

PLAYING GAMES WITH THE TRUTH

Tabloid Stories, Urban Legends, Tall Tales and Bullshit

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We normally think of narrative as divided between two pragmatic kinds: factual and fictional. Their difference resides in the nature of the contract that binds sender and receiver. In factual narrative, the contract can be conceived along the lines of Searle's (1969) definition of assertion: the sender believes that the narrative is true, has reason for believing so, and wants the receiver to accept it as true. This contract can be transgressed through lie¹ or through error. In the case of lie, the sender does not believe the story, while in the case of error, he/she does not have sufficient evidence for the truth of the story. The communicative act of factual narration can also fall flat without a clear breach of contract, when the receiver does not learn anything new from the story. The exact wording of the contract that underlies fictional narratives depends on particular definitions of fiction, of which there are many (Ryan forthcoming), but it can be roughly defined as offering a story for make-believe rather than belief, or to be imagined rather than taken as true.² Breaches of contract are more problematic in fiction than in factual narrative, because, as Sir Philip Sidney observed, "the poet nothing affirms"; therefore, he never lies. For the same reason, authors of fiction cannot commit errors, at least not with respect to the real world, though they can commit inadvertent blunders with respect to the fictional world, for instance by having the sun set in the east in a realistic text. On the other hand, it is very easy for fictional texts to fall flat by failing to stimulate the receiver's imagination.

Can the distinction proposed above between factual and fictional narrative endure in the so-called post-truth era (McIntyre 2018), an age when the distinction between truth and falsity has supposedly become obsolete and truth has been replaced by what the TV personality Stephen Colbert called "truthiness"—that which needs only the appearance of truth to be presented as such? The term post-truth suggests an idyllic past, now gone, when there was respect for the truth, but post-truth has both a timeless and a time-specific dimension. In its time-specific manifestation, post-truth refers to the proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories in today's society, a proliferation largely due to social media and digital technology. Studies have suggested that fake news spreads faster than truth, arguably because, not being constrained by the facts, they are more sensational, more "newsy," and therefore more tellable (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). In its timeless conception, post-truth refers to a formation of beliefs based on intuitive feelings rather than objective evidence, and to the uncritical acceptance of any kind of information that supports these beliefs. Gullibility and disregard for the truth have always been with us, and the present time only differs from the past in that thanks to technologies of communication, it offers people easier access to data that supports their deep-seated,

emotionally based convictions. Social networks reinforce these convictions by putting people in contact with other people who share the same beliefs. If gullibility, thirst for sensational news, and the need to belong to belief communities are nothing new, neither are narratives that challenge our ability to distinguish facts from rumors and fabrication. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss three established narrative genres that involve a more complicated relation to truth than the contracts defined above and therefore challenge the standard dichotomy between fact and fiction. Then I will take a closer look at a discourse type that transcends the distinction between truth and falsity.

Tabloid stories

By tabloid I mean those weekly print newspapers, like *National Enquirer* or *Weekly World News*, that are displayed in the check-out aisles of supermarkets. They are currently in sharp decline, not because audiences have lost interest in the type of stories they tell, but arguably because of competition from digital media: *National Enquirer* went from a distribution of 4 million in 1990 to a mere 265,000 in 2018. Their stories cover two major topics: gossip about celebrities and the paranormal, such as the occult, astrology, UFOs, extraterrestrials, Bigfoot, ghosts, witches, ancient curses, miracles, communicating with the dead, and stories about freaks. This second topic seems, however, to be losing popularity, compared to celebrity stories. Tabloids embrace “traditional American values,” together with conservative politics (the *National Enquirer* treats Hillary Clinton as a villain and Donald Trump as a hero); they use formulaic language (as Elizabeth Bird notes, stories are “amazing,” “baffling,” “untold” or “incredible”; heroes are “spunky” or “gutsy”; small children are “tots,” dogs are “pooches,” and husbands are “hubbies” [2005, 581]) and the same plots and themes recur over and over again: Elvis (or JFK, or JFK Jr.) is alive, the government (or the media or scientists) is hiding things from you, and x is living sad (or brave) last days. All in all, tabloid narratives follow a French recipe for popular success epitomized by the micro-story “My God, said the marquise, I am pregnant. Who done it?” To the themes of religion, aristocracy, sex (or scandal), and mystery represented in this story, one must add romance, a major ingredient of tabloid narratives. Contents are audience-driven to the extent that the writer’s primary concern is to please the reader, as opposed to high art, whose purpose should be to shake audiences out of their thinking habits.

The common opinion concerning tabloids, especially among educated people who would not be caught buying this kind of trash (but enjoy reading the headlines while waiting in line at the supermarket check-out) is that their stories are fabricated but presented as facts to a naïve audience who believes in their truth. But the situation is more complex on both the sender’s and the receiver’s side. Bird, who has conducted extensive research on tabloid stories from an ethnographic and folklore point of view, observes that most tabloid stories are supported by sources, just as are the stories of the mainstream press: “A story is ‘accurate’ if it faithfully reports what was said or written by sources. By this standard, much of what is written in tabloids can claim to be accurate” (1992, 93). But the reliability of the source may be questionable: for paranormal stories, the source may be somebody who deeply believes in the occult; for gossip, somebody who has only a remote acquaintance of the celebrity; and in many cases, sources are fully invented (“doctors baffled”). But outright lies or slander are the exception rather than the rule, and this is why lawsuits against tabloids are relatively rare. Moreover, if there were not a minimum of trust in the accuracy of tabloids, they would not resort to “catch and kill” in order to protect certain people from negative stories. As for the paranormal stories, their credibility depends on the reader’s personal beliefs. Though science tells us what creatures exist and what events are possible, contemporary societies are not homogeneous in their beliefs, and tabloid stories provide support to those who maintain the beliefs of other times or cultures in the supernatural.³

Because tabloid narratives are mainly consumed by the working class, it is easy to fall into a classist view of their readers as passive and gullible victims of lies; on the other hand, it is equally dangerous

to fall for a view of these readers as active creators of meaning who deliberately subvert through their choice of reading materials the values of the educated class. Elizabeth Bird has conducted a thorough investigation of people's reasons for reading tabloids, analyzing over hundred testimonies, and she concludes that "there is not one, single, 'reading' of tabloids; there are not even only two or three. But there are not infinite numbers of readings, either; tabloids cannot be anything to anybody" (1992, 216). The various ways of reading tabloid stories depend on the relative importance of two basic criteria: information and entertainment.

Many of Bird's informants indicate a willingness to hold some stories as true. Fans of celebrity gossip may be interested in everything they hear about their favorite personalities, while readers who believe in the paranormal may regard tabloids as sources of information about phenomena that are deliberately suppressed by the mainstream media, thereby implicitly adhering to a conspiracy theory. Yet, a willingness to regard some stories as true does not mean that readers will believe all the stories in the publication, nor that they will believe strongly the more credible ones, for belief is a matter of degree. With a mainstream newspaper such as the *New York Times*, disbelieving many of the stories would incite readers to switch to another source of information, but with tabloids, readers seem much more forgiving of disinformation because they read *cum grano salis*.

Even when readers encounter a story that they cannot believe, the inventiveness that went into its creation may be a source of enjoyment. These readers adopt a playful attitude toward the story not unrelated to aesthetic appreciation. They enjoy the imaginatively possible, which is nearly infinite, rather than the probabilistically possible, which is limited by the laws of nature. Does reading tabloids for entertainment mean that the stories are read as fiction? Only if we conceive fiction in its common sense of falsity: readers can enjoy tabloid stories without regarding them as true. This disregard for truth does not, however, make tabloid stories fictional in a technical sense, at least not if we conceive fictionality as determined by the sender's intent (as in Searle 1975). Rather than falling clearly into the fictional or factual domain, tabloid stories involve an ambiguous pact between sender and receiver: an overt factual pact by which the sender presents them as true, and a covert fictional pact by which they are offered merely to the imagination, for their writers are aware that the stories may stretch credibility. The reader who wants to believe the stories adheres to the overt pact, while the reader who reads for entertainment lets the covert pact override the overt agreement.

The communicative ambiguity of tabloid stories can lead to an ironic mode of reading by which readers seek neither information nor entertainment from the imaginative quality of the stories, but rather enjoy a cynical laugh at the kind of trash that other people are stupid enough to believe. They "are just flummoxed by what they see as these preposterous ideas that are presented there ... and not even worrying for a minute over whether it's true, or whether the people who wrote it think it's true—it doesn't matter" (Ken Matthews, quoted by Bird 1992: 116). These readers do not enjoy the stories per se, but rather only care about whether or not somebody else believes them; ironists in other words are "othering" tabloid readers in order to feel superior. But they may be laughing at a barely existing audience, for, as Bird's studies suggest, dedicated tabloid fans are fully capable of a playful reading.

Urban Legends

The term urban legend is used by folklorists to refer to incredible tales about everyday life that are told as having truly happened to a "friend of a friend," or FOAF, though they cannot be verified since the source that supposedly guarantees their authenticity is too remote to be located. Their elusive origin, coupled with their highly newsworthy and therefore spreadable content, gives urban legends a viral quality. As they are passed along, they acquire new features, though they retain the basic plot structure that warrants their tellability. In contrast to the celebrity gossip of tabloids, urban legends happen to ordinary though not identifiable people, and in contrast to traditional legends, which tell about a distant past, they concern supposedly recent events; they involve objects and activities typical

of contemporary life: cars, pets, appliances, and now digital technology, whose dangers they love to expose. Moreover, while traditional legends are often connected to specific geographic landmarks, urban legends could happen everywhere; but in order to make them more credible, narrators often assign them to locations familiar to both the teller and the hearer. The same urban legend can therefore happen in New York and Chicago, in Los Angeles and Salt Lake City, or even on both sides of the Atlantic.

Here is an example of an urban legend collected by Jan Harold Brunvand that is told all over the United States:

A weird thing happened to a woman at work. She got home one afternoon and her German shepherd was in convulsions. So she rushed the dog to the vet, then raced home to get ready for a date. As she got back in the door, her phone rang. It was the vet, telling her that two human fingers had been lodged in her dog's throat. The police arrived and they all followed a bloody trail to her bedroom closet, where a young burglar huddled—moaning about his missing thumb and forefinger.

Brunvand 1984, 3–4

The variations observed by Brunvand concern the race of the dog (often a Doberman); the reasons for the woman having to get home rather than staying at the vet, an event that makes possible the dramatic phone call; the appearance of the fingers (in some racist versions, they are described as black or brown); and the involvement of the vet (he may come along with the police to save the woman). But common to all versions is the grisly discovery of the bitten fingers, the dangerous situation of the woman being alone in a house where a burglar is hiding, and her rescue by two benevolent males—the vet and the police. The horror theme and the theme of the helpless woman in need of male protection are indeed a common staple of urban legends. But even though the story is told as true, it contains some plot holes that would reveal its made-up nature to a skeptical audience: why is the burglar staying in the closet after the woman and the dog have left? Why doesn't the woman notice the trail of blood? Could a dog really bite off the thumb and forefinger, rather than the other fingers (think of the likely position of the hand in a defense against a dog), or going for the throat? The story is interesting because of the grisly discovery of the severed fingers, but this event would be so easy to make up that it would not make good fiction, even of the horror kind; therefore, the story must be true to deserve to be told. If the receiver contests its truth, the teller will be offended, because he or she will be exposed as gullible. The tellability of urban legends thus rests on the principle “reality is stranger than fiction” (see Brunvand 1981).

Through their virality and lack of verifiability, and through their predilection for warning people of hidden dangers, urban legends anticipate the spreading of rumors and the conspiracy theories of the post-truth era. Social media platforms offer a much more efficient way of disseminating them than word of mouth, but also a much less creative one. Nowadays, rather than retelling the stories with their own details and embellishments, all that senders need to do to further circulate them is hit the retweet function, and to express their appreciation, which involves belief in the tales, all that receivers need to do is hit the like button.

Tall Tales

If there is a form of discourse that can hold the claim of being the ancestor of narrative fiction, this form is the tall tale. I write form of discourse rather than genre, because as soon as it is recognized as a genre, the tall tale becomes fiction. But in its spontaneous manifestation, it is just a narrative of personal experience containing lots of exaggeration and self-promotion of the teller. Tall tales originate in stories about outdoors life, especially fishing and hunting, told around the campfire by “men

who are separated from settled domestic milieux” (Bauman 2005: 582) such as hunters, fishermen, frontiersmen, loggers, and cowboys. The tall tale is therefore a typically male form of discourse, as opposed to gossip, which is traditionally associated with women’s speech (Fritsch 2005: 207). Though they are overtly presented as true, tall tales veer from the familiar to the unbelievable, and the audience gradually comes to recognize them as fiction. But not always: tall tales are often used as a way to pull the leg of naïve outsiders, such as tourists or neophytes, and to make fun of them behind their back.⁴ I remember being fooled by a yarn told by a guide during a rafting trip on the Rio Grande. The story concerned the guide’s grandmother, a tough Texas lady, who had been persuaded by her grandson to take a rafting trip with him, the first of her life. She was a big drinker, so they had to double the load of beer. After a while the raft hit whitewater and capsized. Most of the passengers managed to hang on, and drifted downstream, but the grandmother fell off and landed on an island on the Rio Grande. There was no way for her get to the shore because she did not know how to swim. But a herd of wild horses suddenly appeared. She mounted one of the studs, and he swam toward the Mexican side of the river. Once there, he started galloping away at full speed, and she had no way to stop him since she had no bridle. At this point I and the rest of the audience recognized the story for what it was, a big lie, and there was no point for the storyteller to continue. This overt factuality/covert fictionality plays for its effect on the tendency of audiences to regard stories as true, unless explicitly framed as made up; it can therefore only occur in an informal communicative setting. Recognizing the fictionality of the tale will not insult the teller, since the point of the game is to test the limits of the audience’s credulity. But when tall tales are told in what Richard Bauman calls an esoteric setting (Bauman 2005:582), such as the liar’s bench in the general store, or a storytelling contest, their fictionality is a given, and their point lies in the inventiveness of the lies—which, of course, are no longer lies from a theoretical point of view. Even when tall tales become an institutionalized genre, however, their trademark lies in a gradual transition from the familiar to the unbelievable; this feature is what distinguishes tall tale contests from storytelling slams based on the narration of personal experience.

Given their male origin, it is not surprising that tall tales rely on a form of expression whose name explicitly associates it with masculinity. This form of expression, which permeates many acts of communication, is the topic of my next section.

Bullshit

A call for papers issued in 2020 by the *Polish Journal of Aesthetics* asking for contributions on “Bullshit Art” (a form of art represented, I assume, by the work of Andy Warhol and the uncreative poetry of Kenneth Goldstein) opens with the claim that “Bullshit studies is a developing scholarly discipline that emerged in the late 20th century.” A Google N-Gram search on bullshit shows indeed an upward curve that begins around 1995 (.000058), takes a sharp upward turn around 2000 (.000085), and maintains a steep grade of about 60 degrees until 2018 (.00034) with a dip in 2019 (.00033) too insignificant to be meaningful. (The statistics stop with 2019.) This rise in interest for bullshit suggests an increase in the amount of the stuff itself in our cultural and (especially) political environment.⁵ Harry Frankfurt opens his pioneering book on bullshit as follows:

One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. ... In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves.

2005: 1

Whether or not there is more bullshit in the post-truth era than at other times is open to debate; but nowadays bullshit is certainly more visible, more spreadable, and because it comes from more

powerful sources, it seems to become more acceptable. To illustrate the phenomenon of bullshit, which is a style of discourse rather than a narrative genre, I will use a story told by the most powerful influencer of them all: former U.S. President Donald J. Trump.

The story was told during a political rally on June 20, 2020, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the first large campaign event held after the outbreak of COVID-19. It refers to an incident on June 13 at the commencement of the West Point military academy. After giving a speech, Trump took a drink of water, holding the glass with two hands. Later, he went down from the stage on a steel ramp, walking very slowly and head bent, looking much older than he generally does. These two incidents led to speculation in the press that he might be suffering from some kind of disease, such as Parkinson's, a suggestion that infuriated Trump, since he had made the contrast between his physical vigor and the alleged weakness of his opponent, Joe Biden, into a dominant campaign theme. Trump's first effort to disprove the story was through the following tweet, issued between the West Point commencement and the Tulsa rally:

The ramp that I descended after my West Point Commencement speech was very long & steep, had no handrail, and, most importantly, was very slippery. The last thing I was going to do is "fall" for the Fake News to have fun with. Final ten feet I ran down to the level ground.

Momentum!

Thanks to the length restrictions of Twitter, this account is relatively sober. The most blatant intrusion of bullshit is the exaggeration of the next-to-last sentence ("I ran down to the level ground"). The concluding exclamation can be read as referring not only to the accelerated pace of the president once he comes close to the flat ground, but also to the boost to his candidacy that he expects from the imminent resumption of in-person campaigning.

The Tulsa rally (which not only contributed to the spreading of the COVID-19 virus but also turned out to be a public relations flop, with a much smaller audience than expected) provided Trump with an opportunity to turn the skeletal tweet version into a vivid narrative that captures the what-it's-likeness of the narrator's lived experience. The 14-minute performance is too long to reproduce here in its entirety; I will therefore paraphrase the account of the ramp event, before discussing a full version of the drinking event. (This order respects the order of their telling by Trump.)

The story is framed as a demonstration of the unfairness of the "fake news" media, a recurrent theme of Trump's presidency: it begins with "To show you how fake they are, you might have seen it" and ends with "They are among the most dishonest people anywhere on Earth. They're bad people, bad people." In an ironic reference to the fact-checking industry, which thrives on his speeches, Trump satirizes the media's inability to distinguish lies from exaggeration:

I salute [the West Point cadets] for probably an hour and a half, maybe more, but around that. Watch, if I'm off like two minutes. They'll say, he exaggerated. It was only an hour and twenty five minutes. He exaggerated, he lied, he lied. He's a liar. These people are sick, the fake news.

But while Trump openly mocks the mainstream media, the very fact that he takes so much trouble debunking their speculations also demonstrates that he fears them, and his denial contributes to the spreading of the rumor. After giving a 45-minute speech in the hot sun, and saluting 600 pairs of cadets, feeling a little bit unsteady going down the ramp would be understandable for a 74-year-old man; but invoking fatigue would be a sign of weakness incompatible with the superman image that Trump wants to project. Trump concocts therefore another explanation, one not mentioned in the tweet: he was wearing luxurious leather bottom shoes that offer no traction. To make his point he

shows his soles to the fans. He humorously exposes his predicament by outlining the three choices that face him at the top of the ramp, each of which would be candy for the media. One possibility would be to hold the arm that a general offers him:

Grab me, sir, grab me. I didn't really want to grab him. Do you know why? Because that'll be a story too. So now, I have a choice. I can stay up there for another couple of hours and wait until I'm rescued or I can go down this really steep really, really, really—it's an ice skating rink. It's brutal. So, I said, General, get ready 'cause I may grab you so fast. Because I can't fall with the fake news watching.

If Trump falls, of course, it will be all over the news: he reminds his audience of the publicity given to Gerald Ford for falling out of a plane, or to George H.W. Bush for throwing up in Japan. By going down the ramp slowly (a spectacle he mimics comically for his audience), Trump chooses the lesser of three evils and he makes it down safely. After the event he does what a good husband would do: he calls his wife. Not to reassure her about his well-being, but to get compliments about his great speech. From this point I will quote the story in its entirety. (Numbering mine.)

(1) I said to our great First Lady, I said—let me ask you a question, was it that good the speech that I'm trending, number one? Because I felt it was really good. (2) No, no, they don't even mention the speech. They mentioned the fact that you may have Parkinson's disease. It's true, it's true, it's true. (3) They say, there's something wrong with our President. (4) I'll let you know if there's something wrong, OK? I'll let you know if there's something—I'll tell you what, there's something wrong with Biden that I could tell. (5) So then, my wife said, well, it wasn't only the ramp. Did you have water? (6) I said, yeah. I was speaking for a long time. I didn't want to drink it, but I wanted to wet my lips a little bit. You know, you're drinking for—your working hard up there with the sun pouring down on you. (7) I love this location, the sun's like this. (8) This way, they say, one lighting, right? (9) That's why they did it probably. (10) So, what happens is I said, what does it have to do with water? (11) They said, you couldn't lift your hand up to your mouth with water. (12) I said, I just saluted 600 times like this and this was before I saluted. So, what's the problem? (13) She said, well, I know what you did. You had on a very good red tie that's sort of expensive. (14) It's silk because they—they look better. They have a better sheen to them. (15) And I don't want to get water on the tie and I don't want to drink much. [Gets glass of water from under his desk] So, I lift it up, the water. I see we have a little glass of water, where the hell did this water come from? [Holds glass to his lips, holding it with one hand] Where did it come from? And I looked down on my tie because I've done it. I've taken water and if it spills down on your tie, it doesn't look good for a long time. And frankly, the tie is never the same. (16) So, I put it up to my lip and then I say—because I don't want it—that's just in case, (17) and they gave me another disease. They gave me another disease. [Throws away glass of water] [Audience chants "Trump"] [Audience chants "Four more years"] Anyway, that's a long story, but here's the story.

The trademark of this story is the dialogue form, which confers a dramatic dimension to the performance. Events are indirectly shown, through mimetic reproduction of the speech events that report them, rather than directly told through diegetic representation. This dramatic form creates a "nowness," a "presentness" that contrasts with the retrospective stance of the Twitter version: while the Twitter narrative explains an already known incident, the Tulsa narrative enables the audience to participate, moment by moment, in the experience of a narrator who expects to be congratulated for a brilliant speech and is slapped instead with a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease.

The narration brings three different times into play: 1. the time of the events discussed in the dialogue; 2. the time of the interaction between Trump and his wife; and occasionally 3. the time of the storytelling act at the rally in Tulsa. The story starts out as a question by Trump (1) and a response by Melania (2). Through his question, Trump is blatantly fishing for compliments. Earlier in the speech, in the ramp story, he does the same thing with the Tulsa crowd by claiming that his present speech is just average, compared to his great speech at West Point. This self-deprecating claim is disproved by the roar of the crowd—just what Trump wanted. But here Melania does not provide the expected endorsement; rather she informs Trump of the media gossip. (3) is spoken by the media, but it represents Melania's report of what the media say. (4) is a digression, through which Trump addresses his current audience, taking a stab at his opponent's health. The husband-and-wife dialogue resumes with the question-and-answer pair of (5) and (6) that brings the topic of the second rumor. (7) is another digression addressed at the current audience; its purpose is not just to celebrate the beauty of the West Point site (a theme that also appears in the ramp story) but also to affirm Trump's patriotic love of the military. (8) reports a conversation at time 1 between Trump and the generals, with an obscure allusion to "lighting," and (9) is an aside spoken from the perspective of time 3, but I have no clue what incident Trump refers to with "That's why they did it probably." (Nor, most likely does the audience.) The conversation returns to the current topic with (10), when Trump asks why Melania mentioned the water, and her response in (11). "They said" in (11) refers to the media, but once again the sentence can be understood as Melania's report of what the media said. In (12), speaking to Melania, Trump debunks the diagnosis of the media: the fact that after drinking the water he saluted 600 times means that he has full control of his right arm. In (13), Melania comes up with her own explanation of the incident. It is interesting to note that the theme of the tie originates with Melania rather than with Trump himself, even though as a participant in the incident he should have better knowledge of his motivation; but in Trump's conception of gender roles, concern for a silk tie is probably more fitting for a woman than for a man. (14) could be either the continuation of (13), spoken by Melania, or it could be spoken by Trump. From (15) on, concern for the tie is appropriated by Trump, as the narrative shifts from the report of a conversation about the events to the direct narration of the events. The proposed reason for Trump's two-handed holding of the glass bears a striking resemblance to his explanation of his slow descent on the ramp: in both cases Trump invokes sartorial considerations that flaunt his wealth by displaying his predilection for luxury items. In (16), Trump shifts the topic from not wanting water on his tie to not wanting water at all. This seems to be another digression, meant to stress his superhuman physical condition, for most people would want a drink of water after speaking for 45 minutes in the hot sun. Then in (17), Trump abruptly returns to the current topic by mentioning the diagnosis of the media ("they gave me another disease") and, having brought the report of the water incident to a proper conclusion, announces the end of the story. The audience responds enthusiastically, with chants of four more years.

But this is a false ending, because Trump cannot conclude on a negative note. He must present himself as a winner, and he must return to the point of the story: the dishonesty of the media. Here is the definitive conclusion (my numbering):

(1) I have lived with more the ramp than the water. But I've lived with the ramp and the water since I left West Point, not one media group said I made a good speech or I made a great speech. (2) But the kids loved it because they broke their barrier, which wasn't good in terms of COVID. But they broke that barrier and they wanted to shake hands, they wanted to—and I don't want to tell anybody, but there are a couple of kids they put out there [sic] hand. I actually shook their hand, OK? I actually shook their hand because they were excited. They were excited. They're with their President. They were excited. The most beautiful young people, men, women, the most beautiful young people you've ever seen. So,

think of how you feel if you're me. I go there, how did I do? Sir, that was a great speech. You know, all my people. Sir, that was one of your best. That was great. I say, that's great. I agree. It was a good speech. I liked that speech. (3) They don't mention the speech, but they have been going down this ramp at an inch at a time. It's so unfair, it really is. It's so unfair. They are among the most dishonest people anywhere on Earth. They're bad people, bad people. OK, that's enough that. I wanted to tell that story. Does everybody understand that story? [Audience responds "Yeah"]

This passage is built on an opposition between the failure of the media to give Trump due credit for his speech, expressed in (1) and (3), and the cadets' enthusiastic appreciation in (2). This opposition reflects a dominant Trump political theme: his standing for the "American people" (represented by the cadets) against the establishment, represented usually by the "Washington swamp," but here by the media, as well as by the bossy generals whose strict adherence to rigid protocols stand in sharp contrast to the spontaneity of the cadets, who break barriers to shake hands with their president. The cultish overtones of the episode of the encounter with the cadets are unmistakable: "I actually shook their hand, OK? I actually shook their hand because they were excited. They were excited. They're with their President." This love is reciprocated: in the ramp part of the speech, Trump says "Now, you've got to understand I have the whole corps of cadets looking at me and I want them to love their President. I did this big thing. I love them. I'd love them. They're incredible." To participate in this lovefest, to touch the object of their adoration, the cadets disregard COVID restrictions. In so doing, they express confidence in Trump's power to defeat the virus, or in his denial of its seriousness—a major theme in his campaign. By asking the participants in his rallies to disregard recommendations of social distancing, Trump demands of them a similar demonstration of faith in his COVID policies. The cadet's praise of Trump's speech is offered as evidence of total dedication to the president, but when Trump declares his own satisfaction with his performance, the narrative turns into an act of self-congratulation that highlights his vanity: "I agree. It was a good speech. I liked that speech." Moreover, Trump's subsequent whining about the media ("It's so unfair, it really is. It's so unfair") demonstrates a dependency on other people's opinion that undermines his posturing as object of worship, for strong leaders should not need constant reassurance. The celebration of the love that binds Trump to the cadets degenerates into a demonstration of grudge against the media expressed through rather unimaginative epithets: "They're bad people, bad people."

Readers of the transcript may be puzzled by the apparent non-sequitur between the report of the cadets' praise and the first sentence of (3), "they don't mention the speech." "They" obviously refers to the media and no longer to the cadets, as one might expect. Such a switch in reference would be ungrammatical in written discourse, but the text I am quoting is a transcription of an oral performance that follows different felicity conditions. Though Trump's command of language has been compared to an 8 year old's (Shugerman 2020), judging his performance by the transcript alone would be unfair, because he enacts the story with gestures (mimicking his walk on the ramp), vocal imitation (of the generals), and even props: a glass of water under his desk that he contemptuously throws away. Just as he did not really need water at West Point (he just wanted to moisten his lips), he will not need water during his speech in Tulsa, which lasts nearly an hour and three quarters.

The stories of the ramp and of the water are such obvious bullshit that we can extract from them a grammar of this kind of lingo. I will do so with the help of Harry Frankfurt's groundbreaking little treatise, *On Bullshit* (2005), which has given bullshit philosophical respectability. Narratological and rhetorical recognition should be quick to follow.

The first feature that comes to mind when we think about bullshit is irrelevance. The purpose of a campaign rally should be to outline a political program and philosophy, to define areas of greatest need, and to tell the audience why the candidate is a better choice than the opponent to solve the nation's problems. None of these concerns appears in this section of Trump's speech: he is distracting the audience with stories, rather than providing reasons to vote for him. The stories of the ramp and

of the water may seem trivial, compared to the serious problems faced by the nation in the summer of 2020, but then, the same could be said of the media's speculation about Trump suffering from Parkinson's. By taking so much trouble to disprove these rumors, he responds to bullshit with bullshit.

According to Frankfurt, the bullshitter is somebody who speaks with authority about a topic of which he has really no expertise. "Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about" (2005, 63). Many of us have experienced situations where we have to speak to an audience as supposed experts, and have to answer questions that are either irrelevant, incomprehensible, or that we do not understand. In these cases, bullshit is the only solution. Trump, similarly, is placed in a situation where he has to perform his identity as the Leader of the Free World, despite a questionable grasp of political issues, but he is a natural bullshitter, and facing a large audience of adoring fans, he feels like a fish in water. Only stern political analysts will consider Trump's stories a waste of time: the audience expects to be entertained, and this is exactly what it is getting. Not being bound by factual knowledge gives the bullshitter a wide license to exaggerate. The ramp becomes an "ice-skating rink," the cadets break barriers to touch Trump, and journalists who fail to report on the greatness of his speech are "among the most dishonest people anywhere on Earth." Another bullshitty feature of Trump's speech lies in digressions. As already noted, Trump interrupts his narration with remarks about the beauty of the West Point site, or with snide comments on the health of his opponent. These digressions may seem irrelevant to the current topic, but they are not pointless: by stating the patriotism of Trump, or his superiority over Biden, they serve the purpose of self-promotion. Through the ramp and the water stories, Trump proposes an image of himself as: strong (saluting cadet for hours under the sun); rich (wearing luxury items); loved by the common people (being stormed by the cadets); and victim of the media.

Trump has been credited with some 20,000 false or misleading claims during his presidency, according to the *Washington Post* (Kessler et al. 2020), yet lying is not a trademark of bullshit, nor is it prominent in these stories. As Frankfurt writes:

The bullshitter ... is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they must be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.

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There is no way to tell whether or not Trump's slow walk down the ramp or his needing two hands to hold the glass of water are due to sartorial concerns or to physical stress; nor does the audience really care. At the end of the water story, the audience chants "Trump" and "Four more years." Why should the story earn the support of the crowd for reelection? It does not. The crowd does not care whether the story is true or false, because, as a narrative of personal experience, the tale exploits the domain of the unverifiable. The philosopher Pascal Engel (2016) has claimed that Trump does not really want people to believe him; rather, he wants people to believe in him. He wants to inspire a cult. The episode of the cadets breaking barrier to touch their president brings powerful support to this claim.

The phenomenon of bullshit has lessons to tell about storytelling that go far beyond the case of Trump's ability to mesmerize his base. Bullshit is particularly frequent in the case of what Christian Salmon (2008) calls "instrumental narratives"—stories told for a specific purpose and that benefit the storyteller in a narrow, predictable way. To maximize impact, instrumental narrators resort to stereotyped formulas, language, and plot types that are easily understandable by the audience. A particularly efficient device is emphasis on deeply personal feelings. Frankfurt attributes the proliferation of bullshit to a phenomenon typical of the post-truth era (though he wrote ten years before the term

post-truth became popular): the replacement of “correctness” with “sincerity” (2005, 64). According to this interpretation, Trump may be truly believing in what he says. If identity is constructed by narratives, telling one’s story is creating who one is, and there is no way a “deeply felt” narrative, or one presented as such, can be falsified. When emotions, rather than reason and the beliefs that reason supports, are considered the expression of an authentic self, who is to hold storytellers to objective facts?

Yet, if the bullshitter is somebody who tells about what he or she does not really know and/or what the audience cannot verify, don’t we all bullshit from time to time? Frankfurt suggests this view through an amusing anecdote about Ludwig Wittgenstein, an austere logician who certainly cannot be accused of sympathy for bullshit. The story concerns Wittgenstein’s response to a lady named Fania Pascal, who told him that after having her tonsils removed, she felt “like a dog that has been run over.” Wittgenstein replied, perhaps jokingly (though Pascal thought he was serious): “You don’t know what a dog that has been run over feels like” (2005: 24). The dog comparison is what makes Pascal’s story an entertaining narrative rather than a dull report of facts. If storytellers were held to strict criteria of objectively verifiable truth, there would be no analogies, no figural language, no direct reports of speech, no exaggerations nor dramatizations of personal experience—all devices that Trump successfully exploits, despite the poverty of his vocabulary.⁶ Efficient storytelling, to a large extent, is bullshitting. That a bullshitter like Trump came close to destroying the foundation of U.S. democracy⁷ gives urgency to the work of those, like Galen Strawson (2004), Christian Salmon (2008), or Maria Mäkelä (2018; Mäkelä et al. 2021), who warn us of the limits or dangers of storytelling. If bullshitting epitomizes the art of storytelling, no wonder that Plato wanted to ban poets from the Republic!

Conclusion

How do these four ways of playing with the truth relate to the concepts of fictional and factual discourse? Fictionality has recently become a hot topic of narrative investigation, especially after Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh’s proposal (2015), even though philosophers such as John Searle (1975), David Lewis (1978), and Kendall Walton (1990) have debated the issue at least since the seventies. At the present time there is no definition of fiction that is universally adopted, but if all theories have something in common, it is that fiction is a non-deceptive, openly signaled departure from facts. Where the theories diverge is the point of this operation: the rhetorical theory of Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh regards it as telling something about the real world in an oblique way, while most other theories regard it as the presentation of an imaginary construct (or alternate world) worth contemplating for its own sake. I personally endorse the second possibility, but I will remain neutral in my discussion. Another widely if not universally accepted thesis about fiction is that it differs from lies and from errors. A discourse can therefore entertain five possible relations to truth: respect it (factuality); intentionally but covertly subvert it (lie); unintentionally subvert it (error); openly transgress it for the benefit of the audience (fiction); and situate itself beyond the truth vs. fact dichotomy.

Insofar as they are told as true but consist substantially of inventions, tabloid stories are a clear case of mendacity. It could be argued that those people who read tabloid stories not to gather information but to enjoy “what other people believe” adopt a fictional attitude, but they go only halfway in this adoption, because their pleasure remains dependent on somebody taking the stories as factual. Urban legends are inventions of unknown origin, but they wander so far away from their source that they become neither falsifiable nor verifiable. Since their tellability resides in their being told as truth, their circulation depends on the gullibility and therefore false beliefs of a deceived sender. When tall tales are told in an institutionalized context, such as a tall tale contest, they are a clear-cut type of fiction. But the case of the tale that starts as a true story and ends up being so unbelievable that hearers eventually recognize that they have been had transgresses the condition that fiction must be properly

framed as signaled invention; the signal lies here in the extravagance of the message itself rather than in a paratextual frame. As for bullshit, its contempt for truth does not categorize it as fiction, because fiction requires of its audience an act of pretense in the truth of the message that implies an awareness of its falsity. Bullshitters like Trump are not afraid of being accused of exaggeration⁸ because they are born performers, and their message is largely self-centered. “Look at me,” says the bullshitter, “do not look at the facts.”

Notes

- 1 Throughout this chapter, I reject the informal use of fiction as synonymous with lie.
- 2 It can be argued, with Derek Matravers (2014), that all narratives require an act of imagination, but in the case of fiction, this act is autotelic, while in the case of factual narratives, imagining narrative content is a prerequisite for its evaluation as either credible or not.
- 3 Another outlet for these beliefs is magical realism fiction.
- 4 Truck stops in Wyoming demonstrate this making fun of tourists by selling postcards with fur-covered trout and jackalopes (rabbits with antelope horns), creatures straight out of tall tales.
- 5 The Amazon book catalog reveals several recent books with bullshit in their title. Perusing these titles reveals connotations of uselessness (*Bullshit Jobs* by David Graeber, 2019), of needless prolixity (*Writing Without the Bullshit* by Josh Bernoff, 2016), and especially of insincerity, irresponsibility, and downright falsity (*All Bullshit and Lies* by Chris Heffer, 2020; *Calling Bullshit: The Art of Skepticism* by Carl T. Bergstrom and Jevin D. West, 2020). This last connotation hints at a connection between the amount of bullshit and the post-truth phenomenon.
- 6 It has been said that whenever Trump reports speech addressing him as “sir,” which he does in my samples, this is a mark of invention (Kessler 2020).
- 7 I wrote this after November 3, 2020, but before January 6, 2021, and I had no clue how close Trump would indeed come to destroying U.S. democracy. As I revise this text (May 2021), the danger is still present.
- 8 Note how Trump plays with the idea that he is exaggerating, turning the accusations to his advantage (a common strategy for him): “Watch, if I’m off like two minutes, they’ll say, he exaggerated. It was only an hour and twenty-five minutes. He exaggerated, he lied, he lied. He’s a liar.”

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