



Trump's Pleasure. Or, The Politics of Jouissance. Psycho-Philosophical Essay

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Abstract

This text analyses the main traits of the specific “*Trumpian jouissance*” which is the driving force behind both the U.S. president’s public attractiveness and ambiguity. Donald John Trump’s political behaviour is characterised by a rather unique form of intense, transgressive pleasure called *jouissance*, which transcends normal limits and fuels his unpredictable actions, impacting both domestic and international politics. The phenomenon of *jouissance* explains both his appeal to millions and the risks posed by his leadership style. The text integrates a variety of classical and comparative sources from the history of ideas such as Augustin, Machiavelli, Jacques Lacan and Ernesto de Martino to explore how Trump’s *jouissance* manifests in his rhetoric, actions, and communicational and decisional behaviour, impacting not only the U.S. but international political culture as well. Taken together, the text integrates the genre of the classical political portrait in the sense of a personalized “political psychology” with delving deep into advanced contemporary analytical approaches of inter- and trans-disciplinary calibre such as contextual political analysis, culturo-political philosophy and historical symptomatology. This is why it can be read as a psycho-philosophical essay.

Keywords Populist politics · Political solipsism · Political narcissism · Jouissance · Enjoyment · Perversion · Individual psychology · Social psychology · Deviant social behaviour · Political culture · Public rationality · Imaginal politics · Post-traditional politics · Psychology & politics · Politics of rupture · Politics of transgression · Historical symptomatology

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I

The 45th and 47th U.S. president Donald John Trump's political, communicational and social behaviour is a case considered, by most analysts, to be outside the traditional norm which is nevertheless changing the ABC of national democratic and international political culture. Trump seems to believe that he can – and perhaps should – bend most rules of political culture as *the* great historical disruptor of American and global politics as which he conceives himself. Admittedly, in times of re-globalisation, disruptive or even deviant political behaviour has become, if not the new normal, then at least a phenomenon that can be observed on a relatively broad basis in the “politics that count”. However, Trump remains an exception insofar as he seems to take extraordinary, almost irresistible pleasure in tending to venture, in most cases, a step beyond others' thresholds, in excessive taunting to test conventional limits and, in general, in playing with crossing boundaries at every level. He combines this with an active and expressively megalomaniacal self-aggrandisement that is unusual and largely unknown in the political culture to date. In addition, after the irritations and ruptures of his first term 2017–2021, in the course of his second presidency 2025–2029, Trump's apparently consciously erratic behaviour seems to have entered a further escalation phase, in the meantime impacting the mainstream of contemporary political consciousness and correctness in all sectors of society, including – and departing from – public rationality, thus changing what Juerger Habermas called the “public sphere” as the decisive contextual container of organised democracy and its applied politics (cf. De Luca Picione, R., Dell'Amico, S., & De Fortuna, A. M., 2025).

With the public sphere, general culture is also swayed by Trump's style heavily influenced by, and in part deriving from, the advertising industries. In fact, both the advertising and the cultural industries have, since the 1970s, been converging in the attention economy which, by its very own laws of implicit escalation to keep the attention span of the observer, has elevated escalation to a basic mechanism in the public sphere. The principle of self-escalation is now systemically omnipresent and carried everywhere by social media and information and entertainment platforms such as *YouTube*. The deriving style of noise, counter-order and disruptive behaviour meant to attract the spectator has been aimed at questioning and transcending most conventional limits, be they written or unwritten. The goal is to attract attention in order to capture – and where possible gain control of – the most precious resource of post-post-modernity: the attention span of the viewer, or more precisely: his personal lifetime.

Yet although in this framework the constant distortion of reality by the “advertising” nature of the media's visual and verbal exaggerations, monstrosities and even lies has become a kind of perverse standard for daily life practices of perception and information digestion, the U.S. president's public performance is, in the eyes of many, the ultimate demonstration of deviance for gaining attention in contemporary democracies and beyond, equipped with an apparently inbuilt need for constant self-intensification, reinforcement and radicalisation. In essence, Donald Trump's political style is an expression not only of the contemporary post-formal and post-conventional, but also a forerunner of the future post-normal: a political behaviour not only *out of the box* but *outside the norm*.

II

Enthrallingly, to some extent, Trump seems to believe that his disruptive behaviour can and should be positively trend-setting or even fulfil an avant-garde function for both the future style of domestic politics and international relations at-large. Although this belief

has been criticised innumerable times with good arguments, among them the necessity to keep the political centre with its fundamental character of moderation alive to preserve democracy, the deeper laws behind Trump's attitude have been addressed only scarcely. In reality, they can be identified with the help of one of the most advanced "deeper-digging" approaches to distorted behaviour, the theory of enjoyment developed by French "post-modern" psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) (McGowan, 2025).

First of all, in which ways it might be defended or attacked, Trump's style mixes personal and political aspects, i.e. two sides which, like many populists, he rarely distinguishes. Second, his personal-public style seems to be driven, as far as its varying and often non-coherent manifestations have shown over time, in its (more or less) stable core by a complex form of pleasure termed *jouissance* by Lacan (Žižek, 2006). *Jouissance* is an intense, excessive and contingent, in most cases self-referential and self-sufficient enjoyment that transcends normal limits and fuels unpredictable actions. As far as the experience of Trump's time in office reveals, it is exactly the gradually more open manifestation and public political deployment of *jouissance* that fires up the collective political frenzy that binds millions to Trump's cause through a shared experience of transgression and revelation, apparently reflecting a deeper psychological dynamic in present-day democratic societies with significant social and political implications. As Trump's style is exemplarily impacting not only socially acceptable habits, including rhetorics, among the new generations, but, more importantly, democratic culture far beyond the U.S. and even beyond the Western hemisphere, it is colliding with implicit and explicit traditions of acceptable political behaviour in trans-civilisational ways while clinging to a nationalist narrative, which is one of its founding paradoxes.

III

Our thesis is that the key to Trump's epochal socio-psychological impact is the question: What is *jouissance*?

Indeed, faced with Donald Trump's triumphant political resurgence to a second term in office, and with the insecure outlook on a potential third term which is considered a welcome option by many of his voters (who seem constantly half of the U.S. electorate), one might ask: What is the nature of the *pleasure* that binds millions to his banner – apparently unabashedly no matter what even after four years of *interregnum* by an opposing style and program? The lasting and outstanding fascination with Trump cannot stem merely from satisfaction with his single actions or achievements, which are in many ways dubious. There must be something deeper, more excessive – what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) termed *jouissance*, or "surplus enjoyment" (Johnston, 2026).

Lacan famously distinguished *jouissance* from ordinary enjoyment or pleasure. Pleasure operates within bounds, regulated by what Sigmund Freud called the *pleasure principle* – a homeostasis that keeps us from too much excitement or pain. *Jouissance*, by contrast, is enjoyment beyond those limits: intense, potentially destructive, an excess that can border on suffering. Most importantly, *jouissance* is the satisfaction provided by the drive itself, differing from desire, which is defined by a lack of something specific. *Jouissance* therefore represents a paradoxical, intense satisfaction, or pleasure in pain, that exceeds the pleasure principle. It is the thrill of transgression, the forbidden fruit that promises more than it safely delivers. For a billionaire whose desire for "something" is always satisfied, it is the feeling of the drive itself that is the biggest pleasure that does not need anything else than itself, i.e. its own intensity as an "event" which is experienced as the only sublime beyond the simple desire-satisfaction scheme. Interestingly, with these characteristics, Trump's *jouissance* ful-

fills all three criteria of “postmodern self-transcendence” possible in a wealthy consumer society defined in the work of another crucial “post-modern” philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard (Gratton, 2018), i.e. the unity-in-action of intensity, event, and the sublime.

IV

With the help of the crucial notion of *jouissance*, another classical Freudian term, *Entladung*, also finds a more appropriate framework of psycho-political collocation than by the means of mere *enjoyment* or the term often used to characterise Trump, *narcissism*. As the primary English term for Sigmund Freud’s “Entladung” is discharge or release of energy, Trump’s erratic behaviour can be located in the context of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. “Entladung” refers to the release of psychic tension or drive energy (libido) closely related to the “pleasure principle”, where the mind seeks to reduce accumulated excitation. Combining *jouissance* with discharge, it becomes clear that much of the president’s attitude is not just about “impulsiveness”, as policy analyst Ian Bremmer branded it (GZERO Media 2026), but rather about a discharge through *jouissance* which is much more extreme. And, contrary to narcissism, which can be self-restraint by rejecting its own natural instincts and thus knowing about itself *in actu*, *jouissance* is “naturally” exuberant, self-transcending and thereby outgoing.

From this combined analytic viewpoint of *jouissance* and discharge, the assertion of economic-political analysts such as Ian Bremmer, that the disruptive charge of Donald Trump was “probably” historically necessary for waking up a non-respondent political culture and “broken” political system, both of the U.S. in particular and Western democracies in general, becomes even more interesting.

V

Nevertheless, and independently of whether neo-realist scholars such as Bremmer are right or not, Trumps personal governing style remains remarkably solipsistic, if not *the* expression of political solipsism in our time. Put into more accessible terms, typical for *jouissance* is that as a normal citizen, decision-maker, public figure, or politician, you have to always go “a step farther” – not for others, but for yourself. You are driven irresistibly beyond the edge by venturing a notch beyond the “too much” just to reach another level of experience of the possible yet unknown – almost no matter what the price is, since you secretly believe that in the event of it becoming too dangerous, you can reverse it or take it back at the last second, and then retry. And to some extent you are helpless against this trait of yourself. Even if your reason advises against it, you take the irresistible step towards risk. And perhaps then you might backtrack, and this could become a familiar circle of repetition. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze called this – as powerfully attractive as fatal – circle “difference and repetition” (Deleuze, 1994). With *jouissance*, it is in reality the constant attempt of repetition of the same *extasis*, with the differences limited to occasion, procedure, context and outcome.

VI

This fundamental character of Trump’s pleasure was individually graspable, to mention just two examples of the first year of his second term, (a) in his attitude during major global speeches and (b) towards democratic protests at home.

Ad a) When Trump delivered his major speech at the General Assembly of the United Nations on 23 September 2025, the most striking passages in it were, above all, extreme self-praise and the listing of his own achievements as unprecedented – combined with dis-

paragement of the UN and previous governments, all portrayed as unfit to meet his greatness. Among the most striking quotes were:

“In my first term, I built the greatest economy in the history of the world. [...] And I’m doing the same thing again, but this time it’s actually much bigger and even better.” “I ended seven wars. [...] No president or prime minister – and for that matter no other country – has ever done anything close to that, and I did it in just seven months. It’s never happened before. There’s never been anything like that.” “Many years ago, a very successful real estate developer in New York known as Donald J. Trump – I bid on the renovation and rebuilding of this very United Nations complex. [...] I said at the time that I would do it for 500 million dollars [...] marble floors [...] They decided to go in another direction, which was much more expensive [...] and produced a far inferior product” (United Nations 2025).

Overall, Trump’s speech wasn’t so much abuse directed at specific individuals, but rather the classic pattern: “I’m the greatest, I single-handedly saved the day, everyone else has failed, and the UN is a joke.”

Ad b) A second example was Trump’s behaviour during the intensifying protests against the president held under the label “No Kings” in summer and fall 2025. Instead of doing nothing and letting it be, which would have been the wisest decision in his own interest, he had to step it up. Trump alienated even his own voters, being driven by an irresistible pleasure that was obviously bigger than himself, by publishing AI-made videos in which he crowned himself as a king and, on another occasion, depicted himself as a fighter pilot (something he in reality never was) who bombards his protesters with (his?) excrements.

Besides being this one classical illustration of the above-mentioned Freudian principle of discharge, it was the perfect demonstration that in many cases, his *jouissance* tends to drive Trump to do something more than “normal”, i.e. to undermine stability just to play and to explore the uncharted, the forbidden, the taboo and the dangerous, i.e. to go the step beyond. This trend of tickling the unknown and daring something that is unexpected by everybody else is obviously a drive for self-affirmation and recognition. It lets him constantly do and say things spontaneously, for example in his speeches where he, from some point on, ignores the teleprompter, or improvises in official announcements against every advice of his counsellors. To just do another spin when things are long over the edge may have been one of Trump’s secrets of success in the past, providing him with an immediacy and presence that hardly anyone else emanates. But it also seems to be a fundamental trait of his personality that could ultimately ruin him. Not least because it tends to leave him completely alone when he ventures, for the umpteenth time, into the unknown territory of the “beyond”. And precisely this loneliness in stepping over is both the motive for *jouissance*, i.e. the combination of “total” suffering (which, in his perception, makes him a political martyr) and “total” enjoyment (which, in his view, makes him “the chosen one”), and for the endless circle of repetition between both that inevitably provokes the search for the ultimate “final” step or ground.

VII

Another case of Trump’s “beyond”-narcissism resulting from his politics of *jouissance* which culminated in flashes of omnipotence was exposed during the US-Iran war in February-April 2026. During the second week of the action, the commander-in-chief asserted

that he, and only he himself, could and would decide how long the war would last. The end would occur when it pleased him, or in his own words: “Anytime I want”.

At the peak of the war, Trump “kept the world off balance with ever-changing threats” (The New York Times, 2026a, 2026b) characterised by extreme exaggeration and excess, including his announcement that “a whole civilisation will die” (Borger et al., 2026) if his demands were not fulfilled. This amounted to a breach of taboo by announcing the destruction of an entire civilisation and indeed reminded some of Augustine’s *City of God*. Trump even went so far as to write on Easter Sunday on his social media account “Truth Social” at @realDonaldTrump: “Tuesday will be Power Plant Day, and Bridge Day, all wrapped up in one, in Iran. There will be nothing like it!!! Open the Fuckin’ Strait, you crazy bastards, or you’ll be living in Hell - JUST WATCH! Praise be to Allah. President DONALD J. TRUMP”. Although this was judged as “vile on every level” even by former pro-Trump pundits such as Tucker Carlson who “ripped Donald Trump over his Easter Sunday ‘f-word’ post” (POLITICO, 2026), condemning Trump’s mocking of another religion, it was welcomed by large parts of Trump’s votership as “clear and plain text” in front of a criminal regime.

VIII

Below such public exposures and on a more everyday level but even more effectively, the character of the specifically Trumpian *jouissance* has been constantly, and betrayingly, pronounced by some of the president’s word creations such as “extreme vetting”, “illegal monsters” or “building the American great wall”. Here, in his use of language, his constant, ceaseless and inevitable, probably only half-conscious search for *jouissance* comes to the fore in even more visceral and direct ways (Markman, 2018). Trump’s original linguistic creations such as “braggadocious” (with which he explained that he didn’t want to sound boastful), “schlonged”, “bigly”, or “panican”, and his – equally unerring as infamous – nicknames for his adversaries, such as “New Scum” for his “favourite governor” Gavin Newsom (Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2026) follow, in essence, the same path. They concentrate the structural paradox of *jouissance* in one expression, not unlike a joke does but, in Trump’s case, instinctively and seriously; and they popularise the extreme instead of the normal so that it becomes part of a *jouissance* which is publicly in the eye of everybody and thus sharable by the masses. It is, ultimately, word artistry that, like an artwork, perfectly embodies Trump’s inner process of being driven by a force which, in essence, is he himself but at the same time something larger than him.

IX

Yet there is another paradox. It is precisely Trump’s constant temptation to venture into the unknown of the “beyond everything normal” that seems to be, at the same time, his experience of an ultimate condensation of the self – an act of, in the instance, temporary “total” enjoyment that becomes a blinding-bright light which no longer needs anything other than itself, in its very moment of occurrence. Some may call this narcissism. Yet true *jouissance*, as manifested by Trump’s spontaneous outbreaks, is more than that: a powerful experience that elevates the inner perception of the self to ultimate grandeur, so intense that it temporarily annihilates the real subjectivity of its bearer in the act.

Therefore, contrary to enjoyment, *jouissance* is, to put it in one sentence, an act of simultaneous self-exuberance and self-annihilation. The paradox here is: total *jouissance* leads to self-annihilation, and this is its fundamental character of elevation. Because of its unparalleled power, this act is something that can only be restrained by the subject’s resistance. As

a result of the latent nihilistic totality of *jouissance*, however, the subject must have a very stable moral personality and a strong inner ethical compass, be it rooted in a super-ego, religion or in something more humanistic, grounded or practical, to be able to resist the fundamental meta-narcissistic temptation inherent in *jouissance* which, by its very own nature, borders on the abyss of nothingness.

Trump's everyday personality seems to believe that he has this capacity of resistance against his own *jouissance*. When questioned if there are any limits to his power, Trump in January 2026 stated: "Yeah, there is one thing. My own morality. My own mind. It's the only thing that can stop me" (The New York Times, 2026a, 2026b). Yet the president's resistance to what he could do with his – in his perception – unlimited powers to overcome his personal and biographic limitations, and what he sees as the limitations and biographical flaws of his nation, seems to be dwindling more with every day in office. And the more the Lacanian law of excess seems to take over.

X

If nothing else, Trump's way of executing power domestically in his second term in office has become the perfect illustration of the *jouissance* principle. Not by chance, it has been stably embodied in the president's political practices and rituals. His rallies are more carnivalesque spectacles of defiance than ever – against elites, norms, political correctness. Supporters describe a visceral rush: the joy of seeing taboos shattered, enemies humiliated. This is not calm contentment but a *jouissance* spiked with aggression, a pleasure in the breaking of barriers that feels liberating for those who feel as the losers even as it risks chaos.

It may not be without any relevance, although it is a without doubt dangerous hint that could be misunderstood, that this creative destruction inherent to *jouissance* has been played through – and to some extent even provided as a "cultivated" experience – by the (post-)modern arts and the movie industry since the 1950s. Particularly over the past half century, they may have helped to bring a certain "perverted" attitude gradually closer to mainstream. A first wave of *jouissance*-like imaginaries came after WWII and the atomic bomb, embodied, for example, in giant radiation-mutated ants and the silent and naked horror that emanated from them. A second wave came with the Vietnam war in the late 1960s and early 1970s, embodied, for example, in "wildly popular" movies such as *M*A*S*H* or *Apocalypse Now*. And a third wave came with the 1968 boomer revolt aiming at "liberating pleasure" in both physical and mental ways, embodied, for example, in *Last Tango in Paris* and the so-called "sexual revolution" which led to its own catechism of wrong or right. A fourth wave came with the materialistic consumer thrusts of the 1960s to the 1990s, perhaps best embodied in the new *Zombie* movie genre starting with George A. Romero in 1968. Eventually, the fifth wave came with the congenial portrayal of the vulgar-to-perverse paradoxes of pleasure culture since, embodied, for example, by *Crash* by David Cronenberg or *Pulp Fiction* by Quentin Tarantino, whose style subsequently infused broadly into until then moderately "normal" TV shows, which became gradually consciously weirder, more cruel and aberrant.

XI

All five of these waves have been ambiguously oscillating between affirmation and critique of the "père-version" of modern life, in the exact sense of Lacan: a "version of the father" which is still the mainstream habit and has to be forcedly accepted but at the same time constantly undermined and subverted if one wants to remain authentic to him- or her-

self. “Père-version” is not inner emigration or open rebellion, but rather a torn attitude of adhering to something that is at the same time hated and fought against. In this sense, it is the embodiment of the basic structure of the joke which plays with the surprising identification of opposites. This creates an ambiguity which is the source for the longing for *jouissance* and not dissimilar to what Andy Warhol had started exemplarily with his car-crash motives, the “Death and Disaster” series which were produced primarily between 1962 and 1964.

Each of the five waves mentioned above was disseminated by the arts of their time which had become “affirmative-critical” expressions of “mature capitalism” in half- or fully populist style and in super-conscious “deep ambiguity”. All of these waves were “enjoyed” by the public, with the stirring excitement and shattered thrill that only the “père-verted” mix of horror and pleasure can provide in one’s own self-experience. Their effects on the psyche of the observer were perceived as a temporary self-transcendence through self-forgetfulness, which is something horror movies and shows usually do via the means of “pleasure shocks”.

Trump’s impact on the American voter-landscape has been, to some extent, an extreme arrival point of this evolution, with him originating from the same attention economy in which he became a star with his tv show “The Apprentice” and “Celebrity Apprentice” (2004–2015), with their catch-phrase “You are fired”, focused on the “cruel” authoritarian firing of participants and their psychological anticipation and reaction. This essentially mirrored what German philosopher Georg Friedrich Hegel in his 1807 work *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 1807) called the master-servant relationship (German: *Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*), in English often translated as the Lordship and Bondage dialectic or Master-Slave dialectic. It describes how two self-consciousnesses meet and engage in a life-and-death struggle for recognition, resulting in a hierarchical relationship where one (the Master) is recognized by the other (the Servant/Bondsman), which not only clarifies the relationship but provides pleasure to both. The Trump style as an expression of the times is not far away from the cultural evolution of the post-modern experience of *jouissance* that systematically reproduces the Master-Slave dialectic by mixing the breaking of boundaries, horror, incredulity and ritualised cruelty with excitement and self-abandonment for the sake of ultimate acceptance and submission, i.e. domination and subjugation between the master and his servants, to the joy of both sides. The relationship between Trump and his voters mirrors this dialectic.

XII

It may have been an accident but in the end it will be rather judged as historical symptomatology, when Trump’s self-named “secretary of war” Pete Hegseth in April 2026 tried, for the umpteenth time, to back up the dialectics inbuilt in the “Trump style” by religion, more precisely by warrior religiosity, or rhetoric from the old testament. He did it with just one remarkable fault: he apparently didn’t take the original quote of Ezekiel 25 17 from the King James bible, when he addressed the “enemies” of the U.S., but a modified “blurred” mockery quote from Quentin Tarantino’s movie “Pulp Fiction” which is exactly one exemplary representative of the fifth artistic wave mentioned above (MS Now TV, 2026). Instead of the original, Hegseth quoted the “twist” which had been almost entirely made up by Tarantino’s screenwriter, whilst the audience immersed themselves in religious devotion (WUSA9 TV, 2026). To some extent, Hegseth’s act was the perfect closure of the circle in symbolizing what Trump means in the context of the cultural evolution of *jouissance*. What Warhol and Tarantino wanted to mirror through artistic alienation was the père-verted *jouissance* of consumerism which is to some extent unavoidably mixed with the religious prom-

ise of salvation. (Post-)modern US art at its peak does not criticise this amalgam directly, but rather from within, which has been the origin of many misunderstandings for example of Tarantino's art. Hegseth – probably rather involuntarily – embraced this “art of alienation” and proposed it as the (new?) original which in reality remains a fake or artificial recreation, thereby *de facto* declaring the artificial to be the new reality. By involuntarily transforming a moment of serious meditation into a fake without realizing it, Hegseth recreated the basic mechanism of the joke typology which can be regarded as one core embodiment of the inner tensions of *jouissance*. Far from just being culturally illiterate, Hegseth proved with his unintended coup to be a diligent co-worker in erecting the “parallel reality” characteristic for the mindset of the Trump administration, and he did bravely so in a way that could have been taken from a Tarantino film.

XIII

Yet the archetype of the basic procedure of the “Trump style” is not only deranged, or, as Hegseth justified it, “modified” religious rhetoric, but, equally important, a catch inbuilt in contemporary capitalism itself, and as such. As U.S. advertising czar Brian Tracy once put it, people seek *jouissance* to first transcend themselves materially, then immaterially; and in most cases, they tend to mix both dimensions up in the process, erroneously reducing it to material satisfaction but constantly longing for more. Capitalism's real relationship to self-declared “dealmaker” and businessman Trump is therefore less bound to the person, despite all public deification, and much more to the pleasure process he provides. Or, in Tracy's words,

“people don't care what your product is. They don't care about you. They don't care about your company. They don't care about the background of your company and they don't even care what the product is. People don't care. The only thing they care about is what this product or service does for me. What do I get? What's in it for me? And what they want is they want a change in their life. They want an improvement in their life. A result, a benefit or, highest of all, is a transformation. They want to be transformed” (Tracy, [n.d.](#)).

At the end of the day, Tracy's logic is a good description of the mechanisms related to the deeper, more spiritual dimensions of *jouissance*, both individually and socially, and, ultimately, politically in a materialistic and capitalistic society.

XIV

To round all this up and to understand the stakes that the Trumpian *jouissance* carries and what it may imply for society, we should eventually turn to an older source explaining *jouissance*: Saint Augustine's *The City of God* (Saint Augustine, 2015, original: early 5th century). Writing after the sack of Rome in 410, Augustine contrasted two cities born of two loves. The earthly city is founded on self-love “even to the contempt of God”, i.e. on the pursuit of glory, power, gold/money and temporal enjoyment. The heavenly city is founded on the love of God “even to the contempt of self”.

Trumpism, in its unapologetic public pursuit of dominance and spectacle, is, as we have seen, the paradoxical unification of both approaches. The paradoxical act of *jouissance* intensifies the self until it reaches beyond itself. This first echoes the earthly city's *libido dominandi* – the lust to dominate. Yet, Augustine reminds us that earthly pleasures, however

intoxicating, are fleeting; they cannot satisfy the soul's deeper longing for transcendent peace.

Here, the idea of apocalypse enters – not merely as cataclysm, but in its original Greek sense: *apokalypsis*, an unveiling, a revelation which reaches beyond its own act. The heavenly city which is the only one that can promise full satisfaction is built on the annihilation of the earthly city – a self-transcendence which comes at the price of the *nihil* not experienced as the *horror vacui*, but as the ultimate liberation from the existing which must be overcome.

XV

Trump's core *jouissance* process consists exactly in realizing the *libido dominandi* by *apocalypse* – on the micro-, meso- and macro-level and in intelligently contextualized forms always related to the guts. Not by chance, Trump's instinct precisely unveils hidden discontents everywhere: economic dislocation, cultural alienation, the exhaustion of liberal consensus. In this ambiguous scenery, destruction and discovery coincide. Old certainties crumble, exposing raw desires beneath. The AI revolution, sustained by Trump for power ambitions and embodied by the explosion of the Chatbot and Blockchain industries on the ground of almost complete deregulation, promises the unity of destruction of the old world that existed before, and the revelation of a new world after it. It comes together with Trump's publicly staged fight against Harvard University (Benedikter, 2025), and with it against all elite intellectual and educational institutions, which stand in the way of *apocalypse*, i.e. the heavenly city which is to be erected by Trump's declaration of a "Golden Age" (The White House, 2026) which he even posted on the official homepage of the White House, thus practicing "state capture" (IDEA, 2026) or "Caesarean politics" (Sata & Karolewski, 2020). It is exactly because of this – both visceral and painfully eventful – *tabula rasa* that an AI investment leader with "world ambitions" such as Peter Thiel apparently deeply enquires into the apocalypse (Douhat, 2025) in order to understand the core motif of our time. And it is one reason why another, Sam Altman, has, according to many sources, developed a Napoleon fixation (Minhaj, 2025), apparently to learn how to transcend what is possible by sheer will and anticipation, fed by a seemingly infinite personal energy that some people seem to possess, and following Napoleon's motto "I am fighting by the means of my men's dreams", which according to all interpretations he meant in the literal, not in the aphoristic sense.

XVI

What might follow such a fundamental attraction by destructive revelation which deeply connects the chief and the post-modern masses? Most probably and in one way or another, *apotheosis* – a sort of elevation to divine status, a self-transcendence that dissolves old bodies and selves, and with it memories and, perhaps inevitably, the principle of remembrance itself. For some followers, Trump is already approaching this status: to be seen not just as a leader, but as a figure who, through politics, transcends politics, embodying the "will of the people" made flesh. In direct contrast to the demonisation by his critics (who, with every new simplification, play his game), it is a secular deification by its followers, promising collective exaltation through individual allegiance – not because people find the person attractive (most citizens do not), but because the pleasure process he provides is what they secretly (and partly unconsciously) seek.

XVII

In the midst of such a situation, it may be a rather questionable bet to rely on the person's personal sense of morality or reason. When, as mentioned, Trump, exalted by his – per-

ceived – many personal victories over the course of his years in office, stated that what keeps him allegedly balanced is “my own mind. It’s the only thing that can stop me” (Sanger et al., 2026), the historical teaching that came to mind almost immediately to many was Niccolò Machiavelli’s “Prince” (Machiavelli, 2014). The parallels are indeed striking; and they have been pointed out by contemporary thinkers such as, to mention just one example, Peter Sloterdijk in recent in-depth comparative analyses with the present (Sloterdijk, 2026a).

First of all, the absolute power of the prince, whose freedom is only subject to his own will, has been a matter of concern for political thinkers throughout modern history, as much as it is nowadays with Trump’s exercise of power. In the Italian Renaissance, which sealed the passage from republicanism to primarily princely and royal forms of rule, the education of the prince became a sensitive literary genre. It propagated the moral self-restraint of the head of state with regard to “his own morality”, but paradoxically found its most accomplished expression in the radically amoral *Principe* of Machiavelli, according to whom only power can check power, and all rule is merely a compromise among the powerful and between masters and servants. Machiavelli wrote his masterwork of political thought in post-republican and post-revolutionary Florence, under the then new rule of the De Medici family. His advice to the prince was, rather than self-restraint, to embrace what we would today term *realpolitik*. In spite of the present anachronistic use of this expression, it is worth pointing out that authoritarianism has always been a “politics of reality” in its gist, in a sense that goes beyond classical political pragmatism and strategy: the suzerain, who positions himself above the law and beyond moral judgement, acquires the quasi-cosmological power of constantly destabilising, re-forging and re-maintaining reality according to his whims which are, as has to be hoped by both “the people” and “the elites”, in the best interest of everybody.

XVIII

There may be some teachings inbuilt in this historical analogy. Machiavelli’s prince acknowledges no “principle of reality” which could check him, as he *is* the “principle of reality” in the double meaning of the Latin word *principium*: the fundament and the beginning of all things. The autarch, from the Greek: *the one who has power by himself*, presents his own existence as a demiurgic force that has the world at its disposal. More than a person, he is the carrier of history. As he is both an expression of higher forces and an actor by himself, he is hardly to be held reliable like a normal mortal, and thus, to some extent, does not stand above, but rather outside of the law. Under his spell, the world order trembles and collapses into raw materiality, because authoritarianism unveils the provisional character of any social construction to the père-verse *jouissance* of the spectators.

In other words: The prince is not only “the chosen one”, to paraphrase Trump’s conception of himself, which makes him inevitably also “the targeted one”, as Trump acknowledges, but a proto- and para-spiritual earthquake in the known reality – with the citizens turned into subjects and the people into willing subalterns who perversely “enjoy” the process of a historical *maelstroem* which may also devour them. And, to some extent, this fundamental threat makes it even more exciting. To be “evil” in the sense of overcoming one own’s inhibitions and break out of the normal “super-ego” of social acceptance is experienced as the true liberation by self-transcendence, i.e. something proto- or para-spiritual (cf. Sloterdijk 2026b). The effect is a sense of radical contingency and open-ended possibility that shapes the social atmosphere as the perception that everything is possible at any time, which casts a kind of transcendent veil over everything real and the events of everyday life.

It is the feeling of fear *and* exaltation that Romanticism later exalted as the aesthetics of the sublime, yet, in the post- and meta-form of *jouissance*, without a clear goal but aiming into the (simultaneously beloved *and* feared) unknown.

XIX

To summarise these observations, let us ask for a final time: What is the mystery behind the unbounded power, indestructible will and apparently never-ending, burning desire of an ego that binds millions under its banner, yet burns in itself so strongly that, according to its bearer person (Trump), he cannot find one single role model in U.S. presidential history?

After what has been said we now understand the mythopoetic relation between the post- or meta-autarch and the masses who, at the same time, admire *and* fear his cosmogonic acts as the creator *and* destroyer of worlds which they inhabit. Without doubt, Donald Trump's political venting brings to the stage of world politics a form of pleasure that cannot be grasped in terms of mere satisfaction but must be something deeper. It is a mass phenomenon that carries flashes of the ecstasy of revelation.

In religious terms, "revelation", as pointed out, is close to "apocalypse". Yet, apocalypse is as much about the hidden truth as it is about the end, the *eschathon*. It relates the present to an unknown future to which humans are structurally blind, because this future constantly emerges from what can only be perceived as nothingness. The apocalypse is an absence that is called into being through a creative act from within the world, and that means: it is an expansion of a reality from the future against the present world as such. The force that performs such *creatio ex nihilo* is one that always *reveals* reality by establishing its *existence from nothingness* by the means of a rupture or breakthrough. The riddle of authoritarian energy is the implicit belief that the secret of reality is, in its most inner essence, an abyss of desire and violence – *der Wille zur Macht*, the crude and primordial will of and to power, the creative will of the titans. Yet, historically speaking, this has again and again proved to be an illusion, as the truth that is constantly unveiled by brute force changes frequently, if not all the time, in its appearances which are the only things that exist of it.

XX

In fact, the principle of the *apocalypse* that reveals the future is the "Not yet". This principle comes to the fore especially in times of crisis and rupture, rather than in those that stage a ritualised repetition of the same. This is why the history of apocalyptic thought has been marked by the inner tension between transcendence and millenarism, i.e. the "pure" nullification of the world for redemption, i.e. for a political meta-physics and the idea of re-beginning. It is, in Trump's clothing of the "Golden Age", the expectation of a time of worldly peace and prosperity for all, that is, the Christianised version of the Golden Age that was historically declared for Athens, the Islamic world or the Pax Romana. It is also the secular version of the Thousand Years of the spirit of medieval heretics.

This has its predecessors. In a moment of civilisational collapse – the end of the Roman Empire unveiled by the Visigoths' sack of Rome in 410 CE – Augustine, as mentioned, argued for a deeper historical understanding of the unfolding chain of events. For him, the chain of history was to be understood as a matter of providence between eschatology and the struggles for the establishment of the *City of God*. Yet, Augustine questioned whether the "great leap forward" could be produced by means of a collective act of radicalism among the Christians who wished to seize the moment of Roman doom to force history into their own new millennium by starting a violent rebellion against Roman power. Rather, according to Augustine, the new epoch would come as an expression of the Almighty's decision,

the understanding of which transcends human capability. The intervention of his invisible hand would become clear in history through the sunset of a civilisation and the rise of a new one. Thus, in Augustine's eyes, humans should ultimately act with *prudence*, which is the virtue descending from a fundamental trust in *providence* – not the will to power.

XXI

Captivatingly, the trust in providence is also present in Trump's worldview, and not only since the multiple failed assassination attempts against him, attempts of which he has to constantly expect more – a situation which he knows will probably last a lifetime, which constitutes also a psychological condition. His whole narrative of “the chosen one” revolves around a kind of practical religiosity not tied to churches or masses, but rather to the constant self-revelation of a personal inner truth which lies in the greatness of the events caused by the person himself, as well as in the overwhelming life-and-death threat he simultaneously faces as the surrounding basic condition. This keeps the implicit perception of the human condition as such close to the patterns of subjective perception. As a result, this person's only anchor is his trust in providence, to which one gate of access is, in a “*père-verse*” manner, *jouissance* as a “pure” experience of one's own implicit “otherness” put into action.

XXII

While all these elements are – both materially and mentally – palpable in Trump's historical conjuncture, the prudence implied by providence is clearly missing. This is due to the exaggerated presence of *jouissance*. The unprecedented behaviour that an acting president asks publicly to receive the Nobel Prize for Peace (which he apparently absolutely needs, because otherwise, as he declared, he would have to consider starting wars in order to receive the award afterward for their pacification); that, as a substitute, he accepts the Nobel Prize given to another person because he thinks he is the actual, better recipient who was robbed of it; and that he renames the national Kennedy Center as the *Trump* Kennedy Center, factually adding his own name to history, while at the same time abolishing the Federal Ministry of Education, are all symptoms of a compensatory narcissism beyond boundaries. In foreign policy, during the Iran war in March 2026, Trump publicly stated that he wanted to hit an attacked island “a few more times just for fun” (Gebeily et al., 2026). With regard to Kuba, he declared in the same month that “I could do with it what I wanted” (Yahoo News, 2026). Domestically, a symptom such as depicting Michelle and Barack Obama as apes in a video posted on his social media platform *TruthSocial* (later deleted due to protests even from his own followers) could be read as an unconscious wish towards an “end of all things”, since such all too open racism threatens to nullify Trump's political life efforts even among his own voters.

XXIII

All in all, his subjective “enjoyment” relates Trump's acting dangerously close to the double meaning of apocalypse both for himself as for others, be it for certain social sectors such as universities or major global topics like sustainability; or be it for interdisciplinary social progress as a whole which in “mature democracies” is, by its very nature, tied to open and thus non-narcissistic dialogue. Apocalypse has reemerged several times in Western-European history, including in a “secular mode”. At the verge of post-revolutionary imperialism, Napoleon was seen as both the expression of the force of the people “from below” entering onto the stage of history – see Tolstoi's reading of the Napoleonic wars – and as the embodiment of the Spirit of the World, as in Hegel's famous encounter with the French supreme military commander in Berlin *Unter den Linden*. Yet in both cases, in Russia and

in Prussia, Napoleon was, in reality, the apocalypse for large parts of the existing statehoods, their cultures and many of their peoples.

XXIV

There is, though, an internal differentiation to be added to all this. In considering these and other examples, there are indications that Trump's specific form of *jouissance* could be a combination of narcissism *and* megalomania, a mixture triggered by an infinite need for recognition which may stem, as mentioned, from his relationship with his father or other paternal or challenging figures. This need may have created a personal mechanism of "revenge recognition" which is mirrored in the multiplication of indications of a pathological exuberance that is, paradoxically, not tempered, but rather intensified, the longer Trump exercises power without (from his point of view) restraint.

For example, the renaming of the Kennedy Center, as announced by the White House (BBC, 2025a), was followed by a general remake of US historical and cultural institutions in his image (Reuters, 2026). And Trump's unveiling of a giant gold-accented victory arch design for Washington DC (BBC, 2026c) dedicated to his self-declared "Golden Age of America" in April 2026 was almost immediately followed by his publication of a post depicting himself as Jesus-like figure, (BBC, 2026b) an act which created such a backlash among his own followers on the religious right that he had to delete the post shortly afterwards. Trump's April 2026 row with the Pope Leo XIV (Robert Francis Prevost) (BBC, 2026b), a US-American like himself, for whom is the better American and perhaps the better saviour, was just one logical consequence and the perfect example of his "competitive *jouissance*" tied to recognition. The only thing missing in the spectrum of Trump's self-mirrorings of superb greatness and exceptionality may be the one single thing that is traditionally the ultimate consecration of every US president, at least once dead: his name on "his own" aircraft carrier, i.e. upon a floating city, the biggest weapon and the ultimate projection of power in human history. It is therefore probable that Trump, after stopping the decommission of the carrier USS Harry S. Truman in 2019 (Gould & Larter, 2019), will try to get his own carrier already during lifetime, perhaps if possible even during office. Until 2026, Trump unveiled plans for his own class of battleships, the "Trump class" or so-called "Golden Fleet" (BBC, 2025b) which presents the advantage that there is not only one ship among others bearing his name – in the end, there will be ten or eleven other aircraft carriers with other names around –, but that all dozen or more ships of the class carry the name of Trump, independent of the individual ship's single denomination.

These examples point to the assumption that the link between narcissism and megalomania could not immediately equal mere *jouissance*, but rather its absence: the psychological pressure of a constantly missing or lost *enjoyment*, which causes the constant longing for it, as it can, ultimately, only be provided by the recognition by "the father" which is nevertheless impossible. However, the more *père-vert* form of this is also permanently present and can surface at any given moment: for example in form of the fact that Trump himself constantly takes pleasure in playing around with what he and his followers have branded the "Trump derangement syndrome" by turning it against his competitors and (perceived) "enemies", such as for example against actor Robert de Niro (Wilson, 2024), a favorite move which confirms the "psychedelic" nature of this "*père-version*", or "*father-version*" (Lacan) of things and relations.

XXV

Taken together, the overall “Trump process” ensures that the individual’s private enjoyment is both required and subsumed under the rule of *jouissance*. From the view of the citizens, this requires that the masses crave the leader who seems to guarantee their *outsourced* pleasure, even as he embodies the exact impossibility of such procedure. The self-renunciation of Trump’s voters is their enjoyment, and “his” *jouissance* their transcendence. His creative power is the alienated expression of a collective movement beyond the threshold of predictability into the realm of anything but certain “futuribilities”.

Yet exactly herein lies the dialectic Lacan might recognise in the Trump phenomenon: in a *jouissance* shared between the individual and the masses. *Jouissance* is, by its very nature, profoundly singular – each subject’s unique encounter with excess. But when channelled through a charismatic figure, it becomes collective, binding the many into one ecstatic body. Augustine would warn that this path leads deeper into the earthly city. True transcendence, he argued, comes not through self-apotheosis but through grace – a reorientation towards the non-subjective, or morally “objective”. Whether Trump’s America heralds further fracture towards “creative annihilation” or renewal towards a balanced reasoning embedded in prudent wisdom rooted in public rationality and its historical roots remains open to speculation – for now. But in the intoxicating pleasures of *jouissance*, Lacan’s teachings glimpse an ancient truth: Human beings are drawn to the edge of the forbidden, seeking in politics what only reality’s revelation – transcendent or catastrophic – can ultimately provide. While, interestingly, intellectualism in its US tradition manifests some traits of this too, it is probable that the “Western intellectual tradition” as traced by eminent historians such as the late Bruce Mazlish (Bronowski & Mazlish, 1960), will not play an influential role in Trumps MAGA-USA.

XXVI

What does all this mean for the foreseeable further development of Trump’s pleasure?

In his outlook on the future of the human being, Lacan, at some point in his late work, equates certain experiences of *jouissance* to a mystical experience (Sumic Riha, 2023). Yet the consequences of *jouissance*’s innate drive to nothingness are not only individual, but also collective. Trump is not running just himself, but a nation, and he is also co-running a planet which is heading towards the unknown. In the age of the cyber-bomb, techno-spheric agency and automated intelligence, the risks at stake are high. In the upcoming “transhumanist” age of politics (Benedikter & Siepmann, 2016), there will be a new crucial double bind between leadership, psychology and body politics. In this situation, the phantasmagory of Icarus’s flight comes back to our mind as a pertinent myth of the human flight towards the light. The technological longing for apotheosis that leaves the world behind is no longer just a metaphor for the delusion of dissolving materiality into pure being. The same sun that mesmerises the flyer dissolves the fragile tools that allow him to rise up in the air to loftier places. This eventually reminds Icarus of the force of gravity, but only in the moment – alas – when it is too late to avoid his fatal fall.

Indeed, it could be precisely his irresistible attraction to simultaneous self-apotheosis, self-revelation by self-transcendence *and* self-destruction that could ultimately spell the beginning of the end of the “Trump style” (Immelman & Griebie, 2020), if not of the public fascination with Trump as such. The vortex of hyper-narcissistic *jouissance* which Trump endlessly recreates could end up in a self-devouring downward spiral in which “total” enjoyment leads the subject to its self-dissolution, be it politically or personally. Because it

is Lacan's late work that teaches us that *jouissance*, the more total it becomes, first imitates, then ultimately equals nothingness.

XXVII

Where is the perspective of all this in the political and social dimension?

Without doubt, in a democracy, as long as it stays a democracy, Trump's followers should enjoy their pleasure, be it *père-verted* or not, since they have the right to it under the banner of freedom, equality and justice. Yet the current flight of planet Earth must not collapse into emptiness in front of the unknown, and thus it cannot be left to the typical improvisations and strong changes of mood inherent to *jouissance*. As too little-known Italian cultural anthropologist Ernesto De Martino pointed out in his enquiries into the cultural history of apocalypses (Lo Sguardo, 2016), the longing for an "end of the known world" by breaking the existent system into pieces is, both literally (politically) and psychologically, in most cases the symbol of underlying collective fears and the broadly-felt need for regeneration. This is mirrored by the desire for far-reaching political and social ruptures, as manifest in the election and subsequent re-election of Donald Trump by a majority of U.S. voters. As mentioned, analyst Ian Bremmer explained, in highly contested ways, that the U.S. public and the U.S. democracy felt they "probably needed" such a profound rupture as the Trumpian one, since "the system" had become non-responsive, self-referential and unable to change, at least in the perception of its users. Apocalyptic times are *kairós*, a discontinuous rupture away from the repetition of the same, in contrast with the monotone flowing of time as *chrónos*. The mythos of "the end" entails the promise of establishing "the world" on new premises, a "new order" in the original Greek meaning of *kósmos*. In Trump's case, it has reembodyed itself in a "strong man" who wants to be bigger than life at any cost and seems to be unshakeable in the face of the earthquake events he himself constantly triggers.

XXVIII

From a depersonalised, abstract viewpoint, the narrow passage to such a "new order" can appear to be best achieved by means of the subjective cunning of a "superior reason" like, in his own view, Trump's, which seems to be open to the unknown through a particular talent – fed by *jouissance* – that requires no further additional awareness or advice by others, who become a neglectable side game in history's great play. From a democratic political perspective, though, renaissance, i.e. constant rebirth and regeneration is and must be a collective achievement resulting from efforts to coordinate desires, actions, culture and nature. Some call this process "politics". To be sure, in open societies such a consonance must be based on resonance (Rosa, 2019). It cannot occur just as the improvised, permanently open and unpredictable outcome of a solipsistic *jouissance* turned into mystical (or nihilist) *amor mori*, i.e. the desire to expand the particular into the whole and to dissolve the whole in the particular. Freeing society from its widespread identification with an individual that manifests an open *père-version* turning into temporary historical mainstream, requires the wakeup call of reason. Because reason, in the sense of the historical enlightenment period, is the main human demythologising capacity: it unveils the apocalypse as what it is, and it brings the world back to the ground before it flies too high to safely turn home after its uncertain journey. Replacing *jouissance* with reason is not about paralysing energies, but about balancing things; and this will be core task of the post-Trump era.

XXIX

The implications of Trump's *jouissance* for national and international relations, foreign policy, and security are obviously very concrete. One could draw parallels to Thucydides'

Athen, and particularly to his Melian dialogue (Thucydides, [n.d.](#)). In the Melian dialogue, the core argument is that "...the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must", a statement not only defining political realism or *realpolitik*, but emblematic for Donald Trump's style of leadership and his basic view of political relations. In Trump's view, the strong make the rules according to what pleases them. Yet the main consequence consists in the fact that exactly such exuberance with short-sighted power leads to medium- to long-term defeat – i.e. to apocalypse, as in the case of Athen's total defeat which followed its Melian *hybris*. Scholars like Graham Allison have shown that there is a veritable "Thucydides trap" (Harvard University, [2001](#)): a mechanism in which a rising power challenges an established one, often leading to a war that neither side wants. As in the contemporary case of Xi Jinping's China versus Trump's U.S., the "Thucydides trap" is a mechanism still alive behind the curtains of the 21st century and thus also in Trump's era. It would be foolish to address the Thucydides trap on the basis of *jouissance*.

Parallels like these, although they are mainly historical analogies, should not be underestimated, independent from which ideological, political or "civilizational" angle they are viewed or interpreted. The core of Trump's political behaviour resulting from his deeply imbued *jouissance* has become a political habit not only in U.S. domestic but also in foreign policy action closely observed by both U.S. allies and foes. In this, a potential tragedy lies for America even if Trump's time in office will not be eternal. Trump's excess-driven mode of acting unsettles the foundational assumptions of predictability, reciprocity and rational self-restraint that have guided diplomacy since 1945, and thus could easily trigger the Thucydides trap. The liberal global order system, historically built upon procedural stability and the gradual accumulation of trust, reacts sensitively to a style of leadership that thrives on discontinuity, escalation and the constant transgression of established boundaries. Trump's foreign policy – driven less by strategic doctrine than by episodic impulses of self-affirmation and self-transcendence – introduces a structural volatility into the international arena. Allies experience abrupt oscillations between reassurance and rejection; adversaries witness unpredictability that at times deters, at times provokes, and often confounds. In this sense, Trumpian *jouissance* becomes a global force multiplier of uncertainty, pulling the international system towards a state of permanent crisis and unpredictability. This was visible, to mention just another example, in Trump's intervention in Venezuela and his seizure of president Nicolás Maduro which, independent of political judgement, remains questionable in terms of international law (BBC, [2026a](#)).

XXX

For U.S. foreign policy, this means the partial erosion of the country's traditional dual identity as both pro-active power and guarantor of order. The *jouissance* logic deprioritises long-term strategy in favour of symbolic victories, personalised diplomacy, and spectacle-driven confrontation. Treaties or multilateral institutions become less relevant than the immediate thrill of unilateral action or staged heroism. Even core pillars of U.S. engagement – NATO, global trade regimes, arms-control agreements – risk being re-evaluated according to their capacity to feed, or obstruct, the leader's dynamic of excess. This dynamic not only weakens the normative power of the U.S. but invites rival powers to reinterpret global rules as flexible spaces for opportunistic manoeuvres, thus undermining global stability. The thriving community of countries particularly in the Global South, but also in South-East Asia, which have – outspokenly or silently – chosen the strategy of ANA, or active non-alignment (Benedikter & Cruz-Infante, [2026](#)), is growing as one effect of these policies.

In geopolitical terms, Trump's pursuit of transgressive pleasure fosters an environment in which deterrence becomes less anchored in continuity and more entangled with rather spontaneous threats and performative signalling of readiness, thereby amplifying miscalculation risks, especially in flashpoint regions such as the South China Sea, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, but also – and increasingly – including Africa and the Arctic.

XXXI

Last, but not least, security policy becomes exposed to the paradoxes of *jouissance*. While Trump often frames his actions as designed to strengthen U.S. dominance, the underlying impulse towards escalation and – factual and symbolic – rupture produces security externalities that can undermine long-term national and allied safety. The desire to appear unconstrained by conventional limits – for instance in nuclear posturing, cyber operations, or military brinkmanship – risks normalising behaviour previously considered unacceptable, even if Trump's notorious TACO behaviour (short for: “Trump always chickens out” in the last moment) may mitigate some extremes. The overall erosion of restraint challenges the foundational logic of the post-Cold War security architecture, which relied on mutual recognition of red lines and shared understandings of proportionality. The triumph of performative politics over strategic calculus intensifies the potential for asymmetric responses, hybrid warfare, and the weaponisation of ambiguity. Moreover, Trump's affinity for AI-driven systems in security governance, combined with a weak multilateral regulatory environment, accelerates the militarisation of emerging technologies. This could produce serious consequences for future conflict patterns, and especially increase the probability of conflicts as such since the “Trump style” generally lowers the threshold to risk them.

XXXII

Looking forward, the central question for international relations is whether the Trump administration's *jouissance*-driven approach to domestic and global politics is a transient anomaly or the early sign of a deeper epochal shift which lays at the core of the re-globalisation process (Benedikter, 2021). As liberal internationalism enters a phase of exhaustion, and as technological acceleration compresses decision-making horizons, the “père-vert”, i.e. “father-oriented” or strong-single-male-centred – style of leaders who simultaneously embody crisis, rupture and revelation has become a serious destabilizing factor. From a security perspective, it could trigger new “Oedipus complexes” among various global and regional players which could be induced in the temptation to “murder the father”, which is a typical son's *jouissance* response to his “crazy father's” *jouissance*.

The challenge for the global community in Trump times lies in preventing such a potential spiral of self-exaltation from translating into self-annihilation. A future-oriented foreign and security policy must therefore reclaim Augustine's active prudence as a strategic virtue – not as restraint rooted in fear, but as the deliberate effort to stabilise a world shaken by the temptations of political pleasure as a method of self-affirmation and for the sake of voter support. Whether such prudence can re-emerge with sufficient strength will determine whether the current international system evolves towards renewed equilibrium or descends further into the ecstatic volatilities of playing with regional, national and international apocalypses in all too often provocative and much too risky ways.

XXXIII

All this is especially valid in the face of “The Next Generation Information Environment” that is rising globally, as pointed out by, for example, a recent NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence (NATO Stratcom COE) Report presented at the Munich Security

Conference 2026 (NATO StratCOM CoE, 2026). If Trump's political style is *jouissance* – a performative politics of excess that exalts rupture over continuity – and thereby builds on social media and public presence without the interference of fact-checking gatekeepers, irritations and misunderstandings – also among allies – are set to grow. This is especially probable in the relation of Trump's political style and communication habits with those of Europe, which are fundamentally opposed both historically and normatively. Europe's default habitus remains its mirror image: a culture of proceduralism, anticipated normativity and planning, legal-institutional constraint, incrementalism, and consensus-building that seeks stability through rules, complicated committee procedures, over-bureaucratisation and layered compromise. In short, the EU is the opposite of Trump's *jouissance*. Nevertheless, a growing number of European citizens seems to feel that the anthem of the EU, which bears as its centrepiece "*Freude, schöner Götterfunken*", i.e. enjoyment as the highest experience of self-in-whole, has become an empty shell, and that Europe, as U2's Bono put it (Bono, 2018), has become an idea without a feeling. To this perception, Trump's "wild and untamed" style is seen as a refreshingly emotional alternative. In this way, Trump's political behaviour is dividing Europe, too, into two sharply opposed camps which are mirroring, to some extent, the effect of Trump's *jouissance*.

XXXIV

Here is not the place to discuss the many approaches which, against this backdrop, have tried to streamline Trump's *jouissance* into one or the other known political typology, for example the "new fascism" parallel drawn by Eva Illouz. What Illouz has pointed out, irrespective of direct historico-political identifications, is that "ideas that are not fuelled by emotions die" (Zuzovsky, 2023) – and that Trump's psychology is the perfect adaptation to this basic law of the post-modern attention economy. Also, particularly many parallels are being drawn between Trump's pleasure and the pleasure of the public. After what we have said, it is obvious that the overall development of populism is not only about Trump's own pleasure, but also about enjoying Trump's pleasure at the side of an increasingly "père-verse" public clinging to strong men's disruptive (and often destructive) actions. This is comparable to the viewpoint of a spectator in a video game who can enjoy *schadenfreude* with all its secret satisfactions while not being exposed to any practical responsibility. According to Illouz, the "emotional life of populism" (Schmid, 2024) based on fear and disgust is a perverse enjoyment from a safe distance that integrates the pleasure of destruction as much as the safety of the one who gets passive revenge without making his or her hands dirty.

XXXV

What is our tentative outlook?

Trump is no exception in the contemporary geopolitics of narcissism which are dominating the epoch, carried out as they are by new-old "strong men" at many points of the geopolitical spectrum. But he is their brightest expression – at least within the global alliance of democracies. Trump has co-created narcissistic geopolitics as a new normal that has replaced the international political economy with economic geopolitics. In our – certainly incomplete – collection of elements for a future retrospective psycho-political portrait of the self-named "chosen one" in most recent U.S. leadership history, we have seen symptoms which indicate that as much as it may hold true that politics is, in its core – and in most cases in human history – about money and power, this is not the whole truth about what is happening, nor is it the historical norm. As conservative U.S. media celebrity Joe Rogan put it in his fervent critique of Donald Trump,

“I think over time, as it gets analyzed and we break it down, it’s going to be one of the weirder moments for shaping human culture, and unfortunately for throwing gasoline on this already burning fire of conflict between the various factions of thought in this country. It’s already a weird time...” (Celebrities Against Trump, [n.d.](#)).

Beyond that, in Trump there is an over-proportional importance of self-staging and an overwhelming personal aspiration for recognition and affirmation which is, to some extent, implicit in the radically individualistic condition of post-modern life, but finds its far exaggerated peak in his political style. According to California governor Gavin Newsom who, following his own depiction, knows Trump well, “there is a longing and a need to be loved in Donald Trump, but he is a broken man” (Jimmy Kimmel Live, [2026](#)). Because a human being is always trapped in itself by its very existence, Trump is an example of *jouissance* which offers temporary escape and, in that, is both an existential trap *and* an attempt towards self-transcendence by means of enjoyment, which, seen overall, tends to reach out for (proto-)spiritual fulfilment.

XXXVI

There is one final point to mention. Again, this is not the place to draw the full implications or even consequences of what we have seen as a certain side of Trump’s psychology underlying his socio-political actions. We do not have sufficient space here to reflect on the full range of conclusions that may arise from the described characteristics. However, we must acknowledge that in this essay we have analysed Trump’s *jouissance* at the level of personality, but said almost nothing about how the Republican Party, conservative media ecology (Fox, podcasters, Twitter/X), or campaign finance structures amplify, filter, or constrain that *jouissance*. We this approach, we have undoubtedly risked treating Trump as a metaphysical force rather than a political actor embedded in very specific institutions and discourses.

In reality, in this text we have not systematically asked substantial questions which must arise from what has been described such as: What if Trump is not the origin of *jouissance*, but its most faithful instrument within the discourse of capitalism? In Lacanian terms, the four discourses (Master, University, Hysteric, Analyst), and later the *discourse of capitalism*, describe how social bonds are structured. The capitalist discourse is the discourse in which the subject is constantly told: “Enjoy! There is no limit except your own inhibition.” It short-circuits the symbolic castration that normally regulates *jouissance*. The result is not a powerful Master but a de-subjectivised, frenzied consumer of excess; in Trump’s case, arguably, someone who appears as a leader but is actually the hollowest product of the system.

Therefore, if we have repeatedly noted that Trump comes from advertising and the attention economy, the task of any analysis which may depart from here will be to *formalise* this as the capitalist discourse in crisis. Instead of returning again and again to Trump’s childhood, his father, his need for recognition, his “broken man” psychology which is a sort of personalisation of guilt, in the sense of locating the cause in the individual’s biography rather than in the structural position he occupies, a step further will be needed to address the subjective-objective nexus, which is, *in ultima ratio*, the Trump-capitalism nexus that is per se highly contradictory and complex (for example in his relation to Wall Street, the strategic options of cryptocurrencies or the new generation of techno-capitalists).

XXXVII

A final point of self-reflection which we cannot explore further, but which would need serious attention is, exactly by including the capitalist-discourse route, the fundamental banality of Trump's *jouissance*. If Trump represents the capitalist discourse in its late-stage, unhinged form, then his *jouissance* is not unique or exceptional. Rather, it is exactly what anyone would produce in that structural position. The question here is whether Trump is what the capitalist system needs at this historical moment. It seems plausible that a Lacanian framework would predict that the more "crazy" a leader like Trump appears, the more perfectly he embodies the discourse of post-productive, ultra-indebted, and highly financialized capitalist systems in the post-postmodern era of combined uncertainty, insecurity, acceleration and virtualization – i.e. a system that seem to have "taken off" of reality quite some time ago, probably at the latest since the global financial and economic crisis of 2007-09.

So instead of potentially over-personalising the source of *jouissance* and under-theorising Trump as an *effect* of the capitalist discourse in crisis, any subsequent analysis building on our notes would have to ask: What if the oscillation between omnipotence and humiliation is precisely the rhythm of capitalist *jouissance*, always needing another hit, another transgression or backtrack? What if Trump is the (post-)political representative that implosive, late-stage capitalism needs to try in order to mask its ongoing collapse? And by diverting public attention onto the "crazy politician-jouisseur" so as to hide itself and perhaps miss systemic failure?

XXXVIII

Our conclusion, then?

Neither the history nor the psychology of ideas has ever had it easy with *realpolitik*. The fixation of entire governmental traditions since the 2000s – such as the British one – on "change", with the mechanistic and eclectic notion that an input should produce an output in terms of behaviour and attitudes, given sufficient persistence, ignores the subtle layers of *zeitgeist* and the history of ideas behind (and within) the scenes. At the same time, the signs of the growing importance of "Imaginal Politics" (Chiara Bottici) (Bottici, 2014) and "Public Imagination" (Victor Faessel, Richard Falk, Michael Curtin) (Faessel et al., 2020), have long been written on the wall. One example of the difficulties in incorporating the *zeitgeist* expressed by Trump into political-historical analysis at all – indeed, in incorporating the psychology of ideas into historiography in a manner commensurate with its significance – was Eric Hobsbawm's critique of Richard Overy's book "The Morbid Age" (Overy, 2010). Overy's work sought to capture, in terms of mood and intellectual backdrop, the *zeitgeist* of the interwar period in the first half of the 20th century, which led to the Second World War by the means of a "crisis of civilization". Many critics at that time didn't assume that there was a real importance of the immaterial surrounding factors for "real politics". Yet "Trumpism" shows why mood, *zeitgeist* and the historical unconscious – shaped by the background of a period's intellectual constellation – function as a largely preconscious, but highly influential dimension of personal and political decisions, which should by no means be underestimated. In Trump's case, it is the combination of neoliberalism transformed into neo-libertarianism with a transhumanism that sees itself as the true future humanism "beyond humanity" which, combined with a "more-than-narcissistic personality, lead into a reckless *jouissance* which tends to transcend known limits. This is why the question "Does Critical Theory still need Psychoanalysis?", as posited, for example, by Amy Allen (Baraitser, 2022), has to be taken as rhetorical and answered with a clear and unconditioned "yes".

XXXIX

Summing it up for the reader's pleasure (as we hope!), in this text we presented the following key points to take away:

- Trumpian *jouissance* defined. *Jouissance* is an intense, excessive enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle, involving thrill in transgression and self-exuberance. It is closely related to the experience of self-transcendence and beyond-the-self expansion, driving Trump's political style.
- Manifestations in behaviour. Trump's tendency to go beyond norms, exemplified by provocative actions and language such as self-coronation videos, the false self-portrayal as a fighter pilot who bombards his protesters with faeces and dozens of coined derogatory terms against his political competitors, reflects *jouissance*'s drive to play with limits and to explore the unknown despite risks.
- Collective political frenzy. Trump's *jouissance* creates a shared experience of transgression among supporters, binding them through ritualised pleasure in breaking taboos and challenging elites.
- Historical and philosophical context. Trump's behaviour can be linked to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis, Augustine's concept of earthly versus heavenly cities, and Niccolò Machiavelli's Prince, framing *jouissance* as a political force blending destruction and revelation.
- Double character of Trump's *jouissance*. At the roots of Trump's *jouissance* there seems to be an irrepressible urge for recognition which could stem from an unsatisfying recognition by father figures at an early age. This points to a subtle imbalance in Trump's psychology between a notorious absence of *jouissance* leading to a constant longing for it.
- Risks of *jouissance* excess. The constantly self-intensifying nature of *jouissance* risks gradual self-destruction and, as a result, lasting political instability, as Trump's narcissistic pleasure cannot find, by its very nature, any final fulfilment and thus can lead to the erosion of democratic norms.
- Cultural and political significance. Trump's *jouissance* reflects a broader cultural trend since the 1970s mixing boundary-breaking, horror, and pleasure which has been mirrored by popular culture, the movie industry and fiction. In an age of technological acceleration and re-globalisation it is nowadays influencing – and in turn influenced by – political solipsism and narcissistic geopolitics.
- Impact on international relations. Trump's *jouissance*-driven leadership undermines predictability and long-term strategy in domestic and foreign policy, causing volatility in security and alliances, and fostering uncertainty in geopolitical dynamics.
- European responses. Trump's style has prompted Europe to pursue strategic autonomy, reflecting contrasting political cultures and styles.
- Need for active prudence and reason. Trump's political style presents the challenge of balancing political excitement with active prudence. Balancing *jouissance* with reason is crucial to avoid geopolitical self-harm and guide societies towards renewal rather than destructive chaos in the ultimately not-so-distant post-Trump era.

XXXX

What does all this mean in perspective? And are there any antidotes to excessive *jouissance*?

As the Italian philosopher Roberto Paura put it,

“What Christopher Lasch identified in traditional values – and in religion in particular – as an antidote to the culture of narcissism is, in fact, a concept of great relevance today: that of ‘boundary’. For the narcissist, there are no limits. There is no limit to their dreams of grandeur, wealth and success, just as there is no boundary between themselves and the world. Religions are founded on limits; they draw an insurmountable dividing line between the self and God, between Lasch’s ‘minimal self’ and the infinite Absolute of the sacred. Today we don’t even want to hear about such things: and this is perhaps why the culture of narcissism is triumphing” (Paura, 2026).

Whether this is about religion or not, the search for antidotes to contemporary political narcissism is in full swing. One of the pinnacles *and* shortfalls of history is that it remains dependent on people – who are, in times of “strong” post-modern individualism, in essence all-centred on themselves. The present is an era of political narcissism of “strong men” which has caused a hyper-narcissistic geopolitical period. Yet while this is a common characteristic of the times, Trump’s attitude still stands out. Far beyond just being part of the international politics of narcissism, Trump’s politics show features of *jouissance*. *Jouissance* is more extreme than mere narcissism, as it is exuberant, outgoing and tends to expansion beyond given limits or borders, constantly bringing its bearer, willingly or not, into threshold situations of often difficult to manage and sometimes irreversible characteristics. *Jouissance* is as much the master of its bearer as its bearer thinks he can control it; and both form a unity which may seem spontaneous and irritating to the everyday observer, but has its own system and methodology. It is dominated like other psychological habits by the inseparable combination of difference by the means of repetition (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari) (Aylesworth, 2015).

Therefore, if Lacanian scholar Slavoj Žižek asserts that experience is gained when something happens that completely crashes all assumptions, including the whole theory that preceded known realities, then the advent of Donald Trump can be considered to be indeed a historical “experience”. Trump’s pleasure, incorporated in his *jouissance*, is, to some extent, the contemporary expression of Žižek’s assertion that.

“experience for me happens not when you have a theory – it’s confirmed or not – but when something happens which literally destroys the very network of presuppositions, [when] it literally destroys your world” (The Institute of Art and Ideas, 2025).¹

¹ We thank the generous reader who has made it to this point. To her or him, the unavoidable limitations of this explorative essay have become obvious, even beyond the self-reflection we have undertaken in chapters XXXVI and XXXVII. Our approach does not, in the given space, sufficiently address the biographical, educational or systemic prerequisites of Trump’s obsession; nor does it elaborate on the full, complex and ramified consequences on politics and society in the post-Trump era, which will unavoidably come and be decisively in terms of long-term impact, as every president and even influential politician may only become fully relevant in their historic dimension after they leave office. In short, musically speaking ours has been without doubt more of an *impromptu* or *capriccio* than a *sonata*. Nevertheless, it is known that even a brief yet targeted stimulation can bear serious consequences, and therefore we wish the reader the best in dealing with what we have sketched here, including by not taking it too seriously since every musical piece, be it of what genre it may ever be, is not destined to last, but has its time to then disappear for good.

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Declarations

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