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Indeed, this artificially ordered confusion, this charming symmetry of contradictions, this wonderful eternal oscillation [*Wechsel*] between enthusiasm and irony, which lives even in the smallest parts of the whole, seem to me to be an indirect mythology.

Friedrich Schlegel, *Seine prosaischen Jugendschriften*
[His prosaic juvenilia] 1882.

Notes on “Notes on Metamodernism”

The most popular and widely known theory of post-postmodernism today is undoubtedly metamodernism, as originally set forth in a manifesto entitled “Notes on Metamodernism” by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in 2010. The manifesto spawned a website, a book, and countless articles applying it, and the term “metamodernism” has become the closest thing we have to an overarching term to replace the clunky “post-postmodernism.”

As a theory, metamodernism is decidedly modest and doesn’t make any great claims to rigor. As the two authors originally noted,

our description and interpretation of the metamodern sensibility is [...] essayistic rather than scientific, rhizomatic rather than linear, and open-ended instead of closed. It should be read as an invitation for debate rather than an extending of a dogma. (“Notes on Metamodernism,” 2, henceforth NoM)

In spite of this and similar disclaimers, metamodernism has become so widely used that I think it makes sense to open up the debate called for in the original manifesto and ask more stringent questions regarding the way the metamodernists found their theory.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) its popularity, metamodernism hasn’t been exposed to much critical discussion. One reason is that mainstream academia, which is still dominated by poststructuralist (i.e., postmodern) methodology, isn’t much interested in exploring theories of post-postmodernism. The main reason, though, is that in heuristic terms, metamodernism works wonderfully. Anyone analyzing one of the countless works of art, literature or film that diverge markedly from postmodern irony will quickly find that they “oscillate between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony” (NoM, 5-6) and display some form of metaxy (a tension between the finite and infinite), just as the metamodernist manifesto predicts (NoM, 6). While these criteria seem intuitively appropriate as a way of understanding the new situation, it is still reasonable to ask what the larger metamodernist concept of history is based on. In particular, it is interesting to look more closely at the term “oscillation” [*Wechsel* in the German original] which in Schlegel’s usage is not a philosophical or scientific concept—it simply means a change or a switching back and forth.

If you take a closer look at the conceptual sources of this and similar statements, you'll find that Vermeulen and van den Akker based them on a book called *Romantic Desire in (Post)modern Art and Philosophy* (1999) by the Dutch scholar Jos de Mul, who was also their colleague at the time (NoM, 13). De Mul, in turn, leans heavily on a quote by the German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel that "defines the Romantic as a life-feeling that oscillates between enthusiasm and irony" (De Mul, 64). De Mul also uses "modernism" in a different way than it is understood in the Anglo-Saxon world. In his usage, modernism corresponds to the German *Neuzeit* or *Moderne* (a period "that begins in the 17th century and for which the work of Descartes and Bacon provides the starting point" [De Mul, 16]). In English we would probably say "modernity," a term that he also uses. A further look at de Mul's approach reveals that he sees postmodernism as a kind of reflective contortion (*Verwindung*) aimed at recovering from modernism in the broad sense (De Mul, 249) and not as a successor to the narrower, epochal notion of modernism (which he calls the "historical avant-garde"). The main thrust of de Mul's book is to show that the "oscillation between enthusiasm and irony" as well as the oscillation between immanence and transcendence are operative in both modernism (in both its broad and narrow senses) and in what de Mul calls "(post)modernism"—a development that is different from, but not diametrically opposed to, modernism [de Mul, 14ff.].

The weird—and conceptually dubious—thing about de Mul's book is that it does not recognize any cultural force, trend or concept outside of "romantic desire." In order to do so de Mul has to ignore whole swaths of cultural history, including 18th-century Classicism, 19th-century Realism, the various anti-Romantic movements in France, and those aspects of modernism (in both the broad and narrow senses) that stress neoclassical rigor, mastery of form, or realism at the expense of the unbounded oscillation between "romantic enthusiasm" and irony. De Mul, in other words, is like a soccer team that takes to the pitch without an opponent and gets to shoot goals right and left to its heart's content. "Romanticism" wins all the time.

Metamodernism works the same way.

It is evident that Vermeulen and van den Akker have taken de Mul's and Schlegel's catchphrase and projected it onto two entire stages of cultural development. Modernism (presumably in the narrow sense) is "enthusiastic," [...] "encompassing everything from utopism to the unconditional belief in Reason," whereas postmodernism is "ironic," [...] "encompassing nihilism, sarcasm, and the distrust and deconstruction of grand narratives, the singular and the truth" (NoM, 4). Metamodernism is said to oscillate between the two, producing something new while reproducing what appears to be an ordinary, eternally valid model of cultural development. Given these conditions, the "emergent neoromantic sensibility" of metamodernism isn't all that surprising, since it emerges from two equally neoromantic epochs—modernism and postmodernism.

At this point it also becomes clear that the metamodernists are just as indifferent to the particulars of cultural history as de Mul is. If all culture starting from the 17th century has been based on a recurring romantic "oscillation between enthusiasm and irony," then the metamodern "oscillation between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony" is just a

continuation of something that has been going on in different iterations for the last 400 years. This is also why metamodernism is so easy to use: if you ignore the fact that “the romantic oscillation between enthusiasm and irony” has a 400-year long dialectical history of cultural opposition to it, you won’t have any trouble constructing a history in which one form of romantic oscillation simply supplants another—you can shoot goals to your heart’s content. This is also the crucial difference between performatism and metamodernism (which otherwise agree on the important role of transcendence in the new epoch or episteme). Performatism suggests that the very unromantic imposition of formal order on viewers or readers through devices like double framing is central to the new cultural dominant, whereas metamodernism can’t even conceptualize a history that isn’t romantic to begin with. The performatist notion of history is dialectical, the metamodernist version isn’t. The metamodernists’ later claim that their “structure of feeling” is dialectical and that it “identifies with and negates [...] conflicting positions while never being congruent with these positions” (Van den Akker, Vermeulen and Gibbons, *Metamodernism, History, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, 2017, 10) is of course only true within the romantically oscillating concept of cultural history described above. In the final analysis, the metamodern notion of history is based on the total denial of the dialectical opposition between classical rigor and freewheeling romantic enthusiasm that has traditionally been thought to drive Western cultural history forward.

The metamodern theory of history seems to suggest that stages in historical development consist of a complex set of attitudes and feelings (“enthusiasm,” “nihilism,” “sarcasm,” “irony” etc.) that work according to the romantic notion of oscillation or *Wechsel* advanced by Schlegel. In this model there is no dialectical tension between “irony” and “enthusiasm” that would produce a synthetic third (the two terms apparently just keep swinging back and forth endlessly in different configurations to produce something different, but never so different as to break up the original model), and there is no dialectical competition between romanticism and its cultural nemesis, non-romanticism. The metamodernists are however not content to let this neoromantic model stand alone, and attempt to ground it in the material world of social reality oriented towards Raymond Williams’s “structure of feeling.”

Like all materialist approaches to culture, this approach has trouble demonstrating any form of direct causation between social or economic processes and literary development. While it is intuitively easy to accept the notion that the massive economic, social and ecological changes noted by the metamodernists in the introduction to their book find some sort of expression in literature and the arts, it is much more difficult to find a painting or novel that directly treats, say, “the fourth wave of terrorism hit[ting] Western shores” or “the decline of US hegemony” (van den Akker et al., 2017, 12). Assuming that these and similar massive global developments trickle down into works of culture, these would tend to do so indirectly, as a kind of precipitate or “structure of feeling.” And since this heterogeneous “structure of feeling” which mediates between social reality and artistic representation has to be made explicit in some way, the ball quickly gets kicked back to the romantic model of oscillation, which as we have seen is a kind of “indirect mythology”—a closed theory of cultural development that endlessly recycles two basic principles.

The problems with metamodernism's concepts of history noted above are *academic* in a very literal sense. The criticism voiced here won't faze the majority of metamodernism's followers, who will no doubt continue to apply the theory in a stimulating, if not very stringent way—in effect, shooting balls at a goal without a goalie. However, anyone who is interested in going beyond the catchphrase about “oscillation” and trying to deepen or extend metamodernism productively will run into major problems because of the theory's intrinsic circularity and “depthiness”—its grounding in a 19th century romantic aphorism that has no particular philosophical justification. There are, however, several ways to break open this circularity, some of which are already in use.

The first is a return to the kind of dialectical or agonistic periodization used in neoformalist or structuralist historiography. This has already been done by the metamodernist Linda Ceriello, who speaks of clearly marked, successive epochs (modernism, postmodernism, metamodernism) and drops the whole notion of historical “oscillation” (see Linda Ceriello, “The Big Bad and the Big ‘Aha.’ Metamodern Monsters as Transformational Figures of Instability.” In Michael E. Heyes (ed.), *Holy Monsters, Sacred Grotesques*. Lanham 2018, pp. 207-233). Formalist and structuralist historiographers (Jurij Tynjanov and Felix Vodička respectively) long ago developed functional models of historical development that make it possible to analyze history dialectically without being obligated to a zombie-like Hegelian *Zeitgeist* guiding culture to some higher philosophical goal. The theory of performatism, of course, follows this functional approach to cultural history—performatism is neither the total negation nor fluid extension of postmodernism, but a functional reworking and redirecting of its main devices to create feelings of unity, transcendence, reconciliation etc. that were heretofore unknown.

The second way to deepen metamodernism would be to pay more attention to problems of method and form—a decidedly “unromantic” focus that would allow it to work together with concepts like double framing or theories like object-oriented ontology. The disinterest in problems of form has, for example, resulted in a complete misinterpretation of the performatist concept of double framing. The idea expressed in the metamodernist manifesto [p. 6] that double framing is based on “willful self-deceit” is wrong as a matter of principle because the actual focus should be on the work's form and not on the sensibility of the viewer/reader. In performatism, the unified force exerted by the form of a work causes a viewer or reader to involuntarily shut out his or her own rationality, and not someone thinking to themselves, “heck, I liked that work so much that I'll fool myself and interpret it differently from the way I originally wanted to.”

Finally, it might be a good idea for metamodernists to take a closer look at anti-romantic thinkers like Bakhtin and René Girard, whose critiques of romantic insularity (Bakhtin) and romantic desire (Girard) could help provide some critical pushback to their probably unconscious totalization of the romantic idiom.