

Evolving Genres of the Written Word: “Fake News Fiction” & the Like(s)

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In a world that's said to have gone upside down, the primary victim is the primary virtue that is truth.

What is truth? It comes in many faces. It has a range of identities, definitions and synonyms, such as verity, or simply, fact, as in scientific data. As well does it enjoy a multiplicity of antonyms: untruth, lie (from white to barefaced), deceit, duplicity, fiction, and these days, alternative facts.

The verbiage related to politics and the verdure of imagination that is literature appear to have coalesced, or are now running parallel. The usual error of conflation is also eager to mistake one for the other.

The year just passed has been recognized as the starting point of a timeframe for this head-shaking development, much as hindsight now identifies the brave new words of long ago that have apparently proven prescient. The popularity of the book *1984* by George Orwell has been revived, and demand for copies has risen so surprisingly that retailers soon found themselves out of stock.

Another title, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, is also now being championed by literary critics and political observers alike as having even more of forecasting relevance to what has been happening worldwide: in brief the rise of populism with its fearful tendency to slide to authoritarianism, let alone fascism and tyranny.

But it seems that popular leaders have in common the facility to utilize the popular lie, the untruth that becomes an article of faith among

fanatics. Emotions are wildly at play when rationality takes a backseat, inclusive of its invaluable aspect that is skepticism, or the need to question the validity of anything before blind acceptance.

With the resurgence of Putin's Russia, the calamitous meltdown in Syria that has propelled millions of refugees towards Europe and elsewhere, the continuing bizarre behavior of North Korea's kingpin, the historical fiction advanced by the People's Republic of China with regards entitlement to the South China Sea, the shocker that was Brexit, which first gave distinct voice to the rise of populism, as eventually affirmed with the election of a Rodrigo Duterte in our country and a Donald Trump in the United States of America, with more rightwing populists waiting in the wings in other countries — all these political developments have become alarming, not only for progressives or liberals, or democrats (in lower case), but learned observers, journalists and historians who have enjoyed the privilege of casting a long view on global shifts that concern paradigms.

Fake news started with electoral or political campaigns, and proliferated upon the questionable success of such exercises. To convince voters of the supposedly positive effects of having the United Kingdom withdraw from the European Union, its proponents shielded the electorate from the notion of possibly deleterious economic consequences, and focused instead on the supposed cleansing of the national workforce. It rallied the emotional demographic sector behind the false ideal of a cessation of employment being taken over by migrants.

For a specifically personal case — personal to me, that is, as well as other lovers of whisky — no thinking went into the repercussions of having to establish new trade relations for the distribution and sale of single malt whisky and blended whisky traditionally manufactured with excellence in Scotland, which happens to be part of the United Kingdom.

Concerned ambassadors with knowledge of trade diplomacy have raised the same concern as when Scotland attempted to seek independence only recently. Had the move succeeded, an independent Scotland would have had to establish diplomatic relations with all the countries that the U.K. already enjoyed trade relations with. Some measure of disaster could have befallen Scotland with regards its distribution of whisky. The delays

and new arrangements would have translated into much higher prices for good ol' Scotch.

Thankfully, for myself and several friends with whom I've engaged in many hours of elbow-bending at a bar, that didn't happen. But now, with Brexit, which still has to come into gradual and full shape, the same concern has been revived. Well, it probably won't affect many Filipinos who still think nothing of the perils of gout while manifesting their nationalism with continued intake of San Miguel beer. But for those who have "moved on" and learned of the greater healing powers of "uisge beatha" or the "water of life," we can only say that the gods of spirits remain just, since Japanese and Taiwanese whisky now provide alternatives to our idolatry of the Scottish genius with regards both water and life.

In the US, the false news also started during the long-drawn contest that involved primaries for the selection of Barack Obama's successor. In a way, it may be said to have been similar to searching for a Nikka or Suntory replacement for Lagavulin single malt, that is, if a great whisky can be compared to a great president.

And here in our own proverbial neck of the woods, similarly, the black propaganda unleashed on and from all sides during the presidential election campaign of 2016 became easily converted into both defensive and offensive (in more ways than one) battlecries, even with or maybe because of the euphoria of victory as what turned so-called "retards" extra-giddy.

"Bias" became one of the first bywords. Never mind that its popular, populist's use as an adjective only displayed a severely limited level of literacy. In so-called trolls' hearts and minds (if a troll can be said to have a heart and a mind), all reportage and reckoning of their idol's triumph and initial conduct in office that was less than idolatrous merited that single word of dismissal, even if unhappily truncated in violation of proper use. "Bias." It embodied the simplistic notion of unquestionable supremacy.

We have also heard of the upturn in proffering false binaries or dichotomies, again a staple populist's tack. Everyone who raised an eyebrow or two, much less criticized the actuations and promouncements of the unconventional president, was said to be "*Dilawan*" or of the so-called "Yellow Army."

Much like what happened in winning the vote for Brexit, and much like what would happen with Donald Trump's unlikely but apparently inexorable triumph (ironically despite his losing in the "popular" vote count), it was the promise of a departure from what was perceived as the faulty facets of a predecessor that invested faith in the wildest of prospects. Not only wildest, but the actual diametrical opposite of the predecessor.

Ah, disente, kanyo? O, eto, mamamatay-tao, na mumurahin pa kayo!
In place of what was adjudged as utter display of apathy, here then was the stark, raw empathy involving a purveyor of crude language and street justice.

With regards our former colonizer, in place of expertise in foreign affairs, there was the brazen allure of a demagogue that said what the disgruntled and displaced wanted to hear: protectionism against all imagined threats, terroristic, economic, and social, that went with porous borders and the nagging defiance against stereotyping the faithful of other, different religions as well as expanded gender sets.

When reason is cast to the wayside in favor of panaceas, so are the hallmarks of truth, whether they're of the motherhood character of the text in Goodwill greeting cards or of more detailed and forceful substance. Such is the present dilemma in the United States of America: how does one convince the other half that climate change is indeed a scientifically proven threat, at least more so than the possibility that a Muslim from countries that had no record of terrorist attacks in the U.S. may now be importing terror together with her or his luggage upon landing at the John F. Kennedy airport, his passport and visa details be damned?

Falsehood has a certain lure, as if of a siren song, of what we want to hear, and the promises the tune entails. One could well imagine that the literarily inclined among Americans, especially if they were brought up cuddling classic books, say, even foreign vintage epics, that if there had to be a new Captain America to lead the country back to safety, that leader would, like Ulysses, command his men to lash himself into the mast, so that he would be powerless to give in to the temptations sung by Circe and her minions. But alas, not only does the current version of Captain America forego that wise recourse; he himself flings the siren songs to a

people becoming even more divided, owing to different interpretations of the truth.

He insists that the crowd at his inauguration as President was the largest ever, despite substantial camera evidence to the contrary. And his own minions suggest, indeed as the now infamous Ms. Kellyanne Conway had, that there is such a thing as “alternative facts.”

To that fanciful statement, the response was just as devastating as they were incredulous. “They’re falsehoods,” intoned television journalist Chuck Todd. Lies, plain and simple: that was the common verdict, except perhaps from among some Republicans and members of the extended Trump family.

Yet it seemed to be all of a piece with what had presaged the fantastic utterance. The world going upside down had also entered a dimension defined as post-truth — wherein falsity has crept up to attain a deadlock with veracity, and all systems go when it came to a coin toss between the two.

In Malacañang, the otherwise gently avuncular and articulate spokesperson Ernesto Abella came up with his appeal for both “creative imagination” and “creative interpretation” in reference to the often confounding pronouncements of the Bossman himself.

If the consequences of all this verbal shell game weren’t or can’t be tragic, why, of course we can all grin and bear it, maybe even accede that we’ve just been thrust into comedy hour.

And yet what we are experiencing now is actually part of an apparent global pivot to a curiously novel inclusion among the genres of writing, inclusive of verbal articulation — which is written down and reported, and which draws adverse reactions, all on paper or on reading screens of all sizes, from television monitors to desktops and laptops to tablets and cellphones.

In terms of reportage and commentary per se, while it started with a fringe kind of journalism — blogs and trolling on social media — the initially questionable purveyance of fake or false news has seeped into established tri-media, with prominent personalities, mostly related to politics, spewing mind-toggling conundrums or seemingly oxymoronic terms such as that by-now infamous classic: “alternative facts.”

A popular blogger in the service of Duterte as infallible icon in turn compares the writing of fake news with that of fiction, and identifies them as the same banana. I will submit that she may have a point there, however possibly tenuous, or yet to be established through the process of correct discourse.

It may not matter that her master often prefers to rely on a lodestone of invective. Or should it? He is evidently not of the province of recognition that to curse is to give up on discourse, to cease and desist from being discursive. *Nawalan nang diskurso, kaya't magmumura na lang, at/o magpapatawa ng paka-krudo.*

What about claims that appear to be plucked out of thin air? Four million Filipinos are drug addicts. That's one in 25. Over a million surrenderees, thus acknowledging their addiction. Where are they now, when a supposed rehabilitation center funded by a generous Chinese fellow, one that can house over 10,000 poor but salvageable folks, is presently only rendering service to not even a few hundred?

Reputable national and international news organizations have decried what they contest as “dubious claims ... used to justify (the) bloody anti-narcotics campaign, (per) review of official government data and interviews with the president’s top anti-drug officials, (who) say that data on the total number of drug users, the number of users needing treatment, the types of drugs being consumed and the prevalence of drug-related crime is exaggerated, flawed or non-existent.”

Why does he say that he will take his policemen’s accounts as Gospel truth, no matter if it all flies in the face of CCTV evidence and official investigative reports, then eventually backtrack, without seeming so, when he freezes the same policemen’s conduct of the all-out war on drugs, not because the number of over 7,000 Filipinos slain has been breached, but more because one South Korean businessman was strangled to death right inside a police camp?

The same creative spokesperson recently contended, in the wake of a former president’s niggling observations, that President Rodrigo Duterte’s leadership style is “transformational” and “more visionary.” More visionary than that of the former president, or even of all his predecessors, we suppose he means.

We cannot dispute this claim, as yet, and brand it as falsehood. It is but a claim. And who knows, the first part of the claim may be true, in a manner of speaking. That is, that the burgeoning kill list had indeed caused this strange divergent development — of many Filipinos being transformed into a community characterized by general apathy, while many others were in turn being transformed back into the old “days of disquiet and nights of rage” — as Jose “Pete” Lacaba described the season before the imposition of Martial Law.

Let me digress a bit at this point to offer an anecdote: a personal recollection of a memorable conversation I had with a friend, if a more senior colleague in the profession, that took place sometime in the late 1970s or early-to-mid 1980s. I must apologize that my memory — that fallible repository of private truths as well as acts of deceit — cannot presently pinpoint the exact year of this occurrence: a late-night meal downed with Irish whiskey at the original Café Adriatico off Remedios Circle in Malate.

I also can’t remember what brought us together: just the two of us, as the song says. We must have come from some concert or cultural activity around the area. In any case, I found myself being treated to this midnight repast and drink, by virtue of his being the senior colleague, by Mr. Adrian E. Cristobal, the fellow we honor with this lecture series.

After exchanging perverse notes on the comely ladies we must have ogled in the activity we had attended, and maybe comforting ourselves with prevarications on why we wound up at Café Adriatico by ourselves alone, the chat went on to literary matters, very briefly. And eventually, to my surprise, to politics.

I can’t for the life of me establish exactly when this conversation took place, whether it was in the early 1980s when Martial Law had already supposedly ceased, or maybe even after post-EDSA People Power 1, when Marcos had already flown off and Adrian had relegated himself into an opinion columnist of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

I had never been in his league, merely in his employ at some point or other, or as a beneficiary of his patronage at the height of Marcos’ Martial Law.

What surprised me most was when Adrian volunteered to share with me, not upon any solicitation on my part, what he thought had been

Marcos' gravest offense against the Filipino people. And that was the fact, as he said, that as someone who ruled for 20 years as president and despot, Marcos had stonewalled a generation of the best and brightest Filipino leaders from ever taking over the reins of government. Not just Aquino, Benigno Jr., he said, but the likes of Lorenzo Tañada, Jovito Salonga, Jose Wright Diokno... I'm not sure now if he added other names. But that, in a nutshell, was Adrian's bit of a post-mortem on what turned out to be ruinous political rule.

Well, I'm sure that he had other, varied post-Marcos insights that he shared with other friends and intimates, or may have put down in yet private notes. But it was a memorable night for me, since I had been allowed entry into one small room of verity, if of the Monday armchair theorist variety at worst. I had felt secure however that even given his reputation as a man of letters, a fictionist and dramatist, a Palace rationalizer himself (but never an apologist, as far as I knew), a strategic spinmeister, and a sophisticated raconteur of wit and antic humor, what he told me was a personal tidbit of truth.

Adrian expressed an opinion, a studied opinion. Given his experience as part of history, and his appreciation of that history, then this studied opinion may be said to be closer to fact than to conjecture.

We are all said to be arbiters of our authenticity of experience, and this is what ordains us to function on whichever side of the fence may seem attractive or fortuitous for the moment.

Here, now, many of us find ourselves at a crossroads, as always. From the oral tradition to generational, genre-saturated literature, from journalism in all its forms to the crafting of academic papers, advertising briefs, legislative proposals and judicial discourses, indeed, even or especially of history, we know or we should know that we have all been part of a floating era of baloney, balderdash and bullshit.

Post-truth. Default narrative. Creative interpretation. These are now the syndromic symptoms that stupefy us who are worshipful of the word, written or expressed any which way.

But are Cervantes' windmills also a lie created in his famous character's mind, in the guise of geriatric lunacy, except that it amuses and entertains us? And is Borges' phantom in the circular ruins a fictive hero as

fantastic, thus unreal, as Smeagol/Gollum or Gotham's Batman, and Gabo Marquez' butterflies emerging from a dying man's mouth as winsome, windblown and yet wacky as a flying Peter Pan?

In real life, there is the individual that is said to be a pathological liar. In fiction, there is the unreliable narrator: the young boy whose narrative is riddled with whimsicality, or the mentally deficient who mistakes paranoia or fantasy for realism.

"True Lies" was the title of a film. "Gaslighting" has become a trendy term sourced to another film, where the manipulation of a victim is carried out by dimming the light from a gas lamp to achieve effects of gradual reality distortion. In fiction, effective magic realism is attained by first creating stepping stones as a gradual passage to further suspension of disbelief. One does not stun a reader with a major miracle, unless one were writing in another genre that is not disguised as partly realistic, such as the fable, or outright fantasy.

Julio Cortazar's novel *Hopscotch* employs exactly that game's modus operandi in terms of structural formatting. One can best go through the sequences, as suggested by the author himself, by jumping from one chapter to another, the way filmmaker Quentin Tarantino eschews straight narrative structure, or how Akira Kurosawa repeats a sequence with retold versions of what really happened.

Not a far cry, I say, from techniques now being employed by disruptive presidents.

When I taught the Short Story at the Ateneo, I would tell the class, on the very first day, how we actually apply fiction nearly every day of our lives, with regards the most commonplace things, or at the very least during special moments. As when, say, as young students, they have been given the privilege of driving a car to school and back. And on a particular afternoon, they get into an accident. And when Papa comes home that evening, how they must break the bad news.

Options galore. Pa, guess what? I got an A in our Philo exam. Also in Theology. Oh, by the way, I got into an accident today. Option 2: Wow, Pa, there I was, driving along Katipunan, when a lovely rainbow materialized over Marikina after a thunderstorm, and I couldn't help but marvel at God's wonders, when this container truck just came out of the blue and ...

Option 3: Papa, I know you'll have to sanction me for this, but it really wasn't my fault. Or, I mean, I couldn't help getting emo when my new girlfriend Maria suddenly told me, while we were in the middle of tight traffic, that she's transferring to De La Salle after the sem. So, well, the car's a total wreck.

These options are among the various ways one can mount a fictional attack, or simply, tack. One chooses what one may deem as the most effective way to tell a story. And one's decision would depend on one's knowledge of the audience, in this case one's father. Is he the gullible, merciful type, or very macho if somewhat romantic? One selects the mode with which to engage what one thinks is the level of the listener's credulity.

And one tells such varied stories in one's entire life. How best to explain the birds and the bees to a child? How to tell the spouse when one is fired from a job? How to tell one's in-laws of the need to downsize, or migrate to America, without them?

We go through life and we learn, through a continuum of conundrums.

You can spin but not tell a lie. You should always or only rely on verified data. Remember the boy who cried wolf. Matroshka dolls are layered truths. Smoke and mirrors are the key to M.C. Escher's drawings. Bach's canons are auditory palindromes that sound exactly the same going forward and backward; they are mathematical in their effusive precision.

Jazz improvisation, characterized by inventiveness of spirit and artistry of innovation, plies the sublime "truth" of music, hops, skips and jumps over its restrictions, or undermines it in a subversive yet empowering new way.

Ah, religion: the age-old narrative of adoration and faith, however much it continues to distance itself from humanism, that is, the cognizance of woman's and man's own powers of healing and magic, of transubstantiation of hate to happiness, of gaining haloes owing to human heroism. But there is the power of prayer to convince the prayerful of the strength of their hopes.

Goebbels tells a lie that grows in credibility on a daily basis. It is different from the parlor game that is Chinese Whispers, where the original truth undergoes a procession of embroidery or misinterpretation until it arrives at the end of the line as an entirely different truth. For

its part (let me repeat), China's claim of a nine-dash line is still simply historical fiction.

The hackjob is a tabloid or online clickbait away. Trolls and bots feed on information access, algorithms, data charge, selective justice and happy endings.

We hear of "alt-fact" from the world of "alt-reality."

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."

We collect quotes referring to this brave new upside-down cake of a world and its reverse-parallel, concave-convex universe.

The writer-editor Dean Francis Alfar observes: "Alternate facts, fake news, creative interpretation, post-post-truth. Welcome to the world of speculative fiction! Except it isn't speculative anymore."

Peter Yu of Hong Kong comments on an FB thread: "Chinese have a saying for this, 'pointing at a deer, and calling it a horse.' It's a common tactic of the failing ruling class."

Emma Grey Ellis of *Wired* opines: "We don't live in the age of post-truth. We live in the age of internet-enabled bullshit."

The scholar-author Vince Rafael in Seattle informs us: "A new and timely course, 'Calling Bullshit', soon to be offered by my colleagues at UW, Carl T. Bergstrom (School of Information) and Jevin West (Biology). Here's the syllabus..."

Trump's press secretary Sean Spicer laments: "The default narrative is always negative, and it's demoralizing, And I think that it's just unbelievably frustrating when you're continually told it's not big enough, it's not good enough, you can't win."

From Northwest Portland, the celebrated author Ursula K. Le Guin weighs in:

"A recent letter in *The Oregonian* compares a politician's claim to tell 'alternative facts' to the inventions of science fiction. The comparison won't work. We fiction writers make up stuff. Some of it clearly impossible,

some of it realistic, but none of it real — all invented, imagined — and we call it fiction because it isn't fact. We may call some of it 'alternative history' or 'an alternate universe,' but make absolutely no pretense that our fictions are 'alternative facts.'

“Facts aren't all that easy to come by. Honest scientists and journalists, among others, spend a lot of time trying to make sure of them. The test of a fact is that it simply is so — it has no 'alternative.' The sun rises in the east. To pretend the sun can rise in the west is a fiction, to claim that it does so as fact (or 'alternative fact') is a lie.

“A lie is a non-fact deliberately told as fact. Lies are told in order to reassure oneself, or to fool, or scare, or manipulate others. Santa Claus is a fiction. He's harmless. Lies are seldom completely harmless, and often very dangerous. In most times, most places, by most people, liars are considered contemptible.”

And our own distinguished poet-fictionist-editor Gémino H. Abad often reminds us: “What is imagined is most real.”

To be virtual is to be virtuous, that is, in possession of the virtue of an imagined world, where the good cop and the bad cop can be a chiaroscuro of simplification.

Why, we might claim that even poetry is facsimile. Metaphors be with you, we now say as if wishing one a phosphorescent moral force.

Meanwhile, from Duterte: “*Istorya lang yan*. But be careful, sometimes it merges...” Typical of the mayor from Davao, he climaxes with ellipses, and thus divides us among those who think he is a brilliant strategist who deliberately confounds, and those who believe he is simply inarticulate, especially in terms of rendering finality.

Now trolls and mainstream media are at war, a war of bloggers' choosing, as they see themselves as the initial underdogs that have upped the ante with the privilege of Internet manipulation.

Sass Rogando Sasot, the same reputed Filipina scholar in the Netherlands who has come home to meet with her icon, and who had identified the writing of fake news as equal to writing fiction, posted the following on the Internet on January 30:

“Ito dapat ang final question:

“If you were the VP of a country and a typhoon is predicted to ravage your hometown at the same time as your family reunion in New York which you planned a year in advance, which one would you cancel? The typhoon or the family reunion?”

More or less, the reactions from the alleged *dilawan* may be capsulized as: *“Pwede na pala ma-cancel ang bagyo. (Ang sakit sa bangs.)”*

Others abandoned reason for the quick gratification of *ad hominem* cut-and-thrust as well as good ol’ false binaries.

From John Genuino: “If you were the president of a country, would you kill your own citizens?” That would be a better question.”

The pejorative, the caustic, the sarcastic, the satiric, the parodic are all employed in this raging war of words and worlds gone zany if not mad — where the enhancements of photoshopping are debated *vis-à-vis* professional pure-ism, and the claim of no filter is a championing of the naked truth. No lies! No enhancements! No bias!

Opinions and commentary in today’s social media — wayward spawn of masterworks in letters — entail obligations as measurable as those that challenged predecessors in communication.

Where does the snake oil salesman stand among annals of fakery? Perhaps a distinction may be attributed to the quality of the imaginative presentation. Maybe there simply is inherent privilege in literature of gravitas. Or is it that the morality of truth only rears its butt-end whenever the writing deals with actual human beings, the very (real) bumblers in a world of deceit?

Let us listen to a few disparate individuals who speak with the same sentiment if not the exact same tenor of voice.

The first is a basketball player, an NBA All-Star who can sink three-pointers and yet recall and invoke a great statesman from the past. After a Cleveland Cavaliers win over the Washington Wizards, when asked about a report that his teammate LeBron James favors trading him for Carmelo Anthony of the New York Knicks (which BTW James vehemently referred to as trash from a writer who was himself trash), Kevin Love posted this quote on his Instagram account: “A lie gets halfway around the world

before truth gets a chance to put its pants on.” The quote is from Winston Churchill.

From a report in the *International Business Times* last February 11, we read of how “Apple chief executive Tim Cook is calling on governments and technology firms to step up in the battle against fake news and misinformation online, dubbing it “one of today’s chief problems.”

“Cook urged governments to launch a public information campaign to curb the spread of false news stories, hoaxes and misinformation that are ‘killing people’s minds, in a way.’

More from Cook: “We are going through this period of time right here where unfortunately some of the people that are winning are the people that spend their time trying to get the most clicks, not tell the most truth.”

Even more recently, Mark Zuckerberg, the genius behind Facebook, added his voice to this growing condemnation of false news.

And finally, from a fellow Filipino, someone whom I don’t know personally, have never met, and only found on my Facebook News Feed. His name is Don Kusuanco. He seems to be based in California, but has apparently been here in relation to medical missions. His intelligence and convictions are evident, and his words of spirited engagement resonate with me.

On February 6, he posted a piece with the title, “Dutertism and the Legacy of Anti-Intellectualism.” He begins by recounting how he had been so fortunate way back in June 1991 when he managed to meet astronomer Carl Sagan, through his boss and mentor at the time at a UCLA research center, Prof. Richard Turco who was Sagan’s co-writer for the book *Nuclear Winter and the End of the Arms Race*.

He recalls, though admits to paraphrasing from faulty memory, what Sagan said at that time.

“It is our responsibility to safeguard knowledge, never to suppress knowledge even if it is knowledge that makes us uncomfortable, that challenges what we already know, and most importantly even if it bothers those who are in power because in the end, we know which parts of this knowledge are permissible and which ones are not.”

That was Sagan speaking. Now, 26 years later, Mr. or Dr. Kusuanco says those words have proven prophetic, “as scientific knowledge is being

ambushed in the halls of power.” He argues the point in the following excerpts:

“On the eve of Trump’s inauguration, scientists, hackers, librarians and archivists banded together to save climate change data and other scientific data from being deleted, altered or removed from public domain.

“Everywhere, I see signs of anti-intellectual elitism, as science, arts and humanities are being discredited, critical thinking relegated to insignificance, and replaced by celebrity entertainment, willful ignorance, lack of intellectual curiosity, a soundbite and video culture, and the irrational appeal of conspiracy theorists, flat-earthers and creationists.

“Here in the Philippines, a popular culture phenomenon called smart-shaming has been described. A social commentator once asked why people seem proud of the fact that they’re dumb. I notice how social media trolls, when confronted by facts and statistics that debunk their arguments, would say sarcastically: ‘*Sobrang talino mo.*’ or ‘Whoa stop, you’re giving me a nose-bleed’ or ‘Please be patient because I’m not as smart as you are.’

“The word ‘intellectual’ has become a dirty word, a code for elitism or someone divorced from the *masa*, a characteristic we no longer look for in our political leaders. In December, Duterte, while talking about hypocrisy, dismissed then US president Obama as an ‘intellectual’ who had no business being in politics. ‘*Alam mo kasi the reality ng mga bright... you read so many theories... Magkagulo ‘yan and you come up with something that really abominal.*’ (He meant abominable, jeje). This is coming from a man who cannot even finish his sentence coherently.

“It is our lack of education, our ignorance and our poverty that so-called populist politicians like Duterte and Trump exploit to perpetuate themselves in power and their corrupt ways. Instead of the Filipino people setting their agenda, we have become these politicians’ puppets and pawns in their political chess game.

“For those of us who can still distinguish between falsehood and truth, who still embrace the ideals of equality and liberty, who still subscribe to what is right and what is good, it is our responsibility not to permit our country to slide back into tyranny, superstition and darkness. We must argue for a level playing field for everybody so Filipino children will have access to education and move ahead in life.”

Indeed, education has always been key. To learning all about numbers and how they add up truthfully, or myths and legends and how they are told effectively, dwelling as they may on the un-real, as well as other stories that have to hew to the truth to gain real power.

While on the subject of education, allow me to mention an item of minor relevance with regards a particular form of learning — as what lawyers (often deliberately mispronounced as “liars”) need to go through. Somewhat like a basketball game that is prone to point-shaving, there is such a training regimen that hones a master of reason in the craft of point-splitting.

Jesuitic, we say of such an exercise, when one can argue, through the refinements of sophistry, a point either or both ways, and be convincing at least halfway if not entirely. Davao-based Jesuit Fr. Joel Tabora issued a rather belated acknowledgment of an initially misplaced trust in the Davao-mayor-turned-president’s efficacy of governance, when he finally had to find a stance somewhat compatible with or at least not exactly contrary to the prevailing thinking (even as we speak) among the poobahs of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines. We now find such comments that snort in this wise:

“Jesuits as ‘masters of casuistry’ bending the naked truth as it suits your politics...” Yes, much like lawyers, or blind men feeling up an elephant in the room and describing the animal of contention.

It is not our objective here and now to render judgment on who prevaricates and who speaks the truth. It should not be in our purview of discourse whether to side with whoever tells the truth more than the lie, or vice versa. It is enough for us to identify the tricks of the trade, and indicate what may be gained or lost in that endless commerce between truth and falsehood. And we are simply saying here that this engagement has reached new grounds in more ways than one.

What we may stress is that it is education that filters most of the muddy trappings of emotional resonance, and strips bare both the compelling logic and the trusted instinct that place us on one side of a question.

Somehow, truth has a stronger affinity with intelligence. That may be why it has increasingly come under siege. If you have the worldview of a bemused joker, why, it would seem like much fun — this smart-shaming

and truth-poo-h-poo-ing — no matter how damaging it may be to the rest of the values we trust ourselves to embrace. If you are alarmed however by the advent of such concepts as “fake news fiction” and alternative facts, then there is the path of the better dream to follow. Or we can always respond with humor.

The imaginative may recast the recollection of what was termed Benevolent Assimilation, well over a century ago, as a fake contraption much like an umbilical cord foisted upon a much younger country. And now the toddler and pop arrive at a karmic situation of mirroring one another’s versions of absurd siege — by untruth.

On one hand, the Trump travel ban involving seven countries now appears to have ground into a halt. On the other, the figure of over 7,000 extra-judicial killings appears to have marked a pause for contemplation. (Either that or one Korean life did it.) Now, it’ll be myth-making if it’s claimed that the number 7 always figures as zenith before a fall.

When we here stood on the side of truth in 1986 against a dictator who was fond of that number, our truth went viral the world over, maybe because truth almost always goes with freedom — freedom from living a life of deceit.

In the 2015 film *Youth* by Italian director Paolo Sorrentino, one of the ageing characters, a scriptwriter, delivers the wonderful line: “I have to believe in everything in order to make things up.”

Can truth be boring? Or should the question be: Is truth so boring that we have to come up with alternative figments of the imagination?

This question is posed to everyone. I hope that I have pirouetted enough around the pivot that circumscribes humanist causes, inclusive of both entertainment and enlightenment.

Thank you.

(NOTE: A longer version of this lecture was read at the Asian Institute of Management on February 20, 2017, as the 7th Adrian E. Cristobal Annual Lecture.)

The background features a complex, layered design of overlapping, semi-transparent leaf-like shapes and wavy, curved lines. The color palette is monochromatic, ranging from light gray to dark gray, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern, with a focus on organic, flowing forms.

Filipino

