege that people are not the sex they seem to be.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the French Egyptologist Eugène Lefébure expressed the view that the pharaoh Akhenaton was a woman disguised as a man and had usurped the royal power by succeeding her father Amenophis III. Historically more doubtful still is the medieval legend of 'Pope Joan', which says that Pope John VIII was in fact a woman (Boureau, 1988).

Nowadays rumours concerning sexual identity have to do almost entirely with women who are alleged to be men. This is probably a consequence of the phenomenon of transvestites and 'drag queens'.

The French singer Sheila, a 1960s pop star, was the subject of a rumour that claimed she was a man (Morgan et al., 1988: 27–8). Her discreet private life frustrated her fans and the smallest incident was exploited. In 1962 the scandal sheet *France-Dimanche* reported that the singer had undergone an operation and expressed doubts as to her femaleness. When Sheila had a baby the rumour died away almost completely, except for a few hardened conspiracy theorists who talked of complicity among medical and administrative staff giving the public to think there had been a pregnancy and delivery.

In the late 1970s, rumours alleged that certain famous women who were extremely feminine and had throaty voices were in fact transvestites, for instance Amanda Lear, Salvador Dalí's former muse, and the singer Dalida (Morgan et al., 1988: 26–7).

In April 2001, an international rumour had it that Elodie Gossuin, Miss France 2001, was a man. Now we know the rumour's origin and the route it followed.³ When the French press disapprovingly published the rumour in late April it was relying on an article that had appeared in the *New York Daily News* on 24 April. The American paper itself had taken and translated a text from a Puerto Rican daily paper, which had found the information on a French website [<http://www.examineur.com>] in January 2001. The webzine included a short article entitled 'Miss France is a man. Elodie Gossuin's name is really Nicolas Levanneur'. But the site is run by the former *Infos du monde*, a spoof paper similar to the American *Weekly World News*. The Puerto Rican journalist took the bogus information at face value without realizing the site was a send-up and without understanding the pun contained in the name Levanneur: someone who '*lance des vanes*' ('is having a dig'), a slang word for bad-taste jokes. The hoax turned into a press rumour whose content was not only surprising but also topical when the election of 'Miss Trans(vestite)' was taking place in Paris and preparations for the Miss Universe competition were underway in Puerto Rico.

4. The rumour about bogus moon landings

This rumour claims that no astronaut has walked on the moon. The NASA pictures, transmitted to the whole world, were filmed in a studio on a secret government base in the Nevada desert. American technology was not up to carrying out a lunar landing but the government and the CIA, in their determination to beat the Russians in

the race to conquer space, manufactured a bogus event (Morgan et al., 1988: 194–5). To understand why this rumour and theory emerged we have to put ourselves in the context of the years from 1969 to 1974. In the race to conquer space the Russians were everywhere ahead of the Americans: launching artificial satellites, sending men into space, landing spacecraft on the moon (the soviet probe Luna 9 in February 1966 preceded the American probe Surveyor I in May 1966). So it seemed surprising that the Americans should suddenly leap ahead and put men on the moon in July 1969. The event had an effect on people and may have seemed really ‘incredible’ to many. In addition many Americans who were against the Vietnam war were suspicious of official statements about the conflict as it unfolded. Suspicion of the authorities increased further when the Watergate affair exploded in 1972–4, proving that the government was engaged in secret activities and lying.

Some authors have expounded this theory in books and videos. They have systematically picked up everything they thought was a ‘disturbing detail’: for instance the floating flag (there is no wind on the moon), the footprints like in wet sand (there is no water on the moon), no stars in the sky, strange reflections of light on the astronauts’ helmets (projectors), seemingly repeated lunar landscapes (scenery), etc.

Opinion polls in the late 1990s indicated that six percent of Americans have doubts about astronauts landing on the moon.

In 1975, an American librarian, Bill Kaysing, in conjunction with Randy Reid, published at his own expense a book entitled *We Never Went to the Moon: America’s Thirty Billion Dollar Swindle*. Kaysing is also an ardent supporter of the theory that the British and American governments pushed the Japanese into bombing Pearl Harbor in order to draw America into the Second World War. In 1982, an American engineer, William L. Brian, brought out *Moongate: Suppressed Findings of the US Space Program. The NASA–Military Coverup*. In 1992, Ralph Rene, a self-taught American engineer, paid for the publication of *NASA Mooned America*. Recently Rene stated, on the subject of the 9/11 attacks, that the World Trade Center exploded from the inside (and it was not the Arabs who caused it)!

In 2000, the Frenchman Philippe Lheureux brought out *Lumières sur la Lune. La Nasa a-t-elle menti?* The author added a fresh explanation for NASA’s trickery: the Americans gave up on landing on the moon because they found signs of extra-terrestrial presence there and took fright!

On 15 February 2001, the American tv channel Fox broadcast a programme entitled ‘Conspiracy Theory: Did we land on the moon?’, presented by an actor from the *X-Files* series. In September 2002, the American Bart Sibrel, maker of a video film defending the conspiracy over the moon landings, took the astronaut Aldrin to task, calling him a liar and challenging him to swear on the bible that he had walked on the moon. Aldrin, who stated that Sibrel hit him with the bible, punched him in the face.⁴

In view of the publicity given indirectly by the media to conspiracy theory, websites put up by informed amateurs demonstrated that the deniers’ arguments were wrong.⁵ In November 2002, NASA announced it was going to publish a booklet to respond to the flood of questions from schoolchildren or their teachers about the factual nature or not of the moon landings.⁶ Today the ‘Moon Hoax’ rumour is enjoying a certain popularity among Islamist extremists, both out of anti-Americanism and because the Koran is said to state that human beings cannot reach the moon.

The rumour was the inspiration for several fictional works, which popularized the topic. For example, the film *Capricorn One* (Peter Hyams, USA, 1978) imagines that, lacking the financial wherewithal but to keep a promise made by the US president, NASA simulates astronauts exploring Mars from a military base in the middle of the desert. Recently a French documentary *Opération Lune* (William Karel, France, 2002), put out by the extremely reputable channel Arte on 16 October 2002, revealed that President Nixon had secretly ordered from Stanley Kubrick a film showing man's first steps on the moon in case the Apollo 11 mission failed: but they were the pictures seen by two billion viewers all over the world. However, the documentary was in fact a work of fiction with doctored interviews with Henry Kissinger, Buzz Aldrin and Kubrick's widow and statements from bogus witnesses like Nixon's supposed secretary. The final credits and the 'hints' dropped throughout the film point to the trick. Though the Arte tv channel had taken care to announce that it was a fiction, a large number of viewers were seized by doubts and some intellectuals used the press to condemn the dangerous confusion of true and false (*Le Monde*, 12 October 2002: 4–5).

5. The Pentagon rumour

The attacks on 11 September 2001 in the USA set off a cloud of rumours, most of which circulated on the web. Several of them suggested the American or Israeli authorities were directly responsible for the terrorist acts. One was openly exploited from October 2001 by the French site belonging to a libertarian anticlerical association, the Voltaire Network (Réseau Voltaire): no plane had crashed into the Pentagon; it was a set-up by the American military. In March 2002, Thierry Meyssan, the Network's organizer, published a book which sold 200,000 copies in France, *L'Effroyable Imposture* (The horrifying sham, 2002a), and was soon followed by a second book on the same topic, *Le Pentagate* (2002b). Using data gathered from the web and picture analysis Meyssan emphasized what he claimed were anomalies: no plane debris, wings in particular, can be seen and the impact crater is too small to have been made by a plane. So he suggests that the explosion – inside the building or caused by a missile – is a trick organized by a far-right military-industrial faction operating within the American government.

It is possible to explain why the attack on the Pentagon was the subject of a denying theory by the fact that it was markedly different from those on the Twin Towers. There were no dramatic images of planes crashing and buildings crumbling, nor were there thousands of deaths as there were in New York. Unlike the passengers in the plane that came down in Pennsylvania, whose heroic sacrifice is celebrated, the passengers in the Pentagon plane have not been the object of a national cult. And finally there has been a dearth of information about the Pentagon attack because it is a military zone and therefore surrounded by secrecy.

In June 2002, two journalists published a counter-investigation, *L'Effroyable Mensonge* (The horrifying lie, Dasquié and Guisnel, 2002). Not only did they demonstrate that the alleged anomalies are not anomalies but have a technical explanation, they also reveal how Thierry Meyssan found himself caught up in a denying spiral,

as witnessed by his contacts with well-known antisemitic conspiracy theorists such as the American Lyndon LaRouche or the Frenchman Emmanuel Ratier, by his relations with French secret service officers who would be naturally inclined to see plots everywhere, and his links with anti-American and anti-Zionist Islamists, since in a speech delivered in Abu-Dhabi in April 2002 under the auspices of the Arab League, Meysan talked about 'the Islamist terrorists' fable' with reference to the 9/11 attacks.

6. Negationist theories

Though negationist theories are not strictly speaking rumours, I think it is useful to mention them because they are typical of the workings of denying thinking.

First of all negationists use the whole vocabulary referring to legendary narratives and disinformation: for example Paul Rassinier's *Le Mensonge d'Ulysse* (1950), Arthur Butz's *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century* (1976), Wilhelm Stäglich's *Der Auschwitz-Mythos. Legende oder Wirklichkeit?* (1979), Robert Faurisson's *Le Mythe de l'extermination des juifs* (1987). There are also the words: rumour, bogus, swindle, shaggy-dog story, fabrication ... It is not surprising that negationists have attempted to take over the research on disinformation, rumours and contemporary legends (cf. Campion-Vincent, 2002).

Secondly, it is only by using the notion of conspiracy that we can explain the significance of what negationists present as a huge mystification. The responsibility for the 'historic lie' lies with Zionists and the state of Israel. Thus negationism appears to be a contemporary form of a long series of beliefs in a Jewish plot.

And finally, negationist methodology is the same as all denying theories: the obsessive search for anomalies, facts that seem to offend against good sense, 'details that don't fit'. Deconstruction of weak or questionable evidence is an excuse for rejecting all evidence.

Cases brought against negationists – for instance, in France the Gayssot law of 13 July 1990 outlaws questioning the existence of crimes against humanity – have the effect of confirming their paranoid delusion: they think they are being hounded for telling the truth. For them their theory has become a faith, a religion.

II. Provocation

Paradox (etymologically *para-* 'against', and *doxa* 'common sense') is a rhetorical figure which consists of producing statements that are apparently contrary to common opinion or data provided by experience, but that nevertheless contain illuminating truths (Suhamy, 1981: 118–19). Since Socrates, formulating paradoxes has been a philosophical tactic intended to awaken consciousness, to encourage people to see reality differently. And it is true that philosophy, social progress or scientific inventions have often been negations of the reality principle or claimed as such (for instance 'what is heavier than air cannot fly').

With the aim of providing a demonstration authors have written provocative texts that appear to deny an accepted truth.

For example, Jean-Baptiste Pèrès's book *Comme quoi Napoléon n'a jamais existé* (1817) shows that the emperor is just a sun myth invented by the people: Napoleon-Apollo, born from amid the sea in the east and dying amid the sea in the west, reaching his high point with the sun of Austerlitz, surrounded by twelve marshals resembling the twelve signs of the zodiac! But the book is a parody. In his demonstration using absurd ideas Pèrès is criticizing scholars of his time who explained myths by astronomy: mythical and legendary heroes are reduced to symbolic representations of the stars. The founder of the school, which continued into the 1870s with Max Müller, was Charles Dupuis, author of *Origine de tous les cultes, ou la Religion universelle* (1795). Pèrès was having fun treating Napoleon like one of those legendary saints who, science has shown, did not exist in history.

Closer in time to us, and in another register, Jean Baudrillard published his book *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu* (1991). With this shock title and throughout his text the French philosopher of postmodernism wants to show that the conflict was not at all like a 'classic' war: it had no beginning (declaration of war), and no end (armistice); no more or less equal forces (the USA was operating below its strength – no use of nuclear weapons – and Iraq beyond its strength; conquerors and conquered were known in advance); no bloody hand-to-hand fighting; no decisive battles. The military losses had nothing in common with previous wars: 35 American soldiers killed, many more Iraqis and especially civilians dying in the bombing. The only visible war was the one shown on television, by CNN in particular, where generals, pundits, tv presenters told us about a 'war seen in a mirror' (Baudrillard, 1991: 23). The Iraq war in March–April 2003 largely confirmed Baudrillard's analysis. As regards the number of dead in the American army, the aftermath of the war has turned out to be far bloodier (2000 dead) than the war itself (114 dead).

Some readers of *L'Effroyable Imposture* saw Thierry Meyssan's book as a provocative argument in the same style. They say that in the end the author considers as secondary the fact that a plane crashed or did not crash into the Pentagon. It may even be that Meyssan does not himself believe in his allegations on the subject! In fact Meyssan's primary aim is to denounce the power of the military-industrial complex in the US and its influence on a war-like policy.

III. The three characteristics of denying rumours

Denying rumours and ideas have three characteristic features: hypercritical thinking, revealing another reality and denouncing a plot.

1. Hypercritical thinking

Denying rumours are those alleging that true facts are rumours. This is why denying theories, which are the developed form, explicitly claim allegiance to the scientific model of historical criticism. Indeed the latter has often ended up demon-

strating that events or people (for instance Romulus and Remus, St Christopher or William Tell) never existed.

But deniers practise historical criticism in an excessive form that has been condemned by historians, even the most positivist among them. As early as 1898, Langlois and Seignobos were defining hypercriticism in their famous *Introduction aux études historiques*:

It is excess of criticism that, like the crudest ignorance, ends in misunderstandings. It is the application of critical processes to cases that are not open to question. Hypercriticism is to criticism what a cavilling mind is to a shrewd wit. Some people sniff out puzzles everywhere, even where there are none. They find nuances in straightforward texts until they make them suspect, on the pretext of eliminating imaginary distortions. They spy traces of fabrication in authentic documents. Bizarre mindset! By mistrusting the credulous instinct they come to suspect everything. It should be noted that the more positive the progress made in criticism of texts and sources, the more the risk of hypercriticism increases. Indeed when criticism of all historical sources is correctly performed ... good sense will recommend stopping there. But people will not accept that: they will refine further, as they are already doing with the best established texts, and those that do so will inevitably tip over into hypercriticism. (Langlois and Seignobos, 1992: 115)

This quotation applies perfectly to the deniers' methods. We can think, for example, of the meticulous search for clues that might give grounds for believing in Louis XVII's survival or for contrivance in the photos of the moon landings.

Contemporary historians have repeated this warning against systematic mistrust:

For them [the 'old positivist masters'] the historian's first virtue had to be the critical spirit: any document, any witness would be suspected at the start; methodical mistrust is the form adopted, when applied to history, by the Cartesian principle of methodical doubt, the starting-point of all science; systematically we ask ourselves, when faced with any document: could the witness have been mistaken? Did he want to mislead us?

The image we ought to have of historians will be quite different: no, they should not, when faced with witnesses from the past, put on that sullen, nitpicking, aggressive attitude, the attitude of the bad police officer for whom anyone summoned to appear in court is already suspect and considered to be guilty until proved otherwise; such overstimulation of the critical spirit, far from being a virtue, would be a basic fault for historians, making them practically incapable of recognizing the true significance, the impact, the value of the documents they are studying; such an attitude is as dangerous in history as the fear of being tricked is in daily life, that affectation that Stendhal loved to give his characters ('I always assume the person talking to me wants to mislead me'). (Marrou, 1975: 92–3)

It would be impossible to describe better the paranoid attitude associated with hypercriticism.

Faced with counter-proof demonstrating the truth of the facts contested, believers in denying rumours have to engage in a spiral of denials in order to hang on to their beliefs. For example, it has been seen that if a woman, who rumour claims is a man, has a baby, the deniers have to work hard to show that the pregnancy and delivery were faked. This mechanism is similar to 'hyperbolic doubt' (Boudon, 1992: 149), which has to be deployed by believers in an alternative theory B when faced with

an increasing number of clues in favour of theory A. Raymond Boudon gives the example of the earth being round:

As observations accumulate which are easily explained by the theory [the round earth] and explained with difficulty by its competitor [the flat earth] [a ship's sails appearing on the horizon before its hull, the curved shadow of the earth projected on to the moon, photos taken by satellites, astronauts' observations], it becomes more and more *costly* to keep the second one in the race. (Boudon, 1992: 148)

2. Revealing another reality

Every denying rumour runs alongside its complement, an affirming rumour which substitutes a new reality for the reality denied: such and such a person is not dead, they are alive; another person is not who they claim to be, they are lying about their sex or have been replaced by a double; no astronaut has walked on the moon, the scenes were shot in a studio on earth; no plane crashed into the Pentagon, it was an explosion inside or a missile, etc.

However, the proof of that other reality is hard to provide. Not because that other reality is illusory but because the proof has been or is still being suppressed or hidden. By whom? The answer lies in the conspiracy theory.

3. Denouncing the plot

If *they* are lying to us, if there is a trick, there must necessarily be liars and tricksters. The business of knowingly hiding a truth from the whole world, and getting people to believe in another reality replacing it, implies a concerted plan, the existence of an organized group with power over the media. The identification of the plotters varies according to period and country: revolutionaries, royalists, freemasons, Jews, CIA, etc.

Véronique Champion-Vincent (2005a, 2005b) has shown that in the past maleficent occult powers were identified with foreigners and 'stateless' people, while nowadays they are placed at the very heart of the state. Deniers frequently use the phrase 'official truth', which for them is synonymous with lie, the reverse of the truth they are unveiling.

If journalists tell us what is happening, conspiracy journalists tell us what is being hidden from us. A French far-right information sheet entitled *J'ai tout compris!* (I understand it all) promises a 'monthly detox', 'a review of the facts, events, figures, realities carefully concealed by the system', 'a harsh criticism of the prejudices, false information, ideological deceptions', 'analysis ... that reveals the underside of the cards'. This confirms Inglehart's study (1987) on the greater receptiveness of political extremes, of both left and right, towards conspiracy theories.

Finally, we should note a tendency for supporters of denying ideas to come together. Of course defenders of a flat earth have every reason to believe the rumour that denies the moon landings! It may even be possible to understand why those

who deny the attack on the Pentagon join forces – if prudently – with those who deny the Shoah: a similar pro-Arab and anti-Zionist position brings them closer together. But it is the same conspiracy ideology and the same Manichean vision of the world (manipulators/manipulated) that makes Ralph Rene question both the moon landings and the attack on the Pentagon. It is also what links various publications from Editions Carnot revealing the cover-up of UFOs (Nhart, 1999), NASA's fabrication of the moon landings (Lheureux, 2000), the risks of mobile phones (Carlo and Schram, 2001), the bogus accident that caused Diana's death (Nhart, 2002), the sham attack on the Pentagon (Meysan, 2002a, 2002b), the influence of occultism on governments (Jumel, 2002) and ecologists' lies (Croizé, 2002).

Conclusion

We may assume that denying rumours and ideas will become increasingly frequent and visible on the information market (Taguieff, 2005). There are three main reasons for this.

First, the hard sciences and human sciences have made intellectuals and the educated general public believe in *cognitive relativism* (Boudon, 2003), that is, the idea that knowledge is neither objective nor final. This leads people to be more receptive to all the alternative theories to commonly accepted knowledge. We no longer even talk of reality as opposed to non-reality, but of one conception of reality as opposed to another conception of reality which is just as valid.

Second, governments' proven lies (Watergate, which had a profound impact)⁷ or else the media's naivety in spreading doubtful facts (the Timosoara 'massacre') have made the public suspicious of official statements and information put out by the press. And so, informal communication networks (word of mouth, confidential information sheets, the web) are acquiring a greater credibility and competing with official networks.

Third, and last of all, we have entered a world where reality and its facsimile, true and false, are increasingly confused (Baudrillard, 1981; Eco, 1985). As proof of that, reality tv, reality shows, films mix real images and synthetic ones. In 1960 an episode of the series *The Twilight Zone* entitled 'A World of Difference' (scenario by Richard Matheson) showed a businessman who discovers that his office is just a film set. This fantasy motif of sham reality become almost realistic 38 years later in the film *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, USA, 1998), where an average American leads a quiet life until he notices gaps in his day-to-day existence and discovers the incredible truth: he is the main character in a tv soap opera and reality show and all the people around him, including his wife, are actors playing a part.

The web is emblematic of this growing lack of differentiation. I have shown elsewhere (Renard, 2002) that the internet is tending to make verified information and rumours, fiction and reality, indistinguishable. This is also true of human being and machine (computer programs simulate human presence), distinctions of age, social position and sex (40 percent of those taking part in chatrooms and online games conceal their true sexual identity),⁸ and separation between private and public life (webcam showing private life).

The fantasy series *X-Files* (1993–2000), in which some characters (for instance ‘the smoking man’) symbolize those mysterious people who have an occult power over government, demonstrates the popularity of conspiracy themes in the American and western imaginary. From a more realistic perspective, inspired by true incidents that affected the US president, we could cite the film *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, USA, 1997). The screenplay relates how in the White House the president’s re-election is threatened by a sex scandal: in order to distract people’s attention and rebuild Americans’ confidence in their president a political adviser gets together with a Hollywood director to put out the rumour of a war by fabricating pictures.

I agree with Inglehart’s conclusions (1987) when he says that postwar generations in western societies are more inclined than the previous ones to mistrust those who govern them. Because it does not provide a stable system for categorizing the real, postmodern society is left with having to encourage denying and conspiracy ideas.

Jean-Bruno Renard

University of Montpellier III

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. Taken from <http://www.chez.com/napoleon1804/ney.htm> in February 2003.
2. Taken from <http://www.asett.com> in February 2003.
3. Taken from <http://www2.canoe.com/artsetculture/grosplans/insolite/archives/2001/12/20011203-154148.html> in February 2003.
4. Taken from <http://.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/09/11entertainment/main521663.shtml> in February 2003.
5. See: <http://www.badastronomy.com>; <http://www.redzero.demon.co.uk/moonhoax/index.htm>.
6. Oliver Burkeman, ‘It’s official – US did land on moon’, *The Guardian*, 5 November 2002.
7. It is no coincidence that deniers have invented the words ‘Moongate’ and ‘Pentagate’.
8. Taken from <http://www.washington.edu/newsroom/news/2000archive/0500archive/k052200a.html> in September 2000.

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