

Number 54, November 14th 2011. ISSN 2031-0293

Aurore Van de Winkel

Brussels at the heart of urban legends?

Translation: Jane Corrigan

This article presents urban legends told in Brussels which reflect an urban imagination crossed with local characteristics. Presented as news items although their truthfulness is questionable, these stories mentioning Brussels tell of attacks or harm committed against an anonymous person or the friend of a friend, in everyday public spaces, places of constant coming and going, personal itineraries or familiar shops. These legends feature the confrontation with others, machines or nature, and present Brussels as a dangerous place where security is everybody's business. These legends serve as warnings and allow people to reassert their identity by designating scapegoats. The stories which take place in Brussels may, however, come from elsewhere and be told around the world. The places mentioned are lures intended to increase a feeling of proximity, affects and an identification with the characters. Brussels is featured as an empty shell with the same characteristics as every big city in industrialised western countries – an empty shell necessary for the contemporary imagination.

Aurore Van de Winkel has a doctorate in Information and Communication from the Université Catholique de Louvain (Belgium). She works in collaboration with the Institut Langage&Communication, and is also a visiting researcher at the Laboratoire Cultures et Sociétés en Europe at the Université de Strasbourg. She is the founder of Credentia, an international network of studies regarding belief (credentia-riec.net). She is specialised in the study of urban legends, rumours, stories, conspiracy theories and construction processes involved in the defence and spreading of secular beliefs.

Aurore Van de Winkel, +32(0)474 43 59 94, avandewinkel@yahoo.com

Christophe Mincke (Senior Editor), +32(0)2 211 78 22 / +32(0)473 21 02 65, mincke@fusl.ac.be



Introduction

1. Brussels is a city full of history and is at the heart of many traditional legends¹ whose share of truth and fiction we are more or less aware of thanks to the work of historians. As a city of one million inhabitants and capital of Belgium and Europe, with many sociocultural, ethnic and linguistic communities, it is also depicted in new stories, blurring the border between reality and imagination to the point of sometimes becoming a character in its own right. The documentary fiction film *Dossier B* (Schuiten, Peeters and Leguebe, 2002)² or the comic *Brüssel* by Benoît Peeters and François Schuiten (2008) telling of the existence of a parallel city corrupted by a desire for modernisation and progress to the detriment of its inhabitants, are two examples of this. These stories include historical elements, events or characters, such as the destruction of impoverished neighbourhoods in the city centre in order to build the North-South railway junction, or the kidnapping of then prime minister Paul Van den Boeynants, and integrate them into a work of fiction highlighting the paranormal.
2. Brussels is also the scene of urban legends which are told as anecdotes by people who believe that they are at least partly true. Their truthfulness is, however, questionable.
3. What are the contemporary legends which are told in the city's 19 municipalities? Which category of urban legend do they belong to? What can they teach us about our capital city and the concerns of its

inhabitants and their needs? Do they have special characteristics with respect to stories of this type which are told in other cities?

4. This article first presents a definition of urban legends and the approach used to study them, and then examines the different types of story told in Brussels and their main themes. It reveals what the telling of these stories can teach us about the intentions of their subjects/tellers and the effectiveness attributed to them by the latter. Finally, it will discuss how these stories describe the capital and the way it is represented.

What is an urban legend?

5. Jean-Bruno Renard (1999) defines an urban legend as an *anonymous story with many variations, which is short, has a surprising content and is told as though it is true and recent in a social environment whose fears and aspirations it expresses*.
6. Contrary to a traditional legend, an urban legend is not linked to a place or a chosen and well-known character. It does not use fiction to tell of historical events in connection with a specific place, but rather the experiences of an often anonymous figure in the heart of the contemporary world, making use of latent and recent current events.
7. While traditional legends are linked to a strongly traditional society characterised by firm regional and community roots, a dominant rural environment and an agricultural economy, urban legends are linked to

¹ Manneken-Pis, Meiboom, Saint Michael and the Dragon, t'Serclaes, etc.

² According to this documentary fiction inspired by a book from the 1960s which cannot be found, there are 'passages' in the capital which allow one to access a parallel city. A sect made up of politicians and influential architects aims to destroy Brussels in order to build a utopian city.

our so-called 'modern' society.³ The diversification of interests and lifestyle choices of people in the 20th and 21st centuries has been accompanied among others by a loosening of traditional social ties and a rapid shattering of values, thus calling them into question. These many changes could not take place without ambivalences which, among others, are expressed in urban legends.

8. The internationalisation of exchanges, multiculturalism, the urban environment, the appearance of heterogeneous sub-groups in the same place, the development of the media, the increase in the number of fictions as well as the growing mobility of populations have had an impact on their circulation, allowing them to transcend borders and time.

9. Although we may understand the differences between these two narrative genres, we cannot ignore their similarities. Urban legends may make use of motifs found in traditional stories, yet they may also create new ones, such as those related to new technologies, for example.

Why 'urban'?

10. There is no consensus on the term 'urban legends'. This expression was coined by Jan Harold Brunvand, American folklorist and pro-

lific writer. 'Urban' should be understood as 'modern', in the sense that the city could be considered as the emblem of modernity, given the increasingly important role it plays in industrialised western countries. But some legends take place in the countryside or on motorways, and most of them have a long history, even if the events described in the stories are contemporary with respect to their subjects/tellers.

11. Different terms have been used to designate this narrative genre: *apocryphal anecdotes*, *urban myths*, *belief tales*, *modern legends*, *city folk legends*, etc.

12. Many people prefer speaking of 'contemporary legends'. In France, specialists use the term 'rumours'.⁴

13. While the city is not always the setting for these stories, it is nevertheless often present. In this limited space, different populations meet, mix and intermingle. Each community brings its own culture, symbolism and features. The inhabitants of a city also develop their own collective identity – an urban identity. According to Anne Raulin (2001), '*cities play [...] a major role in the formation of contemporary identities, linking this dimension to concrete places: a city creates not only a specific setting, but also a group of practices and representations; it becomes rooted in reality as well as in the imagination, kept alive through an emblem or a symbolism of its own.*'

³ We adhere to the theory upheld by Arjun Appadurai which contests the idea – supported by Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Ferdinand Toennies, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, among others – that the 'modern moment' existed: a single moment which caused a dramatic and unprecedented break between the past and the present. This idea was understood by some as the moment when a break occurred between tradition and modernity. It was used to distinguish between supposedly traditional and modern societies. Cf. Arjun APPADURAI, *Après le colonialisme. Les conséquences culturelles de la globalisation*, France, Payot & Rivages, 2001, p. 27.

Our belief is that modernity appeared by fits and starts in a non-linear process. All societies still mix different traditions and modernities to various degrees. We therefore understand 'modern societies' to mean societies which implement more and more changes and breaks with their different traditions in their socioeconomic, cultural and political dimensions. This would explain why there is an overlapping of traditional and urban legends and why it may be difficult to distinguish between these two genres. Certain authors speak of 'post-modernity' or 'sur-modernity'. This conceptual debate goes beyond the framework of this article.

⁴ In our opinion, a rumour is different from an urban legend because it is connected with a personality (mental or physical) or a person who is known by the subjects/tellers, is not structured as a story but instead as a piece of information, and may be verified more easily. The person who is targeted is important, whereas in the case of an urban legend, the event is important.

Semio-pragmatic analysis as a method

14. During our doctoral research, we randomly gathered hundreds of written urban legends from leaflets, blogs, specialised or non-specialised websites, forums, emails, newspaper articles and academic works dealing with the subject. We studied them according to a semio-pragmatic analysis allowing us to reveal the possible intentions, identity and relationship of the subjects/tellers of these stories through the identification of approximately twenty elements, in their form and content.⁵

15. We established a theoretical framework in view of obtaining the most pertinent interpretation possible of what was said and the context which could be deduced from it. We therefore identified approximately twenty semio-pragmatic indicators in the urban legends (characteristics of the mechanism used to tell the story through the identification of the paratext, the writing style, traces of humour and polyphony, ellipses, personal, temporal and spatial devices, modalisers,⁶ language acts with an influence on the identification or the rejection of the teller and certain characters, etc.), as well as narrative indicators (study of the relationships between the actants and with the narrator according to the Greimas actantial model) and semantic indicators (connotation, highlighting of certain words by autonymic modalisation, presence of metaphors, metonymies, specialised, obsolete or uncommon expressions, etc.). We also analysed the characteristics of the cognitive mechanism proposed by the message to the recipient and the degree of participation of the latter in the elaboration of the story's meaning, by analysing the inferences that the reader must make in order to understand what is told as well as the representations, models and scenarios which are referred to.

16. These indicators allowed us to determine the position and role attributed to the teller and the recipient as part of the interaction in-

involved in the mechanism used to tell the story, the explicit and implicit intentions of the teller as well as the purposes of the message.

17. The results of this analysis, coupled with interdisciplinary research based on studies in sociology, psychosociology, cognitive sciences and anthropology dealing with similar subjects, finally allowed us to better understand the cognitive and psychosociological mechanisms which lead to a reinforcement of belief, adherence to what is told, the will to spread the legend as well as the possible effects of its narration on the relationship and the composition of the identity of the communication partners.

Five prototypes

18. Our analysis allowed us to distinguish five different prototypes of legend according to the main character highlighted, the narrator's objectives, the role attributed to the reader and the implicit message of the story:

19. Firstly, the warning legend, which is very common, presents a character who is the innocent victim of an opponent (crooks, murderers, terrorists, etc. but also wild animals and new technologies). The narrator informs and warns his or her community of the existence of this danger, advises and asks readers to warn others of the latent threat. This type of legend transmits a negative warning message with respect to the dangerous outside world followed by a positive message of mutual aid related to the spreading of the story.

20. Secondly, the moralising legend, which is a little less common, tells the story of an individual who, by seeking pleasure or success, commits a careless, immoral or condemnable act and is punished for it (deviant sexual practices, infidelity, etc.). The consequences of his or her behaviour lead to shame, suffering or death. The narrator becomes

⁵ In this article, we shall discuss only the conclusions and pertinent elements from the results of our analysis in order for it to be clear, relevant and concise. The method and complete results of the analysis may be found in the thesis by A. VAN DE WINKEL, *Communication, croyance et construction identitaire : le cas des légendes urbaines. Analyse sémio-pragmatique de récits légendaires urbains*, Louvain-la-Neuve, UCL, 2009.

⁶ Signs of the teller's judgment regarding what is being told.

moralising: by mentioning the harmful consequences of this type of behaviour and by making fun of the main character, he or she leads the members of his or her community who share the same values to reject this anti-hero and to adopt the opposite behaviour. While these stories are referred to as moralising, they are however not moral, as they may contain remarks which are racist or discriminatory with respect to women, the elderly or marginal people.

21. Thirdly, the revenge legend tells the story of an individual who was attacked, conned or betrayed by an opponent but who ends up taking revenge in an intelligent or humorous way. The subjects/tellers are important as they contribute to the revenge by spreading the story and thus its moral values.

22. Fourthly, the cynical legend, which is the least common, presents a character who disobeys the rules of politeness, respect or authority in order to achieve success and put down a figure of authority (an employer, a professor, a parent, etc.) who is supposed to ensure that he or she follows the rules imposed by society. But due to the character's cheek, he or she is able to obtain what he or she wants in an immoral way without being punished. The implicit message of this type of story is that it pays to be cheeky and that there are ways to get round the rules honourably. By spreading this story, one appropriates this victory.

23. Finally, the mystery legend tells a surprising story which happens to some unknown person, leaving the reader in doubt and full of questions about the mysteries of life. The story tells of the presence and acts of an animal, object, phenomenon or being with 'abnormal' characteristics. The teller is only able to provide information about the existence of the phenomenon and cannot provide advice regarding what to do about it. The implicit message of this type of story is that 'the paranormal exists'.

24. A story can go from one type to another by adapting to all sorts of context, interaction and subject/teller. The latter have an impact on the content of the urban legend. In addition to the appropriation of the content through these modifications – according to their personal story, experience, characteristics, context of the interaction, audience as well as their relationship with the audience – they may also choose which implicit message to highlight.

Urban legends in Brussels

25. Various urban legends are told in Brussels. We have chosen from our collection those which explicitly mention a location in the capital.⁷ It is interesting to note that the vast majority of them are the most common type of legend, i.e. warning legends. We shall, however, present two moralising legends as well. Legends of other types are also told in the city but do not mention it explicitly.

26. These stories present the capital either as a very dangerous place where attacks and confrontations with others are a common occurrence, or as a place where people have no morals. Attacks, contaminated food, dangers of new technologies or dangerous animals are the main themes of these stories.

27. Several variations of *The Perfume* legend have been told since 1999 on the internet, most of the time via email.⁸ It explains that a woman who was shopping in Rue Neuve (a busy shopping street in Brussels) was approached by men who were selling a luxury perfume at a low price. She followed them into a quiet alley to smell the fragrance from the famous perfume bottle. Unfortunately, it was not perfume but rather ether⁹ and she fainted. The men then took the oppor-

⁷ As urban legends are spread via many different media, it is impossible to determine with certainty how often they appear or the number of people who know them and credit them to a given city. These stories also have multiple themes. We therefore did not take these criteria into account in order to select the ones presented in this article.

⁸ Some of their variations are communicated and dissected on the specialised websites *hoaxbuster.com* and *snopes.com* : <http://www.foxbuster.com/hoaxliste/hoax_message.php?idArticle=10230>, last consultation on 4 May 2010, <<http://www.snopes.com/horror/robbery/perfume.htm>>, last consultation on 10 May 2010. The comments of internet users provide us with information about the places where the legend is established, how much people believe what is said and their reactions to it.

⁹ A small amount of ether will not put an adult to sleep. In order to achieve the desired result, a large amount is required.

tunity to steal her bag and *God knows what else they could have done to her*. The message ends with the warning: *PLEASE SEND THIS MESSAGE TO ALL OF YOUR FEMALE FRIENDS, AND BEWARE! THIS APPLIES TO MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS, GRANDMOTHERS, AUNTS, SISTERS AND GIRLFRIENDS. IF YOU ARE A MAN, SEND THIS MESSAGE TO YOUR FAMILIES AND FEMALE FRIENDS.*

28. The semio-pragmatic analysis of this story reveals that the aim of this message is to warn female friends and family members of a potential danger which they may encounter. The person who sends the message thus becomes their potential saviour and informs them that he or she is concerned about their health and safety. He or she urges others to do the same. In order to emphasise the importance of spreading the message, the narrator refers to rape as well as theft. The person who refuses to send this warning might therefore appear to be egotistical and unaware of the danger. This legend has a hidden message: the story informs us in an implicit and caricatured manner that only women could be tempted by cheap perfume and naive enough to follow strangers into a dark alley. The men who belong to the group of subjects/tellers of the story are placed by the teller in the role of potential saviour.

29. This urban legend is still being told in France, Quebec, Switzerland and Spain. Certain modifications of the text have been identified by the sceptics at *Hoaxbuster.com*: Rue Neuve or a shopping centre in Brussels have been replaced by a Fairview shopping centre in the United States and Canada, a Walmart, an Auchan supermarket, a Parly2 or a

Carrefour in France. The mention of a police constable vouching for the story was noted in Switzerland as well as that of a lawyer in France. The opponents were sometimes foreigners (in Belgium), women (in the United States) or Raelians¹⁰ in France. The ether has also been replaced by a euphoria-producing drug and the car park or the quiet alley, by a Parisian taxi.

30. The *Hitchhiker with Hairy Hands*¹¹ is another story which takes place in another well-known place in Brussels, but this time in relation to an item in the Belgian news. It has been told in Belgium since June 2000, and the *Nouvelle Gazette* mentioned it again in August 2009.¹² This story tells of the misadventure of a young woman driving an elderly woman home from Kinopolis, located at the Heyzel site. The elderly woman ends up being a serial killer in disguise (the '*Dépeceur de Mons*', or the '*Mons Ripper*'¹³). The young woman was able to escape by confounding him regarding his hands and by causing an accident with a bus.

31. The reader of the story is able to identify with the victim – the friend of a friend – and infer what could have happened to the young woman if she had not escaped: by using the information provided in the story – such as the chainsaw in the boot of the car – and his or her own knowledge of the murderer's crimes as described in the news, for example, he or she can imagine the murder scenario. The lack of information about the victim's feelings when faced with the killer may also lead the reader to speculate about what she may have felt and about the psychological consequences of this situation. The narrator presents

¹⁰ Members of the Raelian religion, led by Raël. They believe that humans are the descendents of extraterrestrials. They are known, among others, for claiming to have successfully cloned a human being.

¹¹ <<http://rocbo.chez.tiscali.fr/free/hoaxes/hoax.htm>>, last consultation on 4 March 2009 ; V. CAMPION-VINCENT, J.-B. RENARD, *De source sûre. Nouvelles rumeurs d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, Payot, 2005, pp. 255-258 ; <<http://www.hoaxbuster.com/hoaxliste/hoax.php?idArticle=2050>>, last consultation on 2 September 2010.

¹² <http://www.lanouvellegazette.be>, last consultation on 1 September 2010.

¹³ The '*Dépeceur de Mons*' (or the '*Mons Ripper*') is the name given by the Belgian press to the unidentified murderer who killed several women and cut them into pieces in the region of Mons, Belgium between 1993 and 2001. The murderer – whose name has a strong symbolic impact and who is mentioned in this legend – in reality has not yet been arrested. According to the website *hoaxbuster.com*, the Belgian newspapers still mention his reappearance as a miscellaneous event and the special investigation unit which handles this case has to deny these rumours regularly.

him/herself as a kind friend who warns his/her friends and family selflessly so that they will be careful and thankful for being warned and will go on to warn others themselves. This story explains implicitly that people are not always what they appear to be and that a monster might be hiding behind a reassuring image.¹⁴ Thankfully, in the many versions of this story, the victim always escapes!

32. This story is told in Brussels, but was not created in this city. It was also heard in England in the 1970s and has been told in the United States since the mid 1980s. This legend often reappears when a serial killer commits wrongdoings. In 1977, it featured the 'Yorkshire Ripper'. Anecdotes about highwaymen disguised as women were told as early as 1834 in England. Cars were replaced by horse-drawn carriages, the woman was a thief in disguise and the victim was a man. But the tell-tale hairiness, the ruse and the discovery of weapons were identical. This legend therefore makes use of very old archetypes and adds contemporary elements for the action to take place in Brussels.

33. In 2002, the Rogier metro station was also the setting for attacks, with the story of a young girl who was attacked by young foreigners who slashed her entire face, cutting her facial muscles so that she could not speak. In another version, the attackers asked her if she preferred rape or the 'angel's smile'. When the young girl chose the latter, they cut the corners of her mouth and punched her, causing her to yell and tear her mouth. Once again, in this legend there is an identification with the victim and the rejection of the opponent, i.e. the attacker. By spreading the story, the teller meets the same need to protect women who are close to him or her. And as with the previous story, this one was also refuted.

34. At the time, the free newspaper *Metro* as well as the newspaper *Sudpresse* (Gochel, 2002) declared that this 'rumour' had been

spreading since the beginning of the 2002 school year, not only in Brussels but also in the schools in and around Liège, in the region of Namur and in a few other Walloon cities. However, nothing was reported to the police and the hospitals had not dealt with such a case.

35. The *Ikea Abduction*¹⁵ story tells of the kidnapping of the daughter of a friend at IKEA in Anderlecht. After locking the doors and searching the premises, the security guards found the child shaved and drugged in the toilets. The story has been circulating by email since October 2005. The reader is led to infer what could have happened to the victim if the kidnappers had been successful. The narrator does not say why the child was abducted but Belgian readers who are influenced by relatively recent national news can make the link with affairs of paedophilia.

36. The implicit messages of the legend are that one should always keep an eye on one's children even when they are well behaved, and that criminals are everywhere, even in places which appear to be safe such as a shop where families go. However, it is reassuring to spread this message because it is considered as a prevention of this type of act.

37. *For once*,¹⁶ the police and the shop's staff reacted in an efficient way, but the narrator underlines the fact that there was no 'publicity' about this type of abduction, which is apparently so common that big shops have already come up with procedures to deal with it efficiently. The plot theory thus emerges. In the legend, the narrator justifies the lack of media coverage by declaring that the investigators want to arrest the members of a new network of kidnappers, which implies that they are allowing these schemes to continue with the risk that there will be new victims, only in order to make progress with their case. In this story, the kidnappers were arrested despite the fact that there was nothing which allowed them to be distinguished from the other clients.

¹⁴ This theme is used frequently in fairytales, such as the disguised wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*, for example.

¹⁵ <http://www.hoaxbuster.com/hoaxliste/hoax_message.php?idArticle=42284>, last consultation on 28 September 2010 ; H. DELFORGE, 'Info ou intoax', *Flair*, 22 February 2006, p. 36.

¹⁶ <http://www.hoaxbuster.com/hoaxliste/hoax_message.php?idArticle=42284>

The Belgian Dutroux case emphasises the plausibility of this legend, as there was nothing distinctive about the paedophile Marc Dutroux which could have been a sign of his tendencies: he was a married man and father, a heterosexual, white and Christian, which are commonplace characteristics in this country.

38. IKEA had to refute this legend, saying that this 'rumour'¹⁷ was groundless and that it was probably the work of a bad joker or an ill-intentioned person who wished to conspire against the company's image.¹⁸ However, the comments about prevention at the end of the story lead us to assume that the subjects/tellers were far from wanting to be malevolent, and instead wanted to provide mutual help and advice to their friends and families. Similar legends have been told since the 1980s for the oral version, and since 1999 for the internet version. The Belgian press, in particular *La Dernière heure*,¹⁹ seized it in 2005 to publish a denial, and *La Libre Belgique*²⁰ linked the story to organ trafficking.

39. Legends about the kidnapping of children who were found just in time in the fitting rooms or toilets of hypermarkets were also told in Belgium (Messancy, Wépion, Bouge, Namur, La Louvière and above all Châtelineau, probably because of the population's strong identification with the parents of the victims in the Dutroux affair) in summer 1995.

40. Children are not the only victims of kidnappings in Brussels: women are as well. A legend similar to the 'Orléans rumour' studied by Edgar Morin (1969), affirmed that young women who were trying on clothes in a shop disappeared in the fitting rooms and were sent abroad as part of the white slave trade. This legend was told in the 1960s in Brussels. At the time it was about a shop called Samdam in

the Rue des Fripiers,²¹ and the victims were sent to Morocco (Top, 1990). This legend existed in France from 1955 until the 1980s. An unexpected consequence of this story according to Edgar Morin (1969), is that while many young women stopped going to the shops in question or did not go unaccompanied, others rushed to them, hoping to witness an adventure of this type.

41. In the same vein, Mr H.,²² an employee at STIB – the Brussels public transport company – told us that people had informed the company by telephone and post of the disappearance of women in the coin-operated public toilets of metro stations. The STIB verified these allegations but only found cases of electric disturbance of the door opening mechanism. The telephone calls and letters poured in once again, saying that the kidnappers had attached a big pipe to the toilet to pull the women down to the sewer. A new verification led to the conclusion that the pipes were too small for a human body to go through them. The worried people replied that it was too late and that the kidnappers had put the small pipe back because they had enough women.

42. In the 1980s, the Anneessens metro station had a bad reputation. It was said that people were put to sleep with chloroform late at night, and woke up to find that one of their kidneys had been stolen by organ traffickers!

43. Urban violence and attackers (always men) therefore represent the main theme of urban legends which take place in Brussels. The victims are usually women and children who are attacked, robbed or kidnapped, and the subject/teller of the urban legend plays the role of saviour who warns a potential victim of the dangers in the city. Information

¹⁷ Term used by Anne-Françoise d'Aoust – company spokesperson responsible for public relations in Belgium – in reference to the story.

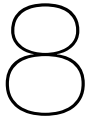
¹⁸ The chain did in fact experience a loss of customers following the diffusion of this urban legend.

¹⁹ K.F., 'Fausse tentative de rapt chez Ikea', *La Dernière Heure*, 12 October 2005.

²⁰ R.P., 'Des tentatives de rapt d'enfants chez Ikea...', *La Libre Belgique*, 11 November 2005, <http://www.lalibre.be/article.php?id=10&subid=90&art_id=250346>

²¹ It was also told in Tienen.

²² Mr H. – whose identity we shall not reveal – was a dispatcher for this company at the time this legend was told. He told the author of this article the story during a telephone conversation on 15 March 2005.



becomes synonymous with protection. The stories of the kidnapping of women for forced prostitution have decreased following the easing of moral standards and have been replaced by organ trafficking and child abduction.

44. The attacker sometimes targets the food we eat. Influenced by neophobia – the fear of new things, especially in our culinary habits at a time when we have lost individual control of food production and distribution chains – and by a context of food-related scandals (mad cow, bird flu, etc.), legends concerning restaurants and fast food restaurants are widespread in Brussels. For example, in a snack bar in Rue du Marché aux Fromages (better known as Rue des Pitas), the staff are said to ejaculate in the white sauce. This story reflects a fear of a lack of hygiene and a racist attitude towards Turks or Greeks who own most of the restaurants in this street. The readers are invited by the teller to boycott these restaurants in order to preserve their health.

45. New technologies also cause some concern: at the end of the 1990s in Brussels, a student at Université Libre de Bruxelles had his arm torn off by a new automatic food distributor next to the campus. This legend emerged after Delhaize had installed distributors offering a wide selection of food and essential items.

46. But the danger does not only come from others or from machines: nature confronts us with frightening animals which city dwellers are not used to. During a student job in the *Food Import* unit of the company Carrefour in Evere in September 2001, the author was told that invoices from faraway countries were kept sealed in a fridge because some of them contained insect eggs. The staff had established this practice since a secretary on the 7th floor had had a big spot on her hand which turned out to be an exotic spider's nest!

47. And spiders from warm countries are not only found in the workplace, but also in people's homes. A seller in an artificial plant shop told the story of a young woman who had bought a yucca. She noticed that when she watered it the plant seemed to come to life and its leaves quivered. She was worried and sought help: the fire brigade, the police or a specialist from the Museum of Natural Science ordered her to get to a safe place and took the plant to be burnt because it contained

trapdoor spiders whose venom could have killed her. According to Véronique Champion-Vincent, these creatures may represent untamed nature or the foreigner. These stories may have the effect of making the inhabitants of Brussels wary of their presence in their daily lives and the dangers related to them.

48. This urban legend was first heard in northern Europe in the 1970s, and was at its peak in the 1980s with the version featuring the yucca, a decorative plant which had become very popular. It was spread on the internet in 1997 and was also told in Germany, Sweden, Scandinavia, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. The consequences of this story were in particular a huge drop in yucca sales and a significant loss of income for shopkeepers.

49. While this story may be considered to be a warning legend, others – with the same theme but a different approach by the teller – may enter the category of moralising legend. It is therefore a person's ridiculous behaviour which allows a creature to get into his or her body, as we see in the example below.

50. In the 1990s, a hairdresser in Ganshoren told the story of an elderly woman who came to her hair salon and who liked to crimp her hair to put it into a bun. She had been suffering from itching sensations for some time, and upon opening her bun, the hairdresser was surprised to find a spider's nest, with tiny spiders eating the woman's scalp. The teller is not trying to warn an innocent victim of a danger, but instead distances him/herself from the main character. He or she rejects her behaviour, namely her interest in her appearance which is associated with dirtiness, and presents its disastrous and unenviable consequences. The elderly woman is at fault and the teller rejects or even makes fun of her, implicitly advising the reader not to make the same mistakes. Laughing or being disgusted about the same misfortune has the effect of placing the teller and reader in the same community of judgment. In this case, the communication partners are no longer in a potential saviour/victim relationship but rather a moraliser/moralised relationship.

51. This story – which is told in an autobiographical manner – is in fact an urban legend which has existed since the 1950s, in particular in

England. The hairdresser and the hairstyle change with the fashions, but interest in one's appearance and dirtiness are always criticised.

52. While animals are sometimes considered to be the attackers, in certain legends people are violent towards them. For example, it is said that there are no longer any donkeys in Josaphat Park since a police constable caught a Turk in the middle of a sexual act with one of them. Indicators such as ellipses, associations of favoured ideas, irony, etc. show that this other moralising legend with strong racist undertones also emphasises the immoral nature of this behaviour, and implicitly leads the subjects/tellers to reject the offender by making fun of him and by being disgusted by his acts. The foreign identity of the anti-hero in particular allows one to distance oneself from him and to identify more with the police constable or the narrator, who seem to share the same conservative sexual values which are dominant in contemporary society.

The effectiveness of urban legends

53. As we have seen, by mixing reality and fiction, symbolism and rationality, imagination and current events, urban legends tell of the transgression of standards (moral, natural, legal, etc.) which regulate the relationships between people or between people and nature. They also tell of the reactions resulting from this transgression (solidarity, suppression, prevention, fear, etc.). These stories are entertaining in particular because some of them are funny. However, they also have the effect of giving a meaning to events, offering advice or reducing anxiety by indicating a danger as well as the time and place of its occurrence. As such, they meet a need for certainty and predictability. These stories reflect authentic social problems of today's world such as racism, the inability to tame nature and urban insecurity. They create meaning and support values such as mutual help or security. They uphold customs – such as sexual practices between humans rather than with animals, or the use of prevention to counter violence. These customs are advocated in all legends by the identification with the valued characters or the rejection of those who are made fun of or despised by the narrator.

54. Providing information, warning others of a danger and forbidding or condemning behaviour are the messages which these warning and moralising urban legends may contain. But they all call on the solidarity of the members of a group of people (that of the subjects/tellers), remind them of its existence and its values which are most often conservative, and increase the feeling of belonging among its members by getting them to participate in the group by spreading the story. They also allow identity building and reassertion as there are always two groups in opposition in the story: the first is that of the valued character (for example, the innocent victim in warning legends) as well as that of the narrators of the urban legend and the recipients of the story, who share moral values and the same humour. This group is in opposition with a group which is criticised, represented by the anti-hero or opponent in the story (the deviant), a scapegoat chosen according to the story and the political, socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of the subjects/tellers of the legend. It is in the refusal to identify with this other community that the latter may assert themselves. In the stories presented in this article, the scapegoat is often the foreigner, thus revealing by opposition the identity of the subjects/tellers who are natives of Brussels or who belong to another sociocultural or ethnic community: non-Turks could tell the legend about the donkey in Josaphat Park as is, whereas Turks could change the identity of the offender during the narration of the story in order not to belittle themselves by extension.

55. As the stories presented take place in Brussels in order to favour an identification with the characters, we may therefore note that the subjects/tellers seem to identify with them as inhabitants of Brussels who are sensible, show solidarity, have conservative values and are concerned about their security with respect to others as well as to nature or new technologies.

56. The subjects/tellers of these stories may spread them and urge others to do the same. When the danger seems near, is physical and concerns a large part of the community, certain subjects/tellers may notify the authorities, avoid the places, products or people in question and become more careful and mistrustful. This behaviour may have economic, sociocultural or even political consequences. The shops

implicated in the stories of child abduction therefore experienced a loss of customers which had an impact on their turnover. Certain stories which refer to the offender in terms of ethnic or national identity may be used when expressing hateful views in order to reinforce fears.

57. Although the warning stories call upon a sense of fear, we are not aware of any extreme panic caused by the events described in Brussels and only journalists who have published denials have asked the police for explanations. Véronique Campion-Vincent (1990) explains that this is due to the fact that the general public have a perception of these events which is both intermittent (it is not a constant concern but one which appears randomly with current events) and indirect (it is through other people or the media that a person becomes aware of the event). In any case, nobody knows a person who has actually experienced such an event!

58. In addition, we were not able to find Brussels news items about attempts by people to imitate the scenarios of these stories. As indicated by Véronique Campion-Vincent and Jean-Bruno Renard (2005), this phenomenon – which is referred to as ostension – has allowed unscrupulous people in the United States to attempt to claim damages by saying that they found a mouse in a soft drink bottle, for example. It is, however, much more difficult to assess the impact of these urban legends on the sociocultural stereotypes of subjects/tellers. A person with racist tendencies who hears urban legends which attribute illegal acts to foreigners might feel more justified in mistrusting the latter.

The representation of the city

59. Urban legends which take place in Brussels describe events which are supposed to have happened in modern settings where people are in close contact with other people whom they have not chosen, being unable to escape this forced sociability and foreseeable but uncontrollable encounters with other groups of people. The inhabitants of Brussels are in semi-public or public spaces every day, in places of constant coming and going and as part of their personal itineraries (metro, public toilets, cinemas, restaurants, shops, sewers, etc.), and which are well

known. They are non-places according to Marc Augé (1992): urban places whose symbolism, identity and historical content is poor. And it is in these identifiable places that the main character – an ordinary person – is confronted with the dangerousness of encounters with others and with violence, which is most often physical.

60. These stories therefore do not take place in old or historical places (cultural heritage sites) such as the Palais de Justice, the Grand Place, etc. which already appear in traditional legends or novels.

61. While certain parts of Brussels are explicitly named in the urban legends discussed in this article, we have seen, however, that the same stories have travelled and have taken place or will take place in other cities, regions or countries. As they move from one city to another, all of these legends adapt to the new environment in which they will circulate and to their new subjects/tellers, while keeping their main scenario and narrative structure. This is what happened with our examples as they adapted to Brussels by mentioning well-known places in the city and by changing some guarantees of authenticity or even the identity of the belittled character. This allows legends to be internationalised while allowing readers to maintain a feeling of proximity with the events and the characters presented in them. This feeling will, among others, allow the recipients of the story to identify with the latter, favouring some of their affects such as fear and influencing their reactions and acts. However, this has a significant impact on the representation of the city in these stories. Brussels acquires an impersonal identity as none of its specificities are used in the scenario of these stories. In the legends presented here, it was not because it was Brussels that the events took place. They took place in the city so that the subjects/tellers who live there could refer to familiar places.

Conclusion

62. We have seen that the contemporary legends which are told in Brussels are very similar to those which exist in major European or North American cities.²³ The same places are presented: non-places (places of constant coming and going, public transport, car parks, sewers, etc.) or well-known shops. Only the names of these places change, referring to the most popular places in Brussels or places familiar to the subjects/tellers such as small shops or the workplace. The historical or cultural heritage sites, which often appear in traditional legends, are not included in our collection. In these public or semi-public places, the inhabitants encounter different communities and must co-exist with them. According to Michel-Louis Rouquette (2006), '*Rumours*²⁴ arise – sometimes to describe and sometimes to explain what threatens, deviates, deteriorates or escapes – in a semi-public space which is defined by the implicit memory of social relationships and is organised according to the economy of practical knowledge.

63. Due to a fear of danger and a desire to show their friends and families that they wish to protect them, the inhabitants of Brussels have therefore taken urban legends from other European or North American cities and have 'Brusselised' them by bringing the action close, as the danger must be described as well as localised in order to increase the feeling of control. Brussels therefore acquires the identity of a city where insecurity prevails, with the coexistence of many communities with a high level of solidarity. However, contrary to New York or other big American cities, stories with a fantastic or mysterious dimension do not exist in Brussels, such as Bloody Mary or Candyman,²⁵ which are such a well-known part of American folklore that they are difficult to export. A selection of stories has therefore taken place, and only those which are compatible with our city are told, leaving the supernatural to novels, tales and traditional legends.

²³ Few studies have been conducted on the stories told in southern countries.

²⁴ This author uses the word 'rumour' as a synonym of 'urban legend'.

²⁵ These legends explain that when a person repeats the name Candyman five times in front of the bathroom mirror, the latter appears suddenly and kills whoever is there in order to take revenge for his own death. He was a man of African origin who had a hook in place of one of his hands. Young white racists chased him with a beehive full of bees which ended up killing him. This legend is similar to that of Bloody Mary.

Bibliography

- APPADURAI, A., 2001, *Après le colonialisme. Les conséquences culturelles de la globalisation*, France, Payot & Rivages.
- AUGÉ, M., 1992, *Non-lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Paris, Le Seuil.
- CAMPION-VINCENT, V., 1990, 'Situations d'incertitude et rumeurs: disparitions et meurtres d'enfants', *Communications*, n°52, pp. 51-52.
- CAMPION-VINCENT, V., RENARD, J.-B., 2005, *De source sûre. Nouvelles rumeurs d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, Payot.
- DELFORGE, H., 2006, 'Info ou inthoax', *Flair*, 22 February, p. 36.
- F. K., 2005, 'Fausse tentative de rapt chez Ikea', *La Dernière Heure*, 12 October, p. 5.
- GOCHEL, L., 2002, 'Rumeur du "Sourire de l'Ange": démenti formel', *Sudpresse*, Tuesday 22 October, p. 12.
- MEUNIER, J.-P., PERAYA, D., 2004, *Introduction aux théories de la COMMUNICATION. Analyse sémio-pragmatique de la communication médiatique*, Brussels, De Boeck Université, 2nd edition.
- MORIN, E. et al., 1969, *La Rumeur d'Orléans*, Paris, Seuil.
- P.R., 2005, 'Des tentatives de rapt d'enfants chez Ikea...', *La Libre Belgique*, 11 November, in http://www.lalibre.be/article.phtml?id=10&subid=90&art_id=250346
- RAULIN, A., 2001, *Anthropologie urbaine*, Paris, Armand Colin, coll. Cursus Sociologie.

- RENARD, J.-B., 1999, *Rumeurs et légendes urbaines*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, coll. Que sais-je ?
- ROUQUETTE, M.-L., 2006, 'Théorie des rumeurs et théorie des problèmes', *Diogène*, n°213, January-March, pp. 46-53.
- SCHUITEN, F., PEETERS, B., LEGUEBE, W., 2002, *Le Dossier B*, Belgium, Les impressions nouvelles.
- SCHUITEN, F., PEETERS, B., 2008, *Les cités obscures. Brüssel.*, Casterman.
- TOP, S., 'Modern Legends in the Belgian Oral Tradition', 1990, *Fabula*, n°31 (3/4), pp. 272-278.
- VAN DE WINKEL, A., 2009, *Communication, croyance et construction identitaire : le cas des légendes urbaines. Analyse sémiopragmatique de récits légendaires urbaines*, UCL, Louvain-la-Neuve.

To cite this text

Aurore VAN DE WINKEL, « Brussels at the heart of urban legends? », *Brussels Studies*, Number 54, November 14th 2011, www.brusselsstudies.be

Links

Other versions of this text are available

ePub FR : <http://tinyurl.com/BRUS54FREPUBLIC>

ePub NL : <http://tinyurl.com/BRUS54NLEPUBLIC>

ePub EN : <http://tinyurl.com/BRUS54ENEPUBLIC>

pdf FR : <http://tinyurl.com/BRUS54FRPDF>

pdf NL : <http://tinyurl.com/BRUS54NLPDF>

pdf EN : <http://tinyurl.com/BRUS54ENPDF>

The videos published in *Brussels Studies* can be watched on the *Brussels Studies* Vimeo channel, available here :

<http://vimeo.com/channels/BruS>