

HONGJIN SONG

Semiotic Anatomy of Rumour:
Social Discourse, 'False Memory',
and Infection



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感谢我人生中出现的每一个人，
是你们使我的人生温柔而磅礴。

“A healthy society should not have only one voice”.
— Dr. Li Wenliang, 1986–2020

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0. INTRODUCTION

In *Chan-Kuo Ts'e*,¹ an early collection of dialogues and stratagems about important events in the Warring States period, there is a fable that most Chinese people have heard of in their childhood:

When P'ang Ts'ung² was to accompany Wei's heir, who was going as hostage to Han-tan,³ he spoke to the king of Wei before he left.

"If someone were to tell you there was a tiger in the marketplace, would you believe him, my lord?"

"No."

"If two people said there was a tiger in the market, would you believe them?"

"I should suspect something," replied the king.

"If three people should tell you there was a tiger, would you believe it?"

"I would." (Crump 1999: 17)

This petite, anecdotal rumour that the king believed in a non-existent tiger was one of the oldest examples of how rumours are generated and transmitted in the social sphere. Consisting of "unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements" (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007a: 13), rumour refers to the spread of misinformation or untruthful statements about what is happening in society. This phenomenon is even more prevalent in our modern times. Due to the development of digital media and our capability of receiving information from the social sphere, the world is both constructed and obscured by the information we receive every day from all kinds of sources. The truth has been hidden behind painted veils. Facts become confusing when tons of information and misinformation flood the public sphere. This "truth decay", as coined by Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael Rich (2018), points to a fact that we are reluctant to admit: rumours are infiltrating our lives, and our reality has become more fragile than ever before.

Rumour is not a modern invention. As the "oldest form of mass communication" (Kapferer 1990: 1), rumours have been living with us long since the advent of human languages, or even before it, since (mis)information is not only transmitted via languages. Once there are ways of encoding experienced reality, no matter what the encoding system is, there is a possibility of informational

¹ Also known as *Stratagems of the Warring States*, a book entitled and edited by Liu Xiang (77-6 BCE) on the stratagems and diplomacy of the countries in the Warring States period. The author of the book is unknown.

² Also known as P'ang Gong, an advisor of Wei's regime.

³ Han-tan was the capital city of Zhao, who was to be allied with Wei. During the era of Warring States, it was a common practice for the states to exchange the ruler's heirs to other countries as hostages to enhance the allegiance.

distortion in different forms, such as stretching, fogging and miraging (Kirk and Talbot 1959). The distortion of information at the technical level happens every time there is a transmission of information. Moreover, encoded messages being exchanged during communication converge to establish a semiotic reality that is related to, yet different from, the phenomenological reality that every living being on earth resides in. In other words, the semiotic reality created by acquiring symbolic systems helps living beings, especially humankind, reside in a “new dimension of reality” (Cassirer 1962: 43). But the advent of semiotic reality also presumes the possibility of “lying”, which is the mismatching of the representations of reality and the reality perceived by an addresser.

Yet rumours are more than that. Rumours are inevitable in every epoch of human history, as Françoise Reumaux noted:

With the advancement of time, we can associate rumor with human speech. It was the vehicle of news, in which extravagance was not surprising, as if it were legitimized by the extreme situations in which the first theoreticians of the phenomenon found them. (Reumaux 1996: 1, translation mine)⁴

The existence of rumours is not at all surprising because, as a phenomenon, they are already sedimented in culture, in the general corpus available to all members of society. Besides our everyday encounters with the world via our own flesh, an articulated form of reality is created for communication's sake: encoded messages are further communicated and decoded in the social sphere when communication happens and these speech acts function as social discourses at different levels of society. More importantly, these discourses do not fade away but sediment themselves as the context for further communications. All these discourses merge into an agglomeration and all these realities overlap to forge a multilayered social reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Rumour, at the meta level, thus appears as a category of social discourses, representing an alternative reality. These alternative realities are mingled together with each other in social discourses when information is exchanged in the social sphere. In this regard, all social discourses have the potential to become rumours under specific institutional and epistemic conditions; this will be the focus in the following pages.

Rumours have long been of research interest for societal scholars, especially during the 20th Century. However, systematic scholarship on rumours remains an underdeveloped enterprise: most of the rumour studies are case-based analyses and *ad hoc* theories regarding the case itself, not to mention that these analyses are set on presumed “stereotypes” against rumour, as Dan E. Miller observes in a tribute to Tamotsu Shibutani:

⁴ “En avançant dans le temps, on peut associer la rumeur à la parole humaine. Elle est alors porteuse de nouvelles dont l'extravagance n'étonne pas comme si celle-ci était légitimée par les situations extrêmes où les ont trouvées les premiers théoriciens du phénomène”.

[...] it is notable that very little strategic empirical research has been conducted on rumors as they occur in natural social settings. Although hundreds of studies have reported surface descriptions of the content of rumors and legends, this interest has not resulted in the development of a general theory of the rumor process. Consequently, most of the literature on rumor and urban legends remains superficial descriptions and explanations relying on prevailing stereotypical conceptualizations. (Miller 2005: 505)

The difficulty of studying rumour lies in the fact that rumours are at the same time too abundant and too scarce. By being abundant, rumours permeate our society; there are thousands of rumours exchanged every second in human society. The whole society is steeped in rumours at all levels. By being scarce, few rumours attract academic concern—most of them are ephemeral and are difficult to grasp since they come in different variants and mutate quickly. Fine and Ellis noted that “To study rumor is to accept a challenge. There is no central repository that tracks rumor. Rumors come and go, sometimes noticed and often ignored. Rumors are occasional, evanescent, and often private” (2010: 15). Rumours anchor the meaning of the perceived social reality in the same way as images are anchored with words relating to them (Barthes 1977a: 40). Yet this reality is not graspable since it is depicted by discourses *as if* the objective reality is readily available. Therefore, rumour discourses mutate and transform quickly. Catching rumours is like catching shadows. In order to catch them, we need “conceptualizing shadows” (Reumaux 1996: 3, translation mine),⁵ since shadows will appear only if we project light onto them.

0.1. The Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

Rumours have both visible parts and invisible parts in their totalities. On the one hand, they are transmitted in the social sphere. On the other hand, they are deeply rooted in the cultural context of given collectives. Rumour studies are compelled, then, to focus not only on how rumours are generated and transmitted, but also on the pre-generation stage of rumour, i.e. the social and the cultural context of rumour. That is, not only do we need to study the phenomenon of rumour in itself, but also “to link this fabric to the mythological fabric which is its frame” (Reumaux 1996: 16, translation mine).⁶

If we come back to the story “Three men make a tiger” above, we can distinguish six features that are interrelated in the incubation of a rumour, implicitly or explicitly following the order of rumour process:

⁵ “pour saisir la proie, il faudrait conceptuellement saisir l’ombre”.

⁶ “relier ce tissu au tissu mythologique qui en est la trame”.

1. Collective unconsciousness: a tiger is a powerful, dangerous animal;
2. Collective memory: tigers did eat humans according to experiences from the past;
3. “False memories”: it is said that there was a tiger in the marketplace;
4. Textual basis: a statement arising out of false memories is made and articulated in the social sphere;
5. Transmission: the statement travels through various individuals and social groups in the social sphere;
6. Reception: individuals and social groups believe in such statements in the social sphere.

First, 1, 2 and 3 focus on the invisible part of the rumour phenomenon, and 4, 5 and 6 on the visible part of it. For rumours, the invisible indicates their cultural backgrounds, social context and personal processing of memories perceived from the social sphere, which has not yet been articulated. This part is usually incorporated in the study of the visible parts of rumour phenomena in most of the academic works on this topic (For example, Peterson and Gist 1951; DiFonzo and Bordia 2007a; Allport and Postman 1947; Knapp 1944). Rumours present themselves as texts in the social sphere, the venue where understandings of reality are exchanged and shared, from which a social reality is constructed.⁷ Under most circumstances, rumours are a series of texts ready for transmission. However, all texts have their roots in other texts in synchrony and diachrony. These texts either function as texts and construct an intertextual network, or function as contexts that help make sense of the presented text. As Lotman (1988: 54) noted, texts in the social sphere have a tendency to “integration” and “disintegration”. Rumour texts are generated intertextually with other supportive texts and with “disintegrated” texts functioning both as the source of rumour texts and as the key for comprehending them. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the context of rumour, both social and cultural, to grasp the full process of rumour generation.

These six layers can also be dissected into three parts, along with the three stages of rumour. The collective unconsciousness and collective memory focus on the pre-generation aspect of rumour. Rumours do not present themselves as rumours in this stage. They are merely normal discourses that are restored in the general corpus of society. Reumaux (1996: 15) uses the metaphor of insects’ metamorphosis and calls this stage of rumour “larva”. From the very beginning, several archetypes are the fundamental psychic power, moderating all human activities like seabed channelling the movement of water (Jung 1977; 1980). In collaboration with cultural institutions, they function as a prerequisite for rumour

⁷ In this sense, the idea of “social sphere” is similar to what Habermas terms the “public sphere” (1974; 1991); but social sphere does not have to be public and open to all for there are also secret channels between enclosed social groups which are considered social but not public.

transmission and form the deepest layer of collective behaviour through the collective unconscious. Above the collective unconsciousness level is the level of collective memory (Halbwachs 1992). According to the Assmanns, collective memory consists of “cultural memory” (J. Assmann 2008; A. Assmann 2015) as the context constructed by previous texts that characterise culture and “communicative memory” (J. Assmann 2008: 111) as the social context regarding current social situations. As we shall see in the following chapters, if we trace the contents of rumour texts at hand, all of them have references to these two levels of collective memory, since no rumours occur without a root from them.

Both the collective unconsciousness level and the collective memory level function as the background in social reality for rumour generation. From a social phenomenological perspective, these two levels are merged into one as we deal with what we can observe in the social sphere. In this regard, the first task of investigating rumours should be mapping out the social sphere, where different kinds of institutions are at play as *actantial* networks (Latour 2005), influencing the narratives of rumours in society. In other words, we should first answer the question: what are those implicit social and cultural institutions that have a stake in generating rumours?

False memories and the textual basis of rumour focus on the articulation of rumours. Nearly all scholars of rumour studies point out that rumours are generated under a pressure to understand uncertainty in society (e.g., DiFonzo and Bordia 2007a: 13; Fine 1997; Reumaux 1996: 13). The pressure, on the one hand, is mediated by the collective unconsciousness and collective memory as discussed above and on the other hand creates a space where “social vibrations are recorded, ruptures, crises, eruptions that unfold under the eyes of the observer” (Reumaux 1996: 13, translation mine).⁸ Under this pressure, people need to communicate what they have experienced and resort to a larger group to comprehend what is going on; as Eco noted, “we are continually tempted to give shape to life through narrative schemes” (1994: 99). Mingled with cultural memory, this pressured situation is the exact node when personal memories are articulated, marking the instance that personal memories become discourses in society. But these memory claims are not truth itself.⁹ They are just claims that can be falsified.¹⁰ False memory does not concern individual mental states, but a socially observable patterns of human behaviours that can be investigated semiotically (Morris

⁸ “[...] vibrations du social, les ruptures, les crises, les éruptions qui se déroulent sous l’œil de l’observateur”.

⁹ The false memory discussed here is not the faked memory discussed in the works on ontogenetic memories (e.g., Devitt et al. 2016; Perrin and Michaelian 2017), which concern the memory that an individual claims to hold but in fact not experienced physically.

¹⁰ Even though the distinction between ontogenetical “faked” memory and “real” memory is not made here, the faked memories are very likely to become rumours in the society, once they are communicated against a grander backdrop of trauma or fear.

1971: 79), in which particular recollections and interpretations are framed and circulated as false. Rumours are not born as rumours; false memories are not born as false. It is worth pointing out that false memory here is a concept *a posteriori*, i.e., that initially there are no memories that can be called “false”. They are all authentic memories of individuals and later communicated in the social sphere. Yet some of these memories are not endorsed by any institutions as the official memory (Burke 1993: 299),¹¹ even dismissed as “false” by these institutions.

The idea of false memories also introduces power relationships into play. The social sphere is never two-dimensional; discourses are characterised and regulated by different social institutions and texts are comprehended under existing frameworks that are legitimised by these institutions at different levels. Power relationships between individuals, their narratives and social institutions are always present during the articulation of memories. Therefore, the task for investigating these two levels is to find how these memories emerge, interwoven with collective memory and dismissed as false.

Moreover, power relationships also affect the belief and persuasion between individuals, leading to the discussion of rumour transmission and acceptance. It is notable here that only on these two levels do rumours manifest themselves as rumours. Macroscopically speaking, rumours are transmitted among different groups of society in various forms. The “facts” depicted by these rumours may be falsified, but this reality check becomes confusing when the “real reality” is beyond reach. In such cases, the checked reality is the social reality, rather than *the real* itself. Two issues are of concern: first, the process of transmission requires a closer inspection. During the process, rumours can persuade people to believe in them and participate in transmitting them by obliging their audience to do so. As Kapferer points out, “*One chooses to become a transmitter*: it is an act of free choice that is the sign of considerable involvement in the rumor; one makes it one’s own, projecting thereon one’s own imagination and fantasies or remembrances” (1990: 141, italics original). Therefore, there is the need to profile the rumour public (Peterson and Gist 1951). Who takes part in transmitting rumours and how and why do they accept rumours and articulate them again in the social sphere?

Second, during the transmission process, new rumours are generated and form a rumour complex (Fine and Ellis 2010: 29). Rumours’ contents are constantly changing and are always in a dynamic state. Within a few steps of transmission, the communicated message will be completely unrecognizable. However, the lost information is not lost forever. On the one hand, the lost information could generate new rumours and again appear in the social sphere; and on the other hand, the gap would be filled by new information, which leads to the phenomenon that these rumours will finally “dissolve” into the collective memory of society,

¹¹ “Offizielle Erinnerungen”

rather than being singled out and eradicated from the social sphere. The development of digital media brings more colours to this problematic: it intensifies the transmedial environment (Rajewsky 2002) in which we all reside. The dynamics of rumour narratives will be the main concern here.

In sum, following the levels of rumour discussed above, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary to address the following questions:

1. As has been discussed above, social and cultural institutions have a large stake in the generation of rumours, including collective unconscious and collective memory. Under the joint effort between social institutions and epistemic patterns at different levels, social reality is constructed with implicit channels for rumours to generate. From this perspective, analysing a rumour phenomenon first of all requires an investigation into these socio-cultural institutions which model communities' perception of social reality, thus channelling and manipulating the generation of rumours.
2. Rumours first appear as discourses in the social sphere under pressure. Personal memories are intertwined with the collective memory of social groups and different texts are generated, trying to explain what is happening around members of society. Therefore, in line with previous research question, rumours are always at the intersection of social pressure and power relationships. The dynamics of rumour articulation further the ongoing discussions on the moment of rumouring within social reality and focus on how rumours are generated out of such pressures and how power relationships manifest themselves in the process of dismissing some discourses as "false", which become rumours as a consequence.
3. Rumours are a social phenomenon; they are actively transmitted in the social sphere. However, as Kapferer notes "Every rumor has a market of its own" (1990: 87); the market is not the whole society because only a number of social groups participate in rumouring. Therefore, developed from the previous research questions, the next mission is to investigate the contagious qualities of rumours, their social dynamics and communicative processes. On the one hand, rumours infiltrate people's daily communications and make them believe in such rumours; and on the other hand, rumours themselves also mutate into other forms as they are articulated once and again. In this sense, we are focusing on how rumours are believed among the rumour public, the mechanisms of rumour transmutation, along with the process of transmission, which finally leads to the diffusion of rumours and how new media, such as the Internet, influence the transmission and transmutation processes.

The research questions will be addressed in the following chapters, one by one. They will be discussed at a theoretical level, along with case studies. As rumours are too abundant to be studied in singular forms, several representative narratives

will be selected from the rumour complex and analysed. Discourse analysis is applied throughout the discussion on these texts, whereas the actant network is also taken into consideration, to map out social factors that supervise the rumour process. By providing a thorough analysis, or an “anatomy” as the title indicates, it is possible to understand the rumour phenomenon from the deepest level, which is soundly rooted in the collective unconsciousness and cultural memory, to rumour’s presence in the social sphere that haunts society and mesmerises the public. But, first things first: there is a question that shall be answered before analysing the phenomenon: what is a rumour after all? Or, what makes a rumour?

0.2. Philosophical Grounds: The Analytical Ontology of Rumours

0.2.1. Truth Claims, Knowledge and Rumours

Kapferer argues that “rumors do not *take off from* the truth but rather *seek out* the truth” (1990: 3, italics original). From the informative level, all discourses provide information about the world beyond and an individual’s mortal reach, no matter what kind of information they provide. In other words, all kinds of discourses participate in the construction of social reality; rumours and other discourses are not distinguishable on this informative level. Rumours are not discourses that negate the objective reality that members of the society behold, but merely a social reality that members of the society believe. Therefore, defining rumour from an analytical point of view must start from the discussion of the relationship between rumour, truth and knowledge.

Truth is never unchallengeable. Instead, it is precisely the falsification of scientific theorem (Popper 1935) that grounds natural science, which constructs the basis of our knowledge of the grand reality that encapsulates the agglomeration of human experiences. However, due to the grandness of phenomenological reality we all experience, it is impossible to resort to this scientific reasoning every time a communicative act takes place. The inability to falsify within a temporal and spatial limit suspends the reasoning process during communication. Truth is suspended; only statements that are taken as truth remain. As G. A. Fine points out, “Truth is not handed to us; truth claims are” (1997: 743). As different truth claims project different versions of truths that may contradict with each other, the evidence-based factual truth (Arendt 2006: 173) is dragged off from the throne and functions as one of the social institutions and merely a version of realities. These different versions of realities, when merged, form a thickened reality (Song 2025a) in which various discourses function as its basis, no matter whether the discourses are “true” or not, which has become even more obvious in our times since different media tend to converge and overwhelm our senses (Jenkins 2006).

Moreover, rumours and knowledge intersect in this thickened reality. First, knowledge functions as the demystifying power that expels rumour. Whenever we encounter a truth claim in the social sphere, we resort to either our knowledge of the world or an encyclopaedia of the totality of human knowledge (Eco 1994: 90) to decide whether to believe in the account or not. In this regard, knowledge functions as the legitimising power of social discourses. It “make[s] objectively available and subjectively plausible the ‘first-order’ objectivations that have been institutionalized” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 110). Whenever a social discourse goes against the knowledge that society apprehends, it will be dismissed as “false claims”, which is the articulation of false memory that we discussed earlier and has the possibility of being transmitted in the social sphere as rumour. However, knowledge does not only mean scientific knowledge. As Jean-François Lyotard pointed out, “scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity” (1984: 7). Following Lyotard’s logic, besides the scientific knowledge which tries to give everything in the world of human artefacts an explanation, narrative knowledge also tells people what to do and presents that “as what it is”. People do not need to know how a refrigerator functions to use a refrigerator. It corresponds to the second level of legitimation, namely the “theoretical propositions in rudimentary form” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 112). Wolfgang Wagner (2007) coined the term “vernacular knowledge” to demonstrate the belief system it constructs, which is deeply rooted in the *Weltanschauung* of given social groups. In this vein, both scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge are at hand, functioning at different levels of social reality when we encounter a rumour text.

However, as with the case of truth claims, knowledge does not accord with the objective reality, but with the social reality that knowledge constructs and vice versa. What knowledge legitimises is also what is generated from knowledge; as Berger and Luckmann contend, “Knowledge about society is thus a realization [...] in the sense of apprehending the objectivated social reality, and in the sense of ongoingly producing this reality” (1966: 84). People are always trying to give what they experience an explanation according to the knowledge structuring their social realities (Fiske 2019) and, whenever they resort to their knowledge, what they will have at hand is merely a habitualised and objectivated social reality that encompasses them (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 71). Therefore, the world, as the object that knowledge assumes to explain, is complex, with “large networks of components with no central control” (Mitchell 2009: 13), and knowledge, which explains this complexity, cannot be reduced to one single perfect system. The irreducibility was already evidenced by the failure of the ambitious project in the middle of the 20th century under the title “International Encyclopedia of Unified Science” (Neurath, Carnap, and Morris 1938–1970), in which Thomas S. Kuhn’s

work (1996) rocked the boat by proving that a unified science is not possible. The encyclopaedia of human knowledge is not a single big book with different volumes, but different encyclopaedias that are heterogeneous to each other. In short, *knowledges* replace knowledge, if there really was knowledge in singular form. Moreover, these knowledges are not directly available in the social sphere. Whenever knowledge needs to present itself in society, it comes in the form of discourses with their respective authorities which require legitimation, no matter whether it is scientific or narrative (e.g., a science academy or a cooking recipe learnt from family members). Following this logic, heterogeneous knowledges are constantly waging “proxy warfare”, focusing on a pragmatic topic, each of which claims its discourses to be the truth statement and gives explanations to the social reality in their own manners. Scientific knowledge is never sublime (but it pretends to be so, as we shall see in the next chapter).

A. J. Greimas, when talking about the cognitive dimension of discourses, stated that “We should also note that our knowledge of the world rests in the first instance on ‘they say’ (the rumor, on-dit)” (1987: 166). It was not a coincidence for Greimas to use the idea of rumours to illustrate our knowledge of the world: all discourses which construct the world beyond our reach could be rumours, no matter whether it is a truthful statement of *the reality* or not. In this sense, it is possible to say that knowledge does expel rumour at the level of institutional legitimation, but it presupposes rumour as the *Ersatz* of knowledge at the level of everyday epistemic practice when people are checking the social reality for the sake of identifying truth. Rumours are therefore the “cornerstone of epistemology” (Fine 1997: 741).

0.2.2. Institutions and Power Relationships

In rumour studies, nearly all scholars refer to an “unverified” state of rumour when defining the phenomenon (e.g., Peterson and Gist 1951; DiFonzo and Bordia 2007a: 13; Allport and Postman 1947: ix; Rosnow 1980: 582; Renard 2017; Knapp 1944). However, what exactly does the word “unverified” mean? Who or what has the validity to verify it? The texts transmitted in the social sphere cannot verify themselves; the verification, or other value judgments of the text, cannot be generated within the narration of a rumour text; rather, it should come from the extra-textual world. The representations of truth in the social sphere as truth claims are “identical regardless of whether the universe referred to is fictional or historical” (Johansen 2002: 152). People resort to the outside of the text, which is the social reality teeming with discourses, to verify these truth claims. These discourses do not function solely by themselves; they are interrelated within an intertextual network at different levels of society for interpretation’s sake. The network is not a flattened plane where texts are situated sporadically, but a textual space in which intertextual relationships are built upon reciprocal endorsement and texts are

therefore congregated. The process of institutionalisation stems from the congregation of texts that are related, and these texts support each other to become more convincing. Further, as “institutionalization is incipient in every social situation continuing in time” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 72), these institutions will be crystalised and objectified in the social sphere which, as a consequence, entrenches these institutions themselves (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 76), even though the texts in the process of its formation are lost or dissolved. In this vein, texts are verified not because they are real “by themselves”, but because they attach themselves to the institutions in the social sphere and are legitimised by them.

As institutions are shortcuts to knowledge, sparing the effort to resort to reasoning every time when verification happens, there is no need to verify rumours by ourselves. Facts are already provided to us as legitimised truth claims via social institutions. They are constructed at different levels of society following the levels of legitimation. Some institutions take physical forms as authorities, while others remain merely collections of discourses and function together in legitimation. More importantly, these institutions are integrated, justifying personal experiences to be articulated in society, which draws from both narrative and scientific knowledges.

The shortcut also causes problems. Along with the collapse of grand narratives (Lyotard 1984), institutions are highlighted, legitimising discourses in the society, whereas knowledges themselves are merely *used* by the institutions. In the same logic, Lyotard emphasises that knowledge “is no longer the subject, but in the service of the subject” (1984: 36). In other words, whenever we use our knowledge to identify rumour, it is the institutions in the social sphere that “speak” in the tone of knowledge, instructing people to believe in a statement or not. From this perspective, the verification of the text functions as the metatext (Popovič 1976) for the statement and accredits the texts at hand. The legitimation of institutions is detached from *the reality* and leads to a “truth economy” (Potter 1996: 5), which takes “reality, events and facts as negotiable and negotiated” (Randviir 2004: 78). Truth has been merchandised in the social sphere in accordance with the dynamics of power relationships. In this regard, social discourses are dismissed as rumours not because they are “untrue”, but because they are verified as false by the social institutions from which they claim to find legitimation.

Institutions depend on each other’s existence to legitimise themselves, since institutionalisation is by nature a discursive practice (Berger and Luckmann 1966). By antagonising or crediting each other, a network of power relationships is constructed. Power relationships are, therefore, pervasive in the social sphere, setting “orders of discourse” (Foucault 1971) as the structure of the social reality. When a statement occurs in society, certain institutions are activated to address the public concern according to the knowledges of individuals. Some of them aim to address the problems and some cause further confusion; rumour appears precisely from here.

Among all these institutions, the reality observed by individuals themselves is of a particular kind. What is a matter of concern here is not a “unified truth” and “ontological reality”, which have already been examined in the previous pages. As the border between observed reality and social reality, these institutions are constructed by the experienced reality of individuals themselves and ready to be articulated as social discourses for others, rather than those beyond reach. Legitimising these institutions is not the function of knowledge but the observed facts; as the old saying goes, “to see is to believe”. Once a social discourse goes directly against the observed facts, it is easy to dismiss it as rumour because the fact is just over there, which also frees this research from an absolute understanding of truth being constructed and relational. Truth claims may be articulated and legitimised in discourses at the macroscopic level, but for participants of rumour phenomena, what they observe and perceive in their everyday life continues to orient their beliefs microscopically. However, the privileged status of direct observation becomes increasingly problematic. In our modern times, even the observed facts can be polluted, covered, obscured and distorted. The seeing-believing reasoning is turned upside-down since the presumed “scientific rationality” has infiltrated into nearly all aspects of our modern lives; we are “kept incapable of being autonomous” (Marcuse 2006: 8) and “factual truth is no more self-evident than opinion, and this may be among the reasons that opinion-holders find it relatively easy to discredit factual truth as just another opinion” (Arendt 2006: 185). The special status of observed facts is suspended; individual rationality gives way to a “tutelage” (Arendt 2006: 178) state. “Seeing is believing” becomes “believing is seeing”, creating an echo chamber that limits the source of information.

However, from the other way round, rumour is also the discourse free from institutional pressures. Fine emphasises that “Rumor was a means through which the public could evade institutional restraint, presumed necessary for military effectiveness then and now” (2007: 213). Not all rumours are misinformation, though. Miller notes that “Rumors are not always inaccurate, nor do they necessarily grow increasingly distorted” (1992: 383). In many situations, especially under totalitarian regimes, rumours are, instead, a reliable source of information in contrast to official ones which try to cover up what is happening in the social sphere. Nevertheless, such information still bears similar traits as rumours since it cannot be included in truth discourses as part of the grand narratives. As a result, the social reality is detached from *the reality* as the observed facts also need legitimation from social institutions, which mediate these direct facts as social facts. From the perspective of the public, Shibutani (1966) pointed out that rumour becomes rife when the existing institutionalised channels of information break down or are no longer trusted by the public. In that delicate moment, all claims are paralleled to one another and compete to win the “trust” of their audience, some of them are from the mediated observed facts and some from the

institutionalised facts. The relationship between rumour and institutions is always dynamic, subject to the intricacies of power relationships between different institutions in the social sphere, whether they are evidence-based facts or not.

In sum, various institutions are interconnected to forge an institutional network, mediating the perceived reality as the topic under a public concern; rumours are, by nature, social discourses not legitimised by the institutions that are activated by a collective concern. By the time of rumour generation, there is no such thing as sublime and uncontested truth; yet all discourses construct different realities for people to choose from under the supervision of social institutions. *Rumours rise from the oscillation of power and knowledges and the overlap of heterogeneous institutions in the social sphere.* Consequently, rumour studies are freed from the tedious checking of whether a claim is truthful or not, which further evades possible fallacies when some rumours are later proven to be facts. The focus of rumour studies in social reality is accordingly shifted from a detective story to a mapping of the labyrinthine institutional world objectified in the social sphere.

0.2.3. The Ideal Rumour in Times of Knowledges

In concluding the discussion of the analytical ontology of rumour, it is now appropriate to catch the shadows, i.e. to discuss features of rumour and define the rumour phenomenon as the subject matter of the study. But before the hunt, it is necessary to point out that the discussion in the following concerns rumours in times when “the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age” (Lyotard 1984: 3). A heterogeneous social reality is thus constructed, in which all discourses find their legitimation in one way or another. In this sense, the discussion on rumours does not concern any special epoch; any period can be under the scope if and only if in that era knowledge can be talked about in plural forms. Our era is the most typical one among all eras which bear this feature. For example, even though the Middle Ages are usually understood as an epoch of the dominant Christian knowledge, it is easy to find out that the Middle Ages were also an era of heterogeneous knowledges. If we move beyond Eurocentric Christian societies, we can find knowledges in that period were intersected with those also from Arabian cultures in the Southeast, Asian Cultures in the far East and many other cultures exchanging how they understood the world. The only determining factor is the perspective that we take. This delimitation, in this regard, legitimises discussions on rumours that appear not literally “in our times”, but fall under power relationships of the same type as their modern counterparts do. Therefore, it is possible to come up with an ideal rumour for philosophical conceptualisations, even though in daily practices they are always mingled with other types of social discourses, as will be addressed later:

First, rumour should appear in the form of knowledge. As has been discussed above, rumours are the *Ersatz* of knowledge. As “justified true belief” (Adriaans and Benthem 2008: 240; see also Goldman 1979), knowledge has to be true, believed to be so, and justified, and coming back to our discussions on rumours, the question rests mostly on the issue of justification: This directly concerns the collapse of the grand narratives discussed above.¹² If the grand narratives were still functioning as an unchallengeable sublimity, the knowledge of the society would still be organised in homogeneity with a set of canonical institutions demystifying all social discourses. In this vein, social discourses are either “proper”, which are integrated into the social reality of the time, or “improper”, which are marginalised and dismissed as paganism and madness (Foucault 2001; 1988). There is no place for rumour transmission since the sublime knowledge has already been inculcated into every member of society. All the observed facts that go against the unified knowledge will be discarded as nonsense and are thus suppressed individually and not articulated in the social sphere, otherwise the articulated experience would be persecuted. This ideal model of a rumour-free society is well argued in many utopian works, for example, Plato’s Atlantis in *Timaeus*, St. Augustine’s *The City of God* and Thomas More’s (2003 [1516]) *Utopia*.

Unfortunately or fortunately, the ideal never comes into reality; rumours are allowed to occur and transmit in the social sphere to release social pressures (Shibutani 1966; Coser 1956) when knowledge(s) in society cannot comprehend what is happening here and now. In this vein, in a Durkheimian sense, rumours “function to help people make sense and manage risk” (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007a: 13) in the place of knowledge. The knowledge to interpret current situations is either absent (which is a rare situation since our society already abounds with different knowledges) or is “too much”. In the latter case, different knowledges occur in various forms of social discourses but only part of them are legitimised by the social institutions. Therefore, there are always rumours in the society since there are always discourses that lack legitimisation. Following this logic, whenever there are grounds for rumours to occur, “knowledge as knowledge” and “knowledge as rumour” always come hand in hand in a contrapuntal relationship instead of an antagonist one. And these two ways of presenting knowledge are irrelevant to it being scientific knowledge or narrative knowledge, because all different knowledges compete at the same discursive level.

Second, rumours are always understandable within a socio-cultural context. Rumours, as social discourses, are always generated and interpreted within an intertextual network. No matter how ridiculous they might seem, rumours are part of the social discourses that can be traced in socio-cultural institutions, since all social discourses should be intelligible within the “symbolic universe” as the ultimate legitimisation of all discourses and institutions (Berger and Luckmann

¹² For more discussions on the definition of rumour, please see Song (2025b).

1966: 113). In order to participate in the signification of the perceived reality, rumours should also use the languages¹³ available in the social sphere, even though most of the time the elements of a rumour are restructured and manifested in a different way. Certain rhetorical techniques, such as hyperbole, are applied to cater to the pragmatic needs under the social situation, but rumour itself is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural backgrounds of given social groups.

Third, rumours are sensitive to the change in power relationships. Discourses that are dismissed as rumours could become widely received facts if the power relationships shift. As discussed above, heterogeneous knowledges are always competing and contradicting each other dynamically, and legitimation processes are also subject to change in the course of history. Grand narratives may change in history and those that previously function as the *Ersatz* of knowledge can be incorporated in truth discourses. Thus, previous rumours can always be incorporated along with the grand narratives to become social facts. Rosnow and Fine (1976: 11) defined rumours as “non-normative evidence”, that “a rumor may be entirely appropriate within the given circumstances, but the genre removed from its context is non-normative” (1976: 11). In line with this argument, rumours are just “displaced” social discourses within a given institutional configuration: once they are put in the right place or the institutions that legitimise the discourse come back to play, rumours will be dissolved in the social sphere and return to “normal discourses” in society.

Fourth, rumours are transmissive in the social sphere yet limited to groups that obtain relevant knowledges. This concerns the social basis of the rumour phenomenon. If a discourse is merely transmitted within a small group as “a collective whose members know each other as distinct individuals” (Fine and Harrington 2004: 343), it is then bound in its locality and is not transmissive in the social sphere. Discourses as such are gossip and urban legends, which will be delimited in later pages. The rumour public (Peterson and Gist 1951) should contain more than one small group to incubate rumours which become infectious as they affect more social groups. Therefore, rumours should transcend certain borders between social groups in order to become rumours, which are “mistranslated” by the time of travelling through borders to reach other social groups. This is the inner boundary of the rumour phenomenon. Rumour transmission also has an outer border: it limits itself to the groups that share a certain knowledge. If such knowledge does not even exist in the group, there is no ground for rumours of such knowledge to proliferate since rumours will only be interpreted with local epistemic structures and lose the original contexts that pressured people to make sense of their current situations.

Therefore, the subject matter of rumour studies should be *a series of discourses generated under a social pressure and out of epistemic heterogeneity, which are*

¹³ The notion of “language” here refers to Lotman’s conception, see Lotman (1990).

excluded from dominant, institutionalised truth discourses, yet circulate within the social sphere as plausible articulations of social reality. Accordingly, the final feature of a rumour is that rumours and their variants under concern are always organised not in a “stream-like” sequence, but in the manner of a “rhizome” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 96) because they are all discourses dispersed in the social sphere; only under the illumination of (de)legitimation are they grouped together as rumours to circulate. In this way, the shadows are caught in a full grasp; and with the conceptualisations and definition at hand, it is now possible to proceed to discuss the relationship between rumour and its “twins”, namely urban legends, conspiracies and conspiracy theories, and gossip.

0.3. Delimitations of the Topic

Though named by a concise word, rumours are always mingled with many other kinds of discourses; those who expect conceptualisations of rumours to be self-clarifying will finally end up with a body of data containing rumours, gossip, conspiracy theories and even some urban legends. Since these social discourses are dynamically in a process of interchangeability, they are sometimes just different phases of the same set of discourses under different circumstances in practice. Rumours may stem from the circulation of gossip and evolve into conspiracy theories and urban legends. Boundaries between these different concepts are always dynamic. Based on the analytical ontology of rumour discussed above, it is possible to delimit rumour from other kinds of social discourses at the conceptual level, as different shadows are projected under different illuminations. In this regard, the shadow is caught by conceptualising our subject matter and we can set our focus on anatomising the rumour phenomenon. But before starting to delimit rumours from other discursive phenomena, it is necessary to point out that all these kinds of discourses refer to a social reality. The names given to these discourses—rumours, gossip, conspiracies and urban legends—come only later when such discourses start to circulate under different circumstances. Therefore, the concepts delimited in the following pages refer only to their analytical differences in society, rather than distinctions in practice.

0.3.1. Rumours and Gossip

No one admits that they are gossiping when they gossip; people will only realise what they were doing afterwards. Both gossip and rumours are actively transmitted between individuals. Though being the closest sibling of rumour, gossip still differs from rumour in many aspects. The most apparent distinction between gossip and rumours is that “gossip centers on the private affairs of individuals, while rumors can revolve around any issue or object at all” (LeGallienne 1912;

cited from Rosnow 1974: 27). In other words, the contents of gossip are usually about private living experiences or stories, yet rumours are much broader, not limited to personal whereabouts. Moreover, the difference in contents between rumours and gossip has a more profound causal logic: they are motivated differently, as Rosnow and Fine point out:

We shall argue, however, that in form (if not also in function) rumor and gossip are not always equivalent concepts. Rumor is information, either substantiated or refuted; gossip is small talk with or without a known basis in fact. The multiple functions that both serve are practically identical, but the motivational hierarchies appear to be different: rumors seem most often fueled by a desire for meaning, a quest for clarification and closure; gossip seems motivated primarily by ego and status needs. (Rosnow and Fine 1976: 4)

Gossip is generated out of a need for an interpersonal coalition against some other members of the group. DiFonzo and Bordia pointed out that “gossip arises in response to situations (or potential situations) of social isolation that highlight the need for belonging” (2007b: 25) and that “People use gossip to accomplish certain social network formation, change and maintenance functions” (2007b: 26). Via transmitting gossip, a small-sized coalition is formed within the group to address individuals’ concern and, outside of the group, gossip will fade away quickly because the discourse does not concern the interest of the new group.

However, it should be noted that what DiFonzo and Bordia were concerned with here is not the sense of belonging in general, but the belonging under a microscope or in the tiny public where people know each other personally (Fine and Harrington 2004). As “an entanglement of multiple and intersecting, affective and material, spatially experienced and socio-politically conditioned relations that are context-specific” (Lähdesmäki et al. 2016: 242), belonging happens on the macroscopic level and the microscopic level. Members of society both belong to different small groups and to a larger folk which is characterised by their text-based vernacular culture (R. Bauman 2008) and collective identification. Gossip, therefore, has its boundaries in transmission, which exists between different tiny publics and small groups. As with the line drawn between different groups, people belonging to each group are characterised by different possible gossip, and gossip ends by itself by reaching the boundary of concerned small groups. Nevertheless, these small groups are all vulnerable to some possible rumours because they all belong to a larger folk. Rumours and gossip are thus the same kind of discourse but happen on different levels of society, depending on the scale of participants in the discourse.

In sum, gossip transmits within a tiny public, whereas rumours transcend that border. The case of a report on an Indochinese person eating a Siberian Husky in the neighbourhood reported in Fine and Ellis (2010: 81) is gossip where “there is an Indochinese person in our neighbourhood who was witnessed eating a dog”;

yet “Indochinese people eat dogs by stealing your dogs for his delicacies” is a rumour fuelled by stereotypes, because it has the implication that all Indochinese faces on the streets, no matter where these people are located, will have the appetite for dogs. In this logic, rumours are distinguished from gossip by their presence in the social sphere. Gossip can become rumours when they reach those that are not stakeholders of the reality that gossip depicts. As has been described in 0.2.3, above, rumours need to cross certain borders to become rumours. From this perspective, gossip is a rumour-styled discourse that does not cross the border between small groups. In other words, gossip is “local”, whereas rumours are “translocal”.

0.3.2. Rumours, Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories

The Oxford English Dictionary defines conspiracies as

the theory that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties; *spec.* a belief that some covert but influential agency (typically political in motivation and oppressive in intent) is responsible for an unexplained event.¹⁴

Here are two related concepts. One is “conspiracies”, and the other is “conspiracy theories”. They are used interchangeably under many contexts; however, they have clear distinctions. Conspiracy theories are “In the broadest sense [...] an explanation, either speculative or evidence-based, which attributes the causes of an event to a conspiracy or a plot” (Basham 2003; Keeley 1999; cited from Byford 2011: 20–21). In this regard, conspiracy theories are explanation systems in which various conspiracies support each other also as discourses in the social sphere. In other words, conspiracy theories are on the metalanguage level, whereas conspiracies are on the objective level. As McKenzie-McHarg points out, “*conspiracy theory* achieves the feat of uniting a concept of a political provenance, namely *conspiracy*, with a concept exhibiting primarily a scientific pedigree, namely *theory*” (2021: 21, italics original). Some conspiracies even have something real as the starting point for the theories behind them, “as a kernel of truth upon which implausible stories about the activities of the would-be rulers of the world can be constructed” (Byford 2011: 35).

Conspiracies offer interpretations of the world, behind which conspiracy theories provide the epistemic patterns of them. They explain the world “accurately”, demonstrating that the authorised presentation of the world is misleading and distorting with a purpose. From this perspective, conspiracy theories are also knowledge according to Lyotard’s understanding of knowledge structures. How-

¹⁴ <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39766?redirectedFrom=conspiracy#eid>

ever, this part of knowledge is socially “stigmatised”. According to Michael Barkun, stigmatised knowledge is the “claims to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the marginalisation of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error—universities, communities of scientific researchers, and the like” (Barkun 2013: 26). However, conspiracy theories are stigmatised not only because they are marginalised by institutional powers; on the deeper level, the stigmatisation lies in the “extreme unfalsifiability” (Byford 2011: 36) of conspiracy theories, which also distinguishes rumours from conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories “are by their very nature irrefutable” (Byford 2011: 36), which conflicts with the idea of falsifiability in every scientific theorem that is studied and institutionalised in scientific research (Popper 1935). Therefore, conspiracy theories are epistemologically stigmatised, alternative institutions. They are intrinsically different from what we call science today.

From the empirical angle, even though conspiracy theories provide an explanation regarding what is perceived, they explain through a system of discourses that support each other, which in return augments itself by circular arguments without turning back to human experiences. In the light of George Berkeley (1998 [1710]), who asserted that “to be is to be perceived”,¹⁵ it is even possible to dismiss the idea that the reality described by conspiracy theories exists at all. The negation could have been too harsh since some conspiracies may be true, but it points to the essence of conspiracy theories: that observed facts have nothing to do with them. In other words, conspiracy theories explain the world in which we live by introducing an imperceptible reality by functioning as alternative institutions, structured by alternative knowledge. From this perspective, conspiracy theories have their certain audience; people need to accept the whole system of such knowledge, which makes it exclusive from the general public and positions these people as “the chosen ones” with a secret agenda. This corresponds to the level of “identity construction and self-description of publics” (Leone, Madisson, and Ventsel 2020: 44) for conspiracy theories. The mesmerised group of people under the Templar’s plot in Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* (2007) would be a good example here: they were just normal citizens, but they made themselves believe in a fabricated plot and caused the death of Belbo, one of the main characters.

However, rumours are falsifiable. The reality pictured by rumours always falls under the realm of human experiences, no matter how marginalised they are. As the *Ersatz* of knowledge, rumours are always identifiable because there are always observed facts spotted and reported to dismiss untruthful discourses. Rumours are just misplaced discourses from somewhere else, but they are still within the realm of “scientific” knowledge because of their falsifiability. Taking one step forward, rumours are exactly the discourses that are falsified, or “dis-

¹⁵ “*esse est percipi*”.

placed”, as has already been discussed in 0.2.3. In short, rumours are still “scientific”, whereas conspiracy theories fail to be scientific epistemologically.

When rumour discourses are finally detached from the observed facts and become totally unverifiable, they turn into conspiracies and resort to the alternative institutions, i.e. conspiracy theories. Conspiracies are thus a more “ideal” form of rumour in terms of their full detachment from the reality that grand narratives construct. In this sense, “Conspiracy theories are not precisely rumors, but they are constructed out of rumors” (Fine and Ellis 2010: 54). In modern times, reality is thickened by the discourses in society due to the development of media technologies; observed facts may function as legitimation for individuals, yet at the social level this legitimation is no longer available. The social reality perceived by people can be deprived of *the reality* easily. Therefore, rumours are more likely to evolve into conspiracy theories in our times.

The other way round, conspiracies project themselves onto the discourses in the form of rumours, which can be seen as an active form of the conspiracies that are under the same legitimation. As alternative institutions, conspiracy theories cannot be directly incorporated into other institutions in the discourses in the social reality due to the epistemological stigmatisation discussed above. Under most circumstances, conspiracies do not reveal all their argumentations but only a part of them which shies away from the circular fallacy and becomes attractive by being systematic. Usually, this kind of rumour is more infectious than a random discourse of untruthful statements due to their systematicity and the difficulty of verifying. In this vein, conspiracies themselves do not transmit in society, yet rumours may draw some elements (and some of these elements adhere to the reality perceived) from conspiracy theories to circulate in the social sphere, since conspiracy theories are a whole system of alternative knowledge that is constructed by discourses. These believed, fragmented conspiracies can also explain the reason why people even claim to believe in the same conspiracy theories but still have discrepancies in their beliefs: they merely share these fragments that are communicated, but the rest comes from their own imaginations and refers to different personal realities that do not enter the social sphere.

In conclusion, conspiracy theories are alternative institutions, surrounded by conspiracies. They are structured by epistemologically stigmatised knowledge and sided with scientific discourses. Rumours are simply a way of filling a knowledge gap by presenting themselves as the *Ersatz* of knowledge. In our daily discursive practices, rumours can evolve into conspiracies if they no longer affiliate to the reality that can be perceived (or, at least, the possibility of perception) and refer to conspiracy theories.

0.3.3. Rumours and Urban Legends

Urban legends, by the name itself, are legends. The truth value of legends is always suspended because they are, in essence, stories (Miller 2005; Fine and Ellis 2010; DiFonzo and Bordia 2007b). They explain a reality in a defamiliarised way based on some fragmented discourses which are rumours by themselves. The defamiliarisation enables the explanation “to be identified” (Lotman 2013: 19) in an artistic sense. Following this logic, when members of society talk about urban legends, they either put the truth value aside or are conscious that what they are talking about is not true; there is no point in discussing the verifiability of urban legends. In this regard, urban legends are also institutions that conceive rumours as conspiracy theories do, but they are not themselves rumours analytically. More importantly, urban legends must have a physical place to circulate. In any urban legend, there is a narrated place where the legends unfold. The locality of urban legends influences the transmission of such stories (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007b). These urban legends are urban legends only in their own localities. Without the original, local context, they would be just recounts of a “local belief” from ethnographers. These exotic stories cannot be transplanted into another soil. Furthermore, when they transgress the inner boundaries between the folks discussed above, they need to change the place of narration and, further, if the locality is erased, urban legends become conspiracies. Urban legends are conspiracy theories operating at the local level.

In clarifying the relationship between urban legends and rumours, Miller pointed out that urban legends are more “durable” rumours pertaining to the locality (1992: 381) and Rosnow and Fine remarked that “In contrast to a legend, a rumour usually dwells on topical content, although some legends may reappear occasionally embodied in the form of a rumor” (1976: 11). Moreover, the dynamics between rumours and urban legends indicate that in practice, the line between urban legends and rumours is always porous, as Fine and Ellis observe:

Nevertheless, consensus has emerged among experts that the proper study of so-called “legend” or “rumor” was not the infinitely varying narrative texts collected by observers, but rather the social process that generated them. Observing the process of legendry, rather than the narratives themselves, became the proper topic of contemporary legend research. In this sense, it became unnecessary to decide if a given text were a legend or “just” a rumor. (Fine and Ellis 2010: 4)

Tangherlini argues that rumours are “a hyperactive state of legend” (2017: 5). Rumours have the tendency to be reproduced repetitively to serve certain interests, whereas urban legends are in an inactive state, restored in a corpus of potential social discourses. In this vein, these urban legends can be reactivated as rumours under the need for articulation to comprehend a certain social context or events,

which is one of the reasons why some rumours in different epochs bear the same narrative elements across history. They refer to a narrative scheme provided by an urban legend that has already been narrated many times. And when urban legends beget rumours, the locality of the discourse is screened out and a more contracted form is created, thrown into the active discursive process for circulation.

In summary, the rumour phenomenon can be delimited with respect to four factors, namely institutional legitimation, transmission status, locality and verifiability. From the delimitating perspective, it is possible to say that rumours are *discourses that are actively transmitted* (in contrast to urban legends) *in the social sphere* (in contrast to gossip) *and are verified as untruthful statements by social institutions* (in contrast to conspiracy theories).

0.4. Previous Approaches, or a Literature Review

The definition of rumours as the product of epistemic heterogeneity and the delimitation in the previous section both point to the fact that the rumour phenomenon cannot be fully grasped by single disciplines. The landscape of rumour studies has been well described by Rosnow and Fine:

Since the early 1900s, rumor has been studied, analysed, and reported on by scholars representing diverse areas of inquiry. Psychologists study the transmission process and the nature of recall; sociologists analyze rumor from the viewpoint of societal structure and the communication process; anthropologists and folklorists are intrigued for what is revealed about social control and rhetorical style; psychoanalysts see in rumor universal metaphors; historians attempt to unravel the effects that rumors have had in wars and economic crises; lawyers study rumor to understand the nature and limits of testimony; physicians work to understand its hysterical contagion; and the police and military attempt to prevent its violence and sabotage. (Rosnow and Fine 1976: 8)

Due to its various forms and different presentations in the social sphere, the phenomenon of rumour cannot be fully understood without a thorough, systematic approach (Peterson and Gist 1951: 159). Yet in the current landscape of rumour studies, different disciplines give their own explanation to the phenomenon and seldom meet and debate with each other. Therefore, the rumour studies that are available at hand are limited to respective disciplines and cannot form a systematic approach in general to understand how rumours are generated and transmitted from the theoretical level. But it is still important to review these approaches and to start by drawing lines between them, before constructing a larger framework to investigate the problematics.

0.4.1. Psychoanalysis and the Visionary Rumour

Probably the first group of scholars who applied their scholarship to rumour phenomenon were the psychoanalysts, represented by C. G. Jung. For them, the rumour phenomenon, especially the recurrence of certain topics among those widespread rumours, demonstrates a deeply rooted collective unconscious that has been developed since the society has come to shape. Once an event catches public concern, the collective unconscious is restaged to the social sphere and channels people's behaviours. Jung defined the collective unconscious as "a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited" (1980: 9, part 1: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious: 43). The inheritance of the collective unconscious characterises the recurrence of rumours that haunt the given society. Following this logic, Jung distinguished as his subject matter visionary rumours from ordinary rumours. In the discussion Jung pointed out that visionary rumours are different from ordinary rumours by "always being an *unusual emotion*" (1959: 6, italics original). Unlike ordinary rumours, which require further details to convince the audience, visionary rumours only need to project an abnormal emotion to the public and rumours will follow in all kinds. As Jung himself put it, when the motif is "seized upon by the rumor" (1959: 6), narratives of the rumour will appear in a short period of time, however strange it might seem in retrospect. Therefore, there should be a psychic source deeper than the social emotions that are widely witnessed as the social context for rumour generation.

Moreover, the different narratives and topics of visionary rumours (although Jung only analysed the UFO rumour as an example of the visionary rumour) also point to the fact that there are also various "topics" in the collective unconscious, namely the "archetypes". Jung attempted to show that in comparison with the personal unconscious, which consists of complexes, the collective unconscious is "made up essentially of archetypes" (1980: 9, part 1: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious: 42). These archetypes are inherited across generations and are shared between members of the society and when the "emotional tension" (Jung 1959: 8) appears, they provide the basic patterns for the generation of related rumours. In order to study the archetype from the perspective of rumour, Jung analysed the dreams of his interviewees and discussed the collective unconsciousness of them, since dreams "have the advantage of being involuntary, spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche and are therefore pure products of nature not falsified by any conscious purpose" (Jung 1980: 9, part 1: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious: 48). In this regard, rumours become one of the "active imaginations" stemming from the collective unconscious and are a very good manifestation of the presence of the collective unconscious in society, as Jung pointed out, demonstrating that rumour "has analysed and interpreted the dream" (1920: 188).

Unfortunately, identifying archetypes itself is a heavy work to do and has won attention among many psychoanalysts. Scholars that refer to the works of Jung mostly focus on folk stories and literature (e.g. Dundes 2002; Carroll 1993), as well as the link between psychoanalysis and sociology (e.g. Clarke 2006; Levine 1978), which are the proper soil of psychoanalysis. But few paid attention to more trivial and omnipresent topics, such as rumour. Rumours are just one of the manifestations of archetypes within human society, which only constitute a small corner of the whole psychoanalytic enterprise. By being the deepest fundamentals of rumour generation, studies on archetypes are situated too far from rumour as a social phenomenon and are seldom restaged in the realm of rumour studies after Jung. However, there is a special feature that distinguishes rumour from other kinds of presence of archetypes: by instigating unusual emotions, certain rumours appear more attractive than others. When people are absorbed in these emotions, irrationality takes the stage and recalls the deepest, psychoanalytic emotional patterns that mesmerise the public (Gardner 2007).

There are also deficiencies in the psychoanalytic approach. On the one hand, more detailed analyses are lacking, focusing the generational process from an “unusual emotion” to a public discourse. Jung’s analyses (1920; 1959) of rumours were based on clinical methods on dreams developed by Freud, focusing on the psychological power behind the rumours. Studies from this perspective, consequently, always risk falling into mysticism, as has been observed in the realm of psychoanalysis. More importantly, the psychoanalytic approach risks becoming circular or tautological. The person under analysis is only able to agree either that (s)he is repressing the expressions owing to a deeper psychoanalytic mechanism or that the analysis is truthful; there is no place for rejection and falsification. In any case, “The audience member who disputes an interpretation cannot win” (Fine 1992: 48).

However, the analyses provided by psychoanalysts should not be ignored, since they have excavated some of the power source of rumour generation. Psychoanalysis is useful in understanding the motives of rumour generation and acceptance by delving into the deepest level of human mentality, especially when it comes to rumours regarding a social fear or some other hysterias. But it falls short in explaining the exact mechanisms through which rumours withdraw elements from the cultural corpus and concretise their contents as actual discourses circulating and haunting the social sphere. All in all, rumours are social phenomena that can be observed and investigated. More disciplines shall be introduced to join the discussion.

0.4.2. The Sociology of Rumours and the Rumour Psychology

Even though psychoanalysts were the first to enter the discussion, it was the sociologists who brought forth the studies known most widely by the academics. The seminal work by Allport and Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (1947), discussed the rumour phenomenon from the other pole, focusing on how rumour is transmitted from one to another. Allport and Postman defined rumour as “a specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present” (1947: ix). The definition points to four widely observed features of rumour: that it 1) has a topic; 2) is transmitted interpersonally; 3) via communication and 4) is an unverified statement. The paradigm of rumour studies is thus set by focusing on these four features among mainstream academics, whereas Allport and Postman focused on the second and the third. By introducing a laboratory approach, rumour scholars tried to find out how a rumour discourse influences the behaviours of individuals and how rumour mongering reaches affected groups. From the results of experiments, Allport and Postman proposed the equation “ $R \sim i \times A$ ”¹⁶ (1947: 33) to illustrate the transmission of rumour, during which rumours are “levelled”, “sharpened” and “assimilated” (1947: 134; also see Higham 1951) as the distortion of truth. Following the observations and analyses of Allport and Postman, the rumour phenomenon became an established subject matter for more scholars to partake in the debate.

The sociological approach proposed by Allport and Postman is, indeed, limited by the times. Against the backdrop of WWII and the immediate post-war period, societies required the public to get rid of misinformation and follow the instructions of governments without any interference, leading to suggestions for controlling rumours in an authoritative style, e.g., “Assure good faith in the regular media of communication” or “Develop maximal confidence in leaders” (Knapp 1944: 35). These dictations, viewed from the present, are no longer sufficient for a comprehensive understanding of the rumour phenomenon as they treat rumours primarily as obstacles to social order rather than as mechanisms of collective meaning-making. Also, by sticking to laboratory approaches, Allport and Postman rejected a collective understanding of the problematics by taking a microscopic stance that “by shifting from individual to individual the story is prevented from being too closely tailored to one individual’s interests, and the resulting product may actually be more accurate” (1947: 60). However, the rumour phenomenon is not only the accumulation of interpersonal communication; it also needs to consider the social and cultural context that is the macroscopic background for rumour generation and transmission. In laboratory experiments, the subject for study is the memory of interviewees, which cannot represent the

¹⁶ Here, R refers to range of rumour, i refers to importance of the topic and A refers to ambiguity.

complexity of the social context. The only concern in a laboratory experiment is the finally distorted information and the middle stages are omitted, “as if it were crossing only a field of corpses, the last of which, suddenly, would rise resuscitated, as in the theater, to announce the good or bad ‘news’” (Reumaux 1996: 113, translation mine).¹⁷

Moreover, in Allport and Postman’s understanding, rumours are distorted truths that impede a healthy society; this ignores the positive aspects of rumour. The disease metaphor fails to recognise the fact that rumours are sometimes also constructive for people to manage things, making meanings around them to cope with any situation to which they are not accustomed. In order to surpass the disease metaphor, Shibutani came up with the idea of “improvised news” (1966) to investigate the contents of rumour. He pointed out that the contents of rumours are not presupposed, but only appear by the time rumours are generated. Following this logic, DiFonzo and Bordia defined rumour as “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger, or potential threat and that function to help people make sense and manage risk” (2007a: 13). In this vein, rumours are not a plague that haunts society and hinders development, but a “cornerstone of epistemology” (Fine 1997: 741) that helps people apprehend explanations for danger and risk. At that moment, people need to gather in groups “as a provider of meanings for situations which do not explain themselves” (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955: 53), which leaves open the question of where these meanings originate and how they become socially available in the first place. These meanings do not appear suddenly out of nowhere; they are already discourses but in other ways, widely observed as folklore, urban legends, local beliefs; in sum, cultural texts. They appear suddenly in sociological observations because the synchronic perspective of the discipline foregrounds moments of eruption rather than the longer cultural histories from which these meanings are drawn. Culture is always there as a comprehensive corpus for rumour generation and as a catalyst for rumour transmission in certain groups.

Another shortcoming of sociological methods for rumour studies is that truth is not a discussable matter. There is a sublimity of truth and *the truth* is always accessible to members of society. But in fact, truth itself is always constructed by discourses that are legitimised by the institutions in society and are structured by the knowledge(s) that members of the society apprehend. There is never a sublime truth that is not challengeable, but only a set of “games of truth” that are constructed upon certain orders of discourse (Foucault 2017). By “games of truth”, Foucault refers to the historically specific practices through which claims become accepted as true and acquire authority within a society. The social construction of truth leads to two new fields for the sociology of rumour studies. On the one hand,

¹⁷ “[...]si elle ne traversait qu’un champ de cadavres, dont le dernier, brusquement, se relèverait ressuscité, comme au théâtre, pour annoncer la bonne ou mauvaise ‘nouvelle’”.

there is the possibility of investigating the social base of knowledge, or “the sociology of knowledge” that “is concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 15); this is undoubtedly a fertile ground for more discussions. On the other hand and maybe more importantly, the will to truth of the members of society, which “relies on institutional support” (Foucault 1971: 11), presumes the importance of members to be “in truth”. People are always using the truth that they claim to reside in to contemplate the discourses in which they participate and to judge discourses from their own beliefs. Therefore, the antithesis between truth and rumour in the sociological approaches of the last century is thus perplexed at the relationship of power, truth and discourses, which requires more elaborations.

Last but not the least, non-human factors also actively participate in the dynamic process. Bruno Latour pointed out that besides humans, objects also have agency, which broadened the landscapes of sociological studies by that time. The Actor-Network Theory (ANT as the shorthand) offers a substantial insight into the relationships between human and non-human actors (*actants*), which forge a network within which discourses circulate. The “sociology of associations”, as Latour himself termed it (2005), traces the actions of different actants and maps out the network for discourses to function and interact with these actants. Hence, rumours are to be studied in a networked venue consisting of not only human subjects, but also non-human factors and institutions. And the first mission for rumour studies from the sociological perspective is an investigation of all these actants as the smallest units of analysis, among which members of the society are merely part of them. In this regard, the associations between different actants of the society are brought alongside the actants themselves, profiling the whole social sphere as the stage where rumours are generated and circulated.

In sum, the sociological approach to studying the rumour phenomenon focuses the observable transmission of rumours in society and brings insights into how (mis)information is communicated between different communities. It can be further elaborated towards how social norms are reinforced and power relationships are entrenched, in which rumours, as social discourses, are articulated to anchor the social reality that is institutionalised by individuals. However, sociology still falls short when it tries to explain how rumours are generated from the communities’ own culture and how these contents appeal especially to the given communities. Indeed, there should be a general “grammar” that structures the articulation of such rumours macroscopically; but on the meso-level (translocal, as discussed above) and micro-level (local, as well as personal), there are also *ad hoc* ways of articulation dedicated to them. Therefore, theories that are “humbler” (Noyes 2008) shall be incorporated with the macroscopic design from the sociologists for investigating rumours in this study.

0.4.3. Memory Studies, a Promise Revisited

Apart from the sociological paradigm, there are also scholars who explore the cultural context to investigate the source of rumour generation. More than a decade before the research conducted by Allport and Postman, Prasad (1935) analysed rumours after an earthquake in India by investigating the impact of local cultures, traditions and customs in social behaviours, which gave insights into how culture affects the generation of rumours. The rumour phenomenon is not generated out of nowhere; any rumour is deeply rooted in what society remembers as the shared past, whether it is remotely as culture or more recently as the “hot topics” in society. Studies on collective memory can be introduced to the debate to bridge the gap between the study of the collective unconscious and the sociology of rumour. Reumaux used the analogy of the metamorphosis of insects to emphasise the importance of collective memory in studying rumours. She pointed out that rumours are like insects; there are three stages in the rumour process, which develops into an outburst of rumours in society:

A distinction will therefore be made between a larval stage, a nymphal stage and an imago stage, the first and the last being placed under the sign of discontinuity, movement and activity, the second under that of immobility, continuity, latencies and virtualities. We see that the larval stage fits quite naturally into the framework of collective memory which keeps track of actions, conflicts, past tensions, and that the imago stage is the one in which social vibrations are recorded, ruptures, crises, eruptions that unfold under the eye of the observer. (Reumaux 1996: 12–13, translation mine)¹⁸

In this regard, the diachronic approach to collective memory of social groups is introduced alongside the synchronic approach by sociologists and has the potential to reveal the features that sociology fails to reach. Unfortunately, Reumaux did not really enter into the study of collective memory as promised by Halbwachs (1992) but only coined the term collective memory (*mémoire collective*) as an umbrella concept referring to the larva stage of rumour generation. For Reumaux, collective memory is a text-based institution that can shed light on the context of rumour generation, but she did not investigate the depth of collective memory to see what exactly these texts are.

¹⁸ “On distinguera donc un stade larvaire, un stade nymphal et un stade d’éclosion, le premier et le dernier étant placés sous le signe de la discontinuité, du mouvement et de l’activité, le second sous celui de l’immobilité, de la continuité, des latences et des virtualités. On voit que le stade larvaire s’inscrit tout naturellement dans les cadres de la mémoire collective qui garde trace des actions, des conflits, des tensions passées, et que le stade d’éclosion est celui où s’inscrivent les vibrations du social, les ruptures, les crises, les éruptions qui se déroulent sous l’œil de l’observateur”.

Collective memory, indeed, has its own stratification, since social groups cannot remember everything precisely in the same way. Texts, as vehicles of collective memory, are also situated at different levels of society and have different kinds of relationships with members of society. Following this logic, J. Assmann conceptualised communicative memory and cultural memory (2008: 109) as the two levels of collective memory, despite the fact that Halbwachs tried to exclude the cultural aspects of collective memory. J. Assmann defined cultural memory as follows:

Cultural memory is a kind of institution. It is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent: They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another. (J. Assmann 2008: 110–11)

From another perspective within the collective memory approach, culture, as the “non-hereditary memory of the community” (Lotman and Uspenskij 1978: 213), provides the contents and topics for rumours to be told and retold in the social sphere, which is already there long before the presence of certain rumours. Therefore, the rumour text is not only in an intertextual relationship with other texts that coexist with the text under investigation, but also within a context where other texts function as “disintegrated” (Lotman 1988: 54) elements to support the generation and comprehension of it. The conception of cultural memory also brings up the question of rumour’s relationship with the collective unconscious, for the border between the two is vague and hard to conceptualise. To one extreme, Reumaux refuted the visionary rumour approach provided by Jung:

But we have to point out that there is no need to appeal to an underlying and unconscious goal-representation to explain the mechanism of rumours. It is not, in our view, the unconscious that manifests itself, but the social imagination and the particular socio-cultural and circumstantial conditions that cause certain representations to be solicited rather than others. (Reumaux 1996: 122, translation mine)¹⁹

The selection mechanism, according to Reumaux’s observations, is not the collective unconscious but collective memory, intersecting with different levels of society. There is no need to refer to the collective unconscious for understanding the generation of rumour. However, it is not impossible to incorporate the two

¹⁹ “Nous ferons cependant remarquer qu’il n’est pas besoin de faire appel à une représentation-but, sous-jacente et inconsciente, pour expliquer le mécanisme des rumeurs. Ce n’est, à notre sens, pas l’inconscient qui se manifeste, mais l’imaginaire social et les conditions particulières tant socioculturelles que conjoncturelles, qui font que sont sollicitées certaines représentations plutôt que d’autres”.

approaches into one, since the two aspects do not overlap, but are hard to demarcate. The relationship of the two is situated in the deepest strata of the rumour phenomenon, which needs further investigation.

The level of communicative memory also contributes to rumour generation and transmission. As the short-term memory of the collective, communicative memory is directly linked to social pragmatics and bridges rumour to the cultural memory of the given social group. Communicative memory appears as the mechanism refreshing contents of rumour and engaging more individuals to participate in the transmission of rumour. In other words, communicative memory constructs the current interpretations and decisions as the everyday social memory that has a lasting impact among members of society, which brings up the question of how individuals need an interpretation of current situations. Therefore, the investigation of communicative memory also borders on media studies. Harald Welzer noted that “media products do not just deliver versions of the past; they also determine the perception of the present” (2008: 287). Media also provide venues for individuals to share their perception of the present to form a larger social imagination, or even hallucination, of what is happening around them, which is, undoubtedly, the most ideal place for rumours to circulate.

In sum, studies on collective memory have the full potential of investigating the rumour phenomenon. There are already plenty of scholars who introduced the idea in the analysis of rumour phenomena (for example, Feldman-Savelsberg, Ndonko, and Yang 2017; Podoshen and Hunt 2009); but it is an enterprise far from completed. The main reason is that the rise and the proliferation of collective memory studies, in the 1990s when the Soviet bloc collapsed, did not continue to the time when the rumour phenomena received the widest concern among academics. But as the newest wave of interest studying the rumour phenomenon is looming on the horizon, now it is time to bring the discussion back to the agenda of rumour studies again.

0.4.4. Folkloristics, the Rumour Public and the Vernacular

The above-mentioned approaches investigate the rumour phenomenon at the social level, yet the rumour phenomenon also has its microscopic patterns, which seem trivial to sociologists, but important for folklorists. As “artistic communication in small groups” (Ben-Amos 1971: 13), folklore is intrinsically connected to the rumour phenomenon because it is a substantial ground for folk legends, beliefs and traditions to manifest themselves in a modern form under the influence of social pragmatics. Therefore, rumours always present themselves as a mixture of both the old and the new, and the study of rumour from a folkloristic perspective is closely linked to contemporary legend, because “Legends, and the rumours related to them, are clearly traditional narratives” (Kalmre 2013: 20). By studying the urban belief tale of bottled mice in cola and other soft drinks in America, Fine

(1979) pointed out that the sources of a rumour are not limited to one. When a rumour is transmitted in society, people attach information from different sources to rumour to make it more plausible and transfer it to the next person. The contents of rumours always find echoes in the substantial archive of first-hand materials collected during fieldwork and are brought back to the table of folklorists.

The polygenesis of rumour points to the fact that rumours are not generated in an instance. The solid foundation of materials collected by folklorists and ethnographers entrenched the visions provided by scholars of cultural memory, that any social discourse has its diachronic aspect as history of social groups, no matter how big or small the groups is. From this point of view, apart from the received history (Gadamer 2013) that functions as the official memory uniting different peoples and groups in society (Burke 1993), there are also local memories that are not recognised on the social level and that are heterogeneous to each other. The heterogeneity of memories in the social sphere coincides with the uninstitutionalised status of rumour discourses (which is, of course, not a coincidence because of the ontological statuses of the two) and precisely in this sense is the study of folklores intrinsically connected to rumour studies.

The folkloristic approach also provides a new way of profiling the rumour public. Different from the sociological approach, which understands rumour as a social phenomenon, folklorists understand the transmission of rumour within different groups, tracing the whole process step by step. Rumour texts are communicated within different groups and within different individuals of a group, which indicates that there are two levels of rumour communication. On the one hand, there is interpersonal communication of rumour texts. On this level, communication happens in a small group where the addressers know personally who the addressees are. In other words, the group is maintained by “personal (typically face-to-face) interaction with the recognition by participants that they constitute a meaningful social unit” (Fine and Harrington 2004: 343). This social miniaturism (Stolte, Fine, and Cook 2001) opens up the opportunity to analyse certain behaviours of individuals to discover how certain memories are generated and later dismissed by some institutions as rumours. On the other hand, Fine (1979; 2007) observes that communication of rumour texts also happens between different small groups. In this case, the communication of rumour texts does not happen interpersonally, but anonymously. The border between these small groups is porous; information is exchanged and transformed into other shapes, which will be further elaborated below in 3.2. Anonymous communication between different small groups, especially under the context of the fast development of media technologies in our modern times accelerates and expands the process, needs more elaborations.

The two dimensions of communicating rumour texts indicate the existence of a “sociology of the local” (Fine 2010), which characterises a meso-level analysis

of the rumour phenomenon to bridge the micro-level of individuals and the macro-level society. Therefore, there should be a communicative modality that is lower (or more local) than the macroscopic communication within the society for rumours to circulate. Richard Bauman termed this modality “the vernacular”:

The vernacular is a communicative modality characterized by: (1) communicative resources and practices that are acquired informally, in communities of practice, rather than by formal instruction; (2) communicative relations that are immediate, grounded in the interaction order and the lifeworld; and (3) horizons of distribution and circulation that are spatially bounded, by locality or region. The vernacular, furthermore, can only be understood in dynamic relation to the cosmopolitan; they are opposing vectors in a larger communicative field. If the vernacular pulls toward the informal, immediate, locally-grounded, proximal side of the field, the cosmopolitan pulls toward the rationalized, standardized, mediated, wide-reaching, distal side. (R. Bauman 2008: 32–33)

Following this logic, Bauman further emphasised that rather than a linguistic-inspired general approach to come up with a prevailing theory for all folklores, it is more proper to focus on “philology of the vernacular” that is “based on the understanding that texts are expressions of and intelligible in terms of the cultures in which they circulate”. (2008: 30) This conceptualisation echoes with Lotman’s understanding of texts as “a full-fledged participant in [the communicative act], as a source or a receiver of information” (1988: 56), which borders the collective memory, especially cultural memory as mentioned above.

However, even though the folkloristic approach secures the fertile ground for folklorists to study their subject matter, rumour, as a translocal phenomenon, requires more than that for a comprehensive understanding of the relevant problematics. Most of the folkloristic studies on rumours—if not all, because of the intrinsic limits of folklorist methodologies—are case studies, under the spirit of “humble theory” (Noyes 2008); but the common ground of these respective cases has not been made clear. It is unfair to criticise the folklorist approach for things that are not promised in the paradigm, but a general understanding of the rumour phenomenon requires less humility and more assertiveness, since we are dealing with a phenomenon of mass communication that can go far beyond local borders.

0.4.5. Transmedial Studies

The rumour phenomenon is always a mass communication (Kapferer 1990: 1), which indicates that the information exchanged is always mediated during the communication process. Roman Jakobson (1985: 113) conceptualised six factors in communication: (1) context, (2) addresser (sender), (3) addressee (receiver), (4) contact, (5) common code and (6) message, corresponding to six functions of

language: (1) referential, (2) emotive, (3) conative, (4) phatic, (5) metalingual and (6) poetic. The schema was further developed by Lotman (1974: 302) in differentiating the addresser's code and the addressee's code at the metalevel, which is a more common situation. In this vein, communication process between the addresser and the addressee is a translation process, which highlights the mediation of information during such communicative acts. The media are therefore foregrounded as the studied matter. As the extension of our senses, the media help us reach others and be reached by others (Mulder 2006). Therefore, when people communicate with each other, the information transmitted cannot be separated from the medium used. In this regard, media have become an inevitable topic of our discussion on rumours. Since "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1994), we need to also investigate what role do media play in rumour articulation and transmission.

However, the development and the proliferation of mass media, especially the digital media, has complicated the problematics. In our modern times, media are "in continuous change and interchange" (Petho 2020: 1), and can no longer be studied separately as one single informative channel. The convergence of media (Jenkins 2006: 2) has created a new normal in social reality, in which the texts present themselves transmedially. Irina O. Rajewsky defined transmediality as "the unspecific phenomenon in media which can be carried out with the specifics of each media, without assuming that a single contact-making medium is important or possible" (2002: 13, my translation).²⁰ In this vein, a hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994) is constructed upon *the reality* and the boundaries between the two are blurred, since the simulation of the real (the simulacrum, as Baudrillard himself coined the term) and the real itself are intermingled in transmediality. It is precisely in this sense that the social reality is a thickened one, as discussed in 0.2.1 above.

Transmediality also infiltrates narratives, no matter whether they are fiction or not. What a text narrates is not merely a story with its plot, but a "possible world" (Doležel 1988; Ryan 2006; 2013) with its own rules and sets, depending on the narratological patterns of it. On the intratextual level, a text has its own narratological structure with different strategies to convince its audience. Even though any kind of communication contains the six factors schematised by Jakobson, the functioning of a rumour text during the communication process needs special consideration, especially regarding the emotive and the phatic function. The possible world constructed by narratives also presumes that there are details not included in the narration. But by manoeuvring upon other functions of language, the details that are not mentioned in the text are filled up by personal

²⁰ "Medienunspezifische Phänomene, die in verschiedenen Medien mit den dem jeweiligen Medium eigenen Mitteln ausgetragen werden können, ohne dass hierbei die Annahme eines kontaktgebenden Ursprungsmediums wichtig oder möglich ist".

experiences of the addressee, which presumes the possibility that messages can be distorted. Moreover, with transmedial storytelling (Jenkins 2006), the mediated reality is seemingly unmediated and appears to be immediate, presenting an almost perfect imitation of the real by making itself imperceptible (Pinchevski 2019: 142). The texts are therefore “too real” to be false, but the reality itself is hidden among the simulacrum and nowhere to be found.

On the intertextual level, the possible worlds narrated by texts are not parallel. The transmedial environment presumes that elements of one possible world can also present themselves in another world. Transfictionality (Ryan 2008; 2013; Saint-Gelais 2005; Doležel 1998) is “the migration of elements such as characters, plot structures, or setting from one fictional text to another. It can be thought of as a relation between possible worlds” (Ryan 2013). The phenomenon itself is not a modern invention; however, it is foregrounded by the advent of transmediality. When possible worlds are mingled with each other, especially with the narratives that claim to be real, our memory, which also depends on retrieving available texts as mnemes, is also influenced by it. Against the extensive backdrop of our personal memories in the transmedial environment, Alison Landsberg terms transmedial memory as “prosthetic memory” (2004: 2) and Erll points out that our memory itself is transmedial (2008). The new form of memory characterises both the personal remembrance and the collective memory in the social sphere by providing various versions of a social event that are coalesced into an agglomeration of different, sometimes even discrepant, possible worlds that can no more be identified separately, which leads to discussion of the social reality perceived by individuals.

The transmediality of memory sheds more light on rumour studies; it casts its influence on two levels. On the individual level, individual memories are submerged in the transmedial environment, which means that every time a remembrance happens, the retrieved memory is always intersected with elements that do not belong to the individual memory itself. In other words, under the influence of transmediality, people are more prone to faked memory (Devitt et al. 2016), which deserves more attention and discussion, especially on the mechanism of its organisation and how it is articulated in society as the source of rumour. On the collective level, the thickened reality concedes a place for some of the memories to proliferate as “false memory” since there are different versions of the same event, which is associated to the power relationship analysis and the landscape of social institutions. Analysis of media as the subject matter, therefore, has become an inseparable part of rumour studies, focusing on not only how (mis)information is transmitted, but more importantly, how the world is mediated and constructed via different media.

Transmediality is not a natural thing. As Lemke noted, we “still need to learn to make sense of radically new multimodal combinations, as was the case historically for sound-film, or for artists’ experiments in synaesthesia. But we only need

to learn to do so in ways that are consensually recognized in the community” (2009: 287). And as learning proceeds, hyperreality starts to overshadow *the reality* and posits itself as the only reality that is available. Consequently, the truth value of a text is deprived of its truthfulness and is totally subject to discursive practices, which is when rumours become convincing. The “faith in fakes” (Eco 1998 [1986]) in hyperreality, in this regard, has opened up a new field to discuss the acceptance and the reproduction of rumour in the context of transmediality. Regarding our modern society in which the Internet permeates every corner, it is impossible to neglect this field, since all kinds of communication in our modern times are affected by the transmedial social reality, in this or that way.

0.5. Between the Two Worlds: A Semiotic Investigation

Herman Hesse, in *Demian* (2013 [1923]), described two worlds that are intersected with each other. The first world belongs to the day. It is a world with light and order. Human rationality hovers in the air and everything is well organised in its right path. The second world belongs to the night. It is a world of ghosts and mysteries. Harsh noises and sullen voices permeate the world with their own vitality: everything is unpredictable; everything is vigorous. Rumours seem to belong to the second world by their presence in society; however, identifying them requires perspectives from the first. Rumours are therefore the discourses that are situated between the two worlds: they reside in the second world and continually make their presence in the first one. In short, they traverse the boundaries between the two worlds.

Rumours, as discourses generated under a social concern and from the heterogeneity of knowledges, are much more complex than the individual one that convinced the emperor. On the one hand, the source of rumours is much deeper than a mere untruthful report of a non-existent tiger; it probes the collective mind in society and is articulated once and again to enchant the public to believe in things that are even ridiculous, if judged from the perspective of human rationality. But that is precisely the place where rumour studies are attractive for scholars: if we presume that humankind is always equipped with the rationality which is assumed to be with universal, why do rumours still convince the public with their own charms? The question leads to a discussion on the truth itself, since human rationality is based on an anchored truth that can be resorted to as facts. In the case of rumours, the truth that the rumour public resorts to is not limited to an all-encompassing science that has been built upon the expertise of humankind, but also their own knowledges that have been passed down from their predecessors. This is to say that, besides a scientifically modified truth, there is also a culturally modelled truth that long precedes the occurrence of modern science. It does not

indicate that culture goes against science; instead, culture and science supplement each other, even overlap in some places as we shall see in the upcoming chapters.

Traversing between the two worlds also means that there are communicative practices in the social sphere. Against social pressure, the rumour public makes meaning out of the need for understanding the world around them and then communicates what it perceives. The outburst of rumours is then observed in the social sphere, which can be anatomised both microscopically as individual behaviours and macroscopically as the transmission of rumours. Under most circumstances, rumour texts are not transmitted from one to another but haunt social groups. Therefore, rather than describing the rumour as transmission, it is more proper to use the word “infection” instead. In virology, infection indicates that “germs enter a human body, increases its number and cause a reaction of the human body” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2022). When a rumour occurs in society, a special group of people, or rumour public, as discussed above, are spell-bound, accept the rumour and speak of it once and again in the social sphere in the same way as germs entering the human body, despite the negative implications. It is, in fact, impossible to trace the transmission of rumours one by one. In other words, the transmission of rumours is not unidirectional like Chinese whispers, but an infective web woven according to different areas of suggestibility (Miller 2005: 511) in which the whole rumour public takes part, making the rumouring atmosphere and intensifying the social imagination. It is possible to understand the rumour infection as a set of discourses that appeals to groups of people under the social concern by retracting from collective memories and causing a cataleptic effect (Reumaux 1996: 174) to the public.

The two directions of rumour studies—namely, the diachronic one and the synchronic one—would need to converge into one in order to understand the rumour phenomenon in full. A new paradigm in a transdisciplinary manner is therefore necessary and semiotics offers the means of bridging the two directions. Rumours, as discourses circulating in the social sphere, are texts with their particular structures in Lotman’s conception (1988). As “A theory of communication is dialectically linked to a theory of signification, and a theory of signification should be first of all a theory of signs” (Eco 1981: 37), semiotics provides a perspective on how information is communicated in society. If we follow the simple model of communication that was developed by Shannon (1948), there are five components in communication: the source (of information), the transmitter, the channel, the receiver and the destination, which corresponds to Jakobson’s (1985) model of communication between addresser and addressee. At all stages, ‘noise’ attends the communication and analysing the phenomenon requires semiotic tools.

More importantly, semiotics considers both the diachrony and synchrony of the rumour phenomenon. On the diachronic plane, culture is investigated as the “long-term memory of the community” (Lotman and Uspenskij 1978: 215) and

functions as the disintegrated texts that regulate the behaviours of members of a culture. Semiotics brings a powerful tool for interrogating the diachronic sedimentation of discourses in society as the collective memory of the given groups, which maps the whole social sphere as an uneven landscape constructed by different kinds of institutions. This direction includes the studies of psychoanalysis, folklore studies and cultural memory. On the synchronic plane, the transmission of rumours in the social sphere is characterised by the sedimented institutions as the meaning-making process under social pressure. The “improvised news” (Shibutani 1966) has its own internal narratological structure and external relationships with other texts, the latter of which brings the text into public discourses. This direction includes the sociological approach, media studies and communicative memory. Bringing these diachronic and synchronic perspectives together, this research builds its theoretical framework primarily upon Lotmanian semiotics, Foucauldian approaches to the history of knowledge, and sociology of knowledge, while being informed by theories of collective memory, power relationships, and mass communication. The empirical materials employed in this dissertation are therefore selected according to their heuristic value for investigating different aspects of rumour. Since we can never predict future rumours (we will address the issue of unpredictability in 2.1 and 3.3) and rumour processes can only be reconstructed retrospectively, all cases examined in this dissertation are historical rumours, whether remote or recent. Each case foregrounds a particular dimension of rumour as a semiotic phenomenon, including epistemic structuring, formation of epistemic authority, articulation, legitimation, circulation, transmutation, and cultural sedimentation. Together, these dimensions form the analytical trajectory of the dissertation.

Eco once wrote that “semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie” (1976: 7). At its ontological level, the rumour phenomenon is precisely the lie that further hazes the real that has already been hidden behind the painted veils. It actively participates in the discursive practice of our daily lives and infiltrates all levels of society by constructing an “out-there-ness” (Potter 1996) and mesmerising individuals. Semiotics has full potential to analyse the rumour phenomenon; but within the field of semiotics, many studies have used cases of rumours in combination with other discourses and texts (for example, Greimas 1987: 166; Lotman 1991) to support arguments, yet without specifically addressing the phenomenon under investigation. Rumour studies have long been marginal in semiotics: only a few applied semiotic studies have investigated the phenomenon in recent years (Hatefi 2021). Rumours are like “the most familiar strangers” to semiotics; however, “with its analytical depth in both the synchronic and the diachronic planes, semiotics has the potential and the responsibility to unmask the complexities since the beginning of our human history” (Song 2025b: 124).

1. RUMOURS BEFORE RUMOURING

Rumours never start from nowhere. In order to understand the rumour phenomenon in its full sense, we need to look deeper into the pre-rumour stages to investigate where people attain the epistemic patterns to comprehend the current reality. The rumours of hairy men in newly communist China are a good starting point of our discussion. When the Chinese Communist Party, or CCP, after toils and sweat, finally defeated the Japanese troops and *Kuo Min Tang*—or KMT, the Nationalist Party—the China in their hands was a land that had been tortured by wars and colonialism for more than a century. During the Proclamation of the People's Republic of China, on October 1st, 1949, Mao Zedong announced, on the top of Tiananmen Gate, the establishment of a new government. Despite “profound economic, social and cultural backwardness” (S. A. Smith 2016: 178), a “New China”, as it should be called, was confident of the future ahead. But with 80 percent of its 540 million population working in farming and 70 percent of them illiterate (S. A. Smith 2016: 179; The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China 2009), the New China was still endeavouring to become a modernised state. Due to similar ideologies and historical relationships, the Soviet Union welcomed the New China and sent expertise and equipment to China to build up its industries from scratch. With Soviet help, China established its own infrastructure for nearly all sectors of industry. People were educated at different levels and living standards were improved. In brief, under the honeymoon, China set its own track of development.

But the honeymoon was not free from haunting shadows. From the late 1940s, it was rumoured in northern regions of China that there were “hairy men” living in or beside waters. The rumours then rapidly travelled to the eastern parts of China, and they wreaked great havoc among the public. These men, as rumours depicted, were “with long hair, coming from waters, and predating human flesh” (Ma 2013; Li 2005; Zhang 2020). The rumour was suppressed and dismissed quickly following the successive victories of the CCP against loitering KMT troops in some regions, since most of the cases were fabricated out of malice by defeated troops (Li 2005; 2011; Zhang 2020) in order to create chaos among ordinary people for their own sake. When the culprits were found by local police or militaries under Communist Party command, such rumours were cleared and stories regarding hairy men disappeared. However, in the mid-1950s, rumours of hairy men resurfaced, in a more concrete and elaborate form: it was said that the hairy men had “bronze or iron claws, gouging out people's eyes and hearts” (Ma 2013); they were living by bodies of water and would “cut off men's genitalia, women's breasts and children's intestines and send them to the Soviets for building atomic bombs” (Li 2005; 2010). The rumour travelled fast, from region to region, affecting half of the new China. “Witnesses” of hairy men swarmed local police stations and shouted their stories on the streets. The whole society

was clouded by fear. This time, the rumour seemed to have gone beyond ideological intentions and surpassed the political confrontation, which was the central theme of the previous spate of rumours. The rumours were going wild: people dared not to go for the crops during the day and go to sleep at night. Pupils were not going to schools out of fear and some people suspected of being hairy men were clubbed to death (Li 2005). The toxic hysteria lasted for more than a year and rumours, as the afterquake of such hysteria, remained recurrent in the following decades. After claiming hundreds of deaths and thousands of arrests, these rumours seem to have become inert and no longer infected the social sphere; however, even now, similar stories are retold in some of the regions where related rumours used to rampage—but without the fear that was a component of the original rumour.

Complicated as it may seem, the case of the Hairy Men, as “the biggest rumor in China in the 20th century” (Li 2011: 13), brings us a typical case, or rumour complex since it contains a bunch of related rumours which originated from both a collective cultural corpus and a public concern. Despite the different explanations in different directions provided by different scholars on the same case, nearly all of them pointed out the polygenetic nature of such a rumour. Contents from different origins intersect and are woven into a magnificent, gaudy tweed cloth: reproductive fear, fear of supernatural powers, concerns of a possible third world war, scientific discourses, political revolts, *etc.* The list can go on and on as long as we are clairvoyant and going to every detail. But more importantly, all these articulated rumours came from what members of the social sphere *knew* about the present situation, no matter whether it was the knowledge of the nearby, that the waters around were rich in myths about a monster living underneath, or about scientific progress in countries thousands of kilometres away, that a disastrous bomb was invented and could obliterate a city. Moreover, all these knowledges, however scientific or vernacular, were all brought to discursive arenas and were articulated in narratives and as epistemic tools to comprehend what was going on around members of society. Therefore, what is notable here, as in all other rumour cases, is that by the time a rumour is articulated, there are already different knowledges intertwined with each other to form belief systems that various social groups adhere to. And when a public concern is raised, people use what they know to contemplate and reflect on the social reality around them, thus coming up with interpretations and attaching meaning to their experiences. In this regard, rumours, as “a form of knowledge” (Fine and Ellis 2010: 5), gain a semiotic depth with their meanings in social reality. In other words, all rumours are interpretable in the social sphere since there are always correlated knowledges pulling strings at their backs.

Moreover, knowledge “‘programmes’ the channels in which externalisation produces an objective world. It objectifies this world through language and the cognitive apparatus based on language, that is, it orders it into objects to be

apprehended as reality” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 84). What rumour depicts and refers to, as being communicated in the social sphere, is already a modelled reality constructed by discourses. Rumours are always articulated in a social reality in which every content of the articulation bears a meaning. In the case of Hairy Men, every part of the rumours made sense to the rumour public: the monster refers to local myths, enemies and Russians,^{21,22} atomic bombs are of advanced technology, relating to reproductive organs²³ and waters are claiming human lives due to annual floods. For the Chinese in the 1950s, their social reality vibrated with these rumours precisely because it was at the same time what they knew and what they perceived. When they were trying to explain what was happening around them by using every bit of what they knew, every bit of what they perceived was already structured by the knowledges they held. The double presence of knowledges both in rumour articulation and in social reality foregrounds the importance of mapping out the different knowledges in the social sphere. By investigating different layers of these knowledges and how they are distributed in the social sphere, which precedes any real rumours, it is possible to understand the epistemic context of rumour articulation before real rumours are articulated. In brief, like a map at hand before visiting a new city, for studying rumours, the first step is to investigate rumours before rumouring, i.e. to describe the different, heterogeneous knowledges in the social sphere.

1.1. A Cartography of Knowledges in the Social Reality

A map of knowledge is nothing new. With its technical attractiveness, maps of knowledge are widely applied as knowledge management in different disciplines and research practices (Van Berten and Ermine 2006; Ermine, Boughzala, and Tounkara 2006). These knowledge management projects aim to visualise different parts of knowledge and illustrate the relationship between them. In a teleological manner, maps of this kind are designed as a route map to solve complex matters. However, rather than mapping, such approaches are more like “engineering” knowledge in a coherent system to provide tools to find a solution for

²¹ In Chinese, a hairy man is called “Mao Ren”, whereas Russians are jokingly termed as “Mao Zi”, or “the hairy guy”, for Russians are hairier than the local Chinese. The term used to imply all foreigners under the Chinese context, but it was later narrowed down only to Russians, especially in the northern regions where exchanges with Russians were the most frequent.

²² Despite the fact that Bolshevik Russia was only a member of the Soviet Union, due to geographical adjacency and its demographic majority in the Soviet Union (including also the “Russification” that haunted the Soviet ideology), people from the Union were all “Russians” in Chinese eyes. The confusion even continues until today.

²³ The pronunciation of the word “bomb” is the same with that of the word “egg”, or a vulgar putting of testicles (Dàn).

the subject matter, not a description of the knowledges available in the social sphere as a comprehensive toolbox for social members. These maps of knowledge fail to be inclusive of other knowledges that may also relate to the subject matter. Knowledge, in this sense, is in singular form because it has one clear line of reasoning pointing directly to the end of the route. This analytic approach offers us a practical device to solve problems, but as its emphasis is often placed on the end results of knowledge production, the diverse processes and methodologies involved are overlooked, which goes against the polygenetic nature of the rumour phenomenon.

This is not the map needed here to understand rumours. As discussed in previous pages, in rumour processes there are multiple knowledges functioning as the source of different contents in texts. Every knowledge system concerning given rumours provides parts of the whole “tree”, or “branches”, to construct a network of knowledges which “is a tree plus an infinite number of corridors that connect its nodes. The tree may become (multidimensionally) a polygon, a system of interconnected polygons, an immense megahedron” (Eco 2014: 54). The polygenesis of rumour (Fine 1979) requires different knowledges to be available at the same time to understand the origin of a rumour phenomenon. By providing paraphernalia, not merely a tool to understand social reality, heterogeneous knowledges are networked in the social sphere in which every knowledge system has a place of its own, with different authority, validity and credibility. Therefore, instead of a cartography of knowledge, what we need here in order to interrogate rumours before rumouring is a cartography of *knowledges*. And the first question is, of course: what are these knowledges and how do they function as knowledges?

1.1.1. Scientific Knowledges: The Magic Conch

Undoubtedly, nuclear bombs are not made from testicles, female breasts and child intestines. Building an atomic bomb requires scientific knowledge from different disciplines and complicated arrangements of resources and human labour beyond what an average person could comprehend. However, as the case of Hairy Men shows, scientific knowledge being beyond public reach does not mean that it cannot actively participate in public discourses. On the contrary, it functions as a meaningful source to legitimise discourses, raise concern in the social sphere and make them more plausible to the audience. Science is not kept away from the mass public by being too complicated to be discussed, but actively engaged in public effort to comprehend the social reality. It is important to note that what is concerned here is not how scientific knowledge is produced in various institutions and developed in the course of human history, but how scientific knowledge participates in the reality of everyday life, i.e. how scientific knowledge is engaged in daily discursive practices and how it is used to construct the social reality that is shared and interpreted by members of society. In this regard, both scientific

knowledge and narrative knowledge (which will be discussed in 1.1.2), are at the discursive level to function as texts and contexts of communication.

The case of Hairy Men manifests the sublime status of scientific knowledge: any discourse that refers to it becomes more plausible and seemingly “truer” than laymen’s babbling or cheap talk on the streets. Science and scientific knowledge are referred to as science without the need of being scientific. Once elements of scientific knowledge are introduced in social discourses, these discourses instantly emit an indisputable aura that ends all discussions and debates no matter whether they are, in essence, scientific or not. As Bruno Latour remarked, “When one appeals to Science, there is no need for debate, because one always finds oneself back in school, seated in a classroom where it is a matter of learning or else getting a bad grade” (2018: 3). The statement seems to go against Lyotard’s argument that in post-modern society we have lost our credulity towards grand narratives and science has lost its central status in legitimating other discourses (Lyotard 1984). However, there is a deeper logic that correlates the two seemingly contradicting statements.

Sublimity of Science in Social Discourses in Post-Modernity

In Club SpongeBob (Overtoom 2001), an episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, SpongeBob and Patrick establish “Club SpongeBob”, in which all members ought to listen to the advice of the Magic Conch, a plastic toy able to talk. Despite the fact that most of the answers from the Conch are “no”, “nothing” and “I don’t think so”, the Magic Conch is still consecrated as the ultimate, sacred revelation that every member of the club should abide by and obey. When Squidward, another character in the series, tries to question the liability of the Conch, SpongeBob and Patrick say:

“Oh Squidward! We must never question the wisdom of the Magic Conch!”

One cannot help but find identical patterns between the Magic Conch and science in social discourses. Both the Conch and science function as a terminator of discourses with absolute assertiveness and become mythicised *abracadabra* that normal people will be spellbound once it is invoked. Owing to the development of empirical sciences, science tends to be linked with rationality and “unscientific” is a synonym of the word “irrational”. The “modern *episteme*”, as Michel Foucault (2002b) puts it, highlights human rationality and underlies the essence of knowledge, which is the verifiability of scientific theorems. Knowledge is knowledge because it can be verified and tested. In other words, there is a correspondence between “the world and statements about the world” (Latour 2018: 71), through which scientific knowledge explains the world and instructs human practice in its course of development. By wielding the magic wand of *Sapere aude* (Kant 1996 [1784]: 17), scientific knowledge provides a structure into which the world can be put and interpreted. The lure of scientism therefore

comes to the stage: by believing in science, problems can be solved and questions answered. Science becomes “the ultimate science of the Real” (Nasr 2007: 132) and is situated at the centre of social discourses as a part of the grand narratives that model all discourses in the social sphere. The metaphysical sublimity of science is associated with the verifiability of science, which structures discourses about science and maintains the “chains of reference”, for “the whole series of points along the way that make it possible to verify the quality of our knowledge” (Latour 2018: 79), between scientific rationales, theorems and the reality that is perceived.

However, this sublimity diminishes with the development of technology and the chains of reference becoming complicated. The chains of reference are not taken for granted and are put under inspection when the complication continues. The distribution of knowledges in different social sectors creates a division between the know and the don’t know, and scientific knowledge is decreasingly able to provide proofs that every member of the social sphere can verify by themselves. This has changed how knowledges present themselves in discourses. As Lyotard identifies, there is “a multiplication in methods of argumentation and a rising complexity level in the process of establishing proof” (Lyotard 1984: 41). The “paradigm shift”, as Kuhn terms it (1996), is also reflected in discursive practices, if not more profoundly, as believing in science has become an ideological object (we will come back to it in 1.1.3). As the case of Hairy Men shows, it is impossible for those who mention atomic bombs in their rumour discourses to also explain how an atomic bomb is built; nor can they precisely argue for the threat of it. They can merely mention it as a gimmick to attract and persuade others who have almost no knowledge about the problem themselves. Therefore, scientific knowledge is at the same time too much and too little: too much because “knowledge moves around everywhere without our knowing how”; but too little “because knowledge no longer has the means to establish its access routes” (Latour 2018: 87). As the correspondence between the world and its statements is questioned, science has lost its metaphysical sublimity as a grand narrative in the social sphere. Following this logic, the modern *episteme* turns into a post-modern *episteme* in which various knowledges coexist, and scientific knowledge is merely one of them, though presumably being the most powerful one due to its performativity under a technical criterion of producing proofs.

The crumbling of the grand narratives does not indicate that everything in science is shattered into pieces and the process is to be restarted all over again, as Lyotard suggests; with the crumbling of the grand narratives, it does not follow

[T]hat they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction. Science ‘smiling into its beard’ at every other belief has taught them the harsh austerity of realism. (Lyotard 1984: 41)

After the crumbling, the illusion of science remains to be situated in the centre of social discourses because the legitimation revolving around science is still present. According to Lyotard, there are two versions of legitimacy: philosophical and political (1984: 31). The philosophical legitimacy, as discussed above, is obscured, whereas the political legitimacy is still valid. The development of science is depicted as equivalent to social progress (the linkage is, in fact, much more complicated than that, as we shall see later) and science is constructed as a performance, or a show, that the whole society witnesses (like a golem that is set for work, see Collins and Pinch 2010). The advancement of science, in political terms, is not a satisfaction to the eagerness of understanding the reality around us but serving a planned political agenda. Scientific knowledge therefore no longer seeks judgements from the nature but is in the service of the subject. Coming back to building the atomic bombs, it was not a coincidence that the time when rumours were rampaging Chinese lands corresponds to the time when the Soviet Union was testing its nuclear bombs: for the mass, illiterate population in China, they might not understand how a nuclear bomb works, nor what scientific knowledge is behind a successful experiment. But they understood that it was science, as a politically important matter of discussion, behind the astounding explosions thousands of kilometres away. It also explains that the rumours of “gouging male testicles” reappeared once again in the mid-1960s, when China had its own nuclear bombs (Li 2010).

It is precisely in this logic that we lost faith in grand narratives, including science in all academic disciplines, but that we believe in science in a new form. Science has become the prey of political discourses and can no longer be separated from them; it has become a second-hand narrative, no more directly a grand narrative itself, but a narrative discursively legitimised by the political. A good example would be the debate between genetics and epigenetics in heredity during the Soviet times. Under Stalin’s rule, Trofim Lysenko, a keen supporter of Lamarck’s epigenetics, opposed Mendel’s genetics and used his political power to discredit and suppress his critics, indirectly contributing to the great famine both in the Soviet Union and in China (Kean 2017). The truthfulness or the scientificity of genetics and epigenetics is not the topic here; however, we can find from the case that Lysenko’s ideas, briefed as Lysenkoism, were legitimised by political power. They were lauded by Stalin as science belonging to the proletariat (Graham 1993: 128), and his dissidents were dismissed as “bourgeois enemies of the people” (Reznik and Fet 2019). In the eyes of Stalin, Lysenkoism *was* scientific—not because it was philosophically scientific, but because it was politically and ideologically scientific. In this extreme case, the philosophical legitimacy of science was totally absent, and the political legitimacy became an indispensable part of science, which again demonstrated that the nature of scientific knowledge has changed.

Therefore, in our modern times, we do not believe in science because it is philosophically important, but because it is politically important. It has become a high tower with its spire up reaching above the clouds: as the Bodmer report (The Royal Society 1985), the landmark of the study on public understanding of science (PUS), shows, it can be observed by everyone but cannot be present in its whole. More importantly, every member of society is told that the tower is important: building up the tower is beneficial and should be done. Of course, this is not a rejection of the philosophical importance of science. It can still explain the world around us; yet the music played inside the tower, unfortunately, is no longer a harmonious idyll.

Science and Politics: Floating Signifiers and Modern Myths

The outcome of the consecration of science is that the public understanding of science and scientific knowledge is prone to politics and public concern. As with the decline of philosophical legitimacy in science, the sublimity of science needs extra mechanisms to maintain its status since it is no longer a self-evident enterprise. The political sublimity of science also indicates that science has become a hollowed object which cannot be reached constitutively in the social sphere. In the Hairy Men example, Li (2005; 2010) observed that not only rumours about atomic bombs were rampant, but also about “big fireballs”, “destructive mushrooms” (an obvious reference to the clouds that nuclear bombs produce) and “thunder bombs”, in which the rest of the rhetoric remained similar. From this perspective, it is obvious that the scientific part, whether the bomb is an object emitting mushroom clouds or scorching vast lands, is not important; what is important here is that the weapon was destructive, threatening the well-being of the people in public conception. And even more importantly, describing the threat requires science to be present in the discourses to legitimise its validity. Science was mentioned in Hairy Men rumours as an expression deprived of its scientific implications. Science and scientific knowledge thus join public discussion in plain language by functioning as a modern myth: referring to science and scientific knowledge becomes identical to referring to superstitions in old times, despite the fact that in modern times, “we no longer have to resort to superstition when faced with the deep problems” (Dawkins 1979: 1). Since all heard information or imagination about the “scientific object” can be used to describe the destructive weapon, more signifieds are added up and overwhelm the original signifier, which starts to float in social discourses. These “floating signifiers”, as Lévi-Strauss (1987: 63–64) terms it, are becoming increasingly detached from their original scientific significations and finally, a “floating chain of signifieds” (Barthes 1977a: 39) replaces the scientific significations in the usage of these scientific terms. Both science’s political sublimity and cultural interpretations constitute our modern myths. We will come back to the intersection of science and culture in 1.1.3.

One may find plenty of similar cases in our modern times. For example, nuclear power, including the destructive weapons and the radiation that follows, is one of the biggest and most widely discussed modern myths. Due to the tragic events in Chernobyl and Fukushima, people around the world are quite aware of the existence and the danger of nuclear power. However, few of them understand the exact mechanisms of how it will affect normal lives, and therefore it can affect everything in public opinion. It can be used to signify anything that sounds the alert on public safety, including those that do not have a direct link to the problem. In 2023, when the Japanese government started to dump the cooling water for the nuclear power plant, which was destroyed in an earthquake and the following tsunami in March, 2011, Chinese people were in panic: under the fear of radiation, with a slight memory of Chernobyl, they rushed to supermarkets to buy salt; and seafood was treated like monster flesh,²⁴ despite the fact that most of the salt sold in China is rock salt²⁵ and the seafood was not affected at all by the cooling water since it took months for the water to reach Chinese seas. The so-called “nuclear wastewater” had become a magical spell, travelling much faster discursively than physically, functioning as an empty basket into which everything can be put.

Another good example is cancer. In the same logic as nuclear power, knowledge regarding cancer is simultaneously too scarce and too plentiful. By being scarce, few people in the social sphere have related scientific knowledge to understand how cancer develops; but by being plentiful, everybody can use it to talk about everything else, from eating the carbonised trims of fried chicken to drinking repeatedly boiled water. Owing to the lack of related knowledge in the social sphere, these statements, though seemingly ridiculous in retrospect, are irrefutable. Once the doubt regarding such statements is raised, it will be instantly faced with worries and questions which are impossible to answer since the whole signification system revolves around a void complicated by science. Therefore, modern myths remain to be modern myths in our modern times, which is an inexhaustible source for rumours to generate. Science as a system of signification in which different scientific discourses constitute a cohesive structure to interpret reality, has become “an unstable compromise between equivalence and difference” (Laclau 2006: 39) in the social sphere. Whereas in the ivory towers, science remains science with all its complicated scientific reasonings, in the social sphere, science has become a system abundant in floating signifiers that everybody can talk about but almost nobody understands intrinsically.

The consequence of a hollowed science in social discourses is that science and scientific knowledge have become a purely political thing. This does not indicate that the philosophical legitimacy of science is no longer available but, in human

²⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/25/world/asia/fukushima-water-seafood-japan-china.html>

²⁵ http://www.yuhua.gov.cn/jdhy49/hygq64/qtqm/202308/t20230825_11201627.html
(In Chinese)

society, philosophical legitimacy has become secondary to political legitimacy. In line with the logic of Lyotard, who proposed that “science, far from successfully obscuring the problem of its legitimacy, cannot avoid raising it with all of its implications, which are no less sociopolitical than epistemological” (Lyotard 1984: 18). Scientific knowledge joins the dynamics of discursive practices as a chain of floating signifiers that constitute the modern myths that members of the society share, in which atomic bombs were merely one spot of the whole chain. From this perspective, a destructive atomic bomb that may remove a whole town is superseded by the tension between the culprits trying to build atomic bombs by killing innocent people and those who thought that they were at risk. The tension demonstrates the political situation of the time, when the New China brought doubts and worries among the general public, not to mention the previous enemies of the Communist Party. And when the gloomy clouds of a new world war were looming on the horizon under the international political context, in which the success of a Soviet atomic bomb increased the toll, such concerns were instantly raised to find their own prey—atomic bombs which nobody knew how they worked. Therefore, atomic bombs became the *name* for the whole discourse concerning them, which brought every participant, remote or close, persons or states, to a political realm with their respective stances towards the subject matter.

In summary, the relationship between science and politics revolves around modern myths. It is precisely the existence of science as a modern myth that makes politicised science possible because politicised science requires the existence of such myths to both conceal scientific significations and open for cultural interpretations. The scientific elements in rumours are thus articulated in the form of floating signifiers. However, there is still a gap that needs to be covered: since science and scientific knowledge are revered in sublimity in the form of modern myths, their presence in social discourses should also be sublime since “‘god’ is not deceptive” (Lyotard 1984: 24). But as we can observe from all rumours containing discourses on science, scientific knowledge is interpreted culturally as narrative in the social sphere, which indicates that the sublimity is challenged. In this regard, the interaction between rumours and scientific knowledge needs further elaboration from a cultural perspective. As rumours are “necessarily unofficial” (Kapferer 1990: 263), their confrontation with science as a part of grand narratives requires a closer investigation, which leads to the discussion on the relationship between scientific knowledge and culture. But before that, we need to investigate what kind of knowledges our culture can provide.

1.1.2. Narrative Knowledges: Culture and Its Corners

Scientific knowledge does not constitute the totality of human knowledge. What people imagined the current situation to be, according to what they knew, was not limited to what they learned in schools and universities. Apart from scientific

knowledge, there are also narrative knowledges (Lyotard 1984: 7), which come from the cultural corpus that a collective shares and transmits to the next generation in texts. Culture, as “systems of knowledge used by relatively large groups of people” (Gudykunst and Kim 2003: 17; cited from Baldwin, Faulkner, and Hecht 2006: 15), also provides individuals with a world that can be comprehended and further internalised as the believed reality for members of that culture. As Lyotard points out,

even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course (1984: 15).

Therefore, narrative knowledges always accompany scientific knowledge in the landscape of knowledges in the social sphere. As the name indicates, narrative knowledges are based on narratives from various origins. This is to say that narrative knowledges are not homogeneous with each other and different from scientific knowledge, which requires a coherent structure to become “scientific”. These narratives may conflict with each other and coexist to function, which indicates that narrative knowledges have the possibility of freeing themselves from grand narratives, rather than being a political thing and revered in sublimity. Lack of universality means that it is impossible to be reduced to a single structure applicable macroscopically. Narrative knowledges are always a mesoscopic enterprise: as a knowledge structure, it is always believed by one community, big or small, but it cannot be extrapolated to the whole social sphere. The distribution of narrative knowledges in the social sphere, as a result, is decentralised.

Moreover, heterogeneity is also present within these structures themselves. Because of their narrative nature, narrative knowledges must be constantly renewed in an articulated form. They are always manifested as foregrounded texts in society. In this sense, each retelling of narrative knowledges adds up a new layer of interpretation or modification, contributing to the overall narratives. In the course of cultural history, the generative process indicates a non-linear development of narrative knowledges, rather than a structural one. The establishment of narrative knowledges is far more complex than scientific knowledge, and more importantly, narrative knowledges are closer to people in the social sphere and more easily accessed and used, since they accompany an individual from birth to his or her death.

For the study of rumours, the complicated situation in narrative knowledge indicates that it is proper to develop the statement that rumour is always in the form of knowledge, as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, above. Since rumours are always fragmented and actively articulated in the social sphere, the knowledges to which these rumours recourse, no matter whether it is scientific knowledge or narrative knowledge, are always mediated personally and include

elements of storytelling, weaving together events, characters and emotions to make sense of a situation. And, more importantly, since rumours are always the opposite side of grand narratives, they cannot enter the sublimity of scientific knowledge. Even though scientific knowledge can be present in rumours, it is always in a mediated form. Therefore, rumour is always in the form of narrative knowledges.

Cultural Memory: Canonical Texts, Identification and Latent Knowledges

When encountering a situation that needs to be understood, people often resort to their previous experiences to help with understanding the current subject matter and seeking certainty. However, these experiences, though belonging to an individual, are mingled with others' experiences "that I get knowledge from" (Wittgenstein 1969: 36e). The exchange of experiences requires a textual basis for communication in the social sphere. As Juri Lotman points out:

In the course of historical development there came a moment when the number of texts needing to be memorized exceeded the capacities of man's individual memory. Written culture came into being, which made it possible to fix a limitless number of texts in the memory of the collective. The significance of written memory was so enormous that images of a book, a library, became identified in people's minds with the very notion of memory. But the epoch of writing led to the domination of the least compact methods of fixation—separate ready texts were preserved. (Lotman 1979: 94–95)

These texts are sedimented in the plenitude of the past, which is the abundance and diversity of cultural narratives and memories that exist within a given society or historical period (Rigney 2005). When an individual tries to *remember* his or her past experiences to understand the current situation, the remembrance often leads to a shared corpus of memory texts (Brockmeier 2002) about others' experiences, accompanying their own ones. Moreover, since culture is an individual's "theory of what his fellows know, believe, and mean, his theory of the code being followed, the game being played, in the society into which he was born" (Keesing 1974: 89), when one retracts from the collective corpus, the remembrance is inevitably modelled by culture. "The cultural recall of the past is governed by a system of relevance that gives priorities to certain aspects of the past and sidelines (effectively, 'forgets') others" (Irwin-Zarecka 2008; cited from Rigney 2005: 18). The memory texts that are recalled culturally construct the cultural memory of a community, among all other memory texts in the plenitude of the past, and these texts, as "condenser[s] of cultural memory" (Lotman 1990: 18), further entrench themselves as canons and working cultural memory. As Aleida Assmann points out, "The canon is not built up anew by every generation; on the contrary, it out-

lives the generations who have to encounter and reinterpret it anew according to their time” (2008: 100).

“Working” cultural memory means that it can be used. Jan Assmann observes that cultural memory is “exteriorized, and stored away in symbolic forms that [...] are stable and situation-transcendent: They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another” (2008: 110–11).²⁶ The displacement of cultural texts indicates that they can be used to comprehend what is happening now, by applying the same structure to the current situation. Moreover, as J. Assmann further remarks, “memory is a matter of knowledge that is distributed among and internalized by each member” (2011: 23). These canonical texts are internalised as their own knowledges; what they know is what they remember. And from another direction, it is exactly these internalised, cultural teachings of “know-how” that consolidate the community that shares such knowledges. Culture provides “the connective structure of common knowledge and characteristics” (J. Assmann 2011: 3). The connective structure is represented both on the synchronic plane and on the diachronic plane.

On the synchronic plane, cultural memory in the social sphere delimits who can use such knowledges. Lyotard argues that “The consensus that permits such knowledge to be circumscribed and makes it possible to distinguish one who knows from one who doesn’t (the foreigner, the child) is what constitutes the culture of a people” (1984: 19). It draws a vague line between those who remember the texts and those who do not. The vagueness comes from interpersonal differences, which different individuals may remember differently and some who claim to remember such texts may also be excluded. In this regard, cultural memory as a set of memory texts sedimented as canonical is also a part of grand narratives, which consolidates the identity of a community. “Cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity” (J. Assmann and Czaplicka 1995: 130). The discussion is highly related to the question of the rumour public, which will be further elaborated in Chapter 3.

On the diachronic plane, the connective structure concerns the continuity of a culture. Lotman and Uspenskij point out that culture is the “nonhereditary memory of a community” (1978: 213). Memory texts are constantly sedimented and transmitted in generations, linking the past and the present. More importantly, knowledges from cultural memory can be instigated to interpret the current situation, which means that cultural texts, though generated in the past, are repeated here and now. “Cultural memory contains a number of cultural messages that are addressed to posterity and intended for continuous repetition and re-use” (A. Assmann 2008: 99). Repetition invokes past texts and brings them to the

²⁶ What J. Assmann is arguing here is highly related to what Berger and Luckmann (1966) conceptualise as “symbolic universe”, which will be discussed in 1.2.3.

present, contributing to the establishment of cultural norms, shaping the behaviour of individuals within that culture (Lachmann 2008).

In the Hairy Men case, both the synchronic and diachronic planes are present. First of all, those who did not know of these cultural texts were excluded from collective reasoning because they lacked related knowledge to join the discussion. Moreover, those who were excluded from the collective effort became the suspicious “them”. In the eyes of local people, these foreigners were dangerous considering the mutual unfamiliarity between the locals and the foreigners. Since foreigners could not participate in the collective reasoning, they could not voice themselves and became vulnerable discursively, and public anger was easily channelled towards them. Foreigners easily became culprits, no matter whether they were Russians, peddlers from other regions, or CCP commissars (Li 2011: 71). More importantly, these cultural texts of water monsters abounded in the regions suffering floods, long before the emergence of Hairy Men rumours. The local people were well aware of the texts by way of repetition of rituals about fighting against the monsters (Ma 2013), stories retold from generations to generations and constantly exchanged ideas on the possible monsters (certainly rumours may stem out of such discussions as the preceding texts of the Hairy Men rumour, which is our focus here). These cultural texts provide cultural interpretations of the past on hairy men and bring them to the present condition, serving to help the public understand the current situation once again, in order to maintain the certainty of the world around the rumour public.

The diachronicity of cultural memory manifests the latency of knowledges in the form of cultural texts. When these texts are sedimented in the course of time, they no longer function as texts in the social sphere but as contexts by providing knowledges to interpret newly generated texts. These texts are disintegrated and cultural memory functions as an agglomerate of backgrounded and dissolved texts as contexts in society and culture (Lotman 1988). Therefore, there is always a time of latency (*les temps de latence*, see Reumaux 1996: 18) between the texts that provide knowledges and the current situation that requires such knowledge. It takes time for these texts to be sedimented and contextualised, infiltrating into the daily communications of communities and to “remain pregnant through the centuries, ensuring the continuity of the social fabric, the envelope of the nymph, and binding mentalities with an indispensable cultural cement” (Reumaux 1996: 16, translation mine).²⁷ Reumaux calls the latency the “nymphal stage” of the rumour phenomenon, in which the knowledges are exchanged and transmitted in the porous surface of the nymphs of rumour before they enter the social sphere:

²⁷ “[...], où l’on peut penser qu’elles sont demeurées prégnantes à travers les siècles, assurant la continuité du tissu social, l’enveloppe de la nymphe, et liant les mentalités d’un indispensable ciment culturel”.

Emphasizing porosity, virtuality, latency time, in short, the incubation that characterizes the nymphal stage, is to say that at this stage the rumor is necessary. Because it is the very expression of the passage in action: the one who sees potentials transform into actions, porosity hardens, pores clog, conflicts erupt and reality explodes into a rain of imagination. (Reumaux 1996: 18, my translation).²⁸

In the case of Hairy Men, there were quite a few centuries between reports of water monsters and hairy men and the Hairy Men rumour (Li 2005; 2010). If we take the latency in chronological terms, it is possible to say that the forthcoming rumours are not arbitrary creations but rather reflections of the cultural knowledges that have quietly settled within the collective consciousness. Kapferer points out that “A rumor’s eternal return thus attests to the realization, on the basis of propitious events, of an explanatory system deeply embedded in collective consciousness” (1990: 116). As cultural knowledges continue to sediment over time, the perpetual cycle of rumour generation persists. And at the present, therefore, rumours always have fertile ground to germinate a rich collection from the cultural corpus of the collective.

The Vernacular and the Vernacular Knowledge

In the social sphere as a macroscope, culture functions as “a complex of identity-shaping aspects of knowledge objectified in the symbolic forms” (J. Assmann 2011: 72). Various canonical texts provide knowledges that are shared throughout the community. However, there are also knowledges that are not socially shared. Even though belonging to the same culture, different groups have different local knowledges to respond to the current situation. These knowledges are informal, everyday knowledge and skills deeply embedded in the practices, beliefs and traditions of social groups, transmitted orally or through practical experience. They are not canonical texts that characterise culture and cannot identify membership of a culture but, rather, focus on the vernacular aspects of ordinary lives. Richard Bauman (2008), in calling these aspects “the vernacular”, accentuates the informal, intimate and local experiences of human beings. In this sense, the vernacular presumes that even within a culture different groups may have different experiences, texts and knowledges that coexist as articulated forms of culture, focusing on daily and local practices. As Ülo Valk puts it, “Vernacular does not refer to a definite

²⁸ “Mettre l’accent sur la porosité, les virtualités, les temps de latence, bref sur l’incubation qui caractérise le stade nymphal, c’est dire qu’à ce stade la rumeur est nécessaire, car elle est l’expression même du passage à l’acte : celui qui voit les potentialités se transformer en actions, la porosité se durcir, les pores se boucher, les conflits éclater et la réalité exploser en une pluie d’imaginaire”.

kind of religious act or a univocal expression but to relationality and openness to other lived forms of expression, knowledge and authority” (2022: 2).

In the Hairy Men case, we can observe the locality and practical aspects of the rumour. When the rumour reached different regions of China, various contents were changed. For example, in the regions where waterways were prevalent, hairy men were water monsters living underneath the water; in the regions where the KMT was fighting against the CCP, the monsters were described as soldier-like creatures with uniforms; in the regions where folk beliefs and sects were plentiful, they were strongly linked to local myths and legends (Li 2011). These variations reflected the vernacular experiences of different local groups in those regions; and more importantly, these various articulations suggested the local knowledges that people withheld when they encountered a situation that needed to be comprehended and communicated.

We can then talk about vernacular knowledge, which “refers to the forms of knowledge and beliefs articulated by ‘ordinary’ people in their everyday lives to provide implicit and explicit structures to their lifeworlds” (Rota 2023: 579). Similar to cultural knowledge, vernacular knowledge is text-based; it is “memorable, repeatable, and thus sharable and durable” (R. Bauman 2008: 31). However, in contrast to cultural knowledge, which is consistent, vernacular knowledges are inconsistent and local. As Valk writes, “Without aiming at unity and coherence, it [vernacular knowledge] can be inconsistent, controversial and fragmentary. Its argumentation tends to be bolstered with factuality and personal experience narratives” (2022: 9). Vernacular knowledges are the self-evident knowledges of different groups according to the intimate worlds around given groups; this indicates the flexibility and adaptability of vernacular knowledge.

Therefore, vernacular knowledges always accompany cultural knowledge as local variations, which also demonstrates the dynamics of rumour transformation during its proliferation within different groups. Whereas cultural knowledge is a broader concept that encompasses the entirety of a community’s shared knowledge from culture, vernacular knowledge concerns itself with the practical, informal and everyday aspects of that knowledge shared in different groups of a community. Both of them rely upon texts in the social sphere, which means that they need to be narrated and circulated as narrative knowledges. They are two sides of narrative knowledge, reaching different levels of society: cultural knowledge resides in the macroscopic society, whereas vernacular knowledges lie in the microscopic social groups. Vernacular knowledges are sporadically distributed in the social sphere and characterise different groups in a community. Moreover, since they are always associated with non-established, grassroots forms of knowledge that arise from daily life, vernacular knowledges are always an alternative to the landscape of knowledge in the social sphere. As Valk notes:

Vernacular knowledge wipes out the dichotomy between secular and religious, extends the religious connotations of belief and covers its secular forms, which equally shape our understanding of reality. In addition, the notion of vernacular is strongly associated with the institutional as its alternative counterpart, referring to social establishments related to power, an aspect that is essential in research. (Valk 2022: 8)

Vernacular knowledges rise from the bottom and from the world as it is experienced. In this regard, vernacular knowledges are always a dynamic flow, which is impossible to be theorised as a system for comprehension's sake. Following this logic, the vernacular knowledge not only concretises non-local knowledges into local forms by attaching intimate experiences to them, but also transforms vernacular knowledges from other social groups with local interpretations. The communication of heterogeneous vernacular knowledges evades the macroscopic, scientifically institutionalised knowledges in the social sphere and happens in informal networks of different social groups. They constantly renew and reformulate the knowledges that do not arise from people's daily lives by keeping the problem-solving process local, which promotes the diversity and heterogeneity of the cultural landscape.

However, identifying the epistemic resources available to a social group is only the first step. As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, these knowledges coexist within an uneven landscape of authority, in which some forms of knowledge are privileged while others are marginalised. To understand rumour as a social phenomenon, we must therefore examine not only the plurality of knowledges but also their hierarchical organisation.

1.1.3. Mild Scientism and Its Hierarchy

There is more we can observe from the Hairy Men case. Apart from the presence of both scientific knowledges as floating signifiers and narrative knowledges as stories and myths, these knowledges tended to intersect with each other as a single structure to function as the epistemic patterns of social groups involved in these rumours. It seems that science takes one step backward to offer a place to collective interpretation of scientific matters; and narrative knowledges level up to accompany scientific knowledges. Scientific terms functioning as floating signifiers indicate that science can maintain its sublimity in comprehending the social reality but can also be assimilated in public discourses and subject to manipulation from the addressers' side. On a macroscopic level, it implies that apart from politicised science, which is a top-down approach, there is also a bottom-up approach to constructing these modern myths. Culture is therefore introduced to

the process of mapping the knowledges in the social sphere, as Uspenskij et al. emphasise:

Scientific investigation is not only an instrument for the study of culture but is also part of its object. Scientific texts, being metatexts of the culture, may at the same time be regarded as its texts. Therefore any significant scientific idea may be regarded both as an attempt to cognize culture and as a fact of its life through which its generating mechanisms take effect. (Uspenskij et al. 1998: 60)

From this perspective, scientific knowledge is thus not only politically constructed, but also culturally mediated. In this sense, scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge are not fundamentally exclusive to each other; they are both epistemic structures that culture provides and mediates. Midgley notes:

science is not just certain people's trade, but a universally important ideal [...] And the special value of science, like that of art, is not supposed to reach only the few who produce it, but also the public which receives it (Midgley 1996: 3)

Cultural interpretations of scientific knowledge are therefore also an important part of its presence in the social sphere. The collective reception of science can therefore be described as "mild scientism", which indicates that science and scientific knowledge are still revered as sublime. Yet, as articulated texts, they are also subject to intertextual relationships with cultural texts in the social sphere. These cultural texts automatically fill in the gap that a hollowed science leaves and maintain the system of floating signifiers, which leads to further discussions on the power dynamics of this mild scientism.

Science and Culture: A Mild Scientism

Mild scientism can be observed in nearly every discourse on science in our modern times: in addition to the reiterated Hairy Men case, another good example here is the rumour on "blooming bamboos" and its implications for the living situation of giant pandas. Bamboos seldom flower and their flowering is usually unpredictable. With an interval of 65 to 120 years, bamboo blooms in a cohort and dies after seeding (Veller, Nowak, and Davis 2015). In 2004, when bamboos bloomed again, it was rumoured that giant pandas, which feed on bamboo, would go extinct because of the death of bamboos following their blossoming. Even though scientists had already clarified that the death of bamboos would not affect the living situations of giant pandas,²⁹ the reasoning in the rumour, which appeared to be very "scientific", still won its audience.

²⁹ https://web.archive.org/web/20160304082250/http://www.people.com.cn/GB/huanbao/1074/30865_19.html (In Chinese)

Alongside scientific texts that were trying to describe the phenomenon of blooming bamboos, various cultural texts were also present in the social sphere to interpret the scientific knowledge. Blooming bamboos are nothing new and pandas that feed on them have already been a cultural figure in China for a long time. Since ancient times there have been superstitions that understand blooming bamboos as a wicked omen, forecasting that something unfortunate—for example, famine or disease—is coming. It is widely believed that massive deaths of bamboo indicate an abrupt change in the environment, usually in an unfavoured direction and people should run away from the change. Such cultural interpretations can also be found in India and other cultures (Jaksic and Lima 2003; Sarma et al. 2010). Moreover, the panda is loved nationwide and is not merely a species, but a symbol of Chinese culture and soft power (Anderlini 2017). Protecting pandas is always on the agenda of environmental policies in China and panda artifacts are quite popular across China. Among all these cultural texts regarding blooming bamboos and pandas, there is one which is highly representative. *Panda Mimi* (1984) is a song by Cheng Lin, a singer, composed to raise public concern about protecting giant pandas, which were on the verge of extinction. Part of the song's lyrics goes as follows:

Here the bamboo blossoms—yoo hey,
Mimi is in the bosom of mommy;
Counting the stars—how beautiful are they,
Where then—is the breakfast next day? (My Translation)³⁰

The song was released twenty years before the explosion of rumours (note the latency of cultural knowledges) that seemed to aim to raise the collective concern for giant panda's well-being as an endangered species.³¹ More importantly, the song pointed out that pandas are lacking food—which draws a direct line under a cultural perspective from starving pandas to the massive deaths of bamboos. Therefore, when bamboos started to bloom in 2004, other observations and clarifications from scientists were marginalised. The scientific knowledge for understanding the implications of blooming bamboos was accompanied by the cultural texts in the social sphere.

Cultural texts provide a rich corpus for society to cover the incoherence in the hollowed scientific knowledge as it has become a system abundant with floating signifiers. On the one hand, cultural texts integrate themselves and function as texts to provide a cultural understanding of the same phenomenon that scientific texts aim to explain. In this regard, both the scientific texts and the cultural texts

³⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xm1LJDyrmZQ>

³¹ Owing to efforts to protect giant pandas, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources moved the category from endangered species to vulnerable species for pandas on its red list in 2016. (<https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/712/121745669>)

constitute an intertextual network to function as a bulk. And on the other hand, cultural texts disintegrate themselves as contexts for interpreting scientific texts. In practical terms, it implies that all scientific findings, no matter how much they are beyond public knowledge of understanding them, are accompanied by an epistemic structure provided by culture to make sense of them for the mass public. The two tendencies of texts (Lotman 1988: 54) indicate the constant dynamics between scientific knowledge and culture: scientific texts inevitably join the discourses in the social sphere and are put under the inspection of culture. In the Blooming Bamboo rumour, the logical gap between the death of bamboos and the extinction of giant pandas was covered by cultural interpretations. The scientific knowledge on pandas feeding on bamboos was taken one step further so that the massive dying of bamboos would lead to the extinction of pandas. It is not scientifically logical, since pandas are also able to migrate to other places to feed, but it is culturally plausible, since panda discourses are culturally at the centre of public concern.

The case of the Blooming Bamboos provides insights on how a modern myth is created. The illusion of science replaced scientific discourses in the social sphere. This illusion mitigates the complexity of scientific knowledge that bars society from knowing its every detail. In being an illusion, it is constructed by cultural interpretations and projections from cultural texts in the social sphere. Therefore, in discursive practices, science is not science in an extreme scientism manner in which science is always believed as a final solution to all problems, but a mild scientism in which belief in science coexists with cultural interpretations of scientific knowledge. Mild scientism means that the public believes in science in a hollowed way because of its sublimity and in this ragged belief system, culture provides patches to mend the incoherence, to make the system run according to its own integrity. In other words, it is a compromise between the sublime scientific discourses and the imminent, complicated perceived reality. Under this mild scientism, interpretive grounds are provided “for accepting scientific accounts of reality as the most truthful or reliable among the promiscuously unscientific varieties always available” (Gieryn 1999: x).

If we compare the structure of the scientific knowledge in the Hairy Men case and in the Blooming Bamboo case, we can find similarities: the scientific knowledge regarding bamboos or atomic bombs functioned as the recourse of the public to make current discourses convincing, even though the seemingly scientific discourses are empty inside. However, they are, in fact, not empty. Barry Barnes points out that “In all communities, including scientific ones, beliefs are judged as valid or well founded according to culturally established precedents” (Barnes 2009: 130). The cultural interpretations of such scientific knowledge fill in the gaps and introduce the sublime science to join the public discussion of the latest topics in the social sphere. As Wolfgang Wagner notes, “Public discourse makes science more than and, at the same time, less than a stripped down version of the

original” (2007: 19). Therefore, it is possible to predict that in the coming years or centuries, blooming bamboos will bring other rumours regarding an unfortunate happening, once new social concerns are raised, in the same way as atomic bombs brought renewed versions of rumours in different forms.

Ideological Aspects of Mild Scientism: A Hierarchy

Mild scientism in social discourses showcases the power dynamics between scientific knowledges and narrative knowledges. Lyotard pointed out that “Scientific knowledge requires that one language game, denotation, be retained and all others excluded. A statement’s truth-value is the criterion determining its acceptability” (1984: 25). The exclusivity of scientific knowledge, with its sublimity in the social sphere, situates science in the place of religion in our modern times. Though deeply rooted in empirical traditions, the methodological rules of science are conventions, in which the endless testing of theories is concluded by accepting basic statements (Popper 2010: 32). These conventions for demarcation and categorization of scientific knowledges also bring institutionalization and authorization in the social sphere (we will come back to this in 1.3, below); but, more importantly, due to the crumbling of the grand narratives and the detachment between scientific theories and human experiences, science has become a sublime illusion that cannot be touched and questioned but can be observed and constructed by discourses in the social sphere. In this way, science claims its dominant position in the knowledges that we are trying to map here. This is to say that by being impure (Epstein 1998) in the sense of losing its metaphysical importance of producing empirical knowledge to be tested, science becomes a substitute for religion (Nasr 2007). Saying “I believe in science” is isomorphic to saying “I believe in the Magic Conch”. As Foucault points out, “Divination is not a rival form of knowledge; it is part of the main body of knowledge itself” (2002b: 36).

In this sense, science has become a set of beliefs but has nothing to do with the reality itself since now science “gains no validity from the fact of being reported” (Lyotard 1984: 26). In continuing the discussions in 1.1.1 on the political legitimization of sublime yet hollowed science, taking science as a sublime object means that science does not need to be scientific; science in discourses, accordingly, does not need to include all the reasoning and chains of reference in presence, not to mention that it is even practically impossible. However, that science being hollowed out and consecrated at the top of the hierarchy also presumes the entrance of narrative knowledges into the process of explaining what is happening around individuals (as we can observe from those modern myths). Whilst scientific knowledges remain at the sublime position, narrative knowledges become subjugated as “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated” (Foucault 1980: 82). They are “present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematising theory” (Foucault 1980:

82) and are marginalised, less credible than scientific knowledges. Since science and scientific knowledges, discussed above as politically sublime, “is constituted by its break from competing discourses that claim to explain the same objects” (Bachelard 1984; cited from Aronowitz 1988: 8), subjugation persists as the continual repression from the scientific knowledges to narrative knowledges,³² rationalising the whole share of knowledges in the social sphere. In other words, the political legitimization of scientific knowledge and the following subjugation towards narrative knowledges indicate that the knowledges in the social sphere do not constitute a *Speculum Mentis*, or a philosophical, idyllic assemblage of different kinds of knowledges as R. G. Collingwood (1946) describes, but a hierarchy that is filled with tensions and conflicts between these knowledges.

Following the logic of knowledge subjugation, we can find that in modern times, all knowledges are ideological and influenced by historical, social-cultural and political factors (Mannheim 1998). The sublimity of science and scientific knowledges indicates the hegemony of science in modern discourses to the extent of being “integrated into the practices and discourses of production” (Aronowitz 1988: 9). The hegemonic status of science and scientific knowledge explains the reason why many rumours, though in essence having nothing to do with science at all, still claim themselves to be science in order to convince the public (for example, recurrent rumours on food additives causing cancer always contains a “scientific” list of the ingredients. See Reumaux 1996: 61 on the case in Villejuif). In the Blooming Bamboo case, we can observe that these cultural texts, being in latency as cultural memories for about two decades, resurfaced to the social sphere in a clear, seemingly scientific logical line. The reasoning in rumour texts was, indeed, barely scientific, but they used the form of logical causality to gain believability by resorting to scientific discourses, because “such memories, even as they build on distinctive experience, are nevertheless constructed with the help of whatever mnemonic technologies and memorial forms are available” (Rigney 2005: 24). This is to say that in the social sphere, narrative knowledges still need to bear a certain extent of scientificity in their presence for public believability, as we can also see in the Hairy Man case, in which public reasonings link atomic bombs with men’s testicles since the two have the same pronunciation in Chinese. Therefore, it is possible to say that the sublime illusion, constructed by political discourses, creates a scientific imaginary that accommodates every social

³² There are, of course, mechanisms in the repressed narrative knowledges to counterweight this subjugation, as Foucault argues on genealogy and “historical knowledges of struggle” (1980: 83). The topic will be discussed in 1.2 on the internal mechanisms of keeping the amalgam of knowledge from being a sole playground of science and scientific knowledges. However, the dominant status of science (as it is constructed by political discourses) is visible in nearly all societies. From an external view of the hierarchy of human knowledges, the constant subjugation persists.

member's imagination of science, rather than a systematic, established structure of knowledge to be thought of (Bloor 1991). This is the essence of mild scientism.

In this regard, mild scientism as a hierarchy of knowledges has become a part of ideology in our modern times (Barnes 2009). This is to say that modernity, or modernisation, is represented not only in the advancements of technology and science, but also in discourses in a grander scope of culture and knowledge development in our society, which further re-evaluates the previous kind of modernisation and its achievements, bringing them to political fields. This reflexive modernisation (Beck 1994) echoes the previously discussed crumbling of grand narratives by Lyotard but takes one step further on public belief in science as a social-cultural reflection of the scientific knowledges available in the social sphere. In mild scientism, people believe in science, yet do not know what exactly it is. It cannot be accessed, but regulating the discourses in the social sphere, as Slavoj Žižek puts it:

The sublime object is an object which cannot be approached too closely: if we get too near it, it loses its sublime features and becomes an ordinary vulgar object—it can persist only in an interspace, in an intermediate state, viewed from a certain perspective, half-seen. (Žižek 2008: 192)

By being a sublime object, the fragmented scientific knowledge and the following cultural interpretations are concealed from their audience and cannot be touched and reasoned in social discourses. The Magic Conch and the belief towards it are beyond question since it has become “a particular definition of reality comes to be attached to a concrete power interest” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 141). Therefore, as Mahdi commented on Karl Mannheim's approach to a sociology of knowledge and epistemology, “The activity of scientific discovery is not simply a neutral process of objective testing of statements, but a discursive testing of value claims for those statements” (1989: 30) which, in return, regulates all discourses in the social sphere. The ideological aspects of mild scientism indicate that the process of knowledge production, including both scientific knowledges and narrative knowledges, is subject to the political discourses that maintain the hierarchy of knowledges. Consequently, what is deemed as “true” becomes a social truth, be it scientific or narrative, not through an objective process of inquiry but through the legitimization of knowledges under a particular power regime, to which we will return in 1.3.

1.2. Superstitious Developers and Helmet-Wearing Monks: The Amalgam of Knowledges

In China and many other culturally related regions, it is a common practice for land developers to invite monks and Taoist priests to pray for the safety of construction sites, along with many other rituals from local folk religions.³³ For the practitioners' safety, according to the regulations of construction sites, they are required to wear helmets when entering the place, which leads to an amusing situation: on the one hand, the developers are resorting to higher beings for security, which should be guaranteed with workers' expertise; and on the other hand, the higher beings are questioned since they cannot safeguard the practitioners, who are also wearing helmets. Apart from being a joke that can be consumed in daily conversation, the story of superstitious developers and the helmet-wearing monks is also a simple example of the current situation of knowledges in the social sphere. Knowledges from various origins are all present in the social sphere, functioning in coexistence and intersecting with each other, rather than in antithesis. In our social sphere, heterogeneous knowledges infiltrate each other and are maintained in an amalgam as a colossal network of "cultural common sense" (Geertz 1975) among social groups, thereby cementing cultural hegemony³⁴ (Gramsci 1992 [1971]: 145). More importantly, due to the mutual irreducibility of these knowledge systems, there is a constant tension between the systems in their seeming contradictions (for example, the land developers should not be superstitious about the safety of the construction sites, and the monks and the Taoist priests should be confident in their safety in the hands of their deities). There needs to be a set of mechanisms to maintain the amalgam, diffuse the tensions and reach homeostasis in cultures and various social groups.

Previous discussions in this chapter have shown that in our social sphere various knowledges manifest themselves in discourses that prescribe and legitimise the hierarchy. Moreover, these knowledges are agglomerated, organically assembled and actively engaged in how people respond to the world they inhabit. The amalgamation of knowledges in the social sphere, in this sense, goes beyond the boundaries between the knowledges mentioned earlier and constitutes the practical knowledge (Bourdieu 2008) that is tacit, often unspoken and deeply embedded in everyday practices. Following this perspective, the amalgam of knowledges first of all presupposes a framework in the social sphere that accommodates these systems, so that they can be used in different situations. Erving Goffman coins

³³ The phenomenon is seldom researched in academia, but is widely reported and disseminated as jokes or memes. For example: https://www.sohu.com/a/512836419_120772099 (in Chinese)

³⁴ In our case here, the hegemony is represented in scientific discourses, as we have addressed in 1.1.

the term “primary framework” to describe the framed knowledges that “allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its term” (1986 [1974]: 21). In this vein, the frameworks situate heterogeneous knowledges in the social sphere and function as the epistemic basis for rumour articulation, which is pragmatic in the sense that these knowledges are used here and now. Secondly, these knowledge systems enter each other and model the inner structure of each system, which is reflected in discursive practices (again, mild scientism is a good example here). As a trans-systemic network, these frameworks connect and mediate multiple knowledge systems and amalgamate them in wholeness. Thirdly and maybe most importantly, the framework has its inner mechanisms to maintain the amalgamation of knowledges. Such a framework keeps the implosion at bay and continues to function as it is in the course of history and in different places in culture. All these mechanisms indicate the polyglot structure of culture (Lotman 1979: 88) and the socialisation of these knowledges, as well as the collective use of them, which is reflected in the process of public reasoning when rumour arises. Therefore, after investigating knowledges vertically as different systems of knowledge and their external hierarchies constructed by discourses, we can also discuss the internal linkages of these knowledges as an amalgam in practical terms.

1.2.1. The Amalgam in Culture

In *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Goffman suggests that primary framework is “rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful” (1986 [1974]: 21). In this perspective, human experiences are attached with meanings so that individuals can navigate themselves in daily lives. The semiotic aspect of the primary framework indicates the epistemic function of culture; as Zygmunt Bauman notes,

Culture constitutes the human experience in the sense that it constantly brings into relief the discord between the ideal and the real, that it makes reality meaningful by exposing its limitations and imperfections, that it invariantly melts and blends knowledge and interest; or, rather, culture is a mode of human praxis in which knowledge and interest are one. (Z. Bauman 1973: 172–73)

In this sense, the framework presumes various knowledge systems inherited in culture, which are learned by individuals during the process of socialisation with others and the social sphere in general. The continual process constructs the social world around an individual as *habitus*, which “is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions” (Bourdieu 2008: 52). In this world, individuals constantly acquire knowledge to make meaning out of their daily encounters, which, in return, shapes a person’s social world continuously in the

course of its development. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that even simple, everyday practices, such as walking, are still modelled by culture (Certeau 2011).³⁵ And the *habitus* inevitably has imprints of culture as the meanings around an individual are steeped in the cultural memory of the social group in which an individual is brought up. In other words, by internalising and embodying cultural norms and practices, individuals develop their *habiti* that guides their thoughts, behaviours and social interactions, ultimately shaping their identity and position within society. As Berger and Luckmann put it, “While it is possible to say that man has a nature, it is more significant to say that man constructs his own nature, or more simply, that man produces himself” (1966: 67).

Moreover, confirming Z. Bauman’s point above, culture, as it blends human interest and knowledges in practice, entails the structure inherent in the practical knowledge is not characterised by logical reasoning, but by practices. Once a kind of knowledge can be used to understand the current ambiguities, it shows up as fragmented statements and is juxtaposed with other fragmented statements from other systems for the subject matter because of the urgency of using these knowledges in practical terms. In the Hairy Men case, we can find these fragments in assembling the practical knowledge in comprehending the situation, no matter whether the knowledges were scientific or narrative. When reports of the hairy men reached people in villages of northern China, these knowledge systems were activated and converged into a mixture of texts from various origins, depending on what individuals *know* about the current situation on an improvised basis (Shibutani 1966). Some of them resorted to local tales and found stories about hairy men; some others who heard from the news that the Soviet Union successfully tested its atomic bombs linked it with the report; some even went deeper to attach reproductive fear to the atrocities of hairy men. The most important thing is that these linkages were made by the time the report reached the public and they originated from the practical knowledge of the individuals of the time.

The above discussions remain on a personal level. When practical knowledge is exchanged interpersonally, these knowledges are also transmitted among the social group during the communication process and construct an amalgam of knowledges in the social sphere. Whilst practical knowledge is exchanged, the collective share of knowledges remains pragmatic, since experiences communicated in the social sphere are still “directly related to concrete actions” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 112). An imminent social reality is therefore constructed upon the current subject matter as shared experiences of that matter among social groups. Along with the construction of a socially shared reality, practical knowl-

³⁵ Interestingly, ancient China also has a story on the cultural aspect of walking: a man went to visit Han-tan, the capital city of the Zhao regime during the Era of Warring States. He found the people there had an elegant style of walking and mimicked it. Unfortunately, he failed to follow the style and even forgot how to walk. The fable “Han-tan toddler” is now used to criticise blind imitation of others’ lifestyles.

edges belonging to members are amalgamated in a way that intersects with personal know-how and collective wisdom. The common world becomes the *habitus* of these social groups, and the amalgam of knowledges is the practical knowledge of them—if we take a mesoscopic perspective to view a social group as a single subject.

From *habitus* to a shared social reality, we can then distinguish the personal aspect and the social aspect of the amalgam of knowledges, which is mediated and modelled by culture. In rural villages of northern China, knowledges about hairy men were exchanged and accepted under a shared cultural context, constructing the social reality on hairy men in discourses of dangerous happenings lurking in corners, which will be elaborated in the latter pages on the transmission of rumours. What is most important here is that the amalgam belongs to social groups and is subject to individual manoeuvring among these groups. Based on their practical knowledge, every individual's personal reflection and interpretation are brought to the social sphere and become a collective share of knowledge from the knowledge systems available in culture. In other words, behind a socially shared reality, there is always an amalgam of knowledges, constructed from the practical knowledges of every individual in the community.

Therefore, the amalgam of knowledges is a product of and by cultures. It situates itself in culture as the structure and framework for its members to interpret and make sense of the world around them, which also presumes the amalgam's social aspect as an unstable, dynamic entity. Moreover, as culture constantly "transforms outer sphere into the inner one" (Uspenskij et al. 1998: 34), the constant internalisation and socialisation of personal experiences into a shared social reality indicates that the amalgam is precisely the frontline of human epistemology that encounters daily experiences.

1.2.2. The Maintenance of the Amalgam

Whereas the amalgam is a cultural product, tensions in "conflicts of knowledge" (Canclini 2006) remain for further investigation since the amalgam persists and cannot be absent. For example, our understanding of HIV as a sexually transmitted disease comprises a modern myth in which public knowledge of the virus is intrinsically contradictory. As Escoffier (1998) notes, public knowledge about HIV is a mixture of scientific facts, vernacular knowledge and hearsay; people take pills and use talismans to stay away from the virus at the same time (for example, see Crimp and Bersani 1988; Turner 1993), which looks very similar to the Helmet-Wearing Monk case mentioned above. The collective effort of inventing safer sex contains incoherent knowledges that are generated and shared among social groups and becomes a common sense for concerned social groups to use in their daily lives. Following this perspective, the so-called "cultural common sense" is an incoherent agglomeration, since the elements that constitute the amalgam derive

from practical knowledges of various individuals with respective *habiti*. Therefore, as Phillip E. Converse (2006) points out, the public belief system is, in fact, not a system. There are two kinds of tensions within the amalgam of knowledges. The first tension is from the heterogeneity of knowledges, which is manifested in discourses as contradicting statements on the same issue. The second tension comes from members of social groups, since every individual has his or her own, subjective world of socialisation and cultural backgrounds. As Clifford Geertz notes, on the problems of cultural common sense as a system,

If one wants to demonstrate, or even (which is all I have been able to do) to suggest, that common sense is a cultural system, that there is an ingenerate order to it capable of being empirically uncovered and conceptually formulated, one cannot do so by cataloguing its content, which is wildly heterogeneous, not only across societies but within them—ant-heap wisdom. One cannot do so, either, by sketching out some logical structure it always takes, for there is none. And one cannot do so by summing up the substantive conclusions it always draws, for there are, too, none of those. (Geertz 1975: 25)

The tensions, indeed, do not indicate the instability of common sense. However, the internal heterogeneity of the amalgam of knowledges requires extra mechanisms to maintain its coherence of functioning as epistemic patterns for social members. In the light of the ant-heap wisdom cited by Geertz, we can distinguish, again, two directions of discussion on the mechanisms that overcome the tensions mentioned above. Suppose that we are holding a handful of soil and trying to move it forward: first, there is a power that collects the heterogeneous knowledges all together, countering the internal disintegrating force of the soil; and second, a force to move it forward. Coming back to the mechanisms of the amalgam: accordingly, there needs to be first of all a force to merge these knowledges as an amalgam and then carry the amalgam through the passage of time. In other words, the amalgam is maintained both synchronically and diachronically.

The Synchronic Plane: Communication, Incorporation and Alteration

When practical knowledge is exchanged in the social sphere, knowledges from others are also constructive for an individual and can be used in practices. People are well accustomed to them since the construction of their *habiti* originates from communication with other individuals from families to societies. In this sense, it is possible to come up with the conclusion that on the synchronic plane, the constant communication in the social sphere brings practical knowledges from different individuals together to function. However, there is more to explore behind this simple conclusion.

Communication, first of all, links individuals' *habiti* and constructs the reality that is shared and lived in. As Berger and Luckmann point out,

The reality of everyday life further presents itself to me as an intersubjective world, a world that I share with others. This intersubjectivity sharply differentiates everyday life from other realities of which I am conscious. I am alone in the world of my dreams, but I know that the world of everyday life is as real to others as it is to myself. [...] All the same, I know that I live with them in a common world. Most importantly, I know that there is an ongoing correspondence between *my* meanings and *their* meanings in this world, that we share a common sense about its reality. (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 37, italics original)

During communication, personal experiences are legitimised (issues on legitimation will be further discussed in 1.3) and exchanged in society, and practical knowledges enter the social sphere. More importantly, communication provides a common ground for its participants to reserve individual discrepancies and proceed in the communicative process, which escapes from possible conflicts owing to differences in respective practical knowledges arising from the pragmatic nature of their knowledges (Simmel 1971: 70–95). In other words, since knowledges are exchanged for practical reasons, the tensions of the amalgam between individuals are resolved out of a need to use these knowledges in the social sphere in communication. In this regard, a unity in diversity is constructed, which is the social basis of the amalgam of knowledges.

Berger and Luckmann (1966: 49) emphasise that “human expressivity is capable of objectification, that is, it manifests itself in products of human activity that are available both to their producers and to other men as elements of a common world”. The common ground between individuals enters the social sphere, as the objectivation of communication processes presumes the social aspect of the practical knowledge of individuals. Nevertheless, as these common grounds are objectified as discourses in the social sphere, individual aspects of knowledge are gradually incorporated with the collective and construct the amalgam of knowledges that can be used by members of a social group. Since we are not talking about the exchange of practical knowledges belonging to Adam and Eve, or Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* before he met our hero, there are always amalgamated knowledge systems available in the social sphere for participants of communication. Therefore, from a macroscopic point of view, the exchange of practical knowledges and the common ground between members are the micro-fibres of maintaining the amalgam at the pragmatic level, and every communication that happens in the social sphere resembles the existent paradigms of social knowledge.

As an individual continuously uses and tests knowledges in the social sphere and in daily practices; their practical knowledges are renewed in practical situations, generating new texts and knowledge which can be again communicated in society. In this vein, the amalgam of knowledges is constantly tested on the podium, in which the more useful parts are maintained and less useful ones abandoned. The dynamics of the amalgam presume tensions between the heterogeneity of various knowledges in the amalgam in a transcendent way. The tension is not resolved

but assimilated in the amalgam as its dynamic features, demonstrating the possibility for changes in itself. The complexity of the perceived reality and the heterogeneity of knowledges used in practice indicate the possibility of immanent alteration of the amalgam during communication. In other words, as the frontline of culture's continual internalisation of human experience, the amalgam in the social sphere, apart from its epistemological aspects in human practices, also implies its alteration in the future coming ahead.

We can take another example of modern myth to illustrate the idea. Under many cultural contexts, instant noodles are considered an unhealthy food, which plays a part in malnutrition and health issues (for example, in Norway: Hilsen, Eikemo, and Bere 2010; in Malaysia: Zalma et al. 2015; in India: Baviskar 2018). Despite the nutritional facts of instant noodles (Gulia, Dhaka, and Khatkar 2014)—that instant noodles are not demonic at all but just lacking proteins for the human body—there are jokes in which if a person is eating instant noodles, whether the person is overweight or underweight, it is certainly the fault of instant noodles. Apart from the semantic aspect of the joke, which concerns both being overweight and underweight as manifestations of health problems, it is a simplistic manifestation of the possibilities of discourse alteration. Contradictory in themselves, the interpretations that the knowledge amalgam provides, could be settled in one direction as the amalgam develops over time. As all these interpretations derive from the social knowledge that instant noodles are junk food and consumption of junk food may lead to health issues, discourses about being overweight and underweight converge at the discussion of instant noodles. When discussions in the social sphere proceed, we can see possible alterations when new scientific facts, personal experiences and truth claims that try to persuade us (as discussed in 0.2.1, see Fine 2007) enter the discussion. This juncture of various interpretations demonstrates flexibility in the amalgam of knowledges. Or, from the other side, the pragmatic nature of the amalgam presumes flexibility, since a text inevitably invokes various interpretations as it progresses in the social sphere (Popovič 1976: 226) and the amalgam, as the agglomeration of people's practical knowledges, should adapt to this heterogeneity. From this point, the inherent possibility of alteration maintains the amalgam of knowledge by imbuing dynamics into it.

The same phenomenon can be witnessed, in a more complex way, in other cases discussed above. In the Hairy Men case, the identity of the hairy men changed as time progressed: in the beginning they were bandits, then communists, then the *Kuo Min Tang* and then the Russians. The change of political context was manifested in discourse as a new normal for the amalgam in the social sphere and the amalgam itself was subject to change in some of its elements, therefore changes in discourses. In the Blooming Bamboo case, social knowledge on the dying bamboo and the living situation of pandas were not put together first. It was after the song became popular and the two sets of knowledges were amalgamated to

generate such rumours. It is notable that in all these cases the alteration takes time during the development of the amalgam, which brings forth discussions on the diachronic plane of amalgam maintenance.

The Diachronic Plane: Continuity, Sedimentation and Repetition

The diachronic maintenance of the amalgam of knowledges concerns the continuity of the amalgam as a socially available object over time. From this perspective, the mechanisms of maintenance include two directions: on the one hand, past knowledges manifest themselves in the present as texts from history. As these texts encapsulate knowledges, beliefs, practices and experiences of past generations, they can be accessed and interpreted by contemporary societies which transferred the past amalgam of knowledges to the present in its own dynamics. On the other hand, current knowledges, maintained as an amalgam, may reappear in the future as constituents of future amalgamation. From this point, it is imperative to investigate the dynamics of the amalgam in time and how it is transferred in the heredity of social groups. In other words, on the diachronic plane, the maintenance of the amalgam concerns two interrelated aspects, which, again, reiterates the tensions between knowledges and individuals discussed earlier: the transformation of the amalgam as epistemic patterns and its relationship with social groups as participants of transformation processes. In this sense, we touched upon the question of collective memory again, as knowledges are transmitted diachronically via memories recollected and retold.

As the amalgam of knowledges is constantly tested in daily practices, texts are generated and communicated in the social sphere and constitute a heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981) in which multiple voices, languages and discourses within a particular social or cultural context coexist (the instant noodle example mentioned above also works here). The heteroglossic nature of the current social sphere also implies that the multivocality can be recorded in history, constituting the plenitude of the past (Rigney 2005) in which complex and diverse human experiences and perspectives are recorded for future recurrence as texts. However, in the plenitude of the past, some texts are maintained in society, whilst some others are lost. Berger and Luckmann point out that “Only a small part of the totality of human experiences is retained in consciousness. The experiences that are so retained become sedimented, that is, they congeal in recollection as recognizable and memorable entities” (1966: 85). Passive remembering, as A. Assmann (2008) puts it, is also a form of forgetting among social groups since these texts are no longer active, excluded from the working memory of social groups, which means that during the sedimentation of texts, some texts are selected as the cultural memory, whereas others are archived in a passive state. In line with the discussions in 1.1, the relationship between different knowledge systems demonstrates a selection mechanism when texts are sedimented from the past, which echoes the discussion on alteration in the previous section. In the dynamics of

alteration incubated in the amalgam, some knowledges are retained as the canon of culture, whereas some other knowledges are archived in the form of texts. In this sense, forgetting, no matter whether passively or actively (A. Assmann 2008: 97–98), is also part of the selection mechanism (Lotman and Uspenskij 1978: 215–16). Therefore, on the diachronic plane, sedimentation maintains the amalgam from the past to the present via selecting knowledges in the form of texts to be recollected in the present in collective memory (the agency of selection processes will be addressed in 1.3, below). It depicts the dynamics of knowledges in the time span that the amalgam is constantly including new knowledges and forgetting outdated ones. The amalgam of knowledges is the projection of the collective memory of preceding generations' knowledges.

If we set our eyes on the present, the sedimented knowledges present themselves as the current amalgam of collective epistemic patterns among social groups. In the Hairy Men case, knowledges originating in different epochs were sedimented to the present which, indeed, mutated to a certain extent due to the alteration that happened over time. When people were imagining the current situation of the hairy men, what they knew of the dangerous creatures generated new texts which were exchanged and entered the social sphere by invoking past knowledges for the present. Apart from generating new texts in the present, which can be used and consumed in the agency of social groups, repetition of past knowledges also entrenches the current amalgam and reinforces the existing relationships between heterogeneous knowledges or re-introduces inactive knowledges to the current heteroglossia. Interpretations of hairy men demonstrate both functions of repetition. On the one hand, the knowledge about the nuclear bomb was freshly introduced to the amalgam and reasserted its importance in shaping people's epistemic patterns under certain contexts. By incorporating the fear of a massive destruction weapon into discourses of hairy men, new links were built to keep the knowledge vigorous in the social sphere. On the other hand, repetition of previously inactive knowledges gives new lives to them. Reports on hairy men before this outburst were found 20 years ago and those on their vandalising the regions could be dated back to the Ming and Qing dynasties (Ma 2013) centuries earlier. Reactivating ancient knowledges is not a random process. It requires related texts still available in the social sphere, which means that the texts are archived, "halfway between the canon and forgetting" (A. Assmann 2008: 102), which presumes the possibility that knowledges can be assimilated again to the current amalgam. Repetition implies that alongside the amalgam that functions as the paradigms of interpreting the current situation, there are also inactivated knowledges that may acquire a new life as available texts. Once they are needed under the current situation, the pragmatic nature of the amalgam brings them back to the table of the public. The mechanism of repetition operates in every present of society, carrying sedimented knowledges from the past into the future. Through their repeated use in everyday practices, these knowledges remain socially effective across time.

Both sedimentation and repetition are mechanisms of maintaining the amalgam in history, whilst sedimentation projects its path from the past to the present and repetition from the present to the future. This is not to say that sedimentation will not happen in the future and repetition did not happen in the past; what was repeated in the past can be sedimented to the present and what is to be sedimented will be repeated in the future. More important is that we speak from the perspective of the present as the future's past (Koselleck 2004); the present amalgam is the outcome of sedimentation from the past and present repetition presumes the amalgam's sedimentation in the future. In this sense, the amalgam of knowledges keeps disintegration at bay while maintaining its own identity, weathering the test of time.

The maintenance mechanisms on the synchronic and diachronic planes foreground two keywords: communication and memory. A network is woven between knowledges as they are transferred between contemporaries and from ancestors to posterity. The process of transmission and transformation ensures that the amalgam is continuously renewed and adapts to new circumstances (which will be further elaborated in Chapter 2), whereas the excluded knowledges turn inactive and have the possibility to re-enter the amalgam. The tensions between heterogeneous knowledges and different individuals are therefore resolved on both planes. On the synchronic plane, constant communication in the social sphere facilitates the exchange and integration of diverse practical knowledges, creating a shared reality that individuals navigate daily. The pragmatic need for providing interpretations of the current subject matter overcomes the tendency of self-disintegration and forms the social basis of the amalgam of knowledges as individuals share their own experiences and interpretations. And under the collective effort of interpreting, the amalgam also incubates possible alterations, which enables itself to unify different directions that heterogeneous knowledges project. Its flexibility adds dynamics to the amalgam and takes the tension between heterogeneity as its inseparable feature; it is precisely in heterogeneity that alterations are possible. On the diachronic plane, the continuity of the amalgam is maintained via sedimentation of past knowledges into the present and their repetition into the future, which are mutually dependent. The two processes demonstrate that the tension between individuals is resolved during the transmission of memories within generations, since it is always the current generation that takes the role of social subjects and heterogeneous knowledges are maintained in the plenitude of the human past, resurfacing to the amalgam when needed, easing the tensions within the amalgam in the time span. With all these mechanisms on both planes, the knowledge amalgam keeps its integrity while retaining its incoherence as the common sense of social groups. In brief, the ant-heap wisdom can function as epistemic patterns since it is maintained both synchronically and diachronically.

1.2.3. Symbolic Universe as the Ultimate Mechanism of Maintenance

By conjoining the synchronic and the diachronic features of the maintenance mechanism, what we have at hand is a continuum of the amalgam in space and time. The continuum indicates that the new texts generated from human experiences are always articulable and communicable in the social sphere with other individuals or towards posterity, since the amalgam of knowledges is always present. In other words, no matter when and where, the world around an individual is always meaningful, “which now constitutes a universe in the literal sense of the world, because *all* human experience can now be conceived of as taking place *within* it” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 114, italics original). Within the universe, an individual is equipped with related knowledges to internalise the experience and articulate it in the shared social reality. From this perspective, the amalgam of knowledges is wrapped up in “a symbolic totality” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 113) that stretches itself into different realms of human knowledge and traditions. In other words, the symbolic universe is the venue for individuals to interact with the amalgam of knowledges.

In the Hairy Men case, the revival of discourses on hairy men precisely manifests the presence of the symbolic universe. The instant cognition of the ancient knowledge about hairy men, which turned inactive for a period of time, shows that even the most extreme, bizarre experiences can be articulated and attached to a meaning in the symbolic universe and interpreted in the social reality. The quick response from the public demonstrates the symbolic universe being “the matrix of *all* socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 114, italics original). The symbolic universe links knowledges in the remote and the current heteroglossia by maintaining the amalgam both in space and time, and the synchronic and the diachronic aspects of the amalgam are merged into an epistemic continuum, in which every slice of its diachrony contains synchronic mechanisms (communication) and every synchronic instance is the projection of previous knowledge amalgamation (memory). In this regard, symbolic universes are the ultimate maintenance mechanism of the amalgam of knowledges.

By providing a world in which all human experiences can be meaningful, symbolic universes structure and channel the world around individuals. “Symbolic universes are not merely ideas about the world; rather, they are embodied systems of assumption comprising and fostering the subjective mode of being-in-the-world—i.e. the way of feeling, thinking, acting, and making decisions” (Ciavolino et al. 2017; cited from Salvatore, Valsiner, and Veltri 2019: 30). The symbolic universe is embodied in the everyday living experiences of an individual and, more importantly, the individual can be safe in the knowledge that others who belong to the same social group share the same symbolic universe as

him or her. Subjective worlds, or *habiti* which do have a limited space and time are integrated into the intersubjective universe that is boundless topologically and chronologically in the social reality that it creates. Therefore, “All the members of a society can now conceive of themselves as *belonging* to a meaningful universe, which was there before they were born and will be there after they die” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 121, italics original). In this sense, the shared symbolic universe “interpellates” subjects and stipulates an individual’s social being (Althusser 2001: 173) in the social sphere, in which the whole human society, with its predecessors and successors, is connected by a framework for individuals to interpret their experiences and make sense of their surroundings. In the same vein, the practical knowledges that a person develops through the construction of their own *habiti* are also framed in the epistemic continuum throughout the process of interpellation. Consequently, the interpersonal difference in practical knowledges, instead of being a factor that cracks the amalgam, becomes the dynamic part of it, in which the symbolic universe legitimises practical knowledges and makes their articulation and exchange possible. Moreover, it is precisely the personal experiences that continuously bring new elements into the symbolic universe, preventing the social sphere from being a desperate, 1984-styled utopia in which everyone thinks the same and acts the same (and *knows* the same, if we imagine a model citizen in Oceania), since in the dynamics of the amalgam and the symbolic universe, individuals can be part of the group and retain their identity in the social sphere and in history. As the symbolic universe perpetuates, the common ground is always there.

When the amalgam of knowledges moves onward as the frontline of culture both in space and time, the symbolic universe is also crystalised in the social sphere that records its past, in which the knowledges are also restored in an all-encompassing framework of reference and available for practical use. In other words, symbolic universes have their own history. As Berger and Luckmann note,

The crystallization of symbolic universes follows the previously discussed processes of objectivation, sedimentation and accumulation of knowledge. That is, symbolic universes are social products with a history. If one is to understand their meaning, one has to understand the history of their production. This is all the more important because these products of human consciousness, by their very nature, present themselves as full-blown and inevitable totalities. (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 115).

As the plenitude of the past always contains diverse narrative perspectives, when brought in its totality to the present, the symbolic universe is always a projection of heterogeneous knowledges. The symbolic universe is intrinsically pluralistic, accommodating heterogeneous knowledges under its vault as discourses in the social sphere and can be used. It inherently supports a pluralistic and heterogeneous epistemic framework in which various knowledge systems coexist without a

direct conflict since, on the synchronic plane, the pragmatic nature of the amalgam of knowledges selects fitting parts of these knowledge systems and assembles them to interpret the current situation, which does not exclude conflicts but accommodates them as we can see in rumour phenomena as local epistemic conflicts (we will address this in 2.2). And more importantly, as the amalgam of knowledges progresses forward in the future, this assemblage always happens *within* the symbolic universe, which means that the possible new knowledges are still under the symbolic universe's maintenance. From a microscopic view, it happens in every individual's *habitus*. As social members live in the symbolic universe, the internalised human experiences as ready-made knowledges to be used are always a product of the symbolic universe, which means that the development of the amalgam can never be an abrupt one; it is always a generative process with continuity, which, coming back to the macroscope, is represented as the accumulation of human knowledge in history.

In this vein, the rise of one knowledge system from the symbolic universe (no matter whether it is a newly established one, or it is invoked from the plenitude of the past) does not indicate the diminishing of existing knowledges in the amalgam. Instead, the new constituent of the amalgam is superimposed on other knowledges and adds up to more perspectives in the heteroglossia. For example, when science was introduced to peoples of the Middle Ages gradually in a modern sense, the local beliefs and Christian teachings did not recede, but joined the progression of the amalgam with the scientific findings and reverberated back and forth in the following centuries. For people of the time, both beliefs had the capacity to interpret, and the symbolic universe made the incumbent amalgam *seemingly* homogeneous, functioning as a coherent whole. As the helmet-wearing monks and the superstitious developers have shown, the heterogeneous knowledges are assembled under the context to help individuals make sense of the situation in the symbolic universe, to each their own places.

Therefore, the heterogeneity of knowledges and the tensions between individuals are dissolved in the symbolic universe and every articulation, once it enters the social sphere, is articulable, communicable and interpretable. As Berger and Luckmann remark, "The symbolic universe provides order for the subjective apprehension of biographical experience" (1966: 115), in which every experience and experienced object are ordered by knowledges that are assembled as the amalgam by the symbolic universe. In other words, every individual is already given a place in the symbolic universe to experience and develop their *habiti* and every knowledge system is provided with a place for its path of development, though a volatile one, as discussed in previous sections. In this sense, all rumours find their origins in symbolic universes and can be interpreted in a way by members of such universes.

1.2.4. Rumours in the Semiosphere

The discussions on symbolic universes as the ultimate mechanism of amalgam maintenance bring the topic all the way back to the intricacies between the amalgam and culture again. As discussed in 1.2.1, culture pre-emptively models the amalgam as its frontline to socialise human experiences. To take one step further with the symbolic universe, symbolic universes “are embedded within the cultural milieu; people are exposed to them and thus they internalise them” (Salvatore, Valsiner, and Veltri 2019: 30). The relationship between the amalgam, symbolic universes and culture indicates that all kinds of communication and memory, in which knowledges are transmitted, are possible within a semiotic space that is characterised by culture. Lotman calls this space the semiosphere “as the totality of individual texts and isolated languages as they relate to each other” (2005: 208); and “Outside the semiosphere there can be neither communication, nor language” (1990: 124). From this perspective, symbolic universes ensure that everything is describable and communicable, whereas the semiosphere is a semiotic space where descriptions and communications happen. The order that the symbolic universe provides is realised in the semiosphere. In this sense, symbolic universes are mechanisms of the amalgam maintenance and semiosphere entails the amalgam of knowledges as the product of it, which neutralises the heterogeneity of knowledges as discourses in the social sphere. As Foucault points out,

The culture superimposed on them [various systems of knowledges] another kind of grid which neutralized them, which by this superimposition both revealed and excluded them at the same time, so that the culture, by this very process, came face to face with order in its primary state. (Foucault 2002b: xxii)

The neutralisation effect of culture upon the heterogeneity of knowledges lies in the heterogeneous nature of the semiosphere itself (Lotman 1990: 125). The constant dialogic movement in the present, which links the plenitude of past and the unpredictable future, indicates that the semiosphere contains at least two semiotically untranslatable languages to continue the dialogue, instead of signal transmission in a closed system (Lotman 1990; 2005). When the amalgam of knowledges is applied in the daily practices of mankind, knowledges from the past and from the present are all available as texts, “which gives each synchronic state of culture the features of cultural polyglotism” (Uspenskij et al. 1998: 44). Moreover, in the semiosphere, the constant dialog presumes new texts being generated, as Lotman further notes,

Culture, taken as a whole, not only has a special apparatus for collective memory but also has procedures for producing messages that are in principle new in languages that are in principle new, i.e. it can create new ideas. The combination of these qualities makes it possible to regard culture as a collective intellect. (Lotman 1979: 84)

Therefore, the internal heterogeneity of the amalgam of knowledges is precisely a manifestation of culture's polyglottic nature. As the frontline of culture's internalisation of human experiences, the amalgam constantly produces new texts, which are further sedimented and repeated in the course of cultural development and become constituents of culture. It is precisely in this sense that semiosphere is "the result and the condition for the development of culture" (Lotman 1990: 125). In the dynamics of culture as a polyglottic apparatus, the superstitious land developers and the helmet-wearing monks can coexist, without the need to engage in a fateful fight.

The dynamics of the amalgam in the symbolic universe and the polyglottic nature of culture lead their way back to the investigation of rumour phenomena. As Neubauer comments on the rumours in Orléans, rumour "projects a collective and partly 'literarily' conveyed 'knowledge' onto a current social situation" (Neubauer 1998: 137–38, translation mine).³⁶ As "Rumor provides relevant knowledge that audiences can use here-and-now" (Fine 2007: 7), the amalgam of knowledges shapes rumour discourses over time, which also demonstrates the microscopic dynamics of the amalgam represented in discourses in the semiosphere as part of its inner process of generating new texts. The articulation of rumours within the semiosphere represents the meaning-making effort of the society towards the current matter as part of the development of semiosphere in time.

Therefore, for any rumour that appears as a discourse in society, there is always an amalgam of knowledges making up the epistemic basis and a semiosphere making up its cultural context. In the case of Hairy Men, knowledges from local folklores, the cultural memory of being Chinese, fear of reproduction and atrocities, reports of a massive destruction weapon and stereotypes about foreigners were all present and assembled as an amalgam that projected the Hairy Men rumour. In the case of Blooming Bamboos, knowledges from cultural interpretations of bamboo blooming, scientific facts that giant pandas live on bamboos, concerns of protecting giant pandas, as well as representations of the living conditions of the panda in popular culture were agglomerated to interpret the mass blooming of bamboo at the time. The polygenesis of those rumours represented the complexity of the amalgam of knowledges, which were maintained ultimately by the symbolic universe of the Chinese people of that period; they made meanings out of the phenomena that they observed within the universe and exchanged their ideas in the social sphere, from which new meanings were generated. In the semiosphere, rumours are no more a fleeting phenomenon; rumours are the cultural representations under the projection of knowledges in the semio-

³⁶ "Das Gerücht von Orléans selbst projiziert also ein kollektives und teilweise 'literarisch' vermitteltes 'Wissen' auf eine aktuelle soziale Situation".

sphere. In other words, from the perspective of the amalgam of knowledges in culture, rumours now have a root to trace and to study.

As the frontline of culture in its progression in history, the amalgam of knowledges constantly brings forth new rumours and alters its own path of development as communication happens, which situates the amalgam as the product of the semiosphere. More importantly, the rumour texts that are communicated are also sedimented in the expressivity of culture as past rumours, which can be evoked in the future under a new context with new contents. Rumours “appear as efforts to come up with truthful stories and represent a rich material for cultural analysis that helps us to understand contemporary communication structures, values, emotions and the complex ways in which knowledge was produced” (Jobs 2020: 5). In this sense, rumours enter the realm of cultural history (Burke 1997; Lotman 2019; Torop 2017) by being situated in the cultural synchrony of the semiosphere and the study of rumours joins itself in the cohort of all other discourse studies in the dynamics of semiotic communication.

1.3. Mapping the Institutions

There is still an incoherence between the amalgam of knowledges in the social sphere and the texts that it creates in the semiosphere. Knowledges cannot function by themselves; they must be believed by social groups to function as epistemic patterns to attach meanings to personal experiences and make them further socialised in society. In brief, knowledges do not have agency, and they cannot produce texts by themselves; the agency of using and selecting knowledges is in people’s hands. As Barnes points out, “theories of belief suggest theories of knowledge, even though they do not logically imply them, and that such suggestions must be taken seriously” (2009: 153). The amalgam of knowledges must be presented in the social sphere as beliefs that include “substantive convictions about what the world is like” (Barnes, Bloor, and Henry 1996: 70), which goes beyond mere exchanges of information from personal *habiti*. The belief in the amalgam of knowledges creates a subjective social world, in which individuals are freed “from the burden of ‘all those decisions’” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 71) when faced with the complexities of their own experiences. Therefore, the constructed social reality is a network of beliefs that originates from the amalgam of knowledges but not the amalgam itself, since in discourses, belief in the knowledges used is a prerequisite for articulation, even the simplest ones.³⁷ Despite the fact that “For most people, whatever their way of life, the beliefs they accept and

³⁷ It is indeed possible to “fake” an articulation, according to knowledges that the addresser does not believe, for the sake of humour or trolling. However, the articulation still, ultimately, reflects the personal beliefs of the addresser.

utilize are held unselfconsciously, and are rarely reflected upon” (Barnes 2009: 1), the belief in the amalgam of knowledges comes under our scope “as a process of knowing that is not subject to verification or measurement by experimental means within the framework of a modern Western scientific paradigm” (Motz 1998: 340). As Kapferer remarks, “Social knowledge is based on faith and not on proof” (1990: 264).

The construction of beliefs in the subjective social realities of individuals prompts investigations on social institutions and their legitimacies in the social sphere. As institutions are “any collectively accepted system of rules (procedures, practices) that enable us to create institutional facts” (Searle 2005: 21), public belief in the shared, habitualised social reality includes institutions as an “instituted set of acts or ideas that individuals find before them and that impose themselves more or less upon them” (Mauss and Fauconnet 1975: 11; cited from Dromi 2020: 3). In this sense, whereas heterogeneous knowledges are entities that pull strings behind the screen (projection, as addressed in 1.2), it is institutions that directly model the articulation of rumour texts. This is to say that when individuals apply the amalgam of knowledges to their experiences and attach meaning to them, socio-cultural institutions are always present and supervise articulation. As Althusser reminds us, “there is no practice except by and in an ideology” (2001: 170), meaning that the generation of rumour texts is always embedded within broader social and cultural formations.

Furthermore, all kinds of knowledges and the amalgam they constitute, have the potential of producing texts that may become rumours, but not rumours yet. When these knowledges provide different interpretations and understandings of a social concern, the process runs towards an unending heteroglossia. However, when a set of discourses is dubbed “rumour”, truth is also constructed in the social sphere and the heteroglossia collapses into a fuzzy line between legitimised truth and dismissed rumours, which indicates the sensitivity of truth towards the oscillation of power relationships in the social sphere. As Escoffier notes, “The shifting amalgams of power/knowledge generate new ‘truth’ and ‘power’ effects in the society’s everyday knowledge” (1998: 5). Even though rumouring is not our topic here (we will come to that in Chapter 2), the power dynamics of rumour also presume the existence of an institutionalised world in which discourses have a certain order and manifest the power relationships between social institutions. Following this perspective, social institutions shape the social sphere as a venue where power relationships are unevenly constructed and in return partake in the process of shaping the landscape of social reality, entrenching the unbalanced situation. As Valk points out,

Understanding social realities can hardly be possible without considering power relations between individuals and communities and the mechanisms of maintaining hierarchies and order, which are often sanctioned not only by law and traditions but also by religious institutions. (Valk 2022: 1)

Therefore, if we go back to the initial mission that we started at the beginning of this chapter, which is to map the knowledges' presence in the social sphere to understand rumour as a social phenomenon, what we will have at hand is the interplay of social institutions and the power relationship that constitute the network of beliefs in the social sphere, by which heterogeneous knowledges take shape to modify rumour discourses. As Fine notes, rumours are "an expression of a belief of topical relevance that is spread without secure standards of evidence, given norms for beliefs. [...] I discuss rumor as a form of political discourse" (2007: 5). In line with this logic, the amalgam of knowledges that are assembled as the frontline of culture over time is included in the power dynamics of social institutions with respective legitimacies in the social sphere. As a continuation of the topics in 1.1.3 from the audience's perspective, aspects from public belief inevitably raise the question of the construction of credibility on different levels of society, which includes both scientific knowledges and narrative knowledges.

1.3.1. From Belief in Everyday Life to Trust in Others

As *habiti* are communicated to construct a shared social reality, individuals are also habitualised in the world that contains routines of everyday life. For every individual, their subjective perception of the world around them is characterised by their daily routines that do not need a second thought, or even a first one. These mundane routines create a sense of predictability and order which is solidified by the exchange of *habiti* in the social sphere. In this regard, these daily routines become institutionalised, forming a world "as it is". On this primary level, the social reality of everyday life allows individuals to navigate the world with a sense of security and expectation, which provides a basic form of institutionalisation that starts from the very beginning of the construction of *habitus*. Institutionalisation of everyday life modifies people's preferences and provides judgments in their beliefs when they are encountered with experiences in their daily routines which pre-emptively mediate the acceptance of rumour texts among individuals. As Fine and Ellis point out,

So when we consider rumors, we instinctively use our sense of how the world works and use the touchstones we're comfortable with to decide that one rumor is believable while another is ridiculous, even if the factual bases of both are equally dubious. (Fine and Ellis 2010: 29).

Moreover, as Berger and Luckmann argue, “the reality of everyday life maintains itself by being embodied in routines, which is the essence of institutionalization. Beyond this, however, the reality of everyday life is ongoingly reaffirmed in the individual’s interaction with others” (1966: 169). From this perspective, institutions of everyday life are continually constructed and reconstructed through interactions with others via the constant “world-checking” which internalises the habitualised world in every member of social groups. A world of everyday life is accordingly constructed on the dynamics between the stability of the subjective reality (for example, the sun rises every morning from the East) and the reaffirmation of it (I know that others also see the sunrise from the same direction). In this way, beliefs in everyday routines are consolidated by daily interactions and are reified “as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly supra-human terms” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 106). The process of reification, as Berger and Luckmann assert, is “an extreme step in the process of objectivation, whereby the objectivated world loses its comprehensibility as a human enterprise and becomes fixated as a non-human, non-humanizable, inert facticity” (1966: 106). Everyday routines have become the unquestionable basis of public beliefs, which transforms social practices into seemingly natural and immutable aspects of reality.

Institutionalisation of everyday life also constructs an interpersonal network during the process. Throughout the process of reaffirmation with others, individuals are socialised in small groups, in which the daily routines are anchored in each member’s subjective social reality. As “groups that depend upon personal (typically face-to-face) interaction with the recognition by participants that they constitute a meaningful social unit” (Fine and Harrington 2004: 343), these tiny publics function as basic forms of collective meaning-making in people’s daily lives and operate on a tacit basis. People do not need to attend to their knowledge of everyday life specifically since the process of reification has already set these institutions in the subjective social reality in every individual, which highlights the power of the unspoken and the taken-for-granted in social life. Much of what constitutes social reality is not explicitly stated but is implicitly understood and enacted. This tacit knowledge is transmitted through everyday practices, rituals and interactions, which continuously reinforce the social norms and values of the group. The unspoken agreements, or “tacit knowing” as Polanyi (2009) calls it, are powerful precisely because they are rarely questioned or challenged within tiny publics, thus maintaining the status quo.

However, a reified everyday world also implies its inability to legitimate experiences outside of it. When people encounter experiences that cannot be comprehended by their reified everyday world, a sense of breakdown is invoked and the institutions of daily routines resurface from the subconscious to the conscious, which brings challenges those routines and incubates potentials of rumouring. The case of the Hairy Men shows that when troops from both sides of the civil war and the following Soviet expertise breached the rural lives of

those regions, the institutions of daily life were no longer able to explain what was happening. As Li (2005; 2010) points out, the intrusion into people's daily lives was the direct cause of the Hairy Men rumours. When the daily knowledges are no longer able to render lives as routine, people resort to other knowledges and use them to try to bring the derailed reality back on track. What we need to investigate here is the introduction of other knowledges in the belief system among the public. Due to the limitations of their mortal reach, people are also compelled to put their trust in knowledges beyond their personal experiences which are conceptualised as "knowledge by description" by Bertrand Russell (1910). The exchange of practical knowledges, as described in 1.2.1, above, indicates that we do not only take what is experienced in our own subjective reality as knowledge, but the knowledges described by others as well. Therefore, the subjective social reality not only contains knowledges that are "as it is", but also "as it is said". The description, or texts in our context here, comes from discourses in the social sphere at different levels, ranging from personal conversations to public communications. As Eco observes,

I've learned that for a lot of things, I've been used to putting my faith in other people's knowledge. I confine my doubts to some specialized sector of knowledge, and for the rest I put my trust in the Encyclopedia. [...] Experience, and a long series of decisions by which I have placed trust in the human community, have convinced me that what the Total Encyclopedia describes (quite often in contradictory ways) represents a satisfactory image of what I call the real world. (Eco 1994: 90).

In this sense, trust in other social entities "can also be expressed thoughtlessly, carelessly, routinely and does not require any unnecessary conscious effort, especially when the expectations are almost certain" (Luhmann 2009: 29, my translation).³⁸ From Eco's insights, trust in other social entities implies the construction of institutions that reduce the complexity of personal experiences, indicating the absence of knowledges themselves in the subjective social reality. As discussed in the Introduction of this dissertation, institutions become the shortcut of knowledges for individuals to turn to when they are encountered with situations beyond daily routines. Therefore, the institutionalisation of these kinds of knowledges falls under discursive construction, since institutions lose their self-evident manner that make people believe in them naturally. They are attached with different levels of credibility in knowledge from different sources, which will be further elaborated in the next section about political discourses and in Chapter 3 on the acceptance and transmission of rumours.

³⁸ "Vertrauen kann auch unbedacht, leichtsinnig, routinemäßig erwiesen werden und erfordert insbesondere dann keinen unnötigen Bewußtseinaufwand, wenn die Erwartungen nahezu sicher sind".

1.3.2. Authority: The Construction of Plausibility

Institutionalisation of knowledges beyond personal experiences brings new questions under scope. Unlike institutions of everyday life, which are constructed by intimate and immediate interpersonal experiences, the discursively constructed institutions do not win people's belief naturally since the knowledges are not acquired automatically by instant experiences during the establishment of *habiti*. As Luhmann argues in line with his insights on trust in others being subconscious, "Trust is ultimately always unfounded; it is created by overrunning the available information; [...] Trust remains to be at risk" (Luhmann 2009: 31, my translation).³⁹ This is to say that social institutions need to be further legitimised to maintain their influence on the public and make people believe in them. As Berger and Luckmann point out,

Subjective reality is thus always dependent upon specific plausibility structures, that is, the specific social base and social processes required for its maintenance. [...] [The plausibility structure] is also the social base for the particular suspension of doubt without which the definition of reality in question cannot be maintained in consciousness. (Berger and Luckmann 174–175)

The plausibility structures intersect with the institutions of everyday life, yet the public belief in respect of knowledge systems is not limited by daily practices. When knowledges are confirmed to be believable in practices, these knowledges are taken to be truthful as a whole under the name of institutions. For example, with a Newtonian understanding of light, it is common knowledge that light is comprised of a spectrum in which seven colours are visible to us. In this way, we accept that rainbows are a scientific phenomenon rather than an oath made between God and Noah. This knowledge of everyday life can be constantly tested by our own experiences and self-evident proofs, making us believe that science does tell the truth. In this way, modern science overcomes theological interpretations by constructing authority based on proofs that can be tested by everyone. However, it is the same science that tells us about the formation of black holes and the gravity waves following the oscillation of time and space. Even though these phenomena cannot be experienced by the public masses, they are believed to be so by narratives from the scientific institutions in the social sphere, namely scientists and academic institutes. The example shows that the plausibility of scientific knowledge comes from both institutions of everyday life and narratives legitimised by the social institutions that cast their authorities towards the public. Following the discussions in 1.1, that a hollowed, sublime science is politically important instead of philosophically important, the sublimity of

³⁹ "Vertrauen ist letztlich immer unbegründbar; es kommt durch Überziehen der vorhandenen Information zustande. [...] Vertrauen bleibt ein Wagnis".

science is precisely supported by the authority stretching from daily practices to narratives and expanded to a politically constructed belief in the social sphere. In other words, the sublimity of scientific knowledges covers the epistemic difference between a testable Newtonian optics and a narrative of cosmology, and a hollowed science is both the cause and the result. Since science works in daily lives, it is also plausible in narratives about social reality, leading to a hollowed science subject to cultural interpretations. As Fine notes, “The politics of credibility connects to the evaluation that audiences make of the source of the material: whether to award credibility and whether reference to one’s source is incorporated in the text as it is transmitted, gainsaying its believability” (2007: 9).

The case of cultural interpretations and representations of black holes and gravity waves needs further investigation. As an object existing merely in the narratives for the public, the need for empirical proof is abated, if not needed at all, since scientific knowledge, with its own history as the knowledge systems develop, has established its authority by solving problems of the past and maintains its importance by being promising for the future. As Barry Barnes et al. observe in the example of Mendel’s theories on heredity, the problem-solving paradigms (in Kuhnian terms), are “accepted as authoritative bases for [science’s] practice in specific disciplines or specialties in science” (1996: 102). Individuals may be well aware of the past achievements of science and refer to this authority in the current discourses to legitimise their articulation. In all, authority indicates a “Routinization of mediation in performance”, as R. Bauman (2004: 130) puts it, which is manifested in the authority’s presence in articulation when they exchange their ideas in the social sphere. As Carl J. Friedrich notes, “All authority is in the last analysis the authority of communications” (1954: 312). The authorisation and legitimation inherited in discourses implies the existence of a conventionalised social order for epistemological needs in human history, as Foucault (2002b) shows in his discussion on the *epistemes* of different epochs. Therefore, authorities are incorporated in the process of institutionalisation as the legitimate domination (Weber 1978: 215)⁴⁰ within the power relationships between social entities. As Berger and Luckmann point out, “the institutions must and do claim authority over the individual, independently of the subjective meanings he may attach to any particular situation” (1966: 80). The authorities shape public belief as the by-product of institutionalisation.

Moreover, since authority can be constructed by legitimising narratives in communication, narrative knowledges also establish their own institutions in the social sphere as “a reference to the taken-for-granted features of a local cultural

⁴⁰ In this work, Weber distinguishes three pure types of authority: traditional, rational-legal and charismatic. All three types of authority are accomplished by discursive practices in the social sphere, both in history and at the present, to maintain themselves in the social sphere. In the case of scientific knowledges, the previous two types are highlighted.

tradition” (Barnes, Bloor, and Henry 1996: 199). Via sedimentation and repetition, narrative knowledges also gain their authority as the narratives are realised in practices, as Lyotard puts it,

The narratives themselves have this authority. In a sense, the people are only that which actualizes the narratives: once again, they do this not only by recounting them, but also by listening to them and recounting themselves through them; in other words, by putting them into “play” in their institutions—thus by assigning themselves the posts of narratee and diegesis as well as the post of narrator.

[...]Narratives, as we have seen, determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do. (Lyotard 1984: 23)

Lyotard’s insights on narratives bring political elements to the construction of authority for narrative knowledges. Via sedimentation and repetition, narrative knowledges are institutionalised and influence people’s epistemic patterns as traditions on different layers of society, which are continuously decontextualised and recontextualised in the present (R. Bauman 2004: 147). In terms of cultural memory, Jan Assmann writes that “cultural memory is a kind of institution. It is exteriorised, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent” (2008: 110–11). On the level of vernacular knowledges, the value of tradition “is located in its deployment as part of real human expressive behaviour, and that value may or may not coincide with any empirical quality of being ‘traditional’” (Howard 2013: 75). For both cultural memory and the vernacular, authority is realised in the articulation of knowledges in communication and as texts in the social sphere that construct the so-called tradition that identifies its audience. But, more importantly, it is the power relationships between social entities that determines who gets to tell the stories, whose voices are amplified and whose narratives are marginalised, influencing the discursive practices that maintain the narratives in the social sphere. As Marilyn Motz points out, “The role that expressive cultural forms play in the practice of belief makes them central to questions of power and politics in the inclusive sense of the terms” (1998: 351).

Ma (2013) notes that in the Hairy Men case, the construction of authority was represented as political rituals performed incessantly in rumour-affected regions. According to local folklores, *Jiaolong*, or the scaled dragon, a serpent-shaped supernatural creature, lives in waters and has the capability to summon heavy rains and floods, which impedes harvesting and causes famines. Dealing with the calamities of *Jiaolong* was considered a success of local governance in many

dynasties, including the Ming and Qing. Local governments organised troops by mobilising local able-bodied men to campaign against *Jiaolong* as an emblem of good governance and incorporated the deed into the grand narratives of the ruling regime. As Ma observes,

The campaign against *Jiaolong*, on the one hand, is originated from the tradition of an agricultural culture. On the other hand, it has political aspects in terms of establishing legitimacy. Defeating *Jiaolong*, as a supernatural creature which has its monstrous nature, obviously becomes the clear evidence that Qing is a regime anointed by god. (Ma 2013: 108, my translation)⁴¹

The political construction in the *Jiaolong* case has two implications. On the one hand, as Ma notes, it entrenched Qing's regime by wielding its political power to perform a ritual in which everyone in the region acknowledged the presence of the government. Even though *Jiaolong* did not exist, the campaign was necessary to intensify the government's control of the locals and powder itself as the guardian and the saviour of the public, which was, indeed, repeated in almost every dynasty in Chinese history. However, on the other hand, since the government wanted people to believe that it was the government that kept the danger at bay, the locals also believed in the existence of *Jiaolong*, which bolsters vernacular authority among the people by legitimising discourses from local traditions. As "a central way tradition functions discursively" (Howard 2013: 76), vernacular authorities are represented by stories and legends told and retold in these regions from a long time ago. The myth remained a myth that was backgrounded as the cultural contexts of discursive practices. However, the official campaigns brought the narratives to the front of stage and the texts about *Jiaolong* were brought from mythical time to social time.⁴² Fear therefore took the stage and rumours started to circulate virally, since the efforts that the local government made concretised the abstract, mythological form of the creature into real shapes. The intricacies of rumours and authority and the dynamics in such power relationships will be discussed in 2.3.

Finally, if we come back to the time when the Hairy Men rumours abounded, we can find plenty of institutionalised knowledges casting their authority to the public. First of all, there was science. The honeymoon between the Soviet Union and the new China introduced advanced technologies to the Chinese people and people knew about the destructive atomic bombs that removed Hiroshima and Nagasaki respectively at one strike, especially after Mao's decision that China

⁴¹ “大肆伐蛟，表面出于迷信的劝农传统，实际上也出于塑造正统的政治考量。消灭具有神性的牛鬼蛇神之属的蛟龙，显然是清政权天授神权的明证。”

⁴² According to Jan Assmann (2008), social time refers to the timeframe for social communication and interaction and mythical time refers to the timeframe for cultural memory of social groups.

should have its own atomic bombs (Shu 1999).⁴³ Under the Soviet influence and with Mao's 1955 speech on nuclear bombs, even the mostly illiterate Chinese people knew that science was important and that the atomic bomb was one representation of technological advancement. However, normal people had no idea what an atomic bomb was like. In order to fill in the epistemic gap, they resorted to other social institutions with their respective authorities in order to convince people. When they spotted commissars from the CCP and Soviet experts in their daily lives, the normal routine of life was breached and people therefore turned to the knowledge institutions in the social sphere in order to try to understand the new observations. By referring to the newcomers as hairy men and conceptualising atomic bombs as composed from males' genitals, women's breasts and children's intestines, people touched upon their cultural institutions of the Chinese language, the vernacular, local knowledge from folklore and social taboos on reproduction.

As we can see from the institutionalisation of both scientific knowledges and narrative knowledges, authority is constructed during discursive practices and is in return reflected in text-generating processes in the social sphere. The authorisation process accompanies institutionalisation and is represented in discursive practices as people's beliefs towards certain knowledges, which are subject to political mediation and manoeuvring. The dynamics between different authorities and the intricacies of the politics of plausibility show that social institutions are interconnected with each other, weaving an institutional network in which the authority of different institutions intersect and overlap. When individuals use the amalgam of knowledges to comprehend what is going on around them, what they have at hand is an uneven landscape of social reality that modifies articulation. Therefore, the amalgam of knowledges in the social sphere is, in fact, an interplay of various and heterogeneous institutions. Within the network, "cultural meanings and the institutional structure of society are not two spheres externally related to each other but are instead a continuum" (Heiskala 2014: 50), stretching from routines of everyday life to the sublimity of science. And it is precisely this interplay of institutions that constructs the plausibility structure behind the social reality.

1.3.3. A Socially (De)constructed Truth

The plausibility structure in the social sphere also implies a socially constructed truth, in which "reality, events and facts as negotiable and negotiated" (Randviir 2004: 78). In other words, truth is always malleable in the sense that it not only contains the "as it is" or "as it is said"; it also comprises "as it should be" and "as

⁴³ Interestingly but not coincidentally, Mao gave a speech on nuclear bombs in 1955, precisely the time when Hairy Men rumour resurfaced.

it is believed". Jonathan Potter calls it the "truth economy", by which "truth can be treated as a commodity which is worked up, can fluctuate, and can be strengthened or weakened by various procedures of representation" (1996: 5). The represented reality is experienced as *the* reality and, most importantly, the representations are taken as true, to a certain extent at least, for social groups in the interplay of social institutions. In this regard, the plausibility structure is incorporated into the social reality by setting up a loose and ambiguous projection of truth in the social sphere,⁴⁴ which breeds distortion in the social reality as a default setting (for example, stereotypes, prejudices, enemies) for all social groups. One of the best manifestations of such default setting is the case of rumours about Chinese spreading HIV in a Japanese district.

On September 3rd, 2022, *Shūkan Gendai* (*Modern Weekly*), a Japanese publication famous for its anti-China stance, reported that three bisexual, HIV-infected Chinese students were spreading their disease purposefully among the prostitutes of Ikebukuro District, Tokyo.⁴⁵ The publication noted that the students hid their infection status and chose popular escorts on purpose, paying higher prices for unprotected intercourse. It was claimed that the number of the infected had reached more than 1,000. The news cause wide concern both in Japan and China. It instantly wreaked havoc in the Japanese sex industry, which is well-regulated by government policies and where cases of AIDS are very rare. Even though it was soon debunked by the authorities reporting that AIDS cases in Japan that year stood merely at 870,⁴⁶ the fear and anger did not dissipate. Apart from HIV being a floating signifier in the manner discussed above, scrutiny shows that even before the explosion of rumours, there were already suspicions and conflicts between the Chinese communities in Japan and local Japanese people. According to Zha (2019), Chinese communities in Japan, mostly migrant workers, are always the focus for complaints by local Japanese people owing to their perceived misbehaviour and high crime rates. Besides the exclusions created by language barriers, the Chinese communities in Japan also try to separate themselves from the majority for cultural and historical reasons. The mutual exclusions create prejudgments and suspicions between the two communities and rumour takes the stage as the representation of the reality that is collectively imagined. The social sphere had already harboured multiple discourses that constructed the tension between them. The wide spread of the HIV rumour illustrates what the readers of *Shūkan Gendai* would believe; in other words, the world around the readers of

⁴⁴ The ambiguity arises from the discrepancy between the complexity of the reality and the discourses that try to envelope it. According to H. Putnam (2004), there is constantly a tension between "the word" and "the thing", no matter how detailed the representation is. It is, of course, a phenomenon that semiotics aims to examine.

⁴⁵ <https://gendai.media/articles/-/99243> (In Japanese)

⁴⁶ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/03/23/national/science-health/aids-hiv-numbers/>

that weekly journal was already pre-emptively shaped owing to previous discourses circulating in the social sphere. Therefore, when *Shūkan Gendai* published the news, readers instantly found what they read from the papers plausible because it conformed with the stereotypes they held. As Gordon Allport notes, on the issue of prejudice:

A person's conduct proceeds immediately from his view of the situation confronting him. His response to the world conforms to his definition of the world. He attacks members of one group because he perceives them as repulsive, annoying, or threatening; members of another he derides because to him they are crude, dirty, and stupid. [...] Again, as we have seen, historical and cultural forces, and the person's entire character structure, may lie behind his hypotheses and perceptions. (Allport 1979: 216)

Transmitting the HIV virus on purpose is, indeed, a malicious act that any citizen would reject. As a social taboo, AIDS is sometimes interpreted as an emblem of promiscuity in various cultures (Bolton 1992; Chan, Rungpueng, and Reidpath 2009). But it can also be used as a weapon to humiliate socio-cultural others. From this perspective, the prejudices function as the social institutions that legitimise the humiliation, which further entrenches prejudices as discourses in the social sphere that are taken as truthful statements. It is precisely in this sense that rumours are “too good to be false” (Fine and Ellis 2010: 5).

On the other side of the sea, the *Shūkan Gendai* story instigated a very subtle response in China. Transmitting the virus deliberately is appalling; but as a result of the poignant history between Chinese people and Japanese imperialism, especially during WWII in Nanjing (see Brook 2002; Chang 1997), a considerable proportion of Chinese people are well rehearsed in hatred against Japanese people starting from primary schools, which means that the hatred is institutionalised and sedimented in the discursive practices. Transmitting deadly diseases can thus be interpreted as revenge against the Japanese in some nationalist discourses.⁴⁷ When Chinese people encountered the rumour, they were indeed appalled by the ghastly act. But out of an institutionalised hatred they found this statement possible and plausible, since they understood that some of the fellow Chinese might carry out such an act in a fit of impulse. Again, we can find plausibility structures inherited in the subjective social reality in Chinese society.

⁴⁷ The direct object of the vengeful act concerns the period during WWII when Japanese troops used Chinese people to test bio-chemical and bacteriological weapons (for more details, please see Nie, Guo, and Selden 2010). For extreme nationalists in China, venting their hostility towards Japanese people is the “easiest” way to consolidate their political stance, i.e., related discourses are deeply embedded in the social realities of Chinese individuals and well institutionalised in Chinese national identity.

The institutionalised hatred between the Chinese and the Japanese—or canned hatred, as Žižek terms it in the same sense as “canned laughter” in sitcoms—creates inevitable distortions in the collective imagination of cultural others. As Žižek comments in respect of the Eichmann case, “Eichmann himself didn't really have to hate the Jews; he was able to be just an ordinary person. It's the objective ideological machinery that did the hating; the hatred was imported, it was ‘out there’” (Žižek and Hanlon 2001: 5). The importation of hatred does not need personal reflections on the feeling; it sustains itself by the constant inculcation from social institutions and the social reality is already depicted by these institutions pre-emptively. From this perspective, social institutions function as “externalisation devices” in discourses for individuals to refer to and convince individuals of their legitimacy by constructing this “out-there-ness” of social reality (Potter 1996: 151). In this way, certain discourses are legitimised as the “proper” representation of reality and are consecrated as truth in the social sphere.

The phenomenon of canned hatred demonstrates that the credulity towards social institutions creates an inertia of thinking beyond the social reality provided by institutions, which not only appears in stereotypes and prejudices, but in all discursive constructions of the social reality beyond mortal reach. As a shorthand for knowledge, the institutionalised truth already suffices to provide a world that can be discussed and exchanged without the need for fact-checking. The canned hatred shows that when related discourses prevail in the social sphere, a Chinese person may instantly echo the call and hate a Japanese person, even though the individual might have never met any Japanese individual in real life. In contrast to the logic of a self-evident truth that can be constantly tested in personal experiences, the socially and politically constructed truth is carefully selected by social institutions and the social reality, in this sense, is a world comprised of politically manoeuvred discourses. Consequently, truth is never separable from power. As Foucault reflects on truth, “truth isn't outside power, or deprived of power. truth is of the world: it is produced by virtue of multiple constraints. And it induces the regular effects of power” (1977: 13).

Hannah Arendt laments that “The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed; it is always in danger of being manoeuvred out of the world not only for a time but, potentially, forever” (2006: 176). The networked social institutions become “regimes of truth”, which function as a system determining discourses that can be accepted as truth. As Foucault further clarifies,

When I say regime of truth I do not mean that at this moment politics or the art of government finally becomes rational. I do not mean that at this moment a sort of epistemological threshold is reached on the basis of which the art of government could become scientific. I mean that the moment I am presently trying to indicate is marked by the articulation of a particular type of discourse

and a set of practices, a discourse that, on the one hand, constitutes these practices as a set bound together by an intelligible connection and, on the other hand, legislates and can legislate on these practices in terms of true and false. (Foucault 2010: 18)

Therefore, a socially constructed truth also has a history in the outcome of the dynamic interplay of social institutions. As Daniele Lorenzini asserts, there is “no Truth external to a series of historically situated games of truth that establish the rules for obtaining it” (2023: 4). In different epochs of human history, truth has had different versions and different shapes as the result of the joint effort of social institutions at play. More importantly, as social institutions are located at different levels of society, truth regimes also function at different levels of society, constructing different versions of truth on the meso-level among various social groups. As these versions of truth coexist in society, tensions appear as the actual representation of the intricacies between heterogeneous knowledges. Furthermore, the pragmatic nature of the knowledge amalgam indicates that, in the social sphere, a collectively shared truth that crosses the boundaries of different social groups is projected merely as provisional. Provisional truth (Bush 1908) functions as the compromise of the various versions of truths and is once again under the political manoeuvring of a larger-scale truth regime.⁴⁸ In other words, different social groups have their own projections of truth and, from a macroscopic perspective, it is possible to arrive at a shared version of truth if only the truth is provisional. This is to say that, in the social sphere, truth is both constructed and deconstructed by the dynamics of social institutions. The knowledge amalgam provides different versions of truth and convinces its audience to believe in these versions and the interplay of social institutions, on a higher level, high enough to dismiss something as a rumour by excluding some truth claims in the heteroglossia, determines which discourse is the proper representation of reality.

Therefore, truth is neither a flashing, ephemeral instance of self-evident reality, nor an eternal, everlasting doctrine that does not evince historical time, but a stretching continuum bridging the past and the present and offered in overarching discourses that condition what can be said and how it is said. Under the supervision of truth discourses, ancient fears, collective memories, local lore and vernacular beliefs are intertwined in an amalgam, functioning as the epistemic patterns for comprehending the complexity of the world. In this way, all knowledges in the proxy of social institutions enter the discursive carnival and the socially constructed truth is, in fact, a history of truth that does not rely on “the truth” (Lorenzini 2023: 2).

⁴⁸ The larger-scaled truth regimes are usually a state apparatus (Althusser 2001), grand narratives and science, or any macroscopic apparatuses that determine “the obligations of individuals with regard to procedures of manifestation of truth” (Foucault 2014: 93).

1.4. Concluding Remarks of the Chapter

Huangdi Neijing, or the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor*, is one of the classics that laid the basis of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). It is said that the book was written by Huangdi, or the Yellow Emperor, to explain the fundamentals of TCM and the basic mechanisms of diseases. The seminal work was later proved to be a series of treatises compiled by medical scholars and historians ranging from the second century B. C. to the first century A. D., which was later commented on and footnoted by Wang Bing, a medical historian in the Tang Dynasty (Unschuld 2003). In the chapter “Comprehensive Discourse on regulating the spirit [in accordance with] the Qi of the four [seasons]”, it is stated that the sages cure diseases before they start to cause harm:

“Hence, [when it is said]
the sages did not treat those already ill, but treated those not yet ill,
they did not put in order what was already in disorder, but put in order what
was not yet in disorder,”
then this means just the same.
now,
when drugs are employed for therapy only after a disease has become fully
developed,
when [attempts at] restoring order are initiated only after disorder has fully
developed,
this is as if a well were dug when one is thirsty,
and as if weapons were cast when the fight is on.
Would this not be too late, too?” (Unschuld, Tessenow, and Zheng 2011:
1:57)⁴⁹

The way that sages cure diseases sheds light on how to deal with rumour cases, despite the implications that rumours might be an illness. The above discussions on the heterogeneity of knowledges, the amalgam and the institutionalisation of the social reality demonstrate the situation in which knowledges pre-emptively shape the world that individuals believe in and rumours, not as rumours but as texts and contexts, have already existed in different places of the social sphere before active rumouring commenced. The social stock of knowledge determines what people can imagine of the situation, which is reflected not only in rumours, but in all articulations generally as daily practices.

While scientific and narrative knowledges are present in everyday discourses, they modify people’s communication and structure people’s conception of the world around them, which serve as the prerequisite for the rumour phenomenon.

⁴⁹ “是故圣人不治已病，治未病，不治已乱，治未乱，此之谓也。夫病已成而后药之，乱已成而后治之，譬犹渴而穿井，鬻而铸锥，不亦晚乎？”

On the one hand, scientific knowledges are not isolated from public life but, instead, participate in everyday discursive practices, lending legitimacy to social concerns, even if the general population lacks a deep understanding of science. Science and scientific knowledges are revered in sublimity, and the legitimization is less philosophical than political. Science is treated as a form of sacred wisdom that cannot be questioned. Science, in this regard, is not necessarily scientific in nature but is portrayed as indisputable and elevated in social conversations. Moreover, from the perspective of the public perception of science, the politicisation of science is possible since scientific knowledges have become too complex for most people to comprehend, leading to a situation where people use scientific terms without fully understanding them. Therefore, these scientific terms have become floating signifiers that are mediated by cultural interpretations. On the other hand, narrative knowledges are distributed across different levels of society and are associated closely with culture. On the social scale, the narratives that constitute the canons of a culture provide knowledges that both entrench themselves and identifying those that can use such knowledges. On the local scale, vernacular knowledges function as the local variations of cultural knowledges and provide know-hows about the proximate. More importantly, no matter on what level these knowledges subsist, they are incorporated in the dynamics of culture's contextualisation and re-contextualisation, which means that these narratives can be either foregrounded as texts that provide certain knowledge or backgrounded as contexts that constitute the epistemological "default" set. The intersection of scientific knowledges and narrative knowledges constructs a "mild scientism" in which belief in science coexists with cultural interpretations of subject matters. Whereas scientific knowledges are consecrated and narrative knowledges are subjugated, mild scientism projects a hierarchy of knowledges in the social sphere. The presence of the hierarchy presumes the ideological aspects of mild scientism, through which all social discourses are regulated in their production and articulation.

Despite their irreducibility and heterogeneity, knowledges are amalgamated into a wholeness that allows individuals to comprehend what is happening around them. As the frontline of culture that is constantly internalising human experiences as practices that can be articulated and discussed, the amalgam of knowledges requires certain mechanisms to maintain its wholeness both synchronically and diachronically. On the synchronic plane, the amalgam is maintained under a pragmatic need for comprehension and communication during the exchange of personal practical knowledges between individuals and constant communication sustains the amalgam's dynamics for future alteration. On the diachronic plane, the dynamic is represented as the sedimentation of knowledges from the past to the present and the repetition of current knowledges that are projected to the future. In the continuity of the amalgam of knowledges, some become inactive as texts are archived and some remain to function at different levels of society. The

extreme case is total oblivion, in which the texts are no longer available in the social sphere. The convergence of the synchronic and the diachronic mechanisms leads to a symbolic universe as a universal epistemic structure. As all texts are articulable and interpretable in the symbolic universe, the heterogeneity of various knowledges is dissolved and provided with a certain place to function, interrelated with each other to constitute a network of knowledges moving towards homeostasis. Moreover, these texts, rumours undoubtedly included, compose the semiosphere that neutralises the heterogeneity of knowledges as the polyglottic structure of culture. And, precisely in this sense, rumour can be conceptualised as a cultural phenomenon that has its own temporal depth, rather than being a fleeting shadow that slips away from scholars' interest.

Apart from the presence of heterogeneous knowledges in the objective social reality and their amalgamation, the institutionalisation of these knowledges in the social sphere means that the authority of these institutions, which is represented as different kinds of beliefs between various entities in society, is also constructed alongside with the process of institutionalisation. At the interpersonal level, daily routines are habitualised and everyday life is institutionalised as trust in others that also participate in these routines. Since these practices are constantly repeated and confirmed in daily lives, these institutions become reified and seldom appear in our consciousness, which also indicates that when the daily routines are out of order, the whole interpersonal network of everyday life is no longer stable. However, when certain knowledges are beyond daily experiences, political discourses are required to maintain the authority of social institutions as the shorthand of these knowledges. Even though different kinds of knowledges have different kinds of institutions as their proxies with different kinds of legitimation, their authority is constructed discursively and modifies people's beliefs towards these knowledges, which constructs an uneven landscape of social reality that people share, which is subject to the power dynamics of the social sphere. Different versions of truth are established under the dynamics and more importantly, truths are no longer sublime and eternal, but merely a political construction that have their histories recorded in the process of institutionalisation.

Therefore, in the amalgam of knowledges, it is possible to find a constant tension between "official knowledges" proposed and legitimised by the grand narratives, and subjugated knowledges from which rumours arise due to the ever-changing power relationships in the social sphere. The tension arises from the conflict between the grand narratives that try to unite social discourses under one direction with one single truth before our eyes (Foucault 1971: 12) and other versions of truth that are repressed and marginalised. Within the tensions is the constant power dynamics between the different versions of truth; in addition, one provisional truth is arrived at accordingly. In other words, certain truths are selected to become the single truth that is believed and the relationships between these truths are no longer neutral. As Emil Cioran puts it,

In itself, every idea is neutral, or should be; but man animates ideas, projects his flames and flaws into them; impure, transformed into beliefs, ideas take their place in time, take shape as events: the trajectory is complete, from logic to epilepsy... whence the birth of ideologies, doctrines, deadly games. (Cioran 2010: 3)

Within these power dynamics, society has become an intricate machine continuously churning out rumours and the task set at the beginning of the chapter—which is to map out the knowledges that are present in the social sphere—involves understanding that society, as the breeding ground of rumours, is always teeming with pressures, conflicts, fear and anxiety for rumour generation and for explosion. If we look back to the whole Hairy Men story at the very beginning of this chapter, we can find that the narratives which occurred in those rumour complexes were already rife and ready to explode, and when rumours cast their spell on the public, they became invincible. The world that the Chinese people of that time believed in, constructed by the knowledges they held at different levels and legitimised by various institutions, provided all the necessary contents and contexts for rumours about hairy men to be talked about and then explode. In rumour phenomena, it is the institutionalised, uneven social reality that constantly imbues contents and structures into the articulation about the world around individuals, which precedes any rumour in society. In short, human society is *always prepared* for rumours.

2. THE PRESSURED, THE IMPROVISED AND THE FALSIFIED

Let us, again, start the investigation with a story. Among more than a hundred antique, fancy vehicles displayed at Riga Motor Museum, a venue that houses the widest collection of vintage automobiles in the Baltic regions, there lies one crashed 1966 Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow in the corner.⁵⁰ It was a gift from Elizabeth II, Queen of the United Kingdom, to Leonid Brezhnev, the then-incumbent General Secretary of the Soviet Union. The ragged outer look of the car distinguishes itself from other shining automobiles. But when visitors turn their eyes to the driver's seat of the crashed car, they find a wax sculpture, featuring Brezhnev, sitting there and looking into the skies. The story of that crashed car started at an autumn night in 1980, when a big bang woke up residents in the suburb of Moscow. The sound turned out to be a luxurious black car, which was proved to be the Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow, hitting a heavy dump truck. What made the accident shrouded with mysteries was that when people came to the scene to check what happened, they did not find the driver of the car.⁵¹ Due to the lack of official media coverage of the accident, various interpretations of the car crash sprouted. One interpretation of the accident was that the car was driven by Brezhnev's driver, and he turned for help instantly after the crash. So when people gathered to see the crashed car, the driver was already absent. However, residents of that region did not buy this story and rumours therefore appeared that it was Brezhnev himself driving the car.⁵² Despite the fact that no official sources confirmed who drove the car due to the state control of the press and that Brezhnev was already seriously ill in bed in the 80s (he died in 1982), the rumour won a wide range of audience and the wax figure of Brezhnev was there sitting behind the steering wheel in the museum.

These rumours were, of course, not totally ungrounded. A big fan of luxurious cars, Brezhnev loved driving and enjoyed racing cars. "Cars were his passion" (Shulman 2002: 218). Brezhnev had a wide collection of cars, mostly gifts from foreign leaders and was eager to drive them fast on his own (Schattenberg 2022; Boyle 2022). For example, in 1973, he drove a Lincoln Continental relentlessly in Camp David, together with President Nixon sitting in the passenger seat of the car, without protection of safeguards from both sides (Schattenberg 2022: 307). Back at home, however, under the official narratives of the Soviet Union, such cars were "politically incorrect" to go to the streets, since they were manufactured

⁵⁰ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RR-Silver-Shadow.jpg>

⁵¹ https://gazeta.ua/ru/articles/avto/_razbityj-rollsroyce-brezhneva-ukrashaet-muzej-v-rige/509094 (In Russian)

⁵² <https://press.lv/post/vysokopostavlenyj-lihach-v-rizhskom-avtomuzee-hranitsya-razbityj-brezhnevym-rolls-royce-podarennyj-elizavetoj-ii> (In Russian)

in Western countries. Therefore, aside from Soviet-manufactured cars that he took on during public events, Brezhnev had to enjoy his luxurious Western collections privately. With all these concerns, the story that Brezhnev was driving the car rang extremely plausible to the people of the times and, indeed, accompanied by a good laugh.⁵³

If we apply what we have discussed in the previous chapter to investigate these Rolls-Royce rumours, we may find out that the whole story originated from what people knew of the situation. They knew that Brezhnev was a fervent driver and the car was there at his will. The rumours seemed to be the natural product of knowledges as such held by the Soviet people. However, there is more that we can discover from the case. Apart from the existent knowledge systems that bred the circulating rumours about Brezhnev being the driver of that Rolls-Royce, the atmosphere of rumouring about him at the time is worthy of further investigation. Since the previous chapter has already illustrated the intersection of knowledges and their amalgamation as the frontline of culture's progression in time, it is time to focus on the intricacies of how the amalgam of knowledges, as well as the power relationships that are inherited in it, projects itself in the discursive practices and constructs, first of all, a pressuring atmosphere that people need to rumour about the current situation, regardless of the information that authoritative channels provide. Moreover, when the big bang was heard and people at the scene did not find the driver, the strange situation obliged people to comprehend what happened to the crashed car. In other words, the direct cause of the explosion of rumours as the vent of such pressures is also significant in rumour articulation, since it is the "hot" topic that people need to communicate with each other, from which rumours constantly take shape and start to circulate in the social sphere.

With all these pressures that obliged an interpretation, the fact whether Brezhnev was driving the car became secondary. The important thing is that according to what the people knew of the situation, such rumours were plausible and worthy of circulation. The next step is to investigate the mechanisms that constitute rumour texts that are ready for circulation. As we can witness from multiple cases mentioned above and in previous chapters, the rumour texts that appear in the social sphere are an assemblage of available contents scattered in the social sphere from both the knowledges that people are aware of from their cultural upbringings and the current observations on what is happening in the social reality. More importantly, we can also witness that some knowledges were omitted in assembling rumour texts. This is to say that the production of rumour texts is not a random matching of all available contents, but a selection of these available contents to cater to the current need for comprehension. As Kapferer points out,

⁵³ Humors and rumours are closely linked with each other. The Rolls-Royce rumours had plenty of preceding texts in the form of jokes, which provided contents and contexts for the rumour to take place. The relationships between humors and rumours will be discussed in 2.2.1.

Rumors, let us recall, are not magical events. We often unconsciously consider them like subjects, exogeneous beings mysteriously arising here or there like a goblin or some kind of comer. In reality, rumors are objects, results, or mental productions: a group's members "rumor" at a certain moment, in a certain place, and generate a content, narrative or hypothesis. (Kapferer 1990: 115)

For example, the knowledge that Brezhnev was ill in bed was ignored in these rumour texts since people were trying to bond the crashed car with the collective perception of how Brezhnev was a corrupt politician ruling the Soviet Union. In this sense, rumours also manifest a process of selection, in which the functioning of different parts of rumour texts needs to be addressed from the perspective of social-political factors of the time. As Fine and Ellis note, "As is apparent, rumors, even when they seem innocuous, are responsive to the political world around them. In the guise of being amusing stories, they address fundamental issues of concern" (2010: 130).

The current social pressure and the intricate power dynamics of the moment of articulation of rumours lead to further discussions on how rumours have the name "rumour", which means that interpretations of what is happening, being generated out of the current network of power relationships, will again be integrated into the network of power relationships and are evaluated. As Aldous Huxley commented in the case of Devils of Loudun (we will come to this case later in this chapter),

At any given time and place certain thoughts are completely unthinkable. But this radical unthinkableness of certain thoughts is not paralleled by any radical unfeelableness of certain emotions, or any radical undoableness of the actions inspired by such emotions. Anything can at all times be felt and acted upon, albeit sometimes with great difficulty and in the teeth of general disapproval. But though individuals can always feel and do whatever their temperament and constitution permit them to feel and do, they cannot think about their experiences except within the frame of reference which, at that particular time and place, has come to seem self-evident. Interpretation is in terms of the prevailing thought-pattern, and this thought-pattern conditions to some extent the expression of urges and emotions, but can never completely inhibit them. (Huxley 1971 [1952]: 172)

Following this perspective, at the time when rumours are still memories belonging to an individual on what is happening around them, these personal memories, which are later exchanged in the social sphere, are already "false" in hindsight when the heteroglossia of interpretations on the happenings is again regulated by orders of discourses as the discursive representation of the institutional order (Foucault 1971). As Eco notes in *The Name of the Rose* that "often inquisitors create heretics" (1983: 33), it is precisely the power relationships in the social sphere that create rumours and then exclude them as false memories of the public.

Therefore, after discussions on the preparedness of human society as a venue of heterogeneous knowledges and the interplay of various institutions that construct their authorities in people's beliefs in social realities, we proceed to address the very moment of rumour articulation and the power relationships that these narratives are engaged with from three aspects in a sequence. First of all, according to the description of an ideal rumour discussed in the introductory chapter, every articulation of rumour requires a social pressure that necessitates a collective response to it, namely a set of interpretations of the happenings that require a comprehension. The intricacies between the social pressures and how people cope with them discursively are the first concern. Secondly, as "improvised news" (Shibutani 1966), the process of rumour articulation inevitably accompanies assembling the available contents to make the rumour text meaningful to its audience. With the preceding discussions on rumours being part of cultural history, it is time to consider the details of textual production in the context of rumouring. Lastly, since rumours are always dismissed as the opposite of some "official" accounts of an event as "false memory", it is possible to investigate the power dynamics that finally make rumours "rumour", which is a continuation of the arguments on truth construction in the very end of the previous chapter. In short, it is time that rumours take to the stage.

2.1. The Pressured Atmosphere and the Need to Speak

What the Rolls-Royce rumour brings to our table are not merely the rumours that joke about Brezhnev. It profiles the Soviet Society of the time: Under Brezhnev's rule, the Soviet Union suffered from the "era of stagnation", which was termed by later historians (for example, see Gregory and Dietz 1991; Bittner 2017; Bacon 2002). Despite its rise in military power both in eastern Europe and the globe against the backdrop of an arms race with the United States, lives within the borders remained still, if not deteriorating, which was reflected in the social sphere and different aspects of public affairs. The political and economic situation by that time is well described by Edwin Bacon:

Stagnation was seen to have taken hold across all spheres of public life. In the political arena the low level of personnel changeover, known as Brezhnev's 'stability of cadres' policy, led not only to a log-jam of increasingly elderly men in positions of power across the country, but also promoted corruption and a lack of forward planning. In the economic sphere, [...] the Soviet economy slowed down, particularly when compared with western Europe, and absolute declines in output became more frequent. Shortages, bottle-necks, hoarding and the production of unwanted goods became increasingly commonplace. In the social sphere, [...] this translated into a perceived decline in living standards, and a cynicism about privilege and corruption. (Bacon 2002: 2)

More importantly, at least for our topics here, stagnation is also represented in discursive practices in the social sphere “in an ambient way”. Apart from directly forcing people to speak of certain things or prohibiting it, people of that era were living in a cynicism that was put precisely in *Two Thousand Words Manifesto*⁵⁴:

Worse still, we could scarcely trust one another. Personal and collective honor decayed. Honesty was a useless virtue, assessment by merit unheard of. Most people accordingly lost interest in public affairs, worrying only about themselves and about money, a further blot on the system being the impossibility today of relying even on the value of money. Personal relations were ruined, there was no more joy in work, and the nation, in short, entered a period that endangered its spiritual well-being and its character. (cited from Vaculík 2006: 178)

From the descriptions of Vaculík we can find that there was a general pressure permeating the social sphere, which affected people’s behaviours via a shared conscience about possible implications of trespassing “the hidden line”. Such “soft repression” (Sunny 1998: 433; also see Thompson 2014: 103) of the Brezhnev years constructs an atmosphere of social pressure, which finally led to the articulation of the Rolls-Royce rumours in forms that bypassed punishment from the government. Therefore, after discussing the historical dimension of social context in Chapter 1, now it is time to move to the instant dimension of it, namely the exact social atmosphere by the time of rumour generation and articulation. Its instant nature and the fragility of it due to the swift change of the power relationships require further investigations on its formation. It is a more subtle, evanescent situation of communication that is constructed by the preceding discourses and power relationships, which means that apart from calling these rumours discourses, we now turn to focus on the “discoursing” aspect of rumours. Following this perspective, the current topic of investigation bridges itself with the preceding discussions on cultural history, institutions and power relationships in terms of being a synchronic “slice” of the diachrony of human society.

2.1.1. The Instant Dimension of Social Context for Rumouring

We have already discussed the power relationships between institutions as the agency of heterogeneous knowledges in the social sphere, which construct an uneven landscape of social reality that modifies articulation. Since the institutional

⁵⁴ Interestingly yet ironically, the *Manifesto* was originally a monumental speech to the public of Czechoslovakia by Ludvík Vaculík on 27th June 1968. It heralded the uprisings in Prague Spring, which was later suppressed by armed invasions from the Soviet Union under Brezhnev’s order. Even though the speech did not happen within the Soviet borders (which would be, indeed, highly impossible due to tightened grips of government censorships), it manifests the cynical mentality of the citizens under Communist regimes.

order and the power relationships are discursively maintained (as we can see from the examples mentioned previously in Chapter 1), the ongoing discourses, or the current discoursing in the social sphere are also configured by preceding discourses of respective institutionalisation and legitimation. Therefore, if we translate that historical approach to a microscope on the generation and articulation of current rumours, the instant dimension of social context is a projection of previous discourses on the social synchrony and situates the upcoming texts in the inter-textual framework, which extends the temporal dimension of human society. As Foucault noted in his inaugural lecture at College de France,

At the moment of speaking, I would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices as if it had paused an instant, in suspense, to beckon to me. There would have been no beginnings: instead, speech would proceed from me, while I stood in its path—a slender gap—the point of its possible disappearance. (Foucault 1971: 7)

We can have a closer look to see how the atmosphere is created as extra-textual relationships of rumour texts (Lotman 1977; Lotman and Uspenskij 1978; also see Torop 2017; Semenenko 2022) in the social sphere. Since “A text has the capacity to preserve the memory of its previous contexts” (Lotman 1990: 18), the current rumour texts are always premediated by preceding texts “which circulate in a given society provide schemata for future experience and its representation” (Erl 2008: 392) and, if we come back to the general picture of rumour being in the cultural history, these rumour texts are a juncture between the past and the future which “remediate the past in order to premeditate the future” (Grusin 2004: 23). In this regard, the instant aspect of social context contains previous pressures and conflicts and begets new rumour texts, which also constitutes the future’s context of rumouring as pre-emptive memories (Mazzucchelli and Panico 2021) that models the upcoming articulation.

Communicative Situations and Suspension of Tensions

We can investigate the case of Rolls-Royce rumour by taking one step further from the starting point that people *knew* of the situation in the Soviet Union. These knowledges were exchanged in the social sphere, creating texts that preceded real rumours that revolved around the crashed Rolls-Royce, which addressed various aspects of people’s understanding of the social reality of the time. For example, even before the car crash, people knew that a Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow was given as a gift to Brezhnev and people talked about it. Having the knowledge that Brezhnev was a car lover, people exchanged ideas on Brezhnev’s regimes of corruption and his fleet of luxury cars (Schattenberg 2022: 198). More remotely speaking, there were texts about the mistrust in official informative

channels of the Soviet Union, such as jokes about “*Pravda*”⁵⁵ never speaks of truth”, which made its trajectory even further to a grander discursive arena of the Soviet regime, which bred plenty of rumours (for example, the human sausage factory rumour in Tartu, see Kalmre 2013) that set questions towards the truthfulness of official narratives.

In this vein, the instant dimension of social context is the discursive formation of a communicative situation (Parsons 1952; also see Randviir 2014), forged by existent texts in the social sphere. In other words, these preceding texts become semiotic objects that are both cultural and physical (Parsons 1952: 4).⁵⁶ We have already addressed the cultural aspect of these objects as they refer to cultural traditions and present themselves in the social sphere; what is of concern here is the physical aspect of these preceding texts, which articulators can perceive as experiences and make sense of (in terms of the objectivity of the social reality in a Durkheimian sense, of course). Communicative situations create the possibility of current discourses to appear as the topic of discussion and pave the way for further rumour texts to take the stage. In the Hairy Men case, Li (2011: 112) also observes that before the emergence of the second wave of Hairy Men rumours, which concerned not merely the monsters but also nuclear bombs, there was a petition in Stockholm for promoting nuclear disarmament and preventing atomic war. *The Stockholm Appeal* was held in the context of the Korean War and the fear of an atomic war demolishing human civilisation. Regardless of its ideological nature of being backed by the Soviet Union, *the Appeal* raised great concerns among the public due to the propaganda on the east of the Iron Curtains and provided topics on nuclear weapons as a sublime, “scientific topic”, which resonates with the discussions in 1.1.1.

Moreover, the uneven landscape of social reality discussed in Chapter 1 is also represented in the instant dimension of social contexts, creating and imposing pressures when articulations are made. From this perspective, the instant dimension of social contexts always preserves the pressures and conflicts of power

⁵⁵ In Russian, *pravda* (правда) means “right” or “truth”, which was also the title of the biggest government-backed newspaper in the Soviet Union. Here are some anecdotes about the newspaper, collected and recorded by M. Mel’nikhenko (2014: 614, Translation mine): “In Russian, words are pronounced differently than written: ‘Truth’ is written, ‘lie’ is pronounced.”

“‘Do you read newspapers?’ – ‘Yes.’ – ‘Which one?’ – ‘*Information* [Izvestia, another Soviet newspaper] and *Truth*’ – ‘Why’ – ‘Because in *Information* there is truth, and in *Truth* there is information.’”

“A person is called ‘truth-monger’ – ‘Why, does he love the truth?’ – ‘No. On the contrary, he works for *Truth*’.”

⁵⁶ According to Parsons (1952: 4), there are three classes of objects that constitute the object world in action terms: Social objects are the actors, including others, self, or a collective of individuals. Physical objects are those that are merely tools and conditions for the action. And cultural objects refer to symbolic components of cultural traditions.

relationships between various institutions and in discourses of the past, which are represented as tensions here and now in communicative situations. And these tensions are to be dealt with in upcoming texts for communication due to the dialogic nature of mankind (Bakhtin 1981; 1986; also see Sampson 1993). In this vein, current tensions for articulation are the projections of the power relationships in the social diachrony and are microscopic responses towards the world that we know, manifested in the texts that are exchanged. As Sampson notes, “the very categories by which we know, apprehend and experience the world in which we live are derivatives of a dialogic process occurring within that very world” (1993: 107). From a historical perspective, old tensions are resolved and new tensions occur as time progresses, whereas new tensions turn old and old ones resurface in other forms in the social synchrony. However, from the perspective of the social synchrony, the ongoing dialogic processes are subject to the power relationships in the social sphere. Apart from a “free flow” of discoursing, the communicative situations “can be bluntly manipulated” (Randviir 2014: 49) by social institutions that characterise the uneven social landscape, creating a suspension in the process. When dialogic processes are suspended, the tensions that these processes deal with are also suspended. In this regard, certain discourses have become unspeakable in the social sphere, which counters the human nature of multiple voices (Sampson 1993: 111). People need to find channels other than official ones to circumvent manipulation, by which rumours proliferate.⁵⁷ However, the most important thing here is that such tensions always exist, since there are always things that cannot be talked about publicly. And when these tensions are singled out from dialogic processes and left unresolved, they become the topic of discussion in the microfibers of the social sphere.

The most obvious breach of the dialogic process is censorship. In the Rolls-Royce case, apart from the atmosphere that is formed by preceding discourses and applicable texts in the social sphere, we can find that Soviet censorship also played an important role in shaping the rumour discourses. Because of censorship, some topics have become prohibited and cannot be talked about, which leads to some questions unanswered. More importantly, this failure in communication creates self-censorship (Loury 1994; Das and Kramer 2013) that navigates individuals to keep themselves away from possible punishments from the authorities. As Song (2022b) argues, self-censorship creates a Foucauldian “panopticon” that has become implicit rules for regulating articulations in the social sphere, which leads to the suspension of tensions that need to be resolved. The Rolls-Royce rumours had become the natural result of a collective response to the information control of the Soviet Union: the existence of that Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow created concerns towards how Brezhnev was to make use of it. With the

⁵⁷ The suspension is also reflected in the temporal experience of individuals, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

knowledge (and of course, the preceding texts) that Brezhnev was famous for his corruption, people bypassed official channels of information and were ready to bring their own interpretations to speak of the *believed* versions of the story in other channels than the official one.

Indeed, a suspension of tensions does not merely originate from censorship. Since the social reality is inevitably characterised by power relationships, it naturally creates taboos that cannot be talked about publicly and clearly due to internal rigidities of social institutions (Fairclough 2003). As Loury notes,

It is in this sense that I can say, “There is no (entirely) free speech.” Anyone speaking out on a controversial matter pays the particular price of having others know that he was willing to speak, under a given set of circumstances, in a certain way. When listeners know that not everyone would be willing to pay that price, and specifically that “true believers” are less likely than “apostates” to risk incurring the community’s wrath, they can make empirically valid inferences about reckless speakers. Norm-offending speech then conveys more than just literal meanings. Anticipating these inferences, and wanting not to be seen as deviant, prudent “true believers” may elect to say nothing that risks offending collective norms. By doing so, they leave the field clear for the “apostates,” thereby creating the meaning-in-effect that norm-offending speech identifies deviant belief. In a circumstance of this kind, a climate of self-censorship can become entrenched. (Loury 1994: 437–38)

There is always something in the social sphere that cannot be spoken of, and when such things become needed for the tensions to be solved, suspension appears. For example, due to the dominant ideologies of freedom of sexual orientation, LGBT rights are generally supported in our society. But these politically correct discourses also function as dominating ideologies that exclude truth claims which go against the reality that the dominating discourses depict. In this sense, those that are against the dominant discourses are absent and cannot be articulated publicly, in the same vein as discourses about Brezhnev’s western-manufactured Rolls-Royce. When tensions are brought to the table and such discourses are needed, communications of this kind are silenced (in terms of censorship) or preemptively silenced (in terms of self-censorship), which inevitably creates a suspension of tensions due to the absence of related discourses, leaving a trail of questions unanswered in the social sphere. Therefore, these discourses turn into other forms and resort to other channels for articulation in order to leave the public venue to dominant discourses. It is precisely in this logic that rumours are a kind of speech genre (Bakhtin 1986), influenced by social norms and cultural expectations. In consequence suspension of tension exists in all human societies, not limited to totalitarian regimes such as the Soviet Union.

In sum, preceding texts in the social sphere always create a communicative situation, in which tensions are inherited as the projection of power relationships

between social institutions. Power relationships also influence the current textual generation by disempowering some discourses as “politically incorrect” and suspend related tensions. The suspension of tensions explains the deeper mechanisms of the favourable “weather” for rumours to take stage, such as panic-driven discourses in the social sphere or crisis narratives (as we shall see in the following section). As Reumaux puts it briefly, “There is no society without rumors” (1996: 18, Translation mine).⁵⁸

Risk Construction and Imminent Danger in Rumouring

There is one more thing to investigate communicative situations as the instant social context of rumouring. Preceding texts both premediate the present situation and project themselves towards the future in the current discoursing among social groups. In this regard, communicative situations not only contain current tensions in the social sphere that people can speak about what is happening here and now and what will happen in the future; communicative situations also presume that people can talk about what is not happening and what people do not want to happen as a discursive construction of getting away from possible risks. As Grusin notes on the premediative function of preceding texts, “it is precisely the proliferation of future scenarios that enables premediation to generate and maintain a low level of anxiety in order to prevent the possibility of a traumatic future” (2004: 29). Discourses on possible risks also play a role in the generation process of rumour texts as the premediation of possible consequences of what people are experiencing in the social sphere. Therefore, the communicative situations of rumour articulation not only contain preceding texts as instant contexts from the past to the present, but also immanent projections from the past to the future, which also shapes the current social reality. As Ulrich Beck notes in *Risk Society*,

The center of risk consciousness lies not in the present, but in the future. In the risk society, the past loses the power to determine the present. Its place is taken by the future, thus, something non-existent, invented, fictive as the “cause” of current experience and action. We become active today in order to prevent, alleviate or take precautions against the problems and crises of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow—or not to do so. (Beck 1992: 34)

Following this logic, preceding texts that are about possible risks make a detour to keep away from taboos demarcated by social institutions by talking about a possible future, not the present *per se* but shaping the present. “To summarize, the current crisis of the future is not visible, it is a possibility on the way to reality” (Beck 1992: 55). For example, even though directly talking about people being

⁵⁸ “il n’y a pas non plus de sociétés sans rumeurs”.

arrested by secret agents like KGB was dangerous under the Soviet regime, it was still possible to talk about it as risks of being arrested. For example, there were jokes regarding possible arrest because of getting away from Brezhnev's inculcation to the public.⁵⁹ The instant social context as communicative situations is therefore "a system of 'expectations' relative to the various objects of the situation" (Parsons 1952: 5) that expects those risks not to happen and that influences the current articulation behaviour.

Moreover, risks need to be legitimised to be perceived as a public concern in the social sphere to function as part of communicative situations, which divides danger and risk in asymmetry. Whereas dangers are happening in here and now and threaten the daily routines of people's lives, risks are constructed as the feeling of dangerousness, kept at bay by the institutions that claim their plausibility to the public. As Luhmann contends, "Marking risks [then] allows danger to be forgotten" (2005: 24). Since "Risks can be legitimized by the fact that one neither saw nor wanted their consequences" (Beck 1992: 34), legitimation first of all requires a reality check (Potter 1996: 48) from other fellows, which reflexively confirms that there is no danger looming on the horizon. Reality check indicates the importance of constant dialogues between individuals in the social sphere. By speaking of possible risks in the social sphere, danger is mediated by exchanging ideas and remains on the discursive level since people can talk about it. The tragic outcomes that the risk depicts are in consequence not happening, neither now nor in the discursive future (as a projection from the present). As a Chinese story of a man from Ch'i country who constantly worried that heaven would collapse goes:

There was a man of Ch'i country who was so worried that heaven and earth might fall down, and his body would have nowhere to lodge, that he forgot to eat and sleep. There was another man who was worried that he should be so worried about it, and therefore went to enlighten him.

'Heaven is nothing but the accumulated air; there is no place where there is not air. You walk and stand all day inside heaven, stretching and bending, breathing in and breathing out; why should you worry about it falling down? If heaven really is accumulated air, shouldn't the sun and moon and stars fall down?'

'The sun and moon and stars are air which shines inside the accumulated air. Even if they did fall down, they couldn't hit or harm anyone.'

What about the earth giving way?

'The earth is nothing but accumulated soil, filling the void in all four directions; there is no place where there is not soil. You walk and stand all day on the earth,

⁵⁹ "A man turns on his TV – it was Brezhnev speaking. He changes to another channel – Brezhnev again. He turns to the third – Also Brezhnev. So he changes to the fourth – There sits a policeman saying: now you are running into trouble!" (Mel'nicenko 2014: 618, Translation mine)

stamping about with abrupt spurts and halts; why should you worry about it giving way?’

The man was satisfied and greatly cheered; and so was the man who enlightened him. (Lieh-tzu and Graham 1990: 27–28)

Despite that the story is used to mock those who have groundless fears about something that is highly impossible, the possibility of danger has not left that poor man from Ch’i; it is merely mediated by discourses to make the man believe that heavens would not collapse. Since constructing risks does not require a real danger to happen and keeps the feeling of dangerousness mediated, it needs to be legitimised, on the one hand justifying it as a social matter and on the other preventing it from becoming real threats. In other words, danger-managing discourses may function in lieu of the reality check from individuals and construct their authorities as institutions. Therefore, risks in the social sphere are legitimised as “latent side effects” (Beck 1992: 34), which both construct possible risks as a social matter and handle them discursively by legitimising the institutions that concern this matter. The man from Ch’i was simply convinced by the construction of trust in others. Such construction processes have already been discussed in 1.3.1 and 1.3.2. The situation is becoming more complicated, since in our modern times, the social reality, as discussed in the introductory chapter, has become thickened due to various and heterogeneous discourses coexisting in the social sphere, which indicates that the legitimations also come from different directions and, in most of the circumstances, contradict each other. As “modern society considers danger from the point of view of risk and takes it seriously only as risk” (Luhmann 2005: 27), people are overwhelmed by the multiplicity of possible risks presented by different institutions, media and social discourses. Dangers are almost nowhere to be found in personal experiences, whereas some risks, under the current power dynamics, ring the alarm by becoming “too real” (the transmediality of making these discourses “too real” will be elaborated in Chapter 3). People are left to navigate competing narratives and conflicting legitimations, which further blurs the boundary between real dangers and constructed risks. In this sense, “perceptions of risk and risks are [...] one and the same” (Beck 1992: 55).

However, no matter whether legitimation comes from an interpersonal reality check or from an authoritative construction, it is realised by an ongoing discursive maintenance in risk discourses. No matter what kind of legitimation⁶⁰ is available there (in most situations these methods are intersected), the prerequisite of the process is a constant discursing in the social sphere without being further manipulated, which is often not the case in daily situations. In rumouring, when the

⁶⁰ According to Theo Van Leeuwen (2007), there are four types of legitimations in discourses, namely authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation and mythopoesis.

tensions are suspended due to the severance of dialogic processes (as we discussed in the previous section), the constant legitimization of risk discourses is also impeded and the feeling of dangerousness comes back in an unmediated manner. Since risk discourses are about evading a possible future that nobody has foreseen, if the discoursing is affected either because of censorship or self-censorship, legitimised risks are transformed into baseless, hollowed representations of dangers that are projected to the public. Their legitimations are questioned and the silencing effect persists, further bringing the topic to the problem of legitimization of modern times (as it was argued from various perspectives respectively in Habermas 1973; Lyotard 1984; Beck 1992). For example, when the Bronze Soldier, a monument erected by the Soviet Union in commemorating the victory over Nazi Germany in Tallinn, was removed, there were rumours (Randviir 2014: 50; For more details of the event, see Kattago 2008; 2016) that the Russians are coming back to topple down the Estonian regime. Due to the pro-democratic and anti-Soviet ideology that swooped Estonia after it regained its independence, there are constant discussion on whether the Russians will come back again.⁶¹ The rumour would not have exploded if the statue had not been removed, since it functioned as a place where on the one hand balancing the tensions on the identities of both Russian-speaking communities and Estonian ones, and on the other hand legitimating the risk discourses by reminding the Estonians that Russians would come back (Ehala 2009). Therefore, when the Bronze Soldier was removed, the legitimising power that mediates the risk of possible Russian occupation was put under suspicion, which found its way of being articulated as rumours.

From the Bronze Soldier case, we can find that in the instant social context of rumouring, the mediating power of risk discourses can no longer maintain their plausibility. Risks are no longer justified and explained as public discourses to get away from it, but an imminent danger that is about to happen. If we call back the poor man from Ch'i and tell him that the man whom he trusts is mad or an idiot, the worry will come back again and drive him anxious. Definitely, this model is an oversimplification of real matters such as rumour articulation, but in essence, the communicative situations of rumours contain a failure of mediation of related discourses that people used to accommodate their trust, by which "the invisible hazards are becoming *visible*" (Beck 1992: 55). People can then "smell them in the air", which motivates people to manage the risks by themselves:

⁶¹ Similar cases can be found when *Pillar of Shame*, a monument commemorating the victims of the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 situated in Hong Kong University, was removed in 2021 under the order of the government of Hong Kong. It was widely rumoured that the CCP would send troops to bring Hong Kong under communist rule. For more details, see Riordan et al. (2021).

At this informal, pre-political level, people may well be articulating in their own semi-private social worlds, in their own vernacular, a strong form of critique, whose reflexivity comes not from the critique *per se* but from the occasionally evident sense of self-critique—an awareness of their own self-censorship with respect to the overweening power and hubris of dominant institutions and discourses. (Lash 1992: 6–7)

From this perspective, people attach the current situations with their own reflections and try to speak of them in efforts for reality check with other members of the social sphere, which converges the discussions in the previous section to form the instant dimension of social context in rumouring. Precisely in this vein, rumours are articulated “to help people make sense and manage risk” (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007a: 13) as a complementary mechanism besides institutional legitimations when the current communicative situations pressure people toward a comprehension of what is going on. It is also at this point that the amalgam of knowledges comes to the stage, with which people bring up their own explanations of the current situations that are then circulating in the social sphere. It should be pointed out that the suspension of tensions will not perpetuate, the discursive carnival (we will investigate this in 2.2.1) following the suspension will be finally restored and rumours will bear the name rumours at the end of the day. However, when the dangers are perceived to be real, humankind cannot resist the temptation of bringing what they *know* of current situations to join the carnival.

2.1.2. The Obligation to Speak and (Un)predictability of Rumouring

Previous discussions, including those about available knowledges in the social sphere in Chapter 1, seemingly describe rumours as a pre-determined phenomenon that fits under the causalities of the textual process of culture. This deterministic approach may ring true from the perspective of a transtemporal cultural history; however, from the viewpoint of an instant social context of rumouring, it is barely the full picture of the rumour phenomenon. In all the examples analysed above, we can find that apart from the instant social context as communicative situations forged by a present projection of the preceding texts and a present expectation of future consequences, rumours are also articulated as a response to an event, or a series of events, that are observed and discussed in the social sphere. Events that are happening in the social reality (which, of course, include fictional events but narrated as if they were true. The famous “drop bear” rumour⁶² is a good example here) and people’s response towards related narratives of these events are also an important aspect that is worthy of investigation.

⁶² “Drop bear” is a fictional creature in contemporary Australian folklore. It has features of koala but is a carnivore, perching on tree branches and attacking unsuspecting people, especially tourists. For more details about drop bear, please see Lang (2010) and Janssen (2012).

The foreign-faced Russian experts spotted in Chinese villages, the bamboos that were blooming, the banging sound of a car crash that woke the locals in the suburb of Moscow, to name but a few. In all rumour cases, there seems to be a starting point for rumours in the social sphere. But if we investigate the starting point, we will find that the real happenings in that specific space and time, as well as the real starting point of rumours, are illusory. Due to the polygenetic nature of rumours, we can neither trace rumours in the same way as we are following a detective novel, nor, as previously discussed, tracing the transmission of a disease. Rumours can never be simplified in a virological model, but narratives, no matter whether they are *real* or not, make people convinced that there is a need to speak of it in the social sphere. In this sense, we switch from the illusory start of rumours to the occasionality of narratives in the social sphere, which requires the public to explain the world around them, both physically experienced and discursively constructed, causing a “cataleptic effect” (Reumaux 1996: 174) in the social sphere.

Collective Response to “Fix” the Social Reality

Even though from an outsider’s position, the social reality with its inherent power dynamics is relatively stable, for individuals in the social sphere, the suspension of social tensions indicates that the social reality is no longer as normal as before at a local scale. These *localised* suspensions of tensions indicate that for the social groups that are affected, certain discourses are missing in the social sphere; at this point, disjuncture is detected in the individual perception of the social reality. We have already discussed the synchronic mechanism of maintenance of knowledge amalgams in the social sphere in 1.2 that constant communications compose the network that situates heterogeneous knowledges in a symbolic universe. Our current concern here is, that under the suspension of tensions, the constant processes of an exchange of practical knowledges and the incorporation of such knowledges in collective terms are impeded. Therefore, what is at stake is the shared social reality within these social groups: the confidence that “I know that there is an ongoing correspondence between *my* meanings and *their* meanings in this world, that we share a common sense about its reality” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 37, italics original) is questioned. And this shared social reality becomes ambiguated because of the suspension of tensions, which obliges the affected social groups to rebuild this shared reality. This is, of course, not an effort that starts anew totally. Since tensions are merely suspended locally, there are always available institutions in the social sphere that provide structures for articulation.

It is a famous urban legend in China⁶³: outside of the gates of universities, you can always find some cars, luxurious perhaps but not necessarily, with bottled drinks on the top. It is said that these are for soliciting female students for prostitution. In Chinese, “drink my water” has the same pronunciation as “sleep with me” and the bottled drinks indicate how much the driver will pay.⁶⁴ Such stories may be true as single cases, but they remain to be merely legends that people constantly speak of when they are referring to moral corruption in modern China, especially within university campus. There was even one more case of hard-core believers: On September 25th, 2018, 8 cars gathered under a dorm building with bottled drinks on the top and flashing headlights. The drivers of those cars were suspected of indecency and summoned to the police station. They received no punishments from the police but were blacklisted by the university.⁶⁵ Considering that China remains a conservative country towards talking about sex and prostitution overtly, such urban legends, first of all, are considered as an effort for social groups to bypass the silence caused by the disciplining of social taboos. When there are suspicions of moral decay in society and when such decay is not possible to be directly talked about due to the conservativeness in society, people speak of them in the form of hypotheses, conspiracy theories, urban legends and rumours, to fix the ambiguities and bring the shattered pieces of social reality back to coherence.

However, this effort cannot be done without bringing it back again to the collective, since shared social realities are confirmed and institutionalised via interactions *between* individuals. The tensions are not suspended for one single individual; multiple social groups are affected. When one of them starts to apply his or her imagination of the situation, which is an intersection of various knowledges, to the effort of reconstructing the world around them, those who are subject to the same suspension heed the call instantly since they are also looking for an answer. In this regard, groups replace individuals to be the actors of rumouring. The imagination does not belong to each single individual; it belongs to groups who are affected by the same suspension of tensions. As Kapferer points out,

Sources are, in the end, of but little importance. What must be explained is the genesis of a rumor process is the group's adherence and mobilization. Even if there is an initial speaker, it is the other people who found the rumor for, have heard it, they *pass it on*. [...] To look for the person who started the rumor is to reduce the rumor phenomenon to a purely individual problem that is external

⁶³ Even though an urban legend is categorically not a rumour, speaking of and believing such legends, as we shall see in the following, is the starting point of rumouring.

⁶⁴ In China, the price for a bottled drink usually ranges from 3 yuan to 10 yuan (approximately 0.4-1.5 euros). And in this urban legend, it is said that a 3-yuan drink means that the bid is 300 yuan, and a 5-yuan drink for 500 and so on.

⁶⁵ https://www.sohu.com/a/256140583_157450 (in Chinese)

to the group [...] Such scenarios make for good films, but whereas in a film the public plays the role of spectator, in the case of rumors, the public steals the limelight: the public is the main actor. (Kapferer 1990: 20)⁶⁶

In this sense, we can find out that the obligation to speak rises when suspended tensions create a discursive vacuum, in which the social reality is questioned. Therefore, people need to fix the disjuncture in social reality and bring abnormalities of everyday life back to normal. This “mundane reason”, which Melvin Pollner describes as “The assumption of an ‘out there’, ‘public’ or ‘objective’ world” (1987: ix–x), serves as the basic motivation for those being affected by silence in the social reality. “By speaking out, the social linkage is constructed; on the other side, silence is dangerous” (Neubauer 1998: 158, translation mine).⁶⁷ Once there are articulations, namely the efforts to bring disjunctures back to order, the articulated texts instantly resonate in these social groups⁶⁸ and “The whole village talks about it” (Reumaux 1994). Therefore, the vacuum teems with narratives that originate from other sources of knowledges, legitimised by institutions that do not function previously in such discourses. This is the fundamental logic of rumour discourses as the *Ersatz* of knowledge; we will revisit this aspect when we proceed to investigate the generation of rumour texts.

Moreover, talking about possible prostitution within the campus resembles the imagination of such social groups about moral decay; and within these groups, this collective imagination constructed and reinforced their solidarity. From this perspective we can investigate how social groups are formed in response to the pressuring context for rumouring. “[O]bscenity has the power to build community by allowing colleagues to recognise that they belong together [...]. The demands of effective interaction promotes profanity, that, in turn, amplifies social relations by providing a means to establish emotional intimacy” (Fine and Corte 2024: 307). In the Drink-my-water case, the lewd imagination of female students having sex with those who are putting bottled waters on the top of their cars united those who have such suspicions and formed temporary groups that can transcend the power relationships in general, macroscopic society that caused the suspension (Žižek 1998; 2004). Within these social groups, “obscurity provides discipline without punishment, a forceful nudge” (Fine and Corte 2024: 310) and when the resonance travels beyond boundaries of these social groups, it is put under the power relationships of social institutions and dismissed as rumours, as we shall see in 2.3.

⁶⁶ It should be argued that instead of talking about the public in general, it is multiple social groups that are engaged in rumouring. As we can see from the “Drink-my-water” case, it only resonated in a couple of certain groups and had its limits of transmission.

⁶⁷ “Daß überhaupt gesprochen wird, stellt gesellschaftliche Bande her; Schweigen dagegen ist bedrohlich”.

⁶⁸ This resonance, indeed, is also very important in terms of rumour transmission. We shall return to this in Chapter 3.

Apart from lewdity, we can still find general aspects of this group construction in all rumour cases. Since the obligation to speak originates from the motivation to fix disjunctures of the social reality, when such articulations are made, the resonance in social groups reinforces the linkage by supporting each other's imaginations. As Dan E. Miller comments on the "Snake in the Green" rumour,⁶⁹

The shared focus, standpoint, and comment toward the old woman and Kroger's was brief and ritualized; they had quickly changed topics. However, from this joint act they had established an orientation to and a categorical focus to the conversation. They discussed objects of concern, and they made comments about the objects. Throughout their conversation they supported each other. (Miller 1992: 387)

From this perspective, we can find out that communication within these social groups foregrounds the phatic function of language (Jakobson 1981 [1960]) that constructs contacts between individuals who are affected by the suspension. This function involves features of the communication of conspiracy theories. Despite the distinction that rumours and conspiracy theories are different concepts that reach different levels of society, "The expressions are rather used in the function of confirming social ties, which can be expressed, e.g., establishing an intimate atmosphere conducive of social connection" (Madisson and Ventsel 2021: 40). The phatic function in communication reveals that when people are trying to fix ambiguities in the social reality, the exchange of information (even though there is indeed an exchange, which contributes to the formation of articulated rumour texts) is secondary, but the interpersonal link that can bypass the silence and confirm what people imagine of the situation is of primary importance, which further brings people together as a collective intellect. As Kapferer notes, "Rumors provide a group with the opportunity to stand up and be counted, and to express itself" (1990: 104).

It should be pointed out that, even though the suspension of tensions creates social groups that are subject to such suspension, it is not a re-grouping of social members, but rather a temporary alignment that is also influenced by existing demarcations between various groups in the social sphere. Moreover, this temporary alignment, as we will also see in Chapter 3, usually travels beyond the boundaries of different social groups and distinguishes rumours from gossip, which are maintained at a local level. Precisely in this sense, as we discussed in Introduction, rumours are translocal and the phenomenon is mesoscopic in the social sphere.

⁶⁹ The rumour appeared repeatedly in the 60s and 70s in the United States (also elsewhere in different time frames) that a person, usually a "poor, elderly woman" (Miller 1992: 381), was bitten by a poisonous snake hidden in the produce section of a local supermarket.

Rumouring at the Present: Predictability and Unpredictability of Rumours

The various social groups engaged in rumouring also imply that multiple narratives coexist when people are sharing their interpretations and imaginations in their respective groups, contributing to the polygenesis of rumour. These narratives, as firstly personal comprehensions of what is going on, seem to be unpredictable as different versions of efforts out of the mundane reason to explain the social reality. As Pollner points out,

For practitioners of mundane reason, reality disjunctures are potentially explainable by formulating one or another (and perhaps both) of the competing versions of reality as the product of an exceptional method of observation, experience or reportage. (Pollner 1987: 69)

As we can see from the Rolls-Royce rumour, when the bang was heard in the neighbourhoods, different interpretations appeared to manage the bizarre happening as understandable and explainable. These interpretations are often contradictory to each other (for example, the driver could not be Brezhnev and his driver at the same time), but they all express an understanding of what happened “out there”, an “externalisation device” that becomes part of collective reasoning and is “independent of the agent doing the production” (Potter 1996: 151). In this regard, the starting point of collective reasoning in rumouring is constituted by unpredictable narratives claiming to be true. Kapferer notes the existence of multiple, unpredictable rumour texts as truth claims:

Faced with an ambiguous event, the members of a group put their intellectual resources together to arrive at a satisfying definition of reality. After the event, many interpretations arise: at the outset they coexist and feed off each other. Certain interpretations are abandoned while others continue to spread. The common trunk of all the different versions is what one usually calls the rumor’s content, i.e., that which is passed on to posterity, transmitted by articles or books. In the field, however, one finds a swarm of interpretations, each trying to account as well as possible for “reality”, i.e., to construct its own truth. (Kapferer 1990: 139)

According to Kapferer, the dynamics in the formation process of rumours represent both predictability and unpredictability of rumours. On the one hand, multiple narratives coexist as unpredictable, personal reflections of what is going on. And on the other hand, during this process, the invariant contents of rumours take shape and precisely in that sense, we can talk about a rumour complex with a topic (Fine and Ellis 2010: 29). Therefore, during the stage of what Reumaux terms as “incubation” (Reumaux 1996: 15), these narratives, which are built out of perceived social reality and are spoken out of individual memories, are constantly levelled and sharpened “to grow shorter, more concise, more easily grasped and

told” (Allport and Postman 1947: 75). We shall have a closer look at this process in the following pages on the generation of rumour texts, but our concern here is that this process contains dynamics between different narratives and finally conceives a rumour complex that can be traced and analysed. To illustrate this, we can take a look into the case of “#TrumpIsDead” in the context of Elon Musk’s acquisition of Twitter.⁷⁰

On October 27th, 2022, Elon Musk concluded his acquisition of Twitter, Inc. and later renamed it X. Renowned for his ambitious goals, such as colonising Mars and accelerating the transition to renewable energy, Musk is one of the most influential figures in modern technology and innovation, as well as in public affairs. Moreover, he is often characterised as an unconventional figure who makes impulsive yet influential decisions and frequently voices controversial opinions, in contrast to other billionaires who tend to remain private to safeguard their ventures. His public figure makes him a polarising Internet celebrity in the social sphere. The drama began earlier that year, when he published a post on Twitter, criticising that Twitter’s adherence to free speech should be questioned and its algorithms should go open-source (Paris, Hull, and Alder 2022). And, when the acquisition came out as a blockbuster, netizens flocked to the former Twitter to bring their own narratives to the platform to probe its fact-checking mechanisms. Among all these posts and narratives on the platform, those under the hashtag “#TrumpIsDead” stood out as the most widespread rumour, instigated by the acquisition. The case, first of all, illustrates that there was indeed a concern for freedom of speech both before and after the acquisition, which was raised as a burning issue when Musk initiated the discussion. The tensions were suspended due to the situation where information was monopolised by cyberpunk-styled control of freedom from tech-titans like Tesla. Consequently, it seems to be a natural result when the boomerang hit Musk’s X that the platform did not respond to the concern when the acquisition happened. In short, in the context of a general concern on freedom of speech, the acquisition backfired by adding more fuel to the fire that was started by Musk himself as the suspended tensions were not resolved.

The emergence of “#TrumpIsDead” among all other narratives was one step further if we look backwards from now. Following the 2021 United States Capitol Attack (for more details, please see chapters in Jeppesen et al. 2022), Trump was banned from multiple mainstream social platforms, including Twitter, which gave him a permanent one and established Truth Social (for more details on Trump’s lawsuits against media platforms and about Truth Social, please see Santucci 2021; Osborne, Santucci, and Steakin 2021; Kelly 2020) as an alternative platform from YouTube and Twitter. With all these preceding events, Trump depicted himself as

⁷⁰ <https://news.sky.com/story/trumpisdead-trends-on-twitter-as-users-test-elon-musks-approach-to-fake-news-12736249>

a victim of the overarching “political correctness” and resonated soundly among the grassroots, which contributed to his election in 2016 and re-election in 2024. Since Musk once showed his sympathy for Trump’s ban⁷¹ and expressed dissatisfaction with Twitter’s truth policies, posts about Trump’s death became a satirical test of Musk’s approach to moderation on a social platform’s contents. Trump being the centre of rumours was henceforth both a coincidence and a plan (in the widest definition of both terms).

Therefore, rumouring about Trump’s death has multiple viewpoints in different moments. From the point where all these dramas had not yet happened, the whole event seems to be unpredictable and now when we look back, the event is quite predictable as discussed above. But at the time of rumouring, namely *when* Musk officially became the owner of Twitter and *when* people tried to probe the fact-check mechanisms of the platform, predictability and unpredictability intersected as a juncture between the past and the future. In this sense, the rumour regarding Trump’s death in the present was unpredictable, but not random. Lotman notes that “the view from the past into the future on the one hand and from the future into the past on the other completely changes the object under observation” (2009: 125). He adds:

An unpredictable situation is not an event that is excluded from known cause-and-effect relationships; predictability is defined by the level of our observations. That which appears in a given situation to be fundamentally impossible is clearly excluded from the sphere of predictability. We view as predictable that bundle of probable events each possessing the same probability of being realized in the future. The moment of explosion breaks the chain of cause and effect, causing an entire area to rise up and a collection of identically probable events to come into view. Following from the logic of the preceding developments, it is essentially impossible to predict which of those events will actually occur. (Lotman 2013: 64)

In this regard, rumouring at the present is an intersection of predictability and unpredictability. It is the time when explosion happens; different narratives about the same happening have the same probability and are put onto the table, waiting to become rumours. And when we look back to the moment of explosion, we find the causality of the rumour complex, a traceable trail of preference and choice of various social groups that are engaged in rumouring. But between the past and future, rumouring represents the creativity of rumouring social groups and precisely at the present, unpredictability is gradually translated into predictability: when people start to talk about what they experience, which, in their perception, derails normal routines of their lives, they start to bring their imagination of the

⁷¹ Trump’s ban was later lifted, for more details please see <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-63692369>

situation to the current discoursing. And due to the constant communication of the subject matter, rumour texts take shape and finally sweep the social sphere. The collective reasoning that is inherited in rumours is the mastermind and the present, which is always teemed with various narratives, is the timeframe of rumouring when all the creation processes happen.

As Torop points out, “Explosion is but one part of the communicative processes in culture and associated not merely with social disasters, but also with all kinds of innovation” (2009: xxxvi). What a pressured atmosphere heralds, as discussed in the above pages, is a collective effort from the social groups that are affected by the suspension of tensions to fix the social reality in question. Since the grand narratives are no longer believed as discourses that describe the social reality due to the severance of dialogic processes, the ambiguated social reality obliges social groups to come up with their own interpretations of what is going on here and now. Out of this mundane reason, these affected social groups gather and become the initial rumour public to exchange what they know of the current situation, which, if we come back to the discussions on rumours and cultural history in 1.2.4, serves as the exact moment of cultural history where explosive processes unfold in the reverberances of the futures ahead as the intersection of predictability and unpredictability.

2.2. The Articulation of Improvised Memories

Latour writes that “The world is articulated. Knowledge as well. The two respond to each other sometimes—but not always” (2018: 87). In all rumour cases, as we can see both in the previous chapter and in the above sections, when the world that is believed to be is articulated based on people’s knowledges in the social sphere, texts that enter public discourses are being exchanged among social groups and become the topic of discussion. In this sense, what is communicated is always a memory belonging to certain social entities, be it individual or collective. As we have already discussed in 2.1.2, groups take the place of individuals in rumouring, and communicative memory, as “an interactive practice located within the tension between individuals’ and groups’ recall of the past” (Welzer 2008: 285), replaces individual memories as our object of investigation here. When people are pressured by the social context and start to speak, what is communicated becomes the buzzword of the time and lingers in the social sphere as “a matter of communication and social interaction” (J. Assmann 2008: 109). And in that sense, we take one step closer to the moment when an explosion happens.

From this point we can combine the amalgam of knowledges discussed in Chapter 1 and the instant dimensions of the social context to discuss what is precisely happening during rumouring. What Latour points out about the discrepancies between the world and knowledges of the world is always represented in

articulations, namely the current representation of the social reality that social groups share. The discrepancies cause problems; but it is precisely from these discrepancies that rumours become possible as a way of freeing articulations from institutional surveillance. Therefore, in communicative memories of rumouring, the articulation of rumour texts is an ongoing process that pertains to a relatively shorter period of time (J. Assmann 2008: 111, we shall come back to this in the following pages), in which contents of rumour texts are exchanged and transformed quickly, leading to the final rumour complex as we look backwards. Based on this point, what the amalgam of knowledges provides in communicative memories is a heteroglossia in the present tense: diverse narratives of the shared social reality collide and interweave, which reveals the fluid, fragmented and contested nature of communicative memory. And our first task here is to understand how heteroglossia is foregrounded in the context of rumouring.

2.2.1. The Improvisation of Rumours in the Heteroglossia of Discursive Carnivals

Heteroglossia persists in our social sphere. It is “The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance” (Emerson and Holquist 1981: 428), which indicates that heteroglossia is a natural result of the amalgam. As we have seen in Chapter 1, when the amalgam of knowledges is progressing in time, the constant communication that maintains the amalgam inevitably includes patterns of various knowledge systems in languages, manifesting the hierarchy of knowledges and in return entrenching it. The languages used in daily communications mediate the heterogeneous knowledges in articulations by situating it between the grand narratives, which try to homogenise the whole social sphere and the heteroglossia. As Bakhtin notes, “Every utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)” (1981: 272). Precisely in this vein, heteroglossia is kept organised in its dynamics of the power relationships between various social institutions. The hierarchy of knowledges regulates and stabilises heteroglossia in the social sphere and is represented as an institutional order, in which heterogeneous knowledges are legitimised at different levels and amalgamated as practical knowledges and in which various social groups, immersed within the power dynamics of these knowledges, use them selectively when they encounter what needs to be interpreted. Therefore, in people’s daily practices, such heteroglossia is reflected in the amalgam of knowledges as a selection process with an evaluation of the liability of various knowledge systems; as Eco writes,

[...] in order to decide what is true or false in the actual world, I must make some difficult decisions about my trust in the community. Furthermore, I must decide which portions of the Total Encyclopedia are to be trusted, while rejecting others as unreliable. (Eco 1994: 92–93)

However, when tensions inherited in the power relationships are suspended, the stabilising power that situates these knowledges in their respective places in the institutional order becomes absent,⁷² which indicates that all narratives, articulated out of the need for regaining control of the social reality, are deemed equal, regardless of the institutions behind these narratives. As dialogic processes are impeded, the institutional order that is manifested in languages vanishes along with the legitimization of “proper knowledge” in social discourses, by which *Ersatz* of knowledge is considered equally convincing as knowledges proper. This is to say that when the tensions are suspended for certain social groups, grand narratives are no longer grand and marginalised narratives are no longer marginalised. They become simply narratives that are to be believed and exchanged in heteroglossia. In other words, the suspension of tensions foregrounds heteroglossia that was once regulated with a discursive order; it is a temporary reshuffle of the power relationships in the social sphere. As Eco quotes G. K. Chesterton in *Foucault's Pendulum*: ‘When men stop believing in God, it isn't that they then believe in nothing: they believe in everything’ (2007: 647).

It should be pointed out that this moment only lasts for a very short period of time since the narratives are instantly contextualised in a grander network of texts in the social sphere, and this stage is almost undetectable due to the ephemerality of rumouring⁷³; however, it is necessary since it marks the beginning of a discursive carnival following the suspension of tensions and affected social groups start to speak of what they know of the situation out of the mundane reason. Moreover, the foregrounded heteroglossia registers itself in the communicative memory of these social groups, leaving the topic of rumouring open for discussion. As Bakhtin argues,

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. [...]The

⁷² It is notable here that the absence of the institutional order is still local. Rumouring at this stage has not yet reached social sphere in a macroscope and the absence is retained merely to the social groups affected by the suspension.

⁷³ For example, in the Rolls-Royce rumour, discussions about the identity of the driver who crashed that car were instantly navigated towards Brezhnev due to the social context of the time. But it did not mean that other interpretations did not exist.

suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. [...]all were considered equal during carnival. (Bakhtin 1984: 10)

Rumouring is always a discursive carnival in the social sphere. During the carnival, all kinds of narratives are possible and believable and in the communicative memories of social groups, the institutional order is forgotten temporarily and the centripetal forces loosen the grips. All the contents that later enter the rumour complex appear in this creativity. If we recall the Hairy Men rumour in Chapter 1, rumours of all kinds, no matter whether they were about the big fireballs, destructive mushrooms, the iron-clawed monsters, or human testicles for building atomic bombs, were all generated in an unpredictable heteroglossia for the current topic of concern and emerged as a collective imagination where social groups reconstruct the social reality momentarily. And precisely in this heteroglossia of imaginations, individuals bring their own knowledges and interpretations to the collective reasoning, leading to an infectious state of rumour texts haunting these social groups. The discursive carnival takes place with its contents resonating in communicative memory, leading to a collective obsession revolving around topics of concern, since in this heteroglossia, everybody is eager to speak out, but they have little time to contemplate others' articulations. As Harald Welzer points out, "One deduces what the other person intends and will do even before his or her action is completed" (2008: 295). We can find such heteroglossia in both the Drink-my-water legend and the "#TrumpIsDead" rumour. When people were speaking of their own versions of truth, they simply spoke their imaginations out without further reasoning on their own and the contents of rumouring gradually went unleashed.

Following this logic, communicative memories in a discursive carnival are a process of improvisation. Tamotsu Shibutani (1966) coins the term "improvised news" to illustrate the informative nature of rumours, as well as the improvisation aspect of rumouring. As Fine and Ellis put it,

At these moments, people often embrace a proliferation of rumor to help explain the turmoil. Rumor involves a collective effort after meaning, a desire to tame uncertainty. Yet, as collective action, it involves improvisation by those who take the bits of information that are available and couple these with expectations of what might happen in such circumstances. As such, rumor is improvised news, providing stability, comforting even when the conclusions are dark or mistaken. (Fine and Ellis 2010: 48)

The contents of rumouring, as we can see from previous discussions, are drawn from the amalgam of knowledges that feeds the collective imagination of current situations, while remaining informative to be exchanged in discursive carnivals. As Kapferer notes, "Starting with the slightest little trifle, one improvises and a rumor takes shape" (1990: 49), which again illustrates that rumouring is an inter-

section of predictability and unpredictability, a melting pot that generates unpredictable contents of rumour with predictable informative patterns. Moreover, a discursive carnival of rumouring extends itself in the communicative memories of social groups, in which contents of rumour resonate and entrench the collective imaginations, surpassing the observable facts that are witnessed here and now, since the present social reality is ambiguated. Therefore, “Being informative, rumor rejects the objective (observable) facts to propose what seems most plausible to it, depending, in this case, on the representations of a disaster” (Reumaux 1996: 85, Translation Mine).⁷⁴ In this vein, the cataleptic effect of rumouring originates precisely from discursive carnivals as a presence of the past in the communicative memory of social groups (Lindahl 1996). It poses a stop in the chronological order of events, procrastinating time and bringing all knowledges, present or ancient, to the carnival for generating rumour contents (we will come back to it in 3.3.). Therefore, in discursive carnivals, “We will find, in fact, that rumor does not presuppose its contents but poses them. Its information is new, and does not state or play with the presuppositions” (Reumaux 1996: 86, Translation Mine).⁷⁵ And also in recourse to the shared knowledge patterns of the past, people “make sense of the disturbing changes to their established life, improvising news and sharing their standards of morality with those to whom they feel close” (Fine and Ellis 2010: 105–6), which calls back the phatic functions of communication to make contacts and reconstruct social realities discussed above. In a discursive carnival, “rumors are also an invitation. Speaking means speaking with others. [...] Now rumors are a form of emotional communication: they incite moral commentary, personal opinions and emotional reactions” (Kapferer 1990: 49).

However, discursive carnivals are not revolutions. Since the suspension is caused by the power relationships between social institutions, the discursive carnival of rumouring is still a restricted, authorised transgression (Eco 1984: 6) at a local scale, whereas the social sphere in general is regulated by existing institutional orders. From a macroscopic view, the local heteroglossia among certain social groups is still a discursive phenomenon that happens recurrently as safety valves (see Coser 1956) to mitigate tensions. And heteroglossia, in this sense, provides an “out-there-ness” (Potter 1996: 151) to accommodate the tensions that are suspended. In some other places in the social reality, the unresolved tensions are resolved and unanswered questions answered. However, we have already seen in 2.1 that the communicative situations of rumouring are a result of preceding texts that both recapture the past and project to the future. The current articu-

⁷⁴ “Informative, la rumeur refuse les faits objectifs (observables) pour proposer ce qui lui paraît le plus plausible, en fonction, dans ce cas de figure, de ses représentations d’une catastrophe”.

⁷⁵ “On s’aperçoit, en effet, que la rumeur pose des contenus et ne les présuppose pas. Son information étant nouvelle, elle n’énonce pas ou ne joue pas sur des présupposés”.

lations in heteroglossia, therefore, are still subject to “the historically *aktuell* forces at work in the verbal-ideological evolution of specific social groups” (Bakhtin 1981: 270). As a result, the places “out there” in the social reality is a compromise between the overarching institutional orders and the local heteroglossia, which will be further elaborated in the next section.

Rumouring (not rumours themselves) is exempt from institutional regulations (Fine 2007: 6) but still under supervision. It is precisely in this logic that rumours are closely related to humours, as we can see in the above examples of Soviet jokes. As even “the most repressive dictatorships have always censured parodies and satires but not clowneries” (Eco 1984: 3), rumours and humours operate in a permitted way; they provide a moment of suspension and transgression, yet they reinforce the structures that make such moments permissible. Humour allows for a reflective distance, often deploying irony and wit to subvert norms, whereas rumour embeds itself within the immediacy of lived social experiences, forming a participatory narrative process. In brief, “Humor is a *cold* carnival” (Eco 1984: 8 *italics original*), whereas rumour is a carnival in the present tense.

2.2.2. Rumouring as Witchcraft

The understanding of rumouring being a discursive carnival introduces the perspective of witchcraft into our discussions by investigating the dynamics between local aberrances and overarching social institutions. As Timothy Tangherlini (2017) suggests in the example of interrelations between rumours about vaccination during Covid times and Danish folklore texts, rumouring and witchcraft have the same structure in their meso-level implications to social groups as knowledge domains and power relationships operate on different social levels. For instance, just as people once believed that witches used brooms for flying and wands for casting spells, some modern Americans suspect that Bill Gates, one of the main advocates of vaccination against Covid, uses vaccines to implant microchips, which are then activated through 5G networks.⁷⁶ In that sense, witch hunts never leave us in our social lives as we are entering a modern era, but transform into other shapes while maintaining the power dynamics between the central authorities and marginalised discourses. With such dynamics, discursive carnivals take place as compensation of power for those who are inferior in the relationship, which, in rumouring, are those who are affected by the suspension of tensions. By being a discursive carnival, rumouring creates information that is “necessarily unofficial” (Kapferer 1990: 263) to parallel official statements that represent power relationships in the social sphere for asserting local versions of truth, which constructs an illusion of power and brings the social reality back to normal. There-

⁷⁶ Conspiracy theories and rumours are never mutually exclusive; conspiracy theories are always the hot bed for rumours to generate from and go viral.

fore, from the discussions above, apart from rumouring functioning as “social templates [...] under the pressure of mass destitution” (P. A. Kuhn 1990: 46) and being *supervised by* institutional orders, such discursive carnivals are at the same time *caused by* the same power dynamics. In other words, the causality of discursive carnivals and overarching social institutions falls secondary to a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship between the two.

In illustrating the idea, we can take a look into the case of “Soul-stealers” in China, the biggest witch hunt in Chinese history and well recorded in Philip Kuhn’s (1990) work. It started with the fear of sorcerers stealing people’s souls, which originated in *Te Ch’ing*, a city in prosperous Kiangnan.⁷⁷ It was said that sorcerers could steal others’ souls with rituals by calling their names or using their clothes for their own sake. When reports of soul-stealing reached local governments, the local officials, trying to reassure the public, found suspicious foreigners and peddlers as scapegoats. In society there were also lynchings against the suspected sorcerers. But such “triumph” over witchcraft did not satisfy *Hungli*, the emperor at the time. He had been continuously suspecting that the Han people were plotting against the Manchu’s rule and this suspicion was translated as consistent pushes, sending investigators to understand the situation and to report it back to the monarch. The continuous pressure from *Hungli* finally caused a public scare sweeping the whole society, not only limited in Kiangnan, and a purge in the bureaucratic system of the Qing regime. As Kuhn points out, during the whole sorcery hysteria, “There can be no doubt that the chief prosecutor, from first to last, was the monarch himself” (P. A. Kuhn 1990: 173).

Kuhn further conceptualises that there are two dimensions of witchcraft and witch hunt in the Soul Stealer case (1990: 93): A supernatural dimension focusing on the supernatural power in the social reality and a political dimension of public security. The former remains special to witchcraft, yet the latter dimension links rumouring and witchcraft together. If we align the above discussions to what we talked about the construction of authority and the historicity of truth in 1.3, we can find that the suspension of tensions, which were caused by the interplay of social institutions, also creates a “proper” version of social reality with narratives that are legitimised by knowledges that are in the higher hierarchy and projects such narratives to every member of the social sphere. And these assertions, or grand narratives in Lyotard’s terms (we talked about this in Introduction), also beget local improvisations due to the complexity of the world *per se*, which challenges the homogenising power of grand narratives and instantly triggers political

⁷⁷ Or Jiangnan. The term literally it refers to the south bank of lower reaches of the Yangtze River. Starting from Song dynasty, the region is famed of its prosperity in terms of economy and culture until now, which is also a worry for most of the dynasties in history that ruled from the capital of the North, namely Beijing, due to the geographical distance and cultural differences. For Qing dynasty, the problem was more serious because it was established by Manchu people, not the Han ethnicity that were the majority of Jiangnan regions.

interrogation (for which we will come back in 2.3). Similar structures can be found in the case of “Night Battles”, where local peasants who were born with a caul were believed to have the power of transforming into angels to fight against devils in their dreams for protecting their harvest and were prosecuted by the Catholic church because of heresy (Ginzburg 1983), and in the case of “Devils of Loudun”, where a priest was accused of witchcraft and intercourse with nuns from local monasteries because of political conflicts. From this perspective, the supernatural dimension is overshadowed by the political dimension of the case, which demonstrates that power relationships are always a significant aspect in both witchcraft and rumouring. If we come back to rumours in our times as exemplified by Brezhnev’s Rolls-Royce and “#TrumpIsDead” rumours, we find the same political repercussions in the tensions between different versions of truth when some local versions are predated by grand narratives. In these cases, we can find that the supernatural dimensions only change their faces and the power relationships inherited in the political dimensions remain the same. As Huxley noted on the inquisitors in *Devils of Loudun*,

In order to justify their behavior, they turn their theories into dogmas, their bylaws into First Principles, their political bosses into Gods and all those who disagree with them into incarnate devils. This idolatrous transformation of the relative into the Absolute and the all too human into the Divine, makes it possible for them to indulge their ugliest passions with a clear conscience and in the certainty that they are working for the Highest Good. (Huxley 1971 [1952]: 134)

Therefore, there is always a contrapuntal relationship between the political participation of social groups and the institutional order in the macroscopic social sphere, which has different faces in different epochs of human history. And precisely in this sense rumouring has the same political status as witchcraft; it does not necessarily have to be true or false (in terms of ontological truth), but it has to be unofficial, a transgression of the grand narratives’ exclusivity in asserting the truth (in terms of social truth) as both the result and the trigger of political repression; the supernatural dimension of witchcraft is merely a cover of its political essence, which echoes the discussions in 1.3.2 on the construction of authority via political rituals. The carnivalesque aspects of rumours, originating from the vernacular, “steal” the authority from the grand narratives and *must* be taken as the opposite side of the institutional order and such discourses *must* be interrogated. As Kuhn concludes in commenting the Soul Stealer case, “Sorcery played its part in the political system as the kind of event I shall call ‘political crime.’ Political crime included sedition in all its various guises, whether religious heterodoxy, literary innuendo, or outright revolt” (1990: 187). And from the meso-level perspective, discursive carnivals become the illusion of power in the power dynamics. Kuhn further notes,

Are we glimpsing here the moral nemesis of a society that was becoming impacted by overpopulation, by a worsening ratio of resources per capita, and by declining social mobility? In such an “impacted society” men would come to doubt that they could better their circumstances either by work or by study. Such conditions were made less tolerable by a corrupted and unresponsive judicial system, through which no commoner had reason to hope for redress. In such a world, sorcery was both a fantasy of power and a potential addition to every man’s power. (P. A. Kuhn 1990: 229)

If we come back to the Rolls-Royce rumour mentioned above, we can find that the vacuum, which was created by the censorship regarding public discussions on the corruption of Soviet officials, made all speculations regarding the event equally plausible in heteroglossia, but it is precisely this censorship that navigated people to speak of those things unspeakable and to reassert the social reality around them. By speaking of Brezhnev driving the car himself, people participated in the discursive carnival with their own contributions in fixing the ambiguous social reality, which compensates for being silenced in the social sphere due to public prohibitions. In this vein, the saying “wherever there is repression, there is rebellion” has a deeper meaning: only when there is repression can rebellion take shape. The discursive carnival is not simply a passive retaliation against the repression, and the repression is not merely the authority’s reaction towards these local aberrances; instead, the two coexist and feed each other, maintaining the complexity of the social world yet keeping a common ground under regulations, which makes meaning-making possible in the social sphere. Therefore, rumouring is a necessary mechanism for sustaining a society’s resilience by transversing between different levels of hierarchies of knowledges.

Moreover, the reciprocal and contrapuntal relationship also demonstrates that in discursive carnivals, the two aspects cannot stand alone. Speaking from the bottom and the marginalised still entails contents from a higher hierarchy since it is a fantasy of power (recall the scientific reasoning in the Blooming Bamboo case in Chapter 1) and taking the position of prosecutor also indicates being engaged in the power dynamics. In *Holy Bible* Jesus said to his disciples that “for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword” (Matthew 26: 52); people who are on the quest for hunting witches will always find themselves the prey of the same campaign since they are already part of the discursive carnival. In the case of Devils of Loudun, people who participated in prosecuting the priest were also investigated for witchcraft since it had entered the communicative memory of the time and people were speaking of witchcraft, no matter whether they were the prosecutor or the prosecuted. Coming back to rumouring, we can find similar structures in nearly all rumour cases. Rumours never stop by the social groups that start the carnival; in most of the rumour cases, we can find that the social groups engaged in rumouring are constantly expanding. Under the suspension of tensions, the discursive carnival that is teemed with various versions of social

reality from affected social groups also presumes participants outside of the affected groups to be engaged in such discourses, since the affected groups are on one side of the discursive carnival and the other side from higher hierarchies (as prosecutor, rumour debunker, experts, *etc.*) is necessary in contrapuntal relationships. But more importantly, the newcomers to the discursive carnival, now becoming a part of the carnival themselves, again presume new interrogators from outside of the carnival to be engaged, which indicates a swift transition between the rumouring and the rumoured in scapegoating affected social groups. In this vein, the discursive carnival becomes a swirl involving more people into it, as we can see from many mass fear and hysteria cases in human history, including the Soul Stealer case we discussed above. The infectious transmission in the social sphere will be revisited in the next chapter, but from the perspective of understanding rumouring as witchcraft, as Kuhn (1990: 232) writes at the very end of the book, for all those who participate in the discursive carnival, no one can stay in the between and remain aloof.

2.2.3. Assembling the Contents of Rumour

The contrapuntal relationship between the overarching knowledge structures, local communicative memories and the political essence of all rumour discourses finally lead us to investigate the generation of actual rumour texts. In fact, since all the contents of rumour texts are already available in the social sphere, the word “assembling” seems to be a better fit for rumour generation. Since “A rumor is an explanatory system, i.e., a hypothesis that gives order to observations” (Kapferer 1990: 79), rumour texts are always generated as a response to observations in the social sphere. From this perspective, the generation of rumour texts is first of all a phenomenon of intertextuality, drawing contents from the intertextual framework. What makes the intertextuality of rumour texts unique from that of other texts is that, as we can observe from all rumour cases, in discursive carnivals, the hierarchy of knowledges wanes in its ruling power, whereas the lower, previously subjugated knowledges of social groups as part of the amalgam have the same credulity as higher knowledges in the hierarchy in this reshuffle of knowledge hierarchies. In other words, during discursive carnivals, the hierarchy of knowledges recedes and gives place to the amalgam of knowledges, and communicative situations thus bring all available texts in the social sphere *almost* without an institutional order, leading to a collective imagination of the current situations. It is indeed not a random process and requires further investigation. It is worth noting here again that here we focus on a conceptual instance of rumour generation, not the rumour texts that are already well transmitted and transformed and later collected in retrospect. Therefore, what we are doing here can be analogised with what linguists did for Proto-Indo European language: Even though it is barely possible to find this origin practically, it is still necessary to conceptualise

it for its further transmutations in the social sphere, as we shall return to it in Chapter 3.

The Imagination of the Situation and the Logic of *Ersetzung*

The Rolls-Royce rumour at the very beginning of the chapter demonstrates that by improvising rumours, people attach their imaginations about current situations and participate in the discursive carnival. As the knowledge hierarchies are temporarily suspended and subverted, rumour texts are generated in the resonance within social groups when they share their visions. This is to say that there is always a trace to follow if we investigate the generation process, which, once again, leads to the collective memory of social groups. As Reumaux points out,

[...] the imaginary is far from being ambiguous figures born of chance, but a reproduction of their own shapes, modified or disguised. That is to say that they are the reversion of signs and figures that are elaborated in mythologies and collected in the forge of collective memory. (Reumaux 1996: 18, Translation Mine)⁷⁸

From this perspective, the improvised and assembled contents are resonating in the discursive carnival and are constantly reformulated. In Introduction and Chapter 1, we discussed how certain knowledge structures are subjugated and marginalised; now it is time to see how such knowledges are brought back to the centre in communicative memories of social groups, functioning as epistemic patterns and generating texts for articulation.

Imagination of the situation first and foremost highlights the amalgam of knowledges in social groups' *habiti* to comprehend social reality. As Randviir states,

In order to officially execute coherent interpretation of the physical reality, information on it had to first be placed into the canonical understanding of the world to test the data, correct and eliminate discrepancies with the integral system of canonical texts. Only after these procedures could textual (both verbal and pictorial) representations of the world be articulated. (Randviir 2004: 85)

This apperceptive aspect, "by which new experience is assimilated to and transformed by the residuum of past experiences of an individual to form a new whole" (Runes 1983: 15), has two implications. First of all, in all rumour cases, what social groups encounter cannot be absolutely new. In 1.2.3, we have investigated a symbolic universe that encircles the amalgam of knowledges, in which all experiences are comprehensible and have precedent occurrences. In this regard, any

⁷⁸ "[...] loin de proposer des figures errantes, nées du hasard, il reproduit soit telles quelles, soit en les modifiant, soit en les travestissant, c'est-à-dire en en inversant les signes, les figures élaborées dans les mythologies et recueillies dans le creuset de la mémoire collective".

rumouring and subsequent texts should include a certain degree of forgetting as a selection procedure among social groups. In the case of Brezhnev's Rolls-Royce, we can see that people temporarily forgot that Brezhnev was already seriously ill and it would be highly impossible that he himself was driving the limousine. We will come back to this in the next section regarding rumour texts as a process of meta-communication. More fundamentally, apperception means the logic of *Ersetzung*, which echoes what we have already defined rumours as the *Ersatz* of knowledge in Introduction. In its noun form of action, *Ersetzung* indicates that people use the amalgam of knowledges with little regard of the institutional order during the discursive carnival, which functions as the prerequisite for all rumours to spring out.

As we discussed above, during discursive carnivals, the suspension of tensions causes ambiguities and the institutional order that structures the social reality is temporarily paralysed. The reshuffle of power relationships means that the knowledges that were once subjugated and marginalised are reinvigorated and brought to the table. The Hairy Men case we discussed in Chapter 1 is a good example here. Similar schemes can be found in all rumour cases: since the institutional order behind the social reality is suspended, the hierarchy of knowledges, namely the mild scientism that we discussed in 1.1.3, is reduced to a local pragmatics of knowledges; only if the knowledge systems can help to fix the social reality, the mundane reason of the social groups will motivate them to incorporate such knowledges in their articulations. However, as we have pointed out at the very beginning of 1.3, knowledges cannot function directly in the social sphere. They need to present themselves in the agency of social institutions and thus manifest themselves in discourses, which indicates that the “new order” of knowledges during discursive carnivals is, in fact, a transformation of previously implausible narratives into plausible narratives, when the institutions that are formerly repressed are unleashed from the institutional order as the local aberrance of it. For example, in the “#TrumpIsDead” case, when Musk's acquisition of Twitter instigated great concern, people were constantly trying to find out the “backstage stories” behind it. Any narratives that fed people's imaginations won their eyes and discussion. In retrospect, we can of course conclude that the carnival ended up with the “#TrumpIsDead” rumour, but by that time, all kinds of narratives from various knowledge systems existed as unpredictable occurrences of discourses in the social sphere. Therefore, we can find that during the carnival, the logic of *Ersetzung* means that the rumour texts are gradually taking shape as some knowledge systems “glide” to the place where they were formerly marginalised in the form of narratives to be believed, which are, indeed, not limited to latent and cultural knowledges.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ It is precisely in this process that conspiracy theories, as stigmatised knowledges as we discussed in Introduction, may become rumours that go viral.

One manifestation of this mechanism is the public behaviour in the context of fear. During public fear, these marginalised institutions come back to the stage when the current knowledge hierarchies collapse. As we can see from the Soul Stealer case, the local lores about soul-stealing, once supervised by dominant discourses from authorities, became viral when fear grappled every member of the related regions. Such beliefs, which already exist in the social sphere, are invoked when carnival begins. Kapferer writes that,

In reality, fears, diffuse anxiety and frustration have never left the social body: it is simply that their expression has been repressed, channeled and legitimated. These latter are embodied in a rampant talk that, under favorable conditions, can become rumors. (Kapferer 1990: 117)

In this vein, we can find that under the context of fear, people always refer to more ancient knowledge systems since such knowledges are deeply embedded in cultural memory and *Ersetzung* simply reactivates them from the cultural corpus, which also explains the reason why those that are from the cultural memory of social groups have more authority compared to contemporary ones. As Lotman observes,

The consequence of this epidemic wave of terror was the revival, in large segments of the population, of the most archaic superstitious ideas or, in other words, the activation of ancient models of conscience—the belief in witches and in racial prejudices. (Lotman 1985: 145; cited from Gherlone 2019: 174)

We can also find more contemporary yet marginalised knowledge structures in the context of fear. In the Hairy Men case, people's understandings of atomic bombs (for example, bombs are "eggs"), though mediated by cultural patterns, were relatively new in the social sphere following the rise of awareness of such massive, destructive weapons. Such discourses were marginalised and dismissed as "unscientific" in the social sphere; however, during the discursive carnival, the scientific knowledges that are formerly consecrated as sublime become as believable as knowledges in the lower hierarchy, which is further represented in discourses (The Russians come to cut men's testicles, echoing the new knowledge that the bomb is made from "eggs" in the context of reproductive fear) that various knowledges manifest themselves in narratives of all kinds.

In summary, *Ersetzung* marks the first step of rumour text generation following the suspension of institutional orders. As formerly subjugated and marginalised knowledges fill in the ambiguities caused by the suspension of tensions, the narratives that are *normally* dismissed as non-sense or improper become sense-making again. In this vein, the collective imagination caters to the immediate communicative needs of social groups and sets the starting point for a further and broader discursive carnival of rumour generation. Following the logic

of *Ersetzung*, we can then investigate how narratives reverberate in the discursive carnival and how certain narratives stand out among others among the social groups that are engaged in the carnival.

The Twofold Meta-communication and Forgetting

If we recall what we have discussed in 2.1.1 that the preceding texts constitute the current communicative situations for articulation, we can find that the narratives that become plausible among social groups never stand alone; they are always situated in an intertextual framework that constitutes the communicative situations for individuals to apply their imaginations, which means that the preceding texts are always modelling the current generation of rumour texts.⁸⁰ Therefore, collective imaginations of the situation and the rumour texts that follow are always a combination of the current observations about ambiguities in the social reality and the texts that function as the instant context at the time of articulation. In other words, “The rumor is fundamentally twofold. It takes reality into account and plays with it. In order to account for it, it models the forms and chisels into the images that are part of the imagination” (Reumaux 1996: 38, Translation mine).⁸¹ Rumour discourses always include meta-communication “as communication that follows a primary communication and treats it as a subject of its own message” (Juvan 2008: 72), pointing to two different aspects of rumour generation demarcated by the timeframe of discursive carnivals.

On the one hand, the narratives that are incorporated into the current rumour discourses always refer to texts that exist before the beginning of a carnival, which means that those texts that are outside of the suspension of tensions are entailed into the intertextual network that surrounds rumour texts. Following the logic of *Ersetzung*, the narratives that are brought into discursive carnivals often undergo a process of reinterpretation and adaptation. This intertextual network is not a mere aggregation of preexisting texts but rather a dynamic entity where narratives are reshaped to align with the emerging social reality, which also explains why, as we saw in most of the examples we drew upon, the texts that have their register in cultural institutions are often more plausible. These texts, resonating with deeply embedded cultural patterns and shared experiences, are

⁸⁰ According to the terminology of Popovič, these preceding texts are “proto-texts”, which draw a clear link between the original texts and the texts that follow. However, due to the polygenesis of rumours, finding the original texts is both exhaustive and unnecessary, since these preceding texts have already constituted the communicative situation that rumour texts take to the stage. In this regard, preceding text is a better term than proto-text in our conceptualisation here.

⁸¹ “la rumeur est fondamentalement double. Si elle prend en compte le réel, elle en joue aussi et, pour en rendre compte, elle modèle des formes et cisèle des images qui s’inscrivent dans l’imaginaire”.

recontextualised to address the immediate concerns and ambiguities of the moment; they are “summoned back”, not “generated totally anew”. This process not only reinforces their relevance but also amplifies their credibility (if we recall what we have discussed on the construction of authority in 1.3.2), thus solidifying their place in a rumour’s intertextual network.

On the other hand, rumours are articulated as a response to the current situation. It means that rumour texts are always a meta-communication process regarding the observations and truth claims that are already part of discursive carnivals. The resonation of such texts within social groups indicates a detachment of the social reality, which is constructed by constant discoursing in discursive carnivals, from the original articulators of the narratives. The (re)iterative nature of this process ensures that a rumour grows and adapts, responding to the dynamics of the social groups engaged in its propagation. It is precisely in this logic that sources of rumour are of secondary importance: in line with a structuralist view that “the author is dead” (Barthes 1977b), it is possible to say that for rumour texts, the author of a rumour is always functionally absent. Two analytical perspectives on the agency of rumouring can be distinguished accordingly: from the macroscope of understanding rumours as cultural texts (Lotman 1988; Semenenko 2022) and the dynamics of culture are always observable in the moment of rumouring; and from the mesoscope, social groups are speaking of these rumours in narratives and exchange their information within and between these groups, constituting microfibers of the rumour phenomenon. Whereas rumour texts persist and circulate across the semiosphere (as we have argued in 1.2.4), rumour narratives are situated articulations of these texts. They are inherently self-referential, as their validity and meaning are constantly negotiated within the social group.

In line with the idea of meta-communication, the current, newly generated rumour texts become metatexts that are *about* preceding texts in the social sphere as an “indirect mediation of the original text” (Popović 1976: 226), which allows us to understand the dynamics of rumour generation from the perspectives of transformative processes of texts that rumours mediate. In this sense we also include the proliferation of narratives as possible future rumours and the unpredictability of rumour discourses and rumouring as a reshuffle of knowledge hierarchies during discursive carnivals into the meta-communication process as “a quantitative increase” and “a redistribution in the structure” in a text’s afterlife (Lotman and Uspenskij 1978: 215–16). And following the two stages, the third stage of “forgetting” becomes the next step that finally leads to the articulation of rumour texts.

As Haas and Levasseur (2013) observe, social groups must discard conflicting or irrelevant details from prior knowledge to accommodate the emergent narratives generated in the rumour process, which means that forgetting is always a way of selecting rumour contents for current communicative situations. For example, in the Rolls-Royce rumour, with the need to project people’s imagi-

nation about Soviet officials' lives of corruption, the affected groups *chose* to temporarily forget the knowledge on the health conditions of Brezhnev and the narratives that it was Brezhnev driving the limousine became plausible. Therefore, forgetting is an active process in rumour articulation that select contents from preceding texts and bring them to the forge of the current discursive carnival as the microscopic dynamics of culture's progression forward. From the perspective of cultural history, forgetting becomes "a necessary and constructive part of internal social transformations" (A. Assmann 2008: 98).

If we go deeper into forgetting as the selection process in rumour articulation, we can find a local counter-structure against the overarching social institutions. In 2.2.2 we discussed the contrapuntal relationship between the institutional order and local compensations of power. Moreover, the compensation of power still functions as a power, which indicates that it also creates tensions and following suspensions within discursive carnivals, though locally within social groups, that influence the articulation of rumours. In other words, forgetting represents a local "political correctness" in rumour discourses as a miniature of self-censorship in the social sphere and it also creates its own unspeakable contents that are excluded from rumouring. In Rolls-Royce rumour we find the exclusion of narratives on Brezhnev's health condition and in Soul Stealer case, the belief and the practice of soul-stealing as part of "the 'black' counterpart of the imperial cult" (P. A. Kuhn 1990: 90) also excluded the government's ruling of such practices outside of the discursive carnivals. In other words, discursive carnivals, by being a reshuffle of hierarchies and power relationships, are not an anarchy of social discourses but have their own, "local" orders of discourses as the counterpart of the overarching truth discourses. More importantly, as we have already discussed in 2.2, since discursive carnivals are the direct results of suspension of tensions, these local orders of discourses are dependent on the overarching truth discourses in contrapuntal relationships, which indicates that if truth discourses move forward, these dependent discursive carnivals will also evolve into new shapes, reviving older discourses for new needs. In this vein, we can explain the recurrence of rumours that are previously dismissed: they re-emerge when the local tensions and compensations of power create new spaces within the discursive carnival. These spaces, shaped by forgetting as an active process, allow for the reintegration of excluded narratives under new forms and contexts. This cyclical nature of forgetting and re-articulation underlines the interplay between suppression and re-emergence in rumour generation, highlighting how power dynamics continually regulate what can be spoken and what remains silenced. The continuous resonation of narratives within social groups causes ongoing rumouring during the discursive carnival, as we metaphorised earlier, like a swirl that finally travels beyond the boundaries between social groups.

Existential Presuppositions: Levelling and Sharpening

The previous two sections have already illustrated the complexity of rumour texts at the time when related narratives emerge within social groups. However, as we can see in most of the rumour cases, rumours that we have at hand are always “dry” and simple, maintaining merely their “core” features, whereas other details are exchangeable and adapt to local specifics. During the resonance of narratives, rumour “becomes impoverished until it takes a lapidary form” (Reumaux 1996: 88, translation mine)⁸² and is then transmitted across different localities (this will be further elaborated in Chapter 3). Following the discussions on forgetting above, these metatexts as a forgetting of their preceding texts will also lose some of their contents and be partially forgotten, revealing that in rumour texts, some contents persist during their resonance within social groups. We can draw upon another example to illustrate this process.

Eco (1994) writes about a rumour of a yellow British submarine that was sighted not far from the Argentinian shore during the Malvinas-Falkland War. When a Buenos Aires-based press reported that allegedly London had sent Superb, a nuclear submarine, to the South Atlantic, the British side remained ambiguous about the military mobilisation. Multiple resources followed that Superb was operating in the regions, which convinced the Argentinians that British forces were already around. As Eco narrates, “Now, this story concerns not only the presence of the Superb (which was taken for granted) but also the diabolical abilities of the Britons, who succeeded in keeping their position secret” (1994: 98). Argentinian readers were shocked and news reported that “a yellow submarine” was spotted on the Argentinian seas with a blurred image taken by a pilot. However, when British fleets finally reached the region a few weeks later, the Scottish *Daily Record* revealed that Superb, the nuclear submarine, had never left its base in Scotland and the identity of that mysterious yellow submarine remained a fictional character in stories from the press, which was, indeed, a minor yet interesting footnote on the tensions between Argentine and the United Kingdoms over the topics of Malvinas-Falkland Islands.

The farce, as we can see in retrospect, was definitely a result of participation from multiple parts of society. “[T]he whole story grew out of vague gossip, through the collaboration of all parties. Everybody cooperated in the creation of the Yellow Submarine because it was a fascinating fictional character and its story was narratively exciting” (Eco 1994: 99). Moreover, apart from the collective effort to come up with a satisfying interpretation of a war that was looming at the horizon as a discursive carnival, we can find that the yellow submarine persists as a locus in all narratives. As Eco conceptualises, the existence of a yellow submarine and the drama revolving around it indicates an existential presupposition

⁸² “[...] s’appauvrit jusqu’à prendre une forme lapidaire”.

of the spoken thing *per se*. “In every statement involving proper names or definite descriptions, the reader or listener is supposed to take for granted the existence of the entity about which something is predicated” (Eco 1994: 99), which indicates that when narratives are resonating within social groups, the world that these narratives describe is to be believed as existent firsthand and only later people evaluate the trustworthiness of them. In this vein, no matter what evaluation and dismissal happen afterwards, the rumoured objects have already existed in the social reality (Eco and Violi 1987), not to mention that, as we talked about in the previous section, such evaluations as orders of discourses wane during discursive carnivals. Speaking of *the* thing in narratives presupposes its existence in such narratives and, in the meta-communication that follows, restructures the narratives towards revolving around these presuppositions. As Lotman points out,

The transformation of an event into a text involves, first, narrating it in the system of a particular language, i.e. subjecting it to a previously given structural organization. [...] But when an event is retold by means of a language then it inevitably acquires a structural unity. This unity, which in fact belongs only to the expression level, inevitably becomes transferred to the level of content too. (Lotman 1990: 221–22)

Following this perspective, the narratives are levelled to concise forms that only these presuppositions become invariants in discourses. Other details are therefore subject to change during the resonance, whereas the presuppositions persist in narratives and channel such narratives to transform into concise forms of articulation. The logic of existential presuppositions brings forth the semiotic aspect of “kernels” of resonating narratives, in the sense that these symbols become the topics, or the invariants of the texts for affected social groups, which presumes the future unfolding of these texts (Lotman 1990: 73).

However, “Leveling does not mean random omission of details. Some are more likely to be affected than others” (Allport and Postman 1947: 83). This is to say that, apart from the process of levelling during which these texts become simpler forms in narratives, there also exists a sharpening process “as the selective perception, retention and reporting of a limited number of details from a larger context” (Allport and Postman 1947: 86). Once the texts are articulated, they are instantly integrated into the intertextual network, in which preceding texts that are even outside of the discursive carnival stipulate certain topics to be discussed during discursive carnivals. As the “#TrumpIsDead” case shows, among all suspicions towards the fact-checking mechanisms of the newly acquired X and all the attempts to probe such mechanisms, narratives about Trump stepped out because Trump remained to be a hot topic in the communicative memories of social groups. And coming back to the Yellow Submarine case, we can find that under the influence of preceding texts that constituted the communicative

situations for all rumours to take place, the yellow submarine symbolised people's projections and imaginations of war. In other words, narratives about the yellow submarine became *the* thing that was rumoured about and became the object of collective hysteria that was sought for. This gentrification of narratives, as we can see from most of the rumour cases, indicates that the articulated texts, while subject to intertextual modifications, create their own echo chambers that are continuously deepening and intensifying themselves in meta-communication processes and finally lead to rumour discourses that may ring extremely absurd when looking from a retrospect. "By creating these images, to reorganize a disrupted social space, rumor tends to be a collective exorcism, caught deeper and deeper in the trap set for its own" (Reumaux 1996: 55, Translation Mine).⁸³ As Eco comments on the Yellow Submarine rumour, "Once posited by the discourse of the mass media, the submarine was there, and since newspapers are supposed to tell the truth about the actual world, people did their best to sight it" (1994: 100). And it should be there with their cataleptic effects.

The fluidity of narratives after levelling and sharpening leads to a final, matured rumour that travels beyond these social groups. As these narratives, born in a local context and having shredded off details that anchor them to a specific locality, they become adaptable and interpretable in a wider social context, allowing them to integrate into broader discursive frameworks and infiltrate into other social groups with respective variants. This transformation ensures that the rumour is no longer confined to its initial social context but instead becomes mobile, resonating with different audiences who reinterpret and rearticulate it within their own communicative situations. However, along with rumours travelling through the boundaries between social groups, they finally become a social phenomenon, which situates rumour texts and rumouring directly against the official, authoritative grand narratives that construct and define truth in the social sphere despite the local, carnivalesque suspension of tensions. From now on we can move our scope of investigation from a local perspective to a translocal perspective, to research the power dynamics that finally give rumours their name.

2.3. False Memory in the Power Dynamics

Lotman and Uspenskij pointed out that once a text is generated, "it has to be evaluated according to all the hierarchic ties of that language" (1978: 214). As we have discussed the pressured atmosphere and the composition of rumour texts in the social sphere respectively in 2.1 and 2.2, we now proceed to the evaluative aspect of the improvisations in social groups' communicative memory. When

⁸³ "En créant ces images, de manière à réorganiser un espace social bouleversé, la rumeur qui tend à être exorcisme collectif, se laisse également prendre au piège qu'elles lui tendent".

rumour texts stay at a local level, such evaluations can be suspended since discursive carnivals allow such articulations to appear freely; yet when texts become translocal, evaluation becomes ineluctable since such articulations are not simply personal reflections of the current situation but publicised, becoming part of the discursive practices (“discoursing”, as we put it in 2.1) to construct a socially shared reality. We have already known from discussions in 1.3 that the social sphere, under institutionalisation and legitimation, is an uneven landscape and there is a socially constructed truth for all members of society. Following this perspective, when rumours move out of the resonation within social groups into the social sphere, they are subject to power relationships between various social institutions that structure the social reality. As Eric Wolf points out,

[...] ideas and idea-systems are often monopolized by power groups and rendered self-enclosed and self-referential. While ideas are subject to contextual variation, moreover, this variation itself encounters structural limits, since contexts too involve social relationships and thus acquire their structure through plays of power. (Wolf 1999: 7)

In this regard, once a rumour text travels beyond the boundaries between social groups and becomes translocal, it is enmeshed in the orders of discourse that regulates the social reality and keeps it under normality. As Foucault proposes,

I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality. (Foucault 1971: 8)

Therefore, in line with the acknowledgement that the social sphere is an uneven landscape characterised by power relationships between various institutions, this rugged sphere is not directly visible; it is shrouded by discourses that at the same time hide and resemble power dynamics in the social sphere like sea water covering the seabed. It depends on the perspective of witnessing: if the observer is situated outside the sphere, what (s)he sees is a social sphere made “flat” (Latour 2005) by the discourses operating within the social sphere; however, if (s)he examines the water, (s)he will see the seabed constructed by the spatial structures of society and feel the currents as the result of the marine dynamics.

In this way, we come back to the process of the construction of truth, but from a different angle than in 1.3. Apart from discussing a truth with “A historically constituted division” (Foucault 1971: 10) between true and false, we shift our focus to how given texts are evaluated and engaged in the power dynamics *here and now*, which indicates that from this perspective, truth is not merely abstracted as a sublime object and as an ideology, but also actualised in discourses. As Foucault argues about the development of division between true and false, “the

highest truth no longer resided in what discourse *was*, nor in what it *did*: it lay in what *was said*" (Foucault 1971: 10). Therefore, at the juncture where rumour texts are evaluated as false memories, the objects for discussion and investigation are the discourses that wield the power of truth.

In ancient China, the emperor could order his officials to commit suicide as a form of punishment. However, the act of suicide was not carried out through some kind of "imperial magic"; it still required an official mandate from the emperor, conveyed through discourse, to enforce the order. This is to say that, in the power dynamics that narratives become rumours, the following evaluation always happens at the discursive level that the socially constructed, historically burdened truth enunciates "its meaning, its form, its object and its relation to what it referred to" (Foucault 1971: 10). If we combine this idea with the discussion on discursive carnivals and rumouring as a witchcraft elaborated in 2.2.1 and 2.2.2, we are now continuing this line of investigation towards a "discursive witch hunt". And precisely from here, when rumour texts become translocal, the witch hunt begins.

2.3.1. The Discursive Witch Hunt: Falsified Memories and the Paradox of Suppression

By moving to the evaluative aspect of rumour texts we are now switching from understanding rumouring as the meta-communication of preceding texts to taking rumours as the preceding texts of following metatexts in the power dynamics of the social sphere. Since the texts become translocal and are "identical regardless of whether the universe referred to is fictional or historical" (Johansen 2002: 152), the contrapuntal relationship between discursive carnivals and the institutional orders necessitates the representation of the institutional order to be represented as the counterforce of the emerging rumour discourses to maintain the overarching orders. As the *Ersatz* of knowledge, rumour discourses are challenging the existing knowledge hierarchies on different social levels and, more importantly, ambiguate the socially constructed truth that legitimises the grand narratives in the social sphere. In 1.3.2 we have already discussed the construction of authority and the exclusivity of such practices in the case of campaigning against *Jiaolong*. Following this perspective, in rumour discourses, the contrapuntal relationship is resembled in narratives from both sides and therefore, what is of concern here during the witch hunt are the intricacies between grand narratives and translocal rumour texts.

Allport and Postman, in their seminal work *The Psychology of Rumor* (1947), proposed a "rumour clinic" to battle rampaging rumours during and after WWII. By detecting rumours among the public and dismissing them via public channels, authorities restored the ambiguous social reality and their credibility for their people. Even though the idea was set in the context of WWII, we can still find

similar approaches in our modern times. In the “#TrumpIsDead” rumour, platforms like Twitter (X) and Facebook introduced a fact-check bullet alongside the posts that provide “false information” that radicalizes individuals and when various fact-checking websites, individual or funded by media channels, rose in relatively the same period (For more details, please see Brandtzaeg, Følstad, and Chaparro Domínguez 2018; Ardèvol-Abreu, Delponti, and Rodríguez-Wangüemert 2020). This fact-checking is, again, a political move that contains an authoritative view of truth. In this sense, the rumour texts are delegitimised in the social sphere as “untrue”, and an official truth is provided as the only truth in the social sphere. The institutional response to rumours, as seen in both historical and contemporary contexts, operates as a suppressive mechanism that seeks to neutralise the disruptive potential of alternative narratives. Fact-checking initiatives, whether government-led or platform-driven, function to restore a coherent and stable social reality by eliminating ambiguity, which, indeed, misfire sometimes, as we shall see in the next section.

In suppressions of this kind, we can find the most obvious form of “proxy warfare” as described in the previous chapter. Foucault (1971: 8–10) conceptualises such approaches as the rules of exclusion in the establishment of orders of discourse, which contain “prohibition”, “division” and “rejection”. On platforms that have such fact-checking mechanisms, those who are spreading false information will be prohibited from posting, among which Trump is the most famous. By limiting those rumourmongers’ access to public platforms, such information is discredited and loses its legitimation in the social sphere, therefore being meted out from public discoursing on these social platforms. In this vein, prohibition becomes a punishment that manifests authorities’ sovereign power to regulate the public (Foucault 1995) and banishes the emergence of such texts, in the same logic as burning witches on stakes in the Middle Ages. And the division between true and false is set when the official truth is given in parallel with other versions of truth. With the authoritative legitimation, this anointed version of truth is separated from other versions of truth claims, which finally leads to the rejection of rumour texts as knowledges for here and now.

There are, indeed, problems with the approach of a rumour clinic. Being a top-down approach, such clinics, first of all, cannot address all rumours due to the complexity of human experiences that are articulated in the social reality. The same complexity indicates that in rumour discourses, there “is no original truth” (Kapferer 1990: 132) and the legitimised, official truth is simply a version of the reality that has no ontological primacy. In the afterquakes of the suspension of tensions and the unending discursive carnival in people’s communicative memories, the power of an official truth is abated and often fails to remove other versions of truth from discursive carnivals. In fact, in most of the rumour cases, the dismissal of such memories does not indicate the end of rumours; it is rather the last piece of the puzzle that rumours finally infect all levels of society with

their magic. The contrapuntal relationship between institutional order and discursive carnivals leads to a paradox in suppressing rumour discourses by rumour clinics. In discursive carnivals, grand narratives are not merely a static counterforce but an active participant in the discursive carnival, which indicates that when they attempt to reaffirm legitimacy and contain the disruptive potential of rumours, these very rumours that they counter against also gain a discursive foothold. As we saw in the *Jiaolong* case in 1.3.2, the construction of a governmental authority made people believe that there was such a creature troubling the communities. By denouncing, refuting, or even acknowledging their existence, authorities unwittingly reinforce rumours' presence within the broader discursive framework. Just like the physics of non-Newtonian fluids: the harder you strike it, the more solid it turns out to be. The more aggressively institutions seek to suppress or delegitimise rumour texts, the more resilient these texts become, adapting to the imposed constraints and reemerging in new forms.

Therefore, the relationship between rumours and grand narratives is never as simple as that between heresies and interrogators; interrogators do play a role in the rumouring process, yet the discursive witch hunt never ends by burning witches on the stakes. In the suppression of rumouring, these communicative memories, now falsified by the grand narratives with an official truth, are engaged in a more complicated epistemic labyrinth in searching for understanding ambiguities in the social reality. In this regard, approaches such like rumour clinics or rumour buzzers seldom succeed in reestablishing truth discourses in the social sphere. "By denying a rumor, one is not simply asking people to add a further piece of information to their repertoire but rather to alter their entire worldview" (Kapferer 1990: 244). Moreover, since truth has its own history of social construction (Lorenzini 2023, also see discussions in 1.3), the grand narratives, of which truth discourses are always a part, are never an instant presence of the institutional order, but a continuum stretching in social diachrony. In other words, the grand narratives that are engaged in rumouring always exist before rumours take place and outlive the rumour texts that are generated within discursive carnivals. All these complexities lead us to analyse the power dynamics of truth in rumouring.

2.3.2. Internal Regulations and Historical Inertia

We shall start the following discussion by recalling a fable from Aesop, titled "The Northwind and the Sun" (for the full version of the fable, please see Ashliman 1987: 50). It is said that one day, the Northwind and the Sun were having a competition to see who was stronger and the challenge was to remove the cloak of a traveller. Even though the Northwind tried to blow hard, the traveller merely tightened his cloak; and when the Sun shone, the traveller took off his cloak since he felt the warmth. Apart from the gist of the fable, which is to tell us that kindness

affects more than severity, we can find more about the petite story if we apply the schema to the dismissal of rumour texts. The overt dismissal of rumours, like we discussed above, can be analogised with the Northwind, which is openly providing the official version of truth and rejects the assumptions of the social reality generated during discursive carnivals. However, the role of the Sun is hidden in deeper layers of rumour phenomena.

In the beginning of 2.3 we have already noted that it is the existence of an evaluation that finally makes rumours become rumours in the social sphere. However, it does not have to be the Northwind: In the Rolls-Royce case we can see that the authorities did not respond to the incident directly; however, even though not the imagination of Brezhnev driving the car was not directly dismissed by authorities, but people *knew* that such imaginations *must be* a rumour, which indicates that silence from the authorities is possible, but projection of power is still there. The projection is internalised by individuals to model behaviours (Song 2022b) as a synchronic imprint of the uneven landscape of social reality. In other words, the orders of discourse are internalised as rules, “where discourse exercises its own control; rules concerned with the principles of classification, ordering and distribution” (Foucault 1971: 12). Since we have already talked about a truth with history, the orders of discourse in rumouring are internalised as truth obligations that maintain sublimity of the socially constructed truth. As Foucault elaborates,

[...] for there to be a truth obligation, or again for something like an obligation to be added to the intrinsic rules of manifestation of the truth, it must either involve precisely something that cannot be manifested or demonstrated by itself as true and that needs as it were this supplement of force, this enforcement, this supplement of vigor and obligation, of constraint, which means that one really will be obliged to posit it as true, although one knows that it may be false, or one is not sure that it is true, or it is not possible to demonstrate that it is true or false. (Foucault 2014: 95)

We can see the historical grounds of this truth obligation. As truth is socially constructed with a trail of historical constitution, the truth obligations in the social synchrony represent a historical inertia⁸⁴ of evaluations on truth discourses. Francis Fukuyama (2011) attributes this inertia to a cognitive rigidity that makes complex behaviours possible. As Bart Zantvoort paraphrases the conundrum, “Human beings create ‘mental models’ and rule-based institutions to help them

⁸⁴ The historical inertia discussed here should be distinguished from what Yan Xuetong (2019) conceptualised as the “inertia of history”, by which Yan is referring to the developmental tendency of economic and industrial rise and fall in different societies such as the United States and China because of their respective historical factors. The inertia we are discussing here focuses on the pre-emptive evaluation of generated texts in rumour discourses.

cope with their environment and organise their society more efficiently, but they become psychologically invested in these models and endow them with ‘intrinsic value’” (2017: 710). This historical inertia echoes what we have discussed in Introduction as the shorthand to knowledge, but here we take one step further to investigate this inertia as apparatuses (*dispositifs*) that are sedimented in the unconsciousness of “discoursing” at the social level (Deleuze 1992), in which evaluations are generated pre-emptively as texts emerge in the social sphere as “the coercion of the non-true or the coercion and constraint of the unverifiable” (Foucault 2014: 95).

As people who had just witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union were still haunted by the spooks of Soviet censorship and retaining themselves in their behaviours in society, historical inertia is not simply a projection of historical institutional construction and regulation, but also a projection forward in the social synchrony in discourses, which maintains its course in the metrics of social diachrony. Any rumour texts that break through the boundaries of social groups and become part of social discourses also instigate the evaluative aspect of these texts, by which rumours *naturally* become rumours by the time of being trans-local. This leads to another form of “proxy warfare”: compared to direct dismissal of rumour texts, this form is more like the Sun in Aesop’s story; without a direct suppression and prohibition, rumour texts are thrown into the interplay of power dynamics of truth and become rumours spontaneously since the truth obligations, or projections of the orders of discourse, remain premediating any articulation in the social sphere. In this sense, we continue the discussions in 2.1.1 and 2.1.2, that the suspension of tensions not simply functions as the instant social context of rumouring, but also projects its power dynamics to generated rumour texts and premediates rumours’ position in social discourses. As Foucault notes, “power is ‘always already there’, that one is never ‘outside’ it, that there are no ‘margins’ for those who break with the system to gambol in” (Foucault 2001: 141). The discursive carnival is simply a temporary exemption, a phantom of emancipation from restrictions imposed towards the social sphere, which has, indeed, nothing intrinsically against the nature of a carnival, as we already discussed in 2.2.

We can therefore further investigate the mechanisms of this indirect power relationships’ interplay in rumour discourses. By framing the idea of historical inertia in our investigation on rumouring adds a significant layer of intertextuality that we already addressed in previous pages. The evaluation of rumour texts is already entangled in truth discourses that dictate what counts as truth. In other words, under the historical inertia, the intertextual network becomes the play-ground of grand narratives that inherit power relationships and constitutes the synchronic, instant projection of the uneven landscape of the institutionalised social reality. Foucault terms this mechanism as “commentary”:

In short, I suspect one could find a kind of gradation between different types of discourse within most societies: discourse “uttered” in the course of the day and in casual meetings, and which disappears with the very act which gave rise to it; and those forms of discourse that lie at the origins of a certain number of new verbal acts, which are reiterated, transformed or discussed; in short, discourse which *is spoken* and remains spoken, indefinitely, beyond its formulation, and which remains to be spoken. (Foucault 1971: 12 italics original)

In this regard, we supplement the idea of meta-communication and the intertextual network by the second half of the process, in which rumours are preceding texts and commentaries are incorporated in meta-communication, as we discussed at the beginning of 2.3. In the face of generated rumour texts, historical inertia renders them in a reiteration of the institutionalised truth with its authority, again deeply rooted in history and the power relationships within rumour discourses are therefore configured pre-emptively when they enter social discourses. Direct dismissal from the authorities is thus simply a superficial representation of the internal rules that predicate rumour texts in discourses.

However ironically, the process of commentary is the same process that rumours gain their social significance, even to other social groups that rumour texts reach when trespassing the boundaries. Rumour discourses are attached with meaning and significance only after they are evaluated in the social sphere. As Kapferer comments,

Rumors also attract attention to facts we have already noticed, without having drawn any conclusions from them. For most facts are silent: they are meaningless in and of themselves; we give the meaning, and that meaning varies from one individual to another, and from one era to another. Rumors make events that had hitherto been viewed as insignificant, significant. (Kapferer 1990: 76–77)

Since evaluating apparatuses are already configured by historical inertia, rumours texts become rumours and become significant at the same time, which in return constructs the contrapuntal relationship in rumour discourses, now in a greater scope, expanding the discursive carnival from the original rumouring social groups to other social groups that rumour texts can reach. Again, we find a swirling structure of rumouring, that entails more and more people into the carnival. More discussions regarding this infectious process will be discussed in the next chapter, but we can find from here the commentary mechanism that accompanies rumour texts’ emergence in the social sphere that has already stipulated the status of rumours and the nature of such articulations beforehand; people *need* to speak of it (a mundane reason) and *must* speak of it (configuration of historical inertia). As Foucault points out, “Commentary averts the chance element of discourse by giving it its due: it gives us the opportunity to say something other than the text

itself, but on condition that it is the text itself which is uttered and, in some ways, finalised” (Foucault 1971: 13).

Therefore, in the dynamics of truth, rumouring becomes a footnote for “the self-indexation of truth” (Foucault 2014: 99) that is projected from the past and will be projected towards the future. This progression not only situates rumours within an intertextual network but also reaffirms the inescapable entanglement between discursive orders and their supposed subversions. As a result, rumouring is not disruption, nor aberrance of truth discourses, but a part of their reproduction and maintenance, constantly reconfiguring the boundaries of legitimacy while reinforcing the very structures they appear to challenge. In such dynamics, “truth gradually constrains men, humbles their presumptions, extinguishes their dreams, suppresses their desires, and tears out their images by the roots” (Foucault 2014: 100). The Northwind blows intermittently, but the Sun never ceases to shine.

2.3.3. Truth at the Present and Its Reverberances in the Future

However, the general picture of rumouring in the social sphere is not as doomed as historical inertia projects. As evaluation is a process of meta-communication that projects towards the future, falsifying rumours also begets new texts from the current existing truth discourses, which in return imbues new contents in them. In other words, in an occasion that a rumour is dismissed as rumour, the power dynamics of the truth in the social sphere no longer remain an untouchable sublime object (Nasr 2007; Žižek 2008), but also leaves a trail of texts in discourses that are open to further dynamics in the future to come. This indicates that by probing the sublime truth, by rumouring in our case here, truth is not merely an ideology, or an abstract hierarchy of knowledges as we discussed in 1.1, but a manageable and speakable object that interacts with the progression of cultural history.⁸⁵ As a result, the hierarchy of knowledges, which constitutes part of the grand narratives, and the amalgam of knowledges, which is the frontline of cultural history and held by individuals, are intersected in rumouring and oscillate in the social sphere, under frames of truth discourses on the one hand, but bringing changes of such frames on the other. Therefore, if we expand the timeline of the instance of a rumour phenomenon’s genesis to its implications and aftershocks in the social sphere, we find its “unpredictability of effects” (Lorenzini 2023: 65), which discharges the current dynamics of power into future.

Discussions in the previous section demonstrate that in the social sphere, truth discourses constantly require rumour texts to be dismissed as rumours to maintain

⁸⁵ According to Derrida (1976), these locutionary acts leave traces in cultural history and are constantly interacting with current articulations. And if we are setting our eyes on the present, we can predict the unpredictability of rumouring in future discourses as the “future’s past” (Koselleck 2004), in which the current dynamics of truth become traces in the future.

their sublimity as part of the grand narratives (keeping in mind the truth construction processes discussed in 1.3.2 and 1.3.3) and rumours, on the other side of the power dynamics, need truth discourses to become objects that can be discussed and described and retain their social significance. In this regard, investigating rumouring at the present means dealing with a flashing moment of the history of truth construction. Since in rumouring, in the present tense, everything is spoken at the discursive level, they enter the communicative memories of social groups and are shared in the social sphere and further enrich the intertextual network, abating the contextual elements that the texts (now including both rumour texts and dismissals) are originally spoken. As Habermas points out, “It is one of the peculiarities of our language that we can separate utterances from their original contexts and transplant them into different ones” (2007: 196). From this perspective, historical inertia, as elements from the context of articulation, may not further regulate upcoming metatexts in the afterquakes of rumouring, and rumour texts gradually gain their freedom along the process of interpretation and usage. In almost all the rumour cases discussed above, we can find that such after-effects of rumour dismissal are always “structurally open to renegotiation” (Lorenzini 2023: 66). The shifts of social and international contexts brought old rumours back to the communicative memory; previously dismissed rumours resurfaced to the social sphere with new meanings along with the progression of human history. The presence of truth at the present, while excluding rumours from truth discourses, ultimately extends rumours’ life cycle and promises their “eternal youth” (Kapferer 1990: 141), solidifying the fundamentals for future transformations.

Therefore, this structural openness reveals itself as the discursive transformation both in rumour discourses at the present and truth discourses of history, and more importantly, this transformation is realised in time, or, if we take the perspective of rumouring at the present, it will be realised in the future. This dynamic process also changes the social reality in cultural history. With the presence of the truth at the present, rumours, generated as shadows in discursive carnivals, are also reified in the course of human history and gain their ontological status in the collective corpus of society and become not only manageable and speakable, but also useable, to bring it back to the collective intellect at the moment when social groups need to interpret ambiguities in the social sphere. If we recall the Hairy Men case, we can find that the existence of hairy men, though already dismissed as rumours previously, became a political weapon of both sides of the civil war. In line with the discussions on existential presuppositions discussed in 2.2.3, we can detect such shifts in social reality. Lotman points out that “the peculiar nature of cultural processes manifests itself when different phenomena are given names and acquire their own reality. This reality in turn invades the original object and transforms it into its own image and likeness” (2013: 70). The images of hairy men entered the social reality by being given a name by the incumbent truth dis-

courses and in return gather different social groups under the same imaginations of the current situation by the same process, which were further sedimented in the collective corpus and presumed its future reemergence. In this sense, rumour discourses become both a mirror and a shaper of the social reality it addresses.

The relationship in rumour discourses between rumour texts and their dismissal is never a static one. As Foucault writes,

What is clear is that this gap is neither stable, nor constant, nor absolute. There is no question of there being one category, fixed for all time, reserved for fundamental or creative discourse, and another for those which reiterate, expound and comment. (Foucault 1971: 12–13)

The gradual change of truth discourses further brings dynamics to rumour discourses, causing reverberances within them. It is precisely on this ground that rumours are sensitive to the change of power relationships, as we discussed in Introduction; rumours now may become legitimate accounts of reality tomorrow and vice versa. Every time rumours are articulated in the social sphere, the social groups involved in rumouring are constantly side-stepping between their truth obligations and discursive carnivals, and when the truth discourses are present in rumour discourses, the texts generated out of and legitimised by truth discourses push forward and finally moves such discourses in the metrics of human history. Therefore, the line between rumours and truth is always blurred, constantly redefined and renegotiated via discursive repetition, reinterpretation and shifting social-political conditions. If we come back to see how the Rolls-Royce is exhibited in Riga Motor Museum at the present, the rumours in Soviet times have become truth under current grand narratives of anti-communism and defaming Soviet officials. The narratives in the museum and those that compose the inter-textual network revolving around that Rolls-Royce,⁸⁶ all point to a truth not built upon facts, but a political truth legitimised by the dominating grand narratives of the time. In short, when condemning the Soviet Union becomes a political correctness, Brezhnev should be the driver, despite what the fact was.

2.4. Concluding Remarks of the Chapter

As indicated at the very beginning, this Chapter focuses on rumouring in the present continuous tense. After discussions of Chapter 1, in which we addressed the epistemic fundamentals of rumour phenomena and historical contexts of rumours, this chapter investigates a very moment of rumour phenomena that rumour texts

⁸⁶ For example: <https://www.cnet.com/roadshow/pictures/riga-motor-museum-ussr-soviet-cars/>. Other examples can be found in the links attached to discussions at the very beginning of this chapter.

are generated out of a pressured atmosphere, improvised in the collective intellect and dismissed as rumours in the social sphere. Hinging around the concept of false memories, we first of all focused on the instant dimension of contexts in rumouring as the synchronic projections of power relationships, which create tensions and at the same time suspend them, causing a need for individuals to comprehend the social reality. This mundane reason to maintain the social reality “as it should be” instigates collective intellect to address the ambiguities caused by suspensions, drawing from and constituting the communicative memories of social groups at the same time. Therefore, rumour discourses are always a double resonance: one from an ancient, mythological past that constitutes the epistemic basis of rumouring, and one from current, pressured situations that motivate the current rumouring, which means that rumouring is both predictable (in terms of its historicity rooted in the shared corpus of expressions) and unpredictable (in terms of the current situations that navigate its development).

In this regard, when people start to speak of rumours, what they bring to the collective intellect is always a mixture of what they know and what they observe, and the communicative memories of rumouring are always filled with various interpretations of current situations, forming a heteroglossia that tries to reach an understanding that brings the social reality back to track. However, as tensions inherited in the social reality are suspended, the legitimised truth discourses become merely one version of truth and multiple versions coexist in a discursive carnival within the affected social groups. More importantly, since discursive carnivals are created out of the power dynamics in the social sphere, rumouring is a compensation of power when the institutional order is temporarily absent from heteroglossia. The absence of the institutional order means that the hierarchy of knowledges as we have already investigated in the previous chapter no longer regulates the amalgam of knowledges and situates respective knowledges “in their correct place,” while knowledges that are normally not used for interpreting such situations are introduced back to the carnival. For example, in the aftermath of a disastrous earthquake in India, as Prasad (1935; 1950) notes, people tended to understand it as the punishment of the heavens. In almost all rumour cases, these processes of *Ersetzung* are always two-fold: On the one hand, these rumours resonate within social groups as displaced knowledges continue to generate texts at the metalevel of preceding communications in the carnival; and, on the other hand, meta-communication always presumes possibility of these rumours going beyond affected social groups and generating new carnivals. As rumour texts are levelled and sharpened in such processes, they revolve around existential pre-suppositions indicated in these texts and finally travel through the boundaries between social groups. It is only after this point that rumours are free from their locality and become translocal, subject to the power dynamics in the social sphere and being evaluated.

In line with the idea that rumours are the *Ersatz* of knowledge, rumours are always products of current power dynamics. They are generated out of the suspension of tensions in their locality and finally return to the evaluation of the institutional order when they emerge in the social sphere. Rumours are finally given the name “rumour” after such evaluations. Therefore, the discursive carnival, as the compensation of power, is also a part of the maintenance of the institutional order and truth discourses constantly exclude rumours to maintain the sublimity of an officially legitimised truth. Following this perspective, the power dynamics of rumouring is a flashing representation of the knowledge subjugation that has been discussed in Chapter 1. As Lyotard comments, “knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?” (Lyotard 1984: 9) Here in the case of rumouring, we have a glimpse of the questions that Lyotard raises. The development of human knowledges and the truth that is constructed in human history require a constant disqualifying of some knowledges to be inadequate (Foucault 1980: 82), which is represented in the truth discourses as self-referential and politically legitimised. As Foucault points out, “The day dawned when truth moved over from the ritualised act—potent and just—of enunciation to settle on what was enunciated itself” (1971: 10). In rumouring, when rumours are evaluated as rumours and are excluded from truth discourses, the knowledges that present themselves in rumour texts are subjugated as “misplaced” or “improper”. We can draw upon multiple examples in history to illustrate this: Copernicus and Galileo were once rumour-mongers punished by the church, and in our cases here, people now believe that Brezhnev was the driver of that Rolls-Royce under the political correctness of anti-Soviet discourses. Rumouring at the present is always a decisive moment for truth to maintain its sublimity, regardless of what the fact is.

Paradoxically, such evaluations do not end a rumour’s life of transmission. The falsification process in rumour discourses also promises rumour’s social significance, creating a swirl that entails more social groups in rumouring. More importantly, in this sense, rumours have become a speakable object that travels in cultural history, rather than being a flint spark of randomly generated texts that are easily forgotten. In this vein, rumouring is inevitable in historically constructed truth discourses and proceeds in the general progression of social discourses into the future, which calls back the contrapuntal relationships between the carnival and the institutional order that we discussed in 2.2.2. If we, again, retrieve our scope of investigation from rumour’s present continuous tense to the rumour phenomenon in general, we will find that rumours are precisely the microscopic, trivial borders in which the dynamics of orders of discourses resides. In short, a socially constructed truth needs rumours to exist to enshrine itself and rumours therefore retain their eternal life and promise their return. This is the very essence of the contrapuntal relationships between rumours and truth discourses.

And when we return to the genesis of rumour texts from the perspective of cultural history by combining what we have discussed in both chapters, we will find that such discourses always exist in the social sphere even before certain rumours are articulated. In other words, the genesis of rumour is rather a re-representation of the previously subjugated knowledges in the discursive carnival, where these knowledges are temporarily exempted from the usual hierarchy due to the suspension of tensions; however, the same rumour texts are pre-emptively dismissed as rumours in the social sphere. This is to say that despite rumours being a social phenomenon *a posteriori*, the grand narratives presume the place for rumouring to emerge. These two aspects are not contradictory, but converge at a higher level of complexity. Just as the rituals need to be practiced once again to assert authority (again, like the campaign against *Jiaolong*), subjugation of knowledges needs to take place from time to time to navigate the course of truth discourses in history, which reduces the complexity by interpreting the reality in a unified way. However, on the other hand, rumours rise to add up to the complexity of reality by speaking of alternative truths, “which turns one’s interest away from the Eternal and towards the new” (Deleuze 1992: 163). Following this logic, rumouring, as the juncture between predictability and unpredictability, articulates the world’s complexity and resists the homogenising power of truth discourses, keeping the course of cultural history from being a litany of “correct”, “proper” representations of the world and preventing it from an enclosed system of ultimate truths. Rumouring has become a vital step for the world remaining an interesting place to be described and understood. Via constant rumouring, subjugated knowledges re-emerge, renewed and re-absorbed in social discourses, which in return ensures the constant re-configuration of truth discourses and the development of human knowledges. Precisely in this sense, rumour is the “cornerstone of epistemology” (Fine 1997: 761).

3. THE SOCIAL INFECTION OF RUMOURS

In Mandarin Chinese, rumour is called “Yao Yan”⁸⁷ or “Liu Yan”.⁸⁸ Whereas “Yan” means speech and articulation, “Yao” means being chanted and “Liu” means flowing. Rumours are chanted, flowing and further reproduced in the social sphere among different social groups that are affected by the suspension of tensions. So far, we have already addressed the epistemic structures in given societies (Chapter 1), followed by the moment when rumours are articulated in current communicative situations and are about to set off (Chapter 2). Following the lifecycle of rumours in society, what we have at hand right now is a set of narratives about to be transmitted in the social sphere, and our task here is therefore to investigate the transmission and transmutation of rumours, as well as their own demise. In illustrating these topics, we should bring further cases to illustrate the topic of our discussion here.

When the whole Wuhan city was environed in the mood of the lunar new year, which would be celebrated in a couple of days, no one would foresee the outbreak of a pandemic that later swept the globe. There was, indeed, some insider information that warned people of an upcoming virus, but they were overwhelmed by the festive vibe for the Spring Festival. As early as in December, Li Wenliang, posthumously called “the Whistle Blower”, along with other medical workers who had witnessed an increase in lung infections in hospitals, sent messages in group chats on platforms such as WeChat, the Chinese WhatsApp and Facebook, telling people that a kind of mysterious virus was infecting people insidiously. These early informers were later punished as rumour spreaders by authorities; the later outbreak of the pandemic created a backlash of emotions among citizens to commemorate them, especially Dr. Li (for more details of the story of Dr. Li, please see Song 2022b). Apart from illustrating the ideas in Introduction and in Chapter 2 on the exclusion of facticity in rumours and the power dynamics of rumouring, our topic here is the smouldering of rumours in the context of an invisible danger, which calls back to discussions in 2.1 on the suspension of tensions. By having suspicions of a dangerous virus stalking in the shades, people needed to find a way of talking about it and fixing the ambiguated reality, and by being dismissed as rumours, the information was constantly fermenting in social groups that were already included in this discursive carnival. On January 23rd, 2020, the Wuhan Municipal Government declared a quarantine to maintain the infection of the virus and people were not allowed to go outside of the buildings they resided. The daily necessities were plentiful, yet people were not satisfied by that. The outside world, now no longer accessible, became an inexhaustible source of public imagination, which was always a projection of what people *knew*

⁸⁷ “谣言”

⁸⁸ “流言”

about current situations. Some rumours sounded quite “antique”; for example, it was rumoured that drinking alcohol can prevent people from infection (we can also find the logic of mild scientism here). Some accorded to what people had heard about current situations (For more Covid-19 related rumours in Wuhan, please see Song 2025a). Under most of the circumstances, narratives intersect with each other, and rumour complexes are formed as interlaced interpretations evolving in real time. Following this thread, we may concentrate on the afterquakes of rumouring, namely rumours’ circulation, evolution and eventual dissolution, as well as their final sedimentation in their semiotic afterlives (A. Assmann 2015; Tamm 2013; Burke 2015).

The proliferation of rumours in Wuhan under the lockdown brings more to be discussed. The discursive carnival instigated by the suspicion that a new “SARS-like” virus⁸⁹ (this was what Dr. Li was texting in a group chat on WeChat) was looming on the horizon was followed by a trail of interpretations of what the invisible virus was like when the grand narratives were absent in giving a satisfying interpretation of the situation. When such discourses start their course, they not only resonate within the social groups that try to fix the ambiguated social reality (as we have discussed in 2.1.2); they also trespass the boundaries between social groups and convince others that there is something going wrong. The problem from the perspective of rumours’ audience is thus raised to focus on the mechanisms of rumour transmission and why people are believing in rumours. By the end of Introduction, we describe rumour transmission as a process of infection. The cataleptic effect (Reumaux 1996: 174) not only appears in people articulating what is happening around them; the effect persists when rumours travel between various social groups and mesmerise their audience. As Kapferer puts it, “rumors do not persuade or convince people; rather they seduce them” (1990: 82). We need to clarify the channels by which rumour travels, based on different credulities that people construct in their *habiti* (upon which we have touched in 1.2.1). The infection of rumours still draws upon social groups’ allegiance with their culture and history, which echoes the discussion on cultural memory in Chapter 1. For social groups that are steeped in a given culture, such narratives “are based on historical particulars that make them plausible” (Fine and Ellis 2010: 184) to them and again, from the audience’s side, we draw upon discussions on truth obligations, complementing the ones we had in 2.3.2.

The Covid-19 rumours during the lockdown of Wuhan also bring new aspects with regard to the development of media and information technology. Since it is “the first worldwide digitally witnessed pandemic” (Erl 2020: 867), the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan became a special case to see how a thickened reality, by

⁸⁹ SARS, or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, was first spotted in Guangdong Province in China in 2003. It later went rampage in China and other adjacent countries, which left a poignant, traumatic experience in the collective memory of China.

providing information “too much” and “too real” (Song 2025a), influenced people’s experience of the world beyond their reach, especially when their living space was reduced to liminal areas. Because of the lockdown, the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan gives a relatively “pure” case to see how rumours travel on digital platforms and how truth claims online shroud people’s perception of what is happening here and now. On the one hand, the thickened reality reveals the transmedial aspects of rumours, which is represented not only in the increasing speed of rumour transmission but also in the construction of credibility and authority in the digital space. On the other hand, the overwhelming information flow, especially in the context of a dooming happening such as the lockdown, changes people’s perception of time. In hindsight, time during discursive carnivals seems to come to a halt, and rumours persist and continue to haunt the society, which amplifies rumours’ seduction power in an echo chamber woven by transmediality.

Aside from rumours’ infection and resonance within social groups, another aspect worthy of deeper investigation is rumour’s transmutation of its contents. Even though we have already addressed the problem of rumour complex as a fleeting phenomenon by situating them under the relationship between various power structures and truth discourses, how rumours transform, both in themselves and infiltrate into other discourses, will be the next question to be discussed. When rumours travel beyond the boundaries between social groups, some of their elements are omitted and rumours adapt to the new contexts of articulation. Bearing in mind the textual dynamics in culture, or “sociocultural fluctuations” as Pitirim Sorokin (1970: 53) terms as “any change, of a given logical subject in the course of time” that happens on different sectors of culture and cultures, we can find that rumour texts actively engage in the intertextual relationships and constantly push forward these fluctuations in human epistemology. In line with investigating intertextuality in a social synchrony, it is time to switch to what comes after rumours being articulated. In 2.2.1, we have pointed out that during a discursive carnival, the hierarchies of knowledges are absent and all interpretations ring plausible. When considering the implications of such carnivals, we will find that the unpredictability of rumours leads to an explosive process (Lotman 2009) and intersect with each other as the mundane reason (Pollner 1987) forces individuals to articulate what they understand of current situations in the social sphere, which, in rumouring, are most often times other’s articulations. Infection not only happens among social groups, but also among discourses. Even those that do not have a semantic linkage with the current rumouring will also be infiltrated by elements from discursive carnivals and finally entailed into the carnival, not to mention that in a thickened reality, the media of storytelling and retelling are already melt into a shroud of transmediality (Jenkins 2006).

The falsification of some claims in collective memories is never the end of rumours; instead, as we can see in rumours during the lockdown, rumours already

infect social groups even before they are dismissed as rumours, and after the dismissal, rumours become more attractive. As Reumaux points out, “It does not matter whether a rumor is true or false, because when it turns out to be true, it disappears as a rumor, and when it is false, it seems so true that it seems necessary for individuals to pass it on” (Reumaux 1996: 150, Translation mine).⁹⁰ In line with 2.3, we can find the falsification of improvised memories will in return boost the infection of rumours in most cases, which becomes the pre-last stage of the rumour phenomenon, as Fine and Ellis underscore,

Once this period has passed, and some measure of stability has returned, rumors change their focus. We feel safer, but now we desire to learn that justice has been meted out. People search for inspiring stories about tragedies and triumphs, providing the event with moral meaning and emotional resonance. (Fine and Ellis 2010: 52)

However, there should be a certain point where rumours are diffused. If we again take a macroscopic view of textual dynamics in culture, the diffusion of rumour can be taken as the disintegration of texts (Lotman 1988). Before examining textual disintegration, it is necessary to investigate why rumours lose their attractiveness in social contexts, which, in line with the discussions on discursive carnivals, is the conclusion of this state of unease and the restoration of hierarchies of knowledges. In the case of Covid-19 rumours in Wuhan, when the lockdown was lifted in April, there was a sharp decrease in rumours. Other than simply concluding that the lift of the lockdown marked the end of the proliferation of rumours, we may bridge the discussions with what we have addressed in 2.1 on the suspension of tensions. The suspension of tensions in the social sphere instigates the mundane reason to reestablish the ambiguated social reality, and when such suspension is surmounted in the progression of culture on historical metrics, discursive carnivals are also diffused on a local scale as the social groups are no longer affected by suspension. More intricate mechanisms of rumour diffusion, in this sense, await further elaboration.

It should be pointed out that rumour articulation and rumour infection can happen simultaneously. The sequence is merely causal and may not be temporal. In this regard, Chapter 2 and 3 describe processes that almost happen at the same time. Despite that there is a logical sequence between the two, in practice we see two processes intersect with each other: Whilst older rumours are transmitted in the social sphere, newer rumours are articulated as the following meta-communication of previous texts. At the local level we see the rise and fall of a single rumour’s life and death among social groups, and at the translocal level we

⁹⁰ “Il importe peu de savoir si une rumeur est vraie ou fausse, parce que lorsqu’elle s’avère vraie, elle disparaît comme rumeur, et lorsqu’elle est fausse, elle paraît vraie au point qu’il semble nécessaire aux individus de la transmettre”.

observe such textual dynamics in rumour complexes in which various rumours are articulated and transformed in the social synchrony. By keeping both levels for investigating rumour, we finally have a whole view of the rumour phenomenon with rumour's infection and its own transmutation; after a long journey of exploring what is underneath the earth of the rumour phenomenon, we are now at the point where it is time to investigate the most observable stages of rumour.

3.1. The Resonance: A Swirl of Infection within the Rumour Public

Kapferer comments that "A rumor's content must itself satisfy two conditions of belief: one must be *able* to and *want* to believe it" (1990: 70, italics original). Based on the discussions in Chapter 1, the amalgam of knowledges function as the epistemic basis of rumours. From the perspective of the audience of rumours, we can find that the same amalgam of knowledges enables people to interpret narratives that are about the social reality around them. When articulated rumours are resonating in social groups, these narratives ring plausible and acceptable among these groups because they precisely point to and invoke the same amalgam of knowledges that these groups share in constructing the same social reality that is ambiguated. This is to say that the same mundane reason that pressures social groups to articulate these narratives also leads them to believe in them; only later, in terms of causality rather than temporality, do these narratives become rumours. The resonance within and between social groups accompanies the swirl of infection that constantly draws more social groups and texts into the discursive carnival. Therefore, in understanding the swirl of infection, we need to more closely investigate the mechanisms that these social groups, or "rumor public" (Peterson and Gist 1951), believe in rumours. Multiple scholars point out that rumours are "too good to be false" (for example, Shibutani 1966; Rosnow and Fine 1976; Kapferer 1990; Fine 2007); but few of them investigate the reason why they are "too good". By taking a closer look into the reason why some rumours ring attractive to specific audiences at a certain point, we have reached the essence of the swirl of infection.

3.1.1. Model Readers of Rumours and Auto-communication in Rumour Public

The mass proliferation of rumours in Wuhan demonstrates that, under pressure in the social sphere, social groups that are affected by the suspension of tensions gather together and interpretations resonate in this temporary alignment. As these narratives resonate within social groups, people set aside their doubts against rumours and take them as true statements. In this sense, believing in rumours

always presumes a suspension of disbelief, which can be compared to similar phenomena when people are reading a fiction. As Eco (1994: 101–4) notes, in *The Three Musketeers*, Dumas wrote of a street named *Rue Servandoni*, which could not be possible because the story took place in the early 17th Century, before the birth of Giovanni Niccolo Servandoni, to whom the street name was dedicated only in 1806. When reading the novel, readers never question the name of the street in Paris and take this Paris *as real* in the fictionalised world that the story depicts (we will come back to possible worlds in narratives in 3.2 about textual dynamics), as Eco points out,

This wouldn't matter if the issue concerned only the empirical author Dumas. But now that the text exists, we obedient readers have to follow its instructions, and we find ourselves in an entirely real Paris, identical to the Paris of 1625, except that in the former a street appears which couldn't have existed. (Eco 1994: 104)

We can find the same obedience when people turn to believe in rumours in discursive carnivals. “The reader has to know that what is narrated is an imaginary story, but he must not therefore believe that the writer is telling lies” (Eco 1994: 75). In continuing the discussion on readership, Eco conceptualises the idea of “model reader” as a model foreseen by authors of the text that is “able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them” (Eco 1979: 7), thus being distinguished from empirical readers in real-time situations. In other words, whereas empirical readers “must observe the rules of the game”, model readers are “someone eager to play the game” (Eco 1994: 10). But precisely from here we can find the cacophonies between rumours and fictions. Giovanni Tuzet conceptualises fictions as “assumptions which are knowingly false but used for some purpose” (Tuzet 2022: 457). Regarding rumours, when people are motivated by a mundane reason to fix the locally ambiguated social reality, their believing in rumours, in contrast, demonstrates that social groups take the narratives as true. Hence, despite that there is suspension of disbelief both in fictions and in rumours, the inner mechanisms of both phenomena bifurcate as they are grounded on different situations, which brings the discussion again back to the specifics of discursive carnivals.

In most of the rumour cases, apart from being a conscious suspension of disbelief, such suspensions that happen when rumours proliferate point to a deeper level than merely narratological finesses in fictions. The amalgam of knowledges function as the frontline of culture's progression in time. When people are facing narratives that try to convince them, the amalgam of knowledges and hierarchies of knowledges function concertedly as the epistemological navigations and help people to choose to believe or not to believe in these statements. However, during discursive carnivals, power relationships are reshuffled when hierarchies of knowl-

edges are temporarily subverted. When every truth claim becomes believable in the discursive carnival, the knowledges that empirical readers withhold become flattened as legitimations of these knowledge structures are absent. Therefore, other than conceptualising a model reader as an ideal form of readership, in the case of rumours, the ongoing discursive carnival constantly transforms empirical readers into model readers at this instant dimension of social contexts. In this regard, the model-empirical reader model in fictions can be borrowed into understanding the infectious state of rumours in people's beliefs by reshaping the model into a dynamic one due to the nature of discursive carnivals. In line with the idea of rumour resonance and the logic of *Ersetzung* discussed in 2.2.3, rumours that are generated from the knowledges that affected social groups have already withheld. It is not that these empirical readers know the rules of rumour narratives as in fictions, but that in discursive carnivals, the resonance changes, or even paralyses empirical readers' epistemic compass, namely the hierarchy of knowledges, who are "forced" to become model readers under such pressure. Accordingly, the question of believing in rumours is reshaped into the dynamics of empirical readers of rumour being mesmerised as model readers of rumour in the context of discursive carnivals.

Eco further notes that by conceiving model readers, a path is projected in the narratives so that "Every step of the 'story' elicits just the expectation that its further course will satisfy" (1979: 8). If we come back to investigate the mesmerised rumour public from this perspective, these affected social groups are not "blind" in believing rumours; they have their own expectations based on the mundane reason, yearning for believing things that they know to rehabilitate the social reality. Believing in rumours thus demonstrates a structured interpretive framework, resembling the amalgam of knowledges that people share and utilise in the social sphere. As we can see in the rumours in Wuhan during Covid-19, people believed in rumours that were mobilising what they knew: they knew that there was a new SARS-like virus drawing near and the virus was highly infectious. So it was rumoured that a man was infected by only having a 10-minute transit in Wuhan, even though it was later clarified that the man was merely having a cough.⁹¹ From this small piece of rumour, we have a glimpse of rumour communications in the context of discursive carnivals. When speaking of something that all participants of a discursive carnival know, they were at the same time addressers and addressees, and articulating and believing rumours become two sides of a coin. In other words, the same mundane reason that necessitates people to articulate rumours is the same reason that makes people believe in rumours. Therefore, rumours don't merely inform; they reaffirm, revise, or revive cultural memory and group knowledge. Lotman terms this process as "auto-communication" (Lotman 1990) and rumours and rumouring can be seen as a special case of auto-

⁹¹ <http://society.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0123/c1008-31561513.html> (In Chinese)

communication about rumours' purposes for comprehending what is going on here and now (Song 2025c). Precisely in this vein, rumours are always "too good to be false" (Fine 2007: 6).

Introducing the framework of auto-communication into understanding rumours opens up more dynamics to be discussed. Lotman notes that,

In the 'I-I' system [auto-communication] the bearer of the information remains the same but the message is reformulated and acquires new meaning during the communication process. This is the result of introducing a supplementary, second, code; the original message is recoded into elements of its structure and thereby acquires features of a *new* message. (Lotman 1990: 22, italics original)

Already at the very end of 1.2, we have mentioned that rumours enter the metrics of cultural history in the sense of registering themselves as cultural texts that represent the epistemic structures and power relationships in the amalgam of knowledges. By auto-communication we can investigate the implications of such processes in social groups in a microscope. Following Lotman's ideas, the dynamics in auto-communication constantly change the narratives themselves in that resonance, which promises the internal transmutation of rumour texts. Besides this, by exchanging existing knowledges within the rumour public, namely the social groups that are entailed in the discursive carnival, people achieve more than simply exchanging what they know of the current situation. Rather than passively absorbing information, these groups actively recalibrate their expectations to restore coherence to a disrupted social reality. Under the pressure of discursive carnivals, auto-communication is activated within social groups, as they reprocess their own knowledges to restore order. People believe in rumours to (re)claim their belonging to the social groups in the ambiguated social reality. As Kapferer notes, "To believe a rumor is to manifest one's allegiance to the group's voice, i.e., to collective opinion" (1990: 104).

Moreover, Lotman argues that "The 'I-s/he' system allows one merely to transmit a constant quantity of information, whereas the I-I system qualitatively transforms the information, and this leads to a restructuring of the actual I itself" (1990: 22). Activating auto-communication among the social groups that are entailed in the discursive carnival adds up another layer of collective self-description by generating new information internally (Leone, Madisson, and Ventsel 2020). The process also corresponds to what George H. Mead conceptualises as the fusion of "I" and "me",⁹² which leads to "complete identification of individuals" (Mead 1934: 274). And precisely from this point, smaller, makeshift identities are corralled under discursive carnivals. In line with prior discussions on the mistrust of official statements, this is to say that makeshift identities are

⁹² For Mead, "The 'I'" is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the 'me' is the organised set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes" (1934: 175).

constructed as an enclosed circuit of believing and articulating that escapes (again, a temporary one, as discussed in 2.2 and 2.3) the overarching truth discourses and divides local groups from a larger community that shares such truths. As Fine and Ellis note,

Yet, at the same moment that rumor reveals an uncertain trust in institutions and the quality of the information that they provide, it reveals trust in the knowledge of fellow citizens. Put another way, people in one's social network are treated as credible sources. Rumor reveals trust in one's neighbors and co-workers at the moment that it questions trust in institutions. Trust may unite one group while dividing the larger community of which the group is a part. (Fine and Ellis 2010: 100)

In other words, a makeshift identity among the rumour public is forged within discursive carnivals by a temporary *pidginisation* of these newly articulated self-descriptions along with the “normal” self-descriptions that belong to a higher socio-cultural identification. In this sense, we can finally speak of a rumour public that is constituted by social groups that are engaged in discursive carnivals. As Torop points out,

On the one hand, self-descriptions and alongside with them also meta-descriptions or descriptions from the position of culture as a whole are being created in different parts of culture. This is integration through autonomies. On the other hand, cultural languages diffuse and become creolised due to the communication between different parts of culture. (Torop 2005: 168)

For example, during the lockdown, people in Wuhan who were restricted from going outside of their own apartments came up with a temporary identity and imbued it with new meanings during the articulation and belief in the discourses resonating within them (Song 2022a). The most prominent one might be Fang Fang's diary (2020), in which the author took accounts of what happened each day of the lockdown and firstly published them online. When people read her diary online and sympathised the tragic events mentioned by her (despite that, some of the stories were merely stories and were never verified), they identified themselves and contributed new contents to the meaning of being a resident in Wuhan. Therefore, we can witness that some regional stereotypes, which used to be inactive, were brought back to the public discussion during the lockdown.⁹³ But these stereotypes are not new; they still belong to a cultural system that can be dated back way earlier than the lockdown and they were simply brought back

⁹³ It is worth noting that in the published English version of *Wuhan Diary*, the word “Wuhanese” was used, instead of the “Wuhan People” or the “people of Wuhan”, which represents the formation of the makeshift identity to an extent.

to the table by the lockdown. As we touched upon earlier, different from legends which serve relatively “cold” in auto-communication, rumours are “a hyperactive state of legend” (Tangherlini 2017: 5) that constantly brings new information on the table by repeating prior epistemic structures and adapting them to current situations.

We should never forget that the knowledges that the rumour public utilises and adheres to are not limited to them; under most circumstances they are also shared by other social groups that may not be affected by suspension of tensions (as we have discussed in 2.1), which means that the boundaries of the rumour public are always expanding. By acknowledging this, we have entered the central mechanisms of the “swirl of infection” as mentioned in earlier pages. Torop argues that “When description on one level can be regarded as self-description on another level, then it is possible to see an auto-communication process in communication processes” (2009: xxvii), which indicates that the rumour texts resonating within the rumour public may be also interpreted and travel beyond these boundaries. This calls back to our discussions on the symbolic universe as the ultimate mechanism of maintaining the amalgam of knowledges, in which everything can be interpreted. Starting from here, rumours break through the boundaries of the initial social groups that start rumours.

However, it does not mean that rumours can travel without a leash. People may have the capacity to interpret, but they do not have to. Believing in rumours still requires a mundane reason that people need to believe in such narratives for comprehension’s sake. We should again recall that the mundane reason is still a cultural artefact, rising from the mundane belief in the social reality as “a cultural system which patterns the actions and utterances of members and is drawn upon by them as a way of ordering their projects and circumstances” (Pollner 1987: 17). And the investigation of rumour infection is again brought back to an investigation of socio-cultural channels of the rumour public, which will be elaborated in the next section.

The ever-expanding auto-communication process that originates from social groups that are affected by suspension of tensions demonstrates the central mechanism of the swirl of rumour infection. Discursive carnivals, first of all, foreground the self-description of the affected social groups and generate new texts for those who need such interpretations for comprehending the social reality. Moreover, these texts can be further interpreted by those who are originally not among the affected groups but have such capacity of interpreting, and discursive carnivals are therefore expanded by their reach. In this logic, we can bring back the idea of model readers in the dynamics of rumour infection by concluding that, via auto-communicative processes, discursive carnivals constantly transform social groups into model readers of rumours due to the deeply embedded epistemic structures engraved by culture.

3.1.2. Network of Believing: A Microscope and a Macroscope

However, there is still one issue, more trivial yet significant still, that needs further investigation of the expanding discursive carnivals. On the macroscope we can indeed talk about auto-communication and those that are believing rumours share the knowledges with those who articulate rumours and are willing to believe in these narratives out of a mundane reason. But on the microscope, the channels by which these narratives travel are not specifically designated for rumour infection, but existing channels that have already been constructed in the long endurance of cultural history. As Dan E. Miller points out, “rumors do not move randomly or serially, but rather in sociometric patterns, i.e., chains and webs” (1992: 383). Therefore, to examine the socio-cultural channels that rumours infect, we need to first focus on how rumours are “constantly filtering from one level to another, from one group to another, from one actor to another, via multiple networks” (Reumaux 1996: 18, translation mine).⁹⁴ In this sense, different from a “network of beliefs” to understand how the shared social reality is structured, our focus here is a “network of believing” to understand how interpersonal informative channels are woven, finally, into a social space that people can speak of here and now in discursive carnivals.

The Microscope: Rumour Conduits and Footing

In November 2023, A video raised concerns of many in Mainland China. A man posted on Twitter that when he was discussing incomes with the driver in a cab, the platform, Didi, the Chinese Uber, popped out a warning notice on the driver’s mobile phone that the driver should not talk about related topics with the passenger.⁹⁵ According to the video, the driver used gestures to hush down the discussion when the man in the video also expressed concerns about companies and governments that breach privacies, which are, indeed, not new topics when it comes to what is going on in China. Moreover, in the afterquakes of the outbreak of Covid-19, the economic situation in China was in its downturn due to the strict limits during the quarantine (after Wuhan, there were also other locked-down cities, for example, Urumqi and Shanghai. These lockdowns also instigated rumours and even protests, we shall come back to them later), incomes and salaries had become a sensitive topic in Mainland China because the government was still trying to construct the legitimacy of a hard lockdown, which was questioned after the last lockdown was lifted in 2022. It was later clarified by Didi that such smearing was a rumour and the company never recorded

⁹⁴ “filtrant sans cesse d’un palier à l’autre, d’un groupe à l’autre, d’un acteur à l’autre, par l’intermédiaire de multiples réseaux”.

⁹⁵ Video on X (Twitter): <https://x.com/xiaojingcanxue/status/1723419966660292624>

discussions for analysis' sake.⁹⁶ However, recording what is happening in the cab indeed exists due to security concerns (there were incidents of robbery or sexual violence reported and such recordings could be used as evidence and proof for protecting victims), and rumours on banishing income-related topics persisted, fuelled by existing anxieties over surveillance and censorship.

In 2.1, we have discussed that censorship and self-censorship create a suspension of tensions and necessitate people to reconstruct the ambiguated reality out of a mundane reason. Since “The longer the lock-down, the more likely it is for popular attitudes to turn negative towards the regime” (Zeng 2024: 1374), people had questions towards the efficacy of lockdowns and would like to exchange their understandings of current economic situations as the aftermath of the lockdown. Because of the censorship policy in Mainland China, people needed to find other ways to talk about the economic downturn and traumatic memories of the lockdown. In this sense, the Didi rumours are representatives of concerns on the Chinese government’s censorship, which adapted to new forms in the context of lockdowns. But more than exemplifying the previous arguments, there is more from the Didi rumours. Interestingly, the video was posted on Twitter, a platform that people in Mainland China can only access via a VPN, which indicates that the information did not reach affected social groups (in the sense of being affected by the censorship policies in China) at the same time as it reached its audience on Twitter. In other words, the information, impossible to be transmitted on public channels, travelled to the people in Mainland China secretly via interpersonal networks and gradually instigated discursive carnivals that finally led to a public dismissal by Didi, the company. In this sense, the Didi rumours reveal an often-hidden aspect of rumour infection about rumour’s movements within and between social groups. Since such movements were relayed by the banishment of Twitter, they are more observable than that in most of other cases mentioned above.

To investigate the intricate networks of rumour infection means a closer inspection of how these existing channels are constructed, drawing upon a mentioned yet unfinished topic in Chapter 1 and 2 on the network of rumour articulation and infection. In other words, there is an interpersonal network, upon which “narrators invite listeners to construct meanings from raw events” (Bennett 1999: 117). In 1.3.1 we have already discussed the institutionalisation of everyday life and the trust in others, as well as the following problems of the construction of trust and plausibility in 1.3.2. During the constant exchange of everyday life between individuals, the channels of information exchange are constructed before rumouring happens and can even date back several centuries, as those that we can trace in legend telling. As the case of Lapu-lapu fish and related rumours in Reumaux’s work (1996; for further arguments on channel construction in cultural memory, see Song 2025c) demonstrate, such informative channels have already

⁹⁶ <https://www.163.com/dy/article/IJHR9ST70511B8LM.html> (In Chinese)

been carved by social institutions in the process of constant legend telling and retelling between individuals. Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi termed these channels “legend conduits” as “the sequence of individuals who qualify as legend receivers and transmitters. If the legend goes off its track and ends up on another conduit, its fate might be multifarious” (1976: 96). Following this logic, when legends have been told and retold, a network is woven by existing informative channels when the receivers *believe* in these speakers and in return consolidate these channels.

However, if we come back to the rumour cases at hand, we can find that the information takes the form of stories indeed as we can see from the Didi rumours; but not all of them qualify as “legend”. As Gillian Bennett argues,

First, I want to point out that these features may be characteristics of any story with problematic contents when told in a face-to-face context and when the discursive force is interpretational or heuristic. It is not necessary to define every story which features this sort of debate as a “legend.” Secondly, I want to note that most of the work on the “dialectics of legend” (or, as I would prefer to term it, “story dialectic”) has focused on debates between speakers and hearers; yet another sort of debate is possible. (Bennett 1999: 124)

Bennett’s first point deals precisely with our focus here. In discursive carnivals, people need to comprehend the current ambiguated social reality and believe in others’ stories to fix it. Rumour operates less like an inherited narrative and more like an interpretative, heuristic response to uncertainty. Therefore, Dégh and Vázsonyi’s idea of legend conduits are transformed into “rumour conduits” that illustrate “those who act as receivers and re-emitters” (Kapferer 1990: 93). Following this logic, the formation of a network of believing lies precisely in the construction of believability represented in the narratives when such rumour conduits are used. In other words, we have reached the “microphysics of power” (Foucault 1995) that is constructed interpersonally as politics of credibility. As Fine notes, “The politics of credibility connects to the evaluation that audiences make of the source of the material: whether to award credibility and whether reference to one’s source is incorporated in the text as it is transmitted, gainsaying its believability” (2007: 9).

In continuing the discussions in 1.3.1, the topic here is what happens to these interpersonal conduits during discursive carnivals. The evaluation of the narratives can be measured on the metrics of “footing” as the “range of relationships that speakers and writers have to the descriptions they report” (Goffman 1981; cited from Potter 1996: 123). In the case of Didi rumours, such footings are central to making listeners believe in that story. As Potter adds, “footing is central when dealing with factual reports, because it is through the paraphernalia of footing that speakers manage their personal or institutional accountability for such reports” (Potter 1996: 123). When the story moved from Twitter to people

in Mainland China, it was first read by those who both had access to Twitter and conduits with those that were within the Chinese internet, which demonstrates a demographic relation manifested in rumour conduits. And for those who did not have access to Twitter, their imagination of the current situation, incorporated with their suspicions towards a general censorship inflicted by the government, accorded with the story about surveillance and warnings in a Didi cab. It should be pointed out that, when the information moved to Mainland China, the story had not yet become a rumour since it did not instigate a discursive carnival under social pressure. But when the story was believed to be true within Mainland China, it became a story “too good” to question its credibility. The story “conveys information that justifies one’s intuition or fulfills a barely formulated wish. Its information sounds sweet to our ears” (Kapferer 1990: 104).

Moreover, footing between the speaker and the listener “constructs a discourse whose function is not truthsaying but rather seeming-to-be-true” (Greimas 1989: 658), which links to the second point that Bennett made: rumour travels not to convince or to persuade (not a “debate”, as Bennett points out), but mesmerise those who already have related knowledges to interpret the narratives. This is enough already for a rumour to function. We can then bring back the discussions in the previous section on auto-communication. In the resonance of rumours and rumouring, people reassert their sense of belonging by exchanging what they know and what they hear; and by believing in rumours, social groups claim their allegiance and rumours resonating within have become a manifestation of such groups’ self-description. Therefore, in rumour conduits, the addresser-addressee direction of information exchange is no longer relevant, since everyone, in discursive carnivals, is talking about it (Song 2025c). As Hans-Joachim poetically puts it, “it is immanent, as if it were from the inside, distant and untouched, which can only be heard by those who put the shell to their ear: ‘There is no shout, only murmurs, as from the waves of the sea, if someone hears them from afar’” (1998: 227, translation mine).⁹⁷ In this sense, the direction of telling and being told becomes secondary in the network of believing, and from the interpersonal microscope of believing others, we can then move back to the macroscope to acquire more features in this network.

The Macroscope: Will to Truth and the Model Author of Rumours

The network of believing is interpersonal, not between social groups. Since an individual can be a member of various social groups, the boundaries of these social groups are always porous and the identities of their members are always

⁹⁷ “[...]vor allem aber sind sie so nah, als kämen sie nicht von außen, sondern aus jenem fernen und unbetretenen Innen, das nur vernimmt, wer sich die Muschel ans Ohr hält: ‚kein Geschrei, nur leiser Stimmen Gemurmels, wie von den Wogen des Meeres, wenn einer sie hört aus der Ferne’”.

fluid. This is to say that when rumours are moving on the metrics of interpersonal networks in the social sphere, rumour narratives move beyond the boundaries of affected social groups and have become a social thing. Therefore, this network of believing naturally falls under the surveillance of truth discourses in the social sphere. However, as we have already noted in multiple places in previous discussions, relationships between social groups' beliefs and truth discourses are never as simple as a mere obedience towards a singular truth. From Covid-19 rumours in Wuhan, we can find that despite the truth that the Chinese government provided (that there was not such mass infection and the situation is totally under control⁹⁸), other versions of truth persisted as the description endorsed by central authorities lost its credibility during the discursive carnival. In exploring the macroscopic aspects of the network of believing, our focus is the intricacies that the rumour public believes in rumours before and even after truth discourses dismissing them as rumours. In short, the question is, why people believe in alternative truth claims, while the authorised truth discourses are no longer believed?

The truth obligations that have been created in grand narratives are still functioning, even when truth discourses as the dismissal of rumour narratives lose their credibility (temporarily, indeed). The historical inertia as remaining projections of power relationships still serves to legitimise truth discourses in people's beliefs. Stepping forward, we may investigate the influences that discursive carnivals inflict upon truth obligations. In other words, what we used to describe as historical inertia is a social synchrony that can be projected to future discursive carnivals, whereas our concern here is precisely these projections and their interplays with the network of believing. Due to the suspension of tensions, the legitimisation of truth discourses is absent, yet the obligation has already been inculcated into people's beliefs that there needs to be a truth to anchor down the ambiguated reality. The obedience to an available truth in the social sphere renews the idea of the mundane reason in the previous chapters but proceeds to a deeper level of a "will to truth", which relies on institutional support (Foucault 1971: 11). In discursive carnivals the institutional support wavers, yet the truth obligations that people are compelled to anchor themselves to something believable still exist, which indicates that such obligations, now an unstructured willingness to believe (in the sense of institutional justification that presents a singular truth to be believed), become "misfiring obligations", echoing the conceptualisation of discursive carnivals in 2.2.1 that everything has become

⁹⁸ On January 11th, 2020, the National Health Commission of the Chinese government made a statement that "the new virus was totally preventable, and the situation is totally controllable." Original Link: <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/xcs/yqtb/202001/1beb46f061704372b7ca41ef3e682229.shtml>. Due to later governmental narratives, which changed their wordings, this page is no longer available, please see <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/%E5%8F%AF%E9%98%B2%E5%8F%AF%E6%8E%A7> for more information (In Chinese); also see http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-01/19/c_1125480602.htm (In Chinese)

believable. Precisely at this point, as we mentioned in the former section, articulating rumours and believing in rumours are two sides of the same coin.

Believing in alternative truths out of the will to truth does not contradict the Sun-like dismissal that is inherited as projections of truth discourses from central authorities. Instead, they are always in the power dynamics of the social sphere at the meso-level. As we have already argued in 2.3.2, discursive carnivals create merely a temporary exemption and a phantom of emancipation from the grand narratives in the social sphere; on the meso-level, rumours bounce back and forth between local articulations of the reality and social truth discourses. In this vein, it is proper to say that discursive carnivals, instigated by the dynamics of power relationships in the social sphere, forge a shelter where people *can* believe in a truth other than the only truth that dominates the social sphere. This alternative truth(s) lies not in evidence but in its alignment with deeply embedded cultural scripts and shared semiotic resources. And by that, the other half of the story promised in 1.3.2 and in 2.3 is complemented to the current research.

Since the projection of truth discourses from the grand narratives are still part of discursive carnivals, the misfired truth obligation is still left with a hope that *the truth*, which the will to truth points to and which the truth discourses construct, can be found in various narratives in rumour discourses. Therefore, at every juncture where rumours are articulated/believed, ongoing narratives need to function temporarily as the truth that *can* fix the ambiguated reality, as Kapferer stresses that rumours are to “*seek out the truth*” (Kapferer 1990: 3, italics original). During the lockdown in Wuhan, as well as in many other cases, we can see that people did not merely believe in truth claims passively for comprehension’s sake; they also actively sought for truth and justice in narratives to formulate their wishes. People not only *need* a truth discourse to believe in; they also need to *stay* with the truth discourse by believing it. However, as Song (2025a: 285) argues, during discursive carnivals, a settled interpretation of the current social reality can never be reached due to the heteroglossic nature of discursive carnivals; all truth claims cannot be legitimised since the hierarchy of knowledges no longer structures the social reality. People during discursive carnivals are therefore immersed in a prolonged (we will come back to the temporal aspect of discursive carnivals in 3.3.) resonance of rumours. When people are articulating rumour texts in discursive carnivals, there is no institutional order that can be posited to structure the ambiguated social reality and *Ersetzung* happens as all knowledges are invoked to try to function as the knowledge from higher hierarchies. However, they can never be settled with the position since they are already subjugated in a broader social context that discursive carnivals have not yet reached. This mechanism is represented in carnivals as an unsatiated hunt for truth, in which various interpretations beget various narratives, but none of them can bring the social reality back to order since the power dynamics in the social sphere is still suspending the tensions in the social sphere.

We can find the same hysteria in multiple examples in previous pages and chapters. For example, in the Hairy Men case the hysteria rose from a collective suspicion of the witnessed Soviet experts and a concern to the ongoing nuclear weapon project. And in the case of Brezhnev's Rolls-Royce this hysteria was the outcome of a crashed limousine that people did not find its driver. In all these cases, a final, settled interpretation that could diffuse discursive carnivals (we will come back to diffusion in 3.3) could never be reached and people were constantly speaking and believing in truth claims that rang plausible according to the knowledges they have. In continuing in 1.2.4 that rumours enter the dynamics of cultural history by invoking these cultural texts, we may further elaborate this discussion towards an exceptional situation in cultural history and an understanding of collective emotions as Lotman (1991; 1998; 2000; also see Gherlone 2019) conceptualises. However, this is already beyond the scope of investigating rumours.

The same unsatiated hunt for truth also influences how rumours are told and retold. Because of the persistent will to truth, individuals cannot fully embrace these narratives as "their truth" without fear of later contradiction, embarrassment, or ethical failure. When people articulate rumours, they always try to distance themselves from these narratives. As Fine notes, "As people are often linked to the information they spread, they attempt to avoid the label of liar, deceiver or fool. When uncertain information is being transmitted, the communicator may place distance between self and story" (2007: 9). In this regard, we can clarify the relationship between the microscopic footing between individuals and a macroscopic, overarching will to truth that makes every telling and retelling a motivated drive. On the microscope, people speak of "a friend of a friend" to free themselves from being the liar, and on the macroscope, people resort to the truth discourses provided by an authoritative institution to gain believability in their articulations (mediational performance for authority, see R. Bauman 2004). They are similar in footing, simply operating at different levels. And precisely in this vein, we can explain the unpredictability of rumour narratives within discursive carnivals. As Kapferer points out, these narratives have "a guilt-diffusing function—always supposed, as it is, to come from someone else—it allows for the freest expression of repressed and heretofore unavowable drives" (1990: 46).

If we bring the network of believing back to the arguments in 3.1.1 on discursive carnivals transforming empirical readers to model readers of rumour, we will find that the above discussions can be elaborated further. When the will to truth motivates people to stay with a truth (whatever this version of truth is about), it creates a projection of a "model author" of rumour narratives, either "a friend of a friend" or "a truth-telling institution", that speaks directly as the model readers of rumour will interpret and comprehend. Model author and model reader "must appear together because the model author and the model reader are entities that become clear to each other only in the process of reading, so that each one creates the other" (Eco 1994: 24), and during discursive carnivals, rumour narratives

become “a finished product with the intention that this particular composition should be appreciated and received in the same form as he [the model author] devised it” (Eco 1979: 49). Following this logic, we understand the network of believing from a macroscopic viewpoint that auto-communication happens within the conduits of the network as a cultural mechanism “transferred in time” (Lotman 1990: 21), enabling further investigations on a local scale of these cultural dynamics.

Moreover, Bennett notes about believing in narratives that “Though a storyteller cannot actually prevent audience participation, the finality of these sorts of stories does inhibit it; the audience is left with nothing much to do except admire the effect” (1999: 121). Since the projection of a model author is a collective activity, believing in rumours is not enough for staying in a truth; they also need to articulate what they have observed to join the collective effort in projecting the model author that articulates the current social reality in their own projections. In this sense, apart from believing and articulating interpersonally on a microscope, the macroscopic sense-making and truth-seeking create a centripetal force that obliges individuals to become both the believer and articulator of rumour narratives, therefore constructing their own link with the illusional model author and reiterating the auto-communication processes. In other words, the microscopic interpersonal network constructed by different levels of footing is further supplemented by a macroscopic projection of a model author of these rumour narratives that speaks *as if* the illusion were the speaker. The illusion is, indeed, not a static, ideological truth-speaker from the top to the bottom, but an ever-shifting figuration that holds together the chaotic heteroglossia of rumour during discursive carnivals. Through this process, individuals not only respond to narratives but participate in the maintenance of the social reality as tensions are suspended, however fragile or fleeting they may be, which, again, promises new opportunities for new discursive carnivals and new rumour narratives to be articulated. And the model author, in this vein, functions as the *Ersatz* of the institutional order, which is the fundamental logic of what we have defined rumours as the *Ersatz* of knowledge. In this vein, in parallel with the commentary process addressed in 2.3.2 as a way of falsification, we have a more general aspect of the power dynamics, namely the author function as internal rules of regulating discourses in the social sphere. But this time the power dynamics are no longer the up-down falsification coercion that some narratives are dismissed as “rumour”; instead, the projection of a model author is a bottom-up approach that in return convinces its audience to believe in such narratives. As Foucault points out,

Commentary limited the hazards of discourse through the action of an *identity* taking the form of *repetition* and *sameness*. The author principle limits this same chance element through the action of an *identity* whose form is that of individuality and the *I*. (Foucault 1971: 15, italics original)

Following this trail of arguments, we can integrate the network of believing, both microscope and macroscope, into a grander dynamic of social discourses in textual production and reproduction. For rumour narratives, the collectively projected model author as an outcome of auto-communication exerts its power to its audience by invoking those that are already familiar to these people, whereas the agency of believing is retained in themselves. Whereas commentary regulates discourse by creating new texts as dismissals, the author function in rumours emerges as a collectively projected source whose authority is performatively generated rather than institutionally assigned. It is precisely the motivation that people need to stay with a truth that overwhelms the conduits constructed both in interpersonal networks and between social groups; by investigating both the micro and the macroscope of the network of believing, we have the full view of discursive carnivals from their subtle fabrics of footing to a general, motivated drive for truth. Further on that, we reach a meso-level of social groups that are constantly entailed in discursive carnivals, an infection of rumours as it shall be called, through which, finally, everyone in discursive carnivals is woven into the web of rumours and rumouring.

3.1.3. The Thickened Reality as Catalysis and Paralysis

The network of believing never stands alone and is never static. Rather than being a stable infrastructure, belief is continually performed and negotiated through the circulation of texts, which indicates that these conduits and networks, whether microscopic (interpersonal) or macroscopic (social), are subject to the media used during communicative processes. Even though the network of believing is nothing new, in the wake of a transmedial turn in our modern times, when various media converge to form a formidable agglomerate that covers all our senses while distinguishing them becomes impossible (Rajewsky 2002; Jenkins 2006), the network of believing brings more to be discussed in this context and its implications in our social sphere. This convergence does not merely multiply the channels of rumour transmission; it intensifies the experience of reality itself. In such an environment, as evidenced by Covid-19-related rumours in Wuhan and similar phenomena globally, the media infrastructure is no longer backgrounded—it becomes the foreground of belief production (McLuhan 1994). The social sphere, inundated with information, becomes not just media-saturated but transmedial, complicating the conditions under which belief is formed, sustained and contested.

During Covid-lockdowns, the collective hysteria for truth claims was represented as constant scrolling for more information online via mobile phones when people were confined in their modest living places and were eager for more information about what was going on beyond their physical reach and “it is difficult to stop even though one ends up feeling worse” (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021: 3). Doom-scrolling, in this sense, is defined as “the combination of (1) the content

of dark unsettling news, (2) monitorial news use patterns centered on the smartphone, and (3) attention economy news streams, creating emotional drain through a flow which users find hard to get out of” (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021: 10). Doom-scrolling shows that, in our modern times, the saturation of mediated signs does not simply inform—it envelops the world of perception. The user is no longer a detached observer but becomes immersed in a transmedial flow that exceeds discrete genres, devices and contexts. This immersive flow thickens the social reality by layering information, emotion and speculation into an unrelenting perceptual environment, which also indicates that this thickened reality is always a semiotic reality. In doom-scrolling, the network of believing has become an immersion (Jenkins 2006: 286) of all available representations that bypasses a conscious act of assent, in which there is no choice of believing or not, since the omnipresent media have become the only source of information.⁹⁹

This returns us to the meta-communicative aspects of rumouring in 2.2.3. As rumours are always metatexts in the sense of always being a response toward current situations framed by prior texts, these prior texts, being transmedial, are “too real” and “too much” (Song 2025a) and the original artefact of current representations can no longer be found. Jean Baudrillard calls this process “the precession of simulacra” and further comments on the process as a reflection towards a fable from Borges (1999: 325) about the exactitude of a map covering everything in the Empire,

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself*. (Baudrillard 1994: 1, italics original)

In this hyperreality, believing in those narratives is not a choice; in the desert of the real itself, the narratives that swarm various channels have become the only possible source of information. Therefore, narratives that are “a report of the scene as perceived as opposed to being a broad formulation or interpretation of events” (Potter 1996: 165) can no longer be separated from these narratives’ metatexts that are in the following as their reproductions and interpretations. In other words, the line between *the* reality and its representations becomes porous,

⁹⁹ As we have argued in previous pages, the lockdown provides a relatively “pure” case to see the infection of rumours in our transmedial age.

which corresponds to what Baudrillard conceptualises as the third phase of the precession of simulacra, that these representations mask “the *absence* of a profound reality” (Baudrillard 1994: 6, *italics original*). And its outcome, here in the case of rumours and rumouring, is the intensification of discursive carnivals, exemplified by doom-scrolling: In the unsatiated hunt for truth, people wish to believe in the reality that is genuinely witnessed; however, in hyperreality, all the truth claims are merely representations, pervasive and impelling, without the presence of the real.

However, the will to truth persists. In Introduction we have already talked about a thickened social reality that different versions of reality coexist and merge, and now we have approached the fundamental logic of the formation of this thickened reality as the textual representations of Baudrillard’s hyperreality; since there is no narrative that is “realer”, they are all real, only subject to their own legitimations. A tension occurs consequently: As “certainty is a human goal” (Fine 1997: 741) in discursive carnivals, people need a truth claim that explains the current social reality; however, the thickened semiotic reality presumes that individuals cannot avoid the exposure of other narratives that impede the coherent structure that a version of truth requires. In this logic, the agency of navigating beliefs during discursive carnivals and of cohering the conflicting narratives is reduced to individuals themselves, which are also an inexhaustible source for personal rumour reproduction, as we shall see in later pages.

We can then draw up another example to show how media infrastructures can orchestrate a thickened reality, so powerful that believing in it becomes unavoidable and individuals form a logical consistency by themselves. In December 2005, a TV series titled *Space Cadets* was aired on Channel 4 in UK for ten consecutive days.¹⁰⁰ In the series, the participants, selected from those who answered in an advertisement looking for “thrill seekers”, were told that they were going to a Russian bootcamp and underwent trainings for becoming the first British televised space tourists in history. *Zeppotron*, the producer of the series, transformed a former RAF military base in Suffolk, UK, into a convincing replica of a Russian space training facility, complete with Cyrillic signage, actors pretending to be Russian officials and fellow cadets and detailed props. The participants were subjected to physical and psychological tests, astronaut “training” and even a simulated rocket launch using advanced hydraulics and set design within a motion simulator. The show’s creators went to great lengths to construct a believable narrative. The illusion was reinforced with carefully scripted media reports, realistic training routines and restricted outside communication. Despite some doubts among the participants, the overwhelming consistency and intensity of the staged environment eventually convinced them that they were indeed in space. The hoax was finally revealed to the participants that they had never left UK and

¹⁰⁰ For more details of the TV series, please see Martin (2021).

the Earth, producing reactions ranging from amusement to disillusionment. The show drew both fascination and criticism from the public and media for its ethical ambiguity and manipulation of belief.

Whatever social implications the TV show might have, our concern here is that the participants were immersed in a formidable, overwhelming environment that all its details made the participants believe that they were trained for a space mission. Despite the fact that these people were, as shown in TV, not interacting with a digital space, the immersive situation and the density of narratives around them are still illustrative in the saturation of texts around individuals. Even though there were conflicts between texts that the participants interacted with, doubts about the authenticity of the space program were set aside. The intentionality inherited among the participants as “the will to truth” in the settings of the TV show creates a plausible explanation for every conflict of those narratives, which indicates that there should be a unifying power behind all the interpretations of the participants based on this intentionality. In this sense, we return to the projection of a model author as addressed in 3.1.2. As Foucault notes, “the author as the unifying principle in a particular group of writings or statements, lying at the origins of their significance, as the seat of their coherence” (1971: 14).

However, the specifics about thickened reality, as we have seen in the case of *Space Cadets*, are that the model author projected by the readers of these texts is too real and there is no other option than believing in that illusion. In the TV show, this model author was not only inferred but materially enacted through the totalising coherence of the environment—through uniforms, technical jargon, simulated rocket control rooms and rehearsed social rituals. And the tension between the need for a coherent narrative of the current situation and the discrepancies between various narratives as we noted earlier is not resolved but overlooked by the saturation of texts in the thickened reality. The transmedial model author becomes *the* man of speaking and convincing his audience as a projection of coherence, which creates constant tensions upon the network of believing as belief becomes a reflex rather than a choice. In other words, during discursive carnivals, the thickened reality enwraps its prey, namely those who are affected by the suspension of tensions in the power dynamics, into an echo chamber that the affected social groups *have to* submit themselves to the mastermind behind it, which catalyses the formation of discursive carnivals. We can thus explain the reason why rumours in our modern times are more hysteric and explosive, which further leads to topics on obedience when the environment becomes oppressive, as argued in Milgram’s (1974) and Zimbardo’s (2008) works respectively.

Recalling what we have pointed out in 3.1.1 that empirical readers are converted into model readers of rumours during discursive carnivals via auto-communicative processes, we can explain how transmediality has changed the landscape of the network of believing by complicating the core of this mechanism.

In the thickened reality that texts swarm and grapple all the information channels, the transformation process is no longer a gradual alignment between the narratives and their audience but a bombardment of texts that paralyses individual reasoning, suspending critical distance and accelerating belief formation. The information overload, as argued and popularised in Toffler's works (1990a; 1990b), causes difficulties due to the presence of excessive information. As Bawden et al. (1999) observe, information overload lies in the fact that there is too much available information in the social sphere and too many texts sent directly to individuals such as emails. In a transmedial environment, the two causes continually merge into one as the development of information technologies, as Hartley et al. underscore,

It is equally evident that within the digital environment several traditional cultural categories are completely reorganized owing to technological affordances. A central example is the eclipse of the boundaries between words, images and other modalities as they have been translated into bits and bytes and organized in networks, resulting in the rise of multimodal textualities and a general diversification of creative, distributive, curatorial and receptive practices. (Hartley, Ibrus, and Ojamaa 2021: 119)

In this regard, pervasive and pushed information (Bawden and Robinson 2020) swarm the social sphere that we are residing, and are, in continuing the arguments on information being too real, “too much” and “too close” to us (Song 2022a), so that every narrative on multiple media leaves little room for individuals to maintain their doubts, as we have seen from *Space Cadets*. In other words, the catalysis of belief formation and discursive carnivals is run at the price of a paralysis of individual reasoning. And in that sense, the will to truth during discursive carnivals in transmediality has been turned into an autopilot mode where all the information has become true. Believing, therefore, becomes an act suppressing individual agencies; people in discursive carnivals have finally become “one-dimensional men” (Marcuse 2006) who submit to the transmedial model author in the desert of the real. Rumour today is not one story repeated; it is many iterations simultaneously across channels. What the thickened reality provides is an overwhelming situation that catalyses the formation of the swirl of infection and that empowers its ever-expanding nature and paralyses individual reasoning and believing. In the catalysis and paralysis, finally, “We have indisputable proof of this by formalizing the series” (Reumaux 1996: 75 translation mine).¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ “On en a une preuve indiscutable en formalisant la série”.

3.2. Transmutation of Rumours

Since believing in and reproducing rumours are processes of auto-communication operating within the network of believing, articulating rumours is no longer a discrete “moment” of rumouring, but a continuous, effervescent resonance of narratives unfolding in discursive carnivals. At every node of the network of believing, people articulate and rearticulate what they know of current situations, which means that during the infection of older rumours (an ever-expanding discursive carnival, as described in earlier pages), new rumours are also generated in response to prior narrative fragments, regardless of whether these fragments are officially dismissed or institutionally discredited. These narratives, old and new, travel back and forth between social groups, as Reumaux observes,

It communicates the outside and the inside, in which way what we call social reality seems to be characterized by its porosity. The information constantly filters from one level to another, from one group to another, from one actor to another, via multiple networks, which as a consequence, constantly modifies the content and introduces in a latent way into the collective reality as well the fantasies which constitute the imagination of the actors. (Reumaux 1996: 18, my translation)¹⁰²

We have already examined the latency of cultural knowledges represented in narratives as the nymphal stage of rumours in 1.1.2, where rumours are transmitted as narrative knowledges between social groups that have not yet become ripe rumours. And later in 2.2.3 we discussed how rumours are finally articulated in the context of discursive carnivals. Therefore, after investigating the nodes of the rumour public of rumour production and reproduction, our task here in the following section is, naturally, to examine how these rumour narratives change when they are repeatedly articulated and generate new rumours that join the dynamics.

3.2.1. Rumours on the Move: Inside and Outside

The fact that rumour narratives are articulated, believed and reproduced already implies that they undergo transformations in the process. Lotman emphasises that “In the process of being ‘used’, the text is subjected to transformation, leading to the generation of a new text upon exiting; the initial text, however, remains in its

¹⁰² “[...] qu’elle fait communiquer le dehors et le dedans, ce que l’on appelle réalité sociale semble de même se caractériser par sa porosité, les informations filtrant sans cesse d’un palier à l’autre, d’un groupe à l’autre, d’un acteur à l’autre, par l’intermédiaire de multiples réseaux, ce qui a pour conséquence d’en modifier sans cesse le contenu et d’introduire de manière latente dans la réalité collective aussi bien les fantaisies qui constituent l’imaginaire des acteurs”.

original form and can enter into new relationships with its own transformation” (2019: 85–86). By investigating rumour texts’ transformation, we continue our discussions on auto-communicative processes in 3.1.1 and 3.1.2, since these rumour texts are precisely used by those who already have relevant knowledges for interpreting these narratives. Auto-communication thus becomes the motor of transmutation. During discursive carnivals, it is an ongoing process that preserves the rumour’s form while enabling its transformation, allowing it to adapt across social terrains and localities. In this sense, how rumour texts mutate and beget new rumours can be investigated from two aspects. On the one hand, within the discursive carnivals, rumour texts are articulated and entrench the existing resonance among social groups, which leads to a constant restructuring of rumour texts, acquiring new meanings as discursive carnivals unfold over time. On the other hand, when these rumour texts travel beyond the boundaries between social groups and reach those who have not yet been entailed in discursive carnivals, they adapt to new contexts and generate new texts, which create new tensions that may lead to new discursive carnivals.

Within the Resonance: Textual Restructuring and Amplification

Lotman shows that in auto-communicative processes, there is “the reduction of the words in this language” (1990: 26) of communication. Since all participants of the process are already familiar with the texts that are about to be communicated, there is no need to address the text in its full scale; a set of indexes will already suffice to make the communication work, which echoes what we have already discussed in 2.2.3 that rumours, after being levelled and sharpened, become a set of existential presuppositions that will turn into the final, matured texts. These presuppositions, now from the perspective of auto-communication as kernels of these texts (Lotman 1990: 73), have become indexes for a whole set of narratives that do not need to be articulated, like the symbols used by interpreters when they are translating for the current speaking person. These mnemonic symbols can only be deciphered by those who have already acknowledged the indexes, and in rumour cases, the subject is the rumour public. As Lotman notes,

This note clearly had a mnemonic function, although we should not forget another factor: in view of the unusual connection between signified and signifier in the ‘I–I’ system, it lends itself to cryptography since it is constructed according to the formula: ‘Let those who understand, understand.’ (Lotman 1990: 27)

Another rumour case related to Covid-19 lockdowns in China illustrates the reduction and condensation process within rumour texts. In the wake of strict pandemic controls, many cities across China followed Wuhan’s example by imposing prolonged lockdowns, including Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang

region. On 24th November 2022, a deadly fire in a residential building in Urumqi claimed ten lives. Public outrage surged when it was revealed that fire trucks had been unable to reach the scene in time due to barricades erected for lockdown enforcement—symbolising, for many, the tragic consequences of China’s uncompromising “Zero Covid” policy. This tragedy instigated the White Paper protests, where demonstrators across multiple cities held up blank sheets of A4 paper as a symbol of censored voices. Within this climate of frustration and symbolic protest, a rumour began to circulate that M&G Stationery, one of China’s largest office supply manufacturers, had issued an official letter condemning the protests.¹⁰³ The letter allegedly stated that, in order to “maintain national security and stability” and prevent white papers from being used in “illegal subversive activities,” M&G would suspend all sales of A4 paper both online and offline. This claim, widely shared on Chinese social media, triggered widespread anger—especially among students and office workers. According to reports from CNN, M&G’s stock price plummeted in the following days, reflecting both public backlash and investor unease.¹⁰⁴ M&G promptly issued a public statement denying these claims, clarifying that the circulated letter was a fabrication and that their operations remained normal.¹⁰⁵ Despite the company’s denial, many continued to report difficulties purchasing A4 paper from M&G’s online platforms,¹⁰⁶ which further fuelled scepticism. These rumours only began to subside in December, when the Chinese government abruptly rolled back many of its lockdown policies and everyday life started to return to a state of tentative normalcy.

Some more contexts of the White Paper protest will help us better understand how a mere sheet of white paper became the symbol of protesting. The tragedy of Urumqi was in fact preceded by another protest in Sitong Bridge, Beijing, where a man hung two banners, calling for democracy and President Xi’s resignation¹⁰⁷ two months before, on 13th October. One banner read, “We want food, not PCR tests. We want freedom, not lockdowns. We want dignity, not lies” and the other, “Students, workers, strike for the resignation of Xi Jinping!” The protester, Peng Lifa, was soon arrested and he has been secretly detained until today. The banners sent a clear message to the government that people were tired of incessant lockdowns and quarantines and called for democracy since people had already had doubts of a China under communist rule. It was also rumoured that the banners were written in blood and Peng burnt himself for demonstration. But

¹⁰³ <https://today.line.me/tw/v2/article/LXRJEpa> (In Chinese)

¹⁰⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/29/economy/china-white-paper-protests-stock-run-intl-hnk/index.html>

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.mg-pen.com/corporatenews/info.aspx?itemid=1282&lcid=64> (In Chinese)

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/world/story/shares-of-this-paper-company-took-a-beating-amid-the-white-paper-protests-in-china-heres-what-happened-354694-2022-11-30?>

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/briefing/china-protest-peng-lifa.html>

our focus here, in linking the White Paper protests and the Sitong Bridge protest, is that it precluded a series of public revolts in multiple cities, until the release of the lockdowns.¹⁰⁸ And following the tragic happenings in Urumqi, the protests amounted to their peak as the White Paper protests.¹⁰⁹

The rumours revolving around the stationery company were merely fleeting representations of deeper structures and texts that had long preceded the rumours that we have at hand. Before investigating how blank sheets of paper became the kernel for later rumour texts, we need to first clarify how the paper became symbolised. First of all, the banners that Peng set on the bridge were a fully articulated text. It was singular, authored and highly risky, as we can see from his arrests. Via channels same as those of Didi rumours, those who were also unsatisfied by the situation were aware of the protest and, as a reaction towards the fire in Urumqi, they held up blank sheets of A4 paper—an action that at first glance appeared devoid of content, but in fact condensed and preserved full force of Peng’s original message. During White Paper protests, we can see that blank A4 papers had become the symbol of protesting and only those who knew these protesting events, from Peng’s explicit calls to their reduction into mere blank sheets, could interpret the message. There is no need to state the words clearly again, considering the risks of being arrested. In other words, the white paper had become a condensed text as the result of auto-communication among the public and in that sense, the White Paper protest becomes a text that can *only* be interpreted within that context. Without such contexts, these blank sheets of paper become unintelligible in protest and are merely papers.¹¹⁰

As the white paper became the symbol of dissent, rumours, exemplified by those that were revolving around M&G Stationery, captured the logic of protests and suppression, which indicates that from the reduction of articulation to rumours that later swarmed in, new texts were generated as older texts were restructured, imbued with new semantic values during the resonance. During auto-communicative processes, every node of the network of believing attaches his or her own understanding of the situation to the kernel of older texts, and when these texts are articulated, they become restructured through the tension between the original meanings and new, individual affiliations. As Lotman observes,

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.barrons.com/news/long-live-the-people-beijingers-gather-for-frigid-anti-lockdown-rally-01669565407>

¹⁰⁹ In this context, the White Paper protest rings very similar to Yellow Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, where people held yellow umbrellas to protest the change of Hong Kong’s constitutions, which was supported by the Chinese government. Umbrellas were used for protecting people from tear gas and other inflammables.

¹¹⁰ Indeed, within the symbolic universe, as we have discussed in 1.2.3, there are no texts that are totally unintelligible. However, without the contexts that promotes auto-communication, white papers no longer have connotations to the protest.

Tension arises between the original message and the secondary code, and the effect of this tension is the tendency to interpret the semantic elements of the text as if they were included in the supplementary syntagmatic construction and have thereby acquired new, relationary meanings from this interaction. (Lotman 1990: 28)

Following this logic, a blank sheet of paper, rather than being a reduced entity for signification, is saturated with meanings that presume a constant restructuring of the older texts among every participant of the discursive carnival. As Lotman further notes, “my informational input correlates with previous information fixed in my memory, organises it, and produces a noteworthy quantitative increase of information as output” (2000: 426; translated in Tamm 2015: 6).¹¹¹

Moreover, we should never forget that rumouring within the rumour public is not a pure auto-communicative process, as simple as the interpreter example we mentioned in previous pages; instead, rumours are “transmitted through two channels simultaneously” (Lotman 1990: 29). Therefore, every reproductive node should not only reiterate the kernel of the texts but also contribute something new to the ongoing public discussion. However, what every participant of discursive carnivals has at hand are kernels of texts, which function simultaneously as a navigational anchor and a generative prompt. As they lack specific verbal articulation, these kernels invite, even demand, elaboration. Each act of articulation is simultaneously an act of positioning within discursive carnivals and a possible point of differentiation: to stand out, to gain traction, or to emotionally resonate. If we multiply the above-mentioned restructuring processes and investigate them by taking the rumour public as our focus, we can find that the input and the output of information happen almost at the same time due to the persisting will to truth that longs for a coherent, settling interpretation of current situations. The intensity and simultaneity of information exchange always lead to a rapid increase of information around the kernel of texts, as we can see from a rumour case recorded by Reumaux (1996: 69) about the number of local bandits, in which 500 gangsters became a 40,000-strong, well-trained Spanish army within one day of resonance. The more the kernel circulates, the more it becomes a template for divergent elaborations, which finally explains the reason why informational inflation happens during the resonance among the rumour public. And amplification and exaggeration, then, are not aberrations but structural features of rumour dynamics within discursive carnivals.

¹¹¹ “[...] вводимая мной в меня информация коррелирует с предшествующей информацией, зафиксированной в моей памяти, доорганизовывает ее, и в результате «на выходе» получается значительный прирост информации”.

The Expanding Terrains of Discursive Carnivals: Assimilation and New Carnivals on the Horizon

If we recall what we discussed about existential presuppositions in 2.2.3, the formation of such presuppositions presumes that rumours can travel between social groups. Then it is imperative to study how rumour texts reach new social groups and lead to further implications. The porosity between different social groups presumes that the kernel as the product of auto-communicative processes can be relocated to other social groups, generating new texts under new inter-textual relationships. In this regard, the discussions in 3.1.1 and 3.1.2 gain another perspective, namely the transmutation of rumour texts in different social groups. As we can see from the White Paper protests, in different cities there were different protests, adapting to each city's specialties under the same name. For example, in Shanghai, the protest took place on Urumqi Road¹¹² (most of the names of streets in Chinese cities follow a Soviet fashion: roads are named after other cities). And in Guangzhou, the protest was reframed with reference to the protest against the Communist Party's tightening control of Hong Kong.¹¹³ Among all these variations of protests we can see that the kernel of protesting, namely the white paper, was adapted to new contexts when it travelled to other social groups. Allport and Postman term the stage after levelling and sharpening as "assimilation", which "has to do with the powerful attractive force exerted upon rumour by the intellectual and emotional context existing in the listener's mind" (1947: 100). From this perspective, the textual dynamics of rumour transmutation is concretised back to the agencies of individuals within social groups.

We have already noted at the very end of 3.1.1 that the knowledges required to interpret the kernel of texts as consequences of auto-communication are not limited to those who start rumours. This is to say that the texts generated within auto-communicative processes that structure current discursive carnivals may also be interpreted by social groups that are not initially affected by suspension of tensions under new contexts and intertextual relationships. People outside Shanghai also knew about what white papers indicated under the contexts of protesting. These texts already inherit with a projection of model readers. As Lotman notes,

A text and its readership are in a relationship of mutual activation: a text strives to make its readers conform to itself, to force on them its own system of codes, and the readers respond in the same way. The text as it were contains an image of its 'own' ideal readership, and the readership one of its 'own' text. (Lotman 1990: 63)

¹¹² <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/china-protests-shanghai-beijing-covid-lockdown/>

¹¹³ As the capital city of Guangdong (Canton) Province, Guangzhou speaks Cantonese, same as in Hong Kong with a slight variation.

However, as these texts are deprived of the details that locate them to their original contexts as the consequence of auto-communicative processes, a gap appears when the narratives are being interpreted and articulated. Based on the shared knowledge capabilities, the new audiences are able to interpret them; but due to the lost details, these narratives are not yet ready to be articulated. Now the new readers of these narratives need to relocate the kernel to their own contexts for articulation, which is represented by the new readers assimilating the texts that travel to them. More importantly, the newly articulated texts in return reshape their readers, who are the same groups of people that articulate them, which again constructs a model author of these texts as a projection based on the shared knowledges they have with the original groups that start these rumour narratives. In the case of White Paper protests, for example, protesters in Shanghai had Urumqi Road as a reference to the fire in Urumqi, but in other cities that do not have such a road, this reference did not work. This, however, did not indicate that the protest could no longer make sense; people imbued the performance with other linkages that redirected to the tragedy, even to Peng in Sitong protests. Similar slogans for democracy, human rights, and opposition to dictatorship were shouted in protests in other cities.¹¹⁴ In that sense, even though the new readers are not model readers for the original texts, they *are* model readers of the reduced texts as they are deprived of the original details and as model readers, they attach their own memories to the articulation (reproduction) of new texts that are based on these kernels.

This narratological process leads to discussions on the dynamics between *fabula* and *syuzhet* initiated by Propp (1968). For Propp, as well as for many Russian formalists, *fabula* refers to the raw materials to be narrated and *syuzhet* is the “grammar” of the narratives or how the narratives are told (Prince 1994). In rumour narratives, *fabula* is subject to individual creativities and how the world is experienced by the rumour public, whereas the *syuzhet* has already been configured by discursive carnivals. The kernels of rumour texts are, therefore, narrative formations that combine a *syuzhet* prescribed by current discursive carnivals and a *fabula* that is simplified as much as possible. In this vein, the model author constructed in original discursive carnivals has a window to convey a message to new readers of the texts without interference from original details, compelling them to believe in these narratives and to fill in the “blanks”. As Lotman adds,

On the one hand, an author is at liberty to change the dimension of the readership’s memory and may force the readership to *remember something they did not know*. On the other hand, a reader cannot forget the real contents of his or her own memory. So the text shapes its readers and at the same time the readers shape their text. (Lotman 1990: 67–68, italics original)

¹¹⁴ For example, in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province: <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/690320.html> (In Chinese)

From here we can see how the tension between the shared knowledges in the social sphere (as the powerhouse for auto-communication) and the local details and contexts (as the inexhaustible source for local articulations) constantly recontextualises such narratives in new intertextual networks in the social sphere, regardless of the previous dynamics in original social groups.

If we return to the rumours about selling white papers, we can find the same variations that were adapted to local contexts. Multiple resellers in different cities were mentioned in these rumour narratives. Edgar Morin describes this phase as *metastasis* of rumours, that “In the absence of all repressive measures [...] Anything now [can] add to the flame” (1971: 30). As the newly generated texts are articulated, they join current communicative situations for social groups to interact with, creating new tensions that are imposed on them and that are to be dealt with in the forthcoming dialogic process in the social sphere. Hence, such tensions are also prone to a suspension that finally starts new discursive carnivals and from that point, we can reintroduce the moment of rumour articulation, the whole process addressed previously since Chapter 2. This happens again and again in multiple social groups that rumour narratives can reach, which is marked by the related knowledges for interpretation. In that sense, what follows a discursive carnival is a proliferation of carnivalesque discursive practices expanding in the social sphere; as rumours infect different social groups in auto-communicative processes, new texts are also generated out of the dynamics and may create new discursive carnivals among various social groups, which invokes new power dynamics in the social sphere and presumes possibility of new rumours circulating, reaching further social groups and adapting to new localities. Therefore, the ever-expanding discursive carnivals are a radical pluralisation of meanings. Every new articulation by a different group is both a testimony to shared struggle and a sign of interpretive autonomy, collapsing the distinction between rumour and legitimate political narrative, which, finally, brings the discussion back to one of the most fundamental aspects of our discussion, namely the interplay between microscopic textual processes and macroscopic textual dynamics in the social sphere.

3.2.2. Textual Dynamics in Power Relationships

There is another half of the story about White Paper protests that can be told. The practice of raising white blank paper for protesting is not an invention from China: Against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there were also protests against the invasion. People went to the Kremlin and held papers with the words “*Njet Vojne*”,¹¹⁵ to express their dissidence against the

¹¹⁵ “Нет Войне!”, which means “No to War!”

Kremlin. In reaction, some demonstrators were arrested¹¹⁶ and police were patrolling on Red Square to make sure that the demonstrations were under control. A video¹¹⁷ was then posted on March 13th on YouTube and other video channels by *Activitaca*,¹¹⁸ a Russian-language Internet resource dedicated to civil activism, that a woman was holding a paper with the words “*Dva Slova*”¹¹⁹ in front of the Kremlin and was taken by the police. As an instant response to that arrest, on March 14th, it was reported that a man in Novosibirsk was arrested for holding a blank paper,¹²⁰ which generated further repercussions in multiple cities (International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia 2022).

Even though the authenticity or origins of these videos and reports remain to be fully verified, we can see a reduction process there, in the same vein as what happened in China. The most important thing here was that what the Chinese people knew was that the protest had started with *Njet Vojne*, then became *Dva Slova* and ultimately turned into a white paper. The same kernel travelled magically even between different cultural spheres and appeared in the narratives of different social groups on both sides of the border. Despite that the protests in Russia were not rumours yet, from the perspectives of protests in China, what we can find here is that what finally came as rumour narratives were merely a small share of the whole intertextual network that extends both diachronically (as rumours evolve through time) and synchronically (as discursive carnivals extend to other social groups). In this sense, the reason why rumours seem to be travelling at an immeasurable speed is that, if we only focus on the rumour narratives, we will have omitted numerous intermediate steps—the manifold acts of believing, adapting and rearticulating—that constitute the whole intertextual network that illustrates rumour transmutation. Therefore, what we described in the previous section is merely one of the countless trails that constitute the complicated web of intertextuality and the dynamics of transmutation of these rumour narratives can hardly be understood within the framework of a text, or a set of texts.

Moreover, even though these narratives do indeed have linkages as the white paper functions as one of the essential existential presuppositions, the internal logic that presumes such linkages still requires further elaboration. In other words, with the features of auto-communication we can describe what is happening when rumour texts travel between different social groups (even beyond borders, as we have seen in the relationships between *Dva Slova* and White Paper Revolution)

¹¹⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/ukraine-crisis-hundreds-detained-in-anti-war-protests-in-russia>

¹¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IM7TBEr72nE>

¹¹⁸ <https://activitaca.org/>

¹¹⁹ “Два Слова”, which means “Two Words.”

¹²⁰ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/russian-police-arrest-man-for-holding-up-blank-sheet-of-paper-1.4826435>

and adapt to new contexts, but that only solves the “how” question. As rumours indicate a hyperactive state of social discourses, investigating the transmutation of rumour narratives requires interrogating the “why” question: why these dynamics emerge and propel such transmutations. Following this thread, we are led back to discussions on textual dynamics and bringing them under the inspection of power relationships.

As a concept *a posteriori*, rumour is not a textual category with intrinsic properties; it is a discursive state, assigned retrospectively through mechanisms of power relationships. Between *Dva Slova* and White Paper Revolution, there is an isomorphism of power relationships on different levels of social discourses: people expressed dissent regarding government decisions and policies, and such dissidence was exposed to governmental censorship and repression. In this vein, the isomorphism empowered social groups on the two sides of the border to use the same kernels as white papers for the same purposes and these kernels, in the next step, had become an inexhaustible source of rumour articulation. As long as the social groups are able to interpret the reduced texts in auto-communication, rumours revolving around such kernels will appear in various forms. In the protests both in Russia and in China, this capacity to interpret and articulate in shared kernels, or shared *syuzhet* as previously discussed, was enabled not by shared geography or language, but by a shared condition of discursive suppression, especially after the joint statement made by Xi and Putin after the Winter Olympics in Beijing, China.¹²¹ The outcome of that isomorphism, on the one hand, builds up a shared identity between the protesting Russians and the protesting Chinese, which recaps the formation of a makeshift identity mentioned in 3.1.1. Only in this way can we talk about a rumour public with a prescribed makeshift identity for those who are affected by suspension of tensions. On the other hand, as such articulations were already positioned as the interrogated and the prosecuted, rumours rose out of these articulated texts as if they were *predated* by overarching truth discourses. And there is no escape, as Foucault shows:

There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. (Foucault 1980: 93)

In this regard, we can finally conjoin the discussion here with what we have already addressed in 1.3 and 2.3. In 1.3, we investigated the construction of authority and the pre-rumour power structures that set up the synchronic power relationships out of which rumours are articulated; in 2.3, we addressed the moment

¹²¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/4/chinas-xi-to-meet-russias-putin-ahead-of-olympics-opening-rites>

when rumours are dismissed and finally become rumours that are transmitted. Here we come back to the social diachrony again, focusing on the constant tensions between history of *the truth* and local, subjugated forms of articulations with the mundane reason along the course of discursive carnivals. As auto-communicative processes constantly produce narratives, the overarching truth discourses also accompany the afterquakes of rumour articulation and operate at every step as the kernel unfolds itself among the rumour public. If we consider that the mundane reason is also unleashed by the interplay of power relationships (as we have addressed in 2.1) and that the mundane reason is a meso-level phenomenon that is confined to those who have the capacity of participating in auto-communication, the power dynamics that accompany rumours in discursive carnivals become the macroscopic representation of the mundane reason. In short, the mundane reason sustaining rumour practices and the dismissive power regulating them are structurally aligned, differing not in logic but in scale and position in rumour discourses. Therefore, the logic of rumour transmutations is not that rumour texts themselves have different dynamics than other “normal” texts, but that there are textual dynamics in the social sphere first of all and under the power dynamics, some texts become rumours. It is like pouring ink into a river: What we witness as the movement of the ink is, in fact, the movement of the river. The observed dynamics of the ink lie in the fact that the river has dynamics *per se*, and ink just *marks out* the movements.

Moreover, let us never forget that power relationships are manifested in discourses. Narratives are not selected as rumours because of magic or other metaphysical powers; truth is also a set of discourses that participate in discursive carnivals to enforce its mandate. Power dynamics are not an extra layer of textual dynamics in the social sphere, but part of it and participate in it. In line with previous discussions that power relationships not only sanction and repress rumour articulation but also shape the grammar of what is sayable and believable in each moment of articulation, power relationships inhabit the narratives, navigate their paths and configure their mutational logic even after the moment of rumouring. Namely, as truth discourses are also part of the discursive carnival, the presence of truth discourses also blazes the trail for rumours to sprout and infect. We can, again, find various examples during the Wuhan lockdown.

On March 19th, 2020, as there were no new cases reported in Wuhan,¹²² Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of World Health Organisation, lauded that it was “an amazing achievement”.¹²³ Due to the ease of the situation, the medical teams that were sent to Wuhan and other regions in Hubei

¹²² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/china-reports-no-domestic-cases-of-coronavirus-for-first-time-since-outbreak-began>

¹²³ <https://www.who.int/news-room/speeches/item/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-mission-briefing-on-covid-19---19-march-2020>

Province to help with the outbreak of the pandemic were planning to return. However, apart from the official applause and touching scenarios of bidding farewell to those who helped Wuhan during the darkest times, another piece of news caught people's eyes the following day. It was reported that the teams for disease control, which were assigned by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC), an institution directly under the National Health Committee (NHC), would leave Wuhan later than previously planned.¹²⁴ The news wreaked havoc in Wuhan; people were worried that the situation in Wuhan was in fact way worse than what was reported. As fast as the same day when the news came out, an article titled "My Most Unforgettable Day"¹²⁵ appeared online, saying that there were still new cases in multiple districts across Wuhan. According to the article, which was said to be by a journalist "from mainstream media", the reason behind no new cases reported was that the hospitals, due to political pressure from the municipal government, refused to accept new patients to maintain their "zero" number. Rumours therefore exploded that the situation was still intense and the delayed withdrawal of the working teams from CCDC even supported such suspicion. Even though the government dismissed the article as untrue¹²⁶ and clarified that the CCDC team stayed in Wuhan merely for training purposes, the dismissal did not quench the fermenting fear of the pandemic. More rumours, this time more radical than simply about new cases in various districts, appeared. For example, according to one rumour, the Wuhan Municipal Government was recruiting porters to carry corpses at the funeral parlour at a wage of 4,000 RMB a day (some 500 euros).¹²⁷ And such rumours, in fact, reoccurred multiple times throughout the lockdown in Wuhan, as long as the official discourses spoke of the easing of current situations.

In this sense, we continue the discussions at the very end of 2.3 on the reverberances of rumours and their relationships with truth discourses in the future. From our standpoint here, the future projected by the moment of rumour articulation is now realised as truth discourses participate in the diachrony of rumour texts. Coming back to the case of the above-mentioned rumours, apart from the absurdity of their contents and people's habitual incredulity towards governmental institutions and official mouthpieces, these rumours also showed how truth discourses navigate the direction of rumouring. Here the events reported by the news were not simply facts, but also discursive events that produce interpretive ambiguity, thereby participating in the generation of upcoming rumours. First of all, an auto-communicative process within the people of Wuhan happened; the whole story about those great achievements and the delayed withdrawal of

¹²⁴ <https://www.zaobao.com/realtime/china/story20200323-1039431> (In Chinese)

¹²⁵ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/IJ7-BLen4DKhH_jkNYVfDg (In Chinese)

¹²⁶ https://wjw.wuhan.gov.cn/ztl_28/fk/yqtb/202004/t20200430_1196778.shtml (In Chinese)

¹²⁷ https://www.sohu.com/a/381611083_612784 (In Chinese)

teams from CCDC was reduced to a central concern on the pandemic itself, hinging on the question “Why would they delay if the situation is safe?” And when the truth discourses entered the discursive carnival by dismissing the article as a rumour, they navigated public discourses toward a sense of impending danger that instigated people’s response according to what they knew (both currently and previously) about the situation, which invoked the amalgam of knowledges in the social sphere, thus leading to further rumour explosions towards a public hysteria and absurdity in narratives. As the rumour public rearticulates meaning in reaction to or anticipation of official discourses, they generate feedback that may retroactively alter what is recognised as truth. Hence, the truth’s entanglement with rumour is not only reactive but also anticipatory, constantly recalibrating a rumour’s articulation based on the imagined and real trajectories of rumour infection, which restates the shadow metaphor that we have hinted at recurrently in previous pages. And when governmental authorities and powerful sources like official informative channels change their tones, these rumours, such as the sky-high wage in carrying corpses, are easily forgotten, as new rumours appear under new relationships. “Rumors, like giant pieces of collective chewing gum, inevitably lose their flavor and must be replaced by other rumors that are just as pleasing, keep people’s mouths just as busy, and are thus just as ephemeral” (Kapferer 1990: 108). We will come back to this case when we investigate the diffusion of rumours in 3.3.

In sum, whereas rumours are like shadows moving magically here and there, they are in fact textual dynamics, brought into being and continually reshaped by power relationships in the social sphere. Therefore, what appears to be a spontaneous eruption is the visible contour of deeper currents: rumour narratives trace the movements of power relationships and power relationships constantly predate new narratives as rumours, which in return presses against truth discourses towards new public concerns in the social sphere, begetting new power relationships as new rumours need new interrogators to dismiss them. In this sense, power dynamics are represented as a recursive process reverberating in society’s diachrony in response to truth discourses in discursive carnivals. And up until now, we have the full story of the swirl of infection.

3.2.3. Possible World(s) and Intersection of Rumours

Before discussing the diffusion of rumours, one more topic needs to be addressed as a continuation of the arguments in 3.1.3. As the transmedial environment provides a thickened reality in which all narratives are “too much” and “too close”, these narratives agglomerate into a gigantic, overwhelming shroud that encapsulates all media. When social groups that are engaged in discursive carnivals articulate how they themselves comprehend the social reality under the mundane reason, their articulations are also subject to the affordances of the thickened

reality. In other words, the catalysis and paralysis, from a macroscopic perspective, also transform the textual dynamics in the social sphere, which inevitably influences the transmutation of rumour texts within discursive carnivals. As we have pointed out in previous sections, the auto-communicative processes in rumour communications presume rumour texts' dynamics and are subject to personal understandings of what is going on in the social sphere, therefore promising ever-changing rumour narratives among rumour publics. Such kernels, once charged with condensed meaning, are not confined to a single communicative channel but traverse media, thereby producing an unprecedentedly complicated intertextual network that is engaged both with more social groups (as we can also see in the White Paper Protest, in which Chinese netizens knew of the protests in front of the Kremlin from the Internet) and with more preceding texts (as the constructive force of communicative situations, as we argued in 2.1). Moreover, at the moment of rumouring, the articulated rumour texts also enter this thickened reality, begetting new narratives in these text-saturated communicative situations.

Hartley et al. point out that the “pulverization of textual creation and fragmentation of reception” (Hartley, Ibrus, and Ojamaa 2021: 118) complicates our analysis of modern-day digitally mediated culture. Whereas the latter is represented as catalysis and paralysis of belief processes among the rumour public, the former focuses on the following textual production and reproduction during discursive carnivals. In the thickened reality, narratives are, first of all, given a volatile semiotic environment in which these stories “unfold across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (Jenkins 2006: 95–96). These narratives are not simply stories that are told; but provide a world that their believers can experience and participate in (Jenkins 1992; 2006). And based on the possible world that preceding narratives depict, new narratives are articulated in the thickened reality and contribute to the existing world according to individuals' understanding of the real world semiotically. As Doložel (1998: 20) suggests, “fictional worlds are accessed through semiotic channels and by means of information processing. Because of the semiotic mediation, accessibility is a bidirectional, multifaceted, and historically changing commerce between the actual and the fictional”. Therefore, if we look back to investigate the assimilation process in 3.2.1, we can find that these possible worlds, via semiotic channels, presume and intensify assimilation in rumour narratives as rumours (Song 2025a), produced and circulated in thickened reality, cease to be singular utterances and become participatory universes—open to rewriting, expansion and recursive embedding within other narrative strands.

Moreover, as Eco (1994: 81) notes, these possible worlds still require participants' knowledges to become possible and manageable. Ryan points out that “The foundation of PW theory is the idea that reality—now conceived as the sum of the imaginable rather than as the sum of what exists—is a universe composed of

a plurality of distinct worlds” (2006: 644), which indicates that the distinction between these possible worlds and the real world is framed by the hierarchies of knowledges in the social sphere and accords to the amalgam of knowledges that their readers hold. In other words, the boundaries between these different possible worlds and those between the possible worlds and the real world are constructed and maintained by truth discourses in the social sphere. We can obviously know that Robinson Crusoe is not a real figure in our real world but a fictional one not because someone among us has met him in real life, but because the figure is from classic literature according to agreements that are structured by shared knowledges. In the same vein, when people encounter narratives in the thickened reality, they do not assess their truth value solely based on empirical verification, but rather through their prior knowledges and the intertextual network that serves as the context of narratives that are to be articulated.

However, as we have noted in multiple places throughout the whole research, during discursive carnivals, hierarchies of knowledges are reshuffled and the distinctions legitimised by truth discourses are under suspicion. As “there is a close connection between the truth conditions of counterfactuals and those of interpretive statements concerning fictional worlds” (Ryan 2006: 644), the seemingly unmediated possible worlds (again, too close, too much) are set loose when the truth conditions become questionable and the interpretive statements lose credibility. If we take a closer look at each member of the social groups affected by discursive carnivals, we discover that while the mundane reason motivates them to speak of the current situation, their articulations do not originate from clearly separated, epistemically structured possible worlds that can be consciously distinguished and addressed respectively. Instead, in the semiotic reality that lies beyond individual reach, the preceding narratives give birth to *one single* possible world, in which all narratives have their own registers under the navigation of truth discourses as a generative force of rumour narratives (as we have noted in the above section). This is to say that, during discursive carnivals, the narrative boundaries between various possible worlds, which used to be demarcated by the truth discourses, are now ambiguated and become diluted by all the truth statements that are available in discursive carnivals. And the new narratives, in return, contribute to this conglomerated world in their own heterogeneity, gathered together merely temporarily under the overarching truth discourses, which, by participating in discursive carnivals, make these worlds even “realer” by addressing collective imagination directly. Therefore, within discursive carnivals, the possible worlds in various narratives are no longer “parasites of the real world” (Eco 1994: 83) but are dissolved along with the real world in this thickened reality, which at the same time presumes and resolves the heterogeneity of the gargantuan narrative world. In this sense, the logic of *Ersetzung* as a glide of knowledge structures at the moment of rumouring, has become a continuous process, amplified by the transmedial environment.

The most obvious consequence of this singular world is a loosened perception of the reality when rumours proliferate, as we can see in many Covid-19-related rumour cases, many of which even rang ridiculous. On 5th February, in the darkest moments of the pandemic in China, rumours claimed that a newborn was able to speak, stating that eating an egg a day would protect people from the pandemic.¹²⁸ Shortly after this, some other rumours that had similar contents appeared. For example, one read that “a sow opened its mouth, saying that eating nine eggs before dawn will protect you from the virus”, which was even accompanied by a video of a female swine surrounded by piglets. Apart from attributing these narratives to vernacular beliefs and authorities that we have discussed in earlier pages, these stories functioned as a cultural response to the ongoing pandemic, rising from the rumour public’s respective world that had already been well entrenched in their understandings of what was happening. As Howard contends, these narratives online “are assertive inflections of his own understanding of the media world he inhabits” (2011: 116). And when the media world is conglomerated in a gargantuan entity that overwhelms individual reasonings of the real and the fictional, narratives from the rumour public become stories of magical realism, entailing all possible elements to join the discursive carnival.

We can detect that some fragments of prior narratives are absorbed and recontextualised in new narratives within discursive carnivals. These elements migrate into new narratives, becoming new faces of rumour that hinge on existing kernels through auto-communicative processes. In the above rumours we can abstract two elements that moved along this high-speed of intertextual network: speech from non-linguistic creatures (either a sow or an infant) and eggs as a panacea. Besides the consecrated meanings of the former one and vernacular authorities in the latter one, we can also find that by accelerating assimilation in rumours, in the thickened reality, narratives during discursive carnivals are constantly dislocated and relocated across multiple platforms and the elements enter each other’s narratives as a result of the agglomeration of texts and therefore a singular, heterogeneous narrative world. The displacement and the transposition of these elements, which has been conceptualised as transfictionality (Doležel 1998; Saint-Gelais 2005; Ryan 2008), disclose the relationships between the possible worlds and when these worlds merge into one, these elements become basic features of the narratives that construct and enrich this narrative world.

Transfictionality is of course not a new phenomenon. As Ryan points out, it “is a phenomenon as old as print narrative, [...]perhaps even as old as narrative itself, [...] but it has become particularly prominent in postmodern culture” (2013: para. 24). Continuing the discussions in previous sections that the transmutation of rumour is in essence a part of textual dynamics under power relationships in discourses, what transfictionality reveals in the rumour phenomenon is that in the

¹²⁸ <https://news.sina.cn/?vt=4&urlHistory=news> (In Chinese)

thickened reality, these rumour narratives intersect with each other both spatially among various rumour publics and temporally in textual dynamics. Therefore, the whole discursive carnival has become a colossal, flowing world of narratives, in which rumours occur here and there, sporadically, as truth discourses both predate and navigate their courses. In this sense, transfictionality in rumour is not just an aesthetic feature but a discursive condition, which complicates any binary between true and false, as rumour texts, through their transfictional travel, gain legitimacy not through physical proofs but through discursive resonance within the thickened reality by continuously disassembling and assembling various elements of narratives, which resonates with the pulverisation of textual creation. Even though rumour narratives are not always fictions, we can still find that under the overarching truth discourses, rumour's transmutation still follows the logic of fictions and refers to a shared fictional world within the rumour public. In cases as special as rumours in Wuhan, as we noted at the very beginning of this Chapter, all narratives in the thickened reality had features of fiction yet contributed to the gigantic possible world and function as micro-physics of cultural history, which will be revisited in the following sections.

3.3. The Diffusion of the Rumour Phenomenon

Kyoko Suiri, or *In/Spectre*, is a novel by Japanese writer Kyo Shirodaira (2011) that blends detective fiction with supernatural elements. Set in a world where spectres, referred to as *kai'i* in Japanese folklore, coexist with humans, the story explores a fragile boundary between the visible world and the unseen one. The protagonists are tasked with maintaining this boundary, upholding an agreement made with the spectres' leader that supernatural beings should not interfere in human affairs. What makes the story special and attractive is the method of maintaining that boundary. When a spectre intrudes upon the human world, either by being perceived or by engaging in human affairs, the protagonists not only explain to their audience how the spectre achieves such deeds, but also fabricate an alternative, plausible explanation for those involved. Rather than revealing the existence of the supernatural, they construct narratives that reframe the event within the bounds of normality. Through narrative negotiation, a "satisfying" interpretation is established, which renders the uncanny familiar, preserving the social order and keeping the boundary intact. This process of fabricating plausible explanations, as the novel presents it, resolves the mundane reason for fixing the ambiguated reality and thereby diffuses the discursive carnivals instigated by the suspension of tensions as we have conceptualised in Chapter 2. What is remarkable here is that the explanations given by the protagonists are not necessarily the most accurate, but are crafted truth statements that are narratively managed and navigated. Apart from directly describing them as a "cover-up" in a conspiracist's

tone, these explanations show that the diffusion of a rumour phenomenon is an ongoing cultural-historical negotiation between the rumour public's beliefs and truth discourses, which evolve by continuously smoothing out discursive carnivals.

Therefore, to understand the eventual "death" of rumours we need to come back to cultural history. As a concerted result of people's beliefs and power dynamics in the social sphere, the diffusion of the rumour phenomenon marks the restoration of the hierarchy of knowledges and the end of the reshuffling of power relationships among the rumour public. This is to say that alongside acknowledging cultural history as the metrics of textual processes, the concern here in rumour dynamics is the reverberance of truth discourses in the past's future, as we have already foreseen in 2.3.3. Moreover, all these processes operate on local and translocal levels. Since new rumours are generated out of preceding rumour texts and discursive carnivals may also expand, as addressed in 3.2, the diffusion of the rumour phenomenon does not mark the end of discursive carnivals in general. At mesoscopic levels, rumours gradually phase out since the rumour public, previously affected by the suspension of tensions, is no longer motivated by the mundane reason to fix the social reality. In this sense, the "death" of a rumour is not a singular event but a localised resolution, whereas discursive carnivals are merely relocated to other social groups, which will undergo similar processes until their diffusion and finally disappear in the social sphere. Following this logic, we need to further explore the relationship between truth discourses as macroscopic backgrounds and mesoscopic discursive carnivals in cultural history, namely, how translocal discursive carnivals, by forging a swirl of infection, veer off temporally from the progression of cultural history.

3.3.1. *Chronos* and *Kairos*: Temporal Aspects of Discursive Carnivals

Echoing the discussion in 1.2.4, where rumours were shown to enter the dynamics of cultural history by registering themselves within present knowledge structures, no rumour can last and persist as texts integrate and disintegrate over the course of cultural history. From the perspective that rumour texts are integrated with the metrics of cultural history, it seems that all these texts are integrated and diffused in their due time. In macroscopic cultural history, time is *chronos*, as John E. Smith conceptualises it as "a grid upon which events can be plotted for the purpose of historical writing and interpretation" (J. E. Smith 1969: 3). And all rumour texts are woven into the textual dynamics in culture, each of which, as micro-fibres of culture, contributes to the progression of cultural history in time (Torop 2017). Rumours in *chronos* have their own beginnings and ends (which is, indeed, an ideal conceptualisation) chronologically, and time, as Smith further argues, "permits, as the term implies, a chronology to be constructed, and therefore a chronicle of events which forms the initial material for the writing of history" (J. E. Smith 1969: 3).

However, that is merely an aspect viewed from outside discursive carnivals and from the macroscope. If we focus on the temporal experiences of the rumour public, we can find that discursive carnivals also create a frame for an *event*. When cultural history progresses as *chronos*, for the rumour public, time has become the “right time”, or *kairos*, understood as “the special position an event or action occupies in a series, to a season when something appropriately happens that cannot happen at ‘any’ time, but only at ‘that time’, to a time that marks an opportunity which may not recur” (J. E. Smith 1969: 1). Unlike *chronos*, which is the quantitative aspect of time that progresses forward in the course of cultural history, *kairos*, as the qualitative character of time, “points to the significance and purpose of events and to the idea of constellations of events yielding results which would not have been possible at other times and under other circumstances” (J. E. Smith 1969: 2). This is to say that, as events that register themselves as meaningful in the course of cultural history, discursive carnivals are constituted by narratives that appear as these processes unfold. Discursive carnivals start from the suspension of tensions and the articulation of current ambiguities in the social sphere, which in return frames the whole explosion of narratives (note that we have conceptualised the outburst of rumours as an explosion in Lotmanian terms in 2.1.2 and we will again return to it at the end of this chapter) as an event in retrospect. In other words, in *kairos*, “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence” (Ricoeur 1984: 1:52). Therefore, the relationship between *chronos* and *kairos* is that, in *chronos*, or “calendar time” as Ricoeur (2004: 44) puts it elsewhere, the narratives that constitute events diverge from the indifferent progression of *chronos* and create a “special temporal position” (J. E. Smith 1969: 7) for *kairos*. As Smith (1969: 5) notes, “*Chronos* approaches the feature which defines *kairos*, namely that some time is the right time for something to happen or take place and this right time is sharply distinguished from ‘any time’”. In this logic, understanding the temporality of discursive carnivals means “following therefore the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time” (Ricoeur 1984: 1:54). This temporality is thus demarcated by narratives within discursive carnivals.

While *chronos* allows rumours to be plotted retrospectively as events with beginnings and ends, *kairos* captures the lived temporal experience in which rumours appear unending. For the rumour public that is “trapped” in *kairos*, which is “*the time when* a constellation of events presents a crisis to which a response must be made” (J. E. Smith 1969: 6), the swirl of infection forces all discourses to revolve around the present ambiguities (which have been explored previously in 2.2) and the rumour public will not “let it go”. As a process of auto-communication, rumouring among the rumour public changes the course of textual dynamics from a chronological flow of textual integration and disinte-

gration (Lotman 1988) to an unsatiated hunt for truth that keeps the topic fresh. Consequently, the narratives that are exchanged on rumour conduits are less a confirmation than a question, as Fine and Ellis elaborate,

We might better consider rumor not so much an *answer* than a *question*, a socially acceptable opportunity to raise a sensitive or engaging issue, encouraging others to share what they know. Rumor is not so much a statement that is true or false, or even believed or disbelieved, but one about which groups of people can legitimately *debate*. In practice, truth claims are often not passed on as declarative statements—“This *happened*”—but rather as questions—“*Did* this happen?” (Fine and Ellis 2010: 146, italics original)

The constant questioning within discursive carnivals prolongs the experience of the present moment in a state of suspension, which is not a coincidence in terminology with the suspension of tensions. Gadamer notes that “all encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event” (Gadamer 2013: 85). The unending articulation of current ambiguities, therefore, prolongs the temporal experience of the rumour public as they are constantly exposed to the narratives that sustain ongoing discursive carnivals. As we can see during the lockdowns in Wuhan, lockdowns and the pandemic served both macroscopically as a topic that anchored all the discourses during that time and microscopically as various textual exchanges that served as public concerns in different localities.¹²⁹ In this sense, as current discursive practices all hinge on current ambiguities, textual processes are no longer a chronological flow of texts reaching the upcoming future, but a kairotic moment¹³⁰ with a swirl of texts, creating a prolonged present with a “postponed future” (Kattago 2021) for the rumour public. Time is halted and saturated with affect and anticipation as *kairos* lingers within discursive carnivals and rumours proliferate and circulate within this endless temporal span.

We have noted in 2.3.2 that discursive carnivals are merely a temporary exemption from the overarching truth discourses in the social sphere from the macroscope. And the temporal aspects of discursive carnivals, namely *kairos* as a postponed future, further illustrate that this illusory emancipation will finally be resolved as carnivals will end in their due time by being refigured in *chronos*, as the above quote from Ricoeur addresses. As the rumour public remains suspended in the kairotic moment and rumours are rampaging the social sphere, truth

¹²⁹ As a widely spread joke goes in Wuhan and elsewhere around the globe: A man was worried to receive his medical report from the hospital. The doctor told him: “I am sorry to inform you that we found cancer in your lungs and we cannot do much for it.” The man rejoiced: “Oh, thank God it is not Covid!”

¹³⁰ In narratology, a “kairotic moment” means the timing when articulations and actions have the best effect. For more details please see Hawhee (2002) and Petrucci (2001).

discourses that regulate people's articulations also present themselves in discursive carnivals and are engaged in constant rumour proliferation and circulation. The discussions in 2.3 have already addressed the falsification process that finally makes these articulations become rumours, and beyond that, the engagement of truth discourses reiterates the persisting knowledge structures that were once reshuffled in discursive carnivals. The reiteration, of course, is not a return to the *status quo ante*, but restructures discursive carnivals and reaches a negotiation between truth discourses and other narratives that appear during carnivals. As the *In/Spectre* example shows, what was once questioned in the swirl of narratives is now incorporated as part of the truth discourses, though being given the name rumour. They lose their wildness for transmission and transmutation since the truth discourses, in the form of direct or indirect falsification narratives, finally satisfy the mundane reason to restore the ambiguated social reality. The settled discursive carnivals, therefore, lose their momentum for further rumour communications among the rumour public. Even though they may (as it is always so in complicated social frameworks) change their forms and beget new discursive carnivals, the current discursive carnivals reach their end in due course, which means that the same mass proliferation and circulation also forebode the diffusion of rumour, a gradual return from *kairos* to *chronos*. And in retrospect, we see the whole outburst of rumours as an enclosed event with a start and an end. In this sense, in order to fully understand the diffusion of rumours, we need to proceed to investigate the dynamics of truth discourses in the social sphere.

3.3.2. The Moving Shadows of a Gnomon: Rumours and Truth Discourses

The above discussions on *chronos* and *kairos* bring forth more to be elaborated regarding the dynamics of truth discourses and the diffusion of rumours in the social sphere. Since we have already noted the temporal aspects of discursive carnivals, the rumour processes as a whole, as rumours are constantly predated and navigated by truth discourses, can be analogised as gnomons and their shadows on sundials' surfaces. On a sundial, it is not the gnomon, the fixed vertical structure, that moves, but the shadow it casts does, whose shifting position registers the passage of time. This relationship parallels the structural role of truth discourses: the overarching truth discourses construct power relationships with the narratives that appear during discursive carnivals, casting "light" on the institutionalised social sphere that is well-prepared for rumours and giving them form and limit, which has been investigated in Chapter 1. Fleeting shadows, as we call rumours in previous discussions, acquire new meanings through this analogy. As the ink-river metaphor used in 3.2.2, the trajectories of rumours are always governed by truth discourses and are constantly negotiated in relation to them. Instead of interrogation and suppression, the diffusion of rumours is in fact a

phase of a rumour's lifecycle in which rumours are eventually reabsorbed into *chronos* through the structuring force of truth discourses.

The movements of shadows continue from our discussion in 2.3.2 and 2.3.3. In preceding discussions, at the moment of rumouring, even though the hierarchies of knowledges are temporarily paralysed in discursive carnivals, the projections of truth discourses function as historical inertia that forges a cognitive rigidity by carrying forward established knowledge forms and normative explanations. Our concern here, therefore, is the aftermath of rumouring and the re-establishment of the hierarchies among the rumour public on mesoscopic levels, or, in Foucauldian terms, the return of normalities within the truth regime. Lorenzini argues that there is “no Truth external to a series of historically situated games of truth that establish the rules for obtaining it” (Lorenzini 2023: 4), and the constant negotiations between narratives within discursive carnivals and truth discourses are, in this regard, manifestations of such games in various localities of the social sphere, which unfold themselves in the future reverberances of truth discourses. We have pointed out at the beginning of 2.3 that falsification by truth discourses is also at the discursive level and here again, the oscillations of rumours and truth discourses are happening in social discourses as narratives that are finally configured in cultural history as texts. As Ricoeur notes, “every narrative configuration is completed in a refiguration of temporal experience” (Ricoeur 1988: 3:3). This narrativised incorporation of rumour narratives into truth discourses, though positioning rumours at the opposite of the core, neutralises the seductive force of rumours. For example, if we recall the rumours on white papers revolving around M&G Stationery analysed above, after the company issued an official statement denying that it had prohibited sales of printing paper, these rumours lost their attraction; the renouncement resolved the suspension of tensions that had initiated the discursive carnival and restored the ambiguated social reality for the rumour public. At this timepoint, rumours lose their momentum in sustaining the swirl of infection and morph into other shapes and faces. It should be pointed out that this does not contradict the idea that the falsification process, in return, boosts the outbreak of rumours among the rumour public. Be it direct (as dismissal) or indirect (as historical inertia), the representations of truth discourses in discursive carnivals force current tensions to move elsewhere in the social sphere, which locally diffuses the rumour but can never resolve rumours *once and for all*, since tensions and suspension of tensions always exist in society, as pointed out in 2.1.

Moreover, on sundials, the shadows case by the gnomon move according to the sunlight. As texts are generated for situating rumours as rumours in discursive carnivals, these texts are also incorporated into truth discourses in general and take subtle steps to reshape truth discourses in return, therefore changing the course of grand narratives on the macroscope. Indeed, such changes will not be detected in a shorter time span, but as cultural history progresses forward, these

changes will be sedimented as the historical footnotes of the truth with history, as explored in section 2.3.3. On mesoscopic levels, the evolution of truth discourses, on the one hand, leaves a trail of local interpretative struggles as “the dispersal of fluxes of power throughout all the cracks and crevices of the social system; the omnipresence of resistance at every site; and the propagation of knowledge, practices, meanings, and identities out of the deployment of power” (Epstein 1998: 4). These nuances of truth discourses are also sedimented in localities of the social sphere and promise future recurrences, which will be elaborated later in the next section. Our concern here is, that in this afterquake of knowledge subjugation, such microphysics of power can be reperformed in the future; as Foucault argues:

Now, the study of this micro-physics presupposes that the power exercised [...] is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy, that its effects of domination are attributed not to ‘appropriation’, but to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings; that one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess; that one should take as its model a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory. (Foucault 1995: 26)

Therefore, rumours and truth discourses are stitched together during and after discursive carnivals in various localities that discursive carnivals used to rampage, which develops truth discourses from the macroscope by generating texts that record such discursive carnivals and become new knowledges in different levels of the hierarchies of knowledges as stratified in 1.1. These microscopic shifts may be imperceptible in the short term, yet when viewed across a broader temporal scale, they reveal accumulative epistemic transformations, which is of course not limited to scientific knowledges but also narrative knowledges as Lyotard (1984) conceptualises. And more importantly, all these knowledges are interwoven with one another as the practical knowledges for people’s daily encounters. In this sense, we return to the discussions in 1.2.1: the amalgam of knowledges functions as the frontline of culture’s temporal progression, where even the fleeting shadows of rumour leave durable imprints in the evolving truth discourses.

On the other hand, the evolution of truth discourses gradually reasserts a new order, with ongoing discursive carnivals phasing out as truth discourses are modified and reestablished by generating new texts. Whereas the evolution is represented as the amalgam of knowledges moving forward in cultural history, it is locally manifested by the untangling of the suspension of tensions as the impetus for a carnival’s continuation, namely the mundane reason, begins to wane. This reorientation indicates that the perception of the current social reality has changed, which reframes what is perceived as problematic or in need of explanation. As Asch claims, “people do not change their perception of objects; it is rather the objects of perception that change” (Asch 1951; cited from Kapferer

1990: 249). In all the rumour cases we mentioned above, as truth discourses move beyond, the rumour public no longer comes up with their understandings of current situations and switches to new concerns in the social reality. However, if we come back to the macroscopic progression of cultural history, the kairoic moment of discursive carnival is reassimilated into *chronos* as the local residues of discursive carnivals are incorporated into the textual dynamics in culture, which may beget new rumours under newly established power relationships. Discursive carnivals, therefore, pass by like dreams as the rumour public is woken up from their hunt for a settled reality. Now the social reality is settled and rumours as texts circulating in the social sphere have finished their due course in cultural history; yet the end of a discursive carnival does not mark the disappearance of rumour. Instead, its traces are sedimented into cultural memory, awaiting future reactivation. Since the evolution of truth discourses leaves behind their footprints in cultural history, our final task in understanding the rumour phenomenon is rumour's sedimentation in cultural history and possible future recurrences.

3.3.3. A Double Pendulum: Rumours' Afterlife and Cultural History

In the aftermath of discursive carnivals, the conclusion of the rumour phenomenon is not an endpoint but a juncture of transformation, by which rumours migrate from the plane of active circulation into the layered background of cultural texts. In this logic, we move from a rumour's lifecycle to its afterlife in the course of cultural history, namely its sedimentation in the collective corpus of expressions, which also promises its future recurrence when new discursive carnivals loom on the horizon. Moreover, as addressed in 1.2.4 and in 2.3 on the cultural-historical aspects of rumours and the generation of rumour texts, the sedimentation of rumour texts does not mean that only rumour texts themselves are sedimented. As Lotman (1977) argues, besides its inner structure, a text never stands alone and is integrated within the intertextual framework that foregrounds the text as a meaning-making unit. Therefore, when we are talking about a rumour's afterlife, what remains from the course of cultural history is not merely the rumour texts that were once seducing the rumour public, but a set of discourses that include not only rumours, but also the manifestation of truth discourses and all other texts that were generated under the same suspension of tensions. This archaeological aspect of rumours' afterlife (in a Foucauldian sense) corresponds to prior discussions in Chapter 1 that rumour phenomena record past, local power relationships for further historical scholarship.

Following this logic, the sedimentation of rumours also includes the sedimentation processes of the amalgam of knowledges as discussed in 1.2.2 as the maintenance of the amalgam on the diachronic plane. As the discursive carnival is resolved and the truth discourses evolve, residues of rumours substantiate the

centripetal power of maintaining the amalgam as a whole by retaining the local triumphs of truth discourses over rumours along with the sedimented rumour texts (White 1994). In this sense, rumours' sedimentation in cultural history also records the evolution of truth discourses by retaining the subjugation of certain knowledges, and precisely from these records we can speak of truth with history as Lorenzini (2023) conceptualises. Hence, the continuous sedimentation of rumour discourses in cultural history also functions as a constant force of stabilising and developing the hierarchies of knowledges at the same time, since the subjugation of knowledges finally feeds back to knowledges on different levels as rumours touch on different knowledges concerned. The whole discursive carnival, therefore, has transformed into, and even been reified as, a series of texts that enter the collective memory of given social groups and "are sedimented more deeply in people's own living memories, into abundant, diversified cultural narratives" (Song 2025c). For example, the Hairy Men case in Chapter 1 has evolved into an urban legend in multiple regions of China, which also inspired a series of stories such as the "Big-Foot Monster" in the mountains of Hubei Province and the "Wild Men" in Paekdu Mountains in the following decades.¹³¹ And Brezhnev's Rolls-Royce has become part of the Soviet jokes that reframe people's collective conception of the Soviet past. All these examples demonstrate that the sedimentation of rumours indicates a cultural metabolisation that promises their future recurrences in other shapes.

However, a rumour's recurrence requires further investigation into its conditions and timing when *kairos* appears again. As rumours also involve processes of selection through forgetting when rumouring, at that time point, the rumour public chooses to "forget" existing manifestations of truth discourses. They arrive at their understanding of current social realities from what they collectively remember (for more detailed arguments regarding collective memory and rumours, please see Song 2025c), which returns to discussions on suspension of tensions as the trigger of discursive carnivals. In 2.1.1 we addressed that suspension of tensions is an inevitable outcome of the regulating power relationships in the social sphere. From the macroscopic perspective, the textual dynamics of cultural history inevitably project suspensions of tensions onto various localities at different time points and rumours therefore appear and dissolve in the duration of discursive carnivals, which are instigated by such suspensions. The recurrence of rumours lies in the suspension of tensions as both local and translocal mnemonic practices that invoke available elements that constitute rumour texts from the collective corpus of expression. New rumours in the afterlife of older rumours are not the older rumours "once more" but are new

¹³¹ These individual stories may have their own genealogies due to the similar communicative situations. However, the Hairy Men story also brings new contents that have been assimilated into these legends.

texts in the dynamics of culture that demonstrate a temporal asymmetry in time. At the moment when rumours' lifecycles conclude, when looking back, we can call the rise and proliferation of rumours an explosive process (Lotman 2009; 2013), laying down future possibilities for new rumours; and when standing at the moment when new rumours appear, we find the unpredictability of rumours in the course of cultural history, which is further woven into the grander dynamics of culture in itself and begets further new rumours in the future, as discussed earlier in 2.1.2.

The temporal asymmetry of rumours' afterlife opens further questions about unpredictability. The sedimentation of rumours does not contain merely rumour texts, but all the intertextual relations that accompany them. When such relations are conveyed to a new context of power dynamics, they restructure themselves according to new conditions. In this regard, new rumours are not only new in the sense of new texts, but also new regarding their adaptation to new power dynamics, generating new manifestations of truth discourses in new discursive carnivals. Therefore, even though the transmutation of rumour texts accords with the dynamics of textual processes as we showed in 3.2.2, the afterlife of rumours does not rely solely on intertextual networks expanding in temporal frames, but also on social power structures and truth discourses at the time. This "hindsight" of rumour events serves as another source of unpredictability. As Ruesch points out,

Inherent in such an account are all the distortions related to the use of language and speech; and these, together with the personal bias of the observer, often contribute to a report that has little if anything to do with the original events. The deviations are in part due to the fact that a historian is mainly concerned with the evaluation of impact—that is, the effect a given action sequence has had upon subsequent events. As times change, judgments change; and an evaluation of past events is usually undertaken with an eye on the understanding and steering of contemporary events. (Ruesch 1975: 296)

The convergence of two strands of unpredictability in rumours' cultural history resembles the movement of a double pendulum: The first pendulum swings, and the second one swings while attached to the end of the first. This simplified chaotic system of movement reveals the special status of rumours in cultural history: When new rumours unfold in looming discursive carnivals as cultural texts, truth discourses, with their own developments over the timespan in cultural history, also generate a series of texts and join the discursive carnival. For example, we can see the revival of Chinese versions of Soviet jokes in China when people are joking about the government.¹³² When rumours arose about the political revolts against Covid-19 restrictions, rumours absorbed the elements from Soviet

¹³² Some of these Soviet jokes being adapted to Chinese context can be found here: <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/tag/苏联笑话> (In Chinese)

jokes and were predated by truth discourses during the lockdowns, which, as discussed above, were sedimented for future recurrence.

In sum, the unpredictability of rumours and rumouring demonstrates an “eternal youth” (Kapferer 1990: 141) of the afterlife of rumour narratives, which will be sedimented in the collective memory of the rumour public as both texts and intertextual constellations. The sedimentation of discursive carnivals records the development of truth discourses and more importantly, is constantly transformed and reconfigured into new discursive carnivals that are triggered by new suspension of tensions as cultural history progresses. In this light, the afterlife of rumours showcases a more complicated unpredictability, compared with other texts that constitute the plenitude of the past, and finally, yet even beyond the endpoint of rumours, they all fall back to the vitality of culture’s dynamics.

3.4. Concluding Remarks of the Chapter

In *The Elephant in the Room*, Eviatar Zerubavel (2006) asserts that the institutionalised social reality creates a series of silences in the social sphere. The uneven landscape of social realities casts shadows in the social sphere and some topics have become the giant elephant in the room that people ignore due to habitual behaviours, social taboos and political denial. Apart from linking this topic to what was previously observed in Chapter 1 and 2.1, the discussions throughout the present chapter show that the silence is not a void of discourses. Instead, it is saturated by information exchange on conduits that the overarching grand narratives cannot reach. As Zerubavel notes, “Yet the presence of the elephant in the room is not always unanimously denied. Indeed, people often try to break conspiracies of silence and make the open secrets around which they revolve part of the public discourse” (Zerubavel 2006: 17). However, when unofficial information becomes the a force for breaking the silence, namely being transmitted beyond the boundaries between social groups, it turns into rumours that break “the silence about the silence” maintained by both the authorities and the public (Bajohr 2004) and ferment into discursive carnivals. Such carnivals diverge from the “normal” progression of textual dynamics of the social sphere. In this swirl of infection, the rumour public is converted into model readers of rumour narratives due to existing epistemic patterns and the current mundane reason. This conversion is made possible by auto-communicative processes, which also echoes the presumptions in Introduction that the transmission of rumours cannot be simply equated to a mere virological model or mechanical contagion, since this network of believing is sustained microscopically by interpersonal conduits that have been well developed in previous communicative practices. On the macroscope, the knowledges that people acquire are the result of cultural sedimentation and will continue to be used in the future with the

imprints of current rumouring, which is governed by a macroscopic will to truth. The whole discursive carnival, therefore, becomes an unsatiated hunt for truth, which is intensified and catalysed by the thickened reality of our modern times.

During discursive carnivals, rumour texts also undergo transmutations not only textually and semantically, but also politically. As believing and articulating are two sides of the same coin, the transmutation of rumours is not an accidental by-product of the swirl of rumour infection, but an essential mechanism through which rumour expands, restructures and finds new terrains to inhabit. Rumours resonate both within and beyond discursive carnivals, expanding their scopes and thus instigating new carnivals in the social sphere with newly generated rumour texts. But more importantly, the transmutation of rumours is overseen by the power dynamics in the social sphere. Following this trail of logic, rumours that mutate during discursive carnivals are, in fact, narratives belonging to a grander inter-textual network, which is predated and navigated by the ongoing power structures in the social sphere. Being marked out by truth discourses in the social sphere, these narratives finally become rumours, as previously explored in 2.3.

However, rumours are not simply prey to truth discourses. As narratives that aim at helping the rumour public to make sense of the current social reality, rumours function as a negotiation during discursive carnivals to reach a satisfying explanation, which also marks the end of rumours' circulation and proliferation. The diffusion of rumours is by and large a resettling of the overarching hierarchies of knowledges, which are executed by the manifestations of truth discourses within discursive carnivals that finally neutralise the hunt for truth. What appears as the diffusion of rumours is, in fact, a reabsorption, a moment when the kairotic swirl of infection is drawn back into the metrics of cultural history as *chronos*, where rumour texts sediment into the culture's textual dynamics over time. Moreover, the sedimented rumour texts promise their future recurrence; when new suspensions of tensions appear, these disintegrated elements will be once again assembled into new rumours, adapted to new communicative situations and power structures, which promises the double unpredictability of rumours as cultural texts and as negotiation processes towards a settlement of the ambiguated social reality.

Taken together, the discussions above centre on the lifecycle of rumours both interpersonally on microscopic levels and socially on macroscopic levels after the moment of articulation. As promised in Introduction, rumours, as a mesoscopic phenomenon, operate both within the power structures of local social groups and in relation with the overarching truth discourses that sustain the hierarchies of knowledges. And if we return to the overall dynamics of culture, we finally reach the essence of rumours as a fleeting phenomenon that never leaves the human society. Rumours, therefore, also function as interpretative frameworks for future uncertainties, which heralds their eternal return (Eliade 1954). In resonating with Reumaux conceptualisation (1996: 12; also see Song 2025c: 123) on rumours as

the lifecycle of insects, we can develop this schema that in cultural history, the lifecycle of rumours rotate and progress forward; and since rumours pop up and dissolve in the textual dynamics over the course of cultural history, different phases of various rumours intersect in each synchrony of it, thereby presenting the current heterogeneity of culture in the social sphere. This point echoes with our starting point in this research on rumours before rumouring. As the *Ersatz* of knowledge, rumours rise from the heterogeneity of knowledge systems and the polyglotism of culture, while their transmission and transmutation in turn contribute to and consolidate this very heterogeneity. These moments of rumour articulation and circulation form sedimentary layers within collective memories, marking the minor epistemic conflicts and developments in the evolution of truth discourses.

In this way, besides exemplifying the epistemic productivity of culture, rumours also expose “the infamous” (Foucault 2001) as a set of marginal narratives, as well as the processes through which they are made into rumours. As the power dynamics constantly render such narratives suspect, silenced, or ridiculous, like the revelation of uneroded strata after an earthquake, in the volatility of discursive carnivals, rumours reveal the epistemic fault lines of a society. In each epoch of human history, the fault lines shift as the truth discourses evolve, and there are always narratives that are dismissed as rumours, which leads to further discussions on epistemes, as elaborated in Foucault’s works(2002a; 2002b). But if we set our eyes on the fleeting phenomenon of human society, we find that in all these epochs of human history, rumours persist and infect. Like moving shadows on sundials, they subtly recalibrate how futures are narrated and how pasts are understood over the course of cultural history. And all the rumours, as well as other texts that emerge during discursive carnivals, will inevitably leave traces on that weathered sundial.

4. CONCLUSIONS: INK IN RIVERS AND SHADOWS ON SUNDIALS

This research, obviously, does not aim to fight against or repress rumours as governmental agendas do; nor can it be used to do so. To take one step further, as has been reiterated multiple times in this research, anyone who tries to create a social sphere free from rumours will do so in vain, since rumours emerge precisely where meaning, uncertainty and power intersect, functioning as necessary responses to epistemic tension rather than anomalies to be eliminated. From the perspective of macroscopic truth discourses that overrun and attempt to stabilise the social reality, this impossibility is well implied in the inexhaustible corners among local social groups. As Fine and Ellis observe, “The world is a rumor bazaar. [...] As far as rumors go, every culture has a street on which talk is cheap” (2010: 219). And from the perspective of microscopic localities that are always a hotbed for rumours, the inexhaustible complexities of the world as perceived, experienced and articulated are raw materials not only for rumours to proliferate, but also for all discourses in the social sphere that construct the social reality that we believe in, interact with and narrate into texts (Merleau-Ponty 2004). Since “humans have a compulsion to narrate” (Cobley 2014: 1), then, rumours are inevitably the result of the constant friction between the macroscopic social reality and microscopic articulations made by different social groups. Precisely in this logic, rumour is a mesoscopic phenomenon, mediating between structural power and lived experiences. In short, rumours are necessary; they are *required to exist*.

In the same vein, a semiotic anatomy of rumour, as we have discussed in the preceding pages, goes beyond over-simplifying rumours as psychological deficiency, informational distortion or purely media-driven contagion. By acknowledging rumour as a structurally embedded phenomenon within the dynamics of culture, knowledge and power, this study can be productively incorporated into studies focusing on social phenomena that we have delimited in the Introduction—such as conspiracy theories, gossip and urban legends—to manifest the heterogeneity of human knowledges, one of the fundamental premises of this research. This heterogeneity has its own history in human cultures and, more importantly, is essential for rumours to be possible. Drawing from different knowledge systems, articulated texts in the social sphere cannot be reduced to one coherent symphony of truth statements; instead, they unfold as polyphonic, sometimes even cacophonous, narratives that provide different versions of social realities, regulated by historically contingent hierarchies of knowledges. Moreover, as rumour is a phenomenon *a posteriori*, power dynamics in the social sphere reveal the mechanisms by which certain articulations are predated by truth discourses in the social sphere and are excluded from official narratives, thereby offering a diagnostic lens for examining knowledge subjugation and the evolution of truth

discourses. Last but not least, the transmission and transmutation of rumours allows a closer inspection of the rumour phenomenon as a dynamic process in the course of cultural history. As a fleeting phenomenon, rumours are constantly reshaped, intersecting with new intertextual networks and power configurations, which are finally sedimented back to the dynamics of culture, remaining available for future reappearance. In this sense, the rumour phenomenon can be grasped in its full analytical configuration as a dynamic, historically embedded process of meaning-making.

Paul Cobley argues that “even the most ‘simple’ of stories is embedded in a network of relations that is sometimes astounding in its complexity” (2014: 2). In retrospect, every rumour case that we have analysed above, whether complicated or simple, is enmeshed within the intertextual network that stretches across the course of cultural history. These rumours are structurally prepared by institutions, articulated under epistemic pressure and dynamically transformed through transmission, falsification and historical sedimentation. Therefore, the lifecycle of rumour is not a closed sequence but a temporal configuration that can only be grasped through its historical, present and future dimensions. And in that logic, we can finally answer the research questions that we proposed in Introduction. If we take every rumouring as the present tense of rumours, what we can find is an epistemic movement extended from the past, unfolding in the present and opening toward the future. This is to say that the three research questions in the Introduction and the corresponding three chapters reveal the dynamics of cultural history by focusing on different stages of rumours from different yet interrelated temporal dimensions. Rather than restating the research questions verbatim, already resolved at the end of each chapter, this conclusion synthesises the preceding findings within a broader temporal and epistemological horizon.

4.1. Rumours’ Past: Historical Epistemology and the Determined Aspects of Rumours

The past of rumours is never a closed archive, but a sedimented history of epistemic exclusions and negotiations. We speak of what is happening around us according to what we know about the situation; this constitutes the pre-rumour stage of rumours. These pre-rumour resources are historically layered configurations shaped by prior truth discourses, institutionalised knowledges and the subjugation of alternative narratives that occurred in rumours’ past, constituting hierarchies of knowledges in the present. Therefore, taking the perspective of rumours’ past on the rumour phenomenon, the whole of this research can be read from two perspectives: in rumour studies, this research focuses on the lifecycle of the rumour phenomenon, its presence under social pressures and its transmission and diffusion in the social sphere. But, at a higher level, it is also an

investigation into the knowledge hierarchy and orders of discourse which bridges rumour studies with the scope of historical epistemology. In this regard, the hierarchies of knowledges are never a sublime, static entities, but a movement across different epochs of human history according to how knowledges are produced and legitimised (Lyotard 1984: 9; also see Foucault 2002a; 2002b). As Canguilhem (1988: 39) reminds us, what is dismissed as obsolete or erroneous today once functioned as objective truth and truth itself remains historically contingent, subject to criticism and refutation. This historical contingency of epistemic legitimacy echoes what we have already discussed in Chapter 1 as “mild scientism,” that science is politically constructed and culturally mediated and that science and scientific knowledges have become ideological apparatuses that supervise human articulation. Since “the history of science is the history of a certain cultural form called ‘science’” (Canguilhem 1988: 27), science, being consecrated as the top of the hierarchy, is a historical process and a part of cultural history (Uspenskij et al. 1998: 60). And in consequence, such movement in cultural history not only leaves a trail that we may call it the “history of science,” but also a plenitude (Rigney 2005) of past articulations that are deemed as “unscientific”, or “obsolete”, in Canguilhem’s terms. Such plenitude was, is and will always be, the inexhaustible source for all rumours that appear in the course of cultural history.

Following this trail of thoughts, the uneven landscape of the social reality is a crystallisation of past epistemic conflicts as “the result of previous struggles which is objectified in institutions and dispositions and commands the strategies and objective chances of the different agents or institutions in the present struggles” (Bourdieu 1975: 27). And more importantly, this unevenness is discursively constructed and covered evenly by hierarchies of knowledges, and normality is therefore established; normality only ceases to function when discoursing in the social sphere is impeded. In other words, hierarchies of knowledges prepare not only the social reality that is to be interpreted and articulated, but also the historical situation for rumours to take onto the stage. Following this deterministic logic, we may conclude the discussions on the intricacies between truth discourses and rumours in the light of historical epistemology. On the one hand, the truth that hierarchies of knowledges produce becomes *the truth* with a history when it comes to the construction of authority. More importantly, this history projects an inertia upon the present social sphere that pre-emptively dismisses subjugated knowledges as rumours. We discussed how historical inertia functions as the ongoing power that accompanies truth discourses at the very moment of articulation, regulating what can be plausibly articulated, believed and circulated. When new articulations are made in the social sphere, they are instantly subject to the sedimented epistemic conflicts and some of them fall outside the historically stabilised boundaries of epistemic legitimacy. From this perspective, the dismissal of rumours is always a reiteration of past epistemic settlements.

Historical inertia transforms historical epistemic victories into the present as seemingly self-evident criteria of plausibility and maintains truth discourses by excluding alternative articulations to the margins of the whole enterprise. In that sense, every rumour records a microhistory of knowledge subjugation.

Moreover, this truth with a history is lived and enacted by social groups, which means that in the course of such a history, social groups are subsequently demarcated by culture, ideology and knowledges. These demarcations are sedimented and reinforced by repeated communicative practices and shared beliefs, constructing conduits that later rumour texts also utilise. Thus, the rumour public does not consist of social groups that only appear when rumours proliferate, but is a pre-configured community that is determined by shared social realities and common credibility attributed to social institutions. In short, the rumour public is historically prepared; its members already inhabit overlapping epistemic frameworks that shape what can be recognised as meaningful, questionable, or worthy of circulation. We have pointed out that this network of believing is constituted by auto-communicative channels, by which members of the rumour public speak to each other about what they have known to confirm that a shared reality still exists. Rumouring becomes a collective activation of shared interpretative models available in culture at moments when macroscopic progressions in cultural history are rendered as local suspensions of tensions. And again, from the perspective of rumours' past, the rumour public is a historically situated formation, in which social groups are constantly engaged with the knowledges, as well as their respective legitimations, in history.

On the other hand, since the rumour public is the lived dimension of historical epistemology, its articulations will also challenge and re-navigate the course of this history, countering the passivity inherited in social institutions (Merleau-Ponty 2010). Beyond an enclosed circle of knowledge production (Lyotard 1984: 27) within legitimised social institutions, articulations made by social groups participate in and intervene in the progression of truth discourses from within, which unfolds in what may be called the past of rumours, that is, the sedimented field of prior articulations and epistemic negotiations. As history is "time filled by, the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]" (Benjamin 2007 [1968]: 261), these prior articulations also sustain the contingency of the history and serve as the other inseparable half of the knowledges that the rumour public uses here and now, even if some of them are already subjugated and mediated by truth discourses. They leave residues that may be reactivated under new conditions, thereby contributing to the non-linear progression of cultural history. In the same vein, new possibilities for social institutions may be developed and imbued with new elements. As we can see in the Mendel case and in the Copernicus case argued in Canguilhem (1988: 35) and Lyotard (1984: 24) respectively, the once suppressed knowledges, even sometimes dismissed as rumours and persecuted by the truth discourses of that time, become part of the same discourses later.

Therefore, rumours, as subjugated forms of knowledge, entered cultural history while engaged with the power relationships of the time. The past of rumours is not something that rumours leave behind, but something they continually reactivate. Rumours bring sedimented conflicts in knowledge hierarchies back into circulation whenever social reality becomes unstable. It is precisely this recursive movement between epistemic inheritance and present articulation that situates rumour as an ideal entry point for understanding how knowledge orders evolve over time. Rumours are historical epistemic residues in the evolution of truth discourses. And precisely from that point, the three chapters, viewed from the past tense, can be read as the historical situation of knowledge subjugations, the current subjugations as a result of prior subjugations and the afterquakes of such subjugations. To put it shortly, historical epistemology reveals the determined aspects of rumours.

4.2. Rumours' Present: Meaning-making beyond Truth Discourses

Whilst rumours' past reveals the determined aspect of rumours, rumouring, as it unfolds in the present, promises more than simply determinism in the rumour phenomenon. As an ongoing effort of meaning-making under epistemic tension, rumours rise when the tensions in macroscope are rendered as suspensions of these tensions. During the suspension of tensions, the rumour's past, as we have discussed in the previous section, constitutes the communicative situations where social groups are trying to compensate for the severance of dialogic processes. There is a mundane reason for social groups to fix the ambiguated social reality. In the localities where tensions are suspended and dialogic processes severed, the affected social groups use the knowledges they hold to understand what is happening here and now, which means that in the absence of an authorised, legitimated truth for these social groups to believe in, they have to come up with their own versions of truth according to what they know about the situation.

In this sense, the knowledges that were once subjugated under hierarchies of knowledges reappear as legitimate knowledges that can be used to comprehend the current situations. Therefore, the amalgam of knowledges, as the agglomeration of the practical knowledges among social groups, provides heterogeneous interpretations as truth claims about here and now. Rumour texts are also generated in this discursive carnival. It should be noted that at this point, these "raw" texts are not rumours yet, since they remain local and the overarching truth discourses cannot regulate these articulations directly due to the suspension of tensions. These articulations are made as responses to the suspension of tensions and more importantly, become communicable during discursive carnivals. In other words, the suspension of tensions gives space for texts to be articulated and commu-

nicated despite the overarching truth discourses. Every text resonating in discursive carnivals appears believable, which restores the credibility of the previously subjugated knowledges with situated plausibility. Precisely in this vein, rumouring, like witchcraft, serves as the compensation of power in contrapuntal relationships between the overarching truth discourses and people's own experiences, as we have argued in 2.2.

Within discursive carnivals, the fragments of various knowledge systems are assembled as the elements from both inside and outside carnivals are drawn into collective efforts to fix the ambiguated social reality. Since the regulating power from truth discourses temporarily wanes, subjugated knowledges *glide* toward the position that used to be dominated by knowledges of higher hierarchies (scientific knowledges, for example) and generate texts as a response to current situations. These texts are resonating within discursive carnivals as auto-communicative processes since the rumour public is aware of the knowledges activated; and more importantly, this resonance also serves as an unending swirl that generates new texts both by reassembling available narrative fragments and by entailing new fragments into it. After levelling and sharpening, these texts are transformed into kernels of future rumour discourses and have the possibility of surpassing boundaries of localities and becoming observable rumours that can be recollected and analysed, or, in semiotic terms, a series of cultural texts that enter the dynamics of culture.

Indeed, the suspension of tensions does not abolish truth discourses absolutely; it is a local, temporary phantom of emancipation from truth discourses. When rumour texts surpass these boundaries of localities and become translocal, overarching truth discourses come back and impose power relationships on rumour discourses as epistemic conflicts between knowledges on different levels. As "epistemological conflicts are always, inseparably, political conflicts" (Bourdieu 1975: 19), these rumour texts are subject to truth discourses due to the contrapuntal relationships. We can bring the discussions under one metaphor that we used already in 3.2. Rumour discourses are merely marked out, or predated, by the truth discourses and dismissed as rumours, and the transmission and transmutation of rumour texts are, in fact, a minor share of the greater textual dynamics. Some texts are singled out and dismissed as rumours, which are situated at the opposite side of truth discourses and subjugated. The dynamics of rumour, therefore, are in fact an indication of macroscopic textual dynamics delineated by power relationships between local discursive carnivals and overarching truth discourses, which constantly changes truth discourses from within, since the process of subjugation also generates a series of texts that belong to truth discourses.

More importantly, what the ink-river metaphor proposes is that no matter whether there is ink being released into the river, the river itself continues to move. The metaphor stresses that the ongoing meaning-making efforts of the rumour public are, in cultural history, primary, whereas truth discourses remain secondary

within the broader dynamics of culture. We noted that the amalgam of knowledges is the frontline of cultural history since it constantly internalises individual experiences as articulable, interpretable prerequisites for all texts that appear in the social sphere. And once the suspension of tensions instigates a discursive carnival locally, these potentials come into shape as cultural texts that introduce dynamics into culture, which also presumes that the pre-configured rumour public, as discussed in the previous section, is open to a wider audience. In other words, rumours, together with all other articulations made during discursive carnivals, materialise the possibilities promised by culture, further extend these possibilities by enlivening the current heteroglossia and project them towards the future, regardless of how truth discourses are operating from above. As Merleau-Ponty posits, “It is this opening upon a world which makes possible perceptual truth and the actual effecting of a *Wahr-Nehmung*,¹³³ thus enabling us to “cross out” the previous illusion and regard it as null and void” (2002: 347, italics original).

In this vein, truth is always historically organised and presented to us merely as institutionally successful narratives and the ongoing meaning-making processes reveal microscopic mechanisms of cultural history. Jay Lemke contends that “Truth is just a common foot soldier in a much larger semantic army” (Lemke 2005: 37) and this larger semantic army is precisely constituted by meaning-making efforts of social groups to understand what is going on here and now. Since rumours are what people do with history when truth is temporarily unavailable, rumouring foregrounds this microscopic process that is usually shaded by overarching truth discourses. It makes visible how meaning is actively negotiated rather than passively received and internalised and how alternative interpretations circulate before being either absorbed into, or excluded from, dominant knowledge hierarchies. All in all, “trying to understand how and why people make the meanings they do is more useful than fighting over the truths of their claims” (Lemke 2005: 132). It is at this level that culture provides not a unified epistemic ground, but a collective corpus of heterogeneous meaning potentials that can be activated under specific historical and social conditions. Combining this with previous discussions on the determined aspects of rumours, rumouring emerges at the intersection of predictability and unpredictability, a tension that opens directly onto the future-oriented dynamics of complexity.

¹³³ Etymologically speaking, *Wahrnehmung* means truth being perceived (or taken, as *Nehmung* comes from *nehmen*, to take). In Kantian philosophy, *Wahrnehmung* is the raw material of experiences, which have already been framed and mediated by time and space. For Merleau-Ponty, perception, or *Wahr-Nehmung*, is perceiving the world “as real,” which corresponds to a truth (*Wahr*, *Wahrheit*) on how the world appears to a subject, distinguished from *Empfindung*, which is a neutral feeling, or sensation.

4.3. Rumours' Future: Unpredictability and Complexity

Lotman states that “Meaning-making [...] assumes the introduction of texts from outside the system and their specific, unpredictable transformation between the time they enter and leave the system” (2019: 85), which indicates that rumours do not simply unfold along a linear trajectory from articulation to diffusion and disappearance. Rather, they evolve within a complex system in which multiple temporalities, knowledge hierarchies and communicative practices intersect. Each articulation is contingent upon historically sedimented epistemic structures, yet once they are articulated and become cultural texts in the social sphere, it enters a two-fold unpredictability as discussed in 3.3. On the one hand, the current ambiguated social realities guarantee every individual their own creativity in bringing what they know of the situation to collective meaning-making processes; and on the other hand, these texts are projected towards the future and enter cultural history as an event whose consequences cannot be fully predicted. In this regard, the dynamics of rumour texts both in the current discursive carnival and in their afterlife in the future can be summed up as a double pendulum in the course of cultural history for each text.¹³⁴ The dynamics of rumour begin to resemble not a linear causal chain but a sensitive system in which small variations in articulation produce unpredictable effects over time. In an unpredictable, sensitive system as such, as Kolmogorov (1991) notes, the sensitivity of initial conditions and the following non-linear dynamics are unfolded in a radically unpredictable manner, therefore becoming a chaotic system that extends in time. Even though Kolmogorov’s models are not developed for the generation of new texts in the social sphere, as Lotman points out, they provide a general model “for the creation of poetic information” (1977: 28), which is precisely the origin of complexities inherited in texts’ afterlife in cultural history, as we have elaborated in 1.2.

Following this logic, rumour texts unravel in cultural history both in order, in terms of being subjugated knowledges macroscopically and in disorder, in terms of the double unpredictability in each articulated rumour text, which echoes what we have investigated in 2.2. Rumours, as local epistemic conflicts and overarching truth discourses construct a contrapuntal relationship that at the same time antagonise and complement each other. More importantly, as rumour texts seldom stand alone and are always present in a rumour complex that relates to further intertextual networks, these rumour texts constitute the complexity of cultural history from the bottom and precisely in this sense we can converge the discussions in 4.1 and 4.2.

¹³⁴ For a generalised mathematical model of a double pendulum system, please see Price (1935); for more discussions on chaotic systems and chaos theory, please see Ekeland (1998).

The power dynamics addressed in previous discussions persist in the course of cultural history; this is to say that whereas the ink-river metaphor discussed in the previous section reveals the microscopic intricacies of rumours in the social sphere, macroscopically, the currents of the river constitute the progression of cultural history itself, carrying with them imprints of power relationships sedimented across different localities, which, in the same logic as complexities, projects past power dynamics into the present and transfers it towards the future.¹³⁵ Therefore, the instituted hierarchies of knowledges and the rumours that complexities presuppose, are historically legible as gnomon and shadows on sundials, a metaphor we have used in 3.3.2. A sundial does not generate time; it registers time through shadows cast by moving bodies under changing conditions. In a similar manner, rumours do not constitute an autonomous historical force that stands outside cultural dynamics, but function as shadows of deeper movements in knowledge hierarchies, power relationships and meaning-making efforts at the present. Each rumour marks a specific index towards a local epistemic conflict, leaving a trace that allows us to read how the progression of cultural history can never be reduced to a stable chronology. And the gnomon, without doubt, is also subject to the weathering of time.

The sundial metaphor reveals that the ambiguated realities, as a creation of current power dynamics, are also a construction of prior discursive practices and that the current rumours are also an afterlife of preceding texts, which means that the complexities of current texts are the product of preceding complexities. As Morin notes, on the principle of organisational recursion, “everything that is product comes back on what produces it in a cycle that is itself self-constitutive, self-organizing and self-producing” (Morin 2008: 49–50). Coming back to rumours, then, as “a cylindric progression of history as heteroglossia every time when heterogeneous interpretations surface to the social sphere under social pressure” (Song 2025c: 131), rumour texts represent no linear causalities, but a progression of cultural history in which texts integrate and disintegrate (Lotman 1988: 54). In 3.3 we addressed the temporal dimensions of rumours by understanding every rumouring as a kairotic moment and finally return to the *chronos* of cultural history. And with the idea of complexity, we can now have a full picture of rumours in cultural history. Since “In actual history, many dynamic, though non-synchronised and unrelated, processes possessing different temporalities of development co-occur” (Lotman 2019: 97), rumours appear as part of the ongoing complexities in recursive organisations; and in the same vein, the diffusion of rumours is not the ending point, but a structural reformation that brings local cylindric temporal frames back to the linear progression of cultural

¹³⁵ It is not a coincidence indeed, that tradition, as a kind of social institutions that we have discussed in 1.1, etymologically comes from the Latin word *tradere*, or to transfer, since “tradition is the creation of the future out of the past” (Glassie 1995: 395).

history, which prepares for future explosions of rumours. Therefore, rumours in the progression of cultural history are analogous to an ouroboros at the present, yet a flow of complexities from the past to the future. From this perspective, the discussions in Chapter 1 focus on the complexity that is sedimented and mediated, Chapter 2 discusses the current complexities that are being generated and Chapter 3 on future complexities that are free from any deterministic method. In short, rumour *presupposes* complexities in cultural history and vice versa.

Finally, what we have at hand are two metaphors that resemble the rumour phenomenon. Microscopically, namely in each locality of the social sphere that rumours appear, the overarching truth discourses single out texts and subjugate them as rumours within discursive carnivals, like ink released in rivers; and macroscopically, the institutionalised social sphere is constantly projecting shadows to the surface as cultural history moves forward.

4.4. Some Final Notes on Complexities and the Making of Shared Realities

With all the discussions above, we have reached our final point of this research, which also hints at a possible way of living with rumours with further directions on the making of shared realities. In the previous sections we have shown that rumours emerge and circulate within an environment characterised by complexities of cultural history. If we take one step forward to investigate this very juncture when rumours are articulated, the collective effort of meaning-making is precisely the effort of comprehending these complexities projected to the present. In other words, the articulations made here and now are always a discursive representation of current complexities, which is, indeed, not a thorough one considering the irreducibility of complexity. In the case of rumours, these articulations are brought together despite epistemic heterogeneity and will inevitably be brought back to normality through the mundane reason. This is to say that in each local epistemic conflict, the mundane reason for fixing ambiguated realities always foregrounds a negotiation process, a collective decision to finally bring the rumour public under shared realities. Therefore, rumour is a constructive power of the making of shared realities from two perspectives. On the one hand, during discursive carnivals, rumouring provides articulations about realities and the upcoming shared realities are chosen from them. On the other hand, when rumours are subjugated, these rumour texts serve as excluded discourses that in return, *contrapuntally* calibrate the position of truth discourses and maintain their progression in cultural history.

Pollner notes that “The decision to nevertheless act upon a particular version as the grounds of further inference and action (over and against competing possibilities) comprises the politics” (1987: 86), which indicates that from the

heterogeneous articulations to shared realities, a reduction of complexities happens as political processes, in the widest sense of the term. These reductions are never neutral; they are always mediated by historically sedimented knowledge hierarchies and by the interpretative resources available to the rumour public at a given moment. And more importantly, reduction of current complexities means that shared realities are reusable in our perception of the world. As 4.2 notes on truth-taking (*Wahrnehmung*) as our perception of the world around us, when perception happens, it reaffirms the world that we believe in so that we can interact with what we perceive. In other words, we extrapolate these structured, systematised realities *back* to the complexities of the world (stereotypes, for example, as we discussed in 1.3), therefore continuing the past and the present complexities towards the future. This “politics of experience” (Laing 1968; Pollner 1987) opens onto a broader line of inquiry concerning rationalisation as the ongoing objectivation of social realities. It points to productive directions for future research on how shared realities are stabilised, contested and renewed over time. And from that point of view, rumours have become a special case regarding their ferocity of epistemic instability and polarisation of epistemic heterogeneity.

We can find both necessity and danger in these political processes. As “certainty is a human goal” (Fine 1997: 741), individually experienced complexities must be reduced to become socially manageable, leaving possibilities for members of the social sphere to articulate the complexities around them and adapt these knowledges to their everyday life to “a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 33). And on the other hand, there is always the danger of the “Iron Cage”, as Weber (2001 [1905]) puts it, that an ultimate reduction of the articulated complexities brings forth the loss of human freedom by forging a rigid system based on efficiency, rational calculation and control, which forbids the meaning-making effort in the social sphere as meanings are already prescribed from the top. Resisting “the madness of absolute coherence” (Morin 2008: 48) produced by social institutions requires maintaining the possibility that current complexities are always *able to* be articulated in the social sphere. As overarching truth discourses ongoingly assert their primacy by excluding subjugated knowledges, we must keep this dialogue running to keep human knowledges away from a utopic coherence. As Morin points out, “We need a constant dialogue with discovery. The virtue of science that keeps it from succumbing to madness is that new data arrives continuously and leads it to modifying its visions and its ideas” (2008: 48). In this logic, maintaining the balance between the necessity and danger requires thinking as an ongoing task for every individual. As Foucault writes, “We need to free ourselves of the sacralization of the social as the only instance of the real and stop regarding that essential element in human life and human relations—I mean thought-as so much wind” (2001: 456). Positioning thinking as an ongoing task, therefore, helps human society avoid falling into either the illusion of a

permanent truth or the swirl of rumour infection by staying at a distance from both: thinking means a rejection of a tutelage state of reasoning (Arendt 2006: 178), which keeps the dynamics of culture at a very modest, yet important individual level. Certainty is indeed a human goal, but staying with that certainty is not.

This is what a semiotic anatomy of rumours can trumpet for. Since the rumour phenomenon reveals how knowledges are pragmatically organised across social groups, resonating with Foucault's call that "Society must be defended" (2005) in the context of the genealogy of knowledge, it is imperative to stress that *rumouring must be defended* in terms of defending the capacity for contestation and articulation under uncertainty, which cannot be simply understood as a call for freedom of speech. Instead, it is a delicate status of both acknowledging the complexities of our human world and being aware of the overarching truth discourses that mediate our social reality. Rumours, as a mesoscopic phenomenon, reveal to us that they are both a temporal deviation from truths and a part of culture's self-organisation and development. All in all, the rumour phenomenon shows that, as *Homo sapiens*, our societies do not only operate on promises of final truths; rumours weave through our attempts to know the world.

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SUMMARY

This doctoral thesis offers an understanding of the rumour phenomenon from a semiotic perspective. By situating the rumour phenomenon within the broader dynamics of cultural history, knowledge hierarchies and collective meaning-making, the study approaches rumours as semiotic phenomena embedded in the ongoing organisation of knowledges in the social sphere, rather than treating them simply as false information or irrational beliefs. Rumours, as the *Ersatz* of knowledge, emerge, circulate and dissolve within the dynamics of culture as different knowledges compete for legitimacy. In this sense, the thesis examines the epistemic conditions of rumours, the processes through which they are articulated and dismissed and their subsequent circulation and diffusion, thereby constructing a mesoscopic framework for understanding rumours as cultural texts within the course of cultural history.

The study begins from the observation that rumours are commonly analysed through the lens of truth and falsity. While such explanations capture certain aspects of rumour behaviour, they remain limited because they reduce rumours to errors within otherwise stable knowledge systems. These approaches overlook the fact that the boundary between legitimate knowledge and rumour is historically contingent and socially negotiated. What is dismissed as rumour at one moment may later become accepted knowledge and vice versa. This historical fluidity suggests that rumours should not be understood merely as epistemic failures but as part of the processes through which societies negotiate the status of knowledge. After reviewing various approaches to rumours, this research develops a semiotic framework grounded in culture theory, historical epistemology and discourse analysis. Within this framework, rumours are not defined by their truth value but by their positions within the dynamic relationship between different social institutions that constitute our social reality. Rumour is thus a concept *a posteriori*. The distinction between rumour and truth cannot be treated as fixed but must be understood as the outcome of ongoing epistemic negotiations against the grander backdrop of cultural history, leading to further discussions on rumours as mesoscopic epistemic conflicts in the social sphere.

Within this theoretical framework, the thesis formulates three central research questions. The first asks how rumours are historically prepared and what epistemic structures shape the conditions under which they can emerge. The second examines how rumours arise in the social sphere and how certain articulations come to be labelled as rumours. The third investigates how rumours circulate, transform and eventually reach diffusion within cultural communication. These questions structure the analysis across the three main chapters of the thesis, each addressing a different stage in the life cycle of rumours.

The first chapter investigates the historical and epistemic conditions that make rumours possible. It argues that all articulations of rumours originate from what

social groups know about the current situation. In this vein, investigating rumours as a social phenomenon requires, first of all, mapping the available knowledges in the social sphere and examining their relationships with one another. In every society, certain knowledges are institutionalised and legitimised through scientific authority, political institutions and cultural traditions, while other forms remain marginalised or subjugated. While scientific knowledge is politically constructed and culturally mediated, these hierarchies are not static but evolve as new knowledge claims challenge existing structures of authority, changing the contents of scientific knowledge over time. The chapter further discusses how, in practice, these knowledges in different hierarchies are amalgamated together and function as practical knowledges for social groups to comprehend what is going on here and now. Although heterogeneous, the amalgam of knowledges is maintained by constant exchange and ongoing possibility of alteration, which is ultimately situated in the symbolic universe in which anything is interpretable. This amalgamation functions as the interpretative resource through which individuals make sense of events in everyday life. Following this logic, the chapter proceeds to examine how these knowledges establish their authorities among social groups from interpersonal networks to overarching truth discourses and emphasises that truth is always historically situated, subject to power relationships in play at the time. In conclusion, Chapter 1 points out that societies are always prepared for rumours, since existing knowledges are always available for social groups and tensions persist between social institutions.

The second chapter turns to the moment of rumouring itself, examining how rumours are generated within the social sphere. The tensions discussed previously are projected onto the instant dimension of social contexts as communicative situations in which social groups articulate their experiences. While such tensions may be resolved macroscopically, they may appear as a suspension of tensions at the microscopic level. In such situations, the dialogic processes are severed, and the hierarchies of knowledges can no longer function to structure the social reality. Therefore, legitimate truth discourses fail to provide adequate explanations for current situations. As the tensions are suspended, social groups come up with their own interpretations out of the mundane reason to restore the ambiguated social reality. Within this context, these heterogeneous interpretations proliferate, constituting discursive carnivals as temporary communicative spaces in which multiple narratives coexist, resonate within social groups and compete to explain the current reality. In this vein, individuals draw from the amalgamation of knowledges to articulate their explanations, which remain local and provisional. These raw texts become recognizable as rumours when they begin to trespass the boundaries of social groups and truth discourses reassert their authority by marking certain narratives as illegitimate. By dismissing these texts as “false memories,” truth discourses exclude these articulations while simultaneously generating further texts within discursive carnivals and engaging with rumour

discourses directly. Such exclusion is not limited to explicit dismissals but also includes a historically constructed inertia projected from the history of truth discourses. However, when truth discourses generate texts in discursive carnivals, these texts may also, in return, shape the trajectory of truth discourses in the history of knowledge. Precisely in this sense, rumouring is a flash of knowledge subjugation and rumours enter the course of cultural history while sustaining its complexity.

The third chapter analyses the processes through which rumours circulate, transform and eventually diffuse. Networks of rumour transmission connect individuals through existing conduits established in previous communications. These networks are organised by shared interpretative frameworks sedimented in cultural history and form the rumour public. Members of this public participate in processes of auto-communication in which shared narratives are repeatedly articulated, modified and reinforced. As rumours circulate, they undergo continuous transformation through reinterpretation and elaboration. On the one hand, rumour texts resonate within social groups that are involved in existing discursive carnivals, generating new texts that sustain the ongoing rumour processes; on the other hand, when communicated beyond the porous boundaries and relocated in new contexts, they may instigate new carnivals, entailing new social groups in the swirl of rumour infection. Over time, rumour circulation reaches a stage of diffusion when the suspension of tensions is eased by the restoration of hierarchies of knowledges. Diffusion marks the end of a rumour event, but it does not imply the disappearance of rumour discourses in the social sphere. Instead, rumours become integrated into collective memory and remain available for future recurrence and reinterpretation. To conceptualise these processes, the thesis employs the temporal distinction between *chronos* and *kairos*. Rumour articulation and circulation shift the course of cultural history from chronological time to kairotic time, characterised by discursive carnivals. In this sense, all rumours are deemed to end in cultural history, but those who are within the carnival perceive it as an endless swirl of rumouring. And when diffusion happens, this kairotic moment is reabsorbed into the chronological flow of cultural history and rumours become disintegrated as cultural contexts for future reverberance in truth discourses.

In concluding all the discussions above, this thesis situates rumours within the broader progression of cultural history. It proposes that rumours should be investigated through three temporal dimensions: the past of rumours, the present of rumouring and the future of rumour dynamics. The past dimension concerns the historical aspects of rumours through knowledge hierarchies, legitimised truth discourses and networks of the rumour public. The present dimension focuses on the process of rumouring as collective meaning-making under the supervision of overarching truth discourses. The future dimension addresses the unpredictable trajectories of rumour texts once they enter the dynamics of cultural history. The

thesis further explores how rumours contribute to the construction of shared realities. Societies constantly confront complex and ambiguous situations that require interpretations for collective actions. Since complexity cannot be fully grasped in its entirety, social groups must reduce it by selecting certain interpretations as the basis for understanding and collaboration. Rumours contribute to this process by generating alternative interpretations that compete with legitimised ones. Through negotiation, certain interpretations become stabilised while others are subjugated, therefore transforming epistemic heterogeneity into shared realities that structure social life. At the same time, constant articulations of experienced complexity prevent the social sphere from being homogenised. Rationalisation may suppress epistemic heterogeneity and reduce the social sphere to a utopia, where the possibility of critical reflection is diminished. Maintaining a balance between stability and openness therefore requires epistemic heterogeneity, leading further elaborations about shared realities at the mesoscopic level.

KOKKUVÕTE

Kuulujutu semiootiline anatoomia: sotsiaalne diskursus, “võltsmälu”, ja nakatamine

Käesolev doktoritöö pakub arusaamist kuulujutust semiootilisest vaatepunktist. Asetades kuulujutu-nähtuse kultuuriajaloo, teadmiste hierarhiate ja kollektiivse tähendusloome laiemasse dünaamikasse, läheneb antud uurimus kuulujuttudele kui semiootilistele nähtustele, mis on manustatud sotsiaalses sfääris toimuvale teadmiste korrastamisele, mitte ei käsitle kuulujutte kui valeinformatsiooni või irratsionaalseid uskumusi. Ersatz-teadmisenähtused tekivad, ringlevad ja lahustuvad kuulujutud kultuuridünaamika protsessis, kus eri teadmised võistlevad legitiimsuse pärast. Selles mõttes uurib käesolev töö kuulujuttude episteemilisi tunnuseid, protsesse, mille läbi neid artikuleeritakse ja kõrvale heidetakse, ning nende järgnevat ringlemist ja lahustumist. Seekaudu luuakse raamistust, mille abil saada aru kuulujuttudest kui kultuuriajaloo koosseisus olevatest kultuuritekstidest.

Uurimus algab tähelepanekust, et kuulujutte analüüsitakse tavaliselt läbi tõesuse ja vääruse prisma. Kui taolised selgitused pädevad kuulujutu-käitumise teatud aspektide jaoks, siis jäävad nad ikkagi piiratuks, sest nad taandavad kuulujutud muidu stabiilsete teadmissüsteemide sees olevatele vigadele. Need lähene-mised vaatavad mööda asjaolust, et piir legitiimsuse teadmise ja kuulujutu vahel on ajalooliselt ebakindel ning ühiskondlikult kokkulepitav. See, mida mingil aja-hetkel võetakse kuulujutuna, võib hiljem saada aktsepteeritud teadmiseks ning vastupidi. Sellest ajaloolisest voolavusest järeldub, et kuulujutte ei tohiks võtta lihtsalt kui episteemilisi läbikukkumisi, vaid kui osiseid selles protsessis, mille kaudu ühiskonnad teadmiste staatuse üle läbirääkimisi peavad. Peale kuulujuttude käsitlemist ülevaate tegemist arendab antud uurimus semiootilise kirjeldusraamistust, mis põhineb kultuuriteoorial, ajaloolisel epistemoloogial ning diskursuseanalüüsil. Selles raamistikus ei määratleta kuulujutte nende tõeväärtuse alusel, vaid selle järgi, millised on nende positsioonid meie sotsiaalset reaalsust moodustavate ühiskondlike institutsioonide dünaamilistes suhetes. Kuulujutt on seega a posteriori mõiste. Kuulujutu ja tõe eristamist ei tohiks võtta kindlaksmääratuna. Nende suhet tuleks mõista episteemiliste läbirääkimiste tulemina, mis toimuvad laiema kultuuriajaloo taustal ning viivad seega aruteludeni kuulujuttudest kui ühiskondliku sfääri episteemilistest konfliktidest.

Niisuguses teoreetilises raamistuses sätestab käesolev doktoritöö kolm kesket uurimisküsimust. Esimene küsimus: kuidas kuulujutte ajalooliselt luuakse ja millised episteemilised struktuurid kujundavad tingimusi, kus nad saavad tekkida? Teine küsimus: kuidas kuulujutud sotsiaalses sfääris tekivad ja kuidas hakatakse teatud artikulatsioone sildistama kui kuulujutte? Kolmandaks: kuidas kuulujutud kultuurilises kommunikatsioonis ringlevad, moonduvad ning lõpuks laiali-

paiskumiseni, difusioonini jõuavad? Nende küsimuste kaudu ongi käesolev töö püsti pandud, et uurida kuulujuttude eri nõ eluetappe.

Esimene peatükk uurib seda, kuidas ajaloolised ja episteemilised asjaolud teevad kuulujutud üldse võimalikuks. See peatükk väidab, et kõik artikulasioonid kuulujuttudest algavad sellest, mida ühiskonnagrupid end ümbritsevatest tegelikest oludest teavad. Kõik kuulujutud saavad alguse sellest, mida ühiskondlikud grupid oma olemasolevast olukorrast tegelikult teavad. Nõnda nõuab kuulujuttude kui sotsiaalsete nähtuste uurimine esmajoones seda, et kaardistataks kõik kasutusel olevad teadmised, mis sotsiaalses sfääris on. Seejärel saab uurida, kuidas nad omavahel seotud on. Igas ühiskonnas on institutsionaliseeritud ja legitimeeritud teadmised, mis on institutsionaliseeritud ja legitimeeritud teadusautoriteedi, poliitiliste institutsioonide, kultuuritraditsioonide kaudu samas, kui mingid muud teadmismvormid on marginaliseeritud või alla surutud. Kui teaduslik teadmine on poliitiliselt konstrueeritud ja kultuuriliselt vahendatud, siis tuleb mees pidada, et need hierarhiad ei ole staatilised, vaid arenevad uute teadmismväidetena, mis vaidlustavad olemasolevaid autoriteeristruktuure, muutes samas teaduslikku teadmist iseenest. See peatükk vaatleb edasi, kuidas vaadeldud teadmised, mis on kokku koondatud ja toimivad praktiliste teadmistena, aktualiseeruvad eri ühiskonnagruppidele selgitamaks, kuidas nende ümber toimivast aru saada. Olles hetegrogeenne, toimib teamiste kogum seekaudu, et on olemas pidev infovahetus ja võimalik teadmiste vahetus, mis lõppkokkuvõttes on seotud suvaliselt tõlgendatava sümboolilise universumiga. See funtsioonide koondus on tõlgendusbaas, mille kaudu inividid saavad oma igapäevaelu mõtestada, kusjuures tõlgendatavaks osutub kõik, misiganes sümboluniversumis olemas on. See funktsionaalsuste kooslus on tõlgendusbaas, mille kaudu selgitada, kuidas inimesed oma igapäevaelu mõtestavad. Lähtudes selles loogikast, näitab see peatükk, kuidas need teadmised loovad iseenda tunnustatust sotsiaalsete gruppide vahel alatest inimestevahelistest võrgustikest kuni kõikehõlmavate tõediskursusteni. Samuti rõhutab see peatükk, et tõde on alati ajalooliselt määratletud, sõltudes muuhulgas ka ajastulistest võimusuhetest. Kokkuvõtvalt näitab esimene peatükk, et ühiskonnad on alati kuulujuttudeks valmis, sest olemasolevad teadmised on ühiskonnagruppidele alati kättesaadavad, ning et pinged sotsiaalsete institutsioonide vahel säilivad.

Teine peatükk käsitleb kuulujututamist ennast, analüüsides seda, kuidas kuulujutte sotsiaalses sfääris tekitatakse. Eelnevalt arutelu all olnud pinged projitseeritakse sotsiaalsete kontekstide kui suhtlusolukordade vahetule mõõtmele, milles ühiskondlikud grupid oma kogemusi artikuleerivad. Kui sarnaseid pingeid võidakse lahendada makroskoopiliselt, võivad nad ilmned ka mikroskoopiliste pingepeatamistena. Taolistes olukordades dialoogiprotsessid katkestatakse ning teadmishierarhiad ei saa enam sotsiaalset reaalsust korrastada. Seepärast ei suuda legitiimsed tõediskursused ettetulevaid olukordi adekvaatselt seletada. Kui pinged peatatakse, tulevad ühiskondlikud grupid välja oma tõlgendustega tavateadmistest

(mundane reason), et taastada mitmemõtteliseks muutunud sotsiaalne reaalsus. Selles kontekstis hakkavad levima heterogeensed tõlgendused, luues diskursiivseid karnevale kui ajutisi suhtlusruume, milles mitmesugused narratiivid eksisteerivad koos, resoneerivad ühiskondlike gruppide vahel ning võistlevad olemasoleva reaalsuse seletamises. Selles olukorras lähtuvad invidiidid oma selgituste artikuleerimisel teadmiste seotisest, jäädes lokaalseks ja ajutiseks. Neist toortekstidest hakatakse aru saada kui kuulujuttudest siis, kui nad hakkavad ületama sotsiaalse gruppide piire ning kui tõediskursused kinnitavad nende autoriteeti, märgistades teatud narratiivid illegitiimsetena. Kõrvaldades taolised tekstid kui „valemälud“, tühistavad tõediskursused sellised artikulatsioonid, tekitades samal ajal järgnevaid tekste diskursiivsete karnevalide sees ning haakudes seekaudu kuulujutudiskursustega otseselt. Niisugune tühistamine ei ole piiratud selgete väljaviskamistega, vaid puudutab ka ajalooliselt loodud inertsi, mis tuletatakse tõediskursuste ajaloost. Siiski, kui tõediskursused diskursiivsetes karnevalides tekste loovad, võivad tekstid vastukäiguna kujundada ka teadmisaialoo tõediskursuste kulgemist. Just nimelt selles mõttes on kuulujututamine näide teadmise allutamise, ja kuulujutud sisenevad kultuuriajalukku, säilitades samal ajal viimase keerukuse.

Kolmas peatükk analüüsib neid protsesse, mille kaudu kuulujutud ringlevad, moonduvad ning lõpuks lahustuvad. Kuulujuttude ülekandevõrgustikud ühendavad invidiide olemasolevate kanalite kaudu, mis on loodud varasemas suhtluses. Neid võrgustikke korrastatakse jagatud tõlgendusraamistikega, mis on ladestunud kultuuriajalukku ning moodustavad kuulujutu-avalikkuse. Selle avalikkuse liikmed osalevad autokommunikatsiooni protsessides, milles jagatud narratiive korduvalt artikuleeritakse, muudetakse ning tugevdatakse. Kui kuulujutud ringlevad, siis läbivad nad taastõlgendamise ja viimistlemise kaudu pidevaid muutusi. Ühest küljest resoneerivad kuulujututekstid ühiskondlike gruppide vahel, mis on kaasatud olemasolevatesse diskursiivsetesse karnevalidesse, luues uusi tekste, mis hoiavad käimasolevaid kuulujutuprotsesse üleval. Teisest küljest, kui neid edastatakse läbi poorsete piiride ja asetatakse uutesse kontekstidesse, võivad nad tekitada uusi karnevale, kaasates kuulujuttudesse nakatumise pöörisesse uusi ühiskonnagruppe. Aja jooksul jõuab kuulujuttude ringlemine lahustumisjärku, kui pingete peatamist lihtsustab teadmishierarhiate taastamine. Lahustumine märgib kuulujutusündmuse lõppu, aga see ei tähenda, et kuulujutudiskursus sotsiaalsest sfäärist kaoks. Selleasemel lõimuvad kuulujutud kollektiivse mälu ja jäävad kättesaadavaks edasisele ilmnemisele ja taastõlgendamisele. Nende protsesside mõtestamiseks kasutab käesolev doktoritöö ajalist eristust chronose ja kairose vahel. Kuulujuttude artikuleerimine ja ringlemine viivad kultuuriaialoo kulgemise kronoloogiliselt ajalt kairootilisele, mida iseloomustavad diskursiivse karnevalid. Selles mõttes peaksid kõik kuulujutud kultuuriaialoos lõppema, kuid need, kes on karnevalis sees, tajuvad seda kui kuulujututamise lõputut keerist. Kui toimub lahustumine, siis see kairootiline moment suubub taas kultuuriaialoo

kronoloogilisse voogu, ning kuulujutud lõhustuvad kultuurikontekstides, et hakata tulevikus tõediskursustes uuesti kajama.

Eelnevaid arutelusid kokku võttes, asetab käesolev töö kuulujutu kultuuri-ajaloo laiemasse kulgemisse. Paneme ette, et kuulutte peaks uurima kolmest ajalisest mõõtmest: kuulujuttude minevik, kuulujututamise olevik ning kuulujutudünaamika tulevik. Minevikumõõde puudutab kuulujuttude ajaloolisi aspekte teadmishierarhiates, legitimizeeritud tõediskursusi ning kuulujutu-avalikkuse võrgustikke. Olevikumõõde keskendub kuulujututamise protsessile kui kollektiivsele tähendusloomele, mis on üleüldiste tõediskursuste ülevaatuse all. Tulevikumõõde vaatleb kuulujututekstide ennustatamatuid teekondi hetkest, mil nad sisenavad kultuuriajaloo dünaamikasse. Edasi uurib töö seda, kuidas kuulujutud panustavad jagatud reaalsuste konstrueerimisse. Ühiskonnad on pidevalt vastamisi keerukate ja mitmemõtteliste olukordadega, mis nõuavad tõlgendamist, et anda juhiseid kollektiivseks tegevuseks. Kuna seda keerukust ei saa selle tervikkuses täielikult hoomata, peavad ühiskonnagrupid selle redutseerima, valides arusaamise ja koostöö aluseks teatud tõlgendused. Kuulujutud aitavad sellele protsessile kaasa, luues alternatiivseid tõlgendusi, mis legitimizeerituga võistlevad. Läbirääkimiste kaudu muutuvad teatud interpretatsioonid stabiliseerituks, samal ajal kui teised neile allutatakse; nii muudetakse episteemiline paljusus ühiskondlikku elu korrastavateks jagatud reaalsusteks. Samal ajal takistavad kogetud keerukuse pidevad artikulatsioonid seda, et sotsiaalne sfäär muutuks homogeenseks. Mõistuspärastamine võib episteemilist paljusust alla suruda ning taandada sotsiaalse sfääri utoopiaks, kus kriitilise arutlemise võimalikkus on kahanenud. Stabiilsuse ja avatuse vahelise tasakaalu säilitamine nõuab seega episteemilist heterogeensust, mis viib jagatud reaalsuste edasiste viimistlusteni.

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- The Use of a Fictionalized Past—a case study of L. Brezhnev’s Rolls-Royce in Riga Motor Museum*, 9th Annual Meeting of the Memory Studies Association: Beyond Crises: Resilience and (In)stability, 14–18 July, Prague, Czech Republic. Charles University.
- The Semiotic Mechanisms of the Knowledge Amalgam in the Social Sphere*, 16th World Congress of the IASS/AIS: Signs and Realities, 2–6 September, Warsaw, Poland. University of Warsaw.
- The Rumor Phenomenon in the Society of Knowledges and Its Ontological Status in Semiotics*, the 13th conference of the Nordic Association for Semiotic Studies: Feeling—Skill—Knowledge, 7–9 June 2023, Helsinki, Finland. University of the Arts Helsinki, Sibelius Academy.
- The Rumor Infection in Times of Fear—In the Case of Covid-19 Outbreak in Wuhan*, Lotman conference 2023: Fear in Culture and Culture of Fear, 15–17 June 2023, Tallinn, Estonia. Tallinn University.

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(2025) Rumor Infection and Resonating Fear: Rumor Communication in a Thickened Reality. In *Through the Lens of Dread: Exploring the Meaning-Making of Fear in the Mediasphere*, edited by Merit Maran, Mari-Liis Madisson, and Andreas Ventsel, 278–307. Tallinn: TLU Press.

(2025) The Rumor Phenomenon in the Society of Knowledges and Its Ontological Status in Semiotics. In *Feeling, Skill and Knowledge: Semiotics of the Subject in Environment, Culture and World*, edited by Juha Ojala, Merja Bauters, and Lily Díaz-Kommonen, 115–26. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-95999-8_10.

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Konverentsid:

- The Diffusion of Rumors: The Dynamics and Afterlife of Doomed Endings*. The 16th Annual Lotman Days “The End: Finality and Renewal in Culture”, 10–12 June, Tallinn, Estonia. Tallinn University.
- Inexhaustible Cracks: Existential Presuppositions and Dynamics of Culture*, Inheriting Eco. Umberto Eco, the University of Bologna and all the knowledge in the world, 27–29 May, Bologna, Italy. University of Bologna.
- Will Rumors Bring a Better Life? A Cultural Semiotics Perspective*, Nanjing Normal University Semiotic Symposium 2025, 7–8 June, Nanjing, China. Nanjing Normal University.
- The Use of a Fictionalized Past—a case study of L. Brezhnev’s Rolls-Royce in Riga Motor Museum*, 9th Annual Meeting of the Memory Studies Association: Beyond Crises: Resilience and (In)stability, 14–18 July, Prague, Czech Republic. Charles University.
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