



## The Impressionist Act of Willie Nepomuceno: Satire as Political Testimony and Crux of Collective Memory

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**Abstract:** Using the lens of phenomenology, this paper surfaces how political testimony can be treated in its complex relationship to history. It intends to enhance, through an academic and creative way, the practice of collaborative inquiry about the art and craft of satire in the Philippines. The final output of this study is an interrogation of Filipino collective memory as the researcher believes in the imperative of creating a space where Filipinos can locate their identity as manifested in the public sphere, as created by the impressionist artist mirroring the political milieu that frames his testimony.

Remembering is always accompanied by conflict as people have unique ways of retaining an event and what it means. When memory becomes part of the public sphere, it is inevitably steeped in controversy. The publicness of memory is constituted most of all in the field of popular or mass culture—mediated through the channels of mass communication—and it is here especially that we can locate a privileged site for the playing out of the ethical issues arising from the historical or the remembered past.

Nepomuceno's art, deeply etched in the psyche of the nation, is one such repository of the collective memory of the Filipinos who have a long history of fighting tyranny and oppression. His satire, though in the platform of the performing arts, also inscribes the history of the Filipino's struggles "to cure folly and to punish evil". His impressions of politicians leave us with a portrait which Highet calls "a beating heart within and which, when we look into its eyes, seems to be a reflection, distorted with pain, of our own soul."

**Key Words:** satire, testimony, impressionist art, phenomenology, memory

### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Aristotle, comedy developed out of invective or satire, which the ancient Greeks believed to have demonic power that could "kill", as in the verses (hate poems) of Archilochus (Elliott, 1960). For the Arabs, the poet's chief function was

to compose satire (Hija) against the tribal enemy. In Greece, Arabia and Ireland, satire was originally magical, or more accurately, the satirist was often thought to possess preternatural powers.

The use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule "to expose and criticize people's inanities or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues" has the greater



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purpose of constructive and cathartic social criticism from the ancient times to the present. This study interrogates the art of satire in the Philippines' performing arts not only as history that conveys information but more as oral witnessing, or an act of remembrance. In particular, it focuses on a key informant, Willie Nepomuceno, one of the leading lights of the Impressionist act on stage, through an analysis of his repertoire and a codification of his recollection of years of engagement with his audience—what may be construed his testimony as an artist. This testimony hopefully sheds light on the collective memory of the Filipinos that frames their identity.

Pfaff and Gibbs made a study reviewing satire as a mode of discourse that takes a polemical or critical outlook, or as the ridicule of a subject to illustrate its faults (Pfaff, 1997). In many respects, satire is similar to irony and parody, but it is different from both genres in important ways. Unlike irony, satire typically comments on cultural concerns or society rather than on specific individuals. Satire also tends to comment more indirectly or implicitly on the satirized object than does ironic commentary (Kreuz, 1993).

Much satire involves some degree of parody, especially since both are derisive of the topic. But while in parody, an author often exaggerates distinctive aspects of the original work, in satire, the author mostly assumes that readers will recover the absurdity of the created text, which hopefully will prompt the readers to consider issues beyond the text (Brogan, 1993). Of course, as Kreuz and Robert aptly note: "The presence of satire in a text may be even more difficult to detect than the presence of parody because what is absurd to one reader may be perfectly acceptable to another" (Kreuz, 1993).

## 2. MAIN CLAIMS

Using the lens of phenomenology, this paper surfaces how political testimony can be treated in its complex relationship to history. Furthermore, this research enhances, through an

academic and creative way, the practice of collaborative inquiry about the art and craft of satire in the Philippines. The final output of this study is an interrogation of collective Filipino memory as the researcher believes in the imperative of creating a space where Filipinos can locate their identity through an awareness of their lived experiences as manifested in the art of the impressionist artist mirroring the political milieu that frames his testimony.

As per the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, this study seeks to read satire as testimony, i.e. the "stories they are meant to be, fully conveying their legitimacy, resourcefulness, power—and, finally, hope."

According to English writer, painter and critic Wyndham Lewis, the medium of satire is laughter, and it is a hybrid form, standing midway between tragedy and comedy: a grinning comedy as it were while South African poet and satirist Roy Campbell posits that in modern times, satire has the role of a Swift or a Pope, who, out of profound sense of civilized order could expose with devastating brilliance the threatening encroachment of the powers of disorder (Elliott, 1960).

This study uses Qualitative Research Design specifically applicable in the Humanities, in particular the Case Study, in the sense of an empirical inquiry of a bounded system, emphasizing the unity and wholeness of that system. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with the key informant (personal face-to-face, electronic mail, fb messenger), guided by an Aide Memoire complemented by field and archival research on the repertoire of the artist. Field texts (Interview Responses and Repertoire Review) were subjected to phenomenological reduction using a dendrogram. The essence of the phenomenon was emerged using Colaizzi's procedure until themes and subthemes were categorized and validated.

Through the study on the art and craft of Nepomuceno, an appreciative inquiry on the evolution of the art of satire within the milieu of

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historical and geo-political events in the Philippines was accomplished. As Breault (2010) underscored the therapeutic function of stories, they can be intensely introspective and self-centered project and an outer-directed, world-changing process, and within this conceptual framework, the Filipino collective memory was boldly examined and hopefully, reinvigorated.

### 3. ARGUMENTS

Willie Nepomuceno is a Filipino satirist and public intellectual best known for his impersonation of Political personalities, especially Philippine Presidents such as Ferdinand Marcos, Fidel Ramos, Erap Estrada, and Noyon Aquino. He studied Fine Arts at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, during the time of turbulence of the Marcos presidency and eventually, dictatorship. He was a student activist, entertaining at rallies and demonstrations, and was a regular performer in protest actions.

His early inspiration came from a comics character named “Alyas Palos” whose adventurous life as a robber, Nepomuceno saw as spiced with his disguises of real life personalities that allowed him to evade the forces of law running after him. Later on, he recalls:

I was mesmerized by the remarkable impressions of Frank Gorshin, who played the Riddler character at the Batman TV series. Then I was influenced by the legendary Sammy Davis Jr. and lastly, by the impeccable humor of pianist Victor Borge (Nepomuceno, 2018).

He was a frequent guest on television shows like: “Student Canteen” and “Eat Bulaga” and made featured appearances in “Two For The Road”, “The Norma Ledesma Show”, “VIP” (Vilma In Person), “Superstar” . He started his career on television beginning with guest appearances at the

newly opened ABS-CBN studios and almost had his first break at superstardom via “Super Laff Ins”. But just as he was bourgeoning on television, Martial Law was declared in September 1972 and the station was closed.

It took a while but he was able to return via a pioneering morning show for children, “Telebong , Telebong” over GMA 7. He co-hosted another variety show with Nova Villa and hosted his own noontime daily show “Ito Yun Ang Galing!” both on MBS 4. When other stations were already noticing him, People Power erupted and the show was stopped.

Again, he took a hiatus before he made another comeback. After a long while, “Pass The Mike” with Joe Quirino came along and brought him back to the limelight via GMA 7. And then came “ISPUP”, a comedy show over ABC 5 where he won a KBP Golden Dove Award as Best Actor. He reminisced:

It was good while it lasted until a series of management shake up intervened and the show was cancelled. It seems history was overtaking me (Nepomuceno, 2018).

His bursting creative energy needed an outlet. With television out of the equation, Nepomuceno went on to do live shows on stage at the Music Museum. There, he was able to mount his satire on the presidentiables once every six years, most rewarding of which was the Presidential Elections of May 2010. He only planned for two shows but the response was such he had to do repeats every so often, sometimes with barely a week in between. “Presidentiables Gut Talent” has covered six presidential terms of office excluding that of the two Lady Presidents, Cory Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

The most remembered personality he made a sketch for was President Ferdinand E. Marcos. Nepomuceno recalls:

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He carried a fierce personality but somehow, I have humanized him off his pedestal when I did humor and satirical sketches of him. When he declared Martial Law, I made myself scarce hiding from the authorities but later surfaced when it didn't seem as dangerous and continued being more satirical (Nepomuceno, 2018).

During the incumbency of President Fidel V. Ramos, he had a hard time deciding whether to do him or not because according to sources he was 'pikon' (easily offended) so Nepomuceno had to be cautious, but eventually did him at the "Kapihan Sa Manila", a breakfast forum of journalists at the Manila Hotel founded by columnist Neal H. Cruz and had a "face to face" with the President who turned out to be game and gave him a high five gesture to the delight of the guests. Their pictures were all over the major dailies and television news the following day.

When Joseph Estrada became President, it was already second nature for Nepomuceno to do a parody of heads of state. However, they were like lovers having a spat every time he went on stage. He would laugh with the crowd but seemed uncomfortable with some subjects especially when there were hints or allegation of corruption. Eventually, he would find it as part of the territory and willingly subjected himself to the satire. Later on they would hug when they would bump into each other in public or private events.

During the dark days of Martial Law, comedic performances soon became one of the few venues through which Ferdinand Marcos, his wife Imelda Marcos, and other key figures could be criticized within the political mainstream. A number of comedians became very popular for this, notably Willie Nepomuceno and Tessie Tomas, who were known for their comedic impersonations of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos (Veyra, 2017).

Nepomuceno would later reveal that he would regularly be approached by generals of the Armed Forces of the Philippines to stop impersonating Marcos "*dahil siya ang presidente*" (because he's the president) and he's supposed to be treated with respect. The artist says that he still did the impersonations because he felt that was the only way he was able to serve the country during the dictatorship. He claims:

These things come out when there is oppression, and through *parinig* (insinuations), we are able to get back at our oppressors. *Kahit papano, nakabawi na tayo* (In a way, it is our expiation).

It is said that the satirist is a public servant fighting the good fight against vice and folly wherever he meets it. He is honest, brave and protected by the rectitude of his motives. He attacks only the wicked—a moral man appalled by the evil he sees around him and is forced by his conscience's indignation (Elliott, 1960). This was what Nepomuceno accomplished with his satire of crooked politicians, especially Marcos.

Nepomuceno admits to "life threatening" moments like when the staff of then Senator Ping Lacson repeatedly called and sent him a "request letter" to stop the impressions on Marcos. One netizen commented on face book about his valor, after viewing History with Lourds' episode "Political Satire sa Pilipinas" over You Tube:

*Hanga ako talaga kay Willie Nepomuceno dahil sya lang ang kumukutya kay Marcos noon pero hindi sya ipinapatay ni Marcos. Kabag napapanood namin noon si Willie sinasabi naming kawawa naman si Willie baka bukas bigla na lang yan ipadudukot ni Marcos! (I really admire Willie Nepomuceno because he is the only one ridiculing Marcos at that time who was not executed. When we watched Willie then, we felt pity for him, worried*

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*that Marcos would have him abducted* (Veyra, 2017).

Another instance was when Joseph “Erap” Estrada confronted him at the men’s room of the Manila Hotel and expressed disappointment at making him a laughing stock of his impressions. Nepomuceno reminisces:

I cannot recall what we talked about but remembered I was sweating cold all over. Nothing exploded though. That happened when he was still Mayor of San Juan (Nepomuceno, 2018). When he became president, Nepomuceno would level up the satire.

Elliot classified satirists into two types: One is in the mold of Horace, who appreciates most people, but thinks they are rather blind and foolish. He tells the truth with a smile, so that he will not repel them but cure them of that ignorance which is their worst fault. The other is in the tradition of Juvenal, who hates and despises most people and believes rascality is triumphant in his world. His aim is not to cure, but to wound, to punish, to destroy.

Nepomuceno, in his impressions, clearly belongs to the first, subscribing to Dryden’s belief that the true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction. To illustrate, one segment that has become so popular in his Marcos sketch is the dictator delivering his now infamous “This nation can be great again” bombast, tied up with the juvenile ditty “I have two hands”. He explains:

When I do this in Plaza Miranda, the sketch derives double meaning. When I include in the otherwise sanctimonious speech the line “I have two hands, the left and the right,” my audience laughs, knowing this is an allusion to the corruption and human rights violations happening left and right, as the democracy in our country is slowly dying,

despite Marcos’ promise of a New Society. *Yun na lang ang contribution ko na pwedeng ibigay sa bayan* (That, I consider the only contribution I can offer the country) (Nepomuceno, 2018).

It is said that the final test for satire is the typical emotion which the author feels, and wishes to evoke in his readers—mostly a blend of amusement and contempt (Highet, 1962). It is said that in some satirists, the amusement far outweighs the contempt while in others, it almost disappears, changing into a sour sneer, or a grim smile, or a wry awareness that life cannot all be called reasonable or noble.

Nepomuceno’s subtle jab camouflages the ancient tradition of the “talk seasoned with black salt” in the manner of Horace, who in turn credits Bion of Borysthenes, the Greek philosopher who captured and held the attention of his audiences who hated preaching and would never have gone to a formal teaching, people who were ill-educated and uninterested in philosophy, yet still capable of understanding moral problems and of changing their own lives (Highet, 1962). Bion’s discourses, called diatribes, were forceful and bitter verbal attacks against someone or something, which would not work in Philippine culture.

A saying from Bion, preserved by Cicero, rationalizes Nepomuceno’s subtlety: “It is useless to tear our hair when we are in grief, since sorrow is not cured by baldness.” Instead of raging against the dying of the light, Nepomuceno instigates laughter for catharsis and hopefully, for dissent.

#### 4. OPPOSING OR DIFFERING VIEWS

In a perceptual theory of satire, it is shown that satire is neither a matter of form nor of function but a matter of the way both these are perceived in particular contexts by particular



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people (Kuiper, 1984). Some may argue that the impressions done on stage by artists like Nepomuceno are regarded as mere fleeting fodder in the entertainment gristmill, not as carefully conceptualized indictments that have a lasting impact on the tide of political opinion.

Still others may denigrate the political satire of this impressionist artist as irrelevant to the question of who the Filipino really is. This study differs in its view, as the stories gathered from this type of research are rich with context and given life by the individuals in them, so they can offer a better sense of what the Filipino culture values and finds meaningful (Florio-Ruane, 1991).

While satire is not the greatest genre of expression, still, it is one of the most original, challenging and memorable forms practiced by some energetic minds—Voltaire, Rabelais, Petronius, Swift; by some exquisitely graceful stylist—Pope, Horace, Aristophanes; and occasionally, as a paragon, by some great geniuses—Lucretius, Goethe, Shakespeare. It pictures real men and women, often in lurid colors, but always with unforgettable clarity (Hight, 1962). The long history of Nepomuceno's work on stage are testimonies to his brilliant impressions, so much so that it was Marcos himself who sometimes asked Willie Nep to join his rallies as an opening act to draw a bigger crowd, back in the days when his Martial Law was still in the drawing board (Dela Rosa, 2013).

Nepomuceno has also starred in several Gridiron skits at the National Press Club, headlined the annual anniversary of the *Kapihan sa Maynila*, recorded five albums and produced successful shows in the Philippines and abroad for a cause, such as raising funds for victims of media killings (Dela Rosa, 2013), proof that he is taken as a serious artist, not a mere entertainer.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Historian Pierre Nora, known for his work on French identity and memory, stated that we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left (Nora, 1989). Remembering is always accompanied by conflict as people have unique ways of retaining an event and what it means. When memory becomes part of the public sphere, it is inevitably steeped in controversy. The publicness of memory is constituted most of all in the field of popular or mass culture—mediated through the channels of mass communication—and it is here especially that we can locate a privileged site for the playing out of the ethical issues arising from the historical or the remembered past (Hamilton, 2010).

The recent presidential elections in the Philippines brought to fore the insidiousness of media controlled by those who aim to revise history. Alarming, social media platforms have been taken over by paid trolls who are tasked to obliterate from our collective memory the nightmare of the Martial Law regime.

Present factors tend to influence—some might say distort—our recollections of the past, but also because past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experiences of the present (Connerton, 1989). This becomes a critical issue when the collective memory is threatened to be defaced, if not totally obliterated. Thus, there is the imperative of retrieving that which is about to disappear or be forgotten—a key philosophical task of the twentieth century (Hiu, 2017).

Nepomuceno's art, deeply etched in the psyche of the nation, is one such repository of the collective memory of the Filipinos who have a long history of fighting tyranny and oppression. He recalls:

Marcos was more refined. His generals would watch my shows and invite me to their tables afterwards and request me to stop doing the President. In Malacañang,



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a blue lady would refrain me from doing Marcos upon the behest of the First Lady. I would at that moment, but I never ceased doing Marcos even after his death. He (Marcos) should not happen again, ever (Nepomuceno, 2018).

Nepomuceno's sketches reside in what Nora calls *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory) in a country that is gradually losing its *milieu de memoire* (real environments of memory).

One trajectory of collective memory is the effort to document, in the name of history and humanity, what has happened-- to leave a record through writings, monuments, archives, museums, etc (Hiu, 2017). Nepomuceno's satire, though in the platform of the performing arts, also inscribes the history of the Filipino's struggles "to cure folly and to punish evil" (Highet, 1962). His impressions of politicians leave us with a portrait which Highet calls "a beating heart within and which, when we look into its eyes, seems to be a reflection, distorted with pain, of our own soul."

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