

Robin VAN DEN AKKER, Alison GIBBONS, Timotheus VERMEULEN (eds.), *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, ISBN 978-1-7834-8960-2, 245 p.

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The turn of the millennium garnered a series of approaches that sought to redefine both the methodology used in cultural studies and literary theory and the new sensibility proposed by young authors and performers in the fields of art, music, film, literature, and new media. These approaches were also stimulated by the various shortcomings of the more historicised fields, such as traditional comparative studies, hermeneutics, deconstructivism or postmodernism, which were, since the eighties, subject to different attempts of methodological renewal and adjustment to the needs of the age of globalisation (World Literature studies is a good example of this methodological turn).

This series of methodological reorientations in the cultural and artistic field can be understood as an attempt to frame, from a theoretical standpoint, the emergent millennial sensibilities. Cultural theorists that belong to the most varied of subfields in the humanities feel the need to address movements that have already produced cultural objects that could be considered symptomatic to a so-called new *Weltanschauung*. This is also the case with the volume *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen, which tries to encapsulate the artistic, cultural, and political manifestations that emerged under capitalism within the frames of “metamodernism”.

The premise of this volume seeks to build upon the configurations of new types of historicity and affect that merit their own defining concept beyond the inherent limitations of postmodernism. The inadequacy of postmodernist discourse in what concerns the inclusion of emergent millennial sensibilities further urges a selection of new terms that can better contain and explain them. The shift that occurred following

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the new cultural products is explained by the authors of this volume through the concept of metamodernism, which can be defined as an intersection of opposite moments, a “structure of feeling” for which past and present are alternative creditors.

The ambition of the volume, as van der Akker and Vermeulen frame it in the introductory chapter, titled *Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism*, is to

[m]ap today's dominant cultural developments by way of the arts; develop an adequate language to discuss these dominant ways of feeling, doing and thinking, and relate these contemporary concepts, precepts, affects to recent configurations of Western capitalist societies (3).

The limits of the postmodernist discourse on history and historicity make necessary a revisiting of these terms that can better represent the depth and breadth gained after the 2000s: “the bend of history” and “senses of this bend that have come to define contemporary cultural productions and political discourse” (3) in clear contrast to the Postmodernist view of “the end of history”.

As a working concept, metamodernism is rather defined by the contributors of this volume through negations and tensions. It is “*neither* a manifesto, *nor* a social movement, stylistic register, or philosophy” (5) that could be considered as a programmatic rupture from the critical and theoretical traditions, it is rather “that element of culture that circumscribes it but cannot be traced back to any of its individual ingredients” (8). Metamodernism, the editors assess, is “a structure of feeling” that situates itself “*with or among* older and newer structures of feeling” (8). The volume proposes a tripartite discussion related to the three dimensions mentioned in the very title: historicity, affect, and depth. The first element tries to capture the movement between the old and the new, the second between naïveté and scepticism, and the latter between truth and post-truth or subjective authenticity.

The first section opens with van den Akker’s study on the metamodernist regime of historicity as a multi-tense regime that emerges concurrently with events such as 9/11 or the world financial crisis of 2007-2008 and generates symptomatic artistic responses. From here, the section proposes a series of studies applied to such cultural productions. James McDowell proposes a recovery “of the neglect”, read as a metamodernist product and its use in the subfield of film criticism. “The quirky

sensibility” represents one such metamodern structure of feeling, materialised through the millennial and post-millennial American comedies that are defined through a mix of affective and tonal logics. *Fantastic Mr Fox*, *Glory at Sea* are, for McDowell, symptomatic examples for this mixture, two productions that introduce, in some respect, “a realm beyond language” and an intersection of two attitudes: one intellectual, one affective. *Shortbus* also raises several issues that may be read in a metamodernist key, insofar as it affirms a sort of “queer utopianism” in which queer society is no longer discussed in terms of the aggressive embracing that was characteristic to postmodernity. *Shortbus* asserts an inclusive vision on queer society. In the following chapter, Josh Toth analyses *Beloved* in a similar key, emphasizing the way in which Toni Morrison’s novel marks “a movement out of postmodernity” and towards metamodernism, professing what Toth calls “an affirmative critique”, a critique of postmodernist critique and of its way of addressing past and its relation to it. In this respect, *Beloved* is regarded as a forerunner to a metamodernist era.

In chapter four, Jörg Heiser brings forth another metamodern phenomenon, this time one that defines a new relationship between art and the internet: super-hybridity. Looking at it through a post-internet lens, Heiser analyses the role of the internet in the creative act and the shift from a creative fantasy that produces literary or musical works to one that generates codes and virtual programs. Thus, super-hybridity is “more than just a set of artistic practices, but (...) a social practice that can be exploited for all sorts of ideological and political ends” (56). The resulting fantasies that are at the intersection of artistry and programming instruments may, however, result in projects that are harmful for certain communities. Here, Heiser warns about the clash between multiple stages of progress and a certain “asynchronicity” that resulted in the creation of communities such as ISIS and ISL, which combine violence formatted by a religious fantasy with modern means of dissemination. In this “realm of code”, the most perilous transgression that can occur is viewing power, tyranny, and war as mere games.

The second part of the volume, *Affect*, discusses metamodern sensibility and its materialisations in contemporary cultural consumer objects. Lee Konstantinou opens this section with the study “Four Faces of Postirony”, in which postmodern irony is reassessed for its central place it occupies in present-day culture as well as its ruinous effect. For this general postmodern attitude of apathy, the author opposes four models of “postirony”: “motivated postmodernism”, used to describe “the

practice of justifying postmodern literary techniques as verisimilitude” (91), “credulous metafiction”, which uses “postmodern form” in order to reject “postmodern content” (93), “the postironic Bildungsroman”, a sort of revival *a rebours* of outmoded genres and historical forms of realism, and, finally, “relational art”, best exemplified by mockumentaries and “reaction shots” used in TV shows such as *The Office* or *Parks and Recreation*.

These four models are further analysed in the subsequent studies of this section. For example, Alison Gibbons’ “Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect” deals with treating current autofiction as a genuine metamodern genre. The metamodernist turn of autofiction can be traced, according to Gibbons, in the treatment of subjectivity:

Contemporary autofictions do not only narrativise the self, but they also thematise the sociological and phenomenological dimensions of personal life such as how identities relate to social roles, how time and space are lived and how experience is often mediated by textual and/or digital communication. It is in this sense that metamodern affect is situational; it is ironic yet sincere, sceptical yet heartfelt, solipsistic yet desiring of connection (130).

Moreover, Kai Hanno Schwind’s and Gry C. Rustad’s study, “The Joke That Wasn’t Funny Anymore: Reflections on the Metamodern Sitcom”, offers the most accessible option of understanding metamodern sensibility and even provides the most comprehensive definition of the concept. The two authors address contemporary American sitcoms and their employment of humour as a sort of barometer for the different shifts in societal perceptions. Sitcoms have evolved in society’s pace: from postmodern racist humour and cold irony to metamodern humour, which is viewed as an “embarrassment humour”. Metamodernism transforms “the laughing at” into “the laughing with”. The prime examples for this shift are the shows *Community* and *Family Guy*. Whereas the former could be considered metamodernist, the latter’s magical realism still retains the postmodernist application of aesthetic deconstruction of irony and intertextuality that emerges from postmodern anxieties. What *Community* manages to do is rather an aesthetisation of the characters and their respective story arcs, while alienating any attempts at deconstruction. In this sense, its usage of pastiche and irony is wholly metamodern, focusing on the network

of affects and elements that expose the emotional needs of the characters. Another comparative treatment that the authors provide is between the shows *Seinfeld* and *Louie* and *Parks and Recreation*. While *Seinfeld* is brimming with cold irony, apathy, and treats its characters as objects through which it introduces comical situations in order to make a mockery of banal social norms, *Louie* and *Parks and Recreation* creates authentic characters that move away from postmodern resignation and disarming apathy and move toward a “commitment to impossible possibilities” (144). In the words of the authors, the definition of metamodernist attitude is: “this is all going to hell, but at least we tried”. Both scepticism and naïveté represent core metamodernist ways of perceiving existence. The clash between irony and authenticity is revealed when one admits that “there are no really good people, just flawed ones who do their best” (145).

The final section of the volume, dedicated to *Depth*, introduces a different take on the problem of truth. The most relevant chapter is the one authored by Sam Browse, “Between Truth, Sincerity and Satire: Post-Truth Politics and the Rhetoric of Authenticity”, which discusses the idea of the triumph of “truthiness” over the truth and the relationship between sincerity and authenticity:

[I]n post-truth politics, the veracity of what one says matters far less than the extent to which one sincerely believes it. (...) The things that ‘my gut tells me’ have the ring of truth about them – a ‘truthiness’ – that facts simply do not. Post-truth politics represent the triumph of ‘truthiness’ over truth (167).

The *Epilogue*, authored by James Elkins, makes a final argument for the need of new, updated forms of metacritical discourse that are no longer indebted to poststructuralist foundations. By denouncing the “dissonance between the conceptualisation of writing in the theoretical sources (...) and the well-mannered prose that continues to be produced by the art world” (203), Elkins makes a case for going beyond the strictures of academic disciplinarity and towards a new way of writing that transcends the barriers of historical, critical, and analytical writing, a form of “art writing” (210).

The volume edited by van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen contributes to a necessary discussion regarding what comes after postmodernity, while coming up with a series of pertinent solutions to problems that caused hindrances to older

cultural discourses. Beyond mapping metamodernity through its three main elements – historicity, affect, and depth – and suggesting a new language that can be capable of problematising the realities of this newer, “weirder present”, the most important contribution of this book to the present-day theoretical discourse lies within identifying the very need to address all these issues. The lack of a comprehensive language that can contain and explain the various artistic responses to a series of cultural events and socio-political shifts that are more and more radical and impactful to everyday life is perhaps the single most urgent issue in this day and age. Only by updating the language and by revising the theoretical discourse applied to the cultural field can one make more intelligible the new means of producing art at the turn of the millennium. *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism* both addresses these needs and proposes more than a few solutions and discursive alternatives to these concerns.