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Mapping Metamodernism from East to West

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to undertake a diachronic analysis of the emerging notion of "metamodernism". Beginning with comprehensive definitions of modernism and postmodernism, it then navigates through the historical trajectory of metamodernism, tracing its etymology and pre-2010 conceptualizations. Post 2010, the voices of Alexandra Dumitrescu, Thimotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker, David James and Urmila Seshagiri advance the discussion, offering divergent perspectives on outlining this new "-ism". Moving on from the Occident, this research questions the applicability of metamodernism within the Romanian post-communist cultural sphere. Having its roots in Western, capitalist societies, where it is yet to be a fully established and assimilated theory, metamodernism's suitability to diverse socio-cultural climates remains a point of contention.
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Since around 2010, amidst dozens of other emerging "-isms", metamodernism has gained a significant amount of attention as a framework supposedly capable of adequately capturing and defining the current cultural landscape, which both the postmodernist and modernist lenses fail to elucidate.

To grasp the implications and evolution of this budding concept, it is essential to have a clear idea of its predecessors and their key characteristics. For this I will rely on the compressed definitions of modernism or postmodernism that are provided by Thimoteus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their essay *Strategies of the Metamodern:* The modern is associated with politics as diverse as utopianism, formalism, functionalism, seriality, art for art's sake, the flaneur, syntaxis, restlessness, alienation, streams of consciousness, the cinematic apparatus, cubism, Reason, trauma, mass production, and schizophrenia. The postmodern tends to be associated with strategies as varied as dystopianism, late capitalist flexibility, the "end of history"[1], formalism, différance, relativism, irony, pastiche, the waning of affect, consumption, multi-culturalism, deconstruction, poststructuralism, cyberspace, virtuality, pluralism, parataxis, the *unrepresentable*,

and interesse. While these concepts are indefinitely more complex, opting for a list of characteristics makes for a more focused analysis. Taking a look at various theorizations of metamodernism, scholars, more often than not, choose to distill the extensive, often fragmented notions of modernism and postmodernism into their most relevant elements in order to facilitate a more direct comparison and understanding of how metamodernism builds upon and diverges from its predecessors.

Staying true to the title, this paper aims at mapping the historical trajectory of metamodernism emphasizing the divergent approaches to outlining the concept. This lack of consensus and failure to conceive a singular definition for the term ultimately comes down to how different theoreticians relate metamodernism to these two other paradigms. Some understand it as a sum of their characteristics, while others are more flexible in their attitude. These contrastive viewpoints will be discussed later, not before taking a look at the etymology of this new coinage and its pre-2010 uses.

Early/ Pre-2010 Uses

This paper will be discussing the term's early uses only in relation to literature studies, omitting its occurrences in social or political theory editorials (Anthony Elliot, Stephen Feldman)[2].

The first mention of the term metamodernism belongs to Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, who, in his article *The Apocalyptic Fact and the Eclipse of Fiction in Recent American Prose Narratives* introduces it with reference to American literature of the 1970s and its shift in narrative focus from imaginative storytelling to a fascination with the factual. His use of the term in this essay is in no way foretelling a new cultural paradigm, but rather describing an aesthetics in which the lines between fiction and reality "are getting less and less distinguishable"[3]. The only other time he brings up metamodernism is in a footnote when he explains his use of the term "in conjunction with three others to describe various aesthetic and ideational approaches to the art of narrative"[4] - Modernist, Anti-modernist, and Paramodernist. What seemed Metamodernist for Zavarzadeh at the time – the dark humour, irony and metafiction – are nowadays considered key characteristics of the postmodern, as pointed out by T. Vermeulen and van den Akker in *Misunderstandings and clarifications*[5].

Following Zavarzadeh, Andre Furlani is the next to write a relevant article exploring metamodernism. Taking a morphological approach to explaining the notion, Furlani argues that metamodernism directly follows and is derived from modernism:

> English prefix meta- relevantly denotes derivation, resemblance, succession, and change. The Greek preposition from which it derives has an especially pertinent range of meanings: with the accusative, meta means after or next; with the dative, among, besides, or over and above; with the genitive, by means of or in common with.[6]

He then employs it in appreciating the metamodern stance of painter and writer Guy Davenport and a few of his contemporaries (Olson, Duncan, Snyder, Levertov,

Creeley) whose work would otherwise be misinterpreted. According to Furlani, this group, though active during the peak of postmodernism, does not quite fit into this paradigm[7]. Their hesitance to renounce idealization, and Davenport's sense of the sublime peeking through in his writing in the form of organic, unaltered settings and themes of interconnectedness distances them from the ordinary postmodern principles. Davenport himself rejects his contemporary structure of thinking, dismissing this "pedantic, self-conscious, self-congratulatory revolution, with every symptom of having come out of a textbook rather than, as my freshmen say, out of *real life*" (as cited by Furlani[8]). He would much rather revisit modernist values, techniques and themes than perpetuate the "anaesthetizing of sensibility"[9] that is postmodernism.

However, Furlani's understanding of metamodernism is denoting a continuity with modernism while seeking to move beyond it, places him "squarely within the postmodernist paradigm, albeit in the late stages of Postmodernism when modernist values were being revisited"[10] as observed by Alexandra Dumitrescu in her thesis. Despite this statement, Furlani's article seems to be a considerable influence for the development of her metamodern design – both their conceptualizations of the term ultimately come down to the same idea of "contrasts absorbed into harmony"[11]. Their similarity in approach does not stop here, in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, Vermeulen and van den Akker point out that both theoreticians attempt to reconcile modernism and postmodernism in metamodernism as "alternative – solution, even – to what they perceive to be the artistic dead ends and cultural failures of postmodernism"[12].

Post 2010

Moving on to the 2010's when metamodernism starts gaining traction – mainly as a result of the site *Notes on Metamodernism*[13], which provided a platform for the discourse, along with a preliminary framework that diverged in various directions. New interpretations do not necessarily abandon these early, tentative efforts to define a new cultural direction. For example, Vermeulen and van den Akker's explanation of the prefix "meta" aligns with Furlani's, in the sense that they all build upon the Platonic notion of "metaxy", understood as *between*, albeit differently.

While Furlani places metamodernism "between", as in the midst of postmodernism but in continuity with modernism, T. Vermeulen and van den Akker position metamodernism "historically beyond; epistemologically with; and ontologically between the modern and the postmodern. It indicates a dynamic or movement between as well as a movement beyond"[14].

The two scholars imagine these early paradigms as pillars, while the metamodern work is a perpetually moving pendulum swinging between their particularities, which they perceive as extremities: "a modern desire for sense and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all, between a modern sincerity and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy and empathy and apathy and unity and plurality and purity and corruption and naïveté and knowingness; between control and commons and craftsmanship and conceptualism and pragmatism and utopianism"[15]

Whenever the pendulum reaches one of these limits, gravity pulls it towards the opposite pole – it is an "incorporating and redirecting"[16] process. Postmodern irony is

briefly absorbed, before being swiftly replaced by modern sincerity and so forth, creating a constant vacillation, that is "a new synthetic discourse"[17]. Following this pendulum logic, metamodernism is the action of oscillating itself, while a metamodern piece is postmodern and modern once at a time. This is one of the novelties in Vermeulen and van den Akker's work, their Metamodernism does not synthesize these characteristics, it is not their sum, as both Furlani and Dumitrescu argue, it rather "both-neither integrates and-nor excludes"[18].

Another unique aspect would be their insistence on defining metamodernism as a "structure of feeling"[19], rather than a system of thought, a "particular movement, a specific manifesto or a set of theoretical or stylistic conventions"[20]. It is, in William Raymond's terms, as quoted by Vermeulen and van den Akker: "a particular quality of social experience […] historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period"[21]. Essentially, this structure of feeling stands for a sensibility that permeates society, yet impossible to precisely define. Nonetheless, its core lies in artistic expression, the only tool able to capture and clearly articulate the shared experience at a particular time and place.

However, this approach has been heavily criticized as self-satisfactory and not necessarily creative of anything new. In his editorial *Against Metamodernism* Samuel Ludford succinctly spells out the main shortcomings of this theory:

Consensus seeking dialogue can fail in two ways. If it is so intolerant that it does not permit the presence of conflicting perspectives, then it cannot sustain the productive tensions required to drive the formation of a new synthesis. But if it is too permissive, in the sense of admitting multiple perspectives but without actually recognising their conflicts and incompatibilities, then it will also fail to sustain productive tensions[22].

Successful consensus-seeking dialogue depends on two critical elements. Firstly, it must be designed to accommodate and engage with multiple, conflicting perspectives. This entails acknowledging and taking into consideration the diversity of viewpoints that participants bring to the discussion. Secondly, the dialogue must able to identify and address the tensions that arise between the various viewpoints in order to move toward a cohesive resolution.

Ludford believes this oscillation to satisfy the first argument at the expense of the other, ultimately deeming it passive and unconstructive. The pendulum Vermeulen and van den Akker talk about does not offer a medium of communication between the aforementioned poles, it does not initiate discussion as it must discontinue its engagement with any extremity as soon as it hits it. Following the Blakean philosophy of "without contraries is no progression"[23], Ludford reasons that the lack of tensions, of real conflict, leads to nothing substantial being built upon this constant vacillation, which is, in truth, a "state of paralysis"[24]. Neither the modern, nor postmodern moment can actually be surpassed as "oscillating between beliefs is indistinguishable from believing nothing"[25].

Moreover, under the dedicated chapter *Metamodernism in Art: Oscillation vs*

Integration and Interconnections, A. Dumitrescu argues that Vermeulen and van den Akker's version of the concept is hardly original and may well be just another facet of the postmodern consciousness:

> Vacillation, acknowledgement of longings that cannot ever be fulfiled, a reluctance to take a position, the oscillation between possible options, and hesitations between truths and fear of commitment – describe a postmodern sensibility[26].

For A. Dumitrescu, metamodernism is not about oscillation, but rather about balance. She announces her stance with the 2006 article *Foretelling Metamodernity: Reformation of the Self in Jerusalem, Messi@h and Rosarium Philosophorum*, in which she states the principles essential to her branch of metamodernism: ethics, humanness, reconciliation of the opposites and inclusivity. This is essentially what Dumitrescu's metamodernism boils down to and is quite the hopeful and idealistic perspective.

Her version of metamodernism has the pretense of having learned from its precursor's mistakes, retaining all their best qualities:

> [It is] the outcome of a gradual process of departure from, concomitant with re-crystallisations of, some of the values of modernity and postmodernity. Rationality is respected as in modernity, but dethroned from its position as the queen faculty; openness and flexibility are valued as in Postmodernism, but not to the extreme that "everything goes" from the perspective of detachment and irony.[27]

It presents itself as a solution to the "failure of postmodernism"[28] balancing Apollonian and Dyonisian energy and eager to replace the individualistic and cynical "postmodern city"[29]. A byproduct of globalization, Alexandra Dumitrescu's metamodernism is a utopia, a perfectly righteous, harmonious world in which the fragmented self can finally be unified. It brings a new taste for sensibility, beauty, innocence and simplicity with emphasis on the ethical. This "global village"[30] is governed by fellowship and interconnectedness, placing value on each of its members, acknowledging the previously overlooked, alienated other. These are all recurrent themes throughout her work, best summarized in her *A Manifesto of Metamodernism*[31] chapter, which is virtually a manifesto of the sublime.

Nevertheless, her theory is not without its critics. With reference to her island metaphor employed in her 2007 article *Interconnections in Blakean and Metamodern Space*[32] which states that between the islands of modernism and postmodernism there exists a link generative of meaning, Vermeulen and van den Akker argue in Misunderstandings and Clarifications[33] that her variant of metamodernism is nothing but postmodernism:

> If Dumitrescu's argument is that contemporary culture's attitude towards irreconcilable opposites is to interconnect them in the way a network is connected, is a captain on a ship sailing between the various islands of the archipelago, our response is that this is a spot-on description of the postmodern Lyotard proposed in *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*.[34]

Following their line of thinking, the integration aspect – fundamental in Dumitrescu's theory – is firstly but a characteristic of postmodernism, and secondly not the current prevalent sensibility. This is a valid point in their critique as Dumitrescu's argumentation is based on an assortment of novels spanning an extensive period of time.

Yet another contribution to theorizing the disparate notion of metamodernism is provided by David James and Urmila Seshagiri in their *Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution* article. The academici introduce the notions of continuity and revolution with reference to the resurgence of modernism. They advocate that modernism is now to be understood as a cross-cultural "aesthetic venture"[35] - without denying its conventional genesis - and its vast influence on the contemporary novel, which revisits its style, thought patterns and techniques. Another argument strongly upheld in this article is that this revival discerns itself from the revisiting modernism stage in postmodernism "through self-conscious, consistent visions of dissent and defamiliarization as novelistic inventions specific to the early twentieth century"[36].

Applicability on the Romanian Cultural Environment

Timotheus Vermeulen and van den Akker begin the first chapter of their 2017 book by defining the concept in terms of "a structure of feeling that emerged in the 2000s and has become the dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies"[37] and continue to analyze it in relation to occidental, fundamentally capitalistic societies.

Theorized by the West for the West – albeit due to familiarity, as the two theoreticians explain themselves –metamodernism is not an established, well-assimilated theory. Its theoreticians find themselves conflicted, continuously looking for loopholes in each other's interpretations and labeling them as just other aspects of an earlier paradigm. It's unclear whether this is a new concept in its own right or artificially introduced. Metamodernism's situation is already ambiguous, and it being inseverable from the capitalist element - Jennifer Ashton in her essay *Poetry and the Price of Milk (2016)* goes as far as calling metamodernism "capitalism's fantasy of the market"[38], - hinders its functionality in post-communist cultural environments. In his article *Postdouămiismul*, Ovio Olaru points out the recentness of the theory and the impossible task that is applying foreign concepts to the Romanian climate expecting it to reflect the current realities and developmental processes[39].

Following the same line of thought, Emilian Lupașcu in *Metamodernismul în teorie și în practică: pentru o conceptualizare a modernității singulare în câmpul literar românesc* opposes the concept's suitability to the Romanian cultural sphere, building his argumentation on the *uneven* spread of capitalism between Western Europe/ America and the periphery. This would also be responsible for the lack of synchronicity and incomplete assimilation of Postmodernism, reflected by the existence of contradicting elements (technological advancements overlaying communism-reminiscent backgrounds) and the understanding of "post-communist Romanian literature in terms of unfinished, combined, and unevenly developed modernity"[40]. This

is quite the strong line of reasoning illustrating the futility of applying such an unstable and immature concept, such as Metamodernism to the complex and volatile environment that is the Romanian cultural sphere.

Nonetheless, there are voices eager to accept this approach, notably Alex Ciorogar, who, despite recognizing its shortcomings, characterizes the Romanian metamodern poetry as a sort "self-critical hypocrisy", an "*oscillation* between the generation 2000's biographism and postmodern literary techniques productive of *neomodernist* effects"[41]. He even goes as far as comprising a list of Romanian metamodernist writers in his article *Poetica metamodernismului și sfârșitul postmodernității* (III)[42]. Sharing his enthusiasm, Bogdan Vișan[43] is convinced of the emergence of a metamodern sensibility in the post 2000's due to a posthuman branch in literature generated by the infusion of media culture into Romanian poetry and the focus shift from the local to the global context.

While the Romanian critics may have decided on which version of metamodernism to approach, that is, Vermeulen and van den Akker's notion of oscillation, there is no certainty regarding its relevance in this particular environment. Both A. Ciorogar in Poetica metamodernismului și sfârșitul postmodernității (III)" and Bogdan Vișan in *Este postumanismul un metamodernism? Convergențe și divergențe în poezia română contemporană* exemplify their chosen trajectory utilizing – more or less – the same array of authors, which is not necessarily extensive enough to encompass the "structure of feeling"[44,] the general sentiment of the era as was intended by Vermeulen and van den Akker with this concept.

Conclusions

Metamodernism is still a relatively new notion, since its pre-2010 conceptualizations did not necessarily result in any major research. In fact, it was Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's webzine "Notes on Metamodernism" that provided a platform and prompted discussion on the topic. It acted as a catalyst for a substantial number of subsequent studies – reason for its popularity. However, it is prone to collapsing in on itself, as it is not completely functional – the implied continuous and radical shifts between beliefs may culminate with their absence and a lack of progress.

Regarding the Romanian cultural sphere, presenting quite the unique blend of archaic and contemporary elements – for more than a decade, in all possible fields, be it film, literature, music, or art, there has been an obsession with placing present-day narratives against either a communist or rural backdrop – is difficult to be satisfactorily understood through the lenses of a theory developed in a Western, capitalist environment.

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