

Extension Two Major Work

Reflection Statement

“Where are we now?” is a critical analysis of the changing cultural and aesthetic landscape in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This response has been informed by my own experiences with recent literary trends, as well as those in television and film. My interest was sparked when, during my research for the English Extension One elective *After the Bomb*, I noticed the differences between the technical tropes of postmodernism and what I was watching and reading at the time. After investigating this, I accidentally discovered a Youtube video claiming the performance art of Shia LaBeouf as ‘metamodernist’. After some more exploring and reading, I found the theory intriguing, not for its veracity but its ambition in grouping culture and aesthetics. My intent, therefore, in writing my Major Work, was to explore the relationship between culture and what I was *reading about* culture and, hopefully, to inform others with similar interests. Considering the large scope of my work, the chosen form of critical response (analytical writing) provided the perfect framework for exploring metamodernism.

My Major Work is targeted at two distinct kinds of readers. The first is an intellectual, although not exclusive, audience. I understand that the subject itself is quite obscure and most of my readers would need to have a some understanding of literary theory. During my investigation I realised that a significant number of people who engaged with concepts like ‘metamodernism’ were university students in their early to mid twenties. This was evident from the number of undergraduate papers I found discussing metamodernism as well as the swamp of blog sites dedicated to the topic. Consequently, my primary audience became those studying literature, primarily students who may have interest in emerging aesthetic, literary and cultural trends.

My secondary audience are less qualified readers, those who may not study literary theory but may be themselves creators hoping to trace trajectory of contemporary culture. Having read Courtney E. Martin’s *A Responsibility to Light* I determined that new authors and artists had a vested interest in metamodernism. After all, they were the demographic which would inherit Kirby’s ‘cultural marketplace’²⁷. Accordingly, I attempted to limit the amount of assumed knowledge in my response and provide

²⁷ A., Kirby, *The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond*, Philosophy Now, Vol. 58, 2006, P. 34-37.

definitions for more abstract concepts which I consistently reference (such as *absence* in postmodern literary theory). Seth Abramson's *Metamodernism: The Basics* revealed to me that a purely academic dissection of culture was fated to be ineffective if its goal was to inform or engage. As this was partly the purpose of my Major Work, I hoped to emphasise accessibility in my structure and language choices with my secondary audience in mind. Both of my readerships are young, intelligent (although not always knowledgeable) and have some interest in the changing shape of culture. As such, many of the references and cultural touch points that I have implemented (Grand Theft Auto, The Simpsons), are targeted towards them.

Regardless of my audience, the language of literary criticism has the potential to be disengaging. Therefore, I attempted to make my response as accessible as possible to my target readerships. Later drafts particularly focused on making the response more personable, endeavouring to employ a more informal register using contractions, analogies and, where possible, humour. I reasoned that, in keeping with mind purpose, I should avoid indulging in the distant scholarly pretension that is so often associated with postmodern theory. As the subject matter of the project was necessarily dense, I attempted to implement everyday colloquialisms, references and cultural allusions to break down more complex concepts for my secondary audience. Thus my work also appropriates a semi-formal, but solidly academic tone similar to Alan Kirby's *The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond*.

My response was heavily influenced by David Foster Wallace, particularly his essay "*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*". To platform my evaluation of contemporary aesthetics, I paid specific attention to the way he critiqued postmodernism, approaching it through a series of case-studies and genre specific analysis. Wallace used his in-depth analysis of *St. Elsewhere*, for example, to make broader arguments about the relationship between television, irony and later fiction as a whole. Given the scope of my subject, I found this method to be particularly useful. When I began my investigation of recent metafiction, Wallace's approach allowed me to cover ground quickly while still dedicating space to substantive analysis. My short discussion of contemporary television and video games was also designed

to reflect Wallace's dissection of media from the 1990s. I hoped this would provide my readers with a broader understanding of cultural trends. Following this, I focused on establishing a familiarity with my audience through easily recognisable works such as *Modern Family*. "E Unibus Pluram" provided an academic anchorage for my investigation, clarifying how postmodernism 'institutionalised' itself as it entered popular culture. In addition to this, Wallace acted as my entry point into French critical theory.

Having read "Death of the Author"²⁸ earlier in the course, I returned to it hoping that it might reaffirm my understanding of postmodern aesthetics. I supplemented this with preliminary research into the work of other post-structuralists, including lectures on Derrida's "Signature, Event, Context" which gave me an invaluable grasp on the relationship between 'iterability' and 'context' in literature, or rather, the lack of a relation between the two²⁹. This culminated in my greater appreciation of Fowles' deconstruction of the author, allowing me to better evaluate the later dissipation of 'authenticity' in postmodern writing. My research into Barthes and Derrida also became critical to my analysis of *Man in the Dark* as it allowed me to draw an immediate contrast between Auster's emphasis on composition against the postmodern emphasis on absence.

My dissection of contemporary metafiction was, in part, influenced by my study of 'Intertextual Perspectives' in English Advanced. Understanding George Orwell's context influenced my reading of *1984* because it allowed me to glimpse (albeit through posterity) into the whys and hows of his writing process. I instinctively applied this same method of research to my chosen text when searching for a point of difference between *Man in the Dark* and, for example, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Consequently, I gained a heightened awareness of context and its role in shaping ideas, lending weight to my theory about 'author clarification'.

²⁸ R. Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, France, Manteia, no. 5, 1968.

²⁹ Diane Davis. Derrida, Speech, and Writing. 2011, [online video], 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcE7SKM7Rnw>, (accessed 1 June 2017).

My research into metamodernism itself was quite difficult. Vermeulen and Van Der Akker's essay *Notes on Metamodernism*, while forming the basis of the theory, is notoriously abstract and offers virtually no analysis of literary trends. Determined not to make a similar mistake, I examined three different textual forms in my evaluation of aesthetics (Literature, Television, Video Games). This added bottom to my argument, allowing me to comment broadly without overextending myself.

Elsewhere, finding 'seminal texts' on the subject proved nearly impossible. This forced me to look elsewhere for academic support. Noah Burnell's *Oscillating from a distance: Metamodernism in theory and in practice* proved particularly useful as it provided me with a framework on which I could build my later analysis on reconstructive literature. His discussion of Wallace's *Lyndon* as employing a kind of "Brechtian twist"³⁰ to jump between sensibilities and force engagement influenced my own analysis of contemporary aesthetics.

Abramson's *Ten Basic Principles of metamodernism*, his article series *This Month in Metamodernism*³¹, Turner's *The Metamodern Manifesto* and Dali Kadagishvili's *Metamodernism as we perceive it*³² all proved extremely reassuring, if not always useful, in my understanding of the theory behind metamodernism. These pieces revealed to me some of the inconsistencies in the theory - particularly when considered in a broader cultural context. Turner's work was intentionally confusing and, as some have said, ironically so. However, I found the criteria he used to describe the new 'metamodern epoch' to be at once empirically groundless, semantically vague, and in places very specific. I concluded with Turner, as I had with Abramson, that no emerging paradigm should forecast its entry into the cultural marketplace with a rule book of criteria. Ultimately, this aided me in coming to the conclusion that metamodernism is not the descriptive, totalising set of aesthetics that it appears to be.

³⁰N. Burnell, *Oscillating from a Distance: A Study of metamodernism in Theory and in Practice*, United States, Undergraduate Journal of Humanistic Studies, 2015.

³¹S. Abramson, *The Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism*, including *Five more Basic Principles of Metamodernism* and *This Month in Metamodernism*, Huffington Post, 2015.

³²D. Kadagishvili, *Metamodernism as we perceive it*, EU, European Scientific Journal, Vol. 2, 2013.

Irmtraud Huber's book *Reconstructive Fantasies: Literature After Postmodernism* provided me with a comprehensive summary of recent discourse in literary theory and introduced me to critics such as Jonathan Franzen and Francis Jameson. Huber proved useful by discussing the myriad 'successor movements' that sought to label contemporary aesthetics. This new perspective encouraged me to examine metamodernism more critically and thus helped shift my response from a description of theory to an evaluation of recent aesthetic trends.

During the composition phase of my Major Work I did not stray far from the established conventions of critical analysis. I intended to adopt a structural looseness to my response in order to streamline the flow of ideas for my readership. By threading some kind of progression or 'story' through my Major Work, I intended to not only address where we are, but also where we have been, are going and why. I hoped that this would make a more comprehensive and enjoyable reading experience for both my chosen audiences.

I cannot answer the central question posed by my response: "Where are we now?" I was not, however, expecting an answer. I find the uncertainty of our position in culture exciting because, at the very least, it still means we have somewhere to go. I have learned a great deal during my Extension 2 course and have thoroughly enjoyed researching and crafting my Major Work. At times the response proved extremely frustrating to control given the scope of my subject. With that being said, I probably wouldn't do it again.

Endnotes

- 1 Hutcheon L., *The Politics of Postmodernism*, New York/London, Routledge, P. 165–6, 2002.
- 2 Kirby, A. *The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond*, Philosophy Now, Vol. 58, 2006, P. 34-37.
- 3 Hutcheon, L., *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York, A. Kirby, 1988.
- 4 Huber I., *Literature After Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies*, United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, P. 23.
- 5 Ibid. P. 25.
- 6 Wallace, D.F., *E Pluribus Unum: Television and U.S. Fiction*, United States, Review of Contemporary Fiction, 1993, P. 34.
- 7 Ibid. P. 35.
- 8 Ibid. P. 10.
- 9 Ibid. P. 15.
- 10 Kirby, A. *The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond*, Philosophy Now, Vol. 58, 2006, P. 34-37.
- 11 Hyde L., *Alcohol and Poetry: John Berryman and the Booze Talking*, Dallas Inst Humanities & Culture, 1986.
- 12 Wallace, D.F., *E Pluribus Unum: Television and U.S. Fiction*, United States, Review of Contemporary Fiction, 1993 P. 26.
- 13 Eshelman, R. *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism*, Anthropoetics IV, No.2, 2001.
- 14 Huber, I. *Literature After Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies*, United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- 15 Wallace, D.F. *E Pluribus Unum: Television and U.S. Fiction*, United States, Review of Contemporary Fiction, 1993, P. 18.
- 16 Martin, C., *A Responsibility to Light: an illustrated manifesto for the artist's task in troubled times - Brain Pickings*, [website], 2017,

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2017/05/15/focus-wendy-macnaughton-courtney-martin-poster/> (accessed 10 June 2017).

17 Vermeulen, T., and Akker, R., *Notes on Metamodernism*, Journal of Aesthetics and Culture, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2010.

18 Turner, L. 2011, *The Metamodern Manifesto*, Website/Manifesto, United States

19 Huber, I. 2014, *Literature After Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies*, Palgrave Macmillan, Paperback United Kingdom

20 Auster, P. 2008, *Man in the Dark*, Henry Halt and co., Paperback, United States, P. 2

21 Ibid. P. 118

22 Ibid. P. 177

23 Wallace, D.F. *E Pluribus Unum: Television and U.S. Fiction*, United States, Review of Contemporary Fiction, 1993, P. 38.

24 Means, D., *Interview: David Means Makes it Work*, [Website] October 18, 2006, <http://www.powells.com/post/interviews/david-means-makes-it-work> (accessed 15 May 2017).

25 *Modern Family: Do Not Push (S6, E06)*, Lloyd, C. and Levitan, S., United States, 20th Century Fox Television, October 2014 [Broadcast]

26 McKinney, M., *Notes on Metamodernism: The Limits of Postmodern Theory (from a gaming perspective)* [Website] November 7, 2010, <http://www.metamodernism.com/2010/11/07/the-limits-of-postmodern-theory-from-a-gaming-perspective/>, (accessed 27 April, 2017).

27 Kirby, A. *The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond*, Philosophy Now, Vol. 58, 2006, P. 34-37.

28 Diane Davis. Derrida, Speech, and Writing. 2011, [online video], 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcE7SKM7Rnw>, (accessed 1 June 2017).

29 Barthes, R., *The Death of the Author*, France, Manteia, no. 5, 1968.

30 Burnell, N., *Oscillating from a Distance: A Study of metamodernism in Theory and in Practice*, United States, Undergraduate Journal of Humanistic Studies, 2015.

31 Abramson, S., *The Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism*, including *Five more Basic Principles of Metamodernism* and *This Month in Metamodernism*, United States, Huffington Post, 2015.

32 Kadagishvili, D., *Metamodernism as we perceive it*, EU, European Scientific Journal, 2013.

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