COACTION

Notes on metamodernism

Timotheus Vermeulen[1]* and Robin van den Akker[2]

[1]*Department of Cultural Studies, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, Nijmegen, the Netherlands;* [2]*Department of Philosophy, Erasmus Universiteit, Rotterdam, the Netherlands*

Abstract

The postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over. In fact, if we are to believe the many academics, critics, and pundits whose books and essays describe the decline and demise of the postmodern, they have been over for quite a while now. But if these commentators agree the postmodern condition has been abandoned, they appear less in accord as to what to make of the state it has been abandoned for. In this essay, we will outline the contours of this discourse by looking at recent developments in architecture, art, and film. We will call this discourse, oscillating between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, metamodernism. We argue that the metamodern is most clearly, yet not exclusively, expressed by the neoromantic turn of late associated with the architecture of Herzog & de Meuron, the installations of Bas Jan Ader, the collages of David Thorpe, the paintings of Kaye Donachie, and the films of Michel Gondry.

Timotheus Vermeulen is a teaching fellow in Cultural Studies and Theory at the Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He is also currently in the process of completing his AHRC-funded PhD in Film and Television at the University of Reading, UK. He has published on inter- and transmediality, spatiality, contemporary aesthetics, cinema and television, and the work of Jacques Rancière.

Robin van den Akker is a Doctoral candidate in the Department of Philosophy at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and a researcher at TNO Information- and Communication Technologies. He is writing a dissertation on the remediation of urban space by mobile media practices. He has published on everyday life and urban space, digital culture and contemporary design, and the work of Henri Lefebvre.

Timotheus and Robin are also currently working on an international research project documenting trends and tendencies in current affairs and contemporary aesthetics that can no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern but should be conceived of as metamodern. As part of this project they also co-edit a blog called "Notes on metamodernism" (http://mtmdrn.blogspot.com).

*Correspondence to: Timotheus Vermeulen, Department of Cultural Studies, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Email: t.vermeulen@let.ru.nl

> The choice in this election is not between regions or religions or genders. It's not about rich vs. poor, young vs. old. And it is not about black vs. white. This election is about the past vs. the future. It's about whether we settle for the same divisions and distractions and drama that passes for politics today or whether we reach for a politics of common sense and innovation, a politics of shared sacrifice and shared prosperity. ... Yes, we can. Yes, we can change. Yes, we can. (Barack Obama, "Yes, we can change", speech addressed at Democratic Assembly, 28 January 2008)

> I'm noticing a new approach to artmaking in recent museum and gallery shows. ... It's an attitude that says, *I know that the art I'm creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn't mean this isn't serious.* At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind. (Jerry Saltz, "Sincerity and Irony Hug it Out", *New Yorker Magazine*, 27 May 2010)

The ecosystem is severely disrupted, the financial system is increasingly uncontrollable, and the geopolitical structure has recently begun to appear as unstable as it has always been uneven.[1] CEOs and politicians express their "desire for change" at every interview and voice a heartfelt "yes we can" at each photo-op. Planners and architects increasingly replace their blueprints for environments with environmental "greenprints". And new generations of artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favor of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth, and metaxis. These trends and tendencies can no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern. They express a (often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, intimating another discourse. History, it seems, is moving rapidly beyond its all too hastily proclaimed end.

In this essay, we will outline the contours of this emerging structure of feeling. We will first discuss the debate about the alleged demise of "the" postmodern and the apparent rise of another modernism. We will argue that this modernism is characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment. We will call this structure of feeling *metamodernism.*[2] According to the Greek–English Lexicon the prefix "meta" refers to such notions as "with", "between", and "beyond". We will use these connotations of "meta" in a similar, yet not indiscriminate fashion. For we contend that metamodernism should be situated epistemologically *with* (post) modernism, ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism. And finally, we will take a closer look at some tendencies that exemplify the current dominant sensibility, in particular the Romantic turn in contemporary aesthetics.

Some remarks, finally, on our approach. As the essay's title "Notes on metamodernism" suggests, we intend what follows as a series of linked observations rather than a single line of thought. We seek to relate to one another a broad variety of trends and tendencies across current affairs and contemporary aesthetics that are otherwise incomprehensible (at least by the postmodern vernacular), by understanding them in terms of an emergent sensibility we come to call metamodern. We do not seek to impose a predetermined system of thought on a rather particular range of cultural practices. Our description and interpretation of the metamodern sensibility is therefore *essay*istic rather than *scient*ific, 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.

HISTORY BEYOND "THE END OF HISTORY", ART BEYOND "THE END OF ART"...

The postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over. In fact, if we are to believe the many academics, critics, and pundits whose books and essays describe the decline and demise of the postmodern, they have been over for quite a while now. Some argue the postmodern has been put to an abrupt end by material events like climate change, financial crises, terror attacks, and digital revolutions. Others find that it has come to a more gradual halt by merit of less tangible developments, such as the appropriation of critique by the market and the integration of *différance* into mass culture. And yet others point to diverging models

of identity politics, ranging from global postcolonialism to queer theory.[3] As Linda Hutcheon puts it, in the epilogue to the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernity*: "Let's just say it: it's over".[4]

But if these commentators agree the postmodern condition has been abandoned, they appear less in accord as to what to make of the state it has been abandoned for. Hutcheon therefore concludes her epilogue with a pressing question—a question to which she herself does not yet know the answer:

> The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on—as do those of modernism—in our contemporary twenty-first-century world. Literary historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are, after all, only heuristic labels that we create in our attempts to chart cultural changes and continuities. Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it—and name it for the twenty-first century.[5]

Some theorists and critics have attempted to answer Hutcheon's question. Gilles Lipovetsky, of course, has claimed the postmodern has given way to the hypermodern. According to Lipovetsky, today's cultural practices and social relations have become so intrinsically meaningless (i.e. pertaining to past or future, there or elsewhere, or whatever frame of reference) that they evoke hedonistic ecstasy as much as existential anguish.[6] The philosopher Alan Kirby has proposed that the current paradigm is that of digimodernism and/or pseudomodernism. The cultural theorist Robert Samuels has further suggested that our epoch is the epoch of automodernism. And a number of critics have simply adopted the syntactically correct but semantically meaningless term post-postmodernism. Most of these conceptions of the contemporary discourse are structured around technological advances. Kirby's digimodernism, for instance, "owes its emergence and pre-eminence to the computerization of text, which yields a new form of textuality characterized in its purest instances by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple-authorship".[7] And Samuels's automodernism presupposes a correlation between "technological automation and human autonomy".[8] But many of these conceptions—and Lipovetsky, Kirby, and Samuels's, however useful they are for understanding recent developments, are exemplary here—appear to radicalize the postmodern rather than restructure it. They pick out and unpick what are effectively excesses of late capitalism, liberal democracy, and information and communication technologies rather than deviations from the postmodern condition: cultural and (inter) textual hybridity, "coincidentality", consumer (enabled) identities, hedonism, and generally speaking a focus on spatiality rather than temporality.[9]

Nicholas Bourriaud's suggestion, altermodernism, is probably the most well-known conception of the latest discourse. However, it also appears to be the least understood. In response to the exhibition of the same name Bourriaud curated at Tate Britain in 2009, Andrew Searle reported in *The Guardian* that "Postmodernism is dead ... but something altogether weirder has taken its place".[10] Similarly, the art critic for *The Times*, Rachel Campbell-Johnston, testified that "Postmodernism is so last year but [that] its replacement ... is all over the shop".[11] Bourriaud's accompanying essay invites a similar reaction: the precise meaning of altermodernism is as slippery and evasive as the structure of the argument is unclear. As we understand it, Bourriaud ultimately defines altermodernism as a "synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism".[12] According to Bourriaud, this synthesis is expressed, respectively, in heterochronicity and "archipelagraphy", in "globalized perception" as well as in nomadism, and in an incorporation and/or affirmation of otherness as much as in the exploration of elsewheres.

Many of Bourriaud's observations appear to be spot-on. The developed world has extended—and is still in the process of expanding—far beyond the traditional borders of the so-called West. Bourriaud argues that this development has led to a heterochrony of globalized societies with various degrees of modernity and a worldwide archipelago without a center; to globally intersecting temporalities and historically interrelated geographies. Consequently, he justly asserts, our current modernity can no longer be characterized by either the modern discourse of the universal gaze of the white, western male or its postmodern deconstruction along the heterogeneous lines of

race, gender, class, and locality. He suggests that, instead, it is exemplified by globalized perception, cultural nomadism, and creolization. The alter-modernist (artist) is a *homo viator*, liberated from (an obsession with) his/her origins, free to travel and explore, perceiving anew the global landscape and the "terra incognita" of history.

Bourriaud's conception of altermodernism is at once evocative and evasive; it is as precise in its observations as it is vague in its argumentation. However provocative his writing may be therefore, it is also problematic. For instance, his notion of a "globalized perspective" is somewhat difficult, for it implies a multiplicity and scope of (simulacral) vision neither phenomenologically nor physically possible (it appears to us to be more appropriate to speak of a "glocalized perception", in which both the *a priori* of situation and situatedness are acknowledged). Similarly, his intriguing account of a progressive creolism is opposed to the retro-spective multiculturalism of the artworks he illus-trates it with. And his description of the restless traveler and the Internet junky as embodiments of altermodern art also seem rather anachronistic. For that matter, Saatchi's (long the personification of the postmodern, late capitalist art made flesh) recent shift away from the Young British Artists toward contemporary artists from the Middle- and Far East is far more telling—precisely because it implies an interest in a variety of "glocalized perceptions."

The main problem with Bourriaud's thesis how-ever, is that it confuses epistemology and ontology. Bourriaud perceives that the form and function of the arts have changed, but he cannot understand how and why they have changed. In order to close this critical gap, he simply assumes (one could call this the "tautological solution") that experience and explanation are one and the same. For Bourriaud, heterochronicity, archipelagraphy, and nomadism are not merely expressions of a structure of feeling; they become the structures of feeling themselves. And, indeed, it is because he mistakes a multiplicity of forms for a plurality of structures, that his conception of altermodernism—as expressed in the irregularity of the exhibition and the inconsistency of his writing—"is all over the shop", never becomes wholly comprehensible let alone convincing.

Bourriaud perceives, say, seven types of fire-works, in seven kinds of disguises: one is red, one

yellow, one blue, one is circular, one angular, and so on. But he cannot see that they are all produced by the same tension: an oscillation between metals, sulfurs, and potassium nitrates. We will call this tension, oscillating between—and be-yond—the electropositive nitrates of the modern and the electronegative metals of the postmodern, metamodern.

FROM THE POSTMODERN TO THE METAMODERN

What do we mean when we say that "the" postmodern has been abandoned for the meta-modern? It has become somewhat of a common-place to begin a discussion of the postmodern by stressing that there is no one such thing as "the" postmodern. After all, "the" postmodern is merely the "catchphrase" for a multiplicity of contra-dictory tendencies, the "buzzword" for a plurality of incoherent sensibilities. Indeed, the initial heralds of postmodernity, broadly considered to be Charles Jencks, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, and Ihab Hassan, each analyzed a different cultural phenomenon—respectively, a transformation in our material landscape; a distrust and the consequent desertion of meta-narratives; the emergence of late capitalism, the fading of historicism, and the waning of affect; and a new regime in the arts.[13] However, what these distinct phenomena share is an opposition to "the" modern—to utopism, to (linear) progress, to grand narratives, to Reason, to functionalism and formal purism, and so on. These positions can most appropriately be summarized, perhaps, by Jos de Mul's distinction between postmodern irony (encompassing nihilism, sarcasm, and the distrust and deconstruction of grand narratives, the singular and the truth) and modern enthu-siasm (encompassing everything from utopism to the unconditional belief in Reason).[14]

We do not wish to suggest that all postmodern tendencies are over and done with.[15] But we do believe many of them are taking another shape, and, more importantly, a new *sens*, a new meaning and direction. For one, financial crises, geopoli-tical instabilities, and climatological uncertainties have necessitated a reform of the economic system ("*un nouveau monde, un nouveau capitalisme*", but also the transition from a white collar to a green collar economy). For another, the disintegration

of the political center on both a geopolitical level (as a result of the rise to prominence of the Eastern economies) and a national level (due to the failure of the "third way", the polarization of localities, ethnicities, classes, and the influence of the Internet blogosphere) has required a restructuration of the political discourse. Similarly, the need for a decentralized production of alternative energy; a solution to the waste of time, space, and energy caused by (sub)urban sprawls; and a sustainable urban future have demanded a transformation of our material landscape. Most significantly perhaps, the cultural industry has responded in kind, increasingly abandoning tactics such as pastiche and parataxis for strategies like myth and metaxis, melancholy for hope, and exhibitionism for engagement. We will return to these strategies in more detail shortly.

CEOs and politicians, architects, and artists alike are formulating anew a narrative of longing structured by and conditioned on a belief ("yes we can", "change we can believe in") that was long repressed, for a possibility (a "better" future) that was long forgotten. Indeed, if, simplistically put, the modern outlook vis-à-vis idealism and ideals could be characterized as fanatic and/or naive, and the postmodern mindset as apathetic and/or skeptic, the current generation's attitude—for it is, and very much so, an attitude tied to a generation—can be conceived of as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism.

We would like to make it absolutely clear that this new shape, meaning, and direction do not *directly* stem from some kind of post-9/11 sentiment. Terrorism neither infused doubt about the supposed superiority of neoliberalism, nor did it inspire reflection about the basic assumptions of Western economics, politics, and culture—quite the contrary. The conservative reflex of the "war on terror" might even be taken to symbolize a reaffirmation of postmodern values.[16] The threefold "threat" of the credit crunch, a collapsed center, and climate change has the opposite effect, as it infuses doubt, inspires reflection, and incites a move forward out of the postmodern and into the metamodern.

So, history is moving beyond its much-proclaimed end. To be sure, history never ended. When postmodernist thinkers declared it to have come to a conclusion, they were referring to a very particular conception of history—Hegel's

"positive" idealism. Some argued that this notion of history dialectically progressing toward some predetermined Telos had ended because humankind had realized that this Telos had been achieved (with the "universalization of Western liberal democracy").[17] Others suggested that it had come to a conclusion because people realized its purpose could never be fulfilled—indeed, because it does not exist. The current, metamodern discourse also acknowledges that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it *as if* it does exist. Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility.

If, epistemologically, the modern and the postmodern are linked to Hegel's "positive" idealism, the metamodern aligns itself with Kant's "negative" idealism. Kant's philosophy of history after all, can also be most appropriately summarized as "as-if" thinking. As Curtis Peters explains, according to Kant, "we may view human history *as if* mankind had a life narrative which describes its self-movement toward its full rational/social potential . . . to view history *as if* it were the story of mankind's development".[18] Indeed, Kant himself adopts the as-if terminology when he writes "[e]ach . . . people, *as if* following some guiding thread, go toward a natural but to each of them unknown goal".[19] That is to say, humankind, a people, are not really going toward a natural but unknown goal, but they pretend they do so that they progress morally as well as politically. Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find. If you will forgive us for the banality of the metaphor for a moment, the metamodern thus willfully adopts a kind of donkey-and-carrot double-bind. Like a donkey it chases a carrot that it never manages to eat because the carrot is always just beyond its reach. But precisely because it never manages to eat the carrot, it never ends its chase, setting foot in moral realms the modern donkey (having eaten its carrot elsewhere) will never encounter, entering political domains the postmodern donkey (having abandoned the chase) will never come across.

Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern

irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm.

Both the metamodern epistemology (*as if*) and its ontology (*between*) should thus be conceived of as a "both-neither" dynamic. They are each at once modern *and* postmodern and neither of them. This dynamic can perhaps most appropriately be described by the metaphor of *metaxis*. Literally, the term metataxis ($\mu\varepsilon\tau\alpha\xi\acute{\upsilon}$) translates as "between". It has however, via Plato and later the German philosopher Eric Voegelin, come to be associated with the experience of existence and consciousness. Voegelin describes metaxis as follows:

> Existence has the structure of the In-Between, of the Platonic *metaxy*, and if anything is constant in the history of mankind it is the language of tension between life and death, immortality and mortality, perfection and imperfection, time and timelessness, between order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence; between *amor Dei* and *amor sui*, *l'âme ouverte* and *l'ame close*; . . .[20]

For Voegelin thus, metaxis intends the extent to which we are at once both here and there and nowhere. As one critic puts it: metaxis is "constituted by the tension, nay, by the *irreconcilability* of man's participatory existence between finite processes on the one hand, and an unlimited, intracosmic or transmundane reality on the other".[21] Now, the debate about the meaning of metaxis is one of the longest running and most intriguing in the history of philosophy and deserves (and requires) much more attention than we can possibly offer here. The account we provide is therefore inevitably reductive, the arguments we lend from it inexorably precipitate. For our purposes, we intend the concept not as a

metaphor for an existential experience that is general to the *condition humaine*, but as a metaphor for a cultural sensibility that is particular to the metamodern discourse. The metamodern is constituted by the tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all.

METAMODERN STRATEGIES

Let us take a closer look at some recent trends and tendencies in contemporary aesthetics to illustrate what we mean by metamodernism, and to demonstrate the extent to which it has come to dominate the cultural imagination over the last few years. Just as modernism and postmodernism expressed themselves through a variety of often competing strategies and styles, the metamodern also articulates itself by means of diverse practices. One of the most poignant metamodern practices is what the German theorist Raoul Eshelman has termed "performatism". Eshelman describes performatism as the willful self-deceit to believe in—or identify with, or solve—something in spite of itself. He points, for example, to a revival of theism in the arts, and the reinvention of transparency, kinesis and impendency in architecture.[22]

> Performatist works are set up in such a way that the reader or viewer at first has no choice but to opt for a single, compulsory solution to the problems raised within the work at hand. The author, in other words, imposes a certain solution on us using dogmatic, ritual, or some other coercive means. This has two immediate effects. The coercive frame cuts us off, at least temporarily, from the context around it and forces us back into the work. Once we are inside, we are made to identify with some person, act or situation in a way that is plausible only within the confines of the work as a whole. In this way performatism gets to have its postmetaphysical cake and eat it too. On the one hand, you're practically forced to identify with something implausible or unbelievable within the frame—to believe in spite of yourself—but on the other, you still feel the coercive force causing this identification to take place, and intellectually you remain aware of the particularity of the argument at hand. Metaphysical skepticism and irony aren't eliminated, but are held in check by the frame.[23]

The leading American art critic Jerry Saltz also has observed the surfacing of another kind of sensibility oscillating between beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes:

> I'm noticing a new approach to artmaking in recent museum and gallery shows. It flickered into focus at the New Museum's "Younger Than Jesus" last year and ran through the Whitney Biennial, and I'm seeing it blossom and bear fruit at "Greater New York," MoMA P.S. 1's twice-a-decade extravaganza of emerging local talent. It's an attitude that says, *I know that the art I'm creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn't mean this isn't serious.* At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind—what Emerson called "alienated majesty".[24]

Saltz writes exclusively about tendencies in American art, but one can observe similar sentiments across the European continent. Only recently, the established BAK Institute in the Netherlands initiated a group exhibition that was called "Vectors of the Possible". The exhibition, curator Simon Sheikh explained,

> examines the notion of the horizon in art and politics and explores the ways in which art works can be said to set up certain horizons of possibility and impossibility, how art partakes in specific imaginaries, and how it can produce new ones, thus suggesting other ways of imagining the world. Counter to the post-1989 sense of resignation, [it] suggests that in the field of art, it is the horizon—as an "empty signifier", an ideal to strive towards, and a vector of possibility—that unites … and gives … direction. The art works in this exhibition can be seen as vectors, reckoning possibility and impossibility in (un)equal measures, but always detecting and indicating ways of seeing, and of being, in the world.[25]

And the much lauded up-and-coming Gallery Tanja Wagner introduced its opening exhibition with the remarkably analogous words:

> The works [at display] convey enthusiasm as well as irony. They play with hope and melancholy, oscilliate between knowledge and naivety, empathy and apathy, wholeness and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity, … looking for a truth without expecting to find it.[26]

Elsewhere, the cultural critic Jörg Heiser has perceived the emergence of what he calls "Romantic Conceptualism".[27] Heiser argues that the rational, calculated conceptual art of Jeff Koons, Thomas Demand, and Cindy Sherman is increasingly replaced with the affective and often sentimental abstractions of Tacita Dean, Didier Courbot, and Mona Hatoum. Where Demand reproduces the most concrete simulacra, Dean creates affective illusions that can never materialize. Where Koons obsesses over the obscene, Courbot is concerned with the increasingly obsolete. And whereas Sherman criticizes subjectivity, Hatoum celebrates the felt heterogeneity of identity. If the postmodern deconstructs, Heiser's Romantic Conceptualism is concerned with reconstruction.

The film critic James MacDowell, finally, has noted the emergence of the so-called quirky cinema associated with the films of Michel Gondry and Wes Anderson.[28] MacDowell describes quirky as a recent trend in Indie cinema characterized by the attempt to restore, to the cynical reality of adults, a childlike naivety—as opposed to the postmodern "smart" cinema of the 1990s, which was typified by sarcasm and indifference. And yet others have recognized movements as diverse as Remodernism, Reconstructivism, Renewalism, the New Sincerity, The New Weird Generation, Stuckism, Freak Folk, and so on. The list, indeed, of trends and movements surpassing, or attempting to surpass, the postmodern is inexhaustive.

Nicholas Bourriaud would undoubtedly argue that this multiplicity of strategies expresses a plurality of structures of feeling. However, what they have in common is a typically metamodern oscillation, an unsuccessful negotiation, between two opposite poles. In performatist attempts to defy the cosmic laws and the forces of nature, to make the permanent transitory and the transient permanent, it expresses itself dramatically. In Romantic Conceptualist efforts to present the ordinary with mystery and the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar it exposes itself less spectacularly, as the unsuccessful negotiation between culture and nature. But both these

practices set out to fulfill a mission or task they know they will not, can never, and should never accomplish: the unification of two opposed poles.

NEOROMANTICISM

> *The world must be romanticized*. In this way its original meaning will be rediscovered. To romanticize is nothing but a qualitative heightening [Potenzierung]. In this process the lower self is identified with a better self. [...] Insofar as I present the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar and the finite with the semblance of the infinite, I romanticize it. (Novalis[29])

At the time of writing, metamodernism appears to find its clearest expression in an emergent neoromantic sensibility. This can hardly be called surprising. For Kant's negative idealism too was most successfully expressed by the early German Romantic spirit.[30] Now, of course, Romanticism is a notoriously pluralistic and ambiguous (and consequently uniquely frequently misinterpreted) concept. Arthur Lovejoy once noted that there are so many different, often differing definitions of the concept that we might rather speak of Romanticisms.[31] And Isaiah Berlin, one of our time's most adept critics of the Romantic worldview, observed that Romanticism, in short, is

> unity and multiplicity. It is fidelity to the particular ... and also mysterious tantalising vagueness of outline. It is beauty and ugliness. It is art for art's sake, and art as instrument of social salvation. It is strength and weakness, individualism and collectivism, purity and corruption, revolution and reaction, peace and war, love of life and love of death.[32]

However, essentially, the Romantic attitude can be defined precisely by its oscillation between these opposite poles.[33] Romanticism is about the attempt to turn the finite into the infinite, while recognizing that it can never be realized. As Schlegel put it, "that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected".[34] Of course, it is also specifically about *Bildung*, about self-realization, about *Zaïs* and *Isis*, but for our purposes, this general idea of the Romantic as oscillating between attempt and failure, or as Schlegel wrote, between "enthusiasm and irony", or in de Mul's

words, between a "modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony", is sufficient.[35] It is from this hesitation also that the Romantic inclination toward the tragic, the sublime, and the uncanny stem, aesthetic categories lingering between projection and perception, form and the unformable, coherence and chaos, corruption and innocence.

It is somewhat surprising that we appear to be among the first academics to discern in contemporary arts a sensibility akin to Romanticism. For in the arts, the return of the Romantic, whether as style, philosophy, or attitude, has been widely professed. In 2007 Jörg Heiser, co-editor of *Frieze*, curated an exhibition in Vienna and Nurnberg called "Romantic Conceptualism". A mere 2 years earlier, The Schirnhalle in Frankfurt hosted "Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art". In addition, the TATE Britain has recently held a Peter Doig retrospective, while the MOMA looked back at the life and work of Bas Jan Ader. And then we have not even mentioned the multitude of galleries exposing the often-figurative paintings and photographs of twilights and full moons, ethereal cityscapes and sublime landscapes, secret societies and sects, estranged men and women, and strange boys and girls. It appears that, after all those years, the parody and pastiche of Jeff Koons, Jake and Dinos Chapman, and Damien Hirst, the ironic deconstruction of Cindy Sherman and Sarah Lucas, and the nihilist destruction of Paul McCarthy, are finally as out of place as they always pretended to be—but, in times where "anything goes", hardly ever were.

This Romantic sensibility has been expressed in a wide variety of art forms and a broad diversity of styles, across media and surfaces. It has been visible in Herzog and de Meuron's negotiations between the permanent and the temporary; in Bas Jan Ader's questioning of Reason by the irrational; in Peter Doig's re-appropriation of culture through nature; and in Gregory Crewdson and David Lynch's adaptation of civilization by the primitive. It can be perceived in Olafur Eliasson, Glen Rubsamen, Dan Attoe, and Armin Boehm's obsessions with the commonplace ethereal, in Catherine Opie's fixation with the quotidian sublime. It can be observed in Justine Kurland, Kaye Donachie, and David Thorpe's fascination with fictitious sects (Figures 1 and 2), or in Darren Almond and Charles Avery's interest for
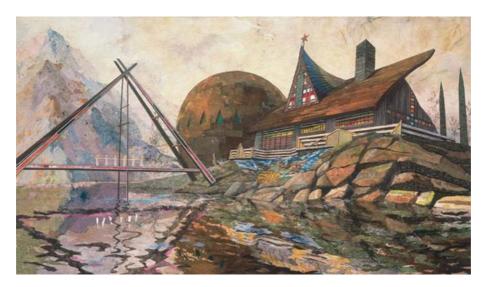
Figure 1. David Thorpe, Covenant of the East (2003). Mixed media collage. Courtesy Saatchi Gallery, Maureen Paley, and 303 gallery.

fictional elsewheres. And one can see it in the plethora of works of artists anew attempting to come to terms with their unconsciousness (think, for example, of Ragnar Kjartansson's at once grotesque and heartfelt attempts to (re)create both his "erotic fantasies of death, longing and eternity"[36] and the Weltschmerz stemming from his failure to do so entirely, or of Selja Kameric's attempts to retrieve an irrevocably irretrievable past, or of Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze, and Wes Anderson's attempts to rekindle the naivety and innocence of their childhood). What these strategies and styles have in common with one another is their use of tropes of mysticism, estrangement, and alienation to signify potential alternatives; and their conscious decision to attempt, in spite of those alternatives', untenableness.

Indeed, both Ader's attempts to unite life and death—and Reason and the miraculous, and self-determination and faith—and Rubsamen's efforts to unify culture and nature might have been more "successful" had they employed other methods and materials. Ader could have equipped himself with a better boat in order to sail the seas (*In search of the miraculous*, 1975); and he could have trained himself better in the art of tree climbing in order to longer hang on to branches (*Broken fall*, 1971). Similarly, Rubsamen could have applied strategies of simulation and/or techniques of postproduction in order to make the electricity poles and lampposts (*I've brought you a friend*, 2007; Figure 3) look more like the magical trees

and ethereal bushes they are supposed to resemble. The reason these artists haven't opted to employ methods and materials better suited to their mission or task is that their intention is not to fulfill it, but to attempt to fulfill it in spite of its "unfulfillableness". The point of Ader's journey is precisely that he might not return from it; of his tree climbing precisely that he cannot but fall eventually. Similarly, the point of Rubsamen's pursuit also is exactly that it cannot be fulfilled: culture and nature cannot be one and the same, nor can any one of them ever entirely overtake the other.

One should be careful, however, not to confuse this oscillating tension (a both–neither) with some

Figure 2. Kaye Donachie, Early Morning Hours of the Night (2003). Oil on Canvas. Courtesy Maureen Paley.

Figure 3. Glenn Rubsamen, *I've decided to say nothing* (2006). Acryllic on linen, dyptich. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.

kind of postmodern in-between (a neither–nor). Indeed, both metamodernism and the postmodern turn to pluralism, irony, and deconstruction in order to counter a modernist fanaticism. However, in metamodernism this pluralism and irony are utilized to counter the modern aspiration, while in postmodernism they are employed to cancel it out. That is to say, metamodern irony is intrinsically bound to desire, whereas postmodern irony is inherently tied to apathy. Consequently, the metamodern art work (or rather, at least as the metamodern art work has so far expressed itself by means of neoromanticism) redirects the modern piece by drawing attention to what it cannot present in its language, what it cannot signify in its own terms (that what is often called the sublime, the uncanny, the ethereal, the mysterious, and so forth). The postmodern work deconstructs it by pointing exactly to what it presents, by exposing precisely what it signifies.

The difference between the metamodern oscillation that marks contemporary art and the postmodern in-betweenness that signified much of the art of the 1990s, 1980s, 1970s, and 1960s is perhaps most visible in the work of those artists and architects who engage with everyday life, the commonplace, and the mundane. Postmodern works, like Rachel Whiteread's reconstructions, Daniel Buren's installations, or Martha Rosler's videos, deconstruct our assumptions about our lived spaces. Metamodern "Romantic" works, such as Armin Boehm's city vistas, Gregory Crewdson's small townscapes, and yes, David Lynch's close-ups of suburban rituals, redirect—and indeed, heighten—our presuppositions about our built environment.

Boehm paints aerial views of commuter towns as at once enchanted and haunted. His oil painting, both tentative and figurative, both atonal and intensely colorful, with a darkness full of light, depicts places that are simultaneously the places we live in and places we have never experienced before. Crewdson (Figure 4) photographs towns haunted by the nature they repress, disavow, or sublimate. In his work of tree-lined streets, white picket-fenced gardens, and picture-windowed houses are sites for inexplicable natural events, from local twilights to people shoveling earth into their hallways, and planting flowers in their lounges, to robins picking at limbs buried below ground. And Lynch's films too frequently thrive on moments that are, at once repulsive and attractive, beyond our grasp. They often tend toward the uncanny, abound with local animism, haunted houses, and surreal characters. A film like *Blue Velvet* (1995) not merely convinces us to distrust Reason. It persuades us to believe there are matters Reason cannot account for: a flickering light, a sadomasochistic relationship, a man wearing sunglasses at night, a blind man who can somehow see, the behavior of robins, an ear in the grass, and so on. The film presents these instances as haunting apparitions, within its texture as much as in its diegesis. They are woven into it, at times divulging the film's plot slowly, then again disrupting it abruptly. Each apparition signifies a narratively inexplicable (but, and that is the point, incredibly fertile) change in tempo, tune, and tone; alternating from comic to tragic, from romantic to horrific and back; turning the commonplace into a site of ambiguity, of mystery, and unfamiliarity, to us as much as to its characters.

In architectural practices this distinction between a metamodern oscillation and a postmodern in-between is even more pronounced—perhaps especially because an emergent metamodern style still needs to distinguish itself from the dominant postmodern discourse,[37] or perhaps especially

Figure 4. Gregory Crewdson, Untitled (2004). Photograph. Courtesy Luhring Augustine and White Cube.

because architecture cannot but be concrete. The works of "starchitects" Herzog and De Meuron are exemplary here. Their more recent designs express a metamodern attitude *in and through* a style that can only be called neoromantic. A few brief descriptions suffice, here, to get a hint of their look and feel. The exterior of the De Young Museum (San Francisco, 2005) is clad in copper plates that will slowly turn green as a result of oxidization; the interior of the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, 2005) holds such natural elements as chandeliers of rock and crystal; and the façade of the Caixa Forum (Madrid, 2008) appears to be partly rusting and partly overtaken by vegetation. While the above examples are appropriations or expansions of existing sites, their recent designs for whole new structures are even more telling. The library of the Brandenburg Technical University (Cottbus, 2004) is a gothic castle with a translucent façade overlain with white lettering; the Chinese national stadium (Beijing, 2008) looks like a "dark and enchanted forest" from up close and like a giant bird's nest from a far[38]; the residential skyscraper at 560 Leonard street (NYC, under construction) is reminiscent of an eroded rock; the Miami Art Museum (Florida, under construction) contains Babylonic hanging gardens; the Elbe Philharmonic Hall (Hamburg, under construction, see Figure 5) seems to be a giant iceberg washed ashore; and Project Triangle (Paris, under construction) is an immense glass pyramid that casts no shadows while it hovers over the city.

These buildings attempt to negotiate between such opposite poles as culture and nature, the finite and the infinite, the commonplace and the ethereal, a formal structure, and a formalist unstructuring (as opposed to deconstruction). Crucially, these attempts are unsuccessful as the buildings never so much seem to balance these distinct poles as oscillate between them. Fragile (bird's nest), disappearing (iceberg), or perishing (eroded rock) natural phenomena question the solidity of structures more or less built for permanence; while a mythical building (castle) from the days of old seems to be either resurrected from the past or mysteriously unaffected by time. Some edifices seem to be either left to the elements (oxidizing copper, rust) or seamlessly integrated with nature (overgrown walls, hanging gardens); yet others seem to defy the basic laws of geometry and gravity by means of their torsions. Lucid surfaces, radiating with light, give the most of ordinary sites a mysterious appearance; while ancient symbols (Pyramid) points toward transient cultures and the infinity of the cosmos.

Ader's, Thorpe's, Lynch's and Herzog & De Meuron's unsuccessful negotiations—the double-

Figure 5. Herzog & de Meuron, Elbe Philharmonie. Copyright Herzog & de Meuron.

bind of both/neither—expose a tension that cannot be described in terms of the modern or the postmodern, but must be conceived of as meta-modernism expressed by means of a neoromanticism.[39] If these artists look back at the Romantic it is neither because they simply want to laugh at it (parody) nor because they wish to cry for it (nostalgia). They look back instead in order to perceive anew a future that was lost from sight. Metamodern neoromanticism should not merely be understood as re-appropriation; it should be interpreted as re-signification: it is the re-signification of "the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar, and the finite with the semblance of the infinite". Indeed, it should be interpreted as *Novalis*, as the opening up of new lands in situ of the old one.

CONCLUSION: ATOPIC METAXIS

Conceiving of the metamodern at the closing of a decade in which about every other philosopher, cultural theorist, and art critic has attempted to conceptualize the aftermath of the postmodern might be considered to be anachronistic, out of place, and—if one still feels the need to conceive it anew despite the multiplicity of attempts that conceptualized it priori—pretentious. It is therefore ironic that our inquiries into the discursivity by which current geopolitical tendencies can be explained and the sensibility by which the arts express themselves have led us precisely to those three concerns: a deliberate being out of time, an intentional being out of place, and the pretense that that desired atemporality and displacement are actually possible even though they are not.

If the modern thus expresses itself by way of a utopic syntax, and the postmodern expresses itself by means of a dystopic parataxis, the metamodern, it appears, exposes itself through a-topic metaxis. The Greek–English lexicon translates atopos (ατοπος), respectively, as strange, extraordinary, and paradoxical. However, most theorists and critics have insisted on its literal meaning: a place (topos) that is no (a) place. We could say thus that atopos is, impossibly, at once a place and not a place, a territory without boundaries, a position without parameters. We have already described metaxis as being simultaneously here, there, and nowhere. In addition, taxis (τα′ξις) means ordering. Thus, if the modern suggests a temporal ordering, and the postmodern implies a spatial disordering, then the metamodern should be understood as a spacetime that is both—neither ordered and disordered. Metamodernism displaces the parameters of the present with those of a future presence that is futureless; and it displaces the boundaries of our place with those of a surreal place that is placeless. For indeed, that is the "destiny" of the metamodern wo/man: to pursue a horizon that is forever receding.

NOTES

1. The authors would like to thank Jos de Mul, Gry Rustad, Jonathan Bignell, and departmental colleagues for their invaluable comments to earlier versions of this essay.

2. Although we appear to be the first to use the term metamodernism to describe the current structure of feeling, we are not the first to use the term per se. It has been used with some frequency in literature studies in order to describe a post-modern alternative to postmodernism as presented in the works of authors as far apart as, amongst others, Blake and Guy Davenport. However, we would like to stress that our conception of metamodernism is by no means aligned to theirs, nor is it derived from them. It is in so far related to these notions that it too negotiates between the modern and the postmodern; but the function, structure, and nature of the negotiation we perceive are entirely our own and, as far as we can see, wholly unrelated to the previous perception.

3. For an excellent consideration of the debate about the 'end of the postmodern', see Josh Toth's *The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010).

4. L. Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), 165–6.

5. Ibid., 181.

6. G. Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

7. A. Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture* (New York/London: Continuum, 2009), 1.

8. R. Samuels, 'Auto-Modernity after Postmodernism: Autonomy and Automation in Culture, Technology, and Education', in *Digital Youth, Innovation, and the Unexpected,* ed. T. Mcpherson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 219.

9. Although it should be noted here that Kirby is careful to point out that he appreciates temporality and spatiality equally.

10. A. Searle, 'The Richest and Most Generous Tate Triennial Yet', *The Guardian,* March 2, 2009. http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/feb/02/altermodern-tate-triennial

11. R. Campbell-Johnston, 'Altermodern: Tate Triennal 2009 at Tate Britain', *The Times,* March 2, 2009, T2, 20–21.

12. N. Bourriaud, ed. *Altermodern. Tate Triennal 2009* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 12.

13. C. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1991); J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); I. Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays on Postmodernism and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 84–96.

14. J. de Mul, *Romantic Desire in (Post)modern Art & Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 18–26.

15. Our understanding of history, or rather historical periodization, is influenced by Raymond Williams's canonical description of dominants, emergents and residuals. See R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121–8.

16. Consider, for example, the immediate differentiation between us (the so-called west) and them (the so-called axis of evil), the broadly shared sense of urgency—visible in the rhetoric of Bush and Blair among others—to "defend western values", the general usage and acceptance of the frame of "the gift of democracy" used in the build-up to the invasion of Iraq, the initial broad support for the Afghan War, and so on and so forth. This is not to say that there have not been critiques of this reflex, but it is only of late that these critiques have become more widely acknowledged, if not accepted.

17. F. Fukuyama, 'The End of History and the Last Man', *New York Free Press*, 1992, 3.

18. C. Peters, *Kant's Philosophy of Hope* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 117. Our emphasis.

19. I. Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View', in *Kant On History,* ed. L. White Beck (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001), 11–12.

20. E. Voegelin, 'Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History', ed. E. Sandoz, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 119–20.

21. R. Avramenko, 'Bedeviled by Boredom: A Voegelinian Reading of Dostoevsky's Possessed', *Humanitas* 17, nos. 1 & 2 (2004): 116.

22. R. Eshelman, 'Performatism, or, What Comes After Postmodernism: New Architecture in Berlin', *ArtMargins* (April 2002), http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/archive/322-performatism-or-what-comes-after-postmodernism-new-architecture-in-berlin

23. R. Eshelman, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (Aurora: Davies Group, 2008), 3.

24. J. Saltz, 'Sincerity and Irony Hug It Out', *New York Magazine*, May 27, 2010, http://nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/66277/

25. BAK, 'Press Statement Vectors of the Possible' (August 2010), http://www.bak-utrecht.nl/?click [pressrelease]

26. Galerie Tanja Wagner, 'Press Statement The Door Opens Inwards' (September 2010), http://www.tanjawagner.com

27. J. Heiser, ed. *Romantic Conceptualism* (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2008).

28. J. MacDowell, 'Notes on Quirky', *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* 1:1 (2010), http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/contents/notes_on_quirky.pdf

29. Novalis, 'Fragmente und Studien 1797–1798', in *Novalis Werke,* ed. G. Schulz (Munchen: C.H. Beck, 2001), 384–5. Our translation.

30. Although we would argue that Kant's negative idealism inspired early German Romanticism, we by no means intend to say that they are alike or even comparable. For Kant, there is no purpose in history or nature, but he imagines one nevertheless in order to progress. For the early German Romantics, nature has a purpose; they simply can never grasp it. To explain this difference by way of the donkey-and-carrot parable: the Kantian donkey never manages to eat the carrot it chases because the carrot is virtual; the early German Romantic donkey never manages to eat the carrot merely because, although actual, it is too far away.

31. A. Lovejoy, 'On the Discrimination of Romanticisms', *PMLA* 39, no. 2 (June 1924).

32. I. Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 18.

33. Ibid., 101–5.

34. F. von Schlegel, 'Atheneum Fragments', in *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments,* ed. P. Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 175.

35. J. de Mul, Ibid., 25.

36. A. Coulson, 'Ragnar Kjartansson', *Frieze* 102 (October 2006) http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/ragnar_kjartansson/

37. Now, we should stress once more that we do not intend to say that metamodernism expresses itself solely by means of neoromanticism. Contemporary architecture, for instance, has to our knowledge not often been associated with Romanticism. Furthermore, the one critic that has compared recent architectural practices with a Romantic spirit, Reed Kroloff, has mistakenly reduced that Romantic spirit to some kind of soothing sensuality and pastel patterning. One might argue that this lack of address might to some extent be explained by the uneasy fit between architecture and Romanticism. Architecture, after all, is the art of the "permanent"'; Romanticism is the attitude of the transient. Or one may suggest that architecture, as the applied art most affected by the fluctuations of the industrial and financial markets and the shifting priorities of political decision making, simply requires more time, money, and political intervention in order to take form more than other arts do. But the lack of address could also simply indicate that metamodern architecture has so far expressed itself primarily by means of other topoi. Of course, there is widespread agreement that contemporary architecture is no longer postmodern. The end of the postmodern is most clearly signaled here by the return to commitment. The growing awareness of the need for sustainable design has led to an ethical turn in the attitude toward the built environment. Roof gardens and solar panels are heavily subsidized, carbon neutral buildings and ecologically friendly neighborhoods are widely commissioned, and, yes, even entirely green cities are being designed from scratch. Necessitated by a competitive market, urged by demanding politicians, and inspired by the changing Zeitgeist, architects increasingly envision schemes for a sustainable urban future. But it is also, as we intend to show, increasingly paired to a new form.

38. N. Ourossoff, 'Olympic Stadium with a Design to Remember', *The New York Times,* May 8, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/05/sports/olympics/05nest.html

39. Several Internet critics have made similar observations. M. Van Raaij of *Eikongraphia* (http://eikongraphia.com/) commented the following on the "erosion iconography" of the residential skyscraper in NYC: "It is beautiful in its celebration of nature. There is however also something apocalyptic and frightening about the reference to decay. It reminds me of the sublime landscapes in romantic painting: beautiful, yet horribly desolate and uninhabitable". And K. Long of *Icon Eye* (http://www.iconeye.com/) described Cotbuss' Castle, accordingly: "It is possible to photograph this building as if it were a classical folly, stumbled upon by a German romantic painter in an idealised German landscape. Schinkel or Caspar David Friedrich would understand the references".