





‘Make America Great Again’ and the Constitutive Loss of Nothingness

An American Nightmare

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When Did the World End?

‘Make America Great Again’ – Trump’s campaign slogan constitutes ‘America’ as a ‘world’. A ‘world’ in the sense implied by Alain Badiou in his *Logic of Worlds*, or at least in the way that Slavoj Žižek has taken from Badiou, the sense that contemporary capitalism is devoid of a ‘world’, a shared sense of meaning, and therefore requires a new master-signifier that could provide a form of ‘cognitive mapping’ (to borrow Fredric Jameson’s term) capable of bringing for us a sense of place and belonging.¹ ‘Make America Great Again’ implies its loss, which signifies its world already having ended. The end of the world and the loss of Trump’s ‘America’ is the world that has ended, which raises two questions: Which world has ended? and When did the world end?

The world that is Trump’s ‘America’ is plausibly the world of his youth: the world of the postwar compromise between capital and labour; the world of the Fordist social welfare state. It is precisely as a rhetorical object that this ‘America’ can become an empty signifier in the arsenal of Trump’s populist discourse. Empty signifiers matter to politics.² But as constitutive of a certain imaginary or fantasy that describes the lack at the heart of the present – the lacking ‘greatness’ – we might surmise that this world is the one that saw the rise of the North American suburban middle class – the world of the single-income nuclear family with the father himself playing the role of the ‘nucleus’. It was patriarchal family mass produced.

To be clear, it was the world of the white suburban middle class; the world of direct American imperialist interventions into the anti-colonialist

White nationalist march in Charlottesville, Virginia, 11 August 2017, marchers chanting ‘Jews will not replace us!’, image source, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/08/14/543418271/on-the-internet-everyone-knows-you-re-a-racist-twitter-account-ids-marchers>

1 Alain Badiou, *Logic of Worlds: Being and Event II*, Alberto Toscano, trans, Bloomsbury, New York, 2009; Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006, p 319; Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, *New Left Review*, vol 1, no 146, p 89

2 Ernesto Laclau, ‘Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?’, in Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, Verso, New York, 1996

and Communist struggles in Korea, Vietnam and Cuba; the world of the Cold War, and the fear and hysteria of possible MAD (mutually assured destruction) by nuclear annihilation. This was the kind of world whose phantasmatically nostalgic depiction is the stuff of popular culture imaginaries of the past twenty years, television dramas such as *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, 2007–2015) or films that mourn the lost masculine ideal, the premier example being *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), or even in music videos that innocuously mock the ideal of white suburban middle-class life, like Katy Perry's 'Chained to the Rhythm'. With nostalgic portrayals such as these, a 'nostalgia for the present',³ whose mourning of the potent father figure has become a sign of a lost masculinity that 'made America great', has only foreshadowed the nightmare 'America' that now breathes its return. When, then, did this world come to an end?

I would say its demise came in five pivotal moments, beginning with the 'event' of the 1960s: a transitional period that saw within the framework of the postwar class compromise the rise of the new social movements, such as second wave feminism and the civil rights movement. Their rise seemed to displace the white father figure as the nucleus of private domestic and public life. But the event of the sixties also saw a watershed cultural moment in the life of capitalism, itself developing, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, a 'new spirit' of itself that mirrored the rhizomatic and horizontal structure of the counterculture.⁴ This moment marked, simultaneously, the foreclosure of the (white) father and the beginnings of the destruction of the Fordist welfare state model, which was, in actuality, the result of capitalism's own diffusion of the foreclosure of the paternal metaphor.

The opportunities and failures of the 1960s, Fredric Jameson says, 'were inextricably intertwined, marked by the objective constraints and openings of a determinate historical situation'.⁵ The very contradictory nature of the sixties, and its place in the American cultural imaginary of the present – as a kind of 'nostalgia for the present' – makes it figure so prominently within the fantasy organisation which structures both the liberal and conservative ideologies of the present. The sixties, for Jameson, constitutes a unified field, of 'a properly dialectical process in which 'liberation' and domination are inextricably combined'.⁶

A second corollary moment came with the 'Volcker shock' of 6 October 1979, when US Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker began the process of raising nominal interest rates up to twenty per cent by 1981.⁷ This move sent a shock to labour unions and debtor countries that would pronounce the full instalment of neoliberalism, the dominant ideology today, first under Jimmy Carter, and then later with Reagan and Thatcher. The Volcker shock created new conditions for the reorganisation of the means of production and distribution, creating a new kind of 'flexible accumulation' that would later help to define the neoliberal penchant for 'deregulation'.⁸ This post-Fordist scenario of the 'freed' factory worker – the worker-become-entrepreneur (or now permanently precarious zero-contract worker) – has been ideologically curtailed by the aforementioned rhetoric of capitalism's new horizontalist spirit.

A third decisive moment was the demise of the Soviet Union and European Communism between the years 1989 and 1991, marking the end of the Cold War – and the so-called 'end of history'. But while global capitalism has been singing its triumphs ever since, even History's coroner,

3 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1991

4 Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Gregory Elliot, trans, Verso, New York, 2007

5 Fredric Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s', in Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory*, Verso, New York, p 483

6 *Ibid*, 513

7 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2005, p 23

8 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell, Malden, Massachusetts, 1989; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, Winchester, England, 2009, p 33

Francis Fukuyama, has had to redact his signature from the death certificate of the world.⁹ Globalisation, to everyone's surprise (save for a handful of orthodox Marxist political economists), has not brought forth the promised third way and pragmatic administration that was foreseen by the Clinton and Blair administrations; instead, it has descended into a never-ending War on Terror, with the Bush doctrine of endless war, and the raising of actual physical barriers, outdoor prisons and barricades preventing the free flow of people, while so-called 'artificial' barriers (such as tariffs) have been torn down to make way for the free flow of capital. It appears that our hopes of being ejected from the 'safe space' of the bunker were somewhat premature.

Fourth, there is of course that other coroner of History, Jean-François Lyotard, whose *Postmodern Condition* describes an 'incredulity towards metanarratives' caused by the transition in the technical basis of capitalism from manufacture and industry to knowledge, informational, communicative and service-based labour – hence, the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism – which has also seen a transformation in the devices that we use to communicate and debate in a seemingly digital public sphere. However, the utopia of the new online digital public sphere has rather become the basis for new forms of surveillance and control coded by nuggets of enjoyment, expressed viciously in the Twittersphere where everyone is permitted their 'voice', but nowhere do we find the arrival of anything resembling a consensus (democratic or otherwise).¹⁰

Finally, I would also add the publication of Deleuze and Guattari's book *Anti-Oedipus* to the list which pronounced on the side of the left the demise of the patriarchal mummy-daddy-me triadic relationship.¹¹ But as much as they show disdain for Freud's Oedipal triadic formula – of the neurotic on the couch who should apparently, for them, be displaced by the schizophrenic on the street – we must be reminded that it is the new capitalism that makes the traditional values of family obsolete, as Mark Fisher points out, exactly in the way Marx had expected. Nevertheless, the theme of *Anti-Oedipus* has now signalled the Father's full return in the ridiculously sublime character of Mr Trump, his name being the new master-signifier, the inverse side of the lost 'America', that now constitutes a new (lost) 'world'.

Strange as it seems, Trump's 'America' is a world upon which we gaze with contradictory and sometimes paradoxically nostalgic fervour – a world of tremendous productivity and social wealth in the developed first world of the West – a world of a kind of social democratic compromise, which was also largely productivist, masculinist and white. Is this not precisely the central political and cultural contradiction of the Fordist and welfare state utopia – that while it provided an idyllic dream world of mass culture for white America, it did this against the background nightmare of capitalist imperialist war, postcolonialist racism afar, domestic racism at home, the air raid scares of nuclear apocalypse and the chauvinism of patriarchal society. What are, or have been, the consequences of registering this loss, culturally?

The explanations for this loss are approached in at least two possible ways, at two poles of an extreme that departs from the (liberal) status quo. One is the historical materialist approach which tells us that the loss of this world is simply the result of the natural unfolding of capital, itself, the effect of its own deterritorialising processes, taking flight and

9 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Avon Books, New York, 1992; Portland Aristotle, 'The Rise of China Refutes "End of History Theory"', Francis Fukuyama Admits to a Shocked Powell's Books Audience', *The Oregonian*, 11 April 2011, http://blog.oregonlive.com/myoregon/2011/04/the_rise_of_china_refutes_end.html, accessed 24 April 2018

10 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, trans, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984

11 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R Lane, trans, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1983

landing wherever it is led by its pursuit for exponential profits – leaving nothing to commodify (other than the bitumen ‘fracked’ out of the earth, or the expropriated data of individuals who are tethered to the information communication systems that we all now rely upon for our distanced sociality). Otherwise, it can invent new needs that will, as they are absorbed by the social, allow it to continue its own path of self-revolutionising deterritorialisation in the interregnum of capital that can again bring us closer to the brink, waiting either to implode on its own devices or to crumble under the might of the proletariat. We confront a crossroad that emerged at the end of the sixties: either the violent return to a more hyper-laissez faire liberalism or a push forward towards Communism. Is the solution to the problems of post-Fordism a return to Fordism? Or do we charge ahead with a new ‘common sense’ or a sense of the Commons – a new Communism? Would *this* constitute a new ‘world’?

An Anti-Anti-Oedipus: Post-Fordism and the Return of the Obscene ‘Father’

This latter scenario is countered by a different narrative that wishes to bring back the productive and revolutionising powers of capital, paradoxically desiring the return of *both* the Fordist father figure of white patriarchal ‘America’ and the transformative power of capital that saw its foreclosure as the only way forward to save the system regardless of its disdain for tradition and family. This detail gives us an indication of the ways in which Western culture has registered the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist subjectivity.

Postmodernism may be the ‘cultural logic’ of late capitalism, but it is also, according to Mathias Nilges, the culture of Fordism in crisis.¹² If this is so, then maybe even what Fisher has dubbed ‘capitalist realism’ – the cynical acknowledgement that capitalism is the only game in town, that ‘there is no alternative’ – is the culture of post-Fordism in crisis.¹³ Life in post-Fordism, even though it appears motivated by pleasure and enjoyment, is of the kind that Fisher has described as ‘depressive hedonia’. Typically, depression is deemed to be anhedonic, where the individual is incapable of experiencing enjoyment. In depressive hedonia, however, the subject is incapable of doing anything but pursue enjoyment which does not return any kind of satisfaction but leaves the subject in a state of depression or guilt. The loss of satisfaction comes from the obligated pursuit of enjoyment resulting from sanctioned transgressions that are nowhere prohibited.

In David Fincher’s *Fight Club*, ‘the narrator’s problem is not repression by consumer capitalism but the ungratifying, hollow ‘freedoms’ it offers’.¹⁴ *Fight Club* shows that post-Fordist culture is one that has become ‘feminised’, which has become one of the bases for its rejection by the misogynistic and phallogocentric culture. In consequence, Fordism marks the idealised locus of pleasurable subjectivity as a result of its Oedipal structure [and] the loss of masculinity’.¹⁵ Post-Fordist capitalism has created a ‘crisis’ of masculinity.

The narrator in *Fight Club* struggles with the absence of repression – the figure of the absent father. His discontent comes from his confusion over his desire for the object of enjoyment and his desire for the obstacle

12 Mathias Nilges, ‘The Anti-Anti-Oedipus: Representing Post-Fordist Subjectivity’, *Mediations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group*, vol 23, no 2, 2008, p 30

13 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, op cit, p 33

14 Ibid, p 36

15 Ibid, p 61

that prevents his access to the enjoyment, since it is the obstacle that truly makes possible his enjoyment.¹⁶ If Fordism was marked by the modern antagonism with authority – the struggle with the father – post-Fordism is marked by the apparent absence of this antagonism. What we seem to desire is an obscene authority that we can transgress since it is only in such transgression that we can garner enjoyment.

The Constitutive Loss of Postmodern Capitalism

Ideological figurations within representational texts of our popular culture, like *Fight Club*, allow us to grasp the dimensions of our cultural fantasies. Let's take another look – against the new need for power and authority, the consumer culture also interpellates us as subjects of uninhibited pleasures. The television series *Mad Men* chronicles these other contradictions of the sixties – of 'the drive towards liberation amid the period's relentless sexism and racism, the aspiration for higher goods such as peace and love amid the culture's burgeoning commercialism, and the allure of "free love" amid egotism and coercion'.¹⁷ *Mad Men* represents 'a promise of liberation that captures the spirit of the decade and, at the same time, evokes ancient... aspirations [for redemption]'.¹⁸ How clever of its creators to represent the commodified field of liberation as an advertisement, for a series about advertisers. Advertising is our common ideology – advertising is the 'capitalist realism' that opposes itself to the socialist kind.¹⁹

'The triumph of advertising in the culture industry,' Adorno and Horkheimer tell us, 'is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them.'²⁰ The affective dimension that they describe is of the kind that Marcuse called 'repressive desublimation' – that is, 'Just as people know or feel that advertisements and political platforms must not be necessarily true or right, and yet hear and read them and even let themselves be guided by them, so they accept the traditional values and make them part of their mental equipment.'²¹ Ordinarily, we think of the sublimated object as the one whose very being is denoted by its prohibition, making it all the more desirable.²² The problem with consumer society is that it appears nowhere to repress our desires. Society obligates us to enjoy! But once the prohibition or the barrier is removed, the agalma (the hidden 'pull') contained in the desired object becomes desublimated and therefore loses its attractive, appetitive qualities. In repressive desublimation we find that the more we are told that our desired objects are in fact accessible, the more we feel (politically) 'repressed' since we find that our inability to act or inherently transgress – which is, itself, the source of our actual enjoyment – has been lost.²³ To protect itself from the desublimated qualities of the object of postmodern consumer capitalism, fetishism rather than repression becomes the operative mode of subjectivisation.

In fetishism, the subject disavows the object's impossible status in order to continue enjoying. The subject, constituted by a traumatic loss of the object, imagines that its 'recuperation' will somehow complete her. This loss is constitutive of the subject, but because of the reified social relationships of capitalism, the object's loss is deemed to be merely contingent, and its appetitive qualities are assumed to be located and accessible in the form

16 Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2016

17 Jane Barter, 'On Not Escaping Yourself: Jewish Conceptions of Memory, Time, and Redemption in *Mad Men*', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, vol 28, no 1, 2016, p 1

18 Ibid

19 Michael Schudson, 'Advertising as Capitalist Realism', in Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society*, Basic Books, New York, 1984

20 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, John Cumming, trans, Continuum, New York, 2000, p 167

21 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 1991, p 57

22 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (1959–1960)*, Jacques-Alain Miller, ed, Dennis Porter, trans, W W Norton, New York, 1997, pp 139–154

23 Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, Verso, New York, 1997, p 18; Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality*, Verso, New York, 1994, pp 54–55

of commodities.²⁴ The consumer can ‘see through’ the deceit of the culture industry, yet all the while feel compelled to keep buying its products, and thereby remain cynical about the possibility of finding satisfaction in the commodity. This is why cynicism and fetishism are structurally homologous – cynicism ‘is a mode of keeping alive the dream of successfully attaining the lost object while fetishistically denying one’s investment in this idea’. Cynical subjects ‘acknowledge the hopelessness of consumption while simultaneously consuming with as much hope as the most naïve consumer’.²⁵ The psychoanalytic conception of fetishism and the Marxist conception of the commodity fetish thus run in parallel with each other; as Žižek puts it, ‘in Marxism a fetish conceals the positive network of social relations [i.e. the exploitation of labour in the production of surplus value], whereas in Freud a fetish conceals the lack (‘castration’) around which the symbolic network is articulated’.²⁶ It is in this sense that capitalism ‘demands perversion from its subjects’.²⁷ Capitalism imposes a perverse subject position in order to continue quests of capitalist forms of consumption. But what happens when even the means of acquiring more goods gets lost? What happens, in short, when our wage packets are impacted by the weight of post-Fordist ‘lean’ production? Do we blame capital? Or is it the fault of some other?

The Theft of Enjoyment: ‘We Want Nothing Back!’

The fetishistic illusion of postmodern (consumer) capitalism is one where the loss of the object is seen as contingent and retrievable in an object of consumption; the nationalist fetish has it that our enjoyment has been stolen by the (racialised) other. Unlike the fetishistic consumer logic of capitalism, it is the other (the constitutive outsider) who is fetishised in the nationalist ideology. Imagining the other as the one who has stolen our enjoyment allows the nation to keep hidden the fact that the apparently stolen object of enjoyment never actually existed in the first place. What the fantasy of the other conceals ‘is the traumatic fact that *we never possessed what was allegedly stolen from us*’.²⁸ In doing so, the national myth conceals the real of an antagonism: the class struggle is displaced onto national tensions with the other. Trump’s narrative is a demagogue’s simple nationalist one that decries a lost ‘America’.

We arrive back at the twin contradictions of Trump’s ‘America’: it stands at the intersection of the capitalist fetish and the nationalist fetish. It sees only in its nostalgic Fordist return to the welfare state’s freedom of class compromise a possible accomplishment of its nationalist fantasy – the elimination of the nationalist’s *bête noire* fetish: the racialised other. Who stole ‘our’ enjoyment, they ask: ‘Mexicans’ (‘build that wall’ – real barriers are erected, artificial barriers are torn down)? ‘Islamists’? ‘Feminists’? The ‘Fake Media’? Only in Trump’s ‘America’ is a return to the Fordist utopia made possible by keeping alive the dream that never existed in the first place. In keeping this lack – this nothingness – alive, pursuing it by other means – that is, by maintaining it as a lack that can be occupied; that can be satisfied – it has realised what it had always already been: victim of American paranoia. The loss that is Trump’s ‘America’ is a loss of nothingness itself: the lack that is constitutive of desire, of which it is itself its own object cause – it is a tarrying with the

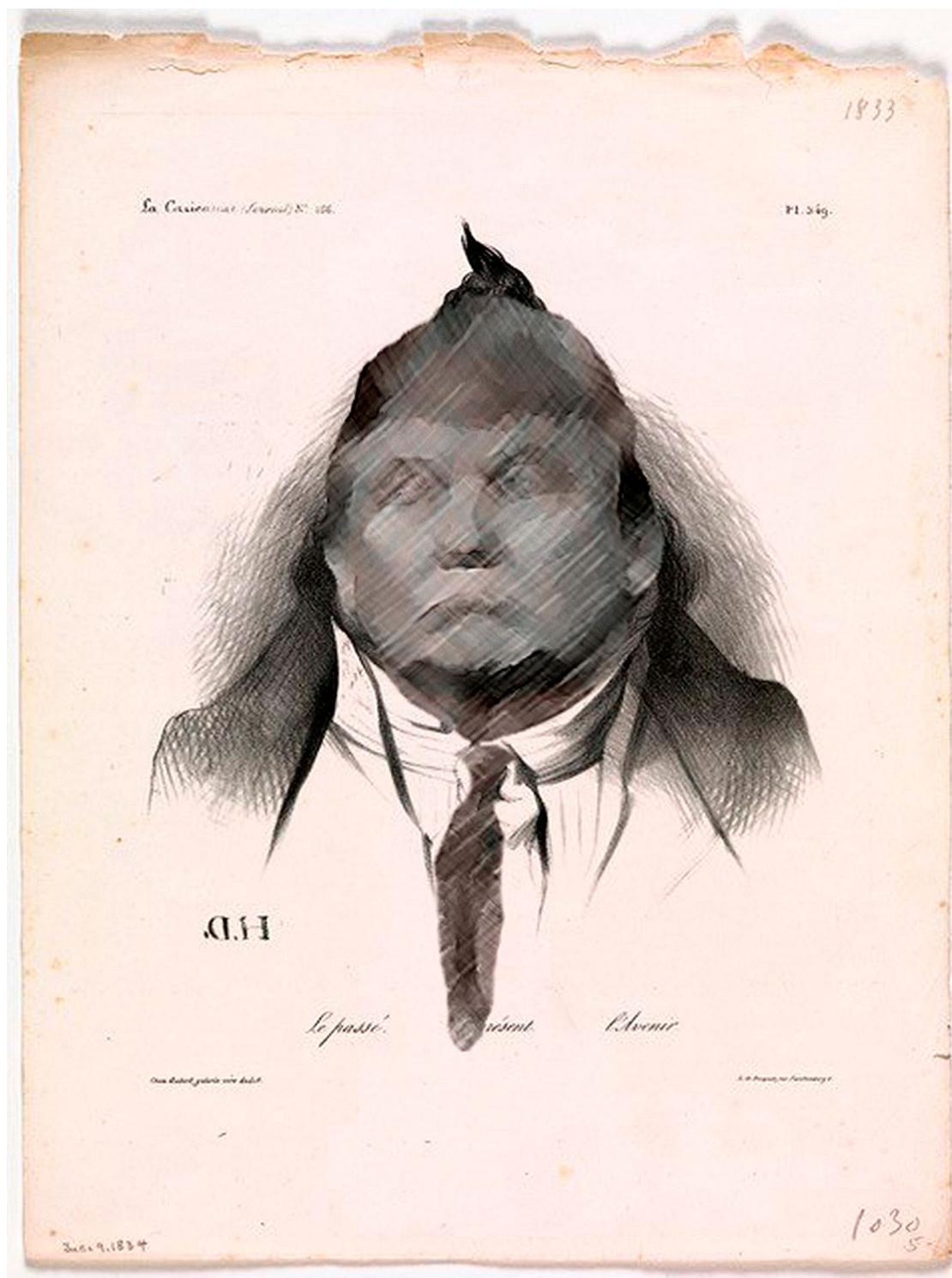
24 McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*, op cit, p 26

25 Todd McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2011, p 29

26 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, New York, 1989, p 49

27 Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan*, Verso, New York, 2015, p 150

28 *Ibid*, p 203



Gregory Sholette, *Daumier Trump*, 2016, (after, Honoré-Victorin Daumier, *Le passé - Le présent - L'avenir* [Past - Present - The Future], 9 January 1834), digital image, size variable, photo: courtesy of the artist

negative that wishes to render the spectral real of the fantasy of the white patriarchal sixties in the space of our shared symbolic universe. And what is that but the realisation of an American (wet) dream become a nightmare?

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