

## ◆ Chapter 6

### **Sinister Signs: What We Can Learn from Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* (*Senselessness*)**

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How do we even talk to each other?  
—Dr. Randall Mindy, *Don't Look Up*  
(dir. Adam McKay)

The 2021 Netflix offering *Don't Look Up* opens with the sound of a tea kettle before there is any image on the screen, making the sound initially unidentifiable. The shrill whistle therefore operates like an alarm that calls our attention to an immanent crisis—we should all look up. The film opens, and the oncoming crisis is a comet that will destroy the Earth. Humanity's insistence on being distracted from what's coming is an analogy for humanity's inadequate response to the ongoing climate crisis. As Dr. Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his graduate student Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence) navigate the intertwined worlds of politics and social media, desperate to have news of the comet taken seriously, their failure to mobilize humanity exposes the ridiculousness of our everyday lives. Upbeat, jazzy music accompanies images of people and animals going about their daily lives, with a distancing effect that is reminiscent of the mechanisms of theater of the absurd. The result is a harsh critique of humanity.

But the film's critique is most sharply aimed at the contemporary American political context. When the comet becomes visible to the naked eye, Dr. Mindy and Kate are initially relieved, thinking that people will no longer be able to ignore it. But on the contrary, the President of the United States (Meryl Streep) launches a "Don't Look Up" campaign, and her followers refuse to see the truth of impending doom—protected in their ignorance by the visors of the red trucker caps they wear, clearly evoking MAGA paraphernalia.

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Manipulative Media**

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Pro-science members of the public respond with a “Just Look Up” campaign, but given the film’s title, one can guess which movement wins out in the end.

The visual cue of *looking* calls attention to a particular feature of our post-truth reality: people will ignore evidence, even when they can see it with their own eyes, if doing so supports what they *feel*, over what they should *know*. That is to say that feelings trump facts. Seeing is no longer believing.

In what follows, I will propose the category of the Trumpian lie, characterized by a denial of readily available evidence to the contrary—evidence of the truth—to which followers are expected to blindly subscribe. In a study of Donald Trump’s claims regarding the size of the audience at his 2016 inauguration, I will show that among the many institutions that he actively undermines is the institution of language itself. I will go on to analyze the failure of language as a sign system in the Salvadoran author Horacio Castellanos Moya’s 2004 novel *Insensatez* (*Senselessness*)—a text wholly concerned with meaning-making.

Beginning with *Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media* (2016) and continuing with their most recent *What Would Cervantes Do?: Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature* (2022), David Castillo and William Egginton have been at pains to show their readers how the literature of Golden Age Spain can serve as a guide for navigating the shifting waters of the present. I wholeheartedly subscribe to their view, except that I don’t think we need to limit our readings to early modernity. The study of literature creates savvy readers who can decipher the world around them with the same nuance with which they read a literary text. In this case, reading *Insensatez* will show us how to read the crisis that emerges when Donald Trump and others like him exploit the arbitrary nature of the sign.

### The Vulnerability of Language

In Ferdinand de Saussure’s well-known formulation, language is a system of signs. Signs are composed of two components: a *signifier* that in turn refers to a *signified*. David Holdcroft explains: “In one fairly natural usage, if a word expresses an idea it might be said that it is the sign of an idea. But this usage is not Saussure’s. For him, a sign does involve two things, an acoustic image and a concept, but he does not think of the former as a sign of the latter. On the contrary, the sign is the union of both of them.”<sup>1</sup> The nature of the sign is arbitrary, and that means two different things. On the one hand it means that there is no natural relationship between the signifier and the signified, or as Holdcroft puts it, “There is nothing about the world which makes one signifier any more appropriate for its signified than any other.”<sup>2</sup> The arbitrary nature

of the sign also refers to the fact that there are no concepts or categories that pre-exist signs—language is not a simple nomenclature.<sup>3</sup> This explains why translating from one language to another is not as simple as assigning new signifiers to the same signifieds, but rather that one must understand the codes or values that compose a particular language system in order to be able to move between one and another.

This essay will focus on the first way in which the sign is arbitrary—the connection between the signifier and the signified—along with another feature of language that for Saussure is essential: language as a social fact. In Jonathan Culler’s words, “in analysing a language we are analysing social facts, dealing with the social use of material objects.” These material objects, Culler continues, “make possible linguistic communication between members of a society.”<sup>4</sup> This was all fine and good when everyone in a speech community agreed on the facts. But now, Saussure’s “social facts” are bumping up against the “alternative facts” of the post-truth era. From here we can turn to the epigraph from *Don’t Look Up*. In a moment of frustration while being interviewed on a talk show, Dr. Mindy laments, “And if we can’t all agree at the bare minimum that a giant comet the size of Mt. Everest hurtling its way toward planet Earth is not a fucking good thing, then what the hell happened to us? I mean my God, how do—How do we even talk to each other?”<sup>5</sup> Like the characters in *Don’t Look Up*, we ourselves are immersed in a crisis of communication. We can see it in social media and the nightly news, and we can couch it in terms of ideology, but it starts with something more basic—how we assign meaning to words.

To Saussure’s thinking, although language systems do evolve over time, they are not susceptible to being changed by an individual actor. Among other factors that explain this is the notion that language relies on traditions: “At every moment,” Saussure asserts, “solidarity with the past checks freedom of choice.”<sup>6</sup> David Holdcroft elaborates on this point: “So solidarity with our traditions and customs is another factor, in addition to the inertia of the collectivity, that makes for stability.” He continues,

There is an evident disutility in attempts to depart radically from established social customs. By convention, one stops when traffic lights are red and moves again when they change to green. An alternative convention is imaginable, viz. stopping when they are green and moving on red. But it would obviously be most unwise to adopt this as one’s practice unless one was sure that everyone else would do the same.<sup>7</sup>

However, in the context of American politics, Donald Trump has met with great success by defying conventions and flying in the face of norms. This feature of his approach to American political life is what I want to highlight: Trump is not only dismissing as “fake news” institutions like the sciences (regarding climate change, for example) or the press (regarding inconsistencies in the things that he says or the negative and embarrassing consequences of the things that he does), but he is trying to dismiss the foundation that makes it possible for us to communicate with one another. And in fact, Saussure does admit, “Language is radically powerless to defend itself against the forces which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signified and the signifier. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrary nature of the sign.”<sup>8</sup>

### **When Size Matters: Inaugural Audiences and Trumpian Lies**

David Castillo and William Egginton open their latest volume, *What Would Cervantes Do?: Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature*, by discussing “The Deadly Devolution of Language.”<sup>9</sup> In this prologue to their work, they address Donald Trump’s peculiar and ultimately dangerous relationship with words: “It doesn’t take a rocket scientist (or a health scientist, or a climate scientist . . . ) to understand that the battle over *words to avoid* and *better* or *best words* is ultimately about power—the power to censor, edit, and control reality.”<sup>10</sup> They go on to cite James Clapper, the director of national intelligence under Barack Obama, who described Trump’s “flexibility” when talking about facts.<sup>11</sup> Were Clapper a linguist, he would have known that what allows for Trump’s “flexible” treatment of language is, in fact, the arbitrary nature of the sign.

A simple example of how Donald Trump has exploited the vulnerability of the sign is the case of the audience size at his 2016 inauguration. In an article published by the *Atlantic* on January 13, 2019, author Megan Garber called this the “First Lie of the Trump Presidency.”<sup>12</sup> In his first press conference following the inauguration, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer insisted, “This was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period—both in person and around the globe.”<sup>13</sup> Members of the press were quick to supply photographic evidence to the contrary, placing photographs of the crowd at the Trump inaugural next to photos of the same space during the Obama inaugural, with evidently more robust crowds at the latter.

Nonetheless, Trump insisted—and continues to insist—that his inauguration had the bigger audience. Given the readily available visual evidence to the contrary, the only way that Trump’s assertion could work would be if

we actually changed the meanings of “bigger” and “smaller,” so that “bigger” referred to the less robust audience and “smaller” to the more robust one. A Trumpian lie, like this one, doesn’t only breach the social contract that says that we will be honest with one another. It breaches the social contract that allows our system of signs to function. As Garber describes it, “The whole thing had the air of incantation. Its foolishness might have been funny, had the attempt at weaponized magic not also suggested one of the darkest elements of the Trump presidency: its radiating conviction that truth itself can be remade in the shape of its leader.”<sup>14</sup>

This may seem trivial. After all, we still know what “bigger” and “smaller” actually mean, and we have photographic evidence to clarify the facts. But I contend that, with this communicative strategy, Trump effects a violent tear in our very social fabric. When Saussure spoke of linguistic communities, he did so to show how communities support language by agreeing on the conventions that assign signifiers to signifieds in a *shared* system of signs. But the inverse holds as well: communities cannot exist without a shared system of signs. So, if Donald Trump flies in the face of linguistic convention, even if only for a moment, and even if he does so with a lie that is so counterfactual as to be absurd, he is making it harder for us to be a community. And the consequences of that can be deadly.

### Castellanos Moya’s *Insensatez*

A novel from the Hispanic context that sheds light on the challenge of meaning-making is Horacio Castellanos Moya’s *Insensatez* (2004), which was translated as *Senselessness* by Katherine Silver in 2008. Sophie Esch observes that, “In the English translation the novel’s title was rendered as *Senselessness*; while adequate, it is unable to grasp the whole meaning of *insensatez*, which ranges from ‘senselessness,’ ‘madness,’ ‘folly,’ ‘idiocy,’ and ‘unreasonableness’ to ‘insensitivity.’”<sup>15</sup> Given the polyvalence of the term, I shall, throughout this essay, refer to the novel as *Insensatez*, rather than *Senselessness*.<sup>16</sup>

Narrated in the first person by an unnamed narrator-protagonist, *Insensatez* tells the story of the narrator’s work for the Archbishopric of an unnamed country (clearly Guatemala) as he edits 1400 pages of reports that consist of the testimonies of members of Mayan indigenous communities who were violently persecuted by the military during the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996). An international team has come together to publish the harrowing testimonies, and the narrator has been hired to give them a last look and to edit these texts, already translated to Spanish from indigenous languages, for style, thereby immediately highlighting problematics of form and content, which will occupy the whole of the novel.

Critics universally cite the novel's first sentence, "*Yo no estoy completo de la mente*" (I am not complete in the mind), as key to understanding this text.<sup>17</sup> In a Cervantine maneuver, this sentence is a first step toward leading the reader to question not only the narrator's state of mind, but also her own. As the novel progresses, the narrator becomes increasingly paranoid, but to what extent his paranoia is warranted is hard for the reader to discern, and as she tries to figure it out, she comes to question her own judgement as well. Christian Kroll-Bryce explains,

By the end of the novel, the narrator is as incomplete in the mind as the victims whose testimonies he has been editing and decides to flee the country convinced that his life is in danger. And we, as readers, never quite know whether his fear and paranoia are substantiated by actual threats or if they are just a product of his imagination; we, to some extent, also become incomplete in the mind, unable to tell fact from fiction, rumors from actual events, rational behavior from irrational impulses.<sup>18</sup>

This predicament culminates with the novel's last chapter, wherein the narrator has removed himself from his difficulties in Guatemala and is staying with a cousin in Germany. He nevertheless thinks that he sees General Octavio Pérez Mena, leader of the massacres of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala, sitting at the same bar as him during a *carnaval* celebration. On the one hand, the reader intuits this to be an effect of the narrator's irrationality because surely this couldn't be possible. But then we come to see the narrator's paranoia as rational when, one page later, we learn that the monsignor who led the project to compile testimonies was murdered shortly after the report was released. As Martín Lombardo puts it,

La publicación del documento hace público el miedo y el horror. Asimismo, la muerte del monseñor resignifica la lectura de la novela, ya que alude a un hecho verídico: el asesinato del obispo Gerardi al día siguiente de la publicación de *Nunca más*. Así como la poesía no está exenta del testimonio, la fantasía tampoco lo está de la realidad ni de lo verosímil.<sup>19</sup>

(The document's publication makes the fear and horror public. At the same time, the monsignor's death resignifies the reading of the novel, since it alludes to a real fact: the murder of Bishop Gerardi the day after

the publication of *Nunca más*. Just as poetry is not exempt from testimony, nor is fantasy exempt from reality or the verosimil.)

The murder of the monsignor solidifies the connection between the fictional report that the narrator edits in *Insensatez* and the real report that was compiled by the Archbishopric of Guatemala under the title *Guatemala: nunca más* in 1998.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the decontextualized sentences that the narrator copies into his notebook, including “I am not complete in the mind,” are taken verbatim from that report.<sup>21</sup> This only adds to the confusion of what’s real and what’s imagined in the novel, as the reader, along with the narrator, strives to keep an eye on the truth.<sup>22</sup>

“I am not complete in the mind” is one of many sentences from the testimonies that the narrator finds fascinating for aesthetic reasons, and copies it into his notebook, thinking that someday he might write a novel with these decontextualized fragments as inspiration. The narrator’s apparently objective treatment of testimonies for their poetic value, ignoring their violent content, has led more than one critic to question his character and sensibility.<sup>23</sup>

This narrator is certainly an unappealing person who seems obsessed with money and sex, while showing himself to be racist and misogynist. It is one of the character’s more despicable moments that I want to focus on, not because of what it says about his moral compass, but because of what it teaches us about language.

### The Stench of a Dissolving Sign

Just after the novel’s halfway point, in its eighth chapter, the narrator achieves what he’s been seeking from the beginning of his tale—a sexual encounter with a beautiful woman. The woman in question is Fátima, a Spanish consultant working on the testimony project. But the night doesn’t go according to the narrator’s plans. The failures that transpire, one after the other, in this episode are examples of the dissolution of the linguistic sign itself: they are failures of meaning. Reading this episode in this way can sensitize us to the dissolution of the sign that surrounds us in the post-truth era in the form of Trumpian lies.<sup>24</sup>

The chapter begins after the episode with Fátima has concluded. The two are in bed, she is asleep, and the narrator reflects on what has just transpired: “ese cuerpo por todos tan deseado había perdido de pronto para mí su encanto, cuando una hora atrás me había preguntado a boca de jarro si yo prefería que ella me la chupara o que me hiciera una paja, una pregunta que carecía de cualquier sentido” (that body so desired by everybody had suddenly lost its charm when just one hour before she had asked me point blank if I’d rather

she suck it or masturbate me, a question that didn't make any sense).<sup>25</sup> For the narrator, if a woman has spent the evening with him and then comes back to his apartment, it *means* that they will have sex. Only in this case it doesn't, because, as it turns out, Fátima has a boyfriend. By her logic, she can engage in some sexual acts but not others. For the narrator, the logic of the evening begins to dissolve, as he perceives in her question something that *makes no sense*. The narrator opts for oral sex, but meanings continue to disintegrate, as the narrator can't stop thinking about his surprise at Fátima's question, and he wonders at the logic that oral sex doesn't *mean* cheating, while intercourse would, thereby pointing again to the arbitrary nature of the sign.

As Fátima proceeds, trying to bring some pleasure to the protagonist, all the signifying capacity of language is lost. She tries to speak with his member in her mouth:

sin concentrarme demasiado en el placer que ella suponía brindarme sino intentando descifrar la diferencia entre chupármela y ser penetrada a la hora de reafirmar la fidelidad ante el novio que llegaría a la mañana siguiente y del cual yo apenas me había enterado, una diferencia que en verdad me costaba descubrir, mucho más cuando ella trató de hablar sin sacarse mi miembro de su boca y pronunció algo así como 'ca-co-que-co,' mirándome con ansiedad.

(not concentrating too much on the pleasure she was supposedly giving me but rather attempting to figure out what difference it would make as she was reaffirming her fidelity to her boyfriend, who would arrive the following morning and whom I had just found out about, if she had given me a blow job or been penetrated, a difference that was frankly difficult for me to discern, much more so when she tried to talk without taking my member out of her mouth, saying something like 'ca-cu-ca-ci,' and looking at me worriedly.)<sup>26</sup>

Fátima is trying to ask the narrator if he's happy—a question that doesn't begin to capture his feelings in the moment. But the two clearly don't share a code that makes language *meaningful*, and the narrator doesn't understand that "ca-co-que-co" *means* "¿Estás contento?" (Are you happy?).

In this total failure of communication, the complete dissolution of the power of the sign, Fátima hasn't yet noticed that the protagonist isn't enjoying



himself. She is becoming increasingly excited and decides to completely undress. She is wearing heavy tights under military-style boots, a fashion

compartida por la mayoría de cooperantes europeas y que yo nada más entendí como un capricho juvenil sin mayores consecuencias, pero que en ese instante adquirió su siniestra dimensión cuando desde ese par de botas militares ascendió un tufo que hizo trizas mis fosas nasales y me provocó la peor de las repugnancias.

(shared by most of her European colleagues and that I had assumed was nothing more than a youthful whim without any further consequences, but that at that instant acquired a sinister dimension when an odor issued forth from those military boots that tore my nasal passages to pieces and made me feel the strongest possible revulsion.)<sup>27</sup>

This is the climax of a scene that the protagonist expected to end in a very different way. The stench is the metaphorical result of the real dissolution of the sign in the context of the failed sexual encounter. For the narrator, if a woman comes home with him, it *means* that they will have sex. If a woman performs oral sex on him, it *means* he will experience pleasure. If a woman is attractive, it *means* she will smell good. But none of these meanings hold up. And as that dilemma evolves, it takes on a “sinister” (the protagonist’s word) tone, which on the one hand is ironic, given the low stakes of this encounter. It lends to the humor of the episode. But on the other hand, it points to the real danger of the loss of the social contract that is language itself, and to the broader senselessness of *Insensatez*.

As the sexual encounter continues and as he tries without success to decipher the events of the evening, the narrator comments that “mi mente rebotaba como pelota de ping-pong” (my mind was bouncing around like a ping-pong ball).<sup>28</sup> Most critics ignore this scene of the novel, at best using it as evidence that the narrator is a sexist womanizer of dubious character. Sophie Esch, however, reads this, along with the next chapter, as the novel’s climax, because here the reader can no longer escape a sense of disgust regarding the protagonist. Specifically, she points to the trope of contagion (the next day the narrator believes he’s contracted an STD from Fátima); we come to absorb all that is disturbing about this text, including the graphic violence of the fragments of text that the protagonist copies from the testimonies that he is editing, no longer able to read from a safe emotional or intellectual distance.<sup>29</sup>

Without disagreeing with Esch, I want to suggest that this episode represents another kind of climax as well. While the narrator's paranoia is evidenced from the novel's first line ("I'm not complete in the mind"), it is from this moment onward that the narrator's psychological imbalance takes on such an extreme tint that it becomes difficult for the reader to know when he is *reasonably* paranoid and when he is delusional, that is to say, when his paranoia crosses over into *insensatez*. What specifically provokes this turn of events is the narrator learning that not only does Fátima have a boyfriend but that the boyfriend is an officer in the Guatemalan military—the same military that is accused of human rights abuses in the report that the narrator is editing: "un militar a quien ella llamaba cariñosamente Jota Ce, que así le gustaba que le dijeran, me explicó Fátima, aunque su nombre fuera Juan Carlos Medina, el mayor Juan Carlos Medina, para más señas" (a military man she affectionately called Jay Cee, for that was what he liked to be called, Fátima explained to me, even though his name was Juan Carlos Medina, Major Juan Carlos Medina, to be more exact).<sup>30</sup>

As Fátima continues to describe Major Juan Carlos Medina, she reveals that they have an open relationship and she will, of course, tell him about the encounter that she's just had with the narrator. This is the cause of the narrator's paranoia becoming exaggerated beyond the reader's ability to discern when he is reasonable and when he is not. When Fátima falls asleep, he describes how he has been left

en un asfixiante estado de agitación interior, a tal punto de desmoronamiento que sólo se me ocurrió apagar las luces y tenderme en la cama con el máximo sigilo, como si así pudiéramos pasar inadvertidos, como si de tal forma pudiera borrar de una vez para siempre esa noche equívoca, propicia tan sólo para mi suplicio.

(in a suffocating state of internal agitation, right on the verge of collapse and the only thing I could think to do was turn off the light and lie down in the bed as stealthily as possible, as if we could thus go unnoticed, as if in this way I could erase once and for all that equivocal night, nothing but torture for me).<sup>31</sup>

Lying in the dark, the narrator formulates the idea that it would be easy for Jota Ce to murder him—Jota Ce, he assumes, being accustomed to resolving problems with violence—and then to blame his death on those members of the

military who were opposed to the production of the report that he is editing. This scenario provides a specific object for his hitherto unfocused paranoia, and it will fuel his worries and his behavior throughout the rest of the novel. The narrator's language of torture and suffering shows how he has internalized the testimonies that he's been editing and has come to see himself, like the indigenous narrators whose language he copies into his notebook, as a victim. From here on out he becomes convinced that there is a conspiracy against him, and he's not safe anywhere in Guatemala.

*Insensatez* illustrates not only how we can lose track of meaning when the arbitrary nature of the sign comes to light, but also how easy it is, once the signified/signifier relationship is broken, to lead an audience down a road away from what's true. The failed sex scene is an irreverent microcosm of the novel, ironically distanced from the narrator's gruesome work. As an editor of testimonies to the unthinkable, he's being asked to make sense of the senseless.

### **Conclusion: Violent Language**

If language's vulnerability, due to the arbitrary nature of the sign, leads to a personal crisis in *Insensatez*, it has led to a collective crisis in the post-truth world, and we should remember again the kettle's whistle with which *Don't Look Up* opens. If we take *Don't Look Up* and *Insensatez* together, they have certain commonalities that can inform our understanding of Trumpian lies and sensitize us to the symptoms of post-truth when we come across them. Among these are distancing effects, dark humor with a sinister side, and moments of absurdity. Absurd it is, indeed, to compare two photos of two different inaugurations and *believe* that the smaller crowd is the bigger, in fact the *biggest* one of all time. In the face of such lies, seeking emotional or intellectual distance becomes a way to keep ourselves safe. But that safety is illusory in the face of a language of violence. Racial minorities, the Jewish and Muslim communities, LGBTQ+ people, among others, know this all too well.

When Saussure demonstrated in the *Course in General Linguistics* that the nature of the sign is arbitrary, no one (I suspect) considered the fact that this basic linguistic truth could be socially dangerous, but so it has turned out to be. What we don't see if we look only at Donald Trump's inauguration claims, but that becomes clearer as seen through the lens of *Don't Look Up* and especially *Insensatez*, is the violence. It is not a coincidence that in *Insensatez* the dissolution of the sign takes place among narratives of genocide and that in *Don't Look Up* it transpires in the shadow of nothing less than the end of the world.

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## Notes

1. David Holdcroft, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 50.
2. *Ibid.*, 66.
3. Jonathan Culler. *Saussure* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons and Company, 1976), 21–23.
4. Culler, *Saussure*, 51.
5. *Don't Look Up*, dir. Adam McKay (Netflix, 2021).
6. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966).
7. Holdcroft, *Saussure*, 62–63.
8. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 75.
9. David Castillo and William Egginton, *What Would Cervantes Do?: Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 3.
10. Castillo and Egginton, *Cervantes*, 5, emphasis in original.
11. *Ibid.*, 5.
12. Megan Garber, "The First Lie of the Trump Presidency," *Atlantic*, January 13, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/01/the-absurdity-of-donald-trumps-lies/579622/>
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. Sophie Esch, "Learning from *Senselessness*," in *Teaching Central American Literature in a Global Context*, eds. Gloria Elizabeth Chacón and Mónica Albizúrez Gil (2022): 209.
16. All English translations of quotes from *Insensatez* are taken from Silver's edition.
17. Horacio Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 2020), 13, emphasis in original; Horacio Castellanos Moya, *Senselessness*, trans. Katherine Silver (New York: New Directions, 2008), 1.

18. Christian Kroll-Bryce, "A Reasonable Senselessness: Madness, Sovereignty and Neoliberal Reason in Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2014): 384. See also Esch, "Learning from *Senselessness*," 207.
19. Martín Lombardo, "El cuerpo del archivo: Función, testimonio y la responsabilidad de un orden. Apuntes sobre *Insensatez* y *Dos veces junio*," *425°F* 18 (2018): 38.
20. Kroll-Bryce, "A Reasonable Senselessness," 382; cf. 385–86. See also Teresa Fallas Arias, "La persistencia de la memoria guatemalteca en las novelas *Insensatez* y *El material humano*," *Centroamericana* 20 (2011): 78.
21. Esch, "Learning from *Senselessness*" 221. See also Emanuela Jossa, "Transparencia y opacidad: Escritura y memoria en *Insensatez* de H. Castellanos Moya y *El material humano* de R. Rey Rosa," *Centroamericana* 23, no. 2 (2013): 36.
22. Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, "La ficción en el momento de peligro," in *Tiranas ficciones: Poética y política de la escritura en la obra de Horacio Castellanos Moya*, eds. Magdalena Perkowska and Osvaldo Zavala (Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 2018), 249. Sánchez Prado's essay offers a helpful contextualization of *Insensatez* in terms of recent Central American literature, and the *testimonio* genre in particular. He argues, "Mientras el testimonio debe recontar la experiencia del individuo como alegoría o representación de las experiencias de una comunidad, *Insensatez* restituye al individuo, en toda su imperfección, el carácter único de su experiencia frente al abismo de la historia" (Although *testimonio* should recount the individual's experience as allegory or representation of the experiences of a community, *Insensatez* reinstates the individual, with all his imperfections, the unique character of his experience, before the abyss of history).
23. Jossa, "Transparencia y opacidad," 42. See also Fallas Arias, "La persistencia de la memoria," 83; Teresa Fallas Arias, "La persistencia de la memoria guatemalteca en las novelas *Insensatez* y *El material humano*," *Centroamericana* 20 (2011): 69–84. Offering an alternative reading, Fallas Arias sees the decontextualized fragments of testimony as features of a rhizomatic text.
24. Donald Trump doesn't have to be the person generating the lie for it to be Trumpian. It need only be a lie that the public is expected to accept in the face of available evidence to the contrary. We might contemplate the case of NY Republican Representative George Santos as a recent example.
25. Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 94; *Senselessness*, 82.
26. Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 95; *Senselessness*, 83–84.
27. Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 96–97; *Senselessness*, 85.

28. Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 98; *Senselessness*, 86.

29. Esch, “Learning from Senselessness,” 208–09. See also Fallas Arias, “La persistencia de la memoria,” 81. Most critics do gloss over this episode in *Insensatez*, but there are interesting exceptions. Teresa Fallas Arias, for example, reads the irony of Spanish consultants traveling to Guatemala for humanitarian purposes, when their ancestors rained down pestilence and massacres on the continent’s indigenous people.

30. Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 99; *Senselessness*, 88.

31. Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 102; *Senselessness*, 90.

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Culleton, Colleen. “Sinister Signs: What We Can Learn from *Insensatez* (*Senselessness*).” *Anti-Disinformation Pedagogy: Tackling the Power of Manipulative Media*. Ed. David Castillo and Bradley Nelson. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 32 (2024): 127–41. Web.

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