

Pomo POTUS, or how Caitlyn Jenner deconstructs democracy

BY STASH LUCZKIW

As if to underscore the demise of ideologies, a presidential campaign focused on self-aggrandizement and character assassination has brought a new kind of leader to power in the United States.

A young girl prays beside two Santas at a "Thank You Tour" rally for Donald Trump at the Giant Center in Hershey, Pennsylvania, December 15, 2016.

When Donald Trump takes the oath of office on January 20 he will truly be the first post-modern president of the United States. What exactly does that mean? Well, it means many things tangentially – but not quite anything exactly. That's because the very notion of "postmodern," almost by definition, defies the categorical certainties the modern world has instilled in us.

In the broadest sense, postmodern denotes an epoch and zeitgeist that no longer applies to the modern world, that has superseded it. And by "modern" world let's mean that confluence of ideas and events that sprang from the Renaissance in Europe and led to the Enlightenment, empirical learning and scientific method, the age of exploration and the rise of nation-states, the Industrial Revolution, liberal democracy, capitalism and its communist antithesis.

In his 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition*, French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard simplifies his definition of "postmodern" to the extreme as "an incredulity toward metanarratives." In other words, the postmodern mindset implies a general skepticism with regard to the grand narratives and theories that attempt to comprehensively explain the world around us; and this skepticism arises as a direct result of a multiplicity of perspectives.

The United States today is unquestionably a multicultural space. Whether or not it should be and the degree to which various cultures should be weighted in importance is up to debate; but to deny the "fact" of its multiculturalism would be to engage in a sort of post-modern sophism that would attempt – disingenuously – to deconstruct the notions of culture and multi-

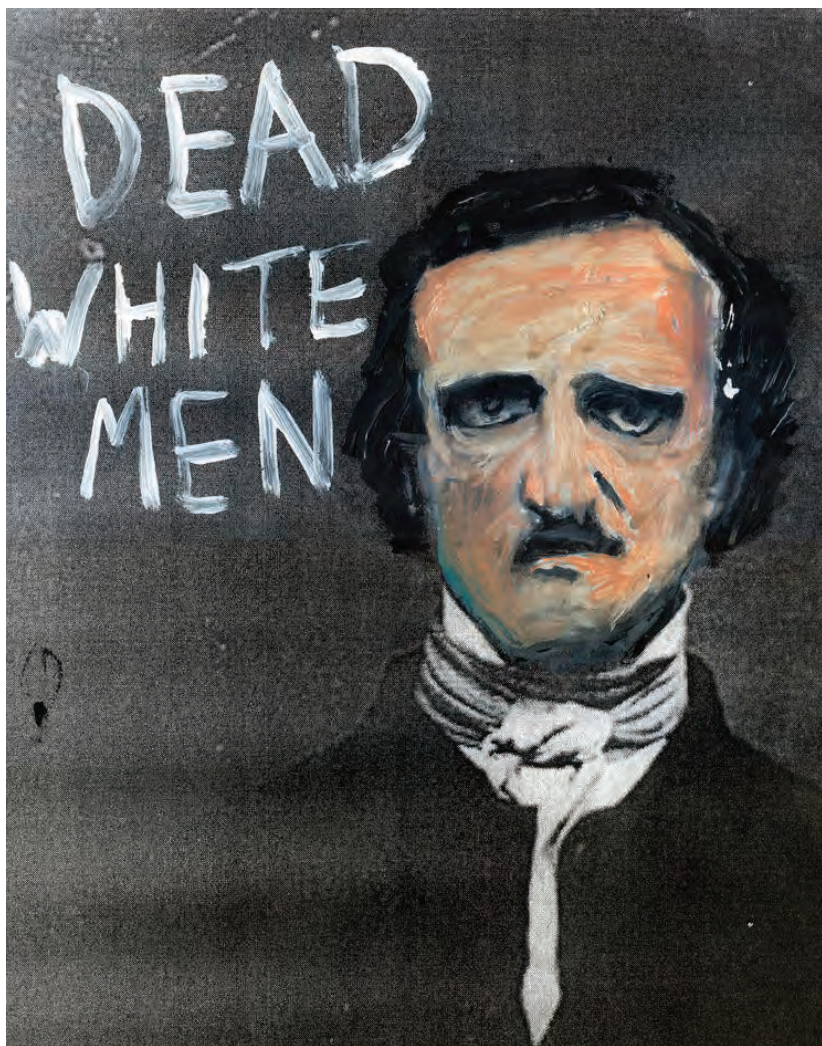
plicity. America was founded upon European principles – i.e., a refined braiding of Greek philosophy, Roman law and Judeo-Christian ethics – which literally swept away an indigenous population deemed by early colonists to be primitive and inferior. Moreover, the importation of African slave labor since the Americas were first colonized had endowed the US with a distinctive cultural vein that has seduced the world during the last century. Indeed, black culture – jazz, blues and all their derivatives – expresses the soul of America, and the rhythms of that soul have done as much for propagating a globalist culture as have any number of multinational corporations.

Yet Trump will be taking office in the context of an American society that has for decades been buffeted by culture wars. University campuses have decried the predominance of "dead white males" on the syllabus. Gender studies departments have given voice to homosexuals and transsexuals in academic circles. Blacks and Native Americans have raised awareness to their tragic history. And the White House has for the past eight years hosted a first lady whose not too distant ancestors were slaves, deemed an inferior race by the descendents of Europeans who migrated across an ocean to settle a continent already populated by "savages" and establish the world's preeminent power.

In hindsight, it is obvious that the American experiment was fated to become the garden in which the postmodern vine bore all its rhizomatic fruit, serving to undermine the deep roots of European culture. (The rhizome metaphor for illustrating the multiplicity and horizontality of postmodern culture was elaborated to great effect in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's seminal 1980 work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.)

Trump's victory has been interpreted as a reaction to this rhizomatic cultural drift; his call to "make America great again" seen as an attempt to turn back the clock to when tough white men imposed America's





A portrait of Edgar Allan Poe, reworked by British artist Panzer Division John Candy, intended to poke fun at the trend in American schools to diversify the literary canon with figures other than “dead white men.”

will onto anyone it came into contact with. But that would be too facile an interpretation. Trump himself—especially his rise to prominence—is actually an outgrowth of the fluid and volatile canvas of ideas that have come to characterize the postmodern world.

The most obvious manifestation of Trump’s postmodern sensibility springs from his rather slippery grasp of the facts and his ability to weasel through the gaps between factual obstacles arrayed against him. Postmodern philosophy is inherently relativistic. Truth is contingent on the language with which it is expressed. And since languages evolve within a given cultural context, any expression of truth must also be contingent on that cultural context. Fact-checkers had a bonanza with Trump throughout the election campaign, calling him out on one egregious whopper after another. But it didn’t seem to matter much. It was as if many voters implicitly understood that political campaigns are contests in rhetoric, and that hyperbole,

character assassination and outright lies are just some of the most effective weapons in the politician’s arsenal. What this reflects is not so much Trump’s unscrupulousness as the fact that the American electorate has grown inured, if not cynical to the spectacle of presidential politics.

In general, a postmodern sensibility tends to eschew defenses of absolute truth. There very well might be some absolute truth out there, but since it is usually expressed in language, one would get bogged down in various linguistic and epistemological morasses before even approaching any sought-after alethic vistas. Perhaps the only language deemed universal enough to convincingly argue for an absolute truth is mathematical language and the various laws of nature expressed in such terms. This has certainly been the trend in the post-Enlightenment world, during which scientific theories have often been treated as gospel law. But only among educated laymen: specialized scientists have long been aware of the astonishing rate at which theories are superseded with the introduction of previously unknown variables. The strange paradoxes of quantum mechanics with respect to classical Newtonian physics is just the most widely publicized; but in every field, from genetics to astrophysics, theories are based less on notions of absolute truth than on normative truth, or extreme plausibility.

Here too, Trump seems to intuitively grasp and apply what many other politicians have labored to come to grips with: namely, who you are, your very essence, is contingent on who is observing you. Like Schrödinger’s cat, both dead and alive until its box is opened and observed, Trump can be anything as long as he is relegated to the confines of the average American’s mind or Facebook newsfeed—anything from a knight in zircon-encrusted Kevlar to a copper-toned denizen of Alec Baldwin’s bowels. With his red “Make America Great Again” baseball cap stumping in West Virginia he is a climate-change denying champion of the working class, promising to bring coalmining jobs back to Appalachia. But in the onyx glass, gilt and pink marble Trump Tower—soon to become White House North, or simply the Black Tower—he is the general among captains of industry. If before he was just a celebrity billionaire struggling to stay in the top one hundred of the Forbes list of wealthiest Americans, now Trump is the grand poobah of America’s loyal order of Wall Street plutocrats.

If anything has become apparent from Trump’s campaign it is the fact that he is a consummate pragmatist. Although certainly given to flights of demagoguery, he doesn’t seem to have an ideological bone in his body. His only stated ideology is “America first.” And as he pursues his policies, it should come as no surprise if he were to switch alliances and backtrack on previous pronouncements—as long as they achieve some



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goal that serves what he perceives as the country's interests. (His own personal interests, it would be safe to assume, have now been securely welded into the country's.) By making America "great" Trump means to reestablish American power to the extent that it can dictate the economic and geopolitical terms in any negotiation with other nations. Power – economic and military – are equated with greatness. But rather than achieving that power by imposing his will through moral suasion, Trump's career as a businessman will incline him to work transactionally: he will cut a deal – even if it undermines some conviction he once rallied behind.

In a postmodern America bereft of any transcendent moral law as conceived by its Deist founding fathers – where truth is a social construct contingent on cultural factors, and culture, like the evolution of species, is determined by a sort of natural selection and random mutations absent any teleology – power is what counts. Power, unadorned by the furbelows of humble earnestness and pious altruism, is the purest expression of greatness. And in the context of realpolitik, earnestness and piety are often deleterious, weaknesses to be taken advantage of by the gathering threats of a multipolar world. So when the commander-in-chief of history's most formidable military power projects such virtues, it is interpreted as disingenuous. From the outcome of the election it appears that Americans sense this intuitively. Trump may be an in-

veterate bullshit artist, but bullshit is one of the politician's most effective weapons, and he wielded it with little pretence that it was anything but bullshit. His opponent, on the other hand, was deemed by too many Americans – particularly among the working classes weary of social justice warriors' relentless sanctimony – as simply full of shit.

So how will Trump govern? Classical categories of governing date as far back as Plato's *Republic*, which also contains some very astute observations on the nature of democracy. Plato describes five types of governing regimes: aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and tyranny. Aristocracy is essentially the rule of those most qualified to rule. Almost inevitably, aristocracy will tend to degenerate into timocracy, or the rule of those who value power and honor. Once government is conducted by those less than worthy, it tends to degenerate further into oligarchy, in which a select group rules through patronage and cronyism. Eventually oligarchy evolves into democracy when the masses demand their fair share of power.

But democracy for Plato was by no means intrinsically good. He describes it as a state in which "there is freedom and plainness of speech, and every man does what is right in his own eyes, and has his own way of life." Yet he also depicts the state as a network of competing institutions, "like a bazaar at which you can buy anything... like a piece of embroidery of which the colors and figures are the manners of men." Ultimate-

A hut made of straw to look like the hair of Donald Trump in Cleveland, Ohio, July 19, 2016.



LARRY BUSCA/GETTY IMAGES FOR GLAMOUR

Caitlyn Jenner speaks onstage at the Glamour Awards in New York City, where he won Woman of the Year, November 9, 2015.

ly democracy is “a pleasing, lawless sort of government, distributing equality to equals and unequals alike... The son is on a level with his father, he having no respect or reverence for either of his parents... The excess of liberty, whether in states or individuals, seems only to pass into excess of slavery... And so tyranny naturally arises out of democracy.”

A handful of Trump’s critics have gotten significant mileage out of Plato’s warnings with respect to how democracy degenerates into tyranny. But of course Plato was writing in the context of the ancient Greek world, in which the “polis” meant something very different from the modern nation-state. In fact, one could argue that today’s United States corresponds in some manner to each of these five regimes, with its increasingly bewildering weave of meritocracy, cronyism and tyranny of the masses. Yet it is this very fluidity of interpretation that undermines the grand narrative of American democracy: that a “Great America” must serve as a beacon for the rest of the world. The erosion of this grand narrative is a glaring symptom of postmodernity.

Whether or not Trump succeeds in “making America great again” is irrelevant – not to mention impossible to quantify. His rise to power was like flotsam washing up on a beach. The waves that brought him there sprang from a maelstrom of contradictions roiling within post-industrial Western culture. Over the

course of a long brutal election campaign, all the other debris had been either pulled back out to sea or buried in the sand. Trump was the last man standing, and he stood tall enough to look like the master of his own destiny. But he won the election by deftly riding the turbulent currents of a transitioning society.

Sixteen years into the 21st century the Industrial Revolution has given way to the Information Revolution; our metaphors of human beings as machines have given way to human beings as biological computer devices acting according to complex software programs, all interconnected in a web of information. The President-elect relies less and less on press releases and massaging relationships with the Fourth Estate. With a few deft tweets he can circumvent an expensive and antagonistic informational superstructure while basking in a simulacrum of direct democracy. Trump seems to have popped the filters off the traditional media, which once served as the gatekeeper and guardian of factual truth.

But in a world where factual truth must compete with political and poetic truth – all of which travel at the speed of light in a relentless 24-hour news cycle – the gatekeepers have lost credibility like a hunting dog distracted by an avalanche of tennis balls keeping him from honing in on the real prey.

The media’s addiction to frivolous distraction is in



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itself symptomatic of the zeitgeist. To wit, the event that could arguably be interpreted as a cultural watershed in Trump's march to victory (an event he had nothing to do with and hardly even commented upon): In May, shortly before the national conventions, President Barack Obama issued an executive order requiring every public school district in the United States to allow transgender students to use the bathrooms that match the gender identity they have chosen. With a war raging in Syria, and criticism at home about a weak recovery, the administration chose to spend hard-earned political capital on a fringe issue whose primary significance was that it exalted subjective interpretation of an individual's essence above scientific fact – which, of course, is the modern world's most reliable barometer of truth.

Several months earlier Caitlyn Jenner (the erstwhile Bruce) won Glamour magazine's Woman of the Year Award. A former Olympic *men's* decathlon champion – still endowed with a Y chromosome and a penis – was deemed *woman* of the year. Moreover, the fact that he had undergone numerous surgeries to shave down various parts of his body and ingested hormones to augment others, all the while still undecided about definitively castrating himself, had earned him/her the Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly's Arthur Ashe Courage Award.

These events, in the wake of a Supreme Court decision to recognize the legality of same-sex marriage, blew all common sense ideas about natural law out of the water. Subjectivity and self-identification had won the day.

Plato had no category for a government which rested upon supremacy of the self, but that's probably because the very idea of individual self, abstracted from the polis, was a later development. In any case, it is only fitting that a society in which the self is supreme should have a self-absorbed narcissist as its supreme leader. Whether Trump will fit that bill remains to be seen. So far, his cabinet choices indicate that one can safely assume the reigning plutocracy is in no danger. In fact, it will probably flourish. But Trump's revolution has already happened in the ether that connects the binary processes behind our computer devices and our minds. The Donald is merely a glitzy emblem of what we have become.

A gender neutral sign outside a bathroom at Oval Park Grill in Durham, North Carolina.

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