Understanding Metamodernism

INTRODUCTION

“The postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over,” are the bold words with which Vermeulen and Van Den Akker opened their paper called “Notes on Metamodernism”. The last half-century our culture has increasingly been impregnated by irony, parody, satire, sarcasm, irreverence, and cynicism due to post-modernism. The search for a collective truth as a lost cause has made way for an attitude in which everything can and should be ridiculed. However, according to the authors post-modernism has not provided us with any answers. Hence, in response, metamodernism attempts to reconcile our post-modern intellectual luggage with our need for answers, hope, and sincerity by continuously oscillating between modernism and post-modernism.

OBSERVATIONS

– The term metamodernism was already coined in 1975 by Mas’ud Zavarzadeh. However, its current meaning is derived from a paper “Notes on Metamodernism” by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010).


– Marvel, 90s parties, La la Land, Murakami, The Office, 4chan, Childish Gambino, Wes Anderson movies, David Foster Wallace, Spring Breakers, Synthwave, Die Antwoord, and Carpool Karaoke are seen as instances of metamodern culture in which irony and sincerity go hand in hand.

In 2014 actor Shia Labeouf showed a sudden change in public behavior. Afterwards, it seemed that his actions were inspired by the “Manifesto on Metamodernism” by Luke Tuner. This was also accompanied by him choosing radically different movie projects. Where he originally was well known for performing one-dimensional characters in mainstream commercial movies like Transformers and Indiana Jones, he went to vulnerable tragic characters who seek some sort of spiritual truth and redemption (Fury, American Honey).

ANALYSIS

Post-modernity has confronted us with the hopelessness of seeking universal truths and grand narratives. However, even though this feeling has been deeply internalized in today’s society, the last decade has presented us with more and more examples in which we, against all odds, attempt to overcome this futility. Whether it be Obama’s “Yes we can” campaign, the success of super hero movies, or Pharrell Williams naive shout out to Happiness, These hesitant returns to a modernistic stance could in part be explained by Metamodernism, which presents a philosophy in which we continuously oscillate between the hopefulness modernism and skepticism of post-modernism. Terms like new sincerity, informed naivety, post-irony, and guilty pleasures exemplify this ambivalent stance.

Last year’s popular Oscar-winning movie Lalaland also seems to resonate with metamodernistic themes. Lalaland explicitly juxtaposes reality and fantasy against the backdrop of the quest of realizing one’s dreams. However, instead of preferring or condemning either one, the movie explores the tragedy and beauty of both by oscillating between the two extremes and giving no finite answer. Metamodernism could also be an explanation for Marvel’s success as opposed to DC Comics. Where DC Comics movies have remained mostly cynical and grim, Marvel presents a more colorful and hopeful universe. This hypothesis seems to be strengthened by DC’s current success with Wonder Woman, which contrasts an extremely hopeful character with the grimness of WWI. In music, as discussed in an earlier note, we noticed that the hip-hop scene was long dominated by hyper-masculinity as a response to white suppression, whereas nowadays we see black artists such as Childish Gambino who try to reconcile many of the dialectical remnants of post-modernism (e.g. ‘white culture’ and ‘black culture’, masculinity and femininity, etc.).

Trump’s campaign and presidency could also partly be seen as an endeavor that has successfully built a meta-narrative, while at the same time being at the center of irony and satire. Some even see Trump as a metamodern politician, since he ambiguously seems to believe in his own metanarrative where self-awareness and sincerity seem to go hand in hand. The use of the term ‘alternative facts’, although unintentional, illustrates a metamodernistic attempt to reconcile facts and falsehoods.

Lastly, metamodernism can also be applied to techno-optimistic movements such as singularitarianism and accelerationism. Characteristically when Ray Kurzweil, the founder of the Singularity movement, was asked if he believed in God, he responded with ‘not yet’. This answer ironically illustrates the idea of progress meta-narrative within Singularitarianism in which humanity’s technological endeavors could send us on an evolutionary path towards more complexity and divinity.

POTENTIAL BENEFICIARIES

– Politicians that use metamodernism to introduce meta-narratives in their rhetoric.

– Media content that successfully incorporates metamodernism.

– Technology companies that heavily rely on an idea of progress (i.e. Tesla, Google).