Kacper Marchlewski
Nicolaus Copernicus University

CONCEPTUALIZING THE POST-POSTMODERN WORLD: A REVIEW OF *METAMODERNISM: HISTORICITY, AFFECT AND DEPTH AFTER POSTMODERNISM* BY ROBIN VAN DEN AKKER, ALISON GIBBONS AND TIMOTHEUS VERMEULEN (EDS.)

In 2010, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker entered the academic debate regarding the question of what replaced postmodernism in the contemporary world by publishing the essay "Notes on Metamodernism." Therein, they proposed their own label for what is broadly referred to as post-postmodernism. The authors argued that metamodernism, described as an emerging structure of feeling (a term borrowed from Raymond Williams's 1954 *Preface to Film*), is "situated epistemologically *with* (post) modernism, ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, italics original).

Published seven years later, the 2017 *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen marks a more developed attempt to construct "a language, or at least a series of linked dialects, to come to an understanding of

our current historical moment" (van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017: 3). The text comprises three main sections: historicity, affect, and depth—each corresponding to a defining area of difference between metamodernism and its predecessor, as well as mirroring Fredric Jameson's discussion of postmodernism in his seminal essay "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984). The area of interest tackled by the particular chapters contributed by different authors varies from film criticism and literature to politics, crafts, or photography. Their common point is the recognition of the constitutive paradigm of metamodernism: the movement of oscillation between "post-modern and pre-postmodern (and often modern) predilections: between irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity, between eclecticism and purity, between deconstruction and construction" (van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017: 11). This description serves as a point of departure for descriptive studies included in the volume.

In "Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism" van den Akker and Vermeulen build on the ideas introduced in their 2010 essay. Crucially, they elaborate on the full implications of the employment of the prefix *meta* in their proposed heuristic label, which, taken from Greek, means *with*, *between*, and *after* (2017: 8). They argue that metamodernism is thus characterized by the upcycling of past culture, in which intertextuality becomes capable of "adding value" through "mov[ing] beyond the worn-out sensibilities" it quotes (2017: 10). Moreover, they establish that the dialectical oscillation of the new structure of feeling functions in a "both-neither dynamic": it should be thought of as a pendulum that reaches both the postmodern and pre-postmodern, yet remains with neither (2017: 10–11). The authors then provide a periodization hypothesis for metamodernism, locating its development in the 2000s and mentioning events such as the Iraq War, the fourth technological "quantum leap" which made personal computers widely accessible, and the financial crisis of 2007–2008 (2017: 12–17). The chapter concisely lays the theoretical ground for the more detailed analyses that follow.

In the introduction to the first section of the book, van den Akker declares that metamodernism brings a renewed "regime of historicity," notably absent during postmodernism (2017: 21). He finds its symptoms in "a contemporary culture that harks back to its past futures to make the present into the future's past" (2017: 23). Such a regime is "multi-tensed": it reconciles "past possibilities and possible futures" (2017: 22). James MacDowell, in the first chapter of the section, "The Metamodern, the Quirky and Film Criticism," outlines three metamodern aesthetic sensibilities: the quirky, "a tone that balances ironic detachment from, and sincere engagement with, films' fictional worlds and their characters"; (29) neo-romanticism, the reemployment of "Romantic impossibility" and grandeur (37); and queer utopianism, an affirmation of queer society's "transcendental" power to achieve social unity (38–39). He discusses them with reference to three films, *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), *Glory at Sea* (2009), and *Shortbus* (2006), thus reaffirming the relevance of his theoretical categories for contemporary cinema.

The reemergence of historicity is more directly tackled by Josh Toth in "Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the Rise of Historioplastic Metafiction," where he traces the shift to the view of history as potentially plastic. Morrison's novel is taken as an example of the metamodern readjustment from historiographic metafiction, which "emphasizes the inescapability of the graphic construct," to historioplastic metafiction, which "shifts our attention to the infinite yet bound pliability of the past" (43). At the center of this new genre stands the paradox between the recognition of history as unsteady and the simultaneous rejection of the resulting relativism (53).

Jörg Heiser's "Super-Hybridity: Non-Simultaneity, Myth-Making and Multipolar Conflict" explores the impact of technologically accelerated intertextuality on culture. The notion of super-hybridity refers to "a method of responding, or exploiting" these rapidly "converging sources and influences" (67). Heiser manages to find its examples in a variety of contemporary phenomena, for instance, in the Islamic State's inclination towards the use of

technology, which results in an intersection of the modern globalized world with the violently orthodox world of the organization. The author concludes that this case also illustrates the widespread non-simultaneity through the interaction of two historically distant sentiments—"myth-making" based on tradition and participation in the technologically literate culture (61–62).

In the final chapter of the section, "The Cosmic Artisan: Mannerist Virtuosity and Contemporary Crafts," Sjoerd van Tuinen discusses what he calls the "artisanal turn," denoting a renewed interest in handicraft. He describes the metamodern "'a-synchronous' present," where coexists a "heterogeneity of (material, technical, social, political, digital, etc.) practices which, in their hybrid togetherness, express and construct the contemporary" (69). The author then points out that art, craft, and design are now reunited through "resingularization," which replaced standardization as technological advancements remodeled the relationship between the processes of creation and production (82).

Alison Gibbons introduces the second section of the volume with the assertion that the metamodern structure of feeling witnesses the return of affect, and phenomenological hermeneutics resurface as accessible (86). In "Four Faces of Postirony" Lee Konstantinou endeavors to set forth the main artistic modes that emerged out of the move past the postmodern irony: "motivated postmodernism, credulous metafiction, the postironic Bildungsroman and relational art" (89). Interestingly, he explicitly rejects the association of postirony with New Sincerity: the latter assumes that it is authenticity that remains after the waning of irony as its Manichean opposite, whereas the former seeks to avoid the irony's eroding power but still carry its critical capability (88–89).

"Radical Defenselessness: A New Sense of Self in the Work of David Foster Wallace" by Nicholine Timmer convincingly situates Wallace's fiction within the cultural logic of metamodernism. In her analysis, she uncovers the oscillation between "psychologistic" and "poststructural" registers in the work of the

author (115). Timmer draws from Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of ethical experiences—namely, those ones which cannot be accurately expressed through language—to find the glimpses of affective sensibility of "radical defencelessness," or "the radical exposure to the other" in the texts (113).

In "Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect" Alison Gibbons deconstructs the prevailing view of autofiction as a typically postmodern genre by establishing affect present therein as "situational" rather than fragmented: present insofar as the subject is located in reference to the surrounding world and people (120). The last contribution to the section concerns a phenomenon that is, arguably, one of the most tangibly present in the metamodern structure of feeling. "The Joke That Wasn't Funny Anymore: Reflections on the Metamodern Sitcom," by Gry C. Rustad and Kai Hanno Schwind is a comprehensive exploration of the tonal shift in the humor of sitcoms from the postmodern "laughing at" the subject, fueled by irony and detachment, to the perceptively warmer dynamic of "laughing with" (132). The discussed change may perhaps be expanded to a broader change invited by the affective turn—the global change of the relation between the reader and the characters in the text to a personal engagement experienced *with* them, hinted earlier by Gibbons (130).

The final section of the book is devoted to the metamodern depth model. Consistently with the methodology employed by van den Akker and Gibbons in their introductions to the previous parts of the volume, Vermeulen establishes the notion of "depthiness" by way of contrast with Jameson's postmodern counterpart—depthlessness. Vermeulen argues that nowadays "artists, activists and writers feel that appearances may well inspire sensations of an outside, of an elsewhere—even if the existence of that elsewhere is by no means certain, or often even unlikely or impossible" (2017: 149). Accordingly, Irmtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk provide a polemic with post-structural thought in their chapter "Reconstructing Depth: Authentic Fiction and Responsibility." The authors develop the method of reconstruction (in

conscious opposition to Derridean deconstruction) as both internally present in a text and available as a way of reading it that moves past the artistic surface (153). Curiously, they contend that the reconstructive search for "authentic depth" is not merely encouraged but stands as the reader's responsibility (156). This chapter seems to be particularly important for establishing the methodology of uncovering metamodern sensibility in cultural products.

The contribution by Sam Browse, "Between Truth, Sincerity and Satire: Post-Truth Politics and the Rhetoric of Authenticity," analyzes the influence of metamodern depthiness on politics. He focuses on the contrast between Tony Blair's "mimetic authenticity" and Jeremy Corbyn's "curated authenticity" (178). As he argues, the former politician markedly tried to appeal to metamodern sensitivity by explicitly showing the space of backstage politics as normal and common, whereas the latter marginalized his private life and focused on public issues, thus making "a tacit claim to [his] authenticity" (181). Blair and Corbyn, therefore, are said to exemplify the contrast between depthless surface and appeal to depth, respectively. However, the author's implication that a mere shift of focus in public appearances can exemplify the metamodern depth is itself not unproblematic because it appears to take for granted that the latter politician's reference to collective problems is essentially sincere.

"Notes on Performatist Photography: Experiencing Beauty and Transcendence after Postmodernism" by Raoul Eshelman is the last chapter of the section. Notably, in 2008 Eshelman published a work titled *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism*, which takes on the very same task of conceptualizing post-postmodernism as the presently discussed volume. Nevertheless, the two approaches are reconcilable, as the ultimate goal of performatist theory is to describe modern cultural texts "in terms of specific techniques and the implicit norms regulating their usage," thus remaining smaller in scope than metamodernism (199). Accordingly, Eshelman discusses the crucial method used in contemporary photography—double framing, whereby common items

or settings are given depth through the recognition of "some higher form of order" present within them (185). The author notices that this purposeful act of seeking unity is directly subversive in relation to the postmodern focus on disorder. He considers the fact that irony becomes "tiring" as an aesthetic sensibility to be the root cause of the emergence of this new perceptual mode (198).

Finally, in the epilogue entitled "Thoughts on Writing about Art after Postmodernism," James Elkins observes the paradox inherent in academic texts tackling cultural production. He points out that such writing continues to employ a post-structuralist approach to deconstruct the scientific discipline it concerns but, simultaneously, remains complacent about the rigorous "formal boundaries" imposed by the academy on the critique itself. Ultimately, Elkins encourages scholars to face the consequences of the fact that it is "impossible to continue to write nonfiction" and to turn from creating purely theoretical texts in favor of experimental forms (206, 210).

On the whole, *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism* stands as a comprehensive investigation of the contemporary structure of feeling. Without a doubt, it is an important work for anyone seeking the answer to the question of what comes after postmodernism. The clear division into sections analogous to Jameson's effort to describe the cultural logic of late capitalism makes the book not only easier to grasp but also more useful as an analytical tool. While not all chapters seem to be fully focusing on the topic suggested by their placement in a particular part of the book, the editors themselves acknowledge that some contributions have relevance for more than one metamodern paradigm (van den Akker & Vermeulen 2017: 18). Moreover, the fact that the volume enters into an open dialogue with other attempts to label post-postmodernism also makes it a valuable contribution to the academic debate on that topic. Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen extensively try to avoid the unproductive, albeit tempting act of rigid classification of the present cultural condition holistically

under one hermetic term. The conceptualization of metamodernism as a structure of feeling is inclusive enough to allow the contributors to find diverse yet cohesive meanings instead of searching for a dogmatic set of features of the contemporary culture.

References

Eshelman, R. 2008. *Performatism, Or the End of Postmodernism*. Aurora: The Davies Group, Publishers.

Jameson, F. 1984. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146, 59–92.

Van den Akker, R., A. Gibbons & T. Vermeulen (eds.) 2017. *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism.* London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Vermeulen, T., & R. van den Akker. 2010. "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2: 1.