

Article

Metamodernism or Metamodernity

Dina Stoev 

National Academy of Art, 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria; dina.stoev@gmail.com

Abstract: The concept of metamodernism relies on our understanding of modernism, postmodernism and the bigger cultural periods that originated them. While modernism is a product of modernity, postmodernism is not situated comprehensively within a well-defined period. Moreover, when dealing with the dichotomy of movement and era in the last century, we are presented with a taxonomic dilemma of conflating eras and their aesthetical manifestations. Contrary to the prevalent view of cultural shifts, here I propose a different attempt at periodising and understanding ontologically the concepts of modernism, postmodernism and metamodernism, and the related cultural periods in which they are situated. I argue that modernism and postmodernism should be considered as a continuum in a temporal sense, but not as equal orders in a categorical sense, and that postmodernism is not an apt descriptor for the period following modernity, nor for the aesthetic paradigm following modernism. To resolve this problem, on the one hand, I propose we adopt the term metamodernity, which better reflects the new era of cultural development. On the other hand, I discuss metamodernism, which is the current aesthetical, and to a degree axiological, manifestation of this new era.

Keywords: metamodernism; metamodernity; modernism; modernity; postmodernism; postmodernity; contemporary aesthetics; metamodernist sensibility; empathy; affect

**Citation:** Stoev, Dina. 2022.

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Arts 11: 91. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts11050091>

Academic Editors: Peter Tzanev and John Zarobell

Received: 17 June 2022

Accepted: 17 September 2022

Published: 21 September 2022

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1. Introduction

*meta*¹

1. informal: showing or suggesting an explicit awareness of itself or oneself as a member of its category; cleverly self-referential.
2. informal: concerning or providing information about members of its own category.

meta—prefix.

1. a: occurring later than or in succession to b: situated behind or beyond c: later or more highly organised or specialised.
2. change: transformation.
3. [metaphysics]: more comprehensive; transcending—usually used with the name of a discipline to designate a new but related discipline designed to deal critically with the original one.

The concept of metamodernism relies in its entirety on the unspoken agreement that we have an established collective understanding of its predecessors—modernism and postmodernism. For the most part that is the case, but only insofar as theorists have a shared intuitive sense of what these terms encompass. There are many working systems of classification, but they are frequently concerned with beginnings, endings and specific manifestations, rather than trying to theorise the general essence of these movements and the sensibility that defines them. Post-structuralism deprived theory of grand categories, generalisations, and the sense that objective truth is attainable. Moreover, contemporary theoretically oriented people have inherited a distrust of these concepts both from postmodern thinkers and from the failing of the postmodern itself. Caution is to be expected when the ostensibly dominant theory about aesthetics, culture and economy of

the previous generation disintegrates in such an underwhelming fashion. We are left trying to grasp structure by perpetually fragmenting our understanding of concepts through highly specialised lenses, be it interpreting single works of art, socio-political or economic developments or scientific advancements, while continuously avoiding the fact that we give examples for intuitive constructs that represent parts of grand categories. In denying ourselves the possibility of theorising these grand categories, we deprive the very concepts we use of their meaning. For example, no one is quite sure what exactly postmodernism entails, but almost everybody can proclaim a work to be postmodernist. Today, many of the characteristics that were considered ‘postmodern’ seem to exist independently of postmodernism itself, which theory seems to agree has ended². Similarly, modernist approaches have resurfaced long after the end of modernism. We think about these notions almost intuitively, but we shy away from theorising what drives this intuition—namely the grand categories of modernist and postmodernist sensibility.

In that respect *Notes on Metamodernism* (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 2010) ventures beyond the established and dares to propose metamodernism—a heuristic term that serves to pinpoint the amalgamation of characteristics from previous periods and movements that make up the current sensibility of our times. It does so by implying the very concept of intuition with the term “structures of feeling”³ and by considering the formation of something grand. That is why it is both radical and an example of its own subject—it dares to posit, in a modernist fashion, a big idea. Simultaneously it cautiously refuses, in a postmodernist fashion, to state the order of category it discusses. This is a well-balanced position, and one that I support to an extent. However, the notion of metamodernism is entirely dependent on understanding both modernism and postmodernism and their sensibilities, and—most importantly—what order of category they are. It seems to me that our current way of thinking about these concepts is somewhat flawed, and precisely because of that we are unable to consider the taxonomy of cultural development that we strive to theorise. This paper will deal with the problem such a method presents. It is vital to construct a framework of relations between the categories of modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism in order to enclose our intuitive understanding in a somewhat logical, albeit generalising, system.

Additionally, the discourse on metamodernism has been predominantly contained within the purely academic circles dealing with culture. What could perhaps be beneficial is a more instinctive approach in addition to the logical viewpoint. For the sake of objectivity, I should state that I am an artist, and as a person who not only looks at art, but also produces it, it is possible that my assessment of the current cultural developments could be seen as somewhat prescriptive when it comes to aesthetics. However, I do not see that as a detriment to the conclusions outlined in this paper, but rather as an example of the metamodernist paradigm I will be discussing here.

I have tried outlining, to the best of my abilities in such a format, my interpretation of the shift that culture has undergone in the last fifty years and its sustained direction. This text is mainly a meditation on intuitive concepts driven by a personal resistance to the characterisations of contemporary art and culture. The designation of names to these phenomena in the broad cultural sense and in the arts is a result of finding a thread within theory that seemed to me to be closest to my intuition and is also well supported by reason—there is a clear bridge in aesthetics from Zavarzadeh to Van den Akker and Vermeulen. Additionally, other authors employing these terms with a slightly different connotation, but with a supposedly similar direction in mind—Hanzi Freinacht, Lene Rachel Andersen, Brent Kooper, Jonathan Rowson and Layman Pascal, and the first longer strictly philosophical metamodernist work of Jason Ananda Josephson Storm⁴—all mark a solidifying idea of metamodern direction of thought, even if they deal with different areas and approaches. The prevalence of the prefix meta in recent times also played a role in the selection of the term “metamodernism”. The construct of “metamodernity”, specifically, is largely a logical necessity more than an intuitive one—there is a difference between an

era and our reaction to it within the arts and theory. The question that I hope to pose and answer is: how far we will expand each definition?

To outline the movement metamodernism, I deliberately refrain from effusive interpretation of art. It is my belief that interpretation is largely counterproductive when dealing with big concepts because it focuses attention on the nuances of the work itself rather than on the (structure of) feeling it is the product of, or indeed, the feeling it could create within the viewer. Instead, I offer a multitude of examples with little context but enough similarities to support the idea of a shared aesthetic. In addition, there are several different vectors of cultural development used to illustrate the essence of the era metamodernity and the driving forces behind it—such as digital technologies and the internet, psychological literacy and the need for emotional effect and affect. My intention is to situate metamodernism as the structure of feeling reacting to a relatively new era that has been emerging in the last fifty years but has recently gained wider traction and has become recognizable as a result of the supposed death of postmodernism, as well as to pose the question as to whether the term “metamodernity” is applicable to this new age while also giving my perspective. The categorisation of movements⁵ and eras is used in support of the opinion that there is enough reason to speak of metamodernity and that it comes right after modernity. This exercise should be understood as an experiment in reviving the interest in grand categories and the debate around them, rather than an attempt to explain history itself.

2. Metamodernist Sensibility

In June 2020, KFC, the company famous for its chain of fast-food restaurants, announced their development of a new gaming console in partnership with the hardware company Cooler Master. Although this information is in itself surprising, the piqued interest within the electronic sphere was not purely due to the competitive power of the technology. The technical parameters are, of course, a marker of the quality of such a device, but KFCConsole surprised the market with something beyond processing power, memory, and graphic card stats. Usually, these characteristics and the compatibility of the machine would be the main point of interest for the prospective buyer or investor. More so, considering that the world of electronics rarely sees platforms capable of challenging Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo. PlayStation, X-box and the several Nintendo consoles, respectively, have a monopoly not only on the console market, but also on exclusivity deals with game studios. It is so hard to survive in this market that even Valve Corporation, after the success of its game distribution service Steam, made an attempt to enter the world of consoles with Steam Machine but could not gain a significant share in the hardware sector. It is also disputable whether there is room at all for new consoles amid the established names and the flourishing PC gaming.

All the big names have a substantial history in the world of electronics and digital services. Each one of them is a leading force on the digital market in one way or another. That is precisely why it is so curious that KFC is trying to gain entry in this field. This is not KFC's first attempt to take advantage of the gaming industry—for instance, in 2019 they commissioned Psyop to develop the game *I Love You Colonel Sanders*, which was an ironic take on dating simulators. However, the leap from tried and tested funny marketing strategies to a new console venture is quite big. Why would a titan of the fast food world decide to go in this direction and why is that attempt being ventured through the development of a new console is a noteworthy question in itself. In addition, the fact that such a device will most likely be mainly a collectible is another equally curious detail. Nevertheless, what makes this specific attempt at business growth so interesting from a culturological point of view is the multilevel absurdity, which paradoxically seems quite logical in the framework of contemporary culture. This console not only presents a competitive gaming system, but also contains a compartment for *warming chicken*. A fact for which there is no explanation, nor reason, beyond it being possible, even if not necessary. Why should there not be a chicken warming compartment in a piece of next-gen

technology? Have there been many people who considered not having to move far from their game to grab a bite—certainly. Are there many people who desperately desire a mini convection oven full of greasy food in the interior of their delicate electronics—hardly. That in fact does not matter. Such a machine is not attractive so much because of its real function, but rather due to the idea of it. It refers simultaneously to the trope of the stereotypical gamer, who does not leave his electronic altar, and to the opposite notion of a gamer with OCD, who would not dream of letting greasy food near his electronics. This object relies mainly on the absurd and on meta-references both to itself and to the gaming community, and the pop culture surrounding it. It creates a web of meaning through absurdity, which can be fully decoded only by the target group for such a device.

It is of no significance whether this console will truly be released on the market⁶ or indeed, whether the chicken warming compartment is solely a marketing trick or even a joke. This extraordinary feature is both a reflection and a generator of the reality we are living in. At first glance, such a hypothetical product might seem too trivial for serious discourse, but the importance of it is contained both in its nature as a product and its *peak 2020-ness* (Pirzada 2020). Such an object embodies the structure of feeling behind contemporary culture and present-day reality. At the risk of sounding unnecessarily self-referential, the inclusion of such a ridiculous product as a serious point of interest in this text also represents that fact.

The examination of such curiosities marks a significant change, a blurring of lines and the blending of conflicting things. Philosophy itself has seen an influx of themes previously thought to be incongruous with its nature and deep meditations on seemingly unimportant things. Whether this is a false belief ensuing from excess self-reflection on my behalf or prescriptive fallacy stemming from the need for a new outlook on culture, is a question that will be answered in due course. On the other hand, many thinkers in recent history pay attention to the mixing of high and mass culture and write about their interlacing, usually reaching conclusions about an inevitable convergence. I should note that this is a sentiment that I do not share, not least because there is a great divide between contemporary art and the general public. This gap has not significantly changed in the last fifty years, as has been noted lately (Spasova 2018, p. 46; Stefanov 2021, p. 18). However, the main examination here is not concerned with the relationship of mass and non-mass culture, but rather with the shared feeling that originates both.

The biggest merit of KFCConsole as an example is its connections to several central points of the metamodern. Firstly, these are the aforementioned absurdity and metareferences, which create new levels of meaning beyond the obvious. Secondly, it is perhaps the even more crucial system that makes them broadly accessible—the internet. One of the factors best illustrating the significance of such an object is the setting that legitimises it and broadcasts the public's reaction to it. The initial news in social media and other platforms was not met with bewilderment, but with humour. A majority of people believed that this was a carefully constructed joke on the part of KFC. This is a significant detail. Here, we ought to pay attention to the nature of many companies' internet presence. The idea that such a campaign could be a joke and that a corporate giant of KFC's stature would allot resources to maintaining anticipation for a fictitious machine, including soliciting the participation and support of Cooler Master, could be entertained only in the framework of contemporary internet culture. For instance, nowadays it is perfectly normal for the Twitter accounts of large companies to advertise and support their image through a vast array of online instruments—direct communication with their clients in customer support style or the diametrically opposed and markedly unofficial practice of creating and sharing memes and jokes. This environment has seriously changed the dynamic and communication previously deemed respectable between supplier and customer and has significantly changed expectations (at both ends). Those changes deserve to be the subject of independent research and are far too complicated to be even partly explained here; nevertheless, they should be noted. This new ecosystem is quite possibly the biggest factor allowing the forming and dissemination of new aspects of culture. Much in the same way

as it is possible for a big company or corporation to tweet a meme or to personally respond to an everyday person's tweet, it becomes possible and even probable for it to release a fake campaign or, as it seems, to offer a product such as this console on the market.

The story around KFCConsole contains several important components—the internet and the way it brings a new social contract into commercial relations; the substitution of standard marketing strategies for the absurdity of a product; the purpose and the nonsense in the product itself; maybe even some strange pseudo-empathy between companies and their customers; and, of course, the public's reaction and the changed way in which younger generations interact with the world around them. In addition, one should not underestimate the function of such an object. This type of machine is one of the symbols of a technological society. In the first place, they are interesting because of the immersive worlds they offer—the games that could be played on them usually have elaborate narratives, detailed visual and conceptual worlds and often elicit an emotional connection with the characters or at least some sort of emotional response. In addition to the work of scriptwriters, visual and sound artists, which in itself undoubtedly belongs to the arts, it would be a mistake not to consider the entirety of games as pieces of art, in a sense—certainly, many of them provoke the same, if not greater, levels of engagement and aesthetic experience as 'conventional' art. In the second place, they are an alternative reality in which a person actively participates. Games exist in a liminal space between entertainment, art and life that has too many dimensions. Such machines are realised precisely in chasing a more in-depth experience, or more detailed graphics, more life-like characters, more veristic virtual reality, and a stronger connection with the content, or alternative worlds and dynamics. It turns out that the need for these types of consoles is no less significant than the need for the printing press, the stage, or the cinema.

In December 2020 it was announced that KFCConsole was not a joke. Most tech-oriented publications, as well as many that did not deal with the such subject matter, reported on the news. As would be expected, it was precisely the seemingly unnecessary chicken warming compartment that turned out to be the reason for people's anticipation of the product. The question is why exactly such an absurd configuration was exciting. The simple answer is that there is not anything more in keeping with the times. Such a product has an epistemic value, because it reflects the feeling that we are living in a reality that seems increasingly unreal and illogical. This reality has a simultaneously apocalyptic and absurd flavour—the more dramatic the situation is, the more dramatic events keep cropping up; yet, this escalation starts to feel fictitious and is ultimately understood as a Shepard's tone⁷. This results in it becoming outlandish and sometimes even funny. Of course, for the most part, this apocalyptic absurdity is driven by the love of media towards overblown titles and the tendentiously fatalistic tone employed for news coverage (although it does seem humanity has a reasonable cause for concern lately)—but that does not make the feeling any less valid. There is no way of knowing, at the present moment, whether a truly never-before-seen, worrying number of unpleasant circumstances and processes has befallen the world. Instead, we should pay attention precisely to the fact that such circumstances have never been seen before. That is the driving force—no matter whether there has always been such an amount of troubling things, now they are more visible than ever. Because of that, the resultant apocalyptic feeling is always accompanied by the sense of absurdity. When consuming the news, every spectacle, regardless of its being horrible, inconceivable, unbelievable, or just garish, saturates the mind with a sense of unrealness, and consequently creates an absurd background to everyday life.

Even when the mind is not busy with the latest news of natural, political, or social calamity, or with some outlandish incident or behaviour, this feeling of absurdity stays with a person and starts overflowing into all parts of life. Obviously, it is supported by a cultural environment that welcomes it, multiplies it, and often processes it into meta-irony. Since everyone can publish creative content nowadays, this type of irony does not stay within the bounds of established creative circles. It flows out of them in the form of a new type of social content that touches all parts of a contemporary internet user's daily life

and starts emerging out of the bounds of electronic communication. For somebody in a corporation like KFC, it presents as the fantastical idea to join the electronic market; for someone else, to pitch or to design KFCConsole; for another, to enjoy the next absurdity—that such a product not only exists, but that they will buy it. The same feeling responsible for these developments is one of the driving forces behind the artistic behaviour that we call metamodernism. Naturally, neither the feeling, nor the resulting meta-irony in art is the only characteristic of metamodernism, but it certainly is a major one.

Meta-irony here should be considered separate from the notion of post-irony. Post-irony is a somewhat ambiguous term—it could mean a return to sincerity; it is sometimes interchanged with meta-irony, and sometimes it is understood as an order of irony (Lisovsky 2018; JrEg 2020). Here, I will be using the third meaning, which explores the internal function of irony as a device. I base my view of irony on this type of categorisation, because in such a system there is a vast difference between the three types of irony—standard, post and meta. On the other hand, the term *return to sincerity* describes the first potential meaning in a satisfying and more apt way.

In Chapter 6, *Four Faces of Postirony* (Van den Akker et al. 2017), Lee Konstantinou explores post-irony as a return to sincerity and differentiates four types of works and the different approaches they employ to create some sort of sincerity. He states that he avoids the prefix *meta*, because it is too closely connected with metafiction. To me this exemplifies two problems—first, the unstable usage of the prefixes *post* and *meta* when it comes to irony; and second, the intermixing of general tonal characteristics of a work and a specific device, sometimes used to facilitate said tone. In that sense, I am fully in support of characterising metamodernism as a sensibility that strives to return to sincerity tonally in some form or way, but here I will deal not so much with tone, as with the metamodernist concept of rational ambiguity, which I believe is best exemplified through meta-irony as a device, especially in the visual arts (both painting and new media).

Meta-irony is a distinctive mode of irony—the statement it contains cannot be clearly deciphered, it is potentially both sincere and ironic at the same time. The creation of meaning depends as much on the originator of the content, as on the viewer. Interestingly, if a person is unfamiliar with this type of irony, they usually reach a conclusion that the statement is either ironic or sincere. Conversely, people who are familiar with the usage of meta-irony typically do not feel the need to ascribe a concrete meaning pertaining to either category. Most often, the point of meta-irony is that it embodies both irony and sincerity. Of course, the meta-ironic can be present within a variety of contexts and it can contain different layers, which can tip the scales of meaning but it never states which one is the “real” meaning. Standard irony is making a statement while inferring the opposite. Post-irony is making a true statement, the irony being the act of articulating it itself. Meta-irony is stating either the truth or the opposite and being ironic about it, and the meaning is muddled in the possible multiple layers of irony. It is irony being ironic towards itself. It also can presuppose a duality in opinion. When used in everyday life usually the joke is found in the act of it and the uncertainty of meaning, when used as an artistic approach it can imply a balance between opposing viewpoints or the acceptance of opposition as part of a whole.

I should note that this notion of both post-irony and meta-irony, understood as subtypes of a device, is closely related to the memetic culture of internet today, which uses both. This broader application is a symptom of the process of legitimisation of new thought patterns—the ironic sincerity and self-ironising irony. Generally, post-irony is used for affect, and meta-irony for ambiguity. Specifically meta-irony is a sign that uncertainty is no longer seen as a conclusion, but rather as a natural background to life. Alternatively, to put it in terms of sensibility, the lack of certainty is not necessarily a bad thing, but rather just a fact of being.

This phenomenon has existed in the world of legitimised art for quite a while. Long before it became a topic of interest in online circles and its theoretical side, meta-irony was used in non-mass culture. An early instance in which meta-irony was considered

by the author himself in such a way is Marcel Duchamp's art. That is perhaps one of the main overlooked reasons for him to be seen as the forefather of contemporary art. Although his point of view is somewhat irreverent towards both form and content, it does not carry the often-negative overtones of later postmodernist irony. In "The 'Meta-Irony' of Marcel Duchamp" (Cook 1986, p. 266), Albert Cook writes, in regard to *L.H.O.O.Q.*, "Ironic indifference in this situation comes to exhibit alertness to mysteries it is neither deploring nor exploring". This comment refers directly both to the work itself and to Duchamp's own words: "Irony is a playful way of accepting something. Mine is the irony of indifference. It is a 'Meta-irony'". What is particularly interesting here is that Duchamp considered his own positions and sought to undermine them ironically, but that was not done in a judgmental manner, it was more of an intellectual exercise in ambiguity: "Any idea that came to me, the thing would be to turn it around and try to see it with another set of senses" (ibid.). This approach is markedly different to postmodernist sensibility, whose art was influenced by Duchamp on a formal level, but whose irony was also infused with distrust of modernism and modernity, and most importantly, with distrust and even condemnation of its contemporaneous actuality; or at least showed a strong drive for exposing it for what it was.

Today, an intriguing example of the nature of meta-irony can be found in a story of accusation, described in an article in *The New Yorker*: *Neo Rauch's Antagonistic Art* (Meaney 2021). Within the frank and compelling portrait of Rauch, the author relays a recent conflict, which I believe illustrates both meta-irony and its difference from post-irony, as well as the importance of understanding when one or the other is employed. The clash between Rauch and famous art critic Wolfgang Ullrich starts with the latter outlining a tendency in the German contemporary art scene. He posits that liberal-minded artists find it hard to concentrate on personal artistic expression, while right-wing-leaning artists rely precisely on artistic autonomy and self-expression. While there is some truth to Ullrich's observations, in as much as there really is an overwhelming interest in the exploration of human rights issues, postcolonial thinking and social justice among liberal artists, and there really is an emerging wave of opposition against these practices, the critic makes not one, but two mistakes. The first, and perhaps the worse of the two, in being quite presumptuous and categorically unsound, is that he equates disagreement and disapproval of an aesthetic trend with right-wing political beliefs (a rather sensitive issue in Germany). The second one is that he specifies Rauch's paintings as the most prominent example of this phenomenon and "exposes" the painter himself as an enemy of liberalism. If Ullrich had written about Rauch as a person, like Meaney does, the problem might have been contained to the first mistake. However, the main point of consideration here is the interpretation of the paintings. The political views of Rauch do not have such a weight when it comes to his art, simply because he has not stated them clearly in it. There are elements referring to liberal culture in his paintings that seem ironic, but one cannot be sure of the statement behind the irony. His verbal stance against some liberal tendencies can inform to an extent the elucidation of his paintings but it does not give grounds for drawing such a specific conclusion. Rauch's paintings are anything but easily decoded and that is very much a deliberate artistic position. In addition, it is exactly meta-irony, among other metamodernist methods, that Rauch usually uses to accomplish ambiguity. Perhaps that is why the painter retorts with a portrait of a man who looks like Ullrich, standing slightly bent above a chamber pot and drawing with excrement on the wall a stick-figure giving a Nazi salute⁸. The title "*Der Anbräuner*" (2019. oil on canvas), means "the one who accuses unduly of Nazism", figuratively, and literally "the one who paints things brown". The painting and title together form a markedly post-ironic approach, which is a departure from the usual artistic practice of Rauch. In a fantastical world such as the one Rauch usually paints, there is no objective truth; in order to make ironic or post-ironic statements, there must be a truth to which irony refers, that is why Rauch's art is usually meta-ironic. Yet, in the "*Der Anbräuner*" there are objective truths, such as a real person in a real environment painting real symbols. With this gesture, Rauch almost declares: "If I want to say something specific,

I can and I do say it". It is a clear message that Ullrich read Rauch's art wrong—and that is because he used the wrong type of ironic order to do so. This short analysis of events does not aim to assess the art of Rauch or the critique of Ullrich, but instead to underline the importance of the mode of irony through which a work of art is examined and created. In addition, it highlights the fact that these modes, while markedly abstract as notions, are decidedly different and take on different meanings.

The meanings, the themes, and the overall function of meta-irony in Rauch's paintings and KFCConsole are, evidently, distinctive from each other, but the parallel between them is necessary if we are to attempt an answer to the question as to whether metamodernism has turned into a distinctive characteristic of a new era that we can call metamodernity. How far does such a structure of feeling extend beyond the framework of "high culture", the extolled sensitivity of the artist and profound ratiocination of the theorist? The hypothesis is that we really have enough cause to consider metamodernism as a mark of metamodernity. After a certain saturation of a specific nature in the reality of the last several decades, this structure of feeling is not confined within art and theory but starts emerging in the most unexpected of places—like the decision to launch KFCConsole, a meta-ironic meta-product. In that particular event, in the driving forces behind it and in the reaction of the public to it, we can see the commodification of the metamodernist sensibility. What is more interesting is not the commodification in itself, but that its emergence and the structures legitimising it signify some sort of uniform perception of the world. In that sense, it is perhaps more appropriate to use the term metamodernism when referring to works of art (and a general sensibility employing metamodernist tendencies) and metamodernity when referring to the overall cultural situation. Alternatively, at the very least, we should consider ourselves amid *-ism* becoming a characteristic of an *-ity*. The concept here differs from Van den Akker and Vermeulen only in as much as it focuses on different phenomena, not so much in the overall conclusions, or dare I say—intuitive understanding of the metamodern. The only considerable deviation from their theory is the opinion that they themselves describe something worthy of the term "metamodernity" because they theorise grand, if subtle, cultural changes extending far beyond aesthetics. I suggest that those changes started developing in the 1970s and matured under the theoretical guise of postmodernism. I must note that it is clear we all consider cultural shifts to be gradual. However, the proposed theory here is that metamodernity started developing from modernity and there is nothing substantial between them, but rather a brief, albeit somewhat radical reaction of the arts and theory on the brink of a new era, in the form of modernism's last subdivision—postmodernism.

3. Metamodernism and Metamodernity, Not Postmodernism and Postmodernity

The idea of metamodernism is not new. In his work *The Apocalyptic Fact and the Eclipse of Fiction in Recent American Prose Narratives*, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh (1975) expounds on a few observations about his contemporaneous reality, which are not just applicable to our present-day reality as well, but seem as if they were written specifically with it in mind. The parallels between these realities are undeniable, or as is proposed here, it turns out they are one and the same, the only thing changing being the maturing, expansion and legitimisation of its cultural paradigm.

Some qualifications are in order here. Firstly, I do not make claims as to the nature of the literature that Zavarzadeh discusses, nor their situating in the debate modern—postmodern—metamodern according to his system—because it includes a completely different classification of literature with several categories. Secondly, despite the fact that literature and the visual arts (and especially pre-postmodernist visual art) are usually considered separately, here I will discuss them as manifestations of the same aesthetic paradigm and a product of a shared sensibility. Visual narrative art, which saw a re-emergence around the time of Zavarzadeh's work, is connected to literature through the instrument of narrative and because of that follows, sets a premise or is parallel to the development of tendencies in literary narrative. Thirdly, that art reflects, reaffirms, and

generates the *Zeitgeist*, and in that sense, it will be beneficial to consider the similarities in tone, intent and affect through intuition rather than attempt a classification through media or in-depth interpretation.

In his work, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh writes about the “eclipse of fiction”, by which he means the eclipse of a particular mode of writing fiction. He describes an entirely new approach to the creation of meaning in the then contemporary prose:

Recent American experimental fiction, in response to the fictive behaviour of the emerging realities of a technetronic culture, moves beyond the interpretive modernist novel in which the fictionist interpreted the ‘human condition’ within the framework of a comprehensive private metaphysics, towards a metamodern narrative with zero degree of interpretation. The mistrust of the epistemological authority of the fictive novelist is mainly caused by the pressures of the overwhelming actualities of contemporary America which render all interpretations of ‘reality’ arbitrary and therefore simultaneously accurate and absurd. (Zavarzadeh 1975, p. 69)

Zavarzadeh's work, created amid the rise of post-structuralist thought, of course, bears the characteristic denial of objective truth. Nevertheless, in contrast to many of his contemporaries, for him this denial, when it comes to fiction, is not a product of the accumulation of knowledge through scientific and humanitarian progress of society, nor is it a product of philosophising. Although the progress itself, in the form of technologies, leads to many of the unreal aspects of reality, he sees the reason for this denial mainly in the acute feeling of the public and the authors alike that they are living in a reality, which seems more improbable, more inexplicable, and even more painful than fiction. According to him, such a reality not only cannot be contained in a ‘personal metaphysics’, but it also does not lend itself to any form of interpretation: “In the post-absurd world, daily experience eludes simple meaningful/meaningless reality testing; it is, in Robbe-Grillet's words, ‘neither significant nor absurd. It is, quite simply’” (ibid.).

He describes a world, filled with real people, who seem like badly written characters and events that would be declined publishing were they in a manuscript, for being too phantasmagorical (King 1969, as cited in Zavarzadeh 1975, pp. 71–72). The social, economic, and political reality in the USA, an example of which was The Watergate scandal (p. 72), seems unreal to people. Certainly, from today's point of view it could be said that the reality had not changed so much as the information network had, a fact that he touches upon with the term “technetronic culture”. The ordinary person had little time to get accustomed to the power of mass-media like television, and their attention until recently had been occupied predominantly with foreign political tensions. Nevertheless, this does not negate the fact that the American reality looked emphatically absurd to all who dared to consider it. Zavarzadeh (1975, p. 76) remarks that in the Third World, where reality seems not to have reached such a point of unrealness, modernist prose is on the rise. Indeed, in the following years, with the steady development and increasing availability of new media and electronics, the downfall of totalitarian regimes, and later the advent of internet and the progress of globalisation, the actuality in a large part of the previously less developed world started looking unreal. Zavarzadeh's words could be seen as a description of postmodernism, and it is nearly accepted as fact that the type of fiction he considers in his work is postmodernist. However, there is a crucial fact that seems to escape notice—there are a multitude of examples in both contemporary literature and the visual arts that suit his definition of metamodernism far better than they suit any definition of postmodernism. Furthermore, the most important part of his reasoning is that he pinpoints with precision the driving forces behind the change in narrative construction. New modes of artistic expression are born precisely in striving for authenticity of fiction (of any kind, including the visual arts) in relation to its contemporaneous reality. If the reality he describes seems more than familiar, and if the definitions he gives for metamodernist literature still apply, have we not made a mistake in dividing culture into too many pieces in the last five decades? That is not to say there was not postmodernism, but perhaps it

was more of a steppingstone and not the permeating and complete new paradigm that it was lauded to be.

The uncertainty in definitions when comparing Zavarzadeh to the following evaluations of what is postmodernist and metamodernist shows a lack of standardisation in the usage of terms. Interestingly enough, that is not because of an existing disagreement about the intuitive idea⁹ we have of these terms, but rather because the taxonomic successions *modernism–postmodernism–metamodernism* and *modernity–postmodernity* are starting to look unsound and problematic. Unanimity, naturally, cannot be expected, yet the understanding of most theorists is that these notions are engrained in our vocabularies and are more or less self-explanatory. It turns out that is not the case. We have an intuitive idea of what they mean, but if used without stipulations and reservations, it might turn out that we are equating terms belonging to different categorical orders and erasing their meaning in the process. A helpful way of contextualising the usage and understanding of the shared meaning of terms is running them through Google. Even if it might seem dubious¹⁰, such a search is in fact a reliable empirical instrument, because the results are shaped by shared notions of meaning. When the word “metamodernity” is searched, Google’s suggestion is “metamodernism”. The only relevant result on the first page is the book of the same name by Lene Rachel Andersen¹¹. Conversely, the search for “metamodernism” results in varied content—popular and scientific articles, books, videos, and others. This is to be expected, because we are more used to talking about *-isms*, and because they are the terms dealing with arts, philosophy and culture in the strict sense. Nevertheless, it is important to note that there is also a certain circumspection when it comes to theorising metamodernity. Perhaps that is due, on the one hand, to the failing of the concept of postmodernity, and on the other, to the “death” of grand categories reaffirmed by poststructuralism.

However, when the words “modernity” and “postmodernity” are searched, the results include an explanation of the terms and a far bigger body of research materials. Again, that is not surprising, because these words are well known and have been actively used in different aspects of the humanities. What is interesting about this situation is that it illustrates the taxonomic problem—the formation (of notion) of all searched words follows different logic. This fact is not simply a philosophical analysis of words, but rather an analysis of the construction of notions. There is a substantial difference between modernity and modernism. The same should follow for postmodernity and postmodernism but it turns out it does not. If we borrow the standards for distinguishing a particular period as an era from our notion of modernity, they could not be applied to the thing we are used to calling “postmodernity”.

Modernity is a broad term that in a historical sense starts after the end of Renaissance and roughly covers the period between The Enlightenment and the middle of the 20th century. Depending on the point of view and the subject, the end of modernity shifts between 1930, 1945, 1980 or even 1990, and according to some theories (examples include Zygmunt Bauman’s *Late Modernity* and Ulrich Beck’s *Second Modernity*), it has not yet ended¹². On the other hand, modernism denotes a period or movement in the arts, literature and culture that is situated in modernity or rather at the very end of it—between 1860 and 1970 (the end point sometimes being 1960 or 1990). In the context of the history of art, the two terms, and especially their ending points, are frequently somewhat interlaced, or even sometimes equated or interchanged.

In much the same way, irrespective of how and to what degree we consider the idea of postmodernity, it is imperative to note the difference between postmodernism and postmodernity. Postmodernism, much like modernism, is understood as a movement in the arts, literature, criticism, pop culture and philosophy, although many alleged postmodernist philosophers deny their characterisation as such. The vast majority of contemporary theorists (Kirby and Bourriaud come to mind) think postmodernism has ended or is ending at the moment. “Postmodernity” is a term that should define the era following modernity and has an economic, political, and broadly cultural connotation. Regarding this notion, today we are not sure whether it has ended or indeed if there even was such a thing. On

the other hand, the word “postmodernism” is habitually used in place of “postmodernity”. That shows a lack of stable systemic construct for either of those terms. In addition, there is a somewhat good reason for this: since the period that these ephemeral notions encompasses is quite a short and recent one, the characteristics of movement, because of the concurrent manifestation of a new era, have been mistakenly ascribed from the former to the latter.

If we are to avoid repeating such a mistake, the difference between movement and era—between metamodernism and metamodernity, should be made clear at the start of theorising each. We always run the risk of mistakenly associating characteristics of one with the other, but I believe that a more precise definition should minimise that possibility. At the moment, the difference between them seems almost indistinguishable, and that is very much a product of the lack of perspective that could be gained only from a distance in time. We should pay serious attention to the change in culture, marked by the interactive nature of internet and electronics. This process has been given many names—the electronic age, the digital age, the information age and so on, and because of that a term like “metamodernity” might seem unnecessary. Nevertheless, the need for examining movement through era, and vice versa, has been clearly shown by a model of interconnectedness in the last century and a half. It seems prudent not to dismantle it, especially in a time when era and movement are even more inextricably linked. The other main reason for considering metamodernity is that modernity had a powerful catalyst—the printing press, and metamodernity has the exact same order of catalyst, only more advanced—the internet. In a sense, this new age is as much modernity as the one before; it is just a transcendent version of it. Furthermore, we should consider metamodernism separately from metamodernity, because theoretical works like [Van den Akker and Vermeulen’s \(2010\)](#), as well as this very text, deal with two distinct categories. On the one hand, they try to pinpoint the unfolding aesthetic (and sometimes ethical) results of an emerging era, which in this case are the initial reaction to its beginning and probably will not remain unchanged for long—hence the *-ism*. On the other hand, they deal with the era itself, and the directional shift of culture as a whole that would be more aptly described by the suffix *-ity*.

If Romanticism and Realism were reactions to the start of modernity, then modernism was a symptom of the eclipse of modernity. Or, alternatively, a harbinger of the digital/informational/metamodern age, because it ‘foretasted’ it in the progress of society and science. Regardless of the choice of phrase, the two mean one and the same thing. Today, metamodernism is the reaction to the start of a new era. Of course, the name metamodernism indicates that it is meta in relation to modernism (and postmodernism). The idea of naming this new age metamodernity, however, stems from its relation to modernity itself. Is the new era itself not meta in relation to modernity? It is characterised by the same type of change in the dominating information system and its capacity for generating and disseminating data. It continues the tendency towards more humane practices with an even more vigorous sense of purpose¹³. It holds the promise for more opportunities through its emerging new systems. The parallels are evident, even if this new age is far more cautious of idealism, as its aesthetic and theoretical manifestations (metamodernist sensibility) are coming to show. In that sense, metamodernism and metamodernity have distinct meanings but a simultaneous development, from our point of view. The speed with which we share and consume culture at the moment, and the distribution of technology and the internet, give us reason to presuppose that the aesthetic expressions of an era will be even more deeply connected to the era itself. These reactions will refer both to the era and themselves even more strongly than before, because they exist in the self-referential system of digital technology. We are faced with an aesthetic and even a gnoseological response, and a general, broader and more complex cultural shift, which are deeply intertwined, but are not the same thing.

When it comes to postmodernity, today it seems to have been a fallacy. Postmodernism was the last movement within modernism itself. To the present day, there has not been another grand ambition for total change and sprawling avant-garde. In the last forty or more years (depending on location), the arts have moved on to a less radical stage,

which not so much oscillates “between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony” (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 2010), as it sees all modernist lessons and refers to them—to modernism’s ideals, as well as to its loss of faith (postmodernism). We can regard the connection between modernity and metamodernity in the same way. Metamodernity carries both the ideals and the loss of faith of modernity. It has the same characteristics as modernity, elevates them and refers to them constantly, fulfilling all definitions of the particle “meta”.

In the book *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism* the word “metamodernity” is not used. The editors open the section *Metamodernism* with the following:

As we have defined it, metamodernism is a structure of feeling that emerged in the 2000s and has become the dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies. We use the term metamodernism both as a heuristic label to come to terms with a range of aesthetic and cultural predilections and as a notion to periodise these preferences. (Van den Akker et al. 2017, ch. 1, sct. Metamodernism, para. 1)

This definition, although understandably cautious of big proclamations, could be construed as theorising some sort of grand category. If we study their words within context (in and out of the book), we are presented with a possibility of considering both movement and era. The collection of texts by different authors in the book outlines metamodernist aesthetic behaviours and artistic methods. However, they are situated in the editors’ examination of contemporary culture (outside of art) on a much larger scale. However briefly, they make sociological, political, economic, and ecological observations, which in turn support the conclusions of aesthetic and ethical nature. This work is as equally suited to naming a new era, as it is to observing a new movement in the arts and humanities. Clearly, the authors are very much aware of that fact, as evidenced by their broad description of the term’s function, although they are very careful not to steer the understanding of metamodernism in a particular direction—“our conceptualisation of metamodernism is *neither* a manifesto, *nor* a social movement, stylistic register, or philosophy” (ibid. para. 4). While I would not use “stylistic register”, and there certainly is no “manifesto” to be found, I think simply the term “movement” fits the overall direction of metamodernism when it comes to the arts and philosophy. Alternatively, if we are considering culture as a whole—then “social movement” and “philosophy” seem too narrow, instead, we are contemplating an era that could be named “metamodernity”¹⁴. Furthermore, in my opinion, the exploration of the movement metamodernism would benefit from employing grand categories and their juxtaposition with the era metamodernity (and vice versa).

It is worth noting that Zavarzadeh’s work is mentioned in a somewhat perfunctory fashion, and the idea of the post-absurd reality as a generator of new modes of artistic behaviour is overlooked, which seems like a missed opportunity, because nowadays it is as relevant as it has always been. According to the editors, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and postmodern and is characterised by attention to the socio-cultural problems of contemporary reality. Their words at the beginning of the book are predominantly harnessed to describe the capitalist environment, of course, strongly influenced by Jameson’s ideas about postmodernism (ibid. ch. 1). Large portions of the rest of the texts by other authors are concerned with the examination of metamodernism’s formal marks and methods, and to an extent—the feeling driving them. The situating and the exploration of metamodernism in this collection inevitably leads to the much broader question of distinguishing metamodernism from postmodernism and postmodernism from modernism. This distinction turns out to be fairly problematic on its own. Many of the artworks that are usually deemed “postmodern”¹⁵ only by virtue of the time period of their creation¹⁶ have a strong modernist or metamodernist ‘aura’. For instance, land art is frequently described as postmodernist without any real basis for it—it does not bear any of the characteristics of postmodernism, instead it is rife with modernist grandeur, sense of awe, and love for playing with form. In addition, to give a really divisive example—the movie *Fight Club* has long been deemed the embodiment of all things postmodern, but I

would argue that is too emotionally charged, empathetic and even hopeful, to a degree, and is far closer to metamodernist vision than anything else. Not in the least because postmodernist platforms exclude psychologised art as being too full of pathos. It turns out such examples exist parallel to postmodernist ones, which greatly expands the period of metamodernism and gives us reason to consider the emergence of something far bigger, be it movement or era.

Today, the leap from postmodernism to postmodernity, facilitated by the overcommitment of philosophy and culture studies to poststructuralist thought, seems questionable. The sources and their interpretations are on uncertain ground—instead of being poignant, Baudrillard's (1994) *Simulacra and Simulation* rings hollow in its deterministic gloom, Lyotard's metanarratives are reanimating themselves from the dead (both in a reactionary conservative fashion and through completely new ideas) and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is due a metamodernist re-classification. Is it possible that the change was indeed happening, but in a different direction—from metamodernist tendencies signifying meta-modern structure of feeling towards a fuller metamodernism signifying the encroaching metamodernity?

If there indeed is a difference between the deceptive postmodernity and the eventual metamodernity, then it lies in the lack of manifestos. They are replaced by an apparent amorphousness, which has its hidden internal logic and maturing aesthetics and ethics evolving quietly under the surface. Poststructuralism indeed marked a time of death, but this death was only the disillusionment with modern ideals. The saturation of events preceding it—a time twice marked by tragedy and the cruelty of war, previously unseen on such a scale, the subsequent rebirth of socio-economic growth and rampant consumerism, the failing of totalitarian regimes undermining the hope in great transformative doctrines, the new media combined with the proliferation of electronics and their seemingly inhuman characteristics all incited a distrust of grand categories. The 'death' of many notions seemed an apt conclusion, and the hope for anything pure, everlasting, or unified seemed naïve and in need of dismantling. However, the eclipse of the modern blended with the birth of the metamodern, which was fed determinism from its conception, but is nevertheless a natural continuation of a long era of hope and direction and is fortified by the uplift of new opportunities in the digital world. The lack of belief in the older grand categories does not mean all sense of direction is lost, rather that it just needs modulation and healthy scepticism.

I have no intention of substituting the whole of postmodernism with the idea of the metamodern (be it metamodernism or metamodernity), but rather to outline a possible thread that existed alongside the postmodernist one but outlived it. Alternatively, metamodernism could be understood as the natural progression of postmodernism, and that certainly isn't far from the truth in some cases, but it seems that many an artist in the last fifty years was doing something that was not postmodernism; what was it, if not metamodernism, or at least its beginning?

Was there anything definitively postmodernist in the Julian Schnabel of the 1980s? Here is an excerpt of an article published on 13 November 1987 in *The New York Times*:

In the catalogue, Thomas McEvilley discusses the way Mr. Schnabel's work straddles modernism and post-modernism, swinging between a modernist faith in painting and heroic individuality and a post-modern skepticism that mocks heroism and compels the viewer to see art first of all as performance and fiction. (Brenson 1987, p. 5)

What about Anselm Kiefer? The summary of the book *Fire on The Earth: Anselm Kiefer and the Postmodern World* (Fire on the Earth n.d.; Gilmour 1992) on Amazon contains the following:

... Gilmour shows how Kiefer's use of literary, mythological, and other cultural texts parallels the intertextual approach common among postmodern theorists. At the same time, the artist's cosmological questioning adds a dimension lacking among many of postmodernism's leading proponents.

And Rachel Whiteread? Here is an interesting line from an art review on John Haber's site, written at some point in the 2000s:

Has she become the last modern, the last postmodern, or the latest to give up on both of them? Probably all at once. ([Haber n.d.](#), sct. Accentuate the Negative, para. 6)

In the visual arts, modernism is a movement in love with a grand idea that relies on form as a vessel of the avant-garde. On the other hand, postmodernism is mainly committed to exposing modernism and modernity as naïve (for believing in grand ideas) and has a love for new media and irony. While the medium truly "is the message" ([McLuhan 1964](#)), it turns out that postmodernism was prematurely declared as the next big movement on its way to becoming an era. In an attempt to situate the phenomenon of postmodernism, the sensibility of artists was conflated with media, method, genre, or movement and different sensibilities were put under the same umbrella term. Perhaps because new media made these categories unclear and even, to some extent, unnecessary, the new media itself became the main vessel not only of meaning, but also of supposed sensibility, and, most importantly, of classification. Certainly, many new media predisposed artists to particular messages, and there was an influx of irony aimed at modernism and modernity. It also stands to reason that if we remove the medium itself, what is under the surface is an artist's sensibility and that should be the driving force that chooses an appropriate expression for itself. Therein lies the faulty assumption that if the appropriate expression of many artists' sensibilities was in the form of new media, and this new media presupposed a postmodernist sensibility, then surely all of them were postmodernists. The idea of the prevalence of postmodernism came from both facts: that the erasure of old categories would lead to the creation of a new one that was meant to house everything new; and the rather romantic idea that an artist rarely uses media unfit for their sensibility, cementing the notion that this new category must be all-encompassing.¹⁷ Thus, a vicious circle of interpretation was conceived—new media, suitable for the new postmodernist irony, ostensibly become emblematic of the spirit of the times and declare the death of modernism and modern ideas; consequently it looked like there was no place for older media or modes of expression, reinforcing the presence of the new ones.

It appeared impossible for an artist who used new media or new methods to not be a postmodernist and for a postmodernist not to use the new media or methods. If art dared to be traditional, at least there had to be something revolutionary about the medium itself (there usually was not). However, there is a lack of justification and reasoning for the classification of many artistic practices as postmodernist; for example, again, land art, despite its relatively new medium, is neither ironic, nor distrustful of modernism. Neo-expressionism, which reinvented expressionist painting, in essence is just renewed expressionism, and has no postmodernist aesthetic tendencies whatsoever. Even many a performance or installation—Joseph Beuys' for example—carry with them a sense of grand ideas, mysticism and have a strong modernist sensibility. Yet, we are used to considering all these examples as postmodernist. Today this looks increasingly suspect. There is very little, in the way of sensibility, that true postmodernist art, like conceptualists similar to Joseph Kosuth or Piero Manzoni, or Pop art's Andy Warhol, share with the above examples.

Additionally, somehow, we seem to have missed a crucial detail when it comes to qualifying what order of category postmodernism is. Despite the negation of modernist sensibility, postmodernism's preoccupation with new media and grand promises seems suspiciously modernist. It looks exactly like modernism's love of form and declarations, reborn again. The avant-garde is again in the form—the new media; the grand idea is present again in the belief that this beacon of new artistic expression, along with irony and poststructuralism, will prevail. In the end, it turns out postmodernism is nothing more than the endmost submovement of modernism, with the last in a series of many grand ideas and manifestos being realised through changes in form and stipulations about what art is. Modernism ended with its negation and last reincarnation—postmodernism. In my opinion, there are enough similarities both in the mode of approach and in the spirit—the

exploration of form and the grandiosity of idea, respectively—to consider postmodernism very modernist in its essence.

If postmodernism was a form of modernism, why should we consider metamodernism to be any different? The difference is precisely in the lack of grandiose platforms or distinctive new form, which makes the changes different in nature. Instead of relying on reinvention and grand ideas, which is a very modernist (and as also postmodernist) approach, metamodernism quietly and almost unassumingly consolidates. Postmodernism put a stop to modernism's preoccupation with the exploration of traditional form, while simultaneously legitimising all new forms, and through its affinity for irony and scepticism, directed artists', critics', and theorists' attention to the content of art in a new way. Metamodernism is dependent on these very facts—it refers constantly to modernism's rise and fall (postmodernism) by virtue of being unconcerned with the specifics of its own form and unwilling to propose a manifesto for uniformity of either form, ideology, or, indeed, immediately obvious direction. It respects the lessons of postmodernism and understands that thanks to postmodernism it is free of the idea that new media, or exploration of form are avant-garde by themselves. Nevertheless, while it knows that irony and scepticism are necessary it does not consider them to be universal tools—for metamodernism, the full rejection of modernist idealism is thoughtless, flippant and an end in itself. Simultaneously, modernism's pursuit of truth and ideals is seen as both doomed and necessary. Irony goes hand in hand with sincerity, scepticism with hope, meaning with meaninglessness, the rational with the absurd.

Moreover, metamodernism puts an emphasis on the content and its nature, whatever it may be, and emancipates it from form. The criteria for artistic value are no longer measured through art's formal characteristics, but rather by their relation to the artists' sensibility and the content itself. The avant-garde, when it is present, is no longer form, but rather meaning that is considered with irony and seriousness. It could even be said that for metamodernism, the avant-garde is mainly in the sensibility—the acceptance of the absurd as a part of reality, and the idea that opposites are not mutually exclusive.

Of course, the process of evolution from modernism to postmodernism and metamodernism cannot be delineated into neat and strictly defined pieces, and should be considered as a vector, and not just as an examination of separate distinct phenomena. The sensibility that we are seeing in metamodernism has been fermenting for a long time and has been showing its presence throughout the 20th century—most notably through proto-absurdist authors like Franz Kafka, philosopher of the absurd Albert Camus, and later “true” absurdist like Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco.

To better understand its current rise and the difference between these early manifestations and present day metamodernism, we should examine its internal logic and the opposition of reality and art. The way in which art references and refers to the era it belongs to is directed by the same structure of feeling that guides the characteristics of the era itself. Yet, art exists in a parallel mode in relation to rational thought (as we usually understand it)—it signifies reality in a way that is not inherent to everyday life. Not so much because of the refinement attributed to it, but rather because of its nature—artworks exist as archives of information, which can hardly be undisputed or fully decoded, and in that regard, they bear information that lacks the clear meaning of reality. Artefacts whose epistemic value relies on intuition do not belong in rational systems on principle.

This exclusivity of art was undermined by factors outside of it. Reality itself started looking increasingly irrational to more and more people. Nowadays, Camus's (1975, pp. 9–111) reasoning in *The Myth of Sisyphus* about the absurd existence necessitating some sort of “leap” in reasoning or faith seems unavoidable not only to the advocates of absurdist philosophy¹⁸—to many, it might seem as if life itself depends on a “leap” of faith and art evolves to reflect that, and to distance itself from life yet again. I am not implying a deep sense of absurdist understanding of the nature of our reality, nor in fact any deep ruminations on it, but rather an intuitive need for a ‘belief’ of some sort¹⁹. If we refer to Zavarzadeh, we might find it in the beginning of writers' need to go beyond reality's

unrealness through new modes of fiction that demand a certain suspension of disbelief in order to achieve an epistemic value. In early non-postmodernist visual arts, we start finding it in the return to metaphysics in artists like Anselm Kiefer, for example. In later cases of artistic practice, we find it in a certain combination of both. Contemporary narrative painters, for instance, quite frequently combine some sort of noninterpretable narrative with a certain sense of otherworldliness, metaphysics, or meta-irony—Tilo Baumgärtel, Daniel Richter, and Neo Rauch, respectively, to name just a few. Slowly, albeit only to us, and not so much in a historical sense, this tendency started enveloping more and more of the art world. This is the movement, tendency or whatever category would best fit it (for I am not confident that any of these will be sufficient or exact enough, given time) that I would call metamodernism. The structure of feeling driving this sort of artistic behaviour has been amplifying and will, for now, continue to do so, and its effect and the sensibility it produces is spilling over and giving birth to ideas like KFCConsole, as well as to peoples' perception of such an item. I must admit I am not sure whether that is a result of metamodernism or a symptom of metamodernity, or if indeed we will see such an interconnectedness that one will mean the other²⁰. Alternatively, and most probably, this sensibility is just a symptom of the coming of a new age and people's attempt to deal with their inability to acclimate themselves to it.

Another dimension that seems to belong both to metamodernity and metamodernism is a turn to empathy. Interestingly enough, it could be found implicitly even in a product such as KFCConsole—empathy is an important instrument in constructing many immersive games, which are in fact the main function of such an object. Beyond that, empathy could be clearly discerned in the socially involved aspects of contemporary internet culture and the resultant new regime of thought. This can be seen in the notable quantity of artworks oriented toward identity and liberal postcolonial ideas, which Ullrich speaks about. Their prominence is due to a shift in public understanding—they are as much a product of the artists as they are of the demand for such discourse in the arts. Tempting as it may be for theory to categorise them as a liberal trend, like many do, they are in fact a symbol of a changing societal norm, irrespective of their aesthetic qualities or repetitive themes. The facts of socially involved thought and behaviour and the growing inclination towards paying attention and accepting the marginalised is a mark of metamodernity and the communication force of internet much more than it is a mark of liberal politics by themselves. A confirmation of this could be found in the parallel stream of artworks (which I consider to represent metamodernism), which do not employ the thematic characteristics of the era but rely on empathy by itself.

The article "In Praise of the New Modernists" (Clark 2015) outlines a tendency in literature that is very much a signal of a growing need for empathy. The author underlines a difference between postmodernist and contemporary prose. The postmodernist novel is devoid of emotional affect and employs predominantly rational systems. The new novelists, on the other hand, use postmodernist approaches like the substitution of character names for A, B and C as well as unusual events, but the intention behind the whole text is different. If in the postmodernist prose it was intellectualisation of the problem, in the new prose it is emotional impact. When it comes to metamodernism and metamodernist works, attention is frequently directed towards methods that have also been attributed to postmodernism—metafiction, autofiction, meta-irony, magical realism, intertextuality and so on. It often seems that not enough attention is paid to the tone of works, and in that sense, this article is quite useful—despite not being overly concerned with the definition of postmodernism and not at all mentioning metamodernism, it paints a very compelling and straightforward portrait of metamodernist literature. The instruments of new fiction that Zavarzadeh mentions are in place; fiction continues looking for a way to reflect absurd reality through substituting the modern narrative for something more fictitious and uninterpretable, but the work is heavily psychologised. It could deal with the emotional world of the character, or, alternatively, the whole work could be touching only for the reader, without involving the characters' feelings at all. This article also underlines a

seldom-discussed side of postmodernism—it is highly rational, and rarely emotional, and Clark stresses that.

Not many people look at postmodernist literature in this fashion; for instance Vladimir Nabokov (with the heavily psychologised and ambivalent *Lolita*), Margaret Atwood (with the dystopian feminism of *The Handmaids Tale*) and Gabriel García Márquez (with the magical realism of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) are often said to be postmodernists, and it seems to be purely by virtue of the time period they created in, and nothing else, although even that definition is quite precarious. Might it be because we have even less understanding of what postmodernist literature is, so it simply became everything not decidedly modernist? It seems that postmodernism (and postmodernity) as a concept for the period became the norm when discussing culture. I do not claim to have expertise on literature, but to me it seems as if again, as with the visual arts, the myth of postmodernity marred the discourse on literature and conflated different sensibilities with one another. There certainly is something non-modernist in these particular books, but there is also something non-postmodernist. Zavarzadeh (1975, p. 75) himself gives an answer to that problem with several categories—like “Para-Modernist” for Nabokov and Beckett, for instance, while also condemning the generalisations of all types of literature as being postmodernist. I propose that from today’s point of view, with the supplementary outline of the expanding metamodernist sensibility that I give, this term might serve us quite well. That is not to say that metamodernism is not an umbrella term, as I describe it, but it is more in accord with authorial sensibility and the structure of feeling that has been gaining traction in the last half a century (and certainly is prevalent in the last thirty or so years), than postmodernism. Metamodernist works strive to pay attention to or signify the human, the emotional and sincere, which seems even more important when presented with a background of confusing post-truth, post-absurd reality. The lack of certainty in facts, and absurdity are not a reason for pure irony, even less for nihilism, as in postmodernism. They are seen as a reason for a nuanced approach capable of grasping complete opposites as parts of a whole. Paradoxes are not fatal, because logic is not applicable to every aspect of reality; instead, the spectrum of contradictions is acknowledged as a natural situation, and hope and the pursuit of something better have become a salvation in themselves, even if they are not guaranteed or even expected to be fruitful.

The reasons for the continued amplification of the turn to empathy extend beyond rejection of postmodernist irony and scepticism for being imperfect responses to reality—the representative power of digital technology and peoples’ growing understanding of mental health further necessitate a more nuanced approach to art making. Technology and the growing access to the internet set a premise for new kinds of metanarratives which could not have existed before—these include metanarratives based on nonnational, nonethnic totals (of course, taking into consideration that they have their opposites thanks to the very same digital platforms). Firstly, the opportunity to read and watch other human beings’ stories, no matter how similar or different they might be, gives a basis for a new kind of understanding. For instance, irrespective of how controversial the concept of political correctness might be²¹, it is indisputable that it is sustained by our access to other peoples’ point of view and our recognition of it. The legitimisation of PC culture is not only due to the fight for human rights and general awareness, but is also a product of the intrinsic opportunity for visibility that comes with internet culture. Secondly, people are in a unique position to find others who share experiences, views, or preferences with them. Really, no example is needed: through the internet, a person can discover anything and everything—emotional support, scientific research and astonishingly specific hobbies and interests. Each personal sensibility, idea, interest, or conviction can find company, as well as a platform, thus forming a completely new web of intertextual and interpersonal connections and meanings.

Crowdfunding and crowdsourcing platforms give the opportunity for realising projects that would not have been brought to fruition before for various reasons. Aside from financing and powering new business ventures, artistic projects or even eccentric ideas, these

platforms form an environment in which gestures of kindness and empathy have a real chance of helping people in need. All these opportunities form one of the scenes of a new kind of metanarrative—people who share particular values or interests not only connect, but also actively contribute towards a mutual goal—not so much the act itself but rather the possibility of it creates a new shared paradigm. There are many spaces that form some sort of new ecosystem of shared thought and action and change the opportunities as well as sometimes form people's predispositions to certain subjects—social media, platforms for blogging, vlogging, forums, open access information, open-source software, collaborative repositories for information and so on.

Highlights like Reddit's campaign in resurrecting GameStop's stock prices in April 2021 give an example of the potential (as-yet-unregulated) forces behind hive-mind-like waves of action facilitated through internet communities and their very real economic reflections. On the other hand, seemingly purely information-driven phenomena like an online encyclopaedia could play an important part in major legislative decisions through advocating—in March 2019 several chapters of Wikipedia blacked out and published a statement against a proposed EU copyright law urging people to speak with their representatives to block it. Wikipedia has been steadily involved in the effort to update copyright law to reflect the current state of information exchange and processing. Of course, none of these examples carry the weight of centuries' worth of shared cultural background and practices, but they have significant potential and possibly overarching consequences. Not only through the accumulation of critical mass, but also through cultivating new modes of thinking, these structures change our perception of old values both in and out of our own culture, which consequently presupposes the creation of new values—this time going beyond borders and the inherent intricacies of nationality and ethnicity—that could very well be a new form of metanarratives.

Additionally, the emergence of ever-growing channels for communication signal humanity's need for better and fuller understanding of each other. The deterministic opinions about the inhumanity and alienation brought on by internet could easily find their opposition in the simplest of communication tools. If we consider communicators of all kinds, we will find that with new versions of these products, they become increasingly well suited to expressing all sorts of information and, most importantly, emotion—from the emoticon, the sticker, the gif, to the selfie, audio, and video—all these additions to simple text chats signify the need for a more comprehensive, fuller communication. The advent of the meme and its relatability in many cases reveals a shared, almost universal understanding of previously not-often-spoken-about feelings—consternation, anxiety, existential dread, awkwardness and so on. I do not mean to extoll the internet's virtues, but only to show some of its most underrated, though highly unifying capabilities.

Another important aspect of the digital cultural environment is the heightened interest in mental health issues. The assorted manifestations of popular psychology are not new by any means—neither self-help books, nor columns or programs answering peoples' questions and problems, all of which have their places in internet culture as well. Nevertheless, the distinctive combination of relative stability within the fields of psychology and psychiatry²², the normalisation of discussions about mental health, the unrestricted access to information and the growing psychological literacy is new and is provided for by the Internet. All that leads to a comparatively higher culture of mental health than before and a certain attention to human psychological response, to psychological and psychiatric conditions, their origins and their presentation. A society that has this sort of understanding of psychological response, that actively uses in everyday life the concepts of mental health and the vocabulary of psychology and psychiatry, will search for a more sensitive representation in art, or for art that evokes some sort of psychological response by itself. Only then can art be of full epistemic value to the contemporary person living in a psychologised culture.

The postmodernist was an author or an artist that represented post-truth and the ensuing strategies for living in a reality that had no objective truths and had no hope

for finding them. The complexities of life were seen as something to be intellectualised, and in the end only pure irony seemed to be a fit response. The metamodernist does not reject the idea that reality is paradoxical and absurd, and truth is largely unattainable; the difference is that a search for truth can be worthy, even if hopeless. The human condition is by definition subjective when it comes to personal experience, but it seems to be very objective in its universality and likes seeking company and understanding. For a time, it seemed that it had found it in shared scepticism and intellectualising, but it quickly became apparent that it was not enough, because it lacked a much needed “leap” of faith. Postmodernism needed more emotion, sense of awe, mysticism, metaphysics, or something else to anchor its rationality and make it more true to the psychological nature of the human being. It looked like it must have gotten it, for were we not living in a postmodernity full of ironic and sceptical, yet emotional or evocative, works of art and literature? Or were we just mired in a concept that we stuck by despite its radical change in meaning? For me, the answer lies in the conceptual instability of postmodernism (and postmodernity), and the glaring difference between several philosophical approaches deemed postmodernist and “postmodern” art. If postmodernism first was undefined, then turned out to be not what we thought it was, but nevertheless we conclude that it has ended, then maybe we were focusing on the wrong thing, and intuitively grasping the concept of a strengthening metamodernism. Therefore, if we decide that there is such a thing as metamodernism, it seems that it has found all these modes of expression that postmodernism lacked and has kept working on them for the last fifty or more years. It has no outward uniformity, but it definitely has a sense of direction.

4. Metamodernism or Metamodernity?

Although I have tried to cover a broad array of examples and interconnected lines of thought and artistic behaviour, I have also heavily propounded the idea of digital technologies as the driving forces behind this new sensibility and new era. It might seem that the majority of developments outlined here are quite recent phenomena, and I have no reason to refer to the 1970s as a tentative starting point for metamodernism or metamodernity and for displacing postmodernity from its pedestal. However, many of these changes were in motion and were tangible long before the present-day electronic advancements were in circulation. The “technetronic society” of Zavarzadeh, [Baudrillard’s \(1994\)](#) apocalyptic notions of technologically driven dissolution of meaning, body, mind, and soul, Lyotard’s preoccupation with computer language and his belief that technologies program conceptual meaning ([Woodward 2017](#), pp. 134–50) and Jameson’s idea that technologies are grounds for a new economic model ([Jameson 1991](#), p. 6) all signify how keenly felt the changing nature of reality was. Before the rise of the internet there were computers, cell phones, television, VCR and older game consoles to name but a few technological vectors. There was also a changing understanding of psychological and psychopathological response—for instance, PTSD as we know it today was defined after the Vietnam war. All these changes are not separate from today, but form a continual shift in a certain direction, the fact that it is more visible now is just a consequence of its growth, not so much of radical change. On the other hand, all of this might seem like an obvious thing to say, but the development of culture should not be considered as a sudden onset of an acute condition, but rather as a chronic condition that develops over time. It is not so much that we do not understand that fact, but somehow, we fail to acknowledge it enough. My attempt at periodising stems directly from that impression and a need to unify parts that should not have been divided in the first place, because they signify the same thing.

The advancement in thought and its accessibility throughout modernity spurred a great wave of theory about the nature of virtually everything. The accelerating progress of society created a feeling of everchanging reality that needed constant redefining of definitions. However, if we look even at recent history from a vantage-point, we might find that significant change continues to be gradual and heavily dependent on grand notions. Our overinvolvement with the meaning of terms and the juggling with language prevent

us from a broader view. In that sense, I feel the need to state that I find many opinions about postmodernism insightful in the intricacies of theory and subject, but profoundly lacking in observations about cultural development as a whole, because they often negate or disregard the continuity and contextuality of culture as a concept. Incidentally, perhaps that feeling is a symptom of a metamodernist sensibility seeking to unify the modernist and postmodernist tendencies throughout the last fifty years.

If we accept the notion of metamodernity, then we must consider it to be a meta-era. First, because it is self-aware, it is conscious of itself and by virtue of its interconnectedness refers to itself in all aspects of its existence, be it popular, political, economic, or other. Second, because it is very similar, but a higher order of the things before it. Third, because it is a time of metareferences, metalinks and metatexts (both in a technological and informal sense), meta-irony, the return to metaphysics, metanarratives (Lyotard's) and new metanarratives beyond the ethnic, national, political, racial or religious. For the first time we can share a meta-reality with people living in a completely separate political, social, cultural or natural climate.

The modern and modernist were both references to grand ideas. The postmodernist was a reference to modernity, modernism, and their end. The metamodernist is a reference to modernism, postmodernism, and their reconciliation, but most of all it is a reference to itself and metamodernity. Metamodernity has a prominent interconnected and self-referential culture and a constantly self-controlling and self-approaching organ in the form of the internet. If the internet continues to be an instrument for communication of various nature, maybe these characteristics will not be lost, but instead will just evolve. Metamodernity is an era of combining heterogeneous and sometimes outrightly opposed meanings and tendencies, regardless of choice of example, be it KFCConsole, metamodernism's irreverent culture commentaries like *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm*²³, or so-called 'high' culture and the renewed turn to affect, accompanied by the same self-awareness, meta-irony and sincerity.

The most significant reason for making a distinction between metamodernity and metamodernism lies in the fact that we are at the relative beginning (and still too close to the transitional period) of a new era. It is imperative that we have two terms through which we examine, on the one hand, the tendencies in the arts and philosophy, and on the other, the characteristics of the era itself. It is quite possible that some of the things we ascribe to one will turn out to be characteristics of the other. Regardless of whether it does, or which direction such a realisation takes, we have to be well prepared for a turn, and this can only be achieved by distinguishing them. Moreover, there are and always will be areas and artefacts of culture that respond to the times in a different fashion to what is considered to be the main aesthetic praxis. It seems to me that, in order to support the theory of metamodernism, we should be able to distinguish products of metamodernity that use 'older', 'newer' or different aesthetics to reflect contemporary reality. Such artefacts should not be deemed metamodernist, but are also not purely modernist or postmodernist by virtue of their metamodern thematic turn or axiological predisposition, to name a few of the possible dimensions in which they can reflect an era. That leaves us with two categories—metamodernist art and sensibility and products and art belonging to metamodernity. For example, at two points in this text, I mention art dealing with identity, postcolonial ideas, and questions pertaining to human rights in one way or another; however, while I deem it distinctly metamodern, I do not think all of it employs metamodernist aesthetics. That is because such art often processes metamodern ideas through modernist or postmodernist methods and does not use the distinctively 'newer' modes of aesthetic expression. The thematic turn of such art is indisputably contemporary from an axiological point of view, but it rarely uses the dominant aesthetic program of metamodernism. Of course, there are more than a few exceptions, but frequently the message of this art must be contained in one main layer—a modernist-like grand idea of a message about identity, emancipation or the spirit of a marginalised group, realised through clear emotive methods, or a postmodernist-like sceptical or ironic take on the same problems with a lower degree of emotion and a higher degree of rationalisation. Contrary to those modes of expression, the emotional and

rational viewpoints in metamodernism are both masked—empathy and critical thought are almost always implicitly felt but are not explicitly stated. Metamodernism also presupposes some sort of remnants of, or outright, absurdity—a characteristic that would not pair well with a clear-cut message of socially concerned art or would directly undermine it. Movies like *Moonlight* (Jenkins 2016) and *The Green Book* (Farrelly 2018) for instance cannot be classified as metamodernist, because they do not employ the characteristic metamodernist narrative devices and have a loud and clear tone and message; however, they are very much products of metamodernity because they deal with important themes about race, identity, status and the intersectionality they create. Conversely, a film like *Get Out* (Peele 2017) is a perfect example of metamodernism—it deals with much the same framework of problems (save sexuality), but it reworks them through a new type of narrative straddling the line between the absurd, horror, magical realism and even sci-fi to a degree, and its message is not clearly stated, but the allusions are obvious enough by themselves and create references to many possible problems at the same time. It creates a new story, fictitious to the point of ridiculousness, not so much to explore a problem and give direction, but to immerse in a feeling both reflecting the absurdity of existence and the struggles of black people at the same time. I feel I should add that this is not in any way an evaluation of aesthetic worth, but an evaluation of an aesthetic category.

I am aware that these opinions might seem prescriptive in the sense that I leave a narrow window to metamodernism with the definitions I give. However, my intention is to describe these two clearly simultaneously existing modes of art. The structure and level of fiction²⁴ and fiction making is quite different in the two categories. Metamodernist fiction nowadays carries the same structure as Zavarzadeh's metamodernism. It might be infused with more emotional effect and affect (although we have no reason to think of Zavarzadeh's metamodernism as lacking them in the first place), but it certainly is exactly what he describes when it comes to fictitiousness, and it carries the same taste of the absurd. That is the main reason I separate metamodernist art from art that is a product of metamodernity.

The topic of metamodernism in the arts deserves special attention in order to encompass its many sides and manifestations for which this text is insufficient. Metamodernism is realised in too many directions and intermixtures of genres. Perhaps the most appropriate approach here is for it to be intuited through narrative art, because it gives precise signals through the nature of its distinctive narrativity. In cinema, being the most vivid form of visual narrative art, metamodernist works are quite clearly discernible, from early examples like *Wings of Desire*, *Stalker* or *Fitzcarraldo*, which carry a taste of fictitious metaphysics; many of Lars von Trier's existential magical realism horror and dramas; the absurd dystopia of *The Lobster*, Wes Anderson's magical naïvism; Taika Waititi's gut-wrenching comedic dramas *Jojo Rabbit* and *Boy* or the mocumentary *What We Do in the Shadows*; the unusually irreverent and rich-in-everyday-comedy drama *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*; the heavily autofictional, metanarrative and meta-ironic series *Fleabag* and *Staged*; the romantic magical realism of *Swiss Army Man*; the metaphysical absurd of *The Lighthouse*; the stylised psychological horror *Midsommer*; the racially oriented fantastical horror *Get Out*; the phantasmagorically social *Bacarau*; to the absurd dramedy *Kajillionaire*. These are just a few of the very well-known titles that embody the metamodernist sensibility. The examples are inexhaustible and can be found both in 'higher' and in 'lower' art or entertainment within very different examples. Often, they can be a mixture of both, like the obnoxious satire and moving sentimentality of *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* and the absurd futility and convivial tone of a comedy game show like *Taskmaster*.

In contemporary art, specifically in 'newer' non-strictly-narrative media and sculpture, metamodernist tendencies can be found in the psychologised, the metaphysical or the fantastical, for example, the personal mythology of Joseph Beuys; the works dealing with the metaphysics of personal or collective trauma of Doris Salcedo and Anselm Kiefer; the heavy autofiction in some of Marina Abramović's works and Mark Quinn's *Self*, or his and Ron Mueck's work on the idea of bodily image; the borderline metaphysics on the edge

of the absurd, design, or futuristic visions of Anish Kapoor, Mona Hatoum and Olafur Eliasson, respectively; the metaphysics of space and man in the works of Rachel Whiteread and Antony Gormley; or the grotesque creations of Patricia Piccinini and David Altmejd. In painting, metamodernism has recently manifested in the return to narrative²⁵, reimagined and more fictitious; the meta-ironic and absurd Neo Rauch; the magical and metaphysical Peter Doig, Ruprecht von Kaufmann, Tilo Baumgärtel and Daniel Richter; the distorted religious and everyday enigmas of Joshua Hagler; the social and disturbing fairy-tales of Nicole Eisenman; the grotesque naïve of Dana Schutz; the mystical magical realism of Aris Kalaizis; and so on. With this long, but by no means close to comprehensive, list of examples, I seek to outline a shared (absurd) feeling underpinning all these different modes of expression or thematic direction. This is art capable of carrying epistemic value about contemporary reality not by way of explanation, but by simply containing the various ‘leaps’ we use to deal with themes of personal and collective nature in a post-absurd environment.

It should be noted that the metamodernist absurd is not the absurd of Beckett and Ionesco; it does not necessarily have a crushing effect on the psyche, nor is it hopeless or distant in its comedy. It is just a fact of reality that has to be lived with. Sometimes it is present in the form of the magical or the inexplicable. Sometimes an escape is found in the metaphysical, in the romantic, in comedy or in the humane, which of course depends on the author or artist, but usually there is something that alludes to some sort of promise, no matter whether it is attainable or, indeed, the right kind of salvation. In a sense, the new absurd is richer in terms of methods and range of emotional affect. This must not be understood as a change in aesthetic value, but rather as the consequence of getting used to absurdity in real life. The metamodernist absurd is many-sided, because absurdity is accepted as a background, instead of a conclusion and because it exists in a system that puts an emphasis on empathy, in whatever form it might be, as a core of aesthetic experience.

5. Conclusions

The sensibility that is ripe today started growing long ago—its beginning is felt first in Kafka, theorised by Camus, stated as a conclusion in Beckett and Ionesco; then, Zavarzadeh saw it infesting reality in a decidedly mundane way and demanding broad recognition; since then, it has kept spreading as an everyday fact of life, but has not significantly changed. It is present at the end of modernity, and it is present again, as a transcendent order of itself, in metamodernity.

In place of modernism’s pathos, metamodernism employs scepticism through irony, and in place of postmodernism’s cynicism and rationality, metamodernism employs a sense of hope through sincerity. All of this is contained in a balanced system responding to a post-absurd reality—the reality of the metamodern era. What Zavarzadeh describes has not changed, but merely matured—the impeachment of Nixon gives way to the two impeachments of Trump, art continues absorbing absurdity and turning it into a more poignant fictitiousness, the new era is just coming into itself and unfurling its potential. Whether or not we choose to call it metamodernity and its dominant aesthetic paradigm metamodernism does not matter much. How long this new mode of making art will last in its present form before it mutates into something else, we have no way of knowing. However, we should be paying attention to both era and movement and we should consider them as interconnected parts of a system that has palpable direction and is not so amorphous as it might seem—from the 1970s until now, from heightened fictionality in art to chicken-warming game consoles. We should consider the grand categories because they carry a different kind of knowledge about things in the form of intuitive concepts and foresee developments in culture through generalisation. For instance, today some of these developments seem to be even more *meta*—like the company behind Facebook changing its name to Meta and working on a new vision for virtual reality called Metaverse.

The grand category of metamodernism seeks to outline the unique sensibility that is trying to deal with a post-absurd reality. The grand category of metamodernity seeks to name the new era that originates this reality and its resultant sensibility. For now, this

new era has both distinctly metamodernist manifestations, as well as remnants of “older” modernist or postmodernist sensibilities. Given time, it will inevitably have new ones. Should metamodernity continue to develop into an era of interconnectedness and self-reference, we will undoubtedly see a turn towards a synthesis of notions. The sensibility driving metamodernism in the arts, and also present in everyday culture, will perhaps permeate theory and will gain a rational interpretation in the sciences. Then, it will no longer be metamodernism, because it could not remain reliant on affect and a sense of the absurd in that framework. Then art, in order to continue being epistemically valuable, and distance itself from reality, will have to adjust and metamodernism will evolve into something new.

For now, we are living at the start of a new era that has conceived a completely new mode of change compared to the previous one. A change that does not want to overturn everything before it, but rather tries to use, combine, and balance its better parts. This new era has a more permeating presence instead of revolutionary overtones. It might be hard to find these positives of our new age when looking at the world right now—war, hunger, pandemic, right-wing extremism, environmental disaster, economic disparity, and so on do not give much reason for optimism. Nevertheless, there is a renewed drive towards the humane, towards accepting the marginalised and helping the underprivileged, towards overcoming the old frameworks of power—be it colonial, racial, gendered or other. Due to the new information networks, this drive, which is undoubtedly a higher order of modernity’s humane project, is spreading in a new way. Undeniably, it also produces a backlash reaction that will not abate soon. However, what we can learn specifically from metamodernism is that people seem to evolve their understanding of the world, that there is hunger for affect and psychologised art—or in other words, for emotional connection, empathy and hope, even if it deals with the absurdity of present-day actualities. The metamodernist sensibility is the key to understanding the metamodern condition of today. We can glean a direction of human development—of modernity becoming metamodernity—that does not seem so bleak. Had it not been for metamodernist sensibility, we would not have had hope. We would have been truly postmodern.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Sylvia Golemanova and Nikolay Golemanov for their attention, useful critiques and encouragement. I would also like to thank Peter Tzanev for the incentive and the invitation for this special issue.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Taken from the online version of Merriam-Webster dictionary ([Meta n.d.](#)).
- ² Examples of this range from exploratory ventures like the scientific conference [After Postmodernism: A Report | International Focusing Institute \(n.d.\)](#) at Chicago University in 14–16 November 1997, at which Michael [Epstein \(1997\)](#) presented his theory of trans-postmodernism; final declarations like the prominent essay *The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond* ([Kirby 2006](#)); to books like [Lipovetsky et al.’s \(2005\) Hypermodern Times](#) and [Kirby’s \(2009\) own Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture](#). The report of the conference offers an overview of postmodernism including the line “We are now a little past the time when it was revolutionary and freeing to undermine all logical fundamentals and scientific “objectivity.” But since postmodernism delights in denying any alternatives, the scientific robot simply marches on”. This highlights a dissatisfaction with postmodernist sensibility. Postmodernist theory was a conclusion that did not offer much meaningful direction beyond itself, nor opportunity for development. It turned out to be a short-lived solution, daunting in its scepticism, and not in line with the sensibility of many, who apparently did not consider it sufficient. It had swept the world in a judgemental storm, refused to be defined and not long after—lost epistemic value. In an almost opposing fashion to this statement, Kirby laments the loss of intellectual fervour and good taste in a decidedly postmodernist fashion himself, which makes his essay a bit of an oxymoron. For explorations about the end of postmodernism see *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* ([Brooks and Toth 2007](#)). For a collection of new theories, dealing with what comes after postmodernism, see *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century* ([Rudrum and Stavris 2015](#)).

- I use this term as described in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Buchanan 2010).
- Jason Ananda Josephson Storm's (2021) book *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* offers a new approach to theory itself, which builds upon modern faith and postmodern scepticism and overcomes deconstructivism. It is mainly concerned with finding a new path for the humanities and the social sciences, which are fragmented, highly specialised and refuse to entertain the notions of a bigger truth or aim. It is perhaps the first metatheory of metamodernism.
- The plurality of modernist artistic practices in its many subdivisions ostensibly made the category "movement" sound obsolete. Nevertheless, if one looks beyond the form and into the structure of feeling motivating the modernists, their outward differences become much less important. The same could be said about postmodernist practices. In that sense, modernism could still be considered a movement, albeit one with many subdivisions. Here, postmodernism is considered to be one of those subdivisions of modernism, with its internal categories, for example, conceptual art, op art, pop art, Fluxus and so on. It is imperative to note that not every example, or artist, of every movement or submovement could be considered as just a part of its category, but I have been careful to apply generalisations with caution.
- As of the 1st of June 2022 it is not on the market and a pre-order option cannot be found yet.
- Shepard's tone is a tonal auditory illusion in which the sound seems to continuously ascend or descend in pitch, without really getting higher or lower.
- I have not used visual materials here, because a Fair Use provision is often not applicable to open access research. I also do not feel it is appropriate to reference an online article containing the image if I do not speak the language it is written in, as is the case with all visual representations I could find online.
- This idea of postmodernism being ironic, full of scepticism and rationality seems to be quite clear to many. Yet somehow it is frequently applied to art that does not fit such a description fully. That seems to be a direct result of the idea of postmodernity—it is understood as an umbrella term that encompasses everything created in its period of duration.
- The results discussed here are derived from the main search function (between October and November 2021), without additional input besides the words. Google Trends and Google Books Ngram Viewer supply graphics of the frequency of searches for a topic or term on the internet or in books, respectively, and are a reliable statistical instrument when it comes to incidence of mention. Given that the data largely are not contextually dependent, they are not used here. An example of their usage in relation to postmodernism can be found in *The Real but Greatly Exaggerated Death of Postmodernism* (Hanson 2019).
- Metamodernity* (Andersen 2019) as well as *The Listening Society* and *Nordic Ideology* (Freinacht 2017, 2019) (pseudonym of Daniel Görtz and Emil Ejner Friis) are books of a somewhat programme nature that try to outline a frame for socio-cultural development through interdisciplinary approach.
- A direction of thought that to me seems correct. The only difference is that here I will use the term metamodernity, because I find it an apt descriptor of the present era's relation to the past.
- The rise of right-wing politics and, frankly, hateful rhetoric around the world should not be considered just by itself. It is a contrary reaction to the humane drive of our age. Precisely the change towards inclusivity and empathy on the one hand, and the ethically globalising power of information on the other, become the impetus for extreme conservatism, because they change the structure and power dynamics in culture, threatening the dominant position of the powerful.
- When considering metamodernism's aesthetic features in and out of the arts, "metamodernist" seems correct, and when dealing with the culture as a whole—"metamodernity" and "metamodern" are appropriate.
- Another example of taxonomic incongruity—"postmodern" should mean *of postmodernity*; instead, it is usually used to describe postmodernist tendencies.
- By turning to Andy Warhol, Jameson (1991, pp. 8–10) signifies two things—first, he considers Warhol to be a par excellence example of postmodernism. Which, in my opinion, he really is. Secondly, Jameson is palpably sceptical when it comes to postmodernism's potential for meaningful content, Warhol is neither hermeneutically meaningful as opposed to Van Gogh, nor is he critical of capitalist society (as Jameson would have liked). A position that I am also in full agreement with when it comes to Warhol. Jameson sees postmodernism's form as "flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality"; its content as almost non-existent, it has turned into a "fundamental mutation both in the object world itself—now become a set of texts or simulacra—and in the disposition of the subject", even when it deals with electric chairs and car accidents, which could have held deeper meaning; and its affect as waning. That is a position on Warhol and most postmodernists that I do not dispute. I am, however, posing the following question: does all of art dubbed postmodernist really share these characteristics? Because they are not applicable to other contemporaneous movements and artists, even ones who were very close to Warhol, like Jean-Michel Basquiat, for example. The "new expressionism" is seen as just a part of an "empirical, chaotic, and heterogeneous" (Jameson 1991, p. 1) mess, that nevertheless should be read through postmodernism's programme. Jameson saw a new particular strain of art, and extrapolated from it a totality which never was.
- That should always be the case, and perhaps would have been, if artists were immune to fashion and trends, which they are not.
- I would argue that accepting the absurd presupposes a leap in its own right, as with any other strategy. I have used the concept of Camus' "leap" instead of Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" because the construct is much more comprehensive and representative of

all sorts of rational and other strategies for dealing with the absurd condition. The phrase “leap of faith” in this text is understood as not necessarily connected to religion, but rather as a trust or reliance on something beyond proof or reason.

- 19 An interesting take on some of the effects of this particular facet of metamodernity on pop culture, conspirituality and new age spiritual belief can be found in *The Metamodern Mythology of The X-Files* (Cooper 2018). Beyond that, *The X-Files* are a fantastic example of dealing with the absurd through a metamodernist lens—from its themes of internal mythology, conspiracy, paranormality, belief, and a sense of hope to the use of metanarrativity, intertextuality, self-awareness and so on.
- 20 There is a ‘feeling’ that science, philosophy and religion are heading into some sort of unification, but that is as much conjecture for now, as it is a point for a separate text. Suffice it to say that an undercurrent of interconnectedness can be felt in present times—be it mundane examples like prominent religious leaders’ appeal for vaccination against COVID-19, the grand abstract notions permeating physics increasingly involving almost philosophical or religious aspects, or the return to metaphysics in philosophy. I mention this because I believe that there is a parallel to be drawn, if not causation, between this feeling and metamodernism’s uninterpretable synthesis. Is this metamodernist thought and will it be a symptom of metamodernity? Probably both.
- 21 I mean largely political correctness’ implications for the arts and the debate around them. There is no doubt about its merits as a more sensitive approach on a broader scale.
- 22 Psychiatric practices in the last thirty years have seen more changes in diagnostic criteria and definitions, rather than the process of treatment itself. Psychology seems to have accepted its compartmentalised nature and the aftershocks of heated disputes among its schools have largely settled into a varied and often combinative practise.
- 23 Many metamodern products and metamodernist works of art operate against their own pretentiousness, vapidness or even crudeness through its explicit statement. If a thing knows itself and uses that fact, then it can hardly be accused of really being what it seems to be—if it is vulgar beyond belief, and plays with that, then perhaps there is another level of meaning or alternatively it is subversive or simply meta-ironic. Self-awareness seems to be an integral part of metamodernist programs.
- 24 In the case of *The Green Book*, biographical fiction.
- 25 Modernism as a whole rarely uses narrative in painting in any significant way and postmodernism is not overly concerned with painting itself.

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