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**WE ARE ALL METAMODERNS: AN INTRODUCTION TO METAMODERNISM**

**VŠICHNI JSME METAMODERNÍ: ÚVOD DO METAMODERNISMU**

## **DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE**

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## **Permission / Svolení k zapůjčení práce**

I have no objections to this MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

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## 1 Introduction

People like classifications. An -ism here, an -ism there, and then there are -isms everywhere. It is almost as if we could not comprehend the world without the help of a suffix. There is something ironic about expressing such a view towards the very idea of one's thesis in the very introduction; and yet, I have written these words sincerely. As I shall hopefully demonstrate in the course of this work, it is perhaps this attitude that best sums up the metamodern view and addresses the condition of "post-postmodernity".

This work aims to explain what metamodernism is and why it matters. It will take into account the critical literature on the topic and demonstrate that metamodernism is an evolving phenomenon that is, in fact, becoming the current cultural paradigm. This work does not seek to "refute" postmodernism as a form of thinking and conceiving of the world and culture, but it does aim to point out the factors that led to the decline of the postmodern paradigmatic model. I will also contextualise metamodernism within the responses addressing the cultural codes generated in the wake of postmodernism. Metamodernism, as with any cultural movement, initially started as an attempt to find new forms of expression and experimentation, trying to move beyond the cynical and ironic postmodernism(s) of yesteryear and towards new, more sincere approaches to society, art and culture in general. At the same time, contrary to what one might intuitively expect, metamodernism does not reject postmodernism, but builds upon it. It will be the aim of this paper to distinguish metamodernism as a paradigmatic shift from the earlier suggested modes. Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm (henceforth simply Storm), one of the greatest metamodern critics currently writing on the topic, outlined the term thusly:

Metamodernism is what we get when we take the strategies associated with postmodernism and productively reduplicate and turn them

in on themselves. This will entail disturbing the symbolic system of poststructuralism, producing a genealogy of genealogies, deconstructing deconstruction, and providing a therapy for therapeutic philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

Metamodernism, as the name suggests, serves as a sort of connection between modernism and postmodernism. The “meta” prefix of metamodernism does not refer to metafiction, as might be mistakenly believed. It refers to the “metaxy”, or oscillation, as its crucial element. Contrary to the tenets of postmodernism, metamodernism rejects the rejection of metanarratives. Metamodernism, in short, oscillates between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony. The postmodern stance of detachment is no longer viable, but neither is the modernist over-commitment. Where postmodern irony begets apathy, metamodern irony begets desire. As it happens, this is one of the major differences between metamodernism and postmodernism, which, especially in its post-structuralist forms had in fact rejected modernism – one may simply recall J.F. Lyotard’s famous maxim that the postmodern condition is defined by the “incredulity toward metanarratives.”<sup>2</sup>

By metanarratives Lyotard meant the totalising interpretations of the world, its history and meaning, ranging from religion, philosophy, art, or, especially significant for the focus of this study, the project of the Enlightenment and its emphasis on the primacy of reason. This drive might be easily understood as a defence mechanism against the totalising interpretations that defined preceding modernism(s) and which could be held accountable for the ruin of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Postmodernists sought to expose these narratives for the power structures that they really were. However, it bears remembering that when Lyotard wrote of this incredulity, he was merely describing the postmodern condition, rather than endorsing it, as it

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (London: The University of Chicago Press), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979 [1984]). xxiv.

may seem at first glance.<sup>3</sup> While this property initially offered critics such as Michel Foucault the liberty to approach pre-established concepts such as modernity and expose the structures of power within them, their incredulity eventually reached its limits, as will be the argument of this thesis. After all, there is no higher aim or goal in postmodernism; it is, by its very conception, an immanent model with no leeway for transcendence. This is why Jameson saw in postmodern theories the collapse of the “depth model” as “depth is replaced by surface”.<sup>4</sup> As I will discuss in the course of this work, metamodernism seeks a return to depth models as well as to historicity and affect, which postmodernism had previously dismissed.

Furthermore, topics (or, indeed, facts of metanarratives) such as social justice, environmental protection and activism have come to the forefront of the metamodern thought, that emerged and continues to emerge from the deadlock of postmodernism, in contrast to the postmodern ethos of doubt and its pre-occupation with endings. Reading works such as Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*,<sup>5</sup> one is reminded of postmodernism’s tendency to end things. It sees itself as the end of everything: the end of ideology, the end of language, the end of philosophy, the end of... the end. Hence the permeating odour of defeatism and nihilism that so repulses the metamodernists. Storm summed up the frustration with the postmodern anti-system: “Postmodern scepticism was supposed to be liberating, but it failed us”.<sup>6</sup> Yet, and this cannot be stressed enough, the aim of metamodernism is not to attempt to turn back the clock of culture to the times of modernism and its illusions of progress, or to go even farther into the imagined past of premodernity, as self-professed traditionalists seek to do. After all, it was precisely the failure of such modernist illusions that spawned the postmodern disbelief. Judging from the collapse of modernist projects in the wake of World

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<sup>3</sup> Saul Newman, “Post-Truth, Postmodernism and The Public Sphere” in *Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics*, eds. Maximilian Conrad et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991 [1984]), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 2.

War II, we might add that postmodernism really was the only way “forward”, as ironic (and metamodern) that may sound. Even during the birth pains of postmodernism, one may detect unities of opposites that will later come to define the metamodern sensibility of our own day. Perhaps there is a possibility to move beyond modernist essentialism and postmodern scepticism after all.

This is exactly where the major failure of postmodernism as a *code* lies. Despite the fact that postmodernism sees itself as having some moral obligations, of being a moral project that fosters critical thinking and self-scrutiny, it fails to do the same when it comes to itself. Despite all its high ambitions and proclamations, despite all the discursive terrorism, postmodernism does *not* promote or even offer solidarity. It is an extremely judgemental and dismissive code, a prism, which at its worst produces only arrogance. This quality is a crucial difference between postmodernism, modernism and metamodernism; whereas postmodernism as a stage of development emerged from the resentment of modernity, and modernism by extension emerged from the rejection of its cultural antecedents, metamodernism emerges from the synthesis of the various stages, although it does mock postmodernism for its inner contradictions quite a bit.

In its conception, this work began as a response to the discontents of postmodernity. The core of the postmodern worldview has become inundated with its own nihilistic excess and postmodernism, like the Nietzschean Last Man, must be overcome. The inherent hypocrisy of the postmodern spectacle lies in the fact that its mode of critique is geared towards deconstruction, rather than to any worthwhile construction, which is beneficial when combating totalitarianism, but counter-productive in the face of contemporary crises. Like David Foster Wallace said in his essay *Big Red Son*: “Underneath it all, though, we know the whole thing sucks.”<sup>7</sup> In his comprehensive essay on the metamodernisms in Czech poetry, Karel Piorecký

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<sup>7</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 4.

expressed his view that the only link between postmodernism and metamodernism is their mutual rejection of the fanaticism of modernism.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the metamodern sentiment is closer to its modernist forefather in that it seeks to transform the goals of modernism through the means of irony, while postmodernism relies on the same means to destroy such goals. Indeed, as Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker commented: “The postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over.”<sup>9</sup> Exactly what caused the death of postmodernism is not clear. Perhaps it was caused by material events, such as climate change, financial crises, terrorism, and the digital revolution, among others, or by cultural phenomena, namely the appropriation of critique by the market, or by developments in mass culture.<sup>10</sup> Further pressure on the ailing postmodern sentiment comes from the diverging models of identity politics, queer theory, or post-colonialism. No matter the cause, this thesis will not focus specifically on explaining the decline of postmodernism, but will employ the postmodern paradigm for the contextualisation of the emergence and proliferation of metamodernism.

While it is a cliché to state that we are living in ever more globalised world, it is less stressed that we are living in an increasingly virtual one. Metamodernism offers what postmodernism never could: hope. The postmodern offerings of pastiche and collage, of melancholy and apathy mixed with cynicism have gotten stale. Metamodernism, on the contrary, consciously strives to offer a resolution, albeit with an ironic undercurrent. This work will thus offer the perspective of actor-network theory as a viable metamodern framework as opposed to postmodern deconstructions. I will also focus on some of the cultural developments that emerged from the disaffection with postmodernism and could be labelled metamodern, namely the phenomena of vaporwave and cli-fi. The developments emerged

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<sup>8</sup> Karel Piorecký, “Romantismus poučených snů (Metamodernismy v současné české poezii),” *Tvar*, 2021 <<https://itvar.cz/romantismus-poucenych-snilku-metamodernismy-v-soucasne-ceske-poezii>> accessed January 2, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, “Notes on metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, no. 1 (2010): 2.

<sup>10</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes,” 2.

in part due to postmodernism's lack of empathy. I will dedicate a part of this thesis to examine the phenomenon of post-truth, which I see as a consequence of the postmodern paradigm. Metamodernism, on the other hand, is further distinguished precisely by its empathetic approach, which further translates into better ability to synthesise rather than dismiss. Seth Abramson put it eloquently:

Metamodernism seeks to collapse distances, especially the distance between things that seem to be opposites, to recreate a sense of wholeness that allows us to -- in the lay sense -- transcend our environment and move forward with the aim of creating positive change in our communities and the world.<sup>11</sup>

On this note, the problem with analysing postmodernism lies in the fact that by now, all the seminal studies of postmodernism that one feels compelled to resort to, such as the works of Lyotard and Jameson, are just so *dated* from the perspective of today (at the time of writing this 'today' is the year 2024). The trends that these works analyse culminated in the 70's and 80's and while we certainly do still experience the aftershocks of the cultural, philosophical, and artistic quakes of those times, the world has since then largely moved on. For example, the weight postmodern scholars accorded to the role of television seems positively exaggerated when viewed from the perspective of the internet age. Jameson's notion of "late capitalism" and its equation with postmodernism seems prehistorical when we consider that his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* came out before the time of mass internet, the 2007-2008 financial crisis, the emergence of precariat, the gig economy and many other marvels only possible in "later capitalism." As a result, this thesis will examine the concept of hypermodernism as a an expression of neo-liberalism and as a competing code to metamodernism in the era of post-postmodernity.

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<sup>11</sup> Seth Abramson, "Metamodernism: The Basics," *HuffPost*, Oct. 13, 2014 <[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/metamodernism-the-basics\\_b\\_5973184](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/metamodernism-the-basics_b_5973184)> accessed January 2, 2023.

The very tenets of postmodernism are off from today's perspective. But maybe they have always been off. Lyotard's famous maxim that the "grand narrative has lost its credibility" is particularly jarring when one considers the media landscape, particularly when it comes to the internet; there are metanarratives virtually everywhere. Even postmodernism's inherent pessimism when it comes to such evergreens as the death of God, disenchantment, fallenness of Being et cetera is on its own a kind of metanarrative.<sup>12</sup> Metamodernism, on the contrary, acknowledges the continuing relevance of metanarratives, and this work will be an attempt to revive the interest in metanarratives in the context of the emerging cultural paradigm of metamodernism. In the following chapter, we will aim to define the key characteristics of metamodernism itself.

## **2 Towards a Definition of Metamodernism**

Metamodernism is meta only in far as it is metareal. Where realism is modern and antirealism is postmodern, metamodernism realizes that the two are, in fact, not mutually opposite. This chapter will thus briefly address the different ways of how modernism, postmodernism and metamodernism approach reality and why exactly is this differentiation crucial in our understanding of metamodernism. A core point of critique related to postmodernism is that of its apparent anti-realism. The debate surrounding the contention between realism and anti-realism appears under many different names. Anti-realism may just as well be labelled idealism, or we could simplify the dichotomy by presenting the debate as the struggle between the mind-dependent and mind-independent convictions. As is the case, the conflict between the two persuasions is based on a misunderstanding (as is usually the case with conflicts).

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<sup>12</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 13.

However, postmodernism does not equal mere voluntarism as it may appear. While the postmodernists argued for a variety of views regarding reality, none of the stereotypically “canonical” postmodernists such as Foucault, Derrida or Lyotard were voluntarists as in that they would believe in the world being universally mind-dependent.<sup>13</sup> A famous illustration of this contention was provided by Bruno Latour who caricatured the attempts of critics to counter what they perceived to be the claims of social construction by “thump[ing] on a table” in order to sufficiently demonstrate reality and to disprove their opponents.<sup>14</sup> This caricature of the anti-realist position is so widespread that it has come to be known as the “furniture argument”.<sup>15</sup> In *reality*, the term to best describe the postmodern condition is not such voluntarism, but rather linguistic scepticism. This scepticism manifested itself in the doubt that linguistic categories are sufficient enough to represent mind-independent world; in philosophy, this reorientation of the discipline towards emphasis on language is commonly referred to as the “linguistic turn.”<sup>16</sup>

This is where metarealism achieves the synthesis of the two; it is not realist or antirealist, but metarealist. In other words, metarealism works along the modes of the Real by asserting that the “real” is “primarily a contrastive or negative term that gains most of its ordinary meaning from an opposing concept.”<sup>17</sup> To say something is “real” only means it lacks some properties of being “not-real”. That is why the very arguments implicating mind-dependence and mind-independence are in fact irrelevant in our study of metamodernism.<sup>18</sup> For example, consider the notion ‘a real Picasso’. This could mean several things, depending on the interpretation. For example, it could mean that we are presented with an authentic work

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<sup>13</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Bruno Latour, “Clothing the Naked Truth,” in *Dismantling Truth: Reality in the Post-Modern World*, ed. Hilary Lawson and Lisa Appignanesi (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 101–128.

<sup>15</sup> Derek Edwards, Malcolm Ashmore, and Jonathan Potter, “Death and Furniture: The Rhetoric, Politics and Theology of Bottom Line Arguments against Relativism,” *History of the Human Sciences* 8, no. 2 (1995): 25–49. <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/095269519500800202>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 41.

<sup>18</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 44.

of Pablo Picasso. Alternatively, this could refer to Picasso himself. Or perhaps it could refer to a masterful example of cubist painting. Alternatively, the statement “not a real Picasso” could yield further deductions about reality from the opposite direction. These metareal claims become even more obvious once we take into account simulacra; Pikachu is *real* insofar as it is an ontological (hyper-) reality. Hence, when conceiving the world metamodernly, the question we should be asking instead of merely relying on the old notions of realism is: *If a phenomenon is real, what is it real in respect to?*<sup>19</sup>

In retrospect, viewing postmodernism from this metarealist angle, we can see that the postmodern “unreality” is not as unreal as it seems, which nonetheless does not make it any less concerning. Seen from this perspective, the postmodern condition is not unreal, but it is real only in terms of being a pure simulacrum. It is not *un-real*, but *hyper-real* in Baudrillardian sense, meaning that the level of simulation has completely obscured ‘reality’. Pop-art is real only in reference to itself, but unreal in any other sense, hence the feeling of dissolving reality. Let us remind ourselves of the famous (mis-)quote from Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulations*: “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth — it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.”<sup>20</sup>

Postmodernism as a paradigm and its cultural expression – this being pop art – flourished in the mode of antirealism. They were enabled by the suppression of the reality, or to be more exact, by the suppression of the reality principle.<sup>21</sup> This reality principle, emerging from the Freudian school of psychology, serves as a sort of self-regulating faculty – it makes us as individuals, but also as groups (even to the extent of civilisations), realise that we have strayed too far from the path of health and sanity before a disaster can materialise. We are thus

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<sup>19</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 42.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations” in *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 166-184.

<sup>21</sup> Don Lashomb, *Warhol/Chris Chan: The Lifespan of American Pop Culture, or The Suppression of Reality* (Wroclaw: Self-published, 2021), 562.

forced to change behaviour to in accordance with the actual reality around us. Pop culture meant the radical suppression of this reality principle – this was no longer simple escapism, it was, at the very least from a modernist standpoint, a proliferation of *unreality*. As Don Lashomb commented: “The reality principle has been staved off to no small degree *because of* the unreal worlds of popular culture that occupy the public consciousness.”<sup>22</sup>

## 2.1 The Late Postmodern Dispute Between Fukuyama and Derrida

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama expressed his thoughts on the rapidly changing cultural and geopolitical landscape in his famous essay *The End of History?*. He posits the thesis that the passing of Marxism-Leninism that was then occurring within the communist bloc would lead to a “Common Marketization” of geopolitics and the delegitimization of neorealist dogmas.<sup>23</sup> In turn, the decreased tension between states would lead to a correlated decrease in the likelihood of a world war, which would subsequently lead to the cessation of ideological conflicts along dialectic lines. The End of History would arrive, where ideology would be wholly composed of matters of “economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands.”<sup>24</sup> History would find its apotheosis in liberal democracy while other constructs of modernity would be abandoned in favour of technocratic ennui; in place of the alternatives of fascism and communism, the common market would reign supreme. It was supposed to be a sad time, one where history has effectively ceased to be due to the end of dialectics and where there would be “neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history.”<sup>25</sup> While we can certainly disagree with Fukuyama’s conclusions, the global crises

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<sup>22</sup> Lashomb, *Warhol/Chris Chan*, 562.

<sup>23</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest*, no. 1 (Summer 1989): 16, JSTOR.

<sup>24</sup> Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” 18.

<sup>25</sup> Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” 18.

that followed in the wake of the Cold War indicate that history did in fact *survive*. We should nonetheless note that his writings largely managed to express the ethos of late postmodernism of the late 80's.

As such, Fukuyama's End of History is symptomatic of the postmodern cynicism; it is lodged within the postmodern episteme, which defines the given possibilities of knowledge.<sup>26</sup> It is noteworthy to state that not only does Fukuyama's idea make sense in the postmodern episteme, but the contemporary critique to it is similarly lodged in late postmodernism too. Jacques Derrida issued a famous critique of the proclaimed "End of History," stating that:

Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious, macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable, singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth.<sup>27</sup>

Here we encounter the clash of optimism and pessimism in regards to the prospects of late postmodernity. Faced with this critique, we are led to question where exactly does Derrida's outrage at Fukuyama's teleological proclamation stem from? Indeed, it is in this dispute between Fukuyama and Derrida that we encounter the crisis of late postmodernity. Elsewhere, Derrida states:

"never, never in history, has the horizon of the thing whose survival is being celebrated (namely, all the old models of the capitalist and liberal world) been as dark, threatening, and threatened."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (London: Routledge Classics, 1966 [2002]).

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx : The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Abingdon, Oxon : Routledge Classics, 1994 [2006]), 106.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 64.

We have to remind ourselves that Derrida speaks from the position of someone who witnessed the prime era of what we could tentatively label “high postmodernism”; this was the time of the “first” end of history (not yet capitalised), during the 1950’s, when Derrida found himself stuck in between the two grand orthodoxies of the time, those being Marxist-Leninist communism and pro-American capitalism. Out of their conflict and their respective unacceptability emerged deconstruction as a defence mechanism against logocentrism and the essentialist notions of the certainty of being.

In Fukuyama, we find the declaration that History has reached its apotheosis in the alliance between free market economy and liberal democracy. Derrida’s commentary thus stems from the awareness that the real outcome of the end of the Cold War is the survival of something that goes beyond the geopolitical and socio-economic dimensions of the supposed End of History; this something is hyperreality spawning simulacra of increasingly virtualised and de-materialised reality. If we put aside Derrida’s misunderstanding of Fukuyama in that the latter had not in fact proclaimed the end of ideologies, but the end of dialectics due to the victory of liberalism as an *idea*, we should focus on the consistency of the postmodern epistemological appeal. Chronologically, if we were to pick a time for the emergence of the metamodern paradigm, metamodernism begins with the end of the Cold War, precisely when the aforementioned dispute between Fukuyama and Derrida was taking place.<sup>29</sup> What we are witnessing in this time period then is nothing less than the clash of interpretations of post-postmodernity, when metamodernism does not yet have any structure whatsoever, but when the cultural codes of postmodernism are breaking down. In the wake of the end of the Cold War, postmodernism began to bifurcate into hypermodernism and metamodernism.<sup>30</sup> These two are the divergent paths offered by post-postmodernism; either

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<sup>29</sup> Brent Cooper, “Metamodernism and The Left: Taking Turns at the Edge of the Paradigm Shift,” *Medium*, May 1, 2022 <<https://medium.com/the-abs-tract-organization/metamodernism-and-the-left-88b45a190824>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Cooper, “Metamodernism.”

we succumb to the trends already evident in postmodernism and let ourselves be swept in the hypermodern dystopia or we embrace metamodernism and attempt to come to terms with sincerity, previously discarded for postmodern irony. In the following subchapter, we will examine what exactly are the interpretations of metamodernism.

## 2.2 Metamodernist Schools of Thought

Where Fukuyama proclaimed the victory of liberal democracy and the end of alternatives to it, postmodernism culturally asserts itself by its very nature as the end of alternatives in general – contrary to popular belief, Fukuyama did not proclaim the end of ideology (as liberal democracy too is a product of ideology) but postmodernism does imply such end by the dismissal of metanarratives. This background will serve us for now in the context of the metamodernist emergence. Before delving deeper into the various critiques of postmodernity, it would perhaps be of great benefit to offer of interpretations of metamodernism. Indeed, we will also delve into the critique of metamodernism and whether it truly constitutes a real and viable paradigm. This will, however, be no easy task and indeed the whole of this work will grapple with the nuances of the concept that is, admittedly, still in evolution.

Historically, the first proclamations of metamodernism came from the *Notes on metamodernism* (2010)<sup>31</sup> paper by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, which established the term in the academic sphere, and from Luke Turner's eight-point *Metamodernism Manifesto* (2011),<sup>32</sup> which further expanded the term into art history and cultural studies. Generally speaking, metamodernism is divided into two streams of thought. These are the Dutch school, which focuses mostly on cultural and historical aspect

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<sup>31</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes,".

<sup>32</sup> Luke Turner, "Metamodernist // Manifesto," *Metamodernism*, 2011 <<http://www.metamodernism.org/>> accessed January 2, 2024.

of the term and is represented by the aforementioned Vermeulen and van den Akker, and the Nordic school, with its political and developmental emphasis. While the Dutch variety of metamodernism is content with its academic position, the Nordic strand of thought is occupied with the metamodern paradigm shift, prescribing concrete philosophy and politics. The essence of metamodernism as such lies somewhere in between these two lines of thinking, beyond the postmodern boundaries. Hanzi Freinacht, the “mascot” of the Nordic school of metamodernism, summed up metamodernism thusly:

[Metamodernism] accepts progress, hierarchy, sincerity, spirituality, development, grand narratives, party politics, both-and thinking and much else. It puts forward dreams and makes suggestions. And it is still being born.<sup>33</sup>

Put like this, metamodernism might appear as merely rebranded modernism, but this first glance could not be farther from the truth. On the contrary, metamodernism does not try to ignore or to deny the postmodern legacy, but it fully acknowledges it, negotiating the postmodern thought and style via modernism. That is precisely why metamodernism is still somewhat struggling with what we could call the “double bind” of modernity. Indeed, while postmodernism is inseparably linked and informed by modernism (which it regards as its predecessor, be it in any form), metamodernism finds itself in the position of a post-postmodernism, which has to negotiate the thematic, stylistic and even affectual legacy of postmodernism in order to move forward.<sup>34</sup> As such, it is a difficult task at times to distinguish between postmodernism, metamodernism, and the various other varieties of post-postmodernism. Nonetheless, it is indisputable that postmodernism laid the foundations to a

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<sup>33</sup> Hanzi Freinacht, *The Listening Society: A Guide to Metamodern Politics, Part One* (Metamoderna, 2017), 375-376.

<sup>34</sup> Jon Doyle, “The changing face of post-postmodern fiction: Irony, sincerity, and populism,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59, no. 3 (2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2017.1381069>.

post-postmodernity that we would eventually come to refer to as metamodernism. As Hanzi Freinacht commented:

By virtue of its own dialectical logic, by the structure of its symbols and their interrelations and by its inherent self-contradictions, postmodernism is the midwife of metamodernism.<sup>35</sup>

As such, metamodernism emerged as a reaction to the insufficiency of postmodernism. Metamodernists seek to question the false unity of postmodernism and the at times incomprehensible frameworks that postmodernists espoused. If there is one characteristic that postmodernism is conventionally associated with (at the very least since Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*) it is its emphasis on total immanence. In other words, postmodernism denied the dimension of depth. Metamodernism, on the other hand, is actively trying to salvage a resemblance of transcendence left over by the models of modernism while also acknowledging the immanence of postmodernity. The metamodern artist is able to achieve a synthesis of the two as the core effort of metamodernism always strives for an interrogation. Instead of clinging to the modernist models of the past (which would only reduce it to rebranded modernism), metamodernism is rather closer to the critical and experimental *spirit* of modernity. It does not blindly adopt the tenets of modernism but investigates what are the true foundations of modernity. As Alexandra E. Dumitrescu commented: “[T]he metamodern searches for a middle ground between the *spirit* of modernity and the reality of technology, a place where the self feels centred, at home, engaged.<sup>36</sup> The theme of depth keeps reappearing in discussions regarding the attributes and consequences of postmodernism.

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<sup>35</sup> Freinacht, *The Listening Society*, 243-244.

<sup>36</sup> Alexandra Dumitrescu, “What is Metamodernism and Why Bother? Meditations on Metamodernism as a Period Term and as a Mode,” (2016): 2, <[https://www.academia.edu/31494316/What\\_is\\_Metamodernism\\_and\\_Why\\_Bother\\_Meditations\\_on\\_Metamodernism\\_as\\_a\\_Period\\_Term\\_and\\_as\\_a\\_Mode](https://www.academia.edu/31494316/What_is_Metamodernism_and_Why_Bother_Meditations_on_Metamodernism_as_a_Period_Term_and_as_a_Mode)> accessed January 2, 2024.

For that reason, metamodernism similarly has to address it too. Where postmodernism shows “contrived depthlessness”<sup>37</sup> there metamodernism shows “contrived depth.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the theme of ‘depthlessness’ was something of an obsession for postmodernists. As a result, we are led to question what exactly happens to the factor of depth in a metamodern setting; has the depth of representation really deepened? Perhaps the most famous analysis of the postmodern impression of depth comes from Jameson’s comparison between Vincent van Gogh’s *A Pair of Boots* and Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*.<sup>39</sup> In the comparison, Jameson emphasises the difference in the modern and postmodern affect. In this sense, Jameson emphasises just how *depthless* Warhol’s piece is in comparison to van Gogh’s. Indeed, Jameson extends this depthlessness to postmodern affect in general:

“the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms to which we will have occasion to return in a number of other contexts.”<sup>40</sup>

Whereas van Gogh’s painting pulls the view in and implies a meaning beyond, for example the background of the downtrodden agricultural worker, Warhol’s work does no such thing. Instead, Warhol denies anything beyond the canvas itself; Jameson stated that as a result, there is no way to finish the hermeneutic gesture.<sup>41</sup> For Warhol, there is nothing but the *image*: the context of the work becomes illegible because of the lack of its depth. To contrast the two paintings, while in van Gogh’s case we can surmise to whom do the shoes belong and even

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<sup>37</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Brendan Dempsey, “[Re]construction: Metamodern ‘Transcendence’ and the Return of Myth,” *Metamodernism*, October 21, 2014 <<https://www.metamodernism.com/2014/10/21/reconstruction-metamodern-transcendence-and-the-return-of-myth/>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>39</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 8-12.

<sup>40</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 8.

what is their symbolic significance, this process is impossible when we look at Warhol's pop-art; it is abstracted beyond contextualisation and therefore depthless. In other words, we find conflict here between the themes of immanence and transcendence. In *The New Depthiness* paper by Vermeulen, the author describes how metamodernism unites the transcendent and the immanent. Postmodernism, on the contrary, was described by Jameson as "depthless". In metamodernism then, we see a resurfacing of depth. To quote from Vermeulen's *The New Depthiness*:

Importantly, these [metamodern] philosophers, artists, and writers, each in their own distinct way, do not resuscitate depth as much as they resurrect its spirit. They understand that the depth Jameson referred to—dialectics, psychoanalysis, existentialism—has been flattened, or hollowed out. What they create instead are personal, alternative visions of depth, visions they invite us to share.<sup>42</sup>

The criticisms levelled against metamodernism mostly consist of the incredulity towards the demise of such 'depthless' postmodernism. For example, Steve Hanson in particular completely rejected the label of metamodernism in his admittedly fairly vitriolic critique.<sup>43</sup> He rejected the metamodern claim to 'Depthiness' and instead stressed the return to dialectical thinking.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, the search for depth is one of the defining characteristics of metamodernism, which conceives of a reconstruction of depth, not necessarily as an affect, but as affectedness. It is through such reconstruction that metamodernism asserted itself in among the various forms of post-postmodernisms once the demise of the postmodern paradigm became obvious.

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<sup>42</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen, "The New "Depthiness"," *e-flux Journal* 61, (2015), <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/61/61000/the-new-depthiness/>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Steve Hanson, "The Real but Greatly Exaggerated Death of Postmodernism," *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 17, no. 2 (Aug 2019) <<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1227839>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>44</sup> Hanson, "The Real but Greatly Exaggerated Death of Postmodernism," 297.

Let us now briefly address these competing narratives of post-postmodernity. In 2002, Linda Hutcheon put forward a provocative question in the conclusion to her now classic *The Politics of Postmodernism*: “Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it – and name it for the twenty-first-century.”<sup>45</sup> Various scholars have since picked up the gauntlet and provided new labels and frameworks for how to conceive of and understand ‘post-postmodernity’. Alison Gibbons sorted these responses into five strands of interpretation.<sup>46</sup> The first response to this challenge came from Lipovetsky who suggested “hypermodernism.”<sup>47</sup> According to him, the contemporary hypermodern times are defined by hyper-consumerism and intensifying anxieties.<sup>48</sup> Hypermodernism is also most frequently invoked as a continuation of postmodernism coupled with neoliberal consumption and we will address this status in greater detail later. The second strand comes from the response to digitalisation; these views were formulated into “digimodernism” as suggested by Alan Kirby, which was brought about by the computerization of text with the emergence and proliferation of new technologies in the 90’s.<sup>49</sup> Admittedly, Kirby does not treat digimodernism as a break from postmodernism, but as another phase in the history of modernity, yet he does postulate that a “death” of postmodernism is an ongoing phenomenon.

The third strand is then even more influenced by the modernist legacy and can be found, for example, in the writings of James and Seshagiri.<sup>50</sup> It is here that a metamodern response is formed in earnest. Here we encounter the effort to postulate modernism as an “era” or an

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<sup>45</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989 [2002]), 181.

<sup>46</sup> Alison Gibbons, ““Take that you intellectuals!” and “kaPOW!”: Adam Thirlwell and the Metamodernist Future of Style,” *Studia Neophilologica* 87, 2015) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2014.981959>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>47</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

<sup>48</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2005): 15.

<sup>49</sup> Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture* (London: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> David James and Urmila Seshagiri, “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution,” *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (January 2014) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24769423>> accessed January 2, 2024.

“aesthetic” instead of “connoting radical artistic responses to every modernity’s upheavals.”<sup>51</sup>

In the fourth strand, we find reactionary attempts that seek to essentially revert to a stage untainted by what the authors see as the ravages of postmodern irony. This strand of reaction is a fascinating subject and will be addressed later in the critique of what I term “postmodern kitsch,” which is particularly visible in the writings of Jordan B. Peterson, among others.

Lastly, metamodernism falls into the final strand and of all the labels suggested for a viable form of post-postmodernism, metamodernism as a label proved to be the most resilient and suitable. Before we get into this last strand of thinking of the post-postmodern, the strand that situates itself between modernism and postmodernism, thus resulting in the notion of the metamodern as it is taken to be understood today, let us address a competing development (or perhaps regression) of post-postmodernism briefly as its positions will help us understand why exactly metamodernism is evolving the way it does. Hence, in the following subchapter we will address the status of hypermodernism as a contrasting development of post-postmodernity.

### 2.3 Hypermodernism

As has been already stated, hypermodernism is one of the bifurcated paths of post-postmodernity. As such, it is presented as a kind of post-postmodernism with all limits and brakes removed; all the phenomena associated with postmodern malaise are exacerbated in hypermodernism without the conscious effort of the metamodernist. Consequently, we find ourselves thrust in the clash between two rivalling visions of post-postmodernity; these being hypermodernity and metamodernity. In hypermodernism then we find increasing replacement of reality with technologically-induced simulation. Paul Virilio stated that in the hypermodern epoch, people: “could no longer believe their eyes, when their *faith in perception* became slave

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<sup>51</sup> James and Seshagiri, “Metamodernism,” 97.

to the faith in the technical *sightline*,” meaning that substitution had effectively reduced visual field to “the line of a sighting device.”<sup>52</sup> The reason why reality is perverted into such increasing degrees of hypermodern simulacra is then the technological advancement, which in turn accelerates the speed of innovation and, notably, consumption. The factors of acceleration and militarisation present in Virilio's thought also contextualise his remarks into the debates of hypermodernity rather than the stale discourse of the modern/postmodern transition. Hypermodernism is then not the culmination of postmodernism as an the end of modernity, but the opposite; it is the degeneration of modernity into a cynical neo-liberalism. The prefix “hyper” in hypermodernism does not only connote the hyperreality that is inherent to it, but also the consumerist excess originating from the empowerment of market forces.

With the foreknowledge of the origins of postmodernism as a reaction to the visions to modernity, one can start to see where exactly do the trends present in hypermodernism stem from. The rising tide of individualism in post-war era, especially in the US, combined with distrust towards authoritarian regimes, produced the so-called “second wave of democracy.” No longer burdened with the futurist utopias of the past, society in the West could turn to non-ideological consumerism instead, with improving technology serving as the facilitator. It truly is an immense irony that the very factor that managed to “regulate” modernity and allow for various visions of modernity to emerge during the modernist heyday were the counter-factors, which are typically labelled as antagonistic towards modernity, such as the State, the Church and the ideal of the Nation.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, without the ‘brakes’ imposed modernity, a second modernity emerged, this being hypermodernity. To quote Lipovetsky:

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, trans. Julie Rose (London : British Film Institute, 1988 [1994]), 13.

<sup>53</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, “Time Against Time, or The Hypermodern Society,” in *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 198.

A second modernity, deregulated and globalised, has shot into orbit: it has no opposite, and is absolutely modern, resting essentially on three axiomatic elements constitutive of modernity itself: the market, technocratic efficiency and the individual. We had a limited modernity: now is the time of consummate modernity.<sup>54</sup>

The hypercapitalism unleashed by the neoliberal de-regulation of the 1980's thus found its cultural expression in hypermodernism. No longer combating the notions of tradition to achieve rationalistic modernity, hypermodernism is involved in modernising the very idea of modernity for its needs.<sup>55</sup> While Lipovetsky in his critique appears quite alarmist and perhaps takes his claims about the hypermodern corruption too far, he nonetheless does identify valid problems that emerged in the wake postmodernism. Where postmodernism fostered scepticism and ultimately failed to provide answers, hypermodernism takes over the torch and fills the cultural void with consumption. Admittedly, the consumerist prerogative was already present in postmodern culture and hypermodernism is just further evolution of the postmodern society. To quote Lyotard's description of the postmodern knowledge production: "knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorised in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange".<sup>56</sup>

As per the current situation, hypermodernism might just as well serve as a byword for right-wing accelerationism. In it, we see why the pre-occupations of metamodernism are valid as defence against the encroaching hypermodernity. Specifically, as Vermeulen and van den Akker show us, metamodernism aims for the reconstruction of depth, historicity and affect, all of which hypermodernism denies.<sup>57</sup> In conclusion, hypermodernism presents us with a hopelessly dehumanised world, run entirely by the forces of capital and spiralling into

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<sup>54</sup> Lipovetsky, "Time Against Time," 198.

<sup>55</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage Publications, 1986 [1992]).

<sup>56</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 4.

<sup>57</sup> Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

catastrophe. None of the concerns that the metamodernists appeal to in the effort to reconstruct sincerity are addressed here. In the following sub-chapter, I will focus on the efforts to revitalise such sincerity in the wake of postmodernism.

## 2.4 New Sincerity / Post-Irony

Much ink has been spilled on the analysis of irony within the postmodernist discourse. While postmodernism at its critical peak could boast that irony subverts ideological constructs of power, this belief in the emancipatory potential of irony and other devices of postmodernism eventually gave way by the time of the 1980's. Granted, it is a difficult task to pin down exactly what constitutes irony and at which point has irony turned into a postmodern affect. Functionally, irony is the antagonist of the reasoning mind; it undermines the processes through which subject formation occurs and through which subject's effort is channelled to apprehend the world.<sup>58</sup> At the present moment, however, it would be cynical to claim that irony has any critical or even revolutionary potential left; the system of thought it sought to criticise and undermine, that of grand modernisms with their utopian imagination that resulted in the ideological extremes of fascism and communism, is now long dead. What were once the devices of subversion are today the norm, or as Slavoj Žižek put it: "cynical distance, laughter, irony, are, so to speak, part of the game."<sup>59</sup> In a similar vein, Peter Sloterdijk stated that: "[w]ith incessant irony, modern philosophizing . . . shrinks to a circuslike rationalism that, in its efforts to train the praxis tiger, proves itself to be embarrassingly helpless."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 11.

<sup>59</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989 [2008]), 24.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michel Eldred (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1983 [2001]), 539.

Not only did irony lose its critical edge, it had also contributed to the development of the postmodern incredulity that degenerated into general cynicism. As a result, consensus becomes nigh impossible; any position taken is depreciated and dismissed. The concept of the public as such crumbles into several counter-publics defined not by a conviction, but by opposition and antagonism alone.<sup>61</sup> Richard Rorty warned against this development when he stated that he could not imagine a functional “culture whose public rhetoric is *ironist*.”<sup>62</sup> Yet, that is our culture today and that is why metamodernism emerged in the first place. Where in Rorty’s time irony could still be labelled as “merely” reactive, today it has turned resentful; it no longer serves as a foundation, it is a roadblock. While in the past, irony might have had a critical and even progressive function, its political importance today is merely historical.

Hence, together with irony, cynicism became the go-to mode of assessment. Likewise, while Fredric Jameson could still claim that ideology can only function when it is masked and hidden,<sup>63</sup> this statement is questionable through today’s optics. The original purpose of irony as a critical tool, as a stance, is now obsolete; as a result of the proliferation of the internet, ideology is now transparent, it is everywhere and, to repeat with Žižek, the more transparent it is and the less we notice it, the purer it gets. There is no longer a need to hide ideology behind a front – ideology has merged with the consumerist mindset. No longer is it hidden behind a product, it has become *the* product. That is why Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus could declare that “deconstruction, ideology critique, and the hermeneutics of suspicion” have lost their utility and credibility, stating that these “demystifying protocols [have become] superfluous.”<sup>64</sup> Although irony may have started as a device of the avant-garde

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<sup>61</sup> Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 14.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 87.

<sup>63</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act* (London: Routledge Classics, 1981 [2002]).

<sup>64</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 2, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.1?origin=JSTOR-pdf>> accessed January 2, 2024.

and counter-culture, its incorporation into mainstream media and most notably pop-culture made it irrelevant as a critical mode.

As such, the status of postmodernism comes into question with irony being one of its prevalent elements. David Foster Wallace was especially attentive to the prospects of postmodernism as a set of “values and beliefs.”<sup>65</sup> According to him, the critical potential of postmodernism had exhausted itself with its own dissemination into broader culture.<sup>66</sup> Wallace, speaking and writing as a novelist, objected to the lack of substance that the postmodern legacy entailed, if there was any at all. Instead of constructive models of thought, of new and substantive aesthetics, the wreck of postmodernism offered only ironic vitriol. In his own words:

The problem is that, however misprised it's been, what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem. You've got to understand that this stuff has permeated the culture. It's become our language; we're so in it we don't even see that it's one perspective, one among many possible ways of seeing. Postmodern irony's become our environment.<sup>67</sup>

Taken as the natural opposite of irony, sincerity plays a crucial role in the metamodern discourse. The question then arises as to how exactly does metamodernism treat sincerity in the face of the developments of the last decades. In order to fill the critical void left by the exhaustion of the postmodern project, David Foster Wallace began to push for New Sincerity. Wallace was deeply disaffected with the way irony permeated everything in the culture around him, which made him seek an alternative. For post-postmodernist writers, it quickly became

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<sup>65</sup> Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 5-6.

<sup>66</sup> Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 6.

<sup>67</sup> Larry McCaffrey, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2012), 49.

obvious that the only way of moving past postmodernist writing would be to transcend irony.<sup>68</sup> The alternative, Wallace thought, lay in the conscious effort to resurrect sincerity; this would result in New Sincerity. He argued for optimistic post-postmodernism, one that could offer empathy and sincerity as opposed to the failed project of postmodernism. As Jon Doyle put it:

Styles such as the New Sincerity were put forward as ways to transcend the ironic game-playing of their forebears and re-establish not only imagination and innovation but also a sense of value and moral importance within fiction.<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, Wallace most famously formulated his stance towards the postmodern conflict of irony and sincerity in his now seminal essay *E Pluribus Unam: Television and U.S. Fiction* (1993). In it, he hypothesises that the next generation of literary “rebels” might come from the ranks of “anti-rebels”: “[...] born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values.”<sup>70</sup> At the same time, however, Wallace pre-empts critique of this claim by stating that any such group of writers would instantly get ridiculed: “These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere.”<sup>71</sup> What Wallace was getting at was the continual effort at “problematization” of postmodern literature, which resulted in the omission of a clear opinion, a stance, or even the belief that literature could serve as an expression of truth; keeping with our theme, Wallace saw postmodern irony as the cause that led to the total immanence of contemporary culture. Doyle further argued that even Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, perhaps the two most notorious representatives of late literary postmodernism, realised the limitations of such methodology on their fiction.<sup>72</sup> Admittedly, New Sincerity is not

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<sup>68</sup> Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Doyle, “The changing face,” 1.

<sup>70</sup> David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 151.

<sup>71</sup> Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 193.

<sup>72</sup> Doyle, “The changing face,” 3.

a program, or a systematic philosophy with specific tenets how to ‘counter’ irony. As such, it exists only as an affect, an appeal to what we could refer to as discipline or rigour that stresses the ever-present awareness of irony. That is why Lambert commented that New Sincerity could be better described as “a sensibility or structure of feeling.”<sup>73</sup>

However, no matter how New Sincerity struggled with the legacy of postmodernism, it never turned reactionary in the sense that it would outright try to deny irony, to turn back the clock. It would be a mistake to conceive of Wallace as an anti-ironist author. Rather, a new cultural and artistic phenomenon developed from this negotiation of irony; that of “postirony.” Lee Konstantinou is especially conscious of this “problem of irony” in his writing, which led him to coin the concept of “postirony”. This project of postirony does not imply a flat out rejection of the idea of irony, but tries to filter the results of postmodernism.<sup>74</sup> Postirony, in other words, is an effort to address and move beyond the problems postmodern irony has created for culture, art and life in general; it is not, as one might think, a period concept, but a project. Konstantinou defined the difference between postirony and New Sincerity thusly:

In contrast to New Sincerity [...], the term postirony doesn't decide in advance what follows the age of irony. The term postirony also reminds us that there are as many solutions to the problem of irony as there are analyses of the problem to begin with and predicts that contemporary post-ironic art will be heterogenous.<sup>75</sup>

In context of writers like Wallace or Eggers, Konstantinou stated that they: “seek to imagine what shape a post-ironic, rather than an uncritically earnest or naïvely nostalgic literary practice, might take.”<sup>76</sup> While Wallace cannot be clearly bracketed within the bounds of the labels

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<sup>73</sup> Stephanie Lambert, ““The Real Dark Side, Baby”: New Sincerity and Neoliberal Aesthetics in David Foster Wallace and Jennifer Egan,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 61, no. 4 (Feb 2020): 394-411, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1727831>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>74</sup> Lee Konstantinou, “Four Faces of Irony” in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017): 88.

<sup>75</sup> Konstantinou, “Four Faces of Irony,” 89.

<sup>76</sup> Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 21.

of New Sincerity, postirony, or even post-postmodernism, his effort alone demonstrates the limits reached by the postmodern paradigm and the need that arose for its supersession.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps we can agree with Nicoline Timmer in her assessment that the defining feature of post-postmodernism is not necessarily sincerity, but *defencelessness*.<sup>78</sup> It is this defencelessness that keeps reappearing in the discussions surrounding the role of sincerity and irony in writing. Wallace especially was conscious of the risks that one takes by writing sincerely and thus exposing oneself to ridicule enabled by the lack of the protection afforded by irony. In the following chapter, we will investigate how the notion of metamodernism evolved in the wake of the debates surrounding New Sincerity and postirony and how apparent the theme of defencelessness becomes once one begins to express oneself in earnest.

## 2.5 Evolving Metamodernism

As has already been indicated, the final strand to post-postmodern thinking is metamodernism, one could say *in earnest*, rather than as just another periodic label. The pioneers of conceiving metamodernism as a paradigm were Vermeulen and van den Akker who presented their views in their paper *Notes on metamodernism* (2010). Like many other critics of (late) postmodernism, they argue that the era that enabled postmodernism is truly gone: “postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over.”<sup>79</sup> For van den Akker and Vermeulen, metamodernism connotes a “structure of feeling” which they understand to be:

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<sup>77</sup> Tim Gurowich, “The unspeakable failures of David Foster Wallace: language, identity, and resistance / David Foster Wallace,” *Textual Practice* 31, no. 5 (April 2017): 1031, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2017.1319111>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>78</sup> Nicoline Timmer, “Radical Defenselessness: A New Sense of Self in the Work of David Foster Wallace,” *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017): 112.

<sup>79</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes,” 3.

[A] sentiment, or rather still a sensibility that everyone shares, that everyone is aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down. Its tenor, however, can be traced in art, which has the capability to express a common experience of a time and place.<sup>80</sup>

This view finds its basis in the writings of Jameson, who originally viewed postmodernism as such a structure of feeling, which was hegemonic and found its expression in the senses of ending; of History, class, art, and so on.<sup>81</sup> Van den Akker and Vermeulen, on the other hand, see the metamodern structure of feeling as a resurgence of debates that postmodernism left unresolved, specifically of History, social class, the subject, art, et cetera.<sup>82</sup> In their assessment, metamodernism emerged due to the socio-cultural factors which were no longer compatible with the postmodernist capacities of critique; these include the end of the Cold War, the 9/11 attacks, the financial crisis of 2007-2008, the Arab Spring and the anarchic protests across the world (such as the Occupy movement), while the cultural developments include the continuing digitalisation (this point is shared with the premises of digimodernism), increasing economic inequality and accelerating climate change. All these factors share the implicit theme of late globalization,<sup>83</sup> whose arrival meant a sort of wake-up call for the postmodern culture, especially in the US.

As such, the collective experience of metamodernity is different, if at the very least historically, than that of postmodernity, which was shaped by the perceived failures of modernism(s) due to the atrocities of World War II. The challenge metamodernism poses is thus not addressed to a vaporous idea of postmodernism, but to the concrete form it has taken that promotes incredulous and problematising cynicism and rejects constructive effort. It is then

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<sup>80</sup> Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism" in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017): 7.

<sup>81</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xiv.

<sup>82</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism," *Studia Neophilologica* 87, no. 1 (2015): 55.

<<https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2014.981964>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>83</sup> Gibbons, "'Take that you intellectuals!' and 'kaPOW!'", 31.

specifically the conventionalised postmodernism which metamodernism accuses of duplicity. For example, following the 9/11 attacks, Graydon Carter wrote of the attack that it constituted “the end of the age of irony”<sup>84</sup> while Edward Rothstein similarly expressed the opinion that the passivity of “relativism of pomo” would be hard to maintain.<sup>85</sup> Vermeulen and van der Akker’s interpretation of metamodernism is distinguished from the other renderings of post-postmodernism by the ethical position it assumes. This is manifested in the emphasis the authors put on the “aesth-ethical.”<sup>86</sup> Gibbons summarised this position thusly:

Aesth-ethical commitment [...] is opposed to the injustices of global capitalism, concerned by the increased digitalization and hyper-reality of society, conscious of the shifting social relationships in a globalizing world, and it hopes for a shared sustainable future, however untenable that may be.<sup>87</sup>

This “aesth-ethical” stance is a significant change of course from the previous postmodern discourses. It is an expression of a commitment towards global ethics in the face of socio-political and technological challenges. Global ethics are then concerned with ways how to increase awareness of our contemporary insecurities and how to address them, or as Widdows argued, these “things matter in terms of how we understand human beings now and into the future and are at the heart of creating a world where human beings are treated ethically.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, the increasing insecurity of the world makes the postmodern approaches no longer viable; in this aspect, we may see the influence of the hypermodern and digimodern discourses, which would argue, that this (hyper-)reality is further exacerbated by the proliferation of the internet and as a result, by wider perception of such instabilities. In one word, what distinguishes metamodernism perhaps most

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<sup>84</sup> Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 7.

<sup>85</sup> Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 7.

<sup>86</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes,” 2.

<sup>87</sup> Gibbons, “”Take that you intellectuals!” and “kaPOW!””, 31.

<sup>88</sup> Heather Widdows, *Global Ethics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2011), 1.

significantly from postmodernism is the accountability it maintains and expects from its adherents. This is where political metamodernism starts; it is an idea that stands on the foundations laid out by earlier theorists of the metamodern epistemology and that outlines the ideas of what metamodern society could look like. It is precisely this call for rejuvenated ethics, indeed for the rehabilitation of ethics, that finds its expression in Hanzi Freinacht's *The Listening Society* (2017). In it, Freinacht emphasises the need for a welfare system that would guarantee and promote personal development and psychological growth as opposed to the hypermodern obsession with consumerist excess.<sup>89</sup> At this point, a little clarification regarding this "author" might be of use. Freinacht himself is a fictitious personality invented by the sociologist Daniel Görtz and the artist Emil Ejner Friis (for the rest of this work I will play along with the authors and comply with the "authorship" of Hanzi Freinacht, as has in fact become the norm among scholars in this case of referencing). Coming back to our topic, there is distinction between the idea of metamodernism as professed by Vermeulen and van den Akker and the 'Nordic School's' conception of it, as represented by Freinacht. He uses the term to denote two meanings; firstly, metamodernism is a political philosophy, and secondly, metamodernism is a "developmental stage."<sup>90</sup> In fact, through his work, Freinacht arrives at another meaning still – that of a paradigm, or in our case, a scholarly model.

Nonetheless, the core idea of metamodernism that recurs in the conceptualisations of the term is the so called "oscillation". It is thanks to oscillation that metamodernism can accommodate both modernism and postmodernism in order to convey the aesth-ethical message. In the words of Vermeulen and van den Akker, metamodernism:

[O]scillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Freinacht, *The Listening Society*, 3.

<sup>90</sup> Freinacht, *The Listening Society*, 15.

<sup>91</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes," 5-6.

While this combination of opposites may seem incompatible, this indeed is the metamodern mode. Metamodernism rises and falls with the hope and the expectation of failure it itself professes. No longer optimism of the modernist discourses, nor the pessimism that later degenerated into nihilism in the case of postmodernism or hypermodernism, metamodern sensitivity finds the equilibrium between modernism and postmodernism. Irony then is not dismissed in metamodern writing and thinking, nor is it used for mere apolitical and superficial posturing, but utilised to convey “both the surface meaning and its intended opposite.”<sup>92</sup> It is further exemplified in the mixture of high and low culture references, not only to hint at intertextuality for its own sake, but to expose the contradictions and juxtapositions of contemporary culture.

Furthermore, metamodernism has been described as “informed naivety” or “pragmatic idealism.” These labels, as counter-intuitive and opposing they may seem, perfectly encapsulate the Janus-like position of metamodernism with one face turned to modernism and the other to postmodernism. As Vermeulen and van der Akker commented: “Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern scepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to impossible possibility.”<sup>93</sup> By way of analogy, metamodernism finds its clearest expression in neoromantic sensibility.<sup>94</sup> This is perhaps most obvious in the similar affect of the two sensibilities, one rebelling against the disenchantment of the Enlightenment and the other struggling to address, if not to override, the dissipation of modernism and the proliferation of postmodern irony. Like romanticism, metamodernism too tries to *re-enchant* the world, although in a different way. Rather than being a philosophy,

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<sup>92</sup> Gibbons, ““Take that you intellectuals!” and “kaPOW!”, 31.

<sup>93</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes,” 5.

<sup>94</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes,” 8.

Vermeulen and van den Akker see metamodernism more as a sensibility, an aesthetic, or what they term the “structure of feeling.”

However, in *Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution* (2014), David James and Urmila Seshagiri state that metamodernism does not see modernism as a “temporally and spatially complex global impulse,” which seems to be the current academic understanding of the term, but as “an era, an aesthetic, and an archive that originated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”<sup>95</sup> Metamodernism thus struggles with the persistent idea of modernism in its stereotypical, Eurocentric form; since metamodernism sees modernism as a historical moment, then it automatically classes itself to be a development of that epoch and hence to be historically defined too. The current academic understanding of the term, however, is not historicist, but sees modernism as something more complex than just an “era”; it is a Kuhnian paradigm in its own right, one that we have to address in order to re-assess our previously held background beliefs. Metamodernism still struggles with the old notions of what is to be regarded as modernism. Hence, situating metamodernism in some neat historical category is a tricky task indeed and for now, it will suffice to address the relationship between modernism and postmodernism that resulted in the metamodern synthesis.

That is why metamodernism comes a revival of sorts, one that resurrects the idea of the myth, or to be more precise, the idea of meaning. These mythmaking attempts, or mythopoesis, are indicative of a reinvigorated striving to address and potentially surpass the problem of postmodern irony. In the next chapter, we shall go over these attempts in more detail and assess them in the greater context of metamodernism.

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<sup>95</sup> James and Seshagiri, “Metamodernism,” 88.

### 3 Situating Metamodernism: Postmodernism as a Problem?

Let us now address what exactly is the status of postmodernism vis-a-vis metamodernism, if indeed we are now proclaiming a new metamodern paradigm. At the very start it needs to be stressed that this paper will not provide an exhaustive account of postmodernism in all its forms due to the term's sheer expanse of meanings and associations. There is no other cultural philosophy or academic theory that would even approach the span of signification this particular term carries and as a result, a properly satisfactory and encompassing literature review is impossible.<sup>96</sup> This chapter should therefore outline where exactly does relevant (*and*, as we will see, irrelevant) critique come from and what exactly were the conditions that led to the development of the metamodern paradigm in the first place. The use of the term "paradigm" in this text refers to Kuhn's idea of scientific progress, which holds that scientific progress (in our case we might just as well argue for cultural progress) does not follow a linear and objective path, but is centred around paradigms, which shape questions that scientists pose and further drive development in a specific direction.

A paradigm in this context thus refers to "the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community."<sup>97</sup> In other words, the world around us can only be understood and interpreted by and through a paradigm; this paradigmatic worldview, which denies the assumptions of logical positivists and their cumulative view of science, is indeed very much in accord with the postmodern view of art and culture. It is this postmodern reaction to modern(ist) science by Kuhn and others, notably Paul Feyerabend in his *Against Method* (1975), that paved the way for brand new modes of cognition, especially from outside the West.<sup>98</sup> However, in accordance with the view

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<sup>96</sup> Hanson, "The Real but Greatly Exaggerated Death of Postmodernism," 1-2.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 175.

<sup>98</sup> Joseph N. Agbo, "The Post-Modern Scientific Thoughts of Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend: Implications for Africa," *Filosofia Theoretica* 3, no. 2 (2014).

that scientific (and indeed cultural) progress happens paradigmatically, we should also note that the postmodern paradigm with its own background beliefs is now ending and opening the way for a new paradigm – that of metamodernism. I agree with Stephen M. Feldman in his stance that Kuhn is at heart not a postmodernist, as he tends to be labelled,<sup>99</sup> as he “explains exactly how science is possible, even though we cannot meaningfully access any type of brute data.”<sup>100</sup> This is because Kuhn is not only incredulous towards logical positivism, but at the same time he fears that scientific disciplines will completely splinter off without some uniting reference to epistemology, which in fact is the same concern that metamodernism has. The point is, this is not an anti-postmodernist work, although frustrations with the failures of (late) postmodernism motivated its inception. This entire thesis runs the risk of being labelled reductive or even ideological as it is ultimately composed of critical scholarship of scholarship (which, on the other hand, is a very fitting *meta* angle for a work about metamodernism). Indeed, many tools developed in the postmodern paradigm are absolutely indispensable in contemporary academia and as we shall see in the course of this work, it would be a serious blunder to think that we could somehow “turn back the clock” and return to some pristine modernist way of life. As stated by Jeremy Green, postmodern theory and practise cannot “simply be written off as a fin-de-siècle trend”<sup>101</sup> and writers wishing to engage with sincerity and emotion will have to do so only vis-à-vis the postmodern condition we already live in.

It is a necessary cliché to repeat that there is no such thing as a single unifying notion of “the” postmodern. The word itself is more of a catch-all term to denote certain tendencies that are suspicious of the beliefs of modernism. Naturally, postmodernism is perhaps most aptly

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<sup>99</sup> Steve Fuller, “Being There with Thomas Kuhn: A Parable for Postmodern Times,” *History and Theory* 31, no. 3 (Oct 1992).

<sup>100</sup> Stephen Feldman, “The Problem of Critique: Triangulating Habermas, Derrida, and Gadamer Within Metamodernism,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 4, no. 3 (2005): 296–320. <<https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300117>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>101</sup> Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 13.

associated with the French post-structuralists such as Foucault, Derrida, Barth and Lyotard, or their American colleagues like Rorty, Butler or Jameson. After all, the founding thinkers of postmodernity did not seek to create a system, but analysed specific cultural phenomena, such as, among others, the distrust of metanarratives, new regime in the arts, late capitalism, decline of historicism and so on. In any case, even French post-structuralism is a loosely associated school of thought, to say nothing of as vaporous a term as postmodernism. Nonetheless, what ties the various postmodern ways of interpretation (might we add, of itself) together is the opposition to modern utopism – the unconditional belief in Reason, grand metanarratives, functionalism, and other core ideas of modernism.<sup>102</sup> Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) outlines how postmodernism resulted in the dissolution of grand metanarratives and legitimised postmodernism as a philosophical worldview. Although the author in fact later distanced himself from *The Postmodern Condition* and even went as far to label it his worst work,<sup>103</sup> the publication of Lyotard's pamphlet directly turned postmodernism into an explicitly theorised and debated cultural philosophical problem.<sup>104</sup> It is postmodernism as a philosophical problem, or indeed as Lyotard's *condition*, that is the central topic of this thesis. In 1980, Jürgen Habermas delivered an equally significant lecture on the topic on the occasion of receiving the Theodor W. Adorno Award in Frankfurt am Main. This lecture would later be published in essay form as *Modernity vs. Postmodernity* (1981).<sup>105</sup> Before the stratification of postmodernism into its own "topos"<sup>106</sup> the term was only theorised in various localised disciplines. Ferraris and Segre, whose paper is referenced throughout this work, deserve particular praise for this distinction as they managed in their research

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<sup>102</sup> Green, *Late Postmodernism*, 13.

<sup>103</sup> Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), 24-27.

<sup>104</sup> Maurizio Ferraris and Anna Taraboletti Segre, "Postmodernism and the Deconstruction of Modernism," *Designing the Immaterial Society* 4, no. 1/2 (1988): 12-24. <<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/1511383>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>105</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," *New German Critique*, no. 22 (Winter 1981), 3-14. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/487859>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>106</sup> Ferraris and Segre, "Postmodernism," 12.

to accurately define the object of research starting in the form outlined by Lyotard and Habermas.

The very premise of postmodernism can be interpreted in two ways and in fact, the meaning of postmodernism oscillates between the two thinkers (the theme of oscillation will later become crucial in the conception of metamodernism). This twofold premise is historical and metahistorical.<sup>107</sup> As is the case of postmodernism, in trying to pin it down to some coherent form, we run into a number of contradictions. If postmodernism is to be understood historically (as goes the stereotypical portrayal) then it can only be situated in opposition to its antecedents; it is a positive overcoming of the modernity of Enlightenment (the argument put forth by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) and romanticism.<sup>108</sup> Perhaps it is not a surprise to notice a parallel between metamodernism and romanticism in their shared nostalgia for a past age. The irony is clear: was it not the entire point of *modernity* to overcome previous eras? As Pound put it, *to make it new*? Seen from this angle, we should perhaps talk of late modernism rather than of postmodernism at all. Alternatively, in the metahistorical, and for the purpose of this work a more pertinent view, postmodernism means the very dissolution of modernist (and indeed, pre-modernist) values – it is because of this metahistorical interpretation that postmodernism is most readily accused of nihilism. In the next sub-chapter, I will examine some of the stereotypical charges levelled against the notion of postmodernism and distinguish these from the concept of metamodernism.

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<sup>107</sup> Ferraris and Segre, “Postmodernism,” 13.

<sup>108</sup> Ferraris and Segre, “Postmodernism,” 13.

### 3.1 Anti-Postmodernism

Let us now address an obnoxious, but nonetheless pertinent point of criticism that postmodernism tends to suffer from the most these days. Legitimate critique has its limits and critiques of postmodernism are no exception. Indeed, I myself find myself threading a narrow line between fair criticism and attacking strawmen that obscure postmodern reality. Metamodernism does not equate to anti-postmodernism; it may criticise the flaws of the postmodern frameworks and even blame some of the contemporary crises on the inadequacy of postmodernism to face those challenges. Yet, metamodernism is located in the metaxy between modernism and postmodernism; indeed, the metamodern paradigm is a direct product of postmodernity. This section thus seeks to address the variety of criticism of postmodernism that one is bound to encounter online. Stemming from the alt-right side of the political spectrum, much of it completely fails to address the basic standpoints of postmodern thought. Later in this work, we will get to a discussion of a metamodern phenomenon that came to be labelled “Vaporwave,” which will serve as an example of how metamodern cultural production may end up being co-opted by anti-postmodern reactionaries.

The most egregious examples of this strawman-lynching come from those critics, who conflate postmodernism with Marxist ideologies, thus rehashing criticisms of perceived “cultural Marxism.” Particularly cringeworthy and misdirected input has consistently been pouring from the likes of Jordan Peterson, who maintains that postmodernism, in fact, is merely rebranded Marxism (for an excellent volume of criticism of Peterson’s ideas see *Jordan Peterson: Critical Responses*, edited by Sandra Woien).<sup>109</sup> When Peterson refers to “postmodernism,” he merely points to a loose assemblage of neo-Marxism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and other strands of thought, that are supposedly attempting

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<sup>109</sup> Sandra Woien, ed., *Jordan Peterson: Critical Responses* (Berkeley: Open Universe, 2022).

to undermine and ultimately destroy “Western civilisation.” This rebranding apparently came as a “sleight of hand” where the failure of Marxism to achieve its socio-economic goals turned into the infiltration of academia under the name of postmodernism. Much of this misreading of postmodernism seems to come from Stephen Hicks’ *Explaining Postmodernism* (2004),<sup>110</sup> which significantly distorts the meaning of the term due to poor scholarship and political agenda. While the claim that postmodernism is, in fact, a metanarrative on its own is consistent with the arguments presented in this work, the paranoid extension of this thought into the realm of conspiracy theories is insincere at best and deranged at worst, as seen in the vitriol that had accumulated in the reactionary post-postmodernism of the self-styled “Intellectual Dark Web” (IDW).

It is actually quite staggering how little research has been done on this strand of thought in academia; the only serious paper I was able to find which thoroughly examines the phenomenon and its implications is that of Gabriel Parks.<sup>111</sup> Parks’ paper is fascinating in the way that he manages to explain how this loosely connected movement came to utilise rhetorical strategies to garner audiences by presenting themselves as “reasonable thinkers” who merely stand for free speech and oppose, among other things, “postmodernism.”<sup>112</sup> Without going deeper in the discussion of IDW, it suffices to note that the rise of such groupings of (in Parks’ words) “organic intellectuals”<sup>113</sup> signifies a crisis of the postmodern/post-structuralist discourse. Mark Fisher expressed his deep concerns with such social polarisation occurring through the toxic online environments in his last work *Exiting the Vampire Castle*

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<sup>110</sup> Stephen Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (Milwaukee: Scholargy Publishing, 2004).

<sup>111</sup> Gabriel Parks, “Considering the Purpose of “An Alternative Sense-Making Collective”: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Intellectual Dark Web,” *Southern Communication Journal* 85, no. 3 (2020): 178-190 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2020.1765006>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>112</sup> Parks, “Considering the Purpose,” 5.

<sup>113</sup> Parks, “Considering the Purpose,” 4.

(2013),<sup>114</sup> but it is doubtful that even he could have imagined what the online space would turn into merely ten years later.

Postmodernism as an academic or artistic mode is not just rebranded nihilism. Lambasting it as such amounts to nothing more than misdirected attacks on what could at best be called postmodern kitsch. Naturally, such kitsch that only pretends to contain greater wisdom while in fact possessing none and hiding this incompetence behind obscurantist verbiage deserves nothing but harsh criticism. Frustration with such pieces often leads to sweeping overgeneralisations of postmodernism; Brian Leiter called out “postmodernists and deconstructionists” for their “sophomoric jargon.”<sup>115</sup> Ronald Dworkin went even farther and straight up denounced the views of postmodernists as “subjective displays in which we need take nothing but a biographical interest.”<sup>116</sup> Most of the staunch anti-postmodernists fail to understand that postmodernism almost always is and was moralising while at the same time either ethically relativist or value neutral.<sup>117</sup> However, while postmodern theorising never outright promoted nihilism (as seems to be the chief criticism levelled against it) it nonetheless largely ignored the role of ethics, while instead relying on inconsistent ad-hoc value-positions. In turn, this approach resulted in postmodern critique shrinking to the affective modes of guilt, melancholy, and condemnation.<sup>118</sup> It almost seems that in the effort to tear down the works of modernism, chiefly that of positivism, postmodernism did away with everything positive too. Instead of promoting growth, postmodern critiques now only pull their targets into gloomy pessimism. More and more, nostalgia pervades postmodern texts for a time when postmodern

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<sup>114</sup> Mark Fisher, “Exiting the Vampire Castle,” *Open Democracy*, November 24, 2013

<<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/exiting-vampire-castle/>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>115</sup> Brian Leiter, “Books in Review,” *ABA Division for Public Education Focus on Law Studies* (Fall 1998), 14.

<sup>116</sup> Ronald Dworkin, “Objectivity and truth: you’d better believe it,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 88, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2961920>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>117</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 237.

<sup>118</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 242.

thinking was at its peak, ironically enough when it still had constructive potential for cultural and political change.

Currently, academic postmodernism has turned scholarship into an assemblage of hyper-specialisation that leaves out any potential for interdisciplinary theory. In literary studies, this stance has perhaps most famously crystallized into works such as *Against Theory*.<sup>119</sup> Ultimately, it seems that metamodernism, or the thought that would eventually be labelled as metamodernism, emerged from the need for a new way of thinking and feeling the world; as Slavoj Žižek is always keen to remind us, it always comes down to ideology,<sup>120</sup> which in this case points to how intersectionality has been traded for various forms of reductionism. Speaking of intersectionality, Žižek's emphasis on ideology, most commonly employed in social sciences, is easily compatible with Hans Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, specifically his maxim that being-in-the-world is always necessarily interpretive.<sup>121</sup> Let us now focus on the core debates that led to the development of metamodernity.

### 3.2 Core Debates

If we were reductionist, we could easily reduce the conflict of modernism and postmodernism to a faceoff between Lyotard and Habermas, for it was *this* academic dispute that formed the bedrock of our contemporary discussion on postmodernism. It is not the objective of this chapter or this work in general to provide a comprehensive critique of their discussion, but it will be crucial to at least reproduce the idea of this scholarly dispute to understand the origins

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<sup>119</sup> William J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>120</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 15-16.

<sup>121</sup> Tina Botts, "Legal Hermeneutics," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<https://iep.utm.edu/leg-herm/>> accessed January 2, 2024.

of metamodern critique of modernity. For Habermas, modernity is a discourse,<sup>122</sup> a conversation among people stretching centuries back into the past. Treating modernity thusly differentiates Habermas from the previous idea of seeing modernity more as a doctrine or a platform.<sup>123</sup> Habermas' central point in his study is the assertion that postmodernism possesses no autonomous legitimacy of its own; it merely sprung from the de-legitimation of modernism. This constitutes for Habermas a "legitimacy crisis" whereby "a social system allows fewer possibilities for problem solving than are necessary [for its] continued existence."<sup>124</sup> Habermas further equates the Enlightenment with the philosophical discourse of modernism and thus postmodernism is merely a byproduct of the incomplete project of modernity. In Habermas' own words:

The project of modernity as it was formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century consists in the relentless development of the objectivating sciences, of the universalistic foundations of morality and law, and of autonomous art, all in accord with their own immanent logic.<sup>125</sup>

It is this Habermasian interpretation that supplied so much fuel to postmodern critiques of modernity and ultimately led postmodernism to form a "prism" through which to view the world. Richard Rorty wrote an excellent commentary regarding the dispute between Lyotard and Habermas; if we reject metanarratives, then we inadvertently create a metanarrative and in turn we require at least one 'standard' for judging and critiquing all reasonable standards.<sup>126</sup> The absence of any such standard means that any act of critique, of distinction

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<sup>122</sup> Fred Dallmayr, "The Discourse of Modernity: Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Habermas," in *Habermas and The Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, ed. Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), 59.

<sup>123</sup> Dallmayr, "The Discourse of Modernity," 59.

<sup>124</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Worcester: Polity Press, 1973 [1988]), 2.

<sup>125</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project," in *Habermas and The Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, ed. Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), 45.

<sup>126</sup> Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 [2010]).

between categories, is ultimately pointless. For Habermas, this equates to resigning on the project of modernity in the sense of the Enlightenment's notion of "rational criticism of existing institutions".<sup>127</sup> Criticism will then still be possible, but only in the vein of Adorno and Horkheimer, whose approach Habermas surmised thusly: "they abandoned any theoretical approach and practiced ad hoc determinate negation... The praxis of negation is what remains of the 'spirit of... unremitting theory.'"<sup>128</sup> As is apparent, Habermas shows a strongly pro-modernist stance and views the development of postmodernity as a threat to this incomplete project of modernity.

Moreover, for Derrida and other poststructuralists, deconstruction is necessary to undermine reason and its capacity to produce totalitarianism. Derrida states this explicitly when he writes that his practice of deconstruction serves primarily to "free oneself of totalitarianism as far as possible."<sup>129</sup> Totalitarianism, in Derrida's mind, is thus inherently coupled with the logocentrism of earlier philosophy, specifically with the project laid down by Nietzsche and continued by Heidegger in the attempt to make a final break with metaphysics. For Derrida, however, the prospect of 'ending metaphysics' is futile and only exposes the fact that Western philosophy has been brought to its limits.<sup>130</sup> Catherine Zuckert commented on Derrida's stance that: "[R]ather than usher in an era of totalitarian politics [...] a radical deconstruction of the tradition constitutes our best defense."<sup>131</sup> This is, however, precisely the point where Derrida himself reached his limit. By denying that there is no stable system of meaning or order, relying instead on the notion of *différance*, by which linguistic meaning is

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<sup>127</sup> Rorty, *Essays*, 164.

<sup>128</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading Dialectic of Enlightenment," *New German Critique*, no. 26 (Spring-Summer 1982): 29, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/488023>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>129</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1988): 648, <<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/448458?journalCode=ci>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>130</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967 [1997]), 19-26.

<sup>131</sup> Catherine Zuckert, "The Politics of Derridean Deconstruction," *Polity* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1991): 352, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3235130>> accessed January 2, 2024.

created rather than given, Derrida offers the exit of totalisation, but at the same time, he deprives us of the capacity to think and act in a *meaningful* way. Zuckert made a crucial observation of this shortcoming:

If all opposites are fundamentally and inseparably linked, as Derrida maintains, there are no alternatives, no "either-or's" between which to choose. We may be freed from complete domination, but we are not free to do much.<sup>132</sup>

Ironically enough, this may prove Habermas' labelling of Derrida as a "(neo-) conservative" true after all, although in a different sense than Habermas originally intended. Derrida may have intended to offer his readers a liberation but in the end, he did not specify what this liberation should entail. At this point, a distinction ought to be made in regard to Habermas' idea of Enlightenment. In his writings, the Enlightenment he appeals to is not that of the 18<sup>th</sup> century variety, but one that stresses liberation as a moral absolute rather than as an epistemological factor. Habermas is aware of the inner contradictions of modernism but instead of doing away with them altogether via deconstruction, he seeks to reconstruct modernism through the philosophical discourse of the Enlightenment, which was left unfinished due to the emergence of postmodernism. What Habermas ultimately produces is the first tangible criticism of postmodernism as a paradigm vis-à-vis the concept of modernity. In fact, what Habermas achieves in his writings is what social sciences refer to as "securitisation," meaning that he effectively turns postmodernism into a threat by the use of a speech act. This "threat" of postmodernism would actually later degenerate into the kitsch of postmodernism that is nowadays paraded extensively around the alt-right forums of the internet. The fact that the alt-right as a stance is an antithetical 'ideology' with its own distrust of progress and other metanarratives originating from the Enlightenment (such as the authority of the state,

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<sup>132</sup> Zuckert, "The Politics of Derridean Deconstruction," 354.

the prioritisation of reason over faith etc.) makes it ironically just another iteration of late postmodernism, but let us refrain from these broader critiques for now as they will be addressed in the following chapter.

Lyotard, on the other hand, stressed the role of value games over a model based on rationality. However, Lyotard does not define any grounding of legitimacy in a rational model and in turn lacks the tools for such critiques; his entire argument rests on the supposed power of language games, yet he offers no idea of a meta-language or a meta-game. Hence, instead of constructing, Lyotard only strives to deconstruct the thesis of his philosophical opponent by showing how the same causes for the dissolution of the modern discourse were in fact imminent in the projects of the Enlightenment and idealism.<sup>133</sup> Lyotard's thesis then rests on the observation that since reason can be used for wrong ends (such as in the hands of tyrants) then reason as a rational and descriptive game cannot be trusted as means for liberation.

To counter Lyotard and other "antimodernists," as Habermas views the critics of modernity, Habermas resorts to label them as 'neoconservatives' in a somewhat bizarre manner from today's point of view. In Habermas' mind, this label is justified as those rejecting the project of modernity are fundamentally likened to those who in the Age of Enlightenment rejected change (these being mostly the nobility). Essentially, postmodernism for Habermas legitimises nothing but irrationality. This argument starts making sense once we realise that Habermas derives his definition of (neo-)conservatism from the writings of Kurt Lenk, who postulated that conservatism emerged from its claim of the irrationality of the world. Pavel Kolář provided an excellent literature review of German political science and found out that this axiom is true only in as far as the fact that the "original" conservatives rejected rationalism of the Enlightenment, but conservatism as an ideology then fully utilised rationalistic

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<sup>133</sup> Ferraris and Segre, "Postmodernism," 14.

argumentation to defend its own values<sup>134</sup>. While we will not delve deeper into the sociology of rationalism as an ideological current, it will do us good to realise in what matrix of definitions do we currently operate.

To further illustrate the conceptual origins of metamodernism, we need to address the Derridean concepts of *différance* and deconstruction and to include them in the discussion. The concept of deconstruction especially tends to be seen as inseparable from philosophical postmodernism (see for example the *Postmodernism* entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).<sup>135</sup> It is, in fact, often presented as an illustration of postmodernism and its potential for critique. Yet, this may not be such a clear case after all and in fact, deconstruction may exactly be the keystone in the transition to metamodernism. This is because the tradition of the liberal/conservative binary (itself a product of modernism) does not properly reflect the metamodern paradigm, which fits far more within the interpretive and social critiques of thinkers such as Derrida, Habermas and Gadamer. These thinkers are especially pertinent in the metamodern phenomenon as the political implications of their work cannot be reduced to a simple liberal/conservative dichotomy. This is because metamodernism is more concerned about value memes than mere posturing along binary lines, or as Freinacht put it: “Metamodernists define themselves through the struggle of value memes against value memes: It’s not if you’re Right or Left that matters the most, but how complex your thinking is.”<sup>136</sup> In other words, the current political dichotomy between the categories of liberalism and conservatism, itself being a product of modernism, does not reflect the propositions and stances of metamodernism.

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<sup>134</sup> Pavel Kolář, “Geneze novodobého konzervatismu jako problém sociálních věd ve 20. století,” *Sociologický časopis* 35, no. 4 (Dec 1999), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3235130>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>135</sup> See “Postmodernism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Published September 30, 2005; Revised February 5, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>136</sup> Freinacht, *The Listening Society*, 359.

For Feldman, neither Derrida, Gadamer or Habermas are truly postmodern as they (especially Derrida) tend to be portrayed (Feldman manages to work around the vaporous label of “radical postmodernist” by replacing it with a somewhat misleading label of “antimodernist”), but they in fact are metamodernists in their appeal to truth, reference and stable contexts, however finite and provisional they may be.<sup>137</sup> Consequently, the disputes of these thinkers are not fundamental disagreements regarding the question of modernity, but a debate on how metamodern critique should be conducted and what is the orientation of power within the metamodern paradigm.<sup>138</sup> Therein lies the very crux of metamodernism: it does not give up on categories such as truth, even if “only” contextual, and even if irony is always present in the metamodern paradigm (for to ignore it would be simply impossible and regressive). This is where late postmodernism failed as it progressively degenerated in anti-modernism – a nihilistic and relativistic parody of itself, a hopeless and intellectually insufficient model of thinking. Metamodernism on the other, is hopeful and radically so: “Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern scepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to impossible possibility.”<sup>139</sup>

In short, I have come to the conclusion that it is not postmodernism *per se* that is the object of critique in this work, but the radical, nihilistic version of it, the postmodern kitsch that serves not to elucidate, but to confuse and break down. It is nothing but reawakened sophism. The key finding here is that this radical postmodernism is legitimised only to the extent that it is a deconstruction of modernism. While Ferraris and others thought that postmodernism is still viable as a revision of modernism without outright excluding the tradition and modernism of the Enlightenment, this is no longer the case today. It is this

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<sup>137</sup> Feldman, “The Problem of Critique,” 304.

<sup>138</sup> Feldman, “The Problem of Critique,” 315.

<sup>139</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes,” 5.

exclusion that resulted in what Heidegger refers to as the “oblivion,” meaning the absence of metaphysics.

Metamodernism as a paradigm emerges precisely from these disputes of modernity; the dream of the Nietzschean postmodernists to overcome modernism has been achieved, but at the expense of overcoming postmodernism too. Feldman made the crucial observation that metamodernism emerges from the critical juncture of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, Jurgen Habermas’s communication theory, and Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction.<sup>140</sup> Vermeulen and Van den Akker went further and situated metamodernism “epistemologically *with* (post) modernism, ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism.”<sup>141</sup> It is a paradigm that emerged from the completeness of the postmodern project (or lack thereof); whereas in the last century, we could hardly claim that postmodernism was a truly global phenomenon in the sense that societies around the globe were postmodern in the way the French philosophers had described, now the reality of the postmodern condition is much more obvious with the proliferation of the internet. Finally, the world has become truly superficial, Warholian even; surface and immanence have assumed new totality over the dimension of depth.

As such, metamodernism is the cultural logic of the internet age, although it is still in formation.<sup>142</sup> The problem one runs into when writing about postmodernism in the current cultural climate is that many of the forms of supposed metamodernism end up being merely manifestations of late postmodernism. Indeed, late postmodernism may be regarded as a separate phenomenon entirely, utilising postmodern techniques not for critique, as the “high” postmodernism did, but for the purposes of representation of the world as it (supposedly) is. Jeremy Green confirmed this development: “we are no longer postmodern

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<sup>140</sup> Feldman, “The Problem of Critique”.

<sup>141</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes,” 2.

<sup>142</sup> Abramson, “Metamodernism”.

in quite the same way as when the concept was first set loose.”<sup>143</sup> Indeed, it may not be the case as Linda Hutcheon claimed that postmodernism has “passed” and that “it’s over”<sup>144</sup> but that its epistemology and indeed its very style persisted. This is why Josh Toth rephrased the decline of postmodernism as something “passing”.<sup>145</sup> We are still living in this culture of postmodern decline. Notwithstanding one’s position towards the finality of postmodernism, one has to note that in light of the ecological, environmental, political and economic realities and crises that are increasingly intensifying with the passage of time, an epistemological shift has taken place, one where the superficiality of postmodernism is no longer viable or useful in terms of critique.<sup>146</sup> A more substantive model of post-postmodernism is thus forming, or rather, it *has to be formed*. To reiterate, we can turn to Žižek’s diagnosis from 2010 (how innocent does that time seem from the perspective of today, further proving Žižek’s alarm):

[T]he capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point. Its “four riders of the apocalypse” are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself (problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions.<sup>147</sup>

Postmodernism as a cultural mode finds itself in a tricky situation. Under the sheer weight of its conceptual baggage, its verbiage and proliferation, it turned into a scarecrow. Critics accuse postmodernism of the disappearance of values on the one hand, and almost in one breath decry the dismissive postmodern moralising, that the term has supposedly come to espouse under the banner of Social Justice.<sup>148</sup> The problem with these critiques lies in the fact that they fundamentally misunderstand the attributes of postmodernism, depicting it interchangeably

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<sup>143</sup> Green, *Late Postmodernism*, 1.

<sup>144</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989 [2002]), 166.

<sup>145</sup> Josh Toth, *The passing of postmodernism: A spectroanalysis of the contemporary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), quoted in Gibbons, ““Take that you intellectuals!” and “kaPOW!”,” 29.

<sup>146</sup> Gibbons, ““Take that you intellectuals!” and “kaPOW!”,” 30.

<sup>147</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), x.

<sup>148</sup> Michael Rectenwald, *Springtime for Snowflakes: 'Social Justice' and Its Postmodern Parentage* (London: New English Review Press).

as a moral nihilism or ethical relativism. In fact, the very tenet which has come to be most frequently associated with postmodernism, that of the incredulity towards metanarratives, may be a result of bad translation. Kirby suggested that the English translation of Lyotard's "l'incrédulité à l'égard des métarécits" suggests an incredulity towards *all* metanarratives due to the omission of any articles before "metanarratives," while in original, this incredulity is expressed only towards the metanarratives that Lyotard describes in his book, which are generally limited to unconditional belief in progress.<sup>149</sup>

Herein lies the core misunderstanding: postmodernism has never been a model, but at most an academic paradigm. Its treatment as a coherent programme produced the popular idea of postmodernism, which in turn became a strawman for critique. Yet, postmodernism as a paradigm did breed its discontents and dismissing these would only keep us as scholars stranded in the desert of concepts. Namely, postmodernism(s) in academia have led to the devolution of problem-solving into problematising. The postmodern sentiment is by no means gone, but its moment in history certainly is. It had exhausted itself so much on fixating itself on jejune details of critique that it ceased to be able to provide an answers whatsoever in to emergent cultural realities. Let us now turn to the modernist side of metamodernism.

### **3.3 The Problem with Being Modern**

Perhaps the crux of the metamodern zeitgeist lies in the convoluted status of "the modern." As is perhaps obvious, modernism does not equate modernity. After all, all art can be thought of as "modern" in its own right. Renato Poggioli expressed this perhaps the best in his seminal work *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*: "It is not in fact the modern which is destined to die, becoming a modern thing that no longer seems so because its time has passed,

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<sup>149</sup> Kirby, *Digimodernism*, 235.

but the modernistic.”<sup>150</sup> Moreover, perhaps the most crucial (and usually the most visible) aspect of the status of the “modern” is the role of technology, which continues to be one of the hotbeds of disputation when it comes to the problem of modernity.

Just to clear the record, the author of this text is not an anti-modernist nor an anti-postmodernist. The argument presented in this work is not aimed at somehow discrediting these (anti-)systems of thought or exposing them as fraudulent. Indeed, postmodernist critiques have been invaluable and as the old adage goes, had they not existed, someone would have to invent them. After all, metamodernism would not be possible without postmodernism. Instead, the task ahead is relatively simple. My aim is to show that postmodernism, as vaporous as the label is (and perhaps precisely because of that factor) has run its course. The conventional origin story of Modernism (capital “M” is intentional here) has turned into a bit of a cliché. According to the classic narrative, modernism roughly starts in the watershed year of 1914.<sup>151</sup> This was the year when Joyce’s *Dubliners* are published as well as Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. *Egoist* sees the light of day in his year as do Schoenberg’s symphonies. It is also the year when World War I breaks out and forever binds formal innovation with cultural devastation.<sup>152</sup>

Writing on the moderns inevitably leads to addressing the problem of modernity itself. As Storm suggested: “Modernity is used paradoxically to indicate equally a diversity of historical and geographic ruptures, a set of contradictory processes, and a cross-cultural episteme and to describe a continuous now-time used for different “nows” from the fourteenth century to the present. All of these are erroneous.”<sup>153</sup> On these grounds, it can be nigh impossible at times to separate the modern from the post-modern. After all, was it not the goal of both to transcend “modernity,” albeit in different ways and from different vantage points?

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<sup>150</sup> Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962 [1981]): 216.

<sup>151</sup> James and Seshagiri, “Metamodernism,” 87.

<sup>152</sup> James and Seshagiri, “Metamodernism,” 87.

<sup>153</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 16.

The idea of the modernity can be handily understood as the consciousness of the transition from the old to the new.<sup>154</sup> As such, modernity revolved around its own unapologetic confidence. The modernists believed that they were heading towards the End of History, that all the great questions of the world had a definitive answer that was just within reach. Be it Hegel's conception of History, Marx's re-elaboration thereof, Einstein's theory of relativity, Freud's discovery of the unconscious, or Wittgenstein's conviction that he solved philosophy, modernity swelled in its own explanations of the universe. Progress was the name of the game. As Storm further suggested: "Nor sooner had "modernity" become the quintessential periodisation than it became possible to imagine its future eclipse."<sup>155</sup>

As we shall see, metamodernism may at first glance be confused for revived and rebranded modernism. Indeed, the two have a lot of common, namely their effort to construct a system, rather than to destroy one. On the whole, the two even share similar language, trying to articulate complex ideas clearly without resorting to the jargon filled word-salads that came to exemplify some of the postmodern(ist) texts (postmodern obscurantism was perhaps most famously exposed in the Sokal affair, otherwise one may even use The Postmodernism Generator online to generate random postmodern articles).

Conversely, situating postmodernism on a timeline is a practically impossible task. This is because of the reason I discussed earlier, that being the vacuity of modernity and modernism. From here it is prefixes all the way down. Any and all paradigmatic modernists can just as well be rebranded as early postmodernists.<sup>156</sup> Indeed, the very term "postmodernism" refers to a vacuous idea of something "after" the fact of modernism. Passage of time and endless cultural attributions turned the idea of postmodernism into what Ihab Hassan called "conceptual

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<sup>154</sup> Habermas, *Modernity: An Unfinished Project*, 39.

<sup>155</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 12.

<sup>156</sup> See Robert Pippin, "Nietzsche and the Origin of the Idea of Modernism," *Inquiry* 26 (1983): 151–80, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00201748308601991>> accessed January 2, 2024.

ectoplasm.”<sup>157</sup> The very attempt to define postmodernism betrays the idea. Perhaps postmodernism is only an ethos, an expression of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or maybe an exercise in re-definition of itself; it is, for all intents and purposes, a cultural uroboros.

Despite its lack of comprehensive critical apparatus, postmodern critique tends to be rather vitriolic and, to be honest, disrespectful. How ironic that a way of interpretation so allegedly poised against the pretences of its ideological forebears tends to display such level of pretentiousness and snobbery. This attitude manifests itself especially in the postmodern re-interpretations of history, which Hassan condemned rather succinctly:

Certainly, we read history from the vantage of the present; certainly, we write history as narratives, tropic and revisionary. But this gives us no licence to cannibalise our past to feed our flesh.<sup>158</sup>

Paraphrasing William James, Hassan provides us with a metamodern dictum: “truth rests not on transcendence but on trust.”<sup>159</sup> We can only trust someone if this trust is reciprocated and in turn, such reciprocity produces empathy, something that is painfully missing in postmodernity. Postmodernism, once so effective in combating the arrogance of modernity, had finally merged with its shadow. The original playfulness of its multiplicity of perspectives had mutated into precisely the same arrogance that it had once despised. The refusal of metanarratives had become its own metanarrative. These developments led postmodernism, once a diverse array of creativity that was freed from the shackles of the dogmatism of earlier artistic movements, to degenerate into a parody of itself, that being the contemporary hybrid of nihilism and defeatism. In other words, postmodernism has finally arrived at its own deadlock.

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<sup>157</sup> Ihab Hassan, “Beyond Postmodernism: Toward and Aesthetic of Trust,” *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2003): 3, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09697250301198>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>158</sup> Hassan, “Beyond Postmodernism,” 4.

<sup>159</sup> Hassan, “Beyond Postmodernism,” 6.

This is why a reaction emerged to the abstracted and deconstructed world in the form of metamodernism, which we will now examine through the school of thought that emerged around the writings of Bruno Latour. Latour's thinking crystallised into what is mostly commonly referred to as the "Actor Network Theory" (henceforth referred to as ANT in this paper). For Latour, the social is a "trail of *associations* between heterogenous elements."<sup>160</sup> This definition is admittedly extremely impractical, as it effectively encompasses any connection there is. Yet, this universalism is part of Latour's objective in his attempt to dislodge anthropocentric thinking. It is precisely this anthropocentrism that is at the heart of postmodernism in its emphasis on human actors. However, the emergence of the Anthropocene, the age defined by the measurable anthropogenic impact on the planet, proves that postmodernism is a dead model. Instead of fetishising the of picture of the *The Blue Marble*, seen from a "point of view from nowhere"<sup>161</sup> we have to realise that we live in a network composed of an awesomely diverse array of actants, human and non-human, organic and non-organic. In contrast, *The Blue Marble* is a supremely immanent image; it presents us with nothing but Warholian surface that completely de-animates the Earth and blurs the boundaries between the animate and abiotic spheres.<sup>162</sup>

This leads us to the bedrock of ANT, that is, Bruno Latour's work *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). Latour dismissed the age-old dichotomy of culture/nature as being an artificial one, resembling rather the binary divisions from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Instead of these old dualisms, Latour proposed a "process of translation,"<sup>163</sup> which produces mixtures between actants irrespective of whether they would otherwise be grouped under the label of culture or nature.

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<sup>160</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 5.

<sup>161</sup> Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2015 [2017]): 77.

<sup>162</sup> Babette B. Tischleder, "Neither Billiard Ball nor Planet B: Latour's Gaia, Literary Agency, and the Challenge of Writing Geohistory in the Anthropocene Moment," in *New Directions in Philosophy and Literature*, ed. David Rudrum, Ridvan Askin and Frida Beckman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019): 185.

<sup>163</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993): 10-11.

This approach goes in stark contrast to what Latour calls the “process of purification,”<sup>164</sup> which aims to separate beings along ontological zones. Another, more cynical view, was offered by Don Lashomb.<sup>165</sup> It is not that culture and nature form an assemblage, a network that we as actants participate in, together with other human and non-human actants (Latour consciously chooses the term “actant” rather than “actor” due to the latter’s anthropocentrism). It is rather the case that culture has cannibalised nature; culture has *replaced* nature, or rather, it has become “new nature.”<sup>166</sup> This culture being pop-culture.

Meanwhile, this evaporation of the world into simulacra has diverted attention from the rapidly collapsing real and networked world. To better imagine such a world, Latour drew on the concept of Gaia<sup>167</sup> in order to imagine, in a mythological fashion, the shared space that we inhabit with the multitude of other beings and non-beings. It is precisely such a sincerely mythopoetic quality that anchors ANT in metamodernity that engenders the awareness of the degrading conditions of life in Anthropocene, as opposed to the neo-liberal delusions of hypermodernity. This is why metamodernism matters as an *idea*. We cannot simply continue to live and create immanently while heading into certain ecological doom. This is why literature today matters more than ever thanks to what Babette B. Tischleder termed “literary agency.”<sup>168</sup> It is this agency that transcends the text and defines the relation between reader and text. Thanks to literary agency, readers are moved and transcend their own reality; as readers, we move beyond ourselves.<sup>169</sup> This is exactly why metamodern thinking, based on irony *and* sincerity, is so important today as engaging in networks suggested by ANT may make us realise that the postmodern surface is not all there is. And now, after this barrage against postmodernism, the next subchapter, we will examine the metamodernist discourse and its answers.

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<sup>164</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 11.

<sup>165</sup> Lashomb, *Warhol/Chris Chan*.

<sup>166</sup> Lashomb, *Warhol/Chris Chan*, 540.

<sup>167</sup> Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia*.

<sup>168</sup> Babette B. Tischleder, “Neither Billiard Ball nor Planet B,” 180.

<sup>169</sup> Babette B. Tischleder, “Neither Billiard Ball nor Planet B,” 195.

## 4 Metamodern Responses

Over the course of the last decade, at the very least since 2014 when the concept had properly entered academic consciousness, metamodernism has gained traction as viable cultural and literary category. With the rapid escalation of contemporary crises, particularly of climatic concerns, it became clear that literary postmodernism is no longer viable for the needs of the 21st century and that an approach is needed that would achieve revive affect but not succumb to the sentimentality, realism or nostalgic escapism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>170</sup> The chief fault of postmodern approaches lay in their obsession with ending, one could say in line with the Fukuyamist thesis. This pre-occupation resulted in the chronic and reductive presentism that affected even the visions of world's destruction; vision of a better future got blocked.<sup>171</sup> As Jameson stated, lived experience turns into “a series of pure and unrelated presents in time.”<sup>172</sup> Hence, under the rubric of postmodernism, the notion of a better tomorrow began to be seen as something suspicious and totalitarian in nature, while the theme of dystopia in turn became highly sought after by postmodernists;<sup>173</sup> for example, the subgenre of cyberpunk emerged as critique to neoliberal capitalism.

Current crises, however, cannot be addressed with the postmodern presentism in mind. The coming (and already occurring) ecological and environmental emergency necessitates historical thinking, which recognises Anthropocene as the era in which humans are not only biological, but also geological agents.<sup>174</sup> It is during such an anthropocentric era when the previously held distinctions between nature and culture are collapsing. Moreover, in place

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<sup>170</sup> Hélène Fau, “Interview with Jeanette Winterson,” *Études Britanniques Contemporaines* 26, (2004): 171–76, quoted in Emily Arvay, “Climate Crises, Ruined Islands, and British Metamodernism,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, (2023): 2, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2023.2268519>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>171</sup> Alison Gibbons, “Metamodernism, the Anthropocene, and the Resurgence of Historicity and “The Utopian Glimmer of Fiction”: Ben Lerner’s 10 and “The Utopian Glimmer of Fiction”,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 62, no. 2 (2021): 138, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1784828>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>172</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 27.

<sup>173</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Utopia,” 57.

<sup>174</sup> Gibbons, “Metamodernism, the Anthropocene, and the Resurgence of Historicity,” 139.

of presentism, metamodernism suggests a new temporal mode of existence, one of heterochronic time and experience. Postmodern simultaneity is no longer sufficient to express the concerns of the coming catastrophes. This observation applies even when we consider the previously mentioned dystopian predispositions of postmodernism; one can notice that even the cyberpunk futures of postmodernism are still very much products of their time. Volatility and increasing anxiety regarding planetary future were key drivers in the decline of the postmodern incredulity. Renewed interest in historicity and metanarratives is arising once again because, to quote van den Akker and Vermeulen:

[W]e are faced with a radically unstable and uncertain world, where political systems and power relations are diffuse and unpredictable, financial security a rare privilege and ecological problems – sometimes quite literally – clog the horizon.<sup>175</sup>

Conversely, metamodernism is rife with utopias; utopianism became the name of the game under the new paradigm. One sub-genre, in which metamodernism is particularly noticeable is cli-fi. The term “cli-fi” itself was coined by Dan Bloom in 2007 and refers to climate fiction.<sup>176</sup> It is in this subgenre, where we encounter the metamodern oscillation, if not between honesty and irony, then certainly between hope and despair. Cli-fi emerged as a reaction against the limited timescales of postmodernist prose. That is why cli-fi came to exemplify the revivalist tendencies of sincerity necessary for any kind of historicism. Authors and critics of cli-fi refer to the variety of metamodernism as theorised by Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen. As has already been established, metamodernism is to these theorists a structure of feeling. In the context of cli-fi, this metamodern view sees the world, in the words of Cooper as: “a sort of social simulation rife with ideological inconsistency,

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<sup>175</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Utopia,” 57.

<sup>176</sup> Rodge Glass, “Global warning: the rise of ‘cli-fi’,” *The Guardian*, accessed January 7, 2024, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/31/global-warning-rise-cli-fi>>.

technological oppression, alienation from one's species-being, while still being hopeful; the type of realizations that are now commonplace within metamodernism."<sup>177</sup> The awareness of coming doom combined with the seemingly paradoxical hope in a better world is typical of the metamodern paradigm. In cli-fi then we can see the Anthropocene re-engaging with rediscovered and reforged thinking via grand narratives; by Anthropocene, we mean the current era in which specifically human activity has cardinal, destructive influence on the planet. Now is the time we as human come to realise our relationships with non-human actants. Metamodernism grants agency, or as Arvey put it: "[metamodern] novels ascribe value to individual acts of resistance despite their presumed ineffectuality."<sup>178</sup>

#### **4.1 Post-truth or how truth got problematised**

One area where postmodernism left a particular impact that metamodernism seeks to address is that of the "problem of truth," specifically the emergence of a phenomenon that has come to be known as "post-truth." Specifically, the age-old postmodern tendency to unmask regimes of truth in order to deconstruct them leaves this discourse (or lack thereof) vulnerable to the emergent narratives of post-truth. It is this post-truth discourse that completely changes the way we understand this regime of power; postmodern critique is helpless when confronting appeals to alternate 'facts' and 'findings' bordering on conspiracy theories. The final act of unmasking postmodernism did was to unmask itself as being a regime of truth on its own. In fact, it is the ultimate irony postmodernism got outdone by the very methods of critique it espoused. We find critique of the postmodern problematising in the work of Latour:

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<sup>177</sup> Brent Cooper, "The Metamodern Condition: A Report on "The Dutch School" of Metamodernism," *Medium*, accessed January 7, 2024, <<https://medium.com/the-abs-tract-organization/the-metamodern-condition-1e1d04a13c4>>.

<sup>178</sup> Arvey, "Climate Crises, Ruined Islands, and British Metamodernism," 2.

And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives.<sup>179</sup>

In other words, it would seem that the extremists, especially of the far-right persuasion, have learned to use the methods of postmodern critique against a shared enemy, be it expert opinion of any kind, scientific knowledge, or essentially any institutionally backed findings and claims that do not fit into one's particular worldview. It also seems that Latour himself changed his views throughout his writings: early in his career, he seems to have adopted a position typical of postmodernism at the time, stating that: "there is no scale of knowledge and, in the end, no knowledge at all."<sup>180</sup> Later in his work, however, he seems to have recoiled from the extent of scepticism that postmodernity came to embody and espouse, which then led him to question the viability of contemporary critique as opposed to constructive meaning-making. As he emphasised in 2004: "The question was never to get *away* from facts but *closer* to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism."<sup>181</sup> In a similar vein, Michel Foucault stated: "as far as the general public is concerned, I am the guy who said that knowledge merged with power, that it was no more than a thin mask thrown over the structures of domination."<sup>182</sup> Despite Foucault's effort to set the record clear, he continues to be identified with the generalized scepticism towards truth-claims and knowledge claims; his work got merged with the caricature of postmodernism, which

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<sup>179</sup> Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 227, <<https://doi.org/10.1086/421123>> accessed January 7, 2024.

<sup>180</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 232.

<sup>181</sup> Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?", 231.

<sup>182</sup> Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1988 [1990]): 264.

in turn became *the* postmodernism. In other words, while postmodernism never equated itself with cynicism, postmodern critiques achieved precisely this effect.

While the post-modernist all-encompassing doubt might have had its justification in the past, it certainly is not sufficient to deal with present challenges. Emancipatory knowledge is what is needed today instead. Storm proposed “zeteticism” as a viable epistemological stance for the metamodern viewpoint. Zeteticism, in short, is scepticism that doubts itself.<sup>183</sup> The concept emerged from the frustration with postmodern scepticisms, which in turn is easy to understand. While scepticism relies too much on its own absolute certainty, zeteticism incorporates into rational doubt the method of abduction in order to produce probabilistic knowledge.<sup>184</sup> Naturally, zeteticism is not without flaws, as was pointed out by Sohaib Khan.<sup>185</sup> Storm’s insistence on humility that he sees as integral to the method, is not synonymous with epistemological stance towards doubt.<sup>186</sup> Furthermore, the probabilistic knowledge that Storm espouses does not alone lead to awareness of structural injustice or of ways of addressing it.<sup>187</sup> Nonetheless, the concept, or even the limited viability of the concept, demonstrates that metamodernism as a phenomenon is capable of fostering critical and epistemological tools.

While originally such scepticisms were understood to be liberating and even progressive, now such doubt has the function of a straight-jacket, or worse, is utilised in post-truth narratives.<sup>188</sup> To believe that postmodernism had no politics would be a fallacy and further illustrates the inner contradiction of postmodernism as a mode; while in the past, postmodernists were most commonly found on the side of the political Left, now they are

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<sup>183</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 234.

<sup>184</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 217-219.

<sup>185</sup> Sohaib Khan, “Minding the Gap: Why Epistemological Rectitude Doesn’t Lead to Political Emancipation,” *Religious Studies Review* 48, no. 4 (2022), <<https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.16194>> accessed January 7, 2024.

<sup>186</sup> Khan, “Minding the Gap,” 507.

<sup>187</sup> Khan, “Minding the Gap,” 507.

<sup>188</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 233.

mostly situated on the Right. However, it would be a mistake to blame postmodernism entirely for the emergence of post-truth. Particularly unfair would be the attempt to lay all the blame on post-structuralism, which in fact may help us to understand where exactly does this striving for interrogation of truth regimes come from. Post-structuralism placed emphasis on the discursive and power-oriented effects of truth, rejecting the universalistic and transcendental interpretations of power. Michel Foucault's work in this area sought to expose that truth is merely contingent on cultural and historical factors and constructions and as such it is arbitrary.<sup>189</sup>

If truth operates only as a regime that is dependent on power, then one could at first glance assume that truth as such does not exist. Yet, the point that Foucault was trying to make was that there is no over-arching truth outside of history, and that truth is always bound with power, that is to say, with social conditions.<sup>190</sup> As Rorty stated: “[...] there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society—*ours*—uses in one or another area of inquiry.”<sup>191</sup> The lesson we should then take from postmodernity is that values and truth that are considered fundamental are not the result of historical development, but of agreements among social communities.<sup>192</sup> In contrast, there is no sign of playfulness in post-truth discourses as opposed to the postmodern critiques, that delved into deconstruction of rigid assumptions presented as “the” truth. Ultimately, post-truth is, despite its pretensions, merely an ideological extension of neoliberalism.<sup>193</sup> Nonetheless, while postmodernity does not necessarily outright equal post-truth, it did lay the methodology that enabled post-truth discourses in the first place. Pretending

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<sup>189</sup> Newman, “Post-Truth, Postmodernism and The Public Sphere,” 22.

<sup>190</sup> Newman, “Post-Truth, Postmodernism and The Public Sphere,” 22.

<sup>191</sup> Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 5.

<sup>192</sup> Santiago Zabala, *Being at Large: Freedom in the Age of Alternative Facts*, (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020): 5.

<sup>193</sup> Newman, “Post-Truth, Postmodernism and The Public Sphere,” 26.

that poststructuralism is in no way complicit with the emergence of post-truth discourses is at best insincere, betraying a commitment to the orthodoxy of the postmodern paradigm. That is because the methodologies of postmodernity are not designed to construct truth, but the opposite; deconstruction is supposed to “unmask” truth, to expose the construction of truth and in doing so, to invalidate its claim to stability. At worst, these attempts at deconstruction merely result in unsystematic scepticism towards any sign of objectivity while deconstruction in such cases exposes only the undeclared biases of the author instead of the contextual and institutional underpinnings of claims, as was the original intention of post-structuralism.<sup>194</sup>

Latour argued that the escape from this impasse lay in the return to realism. Consequently, the humanities will be able to regenerate and find a future in: “[...] the cultivation of a stubbornly realist attitude..., but a realism dealing with what I call matters of concern, not matters of fact.”<sup>195</sup> The hope that postmodernity would be defined by emancipation of ideological constructs proved false. Instead, institutionally backed truth only got replaced by “alternative facts”: the production of knowledge hence got radically decentralised. In a way, this is nothing new. After all, as Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar already noted in *Laboratory Life* (1979),<sup>196</sup> that facts are not grounded in some objective, transcendental truth, but in the networks of institutions, practices and actors that produced them. As Rorty stated: “there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society—ours—uses in one or another area of inquiry.”<sup>197</sup> As such, the strength of facts is not based on their veracity, but on the strength of institutions that produced them: this is a fundamental etymological shift

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<sup>194</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 23-24.

<sup>195</sup> Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?”, 231.

<sup>196</sup> Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979 [1986]).

<sup>197</sup> Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 23.

that the scientific community has begun to grasp only recently, due in part because of the alarm stemming from the dissipation of “alternative science” and post-truth ideologies. Santiago Zabala further distinguished between the postmodern contestation of truth and the post-truth discourses, stating that in the latter there is no playfulness, but rather a recourse to dogmatism.<sup>198</sup> In lieu with the “postmodern apologists” we could subscribe to the claim that post-truth actors merely exploit the methods and tendencies of postmodernism (the very mode of *incredulity*, albeit selective), but in turn, because of the metanarrative of incredulity built into postmodernism, the outcomes of post-truth merely led to further polarisation along ideological lines, instead of some idealised view that would transcend ideology.

For all its liberations, postmodernism ushered in an epistemological oxymoron; the belief in disbelief. Consider, for example, what happened in the wake of deconstructed positivism. The metanarrative metastasized to the point of unrecognizability. In turn, new positivisms emerged that claim the mantle of science while basing their ideological foundation completely elsewhere, most often in quasi-religious beliefs. This is the conspiracy culture of today. One can only think of the Flat Earth theory to realise the extent of paranoia that resulted from the collapse and subsequent attempted reconstruction of positivist metanarratives, albeit in a twisted form. As Peter Knight commented about conspiracy theories, they are “less a sign of mental delusion than an ironic stance towards knowledge and the possibility of truth, operating within the rhetorical terrain of the double negative. They are now presented self-consciously as a symptom that includes its own in-built diagnosis.”<sup>199</sup> Is this not the self-same ironic stance of the postmodernist? Is this not a result of the deconstruction of positivistic discourse, an offspring of discursive terrorism?

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<sup>198</sup> Zabala, *Being at Large*, 10-12.

<sup>199</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 2.

Indeed, the link between postmodernity and conspiracy culture is well established and even forms much substance of postmodern fiction, as can be seen, for example, in the works of Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo. In DeLillo's case especially, we find the claim that conspiracy culture and postmodernity in the US are inherently linked due to the event of Kennedy's assassination. It was this singular event that came to symbolise in popular consciousness a moment of trauma and a rupture with the "innocence" of the past. In Knight's words, the assassination has come to assume the role of "the primal scene of postmodernism."<sup>200</sup> Perhaps then the very origins of the post-truth phenomenon can have their inception in this event. As Knight commented:

The increasing sense of doubt about even the most basic of facts and causal connections also makes the Kennedy case a fitting myth of origin for a cultural logic marked by its skepticism about the authoritative power of narrative.<sup>201</sup>

In her excellent paper entitled *Capitalism with a Transhuman Face*, Ana Teixeira Pinto stated that these online cultural wars are "a proxy for a greater battle around de-Westernisation, Imperialism and white hegemony – or loss thereof."<sup>202</sup> Jameson termed conspiracy theory a "degraded attempt [...] to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system."<sup>203</sup> In a way, one may start feeling sympathetic towards conspiracy theorists. Face to face with the apparent obsolescence of Marxism in the wake of the End of History, they seek new and admittedly increasingly deranged ideologies to grapple with modernity insofar as modernity is synonymous with free market. In their attempts to explain the relation between

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<sup>200</sup> Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to The X-Files* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2001), 116.

<sup>201</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 116.

<sup>202</sup> Ana Teixeira Pinto, "Capitalism with a Transhuman Face," *Third Text* (2019): 5-6, <10.1080/09528822.2019.1625638> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>203</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 38.

power and abstraction they grasp for tools that are insufficient for the task.<sup>204</sup> These attempts to understand the totality of existence have found perfect environment online, spawning the alt-right in the process as a low-brow manifestation of the phenomenon and the genre of philosophical horror as the high-brow form thereof, propagated by the likes of Nick Land. Right-wing accelerationism may have run its course today, perhaps exactly because of its inherent obscurantism, but it laid the epistemological foundations of the foundations of today's iterations of cryptofascism. Figures like Land are ultimately "laying claim to some special truth and presenting (themselves) as a revelatory channel."<sup>205</sup> Pinto commented: "It is by no means coincidental that the point of intersection between LessWrong, transhumanism, neo-reaction, and crypto- reactionary speculative theory is a certain blend of Lovecraftian mythos and Nietzschean lore."<sup>206</sup> If Jameson titled his book 'Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', then the recent online development led to 'Late Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Cryptofascism'.

Moreover, Jameson's fears regarding the influence of television seem almost quaint in today's internet-ridden climate. Nonetheless, these fears of technology as a driver of epistemological crisis find their full realisation in the today's world of always-online paranoia. Indeed, these spasms of discontent flourish because of the failure of the "digital revolution," which promised a future that never came. We can see this sentiment in the work of Mark Fisher, who made his disaffection with the postmodern abolition of future explicit. For Fisher, postmodernism did not yet necessarily equate cultural ruin, but it served as a cultural precursor towards what he termed 'capitalist realism'. This critique rests on the assumption, that under the conditions of late postmodernity, the possibility of an alternative to realism is effectively null.<sup>207</sup> This socio-economic condition is then translated into culture, whose future is

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<sup>204</sup> Pinto, "Capitalism with a Transhuman Face," 6.

<sup>205</sup> Colin Campbell, *The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization* (Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2002): 19.

<sup>206</sup> Pinto, "Capitalism with a Transhuman Face," 7.

<sup>207</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2009): 2.

cancelled.<sup>208</sup> Fisher's thesis emerged from Jameson's writings regarding the colonisation by capitalism:

[I]t has already been observed how the prodigious new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) [...] it is precisely this whole extraordinarily demoralizing and depressing original new global space which is the "moment of truth" of postmodernism.<sup>209</sup>

The "moment of truth" that Jameson referred to is the loss of spatial-temporal coordination. It is because of this loss that the cultural moment following postmodernism is so hard to pin down in the first place. As Fisher stated: "some of the processes that Jameson described have become so aggravated and chronic that they have gone through a change in kind."<sup>210</sup> Nonetheless, it would seem that something radical had happened in the period of late postmodernity, caused perhaps by the logic of intensification and generalisation of capitalist valorisation, thus affecting the forms of representation that are attached to it. Moreover, reading texts that assess the condition of late postmodernity almost invariably leads to bleak conclusion about the possibility of culture, which, as it seems, had been exhausted. One reminded of Žižek's notion of aborted modernity: "the New we are dealing with is not primarily the future New, but the New of the past itself, of the thwarted, blocked, or betrayed possibilities ("alternate realities") which have disappeared in the actualization of the past."<sup>211</sup>

While this paper does not provide nearly enough attention to the phenomenon as it deserves, the mention of it nonetheless serves to illustrate the 'fallout' of late postmodernity, something to which metamodernism reacts. The following sub-chapter describes the ways

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<sup>208</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 76.

<sup>209</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 49.

<sup>210</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 7.

<sup>211</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and The Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012): 322.

in which this fallout manifested itself in culture as the break between postmodernity and metamodernity in the form of “vaporwave.”

## 4.2 Vaporwave

Perhaps the first great metamodern stirring came not from the literary, but musical scene. Electricity cracked in the old speakers of abandoned shopping malls and muzak filled the hallways. Everything drowned in magenta gloom and the world became just a bit more aesthetic. This, it later turned out, was Vaporwave. More of a late/post-postmodernism than metamodernism in earnest, vaporwave engaged in self-aware irony, praising at once the very consumerism that spawned it, while despairing over consumerist malaise. Vaporwave truly was the proverbial snake devouring its own tale. It was and continues to be an aesthetic sensitivity that stands on feeling of nostalgia and grief for a future that had been promised, but never arrived. As such, it is a deeply neo-romantic phenomenon, one that is aware of its own ironic status as a glorified image of past consumerism, but one that continues to find hope in the face of a bleak future nonetheless. As such, it is definitely worth pausing at in our exploration

of metamodernism as it just may be the missing link in metamodern evolution; it is indeed surprising just how much has academic work ignored this significant, if niche phenomenon. While Vaporwave is mostly associate with the music genre, this section will focus on its status as a style and an evolutionary link between postmodernism and metamodernism. But what truly is Vaporwave? Grafton Tanner summarised it thusly: “Vaporwave is one artistic style that seeks

to rearrange our relationship with electronic media by forcing us to recognize the unfamiliarity of ubiquitous technology.”<sup>212</sup>

Vaporwave was primarily a pastiche, combining retro elements with New Age sensibility. Its style imitated dreamscapes of a lost past. At its core, vaporwave is a project of hauntology. Its aesthetic relies heavily on capitalist imagery, or rather, on the idea of life under capitalism, both past and present (and perhaps future too).<sup>213</sup> It is epistemically strung between late postmodernism and the emergent metamodernism, which is the reason why I have found its inclusion in this work fitting and illustrative of the larger and admittedly more abstract concepts that are discussed here. Vaporwave is the hauntological phenomenon *par excellence* and in it, we can find the tentative signs of dissent against the domination of postmodern culture. The central themes of Vaporwave, the very gloom it encapsulates in its visions of exhausted future and nostalgic past, remind one of Mark Fisher’s question in his excellent, if depressing paper *What is Hauntology* (2012): “Could the only opposition to a culture dominated by what Jameson calls the “nostalgia mode” be a kind of nostalgia for modernism?”<sup>214</sup> Even if this nostalgia truly is earnest, it is not aimed at a concrete memory or substance of the past; the past in question is imagined and sublimated. As such Vaporwave does not in fact directly deal with the historicity of past decades of cultural development, but with internet historicity “through ironic remediations of sounds, images, and practices characteristic of earlier phases of the internet...”<sup>215</sup> Vaporwave is hyperreal; it exists only within the bounds of simulacra. Ultimately then, it recreates objects that never existed.<sup>216</sup> However, this reproduction

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<sup>212</sup> Grafton Tanner, *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts* (Croydon: Zero Books, 2016), 10.

<sup>213</sup> Tanner, *Babbling Corpse*, 43.

<sup>214</sup> Mark Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?”, *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 16-24. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>215</sup> Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Music, Online Methods, and Genre,” *Music and Letters* 98, no. 4 (Nov 2017): 605, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcx095>> accessed January 2, 2024.

<sup>216</sup> Nicholas Morrissey, “Metamodernism and Vaporwave: A Study of Web 2.0 Aesthetic Culture,” *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology* 14, no. 1 (2021): 72, <<https://doi.org/10.5206/notabene.v14i1.13361>> accessed January 2, 2024.

of simulacra is not the same as the process we have come to know from postmodern artists.

As Nicholas Morrissey commented:

Vaporwave stopped using the replacement of objective reality with subjective  
sins as purely a means to deconstruct social phenomena (as in postmodernism),  
instead beginning to use it as a means to reverse the simulation into something  
tangible and personal, such as an experience of nostalgia.<sup>217</sup>

Vaporwave evokes a mood, which came to be referred to as the “aesthetics” of the genre; metaxy is reached through the simulated connection of sublimated past and the disenchanted present. This is where metamodernism comes in. Where modernism and postmodernism clash over the legacy of modernist narratives, metamodernism unifies its historical and artistic positions by reassessing and remobilising these narratives. There is nothing inherently authentic about the past it presents – under the nostalgic mode of Vaporwave, the past is reduced to its essence, to its stereotype. It is a conscious process that ultimately raises the ontological questions of what exactly does nostalgia mean and why do we feel it towards a past that exemplifies late postmodernity in its consumerism. Yet, this is exactly where the metamodernity of Vaporwave comes in; whereas the mode of postmodernism would merely inquire the notion of nostalgia itself as an ontological reality, Vaporwave links this question with epistemology. Is our nostalgia authentic? How authentically nostalgic can we really be for an era that exists only in our imagination and how does this awareness affect the nostalgic experience itself?<sup>218</sup> One is reminded of the Luke Turner’s *Metamodernist Manifesto*: “The present is a symptom of the twin birth of immediacy and obsolescence. Today, we are nostalgists as much as we are futurists.”<sup>219</sup> Vaporwave is strung temporally just as substantially. Being a product of metamodernity, it is defined by the oscillation between various polarities,

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<sup>217</sup> Morrissey, “Metamodernism and Vaporwave,” 73.

<sup>218</sup> Morrissey, “Metamodernism and Vaporwave,” 77.

<sup>219</sup> Turner, “Metamodernist // Manifesto.”

perhaps most importantly between modernist creation, with its desire for artistic expression, and postmodernist commentary, with its obsession with social awareness and self-contextualisation.<sup>220</sup> Through this oscillation, metamodernists seek to avoid “the inertia resulting from a century of modernist ideological naivety and the cynical insincerity of its antonymous bastard child.”<sup>221</sup>

Unfortunately, vaporwave itself was not immune to transgressive forces and it too found its downfall in the very fetishisation of the past it espoused. Vaporwave kitsch emerged, mutating into ethno-nationalist sub-genres. Most notably, this was “fashwave,” which, as Pinto commented: “combines images of Greco-Roman marbles with Tron-like grids, pastel colours and palm trees, tying the mythical origin of white civilisation to the American Dream and the joyful promises of the early internet years.”<sup>222</sup> While this development might seem marginal, marking merely a radical offshoot of a relatively marginal subgenre, we should nonetheless pay attention to it. In the radicalisation of Vaporwave, we see the result of failed oscillation, which has been the metamodern theme throughout this work. Indeed, the modernist pole of Vaporwave has always contained the seed of revisionism within it; after all, at the core of Vaporwave is the idealisation of one’s childhood (assuming that one has grown up in Western middle-class conditions) and the exploration of myths about “the good life.”<sup>223</sup> Perhaps then, this unforeseen degeneration of the genre was caused by Vaporwave’s very emotionlessness. It is, after all, a style that has its origin in the supposed End of History, which it both recognises and rejects thanks to its metamodern polarisation. Yet, it seems that these qualities are also a curse, as sublimation of imagined past and idealised nostalgia made the genre susceptible to alt-right appropriation.

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<sup>220</sup> Morrissey, “Metamodernism and Vaporwave,” 70.

<sup>221</sup> Morrissey, “Metamodernism and Vaporwave,” 71.

<sup>222</sup> Pinto, “Capitalism with a Transhuman Face,” 14.

<sup>223</sup> Padraic Killeen, “Burned Out Myths and Vapour Trails: Vaporwave’s Affective Potentials.” *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 626-638, <10.1515/culture-2018-0057> accessed January 2, 2024.

As a style, Vaporwave emerged from the aesthetics and consumerist zeitgeist of the 1980's, a time when most of the fans or even producers of Vaporwave were not even alive. In Vaporwave, we see the shift of postmodern expression. No longer being able to expose and evaluate social standards, postmodern expressions came to only rehash the *notion* of criticism.<sup>224</sup> Instead, Vaporwave artists seek to reverse the simulation of postmodernity, which explains the nostalgic feeling it seeks to encapsulate as something real and authentic. Yet, there is a sense of self-aware irony in the fact that this feeling of nostalgia is connected to an unapologetically consumerist milieu in all its de-sensitised liminality. Ultimately, Vaporwave strives to resolve the inner conflicts of post-postmodernity. It shows just how personal the apparently anonymous medium of the Web might be to its users and how formative the world of the internet is, no matter how real or unreal it is. It is a leap beyond the classically Baudrillardian notions of the "real," where simulacra are more real than the reality they simulate.

## 5 Conclusion

This work described the new cultural paradigm known as metamodernism. Throughout the thesis I focused on the contextualisation of the paradigm in contrast to earlier or indeed competing phenomena and paradigms. Crucially, I provided discursive analysis of postmodernism and the effects it had on culture. Admittedly, this thesis is written from a very West-oriented perspective, focusing mostly on the cultural and academic developments from the Western cultural tradition. As a result, the conception

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<sup>224</sup> Morrissey, "Metamodernism and Vaporwave," 65.

of metamodernism as a variety post-postmodernism is equally a response precisely to this Western idea of postmodernity, as vacuous as the term is. As Hanzi Freinacht said:

“Metamodernism is qualitatively very, very different from postmodernism: it accepts progress, hierarchy, sincerity, spirituality, development, grand narratives, party politics, both-and thinking and much else. It puts forward dreams and makes suggestions. And it is still being born.”<sup>225</sup>

Throughout the thesis, I express concern over the competing varieties of post-postmodernity, most notably hypermodernism. In short, the difference between metamodernism and hypermodernism lies in the kind of response one has towards post-postmodernity; either one passively accepts its ever-increasing consumerism and erosion of pre-established culture(s) in favour of accelerating and militarising neoliberalism, which translates to submitting to hypermodernism, or one actively recognises the threat arising from postmodernity, be it in the ecological, socio-cultural, political or any other area. In case that such a recognition arises and one acknowledges the postmodern developments of the post-war era, thus placing oneself on the oscillating axis, then we could say that one is indeed subscribing to the metamodern structure of feeling. In order to illustrate some of the metamodern phenomena that emerged from post-postmodernity, I examined the Vaporwave and cli-fi as they demonstrate evidence of metamodern oscillation. I also suggested that the framework of ANT could be viable for such a metamodern approach, particularly when it come of the concept of Gaia.

The purpose of this work was not to proselytize metamodernism, but to inform about the condition of the contemporary cultural codes that I identified as crucial in the wake

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<sup>225</sup> Freinacht, *The Listening Society*, 375.

of postmodernism. Coming back to the title of this work, perhaps we are all metamoderns in the fact that we recognise the signs of coming crises for which the ethics (or lack thereof) of postmodernism left us undefended and unprepared. This work suggested the phenomenon of post-truth as one such development arising from the breakdown of postmodernity. Indeed, as I have stated in this work, the techniques of postmodernism are being utilised not for liberational purposes, as was the original intention of thinkers who conceived them, but to propagate increasingly illiberal dogmas (once again, one could say that the infamous Horseshoe Theory was proven right).

Ultimately, I dare to declare that our research should strive towards the exploration of Happiness, or as the Greeks called it, *eudaemonia*. This is not a novel thought and the one philosopher perhaps best known for his scholarly focus on happiness is Baruch Spinoza. E.S. Roraback investigated this Spinozian notion of Happiness in the context of the what the author refers to as the ‘power of the impossible’: “powerful lives and communities of meaning and value informed by the principles of justice, freedom and democratic equality.”<sup>226</sup> Conceptually, this idea is in fact similar to what Storm calls “Revolutionary Happiness” in the context of metamodernism.<sup>227</sup> Despite different labels, these authors offer a way forward, a genesis for human flourishing through the research of (not exclusively) the Humanities and that is why metamodernism matters today and will continue to matter tomorrow. Instead of deconstruction (*Abbau*), metamodernism promotes reconstruction (*Wiederaufbau*). In the end Irony has become a tool of communication: we rely on it to simultaneously escape the gravity of situations while also to establish ironic intimacy among ourselves. It is this kind

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<sup>226</sup> Erik Sherman Roraback, *The Power of the Impossible: On Community and the Creative Life*, (Winchester: iff Books, 2018): 40

<sup>227</sup> Storm, *Metamodernism*, 266.

of irony that is at the forefront of metamodern thinking. To conclude with Freinacht: “Irony brings trust. And trust crowns a winner.”<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Freinacht, *The Listening Society*, 115.

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## 7 Abstract

This work will provide a genealogy of the metamodern condition. The postmodern sentiment is by no means gone, but it has transformed so much at this point that the vague postmodern label has become obsolete. Indeed, the cultural sphere is now dealing with a whole set of urgent social, political and economic realities, spurred on by climatic, financial and geopolitical crises, that postmodernism could never *seriously* handle. In the course of this paper, I will examine the modernist and post-modernist streams of thought that have resulted in the emergence of metamodernism, which somehow counter-intuitively combines modernist sincerity with post-postmodernist irony. Moreover, I will assess this stream of thought through the lens of Actor-network theory, as outlined by Bruno Latour. In the end, I hope to demonstrate that metamodernism offers something that postmodernism, disappointed from the failure of modernist projects, never could: hope.

### Key Words

Metamodernism, Actor-network theory, Post-modernism, Nordic School, Dutch School, Irony

## **8 Abstrakt**

Tato práce poskytne genealogii metamoderního stavu. Ačkoliv postmoderní sentiment ještě nevyrazil, jeho podoba se proměnila do takové míry, že vágní nálepka postmodernismu se dnes již jeví jako zastaralá. Kulturní sféra se dnes zabývá celou škálou urgentních sociálních, politických a ekonomických skutečností, které jsou dále poháněny klimatickými, finančními a geopolitickými krizemi, na které již postmodernismus nemá odpověď. V průběhu této práce se zaměřím na modernistické a postmodernistické myšlenky, které vyústily v metamodernismus, v němž se možná neintuitivně skloubí modernistická upřímnost a postmodernistická ironie. Dále se zaměřím na rozbor těchto myšlenek prostřednictvím teorie sítí aktérů, navrženou Brunem Latourem. V závěru se pokusím demonstrovat, že metamodernismus poskytuje něco, co postmodernismus ve svém zklamání z modernistických projektů nikdy nabídnout nedokázal: naději.

### **Klíčová slova**

Metamodernismus, Teorie sítí aktérů, Postmodernismus, Nordická škola, Holandská škola, Ironie