

Metamodernism

& my train of thoughts

Postmodernism is dead. A bold statement that appears to be emerging increasingly. I would not dare to go so far as to say postmodernism is dead. I think postmodernism is still widely represented — in art, film, music, education, economics and politics.

However, it seems rather clear we will be surpassing postmodernism in the near future and there's a broad consensus about this among theorists. Several successors have already been suggested by various theorists, including *metamodernism*.

In the previous essays I have tried to provide an insight into the concept of metamodernism, by mainly summarizing the information that's currently known about the subject. I have largely confined myself to the visual arts. Although, in my opinion, the visibility of metamodernism is surely not limited to the arts.

Admittedly, there's a change going on within the arts for a while now — and it's noticeable. However, I think it's likely that metamodernism will continue to grow over the years. There is an increasing attention for the end of postmodernism and what will come in its place. I believe metamodernism, so far, is the best answer to that question. Nevertheless, the way metamodernism is explained right now and the context in which this is done, is still too limited.

During the writing of my thesis I have come to realize more and more the essay of Vermeulen and van den Akker is even very limited. Of course, they have indicated it's only a starter and they hoped to instigate others to consider the concept and come to worthwhile additions or improvements. And yes, the essay is also already eight years old — so a lot has changed over the years.

However, for the time being it seems that little to nothing has been added to the concept in the past eight years. So, indeed, a broader context for metamodernism is desperately needed.

I must honestly admit I did not include in my thesis the book *Metamodernism* (2017), recently published by Vermeulen, Gibbons and van den Akker. The publication date of the book was continually moved up and eventually it was not published until the end of 2017, when my thesis was already well on its way.

Off course I can imagine this book will go much deeper into metamodernism and hopefully will provide a much broader context. However, leaving this book out of consideration, metamodernism is still too superficial, too limited — and is still explained too much by various authors, using the same examples.

I have noticed myself how difficult it is to come up with good, new examples and connections. It requires an in depth analysis of contemporary art(ists), movements, developments, trends, etc. in order to be able to compare this with the characteristics of metamodernism.

For me this task proved too great in the limited time I had to write my thesis. First and foremost I've spent a lot of time on really comprehending the concept of metamodernism. I had to read a lot — really a lot and that took quite some time. Only after this I could start writing my thesis.

However, to keep a long story short: I'm convinced metamodernism is much more visible than it seems to be right now. Especially when you look beyond art, I think it's very likely metamodernism will supplant postmodernism in the near future.

Metamodernism beyond art

Western society seems to be changing on many more different levels than art alone. It sometimes seems as if a new kind of awareness has opened up in mankind. I'm certainly not the only one who is sensing this.

Everyone is feeling it and many are talking about it, but it's also evident in developments within different disciplines — philosophy, economy, science, sociology, etc. It's not a very strange development either, given the turbulent times in which we are living right now. A time where major economic, environmental, geo-political and social changes are taking place, that generate such complex issues — it could well be possible a completely different human awareness is required to ever come to any solutions.

I think metamodernism is the appointing of this process of change in our collective awareness — and therefore, in some way, a reaction to current, worldwide developments; the economic crisis, growing inequality, climate change, pollution, etc.

This is not to say that metamodernism will give clear answers to these issues or that metamodernism indicates a clear change in direction yet; metamodernism merely tries to place and merge the changes that are going on, into a new cultural paradigm.

In my opinion metamodernism is an opposition to postmodernism from the conviction that the answers to the major issues we are facing today, will certainly not come from postmodernism. However, for the time being, metamodernism mainly seems to say:

“It's clear something needs to change, but we don't know exactly what — and how”

The attitude metamodernism employs here is to keep an open mind towards all possibilities, with the belief that combining (apparent) opposing elements can lead to new insights and new meanings.

But above all, it's a way of thinking.

And like all the big ideas, it starts with an artistic tendency that will grow to take on social and political significance.

However — I believe this social and political significance is already visible.

Capitalism

Frederic Jameson identified postmodernism as the “*cultural logic of late capitalism*”.

And precisely capitalism is (becoming) a tricky issue at the moment.

Western societies are becoming increasingly aware of the fact capitalism — based on infinite growth, doesn't go very well with our finite planet. The resulting problems are now accumulation and will increase much further.

In addition, capitalism is at the root of modern days growing inequality. The created myth, in which everyone who just works hard enough will be (financially) better off, is being more and more disproved in practice and will eventually no longer be sustainable.

Take, for example, America;

- forty million Americans live in poverty.
- The United States has the highest child poverty rates, 25%, in the developed world.
- One and a half million American households even live in *extreme poverty* today — nearly twice as many as 20 years ago.

Poverty is also growing in the Netherlands. Last January the CBS stated long-term poverty increased further since 2016.

On the other side of the spectrum are the extremely wealthy.

These world's wealthiest individuals total only 8.6% of the population, but they own 85.6% of global wealth. Some of these individuals no longer know what to do with their money and then, for example, set up some crazy project to colonize Mars — as if our own planet is no longer worth saving.

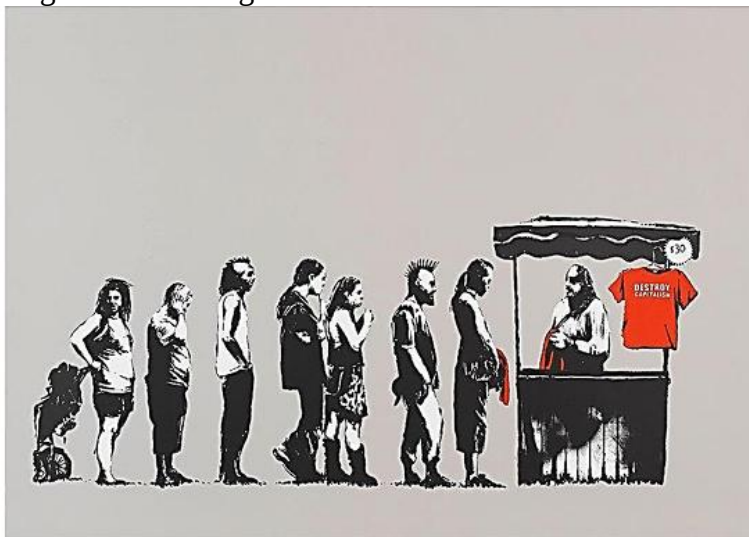


Figure 1: Banksy, *Destroy Capitalism*, 2006

Capitalism is not only at the root of growing inequality; it even actually *generates* more inequality.

Increasingly larger groups of environmentalists, intellectuals, economists, workers, students, etc. seem to become aware of the abyss capitalism will bring us into.

After the economic crisis in 2008, this awareness has grown rapidly and capitalism has been

declared a failure by several economists and political scientists.

As communism began to collapse, the supremacy of western capitalism seemed best challenged by deploying the ironic and skeptical tactics of postmodernism. Over time, however, this created a new difficulty: because postmodernism attacks everything, a feeling of confusion and uncertainty began to grow until — in recent years, it became omnipresent.

By removing all the criteria, we are left with nothing but the market. Capitalism turned art into a commodity — just as it did with everything else. Which is the exact opposite of what postmodernism originally intended.

Of course there's a parallel paradox happening in politics and philosophy: the moment we depress all positions, we can no longer assert any position. And therefore we can't participate in society or a collective.

Looking at it this way it's easy to understand why its power is diminishing by the day: postmodernism (and capitalism) will no longer do as a solution to the world we now find ourselves in.

The art market

This capitalistic perversion is also visible in the art world as, for example, witnessed by the astronomical amounts paid for works of art under auction. After examining more than one million auction records stretching over the last 36 years, economics professors from the University of Luxembourg have concluded that the international art market is overheating — creating the potential for a “severe correction” in the post-war, contemporary and American segments.

They say conditions are remarkably similar to the bubble in 1990 and the market is still inflating in what they term the *mania phase* of its formation.

The art world has turned into a real-life Monopoly game, in which oligarchs, sheikhs and Asian billionaires move around their endless piles of money — most of it gained under dubious circumstances.

It's characteristic for the moral decline of the art world.

In the absence of any aesthetic criteria it became increasingly useful to assess the value of art according to the profits they generated. Capital accommodates all needs.

Artistic success has become about nothing — except money. And even worse: artists increasingly have come to judge their own success that way, too. Exactly how perverse this current art market is, becomes painfully clear in the two-piece documentary *The Great Contemporary Art Bubble* (2009/17, 2017/18), from BBC Four.

I can only say I feel vicarious shame when I watch them (both).

However, let's not pretend this development only takes place within the art world. Moral decline is a global problem in all areas of life. Money seems to be the only value that is really valued anymore.

Norman O. Brown, an American thinker and social philosopher had some interesting thoughts about this. In his book *Life against Death: the Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (1959) he explains our alienated consciousness is correlative with our money economy and its root is the compulsion to work. He believes this compulsion to work subordinates man to things — producing at the same time confusion in the valuation of things and devaluation of the human body.

As a result human drives are being reduced to greed and competition. Eventually the desire for money takes the place of all genuinely human needs.

Brown concludes from this that the apparent accumulation of wealth is in reality the *impoverishment of human nature* and the right morality in this is to renounce human nature

and desires. The effect is to substitute an abstraction, Homo Economicus, for the concrete totality of human nature — thus to dehumanize human nature.

“In this dehumanized human nature man loses contact with his own body, more specifically with his senses, with sensuality and with the pleasure-principle. And this dehumanized human nature produces an inhuman consciousness, whose only currency is abstractions divorced from real life – the industrious, coolly rational, economic, prosaic mind. Capitalism has made us so stupid and one-sided that objects exist for us only if we can possess them or if they have utility”.

Counter movements in the art world

I firmly believe the awareness about this is growing, as is the feeling of discontent — and this will eventually lead to an inevitable change. In my view, this is already visible, for example, in the contemporary craving or striving for *authenticity* and *sincerity*. Where it used to be ‘cool’ to not give a f#ck, it now seems to become ‘cool’ again to have morals — to care for friendship, love and companionship. An interesting book concerning this is *Facing Values* (2017). In short, it advocates the revaluation of our human values, such as love, friendship, empathy and solidarity.

So, fortunately a revolution seems to be developing, also in the art world; a change of attitude towards the market as well as from artists as from gallery owners. More and more artists and gallery owners seem to be rebelling against the current art market.

This attitude is not only due to the conviction that the art market is perverse, but is sometimes also born out of bitter necessity — a growing number of smaller and mid-size galleries can no longer compete with the big names like Saatchi, Gagosian and Zwirner, who dominate the market.

At the same time, more and more artists seem to withdraw or distance themselves from the art world and/or adopt a hostile attitude towards its mechanisms. In their new attitude they seem to be more aware of these mechanisms and, up to a certain level, try to control them.

A good example of this is Luc Tuymans. He stayed loyal to his gallery representation at Zeno X Gallery and has been with them for many years and still is. In addition he doesn’t just sell his work to everybody.

In an interview in 2008, with Jan Haerynck from *De Groene Amsterdammer*, Tuymans said:

“An unreliable collector does not get a second chance to set another foot in my gallery or studio. Forbidden access. I decide whether or not the buyer can see and buy a work. We call this the new “economic” constitution of the art world. Even extremely wealthy buyers can hear an inexorable No from me. You have to play the game intellectually. It’s the only way to survive”.

In other words: he tries to make sure buyers buy his work for the right reasons.

Another, slightly different, example is Marc Mulders.

He used to be represented by high-end dealers in New York and Paris. In an interview in February 2018, with Mirthe de Leeuw from *Mister Motley* he said:

“The capitalistic side of the art world seems to damage the reliability and trust within the arts. Actually, you can say there’s a lot of fake news in the art world”.

After contemplating the question where he fits in within that art world:

“I left my galleries in New York and Paris. You can always walk away. I’ve started to focus more on things that actually matter. In the nineties the world began to scold skeptically. I was a moralist, a catholic reactionist. There was an attitude of arrogance, cynicism and nihilism. Fortunately that seems to be changing again. I’m hopeful, now that I see we’re talking again about the spiritual, the care and the detail”.

The change Mulders is talking about is, in my view, directly connected to metamodernism. Or metamodernism is that change. I’m not sure yet which of the two is more correct.

I think metamodernism entails a new cultural paradigm that, among other things, tries to explain how our current culture and society is changing— and, subsequently, operates. Metamodernism as a cultural paradigm can be recognized in more areas than art alone, as I tried to demonstrate above.

Below will follow another example.

Science

There also seems to be a change going on within science.

Despite the progress our current scientific model has brought to us, the awareness grows that reductionist thinking leaves too many questions unanswered.

What’s consciousness?

Where do we store our memories?

How can we explain near death experiences, telepathy and teleportation?

There’s now more than sufficient proof for these phenomena, but mainstream science refuses to acknowledge this — simply because it can’t be explained from the materialistic and reductionist model.

Quantum physics however, seems better able to provide an answer to these questions, but is hardly compatible with the mainstream scientific consensus. It’s therefore especially the rise of quantum physics that helps to clarify the shortcomings of the current scientific model.

There is more between Heaven and Earth.

A statement believed by almost 60% of Western Europeans and even by 89% of Americans, — but by only 40% of scientists. There is a big discrepancy visible in these percentages that seems to be characteristic for the current relation between the people and science in general.

We seem to be moving further and further towards a post-scientific world, linked with the recognition that (neuro) science does not yet have a satisfactory explanation for what

consciousness is — as subjective experience. We should take into account the possibility that there may be transcendent and mystic phenomena during a person's life and death.

Despite the rigid scientific system in which there is no room for such phenomena, there seems to be renewed attention for these elements among the population. This development is neatly captured by metamodernism.

In so far, as the transcendent, the mystical and the inexplicable form an important part of metamodernism; there's renewed interest, attention and — above — renewed space for it.

Structure of feeling

Vermeulen and van den Akker initially described metamodernism as a *structure of feeling* — and this description is a very appropriate one.

Raymond Williams (1977) coined the concept of a structure of feeling. He explained on the basis of an example:

if you take an art object, analyse it, pull it apart, you would have a lot of different parts, but there's also something that no one has put into it and that's the structure of feeling.

Frederic Jameson subsequently used the term to interpret postmodernism. He wrote:

we have eclecticism in architecture, photorealism in painting, pastiche and nostalgia mode in film. All these different movements have one thing in common, and that's the postmodern structure of feeling; the sense of an ending.

That's exactly what metamodernism is: it's a structure of feeling as it tries to explain our emotional reaction to current social, political and economic changes.

It isn't that obvious yet, but it's palpable.

And its tangibility will only continue to grow.

The metamodern structure of feeling seems to be saying:

"We don't know exactly what needs to be changed — and how, but we're convinced some things must change".

Gradually and over time, more and more pieces will fall into place.

I hope to be able to contribute to this myself. The completion of my thesis certainly does not mean the end of my research — on the contrary, I'm still very busy with it.

At the same time this makes it difficult for me to finish this thesis, because I realize it's also very limited and I really have to restrain myself from trying to elaborate too much.

I believe metamodernism can only fully come into its own when it's explained from different disciplines. Art is just one of them.

I'm convinced art has the ability to sense and translate such changes, early in the process.

Thus, the fact metamodernism was first observed in art and subsequently this led to the essay *Notes on metamodernism*, is not very surprising. In my opinion, this is one of the most valuable forces of art.

However, stating metamodernism is limited to the arts would be a misconception. Metamodernism can be found in many different places. I have given a number of examples above.

Another demonstration of the metamodern structure of feeling is, in my opinion, the growing number of people (worldwide) who are becoming vegetarians, or flexitarians, or vegans. Veganism has grown by 500% in the US since 2014, from 1% to 6% of the population. And 44% of Germans now follow a low-meat diet.

There seems to be some kind of shift happening in our collective awareness that's completely changing our position in regard to animals — and in particular the bio-industry. Here too we seem to want to say: *"What's happening is not right — we're not sure what needs to be changed and how, but we're sure something must change"*.

I could go on with providing examples like this and I would really like to be able to elaborate more on them, but this thesis isn't the right place for that.

Nevertheless; my research will continue and I consider my thesis primarily as a first step towards a much more in-depth analysis.

Conclusion

Let me say it again: it's not that the impact of postmodernism will totally diminish or disappear — not at all, because it's not like we can *unlearn* a great idea.

However, postmodernism is being replaced as the dominant discourse and is now slowly taking its place alongside all the other great ideas and movements. All these different ideas and movements subtly inform our imaginations and the way we discuss, create, interact and react.

We're all becoming increasingly comfortable with the idea of holding two irreconcilable ideas in our heads: no system of meaning can have a monopoly in the truth, but we still have to render the truth through our own system of meaning, or — structure of feeling.

As a result the postmodern challenge — while no less radical — now feels less powerful to us somehow.

Something is shifting in our collective awareness and metamodernism seems to capture this change quite accurately. The metamodern paradigm is already visible in many areas of life. However, metamodernism will continue to grow over the years and I believe it will eventually displace postmodernism as the leading cultural paradigm.