

# Metamodernism

## & New Romanticism

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*The world must be romanticized. In this way its original meaning will be rediscovered. To romanticize is nothing but a qualitative heightening. In this process the lower self becomes identified with a better self. (...) Insofar as I present 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, I romanticize it<sup>1</sup>.*

These words by Novalis have long been suppressed by the modern paradigm and ignored by postmodern discourses. However, over the last two decades or so, they have gradually begun to re-emerge. In 2005 they were reprinted in Max Hollein's catalogue *Ideal world: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art*<sup>2</sup>. They were expressed with such conviction, there could be no more doubt about it: a new sense of the Romantic has emerged<sup>3</sup>.

Our society is marked by increasing mobility and the waning of social bonds. As a response, a new yearning for intimacy and security seems to prevail. As a result we are now confronted with a revival of the traditional work wherever we turn to<sup>4</sup>. It can be seen in the re-appraisal of Bas Jan Ader's questioning of Reason, in the attention for Peter Doig's re-appropriation of culture through nature and it can be perceived in Olafur Eliasson's obsession with the commonplace<sup>5</sup>. It can also be observed in David Thorpe's fascination with the

fictitious or in Charles Avery's interest for fictional elsewheres<sup>6</sup>. Many contemporary artists seem to have taken up the Romantic spirit. However, behind the desire for the beautiful, the magic and the paradisiacal, the dark and eerie are as present as the knowledge that Utopias are doomed to failure.

### **The (New) Romantic movement**

No other period of German intellectual history has produced as many misunderstandings as the Romantic movement<sup>7</sup>. The term *romantic* is, in everyday language, generally used in a reduced sense, meaning dreamy, rapturous, soft, sentimental and far from civilization. However, this commentation of the term has little to do with the actual complex character of the movement. Romanticism aims at more than the paradisiacal, the beautiful or the sublime; it also stands for a generation's



deep scepticism about the rigid conventions of (academic) institutions and the call for artistic independence. It's an emotional symptom of a social reality informed by political, social and economic upheavals. The current generation of artists counter the decline of extensive social plans and the restructuring of political systems with an aesthetic beyond the ordinary, using a vocabulary of yearning rooted in the historical Romantic movement<sup>8</sup>. However,

the motifs from contemporary artists do not only stem from deep down inside them, but also come from magazines, films, newspapers, etc. In addition to quotes and contextualization, the individual elements are

translated into dream visions, characterized by an open and associative structure<sup>9</sup>. Thus, Peter Doig's figure of a painter, viewed from behind and facing an impressive mountain landscape, combines imagination and historical photography, rather than presenting a self-portrait of the artist.

Loneliness is an essential part of Romanticism and as a central subject it is mainly dealt with in the form of sceneries filled with symbolic qualities. Contemporary art contains a wide variety on this theme that range from the threatened idyll to the overwhelming impression of outer vastness and nature.



Christopher Orr, *Untitled*, 2007

Christopher Orr exposes his painted figures to the confusion of haze and darkness. Nature is reduced to a symbolic prop. His figures are not granted any chance of spiritual transfiguration; caught in an inconceivable distance from nature, they give expression to a key element of New Romanticism.

As I've said before: contemporary artists counter the restructuring of political systems and the loss of comprehensive social plans with an aesthetic beyond the ordinary and this transitional state creates a vocabulary of yearning rooted in the historical Romantic movement. New Romanticism is Meta-Romanticism that uses postmodern means, unfolding a synthesis of past and present, emotion and discourse. And indeed, concentrating on the tragic, the sublime, the uncanny and the mystical, often figurative

representation and what appears to be beyond the figurative, contemporary artists present the commonplace with significance and the finite with the appearance of the infinite<sup>10</sup>. But their attempts inevitably, and necessarily, fail. As Friedrich Schlegel stated: the essence of Early German Romanticism is: *'that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected'*<sup>11</sup>.

Romanticism is often misunderstood, because it's a pluralistic and ambiguous concept. No other period of German intellectual history has produced as many misunderstandings as the Romantic movement. Isaiah Berlin observed that Romanticism is:

*Unity and multiplicity. It is fidelity to the particular...and also mysterious tantalising vagueness of outline. It is beauty and ugliness. It is art for art's sake, and art as instrument of social salvation. It is strength and weakness, individualism and collectivism, purity and corruption, revolution and reaction, peace and war, love of life and love of death*<sup>12</sup>.

Thus, essentially, Romanticism can be defined precisely by its oscillation between these opposite poles<sup>13</sup>.

It's important to understand New Romanticism as a sensibility rather than a paradigm, it's more an attitude than an aesthetic regime. Romanticism is about the attempt to turn the finite into the infinite, whilst recognizing that it can never (and should never) be realized. Therefore New Romanticism is characterized by this Romantic oscillation between attempt and failure or between enthusiasm and irony<sup>14</sup>.

Intriguingly enough, many of these New Romantic artists engage with the most unlikely of spheres: the commonplace, the everyday and the mundane. Gregory Crewdson



photographs towns haunted by the nature they repress or sublimate. Glenn Rubsamén presents mundane objects as exceptional and artificial objects as natural<sup>15</sup>. Koen Vermeule fills everyday landscapes with symbolic qualities and focuses on the contemporary loneliness of man.

This engagement with the commonplace and the everyday is not surprising, for New Romanticism is, after all, a reaction to both modernism and postmodernism, just as

Koen Vermeule, *Panama*, 2013

Romanticism was a response to the Enlightenment. The everyday and the commonplace have been central to both modernism and postmodernism; modernism reconstructs the everyday, postmodernism deconstructs and New Romanticism attempts to *both-neither* reconstruct *and-nor* deconstruct<sup>16</sup>. Instead it seeks to accept the commonplace as it is, whilst imagining how it could be, but never will be. And therefore it presents us with the impossible possibility of another *here-and-now*.

## Conclusion

New Romanticism seems to be a response from a contemporary generation of artists to current happenings in our society; the financial crisis, environmental crisis, refugee crisis, growing inequality and (geo-) political tensions. The

longing for a way out, for ideals and the sheltering of perspectives is becoming ever more urgent and ends in a renewed desire for an ideal world. Contemporary art reflects this social context and New Romanticism provides these artists with the iconography and vocabulary to express their dissatisfaction with a world that becomes more and more uncontrollable and increasingly uninhabitable, and their desire for a future that is yet unknown.

# Bibliography

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