



The following, which takes the Trump impeachment hearings (represented by the photo above) as a starting point, was completed in December 2019, before the novel coronavirus pandemic. I have left it as written-- with only parenthetical flash-forwards to the pandemic world-- because of how uncannily the shadow of the pandemic has been cast *back* over it.

Winter 2019

1.

An 11/19 [New York Times](#) photo shows hotel executive and Trump-appointed U.S. ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland being led by one of his lawyers to his deposition before the preliminary House impeachment hearings.

As the accompanying article by Michelle Goldberg explains, lifelong Republican Sondland withdrew support from Trump in 2016, citing clashes in "personal beliefs and values on so many levels," but when Trump was elected, he "donated \$1 million to his inauguration to buy himself an ambassadorship, and then worked slavishly for the president's approval," conspiring to pressure Ukraine into announcing that they were investigating Trump's rivals.

The article turns on a rhetorical question: "Sure, people sell their souls all the time — but why for something as small as a chance to serve a man whose depravity Sondland himself once

recognized?" The question sets up Goldberg's conclusion: "That's the thing about deals with the devil. You get what you want, and then it ruins you." This is the dynamic that interests me.

The photo seems to *show* why Sondland did it. He looks like he's loving being the center of attention, the eye of a bustling storm of lawyers and journalists. The look of anxious attention on the lawyer's face sets off Sondland's basking-in-the-attention (*hi mom!*), riding-the-wave look as he allows himself to be steered along.

This is what Sondland bought with his million-dollar donation: his moment on the historical stage. This is recognition that, no matter how much power and money you wield, you can't quite get as a hotel executive. The fact that this is more of a perp walk than a tickertape parade does not detract from it: that's just the dynamical structure of the moment he's riding.

This is why the photo has an apocalyptic feel to me, along with the lowering clouds and the chaos of lawyers, journalists and camera crews that help give it a giddy, fiddling-while-Rome-burns, last-helicopter-out-of-the-war-zone vibe.

An apocalypse reveals the contradictions at the heart of a historical formation that is shaped around them but cannot withstand their revelation. As Hegel quipped, "the owl of Minerva flies at twilight." The moment a formation comes fully into its own is also its annihilation. The moment could be a transformative rather than a purely destructive one if the system in which it occurs is capable of transformation, but such a transformation would be radical enough that the system in question might not be said to *survive* it.

This is where we are.

The devil, in Goldberg's deal-with-the-devil scenario, is of course Donald Trump, and many of his associates have become subject to its "you get what you want, and then it ruins you" logic. But the devil is also subject to the same logic. As much as he is an arch-villainous master, he is the most abject loser. As Milton's Satan puts it: "wherever I am, there is hell / Me miserable! which way shall I fly / Infinite wrath and infinite despair? / Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell."

Philosopher Judith Butler explores this logic by considering speculations that "Trump is either carrying out a very public suicide or exhibiting some weird genius for survival" and by showing how it must be *both*. If you crave power that can only be generated by flaunting laws and ethics, then you must keep putting yourself into the same predicament, acting out what Freud called the *repetition compulsion* or *Death Drive*: "The shameful 'end' is what he fends off and solicits at the same time: getting shamed is not what he wants, yet he moves compulsively in that direction." Trump "will try to destroy in the course of being destroyed. But for him it will be the scene of a lifetime, a raging battle to determine who delivers the final judgment against whom." Every situation is a fight for existential survival.

While the precise logic and mechanisms of the repetition compulsion are debatable, its operation is most evident in behaviors characterized by repetitive scriptedness. For Trump, these behaviors include the flouting of laws and ethics, the doubling down when called out, bullying

while casting oneself as the victim, and accusing one's opponents of what one is blatantly guilty. These don't differ much from run-of-the-mill ways by which people act out defensive defiance, but the scripted repetition-- daily, hourly-- of what seem to be a small repertoire of defenses, and the stark elegance of these ploys make them special markers of pathology.

The fact that Trump engaged in corruption with Ukraine in the attempt to realize the fantasy that his opponent engaged in corruption with Ukraine is telling. The mechanistic elegance of these reversals and otherings marks the grip of psychopathology.

The strategy of "doubling down" was called a *martingale* in 18th-century France. The idea is that, if a gambler betting on a coin toss doubles his bet after each loss, his first win will recoup all previous losses. This makes winning seem like a sure thing, but in practice, the exponential growth in the stakes will bankrupt you the first time the bet gets too large to cover. Finding someone to bail you out-- as capitalists do-- only prolongs the inevitable reckoning and makes it more dramatic. This scenario captures some of the mechanicity, escalation, and survival/suicide dynamic of the repetition compulsion as a behavior-driving algorithm.

It is easy to speculate about ways in which Trump must have been shamed and rejected as a child-- and that these must be as extreme and thoroughgoing as the ways in which he was entitled and empowered. It is almost too easy to see how the deficit of validation from a cruel father would render him so regressed, so admiring of, and so easily used by authoritarian strongmen like Putin and Erdogan. But this is not about personal psychology. Butler applies her observations not to Trump *per se* but to what she calls "the psychic field we call 'Trump.'"

The term *psychic field* (calling it a *psychological field* might be less open to misreading) could be described as shorthand for the ways in which personal psychology resonates with larger social and historical formations; it's what starts coming into focus when you ask *who identifies with Trump, and how does this resonance happen?* It's related to what cultural theorist Raymond Williams called a "structure of feeling": an emotional and cognitive orientation to the world specific to a particular group, time, and place. For Williams, structures of feeling are especially definitive during the decline of social and economic formations and the emergence of others: for those who feel their power slipping away or in the ascendancy. Psychic fields and structures of feeling connect individual psyches and family dynamics with historical formations such as class, race, gender, nation. At any moment there are particular ways in which these resonate or line up. These might be points of particular stability (where an upholstery button anchors the fabric to the structure underneath) or of particular instability (fractures along which the system is coming apart and new structures may be emerging) *or both*: stuck points along the faultline that build tension for the big reckoning to come.

White masculinity is built on this faultline. As Bob Dylan put it, "if the bible is right, the whole world will explode; I've been trying to get as far away from myself as I can."

To be at once entitled and empowered-- *and* silenced, shamed, or rendered invisible-- is the recipe for toxic whiteness and masculinity.

If you are one of those who feel that compassion for the entitled and empowered will blunt the force of your judgment and anger and will compromise holding them responsible, then consider how your own judgment and anger are being *manufactured* to fuel "the psychic field we call 'Trump.'"

2.

The classic *primal scene* of shaming in individual psychology is the child being caught masturbating. A primal scene of psychological conflict, contradiction and trauma formative for the psyche is not, however, its origin. It is an *epicenter*: the place onto which a dynamic of shaming thoroughly structured into a family system is displaced and condensed. The scene itself-- as stark as it may be-- both makes visible *and conceals* conflict and existential negation too stark and too thoroughgoing to be admitted into consciousness. The same seems to apply to the future apotheosis/apocalypse in which the system is imagined both to come into its own and destroy itself. This *ultimate scene*-- Butler's "scene of a lifetime"-- might be added to the psychopathological lexicon.

An obvious place to start would be the ultimate scene of the cold war era-- the scene of modernity's death drive to mutually assured destruction. Such a scene is nicely portrayed in the apocalyptic climax of the film Dr. Strangelove: Major Kong whoops and waves his cowboy hat as he rides the armageddon-triggering nuclear warhead down from his B-52, while, back in the War Room, General Turgidson and Dr. Strangelove indulge their own kinds of apocalyptic glee.



But the scene of *triumphant suicide* is coextensive with modernity. In 1818, a teenager named Mary Shelley wrote the book on toxic masculinity: the futile attempts by the nameless monster to be validated by the maker/father who has rejected him turn to murderous rage for mutual destruction. Having completed his flailing-at-first but then increasingly methodical murderous mission and driven Frankenstein to his death, the monster looks forward only to the moment in which "I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly and exult in the agony of the torturing flames."

The white, French protagonist in Camus's 1942 novel The Stranger, returning to a dissociated state as he awaits execution for his senseless hate-crime murder of an Arab, realizes only "that I'd been happy, and that I was happy still" but hopes "that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration."

Here in the latter days of modernity, the logic of triumphant suicide is enacted by mass shooters and terrorists (though here, belatedly, we can also recognize those who act out their fantasy of the coronavirus as a conspiracy and a personal affront).

It gets worse. According to Walter Benjamin, humankind's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic." Mark Fisher attributes to cultural theorists Frederick Jameson and Slavoj Žižek the further observation that, as the popularity of apocalyptic fantasies shows, "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." This way of putting it is itself a bit jaded. After all, "kissing everything goodbye" in fantasy might turn out to be good emotional preparation for the revolutionary task ahead. To put this in a less depressive and more activist way: we have gotten to the point where failing to work for the end of capitalism-- even if one cannot fully imagine it-- means bringing on apocalypse.

Will climate change in its catastrophic repercussions (and, we can add, waves of pandemics) jeopardize capitalism, or will capitalism manage to "stay ahead of the curve" via what Naomi Klein called the *shock doctrine*, exploiting proliferating crises as opportunities for profit and power consolidation? Genius or suicide? This is no simple fork in the road. Capitalism and sustained human life will be up for grabs in hundreds of different ways at every juncture, every day. It is as true now as it was when Benjamin, with the Nazis starting to close in around him, wrote that "the enemy has not ceased to be victorious." Above all, you will be challenged to find practices to sustain your own well-being that serve rather than oppose those that will sustain the well-being of the heterogeneous ecosystems to which you belong.

Greta Thunberg has called out what is usually called "hope" in the face of climate change as, more often than not, a form of denial or dissociation-- a way of feeling good enough to go about business as usual. People differ as to how much stoic fatalism and even how much simple realism is conducive to action. Tests have shown that depressives are more realistic when confronted with situations and asked to assess possible outcomes, but-- almost by definition-- these tests are skewed to situations in which the test subjects themselves cannot alter the range of outcomes.

As an old person, I can testify that recognizing that it's much worse-- and much later-- than you think does not leave you only the options of defiantly, heroically or even tragically rejecting your fate (the do-not-go-gentle path), or accepting it with resignation-- or, as is often said, philosophically. What gets in the way of coming to grips with where we are-- emotionally, intellectually, and politically-- is the opposition of defiance and acceptance in the first place-- and of fate and choice, at least in the Western paradigm. Embracing fate is the first step of finding what the real options and freedoms are.

Capitalism will end. Life on earth will end. But when, and how? And which one first?

Coming to terms with climate change means understanding modernity's vision of capitalist individuality, rationality and prosperity as a deal with the devil in which "you get what you want, and then it ruins you." It is not that capitalist modernity fails, but that its *success* is failure. Because climate change is a systemic phenomenon stretching out across the planet and across the span of decades and centuries, it is hard to find a supremely representative ultimate scene-- but for the same reasons, such scenes are everywhere.

In one viral photo, golfers play through in the foreground while a forested mountainside is on fire behind them.



In George Miller's 2015 film Fury Road, a desertified, post-apocalyptic Australia is ruled by the fascist warlord Immortan Joe via his control of water. Joe is ensconced at his Citadel, surrounded by his War Boys with their fleet of monster trucks and other gothically modified vehicles. The War Boys live to serve Immortan Joe and worship the internal combustion engine as a symbol of power, ensuring that their lives will be dedicated to finding and raiding sources of gasoline, their perpetual thirst. When Furiosa is sent to find gas, she goes rogue, rescuing the enslaved young brides of Immortan Joe and driving them across the wasteland, pursued by Immortan Joe and his fleet. When she finds in ruins the community of wise warrior women with whom she had hoped to seek refuge, she and the remaining wise women have no choice but to bring the fight back to the Citadel. On the way, they manage to kill Immortan Joe. They return and release the water to the people; Furiosa is poised to be the new leader.

The film is a generic tour-de-force: one long chase scene, into the desert for half the film and, for the second half, back to the Citadel. On the way back, Nux, the most gung-ho of the War Boys, is captured by Furiosa and the brides. Despondent in his failure to serve Immortan Joe, he is comforted by the brides and, in the process, seems to realize that the feminine/feminist harem and "holding environment" he has fallen into is a hell of a lot better than the toxic masculinist and violent Darwinian nightmare he has fallen out with.

Is it possible to have progressive apocalyptic and postapocalyptic myths and fantasies? And can they contain seeds of political possibility? I think so.



3.

If the blaze of glory is the ultimate scene for the narcissist and paranoiac, then for the depressive, the ultimate scene is *dying alone*-- or in Japanese, *kodokushi*, the lonely death. Like public shame, dying alone has always, for us social animals, been among the greatest fears, often deeper even than the fear of death itself.



Caption: "Miyu Kojima creates miniature scenes based on Tokyo apartments her company has cleaned after solitary deaths" ([Guardian](#) online, 6/19/19, "Dioramas of death: cleaner recreates rooms where people died alone.")

The public shame-- but, at the same time, spectacular recognition-- that the narcissist paradoxically defies *and invites*-- has a kind of opposite in the nonrecognition that the depressive ("too proud to seek help") escapes *and embraces*, unto death.

Capitalist modernity, especially now in its "late" phase, is conducive to both.

We have even found a scientific way of writing these scenarios into the fates that physicists imagine for the universe: a hot and violent implosion driven by gravity (a *Big Crunch*) or a drifting apart into nothingness, driven by dark energy (sometimes called the *Big Chill*)-- triumphant suicide or *kodokushi*, bang or whimper.

How is it that the repetition compulsion or Death Drive, which Freud understood as applying to individual psyches, might even apply at the level of the history of humans on the planetary or even cosmic scale, where complex sets of mostly very different mechanisms are at work? Is it something more than pure projection or mere metaphor?

The long answer starts by recognizing that systems (like psychic fields and structures of feeling) work by partially synching radically different realms and scales-- and that realms and scales are understood better as products of systems rather than vice versa. Only meticulous study of the chains of influence in multiple directions (say, among psyches, societies, and ecosystems) can enable intelligent local interventions.

A shorter and more schematic answer is that, for Freud, the individual psyche is a special case of what we now understand as the necessarily precarious state of complex systems generally-- and especially of living things and their tendency-- like spinning tops, to come inevitably to rest, or steaming cups of coffee that, after a finite interval of swirlings, come to sit quietly-- and forever-- at room temperature. The spinning and swirling-- all the melodrama and convulsive choreographies of living things and their ecosystems-- are elaborations of the arc all systems trace: the leap of a fish from the water, let's say-- its moment in the sun-- if not prolonged then at least is embellished by its wriggings and flappings-- just as, for the psyche, the pleasure principle and reality principle create new detours in the death drive-- detours that shape our path.

For me, the question is not whether Freud discovered a real family resemblance among complex systems or merely found a compelling metaphor between otherwise unrelated realms. It is clear to me, anyway, that systems logic is how complex systems think about fellow complex systems, and that "mere metaphor" is at least the trailhead of a path that converges with the path of scientific inquiry. On the other hand, what's wrong is Freud's reductive understanding of thermodynamics as the inevitable tendency to revert back to a condition of inorganic stasis. It's the same thing that's wrong with the arc of arousal and relief by which Freud mapped the dynamics of pleasure, where arousal is unpleasure and relief is a kind of stasis. The argument may be complex, but you can get the idea of how the paradigm begins to come apart if you'd agree that arousal isn't exactly unpleasure and relief isn't exactly stasis.

To be fair, Freud tuned the resonances between psychoanalysis and physics before the discovery that the universe is expanding, before the postulations of dark energy and dark matter, and before the still-nascent development of quantum thermodynamics, to name a few game-changers. Psychoanalysis got it wrong? Blame physics.

The resting state of things is not stasis-- or you might say, it's exactly *not exactly* stasis.

At the same time, there is no escaping the logic of the death drive because no complex system is eternal; our ongoing task is to stave off collapse-- or to put it in a less reactionary way, we surf on our own dissipation. The idea is to surf in the curl of the wave and to extend the ride as long as possible. Capitalism as a system is unsustainable, not only because it's riven with internal contradictions, but because growth-based economy is a martingale.

4.

Today (Dec. 12, 2019), the New York Times informs me that anti-semitic Donald Trump has issued an executive order against anti-semitism in a way that, by pitting Jews against each other, has virulent anti-semitic force. It is disturbing that yesterday's disturbing stories have already disappeared from the news cycle: two members of the Black Hebrew Israelite sect murdered Jews in a kosher market in Jersey City. The Department of Justice's investigation of the FBI's investigation of Donald Trump shows that the FBI did not act vindictively but nonetheless mishandled the case, thus achieving the political motives of the vindictive meta-investigation, which itself goes uninvestigated.

These are not even the worst stories, only a few with the kind of meta-ironies that twist language to its breaking point.

I think of Yeats, who saw storm clouds spiraling in 1920: "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." And Auden, in 1939, "uncertain and afraid / As the clever hopes expire / Of a low dishonest decade" and "Waves of anger and fear / Circulate over the bright / And darkened lands of the earth."

This is where we are, again.

Last night I dreamed my best friend died. I was eating, and crying uncontrollably. Food was falling out of my mouth, and I was trying in vain to cover my face so that her young son would not see me. Later-- in waking life-- my friend called me as she was walking through the park. I told her the dream, and she said, *whatever the dream was about, it was a real grief event for you.* I thought *yes, she's right, and she has such clarity and sweetness today.* She said her watchword for 2020 was going to be *power*, which I found heartening. Throughout the conversation I could hear her steady footsteps, crunching through fallen leaves, and I thought of Blake's proverb, "Drive your cart and plow over the bones of the dead."

In three days I would be leaving Brooklyn for two weeks in Beijing. I'm not a list-maker, but this is the point where low-level anxiety about leaving something important undone-- enhanced by how often something else occurs to me that I must do-- drives me to make a list. It is the first day I don't have to be on campus-- fortuitously, because I have to be at home to sign for a package. Lunchtime arrives and I find that I have only a ragtag assortment of half-eaten leftovers. Because I can't leave the apartment, I will have to make a meal of what I have on hand, but fortuitously, this serves the mandate to use up all perishable items before I leave. Fortuitously, again, the items seem to combine to make a perfect little meal-- three small tortillas, a few bits of roast pork, the very end of a wedge of cheese, half an apple, and two cookies. The meal strikes me as an answer to the question posed by Robert Frost's oven bird: "what to make of a diminished thing." And finally, fortuitously, this all comes as a kind of punchline to my meditation on sustainability. All the fortuitousnesses seem to converge. It is the most mundane of miracles, which I take as a sign that I'm on the right path. Half an apple, two cookies, three days, four fortuitousnesses.

"Leave nothing on the table": the phrase had occurred to me a few days before when talking on the phone with an old friend who had just lost his longtime love to cancer. Even in sorrow, he said, he felt lightened and lifted by having left no part of their love undone, unsaid. I thought of my own longtime love.

"A thousand kisses deep" (as Leonard Cohen put it), we are gleaners, finding pleasures and surprises in new and even more mundane places, often smaller and subtler, sometimes sweeter. "Summer's gone, but a lot goes on forever."

This is also where we are.

There is a singer everyone has heard,

Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
He says the early petal-fall is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
On sunny days a moment overcast;
And comes that other fall we name the fall.
He says the highway dust is over all.
The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

(Now in Spring 2020, in the first wave of the pandemic, I'm struck by how uncannily the question of *what to make of a diminished thing* sets up the problem of life under lockdown.)