

Metamodernism

A Structure of Feeling

We are living in odd times. The postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, deconstruction and irony has left us with a world in disarray; the financial system is becoming increasingly uncontrollable, our ecosystem is severely disrupted and the geopolitical structure has recently begun to appear as unstable as it has always been uneven¹.

The global debt crisis in 2008 put an end to the myth of the middle classes, exposing the monumental gap (previously papered over by debt) between the one percent and the rest of us². Meanwhile, political stability became fractured by oil crises, increasing inequality, the refugee crisis and the rise of populist extremism. Many people express a desire for change and over the last decade a new structure of feeling seems to be emerging.

Postmodernism

Since the 1950's postmodern irony has been ruling the world. Many books have been written about the power of irony. Everything should be taken with a grain of salt: religion and ideology, art and kitsch, the other and the self, truth and especially reality. And yes, postmodern irony has been very important, especially in the 90's. After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, many great thinkers and politicians believed the last big and fundamental ideological differences of opinion had been overcome. After fascism now communism was also defeated; liberal democracy prevailed. In response, Francis Fukuyama declared the *End of History*³. Nonetheless now, it

seems, history is moving rapidly beyond its all too hastily proclaimed end.

The postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over⁴. While theorists identify different factors that led to the decline of postmodernism, many critics agree that postmodernism has now been replaced by something else, but they appear less in agreement about what to make of this “something else”. Some theorists attempted to answer this question with: *Altermodernism*, *Automodernism*, *Digimodernism* or *Pseudomodernism*. However, most of these conceptions of the contemporary discourse appear to radicalize the postmodern rather than really restructure it.

In 2010 two Dutch, cultural-philosophers, Timothy Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, argued in their paper *Notes on Metamodernism* (2010), this new post-postmodernism is characterized by a continues oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment⁵. They called this emerging structure of feeling *metamodernism*.

The basics

The term *metamodernism* first appeared in the 1970s, used by philosophical, political and social theorists. However, metamodernism as a cultural paradigm received no substantial attention, until the two Dutch, cultural theorists carried it out in detail in their essay.

Epistemologically metamodernism conceives of knowledge and history with a *negative idealism*, that can be described as *as-if* thinking⁶. Metamodernism treats the grand narratives of history with as much scepticism and mistrust as postmodernism does, but at the same time it behaves *as if* these narratives exist and can be known⁷.

Ontologically metamodernism oscillates between the modern and postmodern⁸. It oscillates between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivety and knowingness, empathy and apathy. Like a pendulum, oscillating back and forth between one extreme and another⁹. Metamodernism negotiates between modernism and postmodernism through a romantic response to crisis, which essentially means that we should remain optimistic in the face of our postmodern-enabled hopelessness and act *as if* things will get better (even if we don't necessarily think they will). Metamodernism is therefore constituted by the double-bind of a modern desire for *sense* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all¹⁰.

Meta

To understand this between-ness that's so central to metamodernism, it's essential to fully understand the prefix *meta*. In metamodernism *meta* does not only signify self-reflexivity or a change of position, it also refers to Plato's *metaxy*¹¹. With *metaxy* Plato meant the oscillation between two states: in the myth of Heracles *metaxy* referred to the tragic entrapment between the world of the gods and the world of the humans, without ever entirely being a part of either of them¹². *Meta* signifies an oscillation, a swaying with and between future, present and past, here and there and somewhere; with and between ideals, mind-sets and positions¹³. Because *meta* means *with*, *between* and *beyond*, critics argue that metamodernism should be situated epistemologically *with* (post)modernism, ontologically *between* (post)modernism and historically *beyond* (post)modernism¹⁴.

So, what is metamodernism?

First of all, it's important to understand that metamodernism is a *cultural paradigm* or *cultural philosophy*. This means it's a system for understanding the world. Metamodernism can provide a *logical* understanding of how and why things happen during our time in human history. In this sense metamodernism can be perceived as a *system of logic* to help us better navigate the age we are living in¹⁵.

Metamodernism can also help us understand our *emotional* reaction to the things that are happening right now (both our reaction as individuals as well as the reactions of whole communities or nations) in that case metamodernism can be seen as a *structure of feeling*. The postmodern structure of feeling can be best described as *the sense of an ending*¹⁶.

Metamodernism has its own structure of feeling and it goes something like this: *the world is a lost place, nevertheless we should try to give meaning to it, and we should not let history take its course, even though we are still in doubt about the precise goals we need to aim for*¹⁷.

Metamodernism believes in reconstructing things that have been deconstructed, with a view towards re-establishing hope and optimism in the midst of the postmodern period, marked by irony, cynicism and despair¹⁸. This metamodern reconstructing of things is done by joining opposing elements in an entirely new configuration, rather than seeing those elements as being in competition with each other.

Postmodernism favours deconstructing wholes and putting the resulting parts in zero-sum conflict with one another.

Metamodernism focuses instead on dialogue, collaboration, simultaneity and *generative paradox*; the idea that combining things which seem impossible to combine, is an act of meaningful creation and not anarchic destruction¹⁹.

Metamodernism oscillates between extremes, which means it moves so quickly between two extremes that the way it acts

incorporates both these extremes and everything between them²⁰. The result is something totally new. This idea of doing two very different things at once, to create something entirely new, is defined by metamodernism as *both/and* thinking²¹. Both/and thinking means thinking it is *both* of two things *and* therefore something new.

Metamodernism is a *post-post-truth* phenomenon, because out of the debris of meaning, goodwill and hope it refashions a new *meta-narrative* (a narrative about how we make narratives) that's essentially optimistic²². Because of this, metamodernism celebrates a so-called *informed naivety*²³. This informed naivety helps us to come up with radically fresh ideas. However, in these instances it's not that we forget reality, but it's rather that we, informed by this reality, make a conscious decision to temporarily sidestep or even ignore it²⁴. We are living in a time in which we feel (and are) very isolated. Western society is extremely individualized and the internet is partly to blame. The result of this isolation is an increased awareness of distance; between people, communities, and between objects and ideas. Postmodernism feeds of distances, it thrives on our feeling of being alienated from one another and from our communities. Metamodernism, on the other hand, seeks to collapse these distances. Especially the distance between things that appear to be opposites, in order to recreate a sense of wholeness that allows us to transcend our environment and move forward with the aim of creating positive change in our communities, our world and in our relations with each other.

Metamodern trends and tendencies

To illustrate what is meant by metamodernism and to demonstrate the extent to which it has come to dominate the

cultural imagination over the last decade, it is best to take a closer look at trends and tendencies in contemporary art. Just like modernism and postmodernism, metamodernism is expressed through a variety of practices.

One of these metamodern practices is what the German theorist Raoul Eshelman termed as *Performatism*. Eshelman describes Performatism as *the wilful self-deceit to believe in, or identify with, or solve, something in spite of itself*²⁵. In his book *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (2008), Eshelman maintains we've entered a new, monist epoch in which aesthetically imposed belief replaces endless irony as the dominant force in culture. According to him this cultural dominant works by artificially *framing* viewers in such a way that they have no choice but to accept the external givens of a work and identify with the elements or characters within it²⁶. Thus, *Performatism* is about forcing a particular illusion of order on a viewer and not about experiencing the material world directly or capturing it *as it is* in a particular, decisive instant²⁷. Performatists art *accidentally* always shows the world to be striving towards a higher order and unity. And as the invisible higher source of that order, the artist forces us to believe by using aesthetic means²⁸.

The cultural critic Jörg Heiser has observed the emerging of what he calls *Romantic Conceptualism*²⁹. He claims that the rational and calculated art of Jeff Koons, Thomas Demand and Cindy Sherman is increasingly replaced with affective and mostly sentimental and coincidental art of Tacita Dean, Didier Courbot and Mona Hatoum, but also the Dutch artist Maaike Schoorel fits in this perfectly. Postmodernism deconstructs, Heiser's Romantic Conceptualism reconstructs.

Jerry Saltz, the leading American art critic, also has observed the emerging of another kind of sensibility oscillating between beliefs, assumptions and attitudes:

“I’m noticing a new approach to art making in recent museum and gallery shows. It’s an attitude that says, I know that the art I’m creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn’t mean this isn’t serious. At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind- what Emerson called “alienated majesty”³⁰.

What Saltz observed is now called the *New Sincerity* movement³¹. This trend is generally characterized by expanding and breaking away from postmodern concepts as irony, cynicism and scepticism. Instead, *New Sincerity* celebrates seriousness, genuineness, authenticity and...sincerity.

Of course, Jerry Saltz exclusively writes about tendencies in American art and the *New Sincerity* movement is mainly limited to the US, but similar sentiments can be observed on the European continent. In my essay *Metamodernism and Contemporary Art* I’ll elaborate more on this subject.

New Romanticism

Metamodernism appears to find its clearest expression in an emerging neoromantic sensibility³². This is not very

surprising. As stated earlier, metamodernism is epistemologically expressed by *negative idealism* (as-if thinking) and Kant's negative idealism was most successfully expressed by Early German Romanticism³³.

Romanticism is a notoriously pluralistic and ambiguous concept. In everyday language the term is generally used in a reduced sense, meaning sentimental, far from civilization, full of atmosphere, rapturous, soft, and dreamy. However, the complex character of the actual movement has little to do with this commentation of the term. The Romantic attitude is about the attempt to turn the finite into the infinite, while recognizing that it can never be realized³⁴. According to Jos de Mul, modernity can be considered as enthusiastic thinking about the future without any irony, and the postmodern years are characterized by irony without any trace of enthusiasm³⁵. New Romanticism is the oscillation between enthusiasm and irony.



Olafur Eliasson, *The weather Project*, 2003-04

This New Romanticism is being expressed in many different art forms and a wide variety of styles and media. It is, for example, visible in Olafur Eliasson, Koen Vermeule, Michael Raedecker and Dan Attoe's obsessions with the commonplace. Or in Peter Doig's re-appropriation of culture through nature. It can also be observed in Kaye Donachie, David Thorpe and Justine Kurland's fascination with the fictitious and in Charles Avery's other worlds³⁶. What these different styles and art forms have in common with one another is their use of mysticism, estrangement and

alienation, to clarify potential alternatives. The reason these artists don't choose to employ methods and materials better suited to their mission or task, is that their intention is not to fulfil it, but to attempt in spite of its unfulfillable-ness³⁷. The point of Glen Rubsamen's aspiration is exactly that it can't be fulfilled: nature and culture can't be the same and nor can any one of them ever entirely take over the other. Yet, this doesn't stop the artist from trying.

The difference between the metamodern oscillation that's visible in contemporary art and the postmodern in-betweenness as can be seen in much of the art from the 1960-90's, is most visible in the work of artists who engage with the commonplace, everyday life and the mundane. Postmodern art deconstructs our assumptions about our living space, New Romantic art heightens our assumptions about our living space³⁸.

New Romanticism should not merely be understood as re-appropriation, though. Instead it should be recognized as re-signification. New Romanticism is the re-signification of "the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seamliness of the unfamiliar and the finite with the semblance of the infinite"³⁹.

Conclusion

Metamodernism can be understood as a general response to our current, crisis-ridden, times by a generation that attempts to surpass postmodernism. Therefore metamodernism is reflective of a generation reacting to its predecessors by saying: *We're tired of listening to your whining. If you are so concerned about the moral state of society, then do something about it.* The next generation of artists *is* doing something about it. It may take a couple of more years, but the metamodern culture of negative idealism will displace

postmodernism as the dominant cultural paradigm. However, for now, the metamodern oscillation and as-if mentality indicates that humankind will continue to progress toward confronting the issues of the 21st century. That makes me oscillate between enthusiasm and irony.

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²¹ Idem.

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