

On Transcendent Metamodernism

In October of 2013, PMW Live released online a music video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWLhrHVySgA>) entitled "Chinese Food" that many viewers quickly decried as bigoted. Performed by a young, unknown performer named Alison Gold, the song—and its slickly produced video accompaniment—detailed a white pre-teen's obsession with the titular cuisine, though the terms of the obsession performed several metanarratives about the Orient that were deeply troubling. In one segment of the video, Gold confuses the Chinese people with their Japanese neighbors: Japanese geishas are shown dancing in unison as Gold extols the virtues of Chinese culture. Gold's evident unfamiliarity with the Chinese alphabet and Chinese cuisine is implicitly celebrated throughout; one particularly memorable shot has Gold pointing mutely but excitedly to items she wants at an imagined Chinese restaurant, none of which she can pronounce and most of which are not in themselves critical elements of domestic Chinese fare. Added to the mix shortly thereafter is a magical panda—as later revealed, an African-American male wearing a panda suit—whose function, it seems, is to double down on that tired stereotype of Asian cultures that holds them categorically "wiser" than their Western counterparts.

"Chinese Food" was watched by 15 million people on YouTube, with approximately 50,000 giving the video a "thumbs up" and approximately 180,000 registering the opposite response. Within two weeks of its release, the song had reached #29 on the Billboard Top 100 in the United States, despite apparently never having been played by

any radio station in America. The effusive response to the video—some of it earnestly positive, some of it tongue-in-cheekedly so; much of it earnestly negative—belied its status as an inscrutable art-object. Was it a "sincere" and therefore deeply unsettling portrayal of a young white girl's core values? Or was it an ironic, that is to say parodic, send-up of similar "vanity" productions like Rebecca Black's 2011 "hit" "Friday"? Or was it something else entirely, a comment on metanarratives about narcissism and celebrity constituting what one early scholar of metamodernism, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, called "a commenting on the commenters"? Did it even matter what the intention behind the video had been, if its millions of viewers would likely never gain access to such intentional data? Certainly, whatever the thought behind it, "Chinese Food" captured the attention of a contemporary population deeply unsure of what they were watching but nevertheless enthralled and reinvigorated by the state of suspended confusion into which they'd been put.

Hundreds of other videos in a similar vein have lately flooded the Internet. Consider Lisa Gail Allred's mesmerizingly horrid song (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57Sb14dyaUc>) "3 Second Rule," whose status as either parody or earnest self-expression is again so opaque as to somehow be beside the point. YouTube users have responded to the video informed primarily (and understandably) by their local contexts—they see what they want to see, bending external stimuli to fit their private metaphysics—though few seem capable of describing what they've experienced, let alone explaining how and why it draws their ardent attention.

Over the past two years, contemporary media have hosted a number of distinct variations on this general theme. Zach King, the Internet "magician" whose seven-second videos (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alEXbzvr81k&list=RDalEXbzvr81k#t=0>) on the social media site "Vine" have received millions of Vine and YouTube views, distinguishes himself from Gold and Allred by virtue of the fact that his relationship to the "real" is ambivalent rather than ambiguous. Viewers of King's brief videos know that what they're seeing is merely a series of computer-programming tricks, yet their sense of having witnessed something "magical" is in no sense lessened for having this knowledge. That King's magic is unapologetically "not real" doesn't factor into his audience's affective response, as the tricks so perfectly mimic reality that the distinction between reality and fiction becomes immaterial—and any juxtaposition or transference of the two deeply satisfying. The same might be said for rapper RiFF RAFF, whose music video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxLS-cpgbe0>) "Dolce & Gabbana" is typical of his oeuvre: simultaneously self-serious and impossible to credit; clearly orchestrated, yet lyrically and performatively slapdash; visually mesmerizing yet gleefully insubstantial; at once a parody of itself and so self-invested that its author once threatened to sue the producers of the James Franco vehicle *Spring Breakers* for "recycling my old quotes." If one doesn't exactly know how to take RiFF RAFF, that may well be the terminal ambition of his act—and not, importantly, some commentary on spectacle intended to elucidate something or someone other than RiFF RAFF himself. The rapper, like his art, is a total institution seeking no evident relation to, or discourse with, the world outside.

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Historically, metarealities in the arts have been readily resolvable, usually intentionally so. When artists commented on art, they intended to be seen as doing so—their work was, in this respect, deconstruction-friendly—and therefore could be aligned, as such efforts routinely were, with an academy-driven poststructuralist approach to the instabilities of language and reality. In recent years, however, we've increasingly seen artists who no longer wish to be aligned with either irony or sincerity, cynicism or optimism, but rather to produce decidedly non-interpretive works whose generative ambiguities render them essentially non-absorptive as anything other than sublime experience. Such artists act upon a core premise of the Internet Age: that mere awareness, rather than synthetic value, has become the primary currency in the arts and in the culture at large. If an artist can produce an experience for her audience that is unreplicable and, too, cleverly unparseable, it provokes much more attention and response from today's "surprise-proof generation" (again quoting Zavarzadeh) than would art that was discretely ironic or sincere, knowing or naive. In short, there's a desire in popular culture for a new form of unity, even a sublimity, that the careful deconstructions of the postmodern period made all but impossible.

The manifestations of metamodernism cited above are obscure compared to those that have infiltrated contemporary art and culture in more subtle ways. The fourth season

of the FX Channel's *Louie* begins with a clearly "unreal" event that is in no way segregated from the rest of the episode, permitting a viewer to treat any portion of the episode (or indeed the current season of the series) as possibly itself "unreal." Meanwhile, Wes Anderson's films have become among the most revered and respected both in and out of the academy, despite their ambiguous relationship with both sincerity and irony; Anderson offers his fans grand narratives that carry none of the conventional emotional weight with which such narratives have historically been imbued. In the literary arts, we find poems and novels whose content is substantively "accurate"—that is, whose truth-value has discernible weight and even direction—but which are framed by degenerative formal structures that trouble irresolvably readers' attempts to determine the work's or the author's relationship with logical positivism.

Many of these instances of metamodern thought and creation might have passed beyond our collective radar had certain celebrities not adopted some of their first principles in large-scale performance art projects that captured the attention of many millions. Preparing for his role in an ostensible documentary (2009's *I'm Still Here*), a mumbling Joaquin Phoenix paraded across late-night television in a shaggy beard and sunglasses, appearing to all but those who knew him to be on a downward spiral from the giddy heights of his Golden Globe- and Grammy-winning performance in 2005's *Walk the Line*. Had Phoenix really quit Hollywood for a rapping career, as he claimed? Or was the whole thing an act? Phoenix did so little to break character in public that for many months it was impossible to know; the "act" (or "actuality") was so sustained it became empirical reality. In 2014, actor Shia LaBeouf seemed to follow Phoenix's lead, engaging in so many

acts of plagiarism, antisocial protest, and even alleged criminal behavior that—owing in part to LaBeouf's own claims of being a performance artist, and in part to observers' incredulity that a once-celebrated actor could fall so far so fast—many remain uncertain to this day whether LaBeouf is a genius or a degenerate. Recently, actor James Franco's career has followed a similar arc, with the multi-talented artist finding himself at the center of several scandals (including accusations of plagiarism, collaborations with controversial metamodernist artists, and a bizarre "sexting" incident with a teenaged British tourist in New York) which may or may not have been intended as free advertising for his upcoming novels and films. Meanwhile, the Fox News Channel has, at least in the United States, erased time-honored boundaries between reportage, synthesis, and speculation, even as talk radio commentators spend hours per day unironically lambasting their political opponents for exactly the same rhetorical infelicities they themselves use to execute their critiques. In each of these cases, consumers of contemporary culture have been asked to abide in a state of suspended bewilderment between two or more possible realities, with entire lives and careers and art-objects hovering in the middle, entirely inscrutable.

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In view of all of the above, the obvious question is whether these artworks and artists are trailblazing iconoclasts or merely symptomatic of a paradigmatic shift in how we consume history's eternal antipodes (for sincerity, irony; for optimism, cynicism; for a stable reality, an unstable reality). But a still more intriguing question is whether antipodal analyses are any longer useful, or whether the time has come to speak of multiple dimensions of reality, actualities that are irresolvably contradictory and deliberately incalculable, and a state of affective response in which contemporary humans feel perpetually overwhelmed, but not—critically—degeneratively so. Whereas postmodern theories of hyperreality invariably metaphorized erasure of the line between fact and fiction as a gradual process of degeneration, collapse, and decomposition, metamodernism approaches contradiction, paradox, and ambiguity as reconstructive forces, and emphasizes not singularity-qua-collapse but multiplicity-qua-transcendence.

Where postmodernism renders a purported global metaphysics of late capitalist decay and decline as, too, a local and private metaphysics, metamodernism treats private, local, global, and universal metaphysics as equally interrelated and distinct, and, most importantly, individually infinite in variety. The alternating permeability and impermeability of parallel realities is treated as fundamentally dialogic rather than dialectic, and essential for the advancement of both political and apolitical commitments endemic to contemporary culture. The question to be asked of and into contemporary culture, then, is whether we are seeing not just a condition in which both art and life oscillate between observable poles, but indeed a transcendent metamodern condition in which the poles themselves have disappeared and we, collectively and individually, have

found in the middle space between them an entirely new site of "reconstructive deconstruction." We may consider this space bewildering, frightening, paradoxical, or even atopic, or we may choose instead to consider its generative potentialities as a means for removing present questions of politics and culture from the polarized entrenchments they've been mired in for far too long.

In its early stages, transcendent metamodernism is likely to polarize observers into recognizable positions—enthusiasm or anger, for instance—rather than permitting the inhabitation of a generative middle space between these positions (let alone a dialogic, multi-dimensional space simultaneously between and "above" our presently four-dimensional frameworks). One reason for this is that transcendent metamodern art is intentionally non-absorptive both affectively and intellectually. Another reason is that transcendent metamodernism has been as yet so lightly discussed that the actions of those like Shia LaBeouf still cannot be "read" effectively. The introduction to transcendent metamodernism that follows is intended as a remediation of this; better for an inscrutable new tendency in art to be contingently diagnosed than to have it remain a site of confusion or even animus among those who find comfort in the four-dimensional constructions of modernism or even the four-dimensional deconstructions of postmodernism.

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The terms "metamodern" and "metamodernist" have intermittently appeared in scholarly publications for at least the last forty years, though where or whether there are interconnections between the usages is a matter of some debate. Whether we speak of Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's descriptions of a "Metamodernist" actuality in the America of the mid-1970s, or New Zealander Alexandra Dumitrescu's 2007 citation of poet William Blake as a forerunner of twenty-first century literary metamodernism, or the influential 2010 article on paradigmatic metamodernism written by Dutch cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, one throughline is evident: the depiction of metamodernism as a discernible point of mediation between, as well as an extension of, both modernism and postmodernism. As yet unspoken of is the still more radical possibility, that metamodernism corresponds to a recurring sociopolitical existential state whose generative ambiguities definably transcend those of the other two recurring paradigms in human history, modernism and postmodernism. Of course, to speak here of "transcendence" is not to invoke some sleepy New Age vagary; transcendent metamodernism is at once based in contemporary science and several of the most august philosophical submissions of the last three hundred years.

Understanding transcendent metamodernism begins with an understanding of one important valence of "subjective desire," that being the persistent ambition of human subjects, regardless of their atomized local or global context, to remain self-recognizably exactly that: discrete subjects. As few have spoken more compellingly on the political and moral dimensions of desire than French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, it's with Deleuze that the discussion of transcendent metamodernism begins. As discussed by Daniel Smith, Deleuze's transcendent

theory of desire comprises four discrete components: an object of desire that is definitionally transcendent, inasmuch as only its absence permits the desire for it to endure; an active, rather than merely reactive sense of absence, interpreted by its subject as a "lack of being"; an awareness that all discharges of desire are finally transient and illusory, as none can permanently eliminate desire; and the resultant sense that desire is per se unrealizable.

Taken individually, none of these postulates would be particularly surprising or troubling if Deleuze hadn't also concluded that desire produces reality; in other words, a subject's sense of reality is circumscribed by mechanisms whose defining features are self-delusion and impossibility. For Deleuze in the 1970s, as for us today, this is the foundational paradox in which we abide: experiential reality comprises a multitude of imperfectly individuated fictions.

Just three years after Deleuze published his conclusions in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), University of Oregon literary studies professor Mas'ud Zavarzadeh posited that, after two decades of poststructuralist thought, the Vietnam War, Watergate, a global oil shortage, and various other geopolitical, ecological, and economic upheavals, Americans' collective civic reality had come to resemble the psychosocial reality Deleuze had earlier described in such detail. Reality, wrote Zavarzadeh, was no longer realistic—as the fantastic nature of lived experience had quite simply dissolved the boundary between fact and fiction. If Deleuze's hypotheses imagined desire as a "possible impossibility," then Zavarzadeh's positioned empirical reality as an "impossible possibility." One notes here that the postmodernist par excellence, Jacques Derrida, also spoke of "possible impossibilities," yet consistent with his poststructuralist discourse styled them an "interruption" in our collective four-dimensional actuality, rather than a point of access to additional dimensions and realities.

We might still find none of the above surprising or troubling if Deleuze hadn't also concluded that "there is only desire and the social, and nothing else," and if Zavarzadeh hadn't followed his unsettling observations with a further contention: that when reality is indistinguishable from fiction and vice versa, we can no longer say reality is stable or singular, but must conclude, instead, that it is multiple and abidingly mysterious. Taken together, these two submissions seem to summarize life as a suicide pact between empiricism and a will to live.

This rather frightening state of affairs—a fruitless desire for unity perpetually abiding in a senseless social sphere, analogized by Zavarzadeh as "a knight errant engaged in a bewildering quest of the self in an atomized society"—typifies metamodernism, broadly speaking. Alexandra Dumitrescu has described what we now think of as the metamodern condition as "a boat being built or repaired as it sails"; Vermeulen and van den Akker in 2010 likened it to a pendulum oscillating between innumerable positions due to observable and contrary forces such as fanaticism and irony.

For all the varying and idiosyncratic submissions of the theories they undergird, the above visualizations have two important features in common: first, an explicit contention that the metamodern condition responds to historicized phenomena finally locatable, domestically and internationally, in a postwar twentieth century dominated by poststructuralist theory; and second, a belief that to the extent these phenomena signify individual human subjects' intermittent or persistent attempts to move from a state of self-fragmentation to one of unity or at least self-recognition, the forces comprising these attempts are discrete enough to be observable. They are, in short, eligible for a synthesis in metamodern theory, which is just what we have had from Zavarzadeh, Dumitrescu, Vermeulen, and van den Akker, as well as the

notable others who've addressed the topic since 1975—among them Moyo Okediji (who in 2000 located metamodernism in aggressive challenges to the hegemony of modernist and postmodernist literary forms) and Andre Furlani (who in 2002 was the first to explicitly situate metamodernism as an intervention in the debate over post-postmodernity). Yet unlike these previous readings of the paradigm, transcendent metamodernism holds metamodernism to be merely one-third of an eternal paradigmatic triumvirate also including modernism and postmodernism, and identifies the metamodern in a dialogue of forces that at least partly defies empirical observation and calculation.

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A primary point of distinction between modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism is the treatment of metaphysics by each. While decades of scholarship have complicated our appreciation of modernism considerably, the ambition in modernist thinking to strike toward a global or even universal metaphysics remains—even as the most interesting modernist artworks, for instance Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, fall appreciably if self-avowedly short of achieving that aim. By contrast, in its refusal or perpetual deferral of a stable global metaphysics, postmodernism implicitly collapses metaphysics into the realm of the personal or, more aptly stated, the discrete. For instance, postmodernism offers us theories of performativity that posit the human body as a discrete locus for metaphysical negotiations

once thought universal or at least collectivized; likewise, Derrida's theory of the iterable mark imagines blocks of language as self-contained metaphysical entities that travel through time and space. The operative metaphysics in metamodernism, by contrast, would be termed "field metaphysics" if this adjectival construction didn't inadvertently denote two-dimensionality and locational stasis. We do better, then, to think of metamodernist metaphysics first and foremost as local or regional—a motive system that encompasses a four-dimensional space-time neither wholly private nor indelibly universal—and secondarily as a function of that space-time that permits bounded acts of five- or six-dimensional investigation, discernible to art-lovers as singular works in the literary, visual, material, and cinematic arts.

To apply the above, for instance, in the sphere of literature: If literary fiction, inasmuch as it encourages collective acts of interpretation dependent upon a presumed universal metaphysics—think book clubs—exemplifies several important qualities of modernism; if certain breeds of metafiction exemplify important qualities of postmodernism, inasmuch as they encourage individuated acts of interpretive deconstruction that dismantle the grand metanarratives each of us singly and self-interestedly constructs; metamodernism, through so-called "fan fiction," invokes a locomotive field of reality—not mere actuality—that is both elective and constructive for variably-sized groups of persons across space and time. This is not to say that literary metamodernism finds its best expression in fan fiction, merely that fan fiction is one excretion of the metamodern paradigm in the creative arts. Others include "retconning" (or "retroactive continuity") in comic book culture, this being the practice of retroactively transforming the canonical history of individual superheroes or superhero teams over time; franchise reboots, in cinema, that do not merely parody or otherwise degrade the

works upon which they are based, but instead use both prequel, remake, and sequel releases to re-frame and re-vision their source material with only occasional nods to same; and photorealistic "paintings" generated via computer software and displayed publicly as photographs, which do not so much interrogate the place of genre in art criticism as elevate art criticism above the polarizing taxonomies inherent to generic discourse. In each of these cases we can imagine, respectively, both modernist and postmodernist counterparts: for comic books, the conventional single-series comic book and second-and-subsequent comic book series that evolve their heroes appreciably; for cinema, the stand-alone film and the increasingly disappointing and degraded film franchise (think the *Police Academy*, *Friday the 13th*, or *Saw* franchises); for photography, conventional photography and photorealism. What all of these examples have in common is a modernist exemplar in which construction is privileged, a postmodernist exemplar in which deconstruction is privileged, and a metamodernist exemplar in which the reconstruction of a previously deconstructed object is key.

In the literary arts, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's early reading of metamodernism is particularly significant for four reasons: first, in that it emphasizes the functionality, rather than dysfunctionality, of language post-poststructuralism, envisioning it as a source for creativity rather than affective or substantive decomposition (metamodernism "by no means implies the death of the imagination," wrote Zavarzadeh in 1975, but only that "narrative energy is finding new channels"); second, in that it emphasizes the non-interpretive nature of metamodern literary art, that is, its non-absorptive quality with respect to deconstructive reading technologies; third, in that it treats the synthetic quality of reality as producing an ever-

expanding multiplicity of realities rather than the degenerative singularity of "spectacle" (cf. Debord); and fourth, in that it treats our present period as one in which critical and creative energies are so systematically juxtaposed that the result is not merely (as in postmodern literature) a creative work that deftly incorporates its own self-criticism, but a creative work whose self-criticism was so indelibly part of its drafting process that such self-analysis has been elided from the final work altogether. This is what Zavarzadeh meant in speaking of the "nonfiction novel," which we'd now qualify as a "New Sincericist" gesture. The author of the nonfiction novel has already internalized, "pre-writing," the resemblance of her own life to fiction, so much so that the fact of her autobiography being marketed as fiction need be acknowledged nowhere in the text itself. The text, that is, is merely the text, its arduous self-analysis having predated its creation. As Zavarzadeh wrote, the metamodern creative writer's "acceptance of the world-as-it-is" forms, perhaps paradoxically, part of a "radical...reaction[] to...[an] epistemological crisis."

Zavarzadeh, writing at the dawn of creative writing's academic institutionalization—the so-called "Program Era" in the history of the discipline—was among the first to recognize that where deconstruction is juxtaposed with (or in proximate antecedence to) the constructive process of drafting, as is the case in creative writing workshops, its operations can be and often are elided from the final work. The scholar termed this variety of writing "a metamodern narrative with zero degree of interpretation." In his discussion of one (notably metamodern) breed of "metafiction," Zavarzadeh acknowledged, too, that a creative writer can so confidently anticipate deconstructive readings of her work that, once again, such an awareness need not appreciate visibly in the work itself. This is why we call "fiction about fiction" deconstructive

and postmodern, and metafiction that lacks any self-interpretive component, or so parodies interpretive action as to merely "demonstrate the confusing multiplicity of reality"—the breed of metafiction of which Zavarzadeh wrote so eloquently—reconstructive and metamodern. To Zavarzadeh, metamodern literary art is neither structuralist or deconstructivist, but rather entirely astructural; it "frees" us of the "order-hunting obsession" of non-metamodernist literature.

The implications of Zavarzadeh's analysis for the promulgation of a transcendent metamodernism are legion. If modernist ambitions erected unidirectional literary forays deductively seeking revelation of what the common law terms "natural truths"; if postmodern ambitions replaced those unidirectional impulses with multiple and complex spectra upon which any individual could position herself relativistically; metamodern art occupies a space-time in which such polar spectra can be overleapt entirely by virtue of their antecedent internalization by creative artists. Put simply, metamodernism posits that, definitionally, anything manmade can be transcended; that, as established by the postmodernists, both actuality and reality are synthetic, which is to say manmade; and finally that, therefore, groups of persons can cooperatively or sequentially elect to transcend received streams of actuality and reality without needing to acknowledge themselves for having done so. The resultant works, whether in literature or any other creative genre, occupy an ambivalent space simultaneously between and beyond the polar spectra that deconstructive literary analyses have for decades afforded us. For instance, an aficionado of Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Angel* television franchises who electively determines that not only post-series comic books but even the very best *Buffy* and *Angel* fan fiction may be considered canonical is

embracing a metamodern paradigm; so too, though perhaps more troublingly, is the gaggle of pre-teens who cobble together a cohesive mythology for the dangerous Internet meme known as "Slenderman," even though this entirely "literary" creation lacks both a canon and an agreed-upon origin story. Readers of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy likewise treat as individuated and original reams of literary material that were first and foremost intended to serve as *Twilight* fan fiction. To be clear, none of these works are necessarily metamodern in their minute compositional gestures; it is that their presence and reception in the literary subculture bespeaks the operations of the metamodern paradigm, operations which were admirably forecast by the literary theorist Zavarzadeh.

Similar phenomena are now evident in other artistic subgenres and subcultures as well. For instance, the music-lover who sets aside questions of both aesthetics and ethos to endorse the ambiguous artistic inclinations and talents of a rapper like RiFF RAFF understands the metamodern implicitly, no more or less than do the author, faculty sponsor, and reader-consumer of an MFA program-written "nonfiction novel" whose relationship to both "truth" and "fiction" is not just ambivalent but invisibly so. As Zavarzadeh wrote, in such work the irony of truth's resemblance to fiction is "empirical" and thus merely an "overtone," rather than an explicit compositional marking; it is "perceived not by the subtle mind of the fictionist, but emerg[es] directly from the naked facts." Zavarzadeh notes, too, the normlessness this metamodern time-space produces, as creative writing "fail[s] to fulfill its traditional function: the exploration of the real through the fictional, and the significant illumination of the actual experience through aesthetic patterning."

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Zavarzadeh's literary analyses, including his discussion of the nonfiction novel and his treatment of the metamodern as "an historical...and cultural phase," exemplify the most recent stage in a dialogue between critical and creative energies that has been taking place in Western literature ever since Matthew Arnold's "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" was first published in 1865. Arnold theorized that the newest and freshest ideas in contemporary philosophy formed a "current" to which—separately—both the critic class and the artist class contributed. In some periods, Arnold posited, it was the critics who, inspired by the art of their time, took the lead in supplying ideas to the global "current" of thought; in other periods, artists, inspired by philosophies developed in art criticism and political commentary, generated new works that themselves constituted the newest and freshest thinking available. Critical to Arnold's metaphor was an *alternating* current—the individuation of critical and creative energies as playing discrete roles and participating in discrete periods of dominance. Postmodernism, particularly in Western literature, complicates Arnold's analysis by emphasizing that (particularly in the less-popular literary genres, that is, those whose subcultures are not large enough to support a stand-alone critic class) the artist and the critic are often one and the same. Much poststructuralist poetry, for instance, embodies the belief that creative energies can be habitually self-reflective, too. For Zavarzadeh, however, the juxtaposition of critical and creative energies was simultaneously less literal and

contemporaneous than it was for the postmodernists, and much more fully realized than in the binary, modernist-friendly "current" model originally offered by Arnold. Zavarzadeh's metamodernism was a "combining...[of] allegedly antithetical elements as the 'fictional' and the 'factual,' the 'critical' and the 'creative'"—yet a combination whose actualities were habitually obscured or unacknowledged in the works themselves. Unlike what he termed "anti-modernism" and "paramodernism," the metamodern, wrote Zavarzadeh, "enacts" rather than "interprets."

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To the extent Alexandra Dumitrescu, a literary studies scholar like Zavarzadeh, speaks of the metamodern as a "boat being built or repaired as it sails," she extends Zavarzadeh's investigation into metamodernism by providing a more apt metaphor for metamodernism's operations than the fusion-and-transcendence matrix envisioned by her predecessor. Unlike Zavarzadeh, whose emphasis on "fusion" misleadingly implied a hardening quality in the metamodern, Dumitrescu's dynamic 2007 model for metamodern operations captured a critical if paradoxical component of metamodernism. That is, a boat "being built or repaired" is presumptively not yet extant or functional as a "boat" (actually or in language) until it has been built or otherwise made seaworthy. Yet in the metamodern, it is possible for the prospective sailor to nevertheless proceed as though an unfinished, still ill-defined boat-like object is

something that can be "sailed." In poststructuralist theory, knowledge structures are perpetually contingent, rendering their workaday utility sufficiently a matter of debate and distress that—were such structures analogized metaphorically to a sailing vessel—only a fool would board them in the first instance to seek new lands. Dumitrescu, analyzing the functionality of language both artistically and socioculturally in the metamodern era, envisioned metamodern art-spaces as those in which even a perpetually reconstructive (that is to say, always-already partially deconstructed) framework like language can be locomotive and even confidence-inspiring. That Dumitrescu saw the first signs of such a treatment of language in the nineteenth-century poetry of William Blake, yet nevertheless locates paradigmatic usage of language in this way only in the post-postmodern period of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, offers (along with the quite different research done by Vermeulen and van den Akker in 2010) a bridge between Zavarzadeh's 1970s theories and the proposal, here, that metamodernism is a recurring historical phenomenon in which ambiguous yet sublime reconstructive deconstruction is ascendant in the arts.

Of course, paradigmatic ascendancy is a cyclical and therefore only temporary condition. In time, the metamodern dominant must be replaced (as it always has been historically) by a new modernism, albeit one that looks little like its antecedent "modernism"—for our purposes, the modernism of the early twentieth century—because the new modernism will necessarily be informed by the metamodern era it superseded. In a like fashion, we can forecast, too, the emergence of a novel iteration of postmodern deconstructivism at some point in the distant future. In essence, each successive dominant paradigm re-establishes a purism, one defined variously by the constructability or deconstructability or reconstructive

deconstructability of reality, that can subsequently be transcended by its successors by virtue of these philosophical constructs being manmade and impermanent in the first instance. While modernism may always hyperventilate the present, postmodernism micromanage it, and metamodernism permit brief transcendence of its self-limiting dimensionalities, the three in tandem form a broadly progressive trinity that jointly advances humans' private, regional, and global self-understanding whether or not any of the three advance, commensurately, the quality of the human condition.

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In the 1997 film *Contact*, a set of blueprints picked up by American scientists via satellite transmissions turn out to be the complex and literally alien architectural plans for a time-travel device. The device, which earthly powers-that-be decide to build immediately, is in its final state a massive sphere comprising four rings; when activated, the rings revolve with such blinding speed that to witness it is both bewildering and awe-inspiring. Ultimately, the superimposed revolutions of these rings—which one imagines representing the four Euclidean dimensions of height, width, depth, and time, or what scientists now call "Minkowski spacetime"—produce a rift in the spacetime continuum that allows Jodie Foster's character, an atheistic scientist, to travel into the fifth dimension.

While purely theoretical everywhere but Hollywood, the fifth dimension is nevertheless easily understood as the hypothetical space in which multiple, distinctly observable spacetime continua coexist. In the fifth dimension, an infinitude of realities somehow connected to the "now" we presently observe in the fourth dimension may be mapped; for instance, all possible dinners you could consume tomorrow evening reside contiguously in the fifth dimension. Meanwhile, in the sixth dimension, these separate continua are unanchored from our "now" such that each has its own Big Bang and Apocalypse and everything in-between—which, consequently, enables them to be placed in conversation with one another. In *Contact*, the two spacetime continua depicted on-screen are (1) a reality in which Foster, humanity's designated astronomical representative, spends eighteen hours travelling through space and conversing with an alien creature who takes the form of her deceased father; and (2) an actuality in which the aliens' time-travel device has no functionality at all, and fails to send Foster to the stars. Foster, in other words, enters the fifth dimension. Had she entered the same time-travel device and, instead, traveled to what we'd commonly term an "alternate reality"—such as the universe in which the characters of *Guardians of the Galaxy* are resident—we would trace her movement in the sixth dimension.

As explained in this (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkxieS-6WuA>) video, "Quantum physics tells us that the subatomic particles that make up our world are collapsed from waves of probabilities simply by the act of observation....each of us are collapsing the indeterminate wave of probable futures contained in the fifth dimension into the fourth dimensional line that we are experiencing as time." In a companion video that discusses primarily the sixth dimension (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdnhKE95AqM#t=336>), we

learn that some scientists dismiss this "wavefunction collapse" as merely an "actuality," not a "reality"—meaning that while it is undoubtedly what we *think* we are experiencing, it is not what is "actually" happening. Such scientists, adopting American physicist Hugh Everett's "many-worlds interpretation," declare *universal* wavefunction the objective reality and thereby accept the sixth dimension as a scientific given. Albeit working in a very different field, Zavarzadeh, like Everett, distinguished in 1975 between "actuality" and "reality": the former he associated with a personal context necessarily constructed from contradictory data, while the latter comprised a global (and universal) metaphysics perpetually indiscernible to any single individual.

It's easy enough to dismiss *Contact* as pure Hollywood glamour, until one recalls that it was based on a novel by Carl Sagan, who in 1994 received the Public Welfare Medal, the highest award of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. Sagan received the honor for both his work on hypothesizing the geography of real spaces that are nevertheless presently unreachable by humans—Venus and Saturn, for instance—and for doing more than any other scientist before him to hypothesize possibly real yet presently unknowable entities: that is, extraterrestrial life-forms.

Of course, Sagan's accounts of five-dimensional phenomena and interactions with extraterrestrial organisms are only fictional inasmuch as they are still unrealizable. Scientists around the world have been able to, via mathematics, theorize five dimensions (indeed many more than that) for several decades now. With all this in mind, we can readily imagine what language we might use to describe a person or object permitted to cross the boundaries between the fourth and fifth or fifth and sixth dimensions. I propose that the most probable

term for describing such an unprecedented adventure would be "transcendence," and that that term would hold even—perhaps especially—if we were discussing ideologies of reality instead of empirical actualities. In each instance, as we move to higher and higher dimensions metaphysically, we quite literally "transcend" (pass beyond) all the dimensions below.

Sagan and others' postulates regarding transdimensional transcendence inhabit, naturally, that sphere of activity Deleuze would term "the social"—as to even speak of these ideas is to participate in a transnational dialogic exchange. But what does "transcendence" look like in that most private of spheres, the one that comprises the locally contextualized actuality of the human subject: the ambit of desire? This is not, as snarks might have it, a rhetorical question only for New Ageists to ponder; it is, instead, the present query of literary and cultural studies in the age of metamodernism.

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We may call metamodernism, as Vermeulen and van den Akker have, a "cultural dominant" or "structure of feeling" that manifests as a paradigmatic form of knowing, but we should also recognize that, as to the metamodern condition, we have been here before. However we visualize metamodernism, whether it be as a rapid but observable oscillation in four dimensions or a four-dimensional state of perpetual reconstruction, the interplay of construction and deconstruction signified by metamodernism was not singly or jointly produced by (for instance) "Auschwitz, Hiroshima, My Lai" and "emerging technetronic realities"

(Zavarzadeh), "climate change, financial crises, terror attacks, and digital revolutions" (Vermeulen and van den Akker), or even upheavals slightly farther in the past, such as the French Revolution William Blake contended with in verse (Dumitrescu). Just as the interplay of antitheses is an eternal condition first hypothesized (as "metaxy") by Plato, epochs in which this interplay creates transcendent phenomena in the intermediate space between each and all poles recur throughout history. It's certainly true that, as these other theorists wisely detail, human civilization experienced such a global condition following the advent of the Internet, and after Vietnam, and even after historically distant events such as the French Revolution. It's also true, however, that Roman playwright Hosidius Geta developed the metamodern verse form known as the "cento"—in which disparate data-units are combined as a coherent whole whose constituent parts cannot be traced to their origins—in the late second century, shortly after the reign of Commodus (recently portrayed by Joaquin Phoenix in *Gladiator*) ended the Pax Romana. The 1960s were a turbulent time in America, certainly; just as surely, the Internet Age has its turbulences; but it's not clear that our chaos is any more ontologically complex or transformative than the decline and fall of the Roman Empire was.

In other words, while most bounded epochs exhibit a bias toward either the many forms and counter-forms of construction (for instance, the period in which so-called "modernism" dominated Western letters) or those of deconstruction (as with postwar "poststructuralist" thought), it is possible—however uncommon—to locate historical moments in which "reconstructive deconstruction" is the defining sociopolitical and subjective function. The awesome bewilderment the paradox of reconstructive deconstruction promotes in both private

and public spaces constitutes an iteration of Kantian sublimity we may term both metamodern and transcendent.

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If Kantian sublimity denotes a condition in which a subject is sensorily overwhelmed—to the point at which external stimuli become non-absorptive—metamodern transcendence is an overthrow of moral and social sensibility that renders massive stockpiles of contradictory stimuli non-differentially absorptive. Metamodern transcendence is consequently a non-discerning receptivity rather than a discernible deferral. This does not mean that we find, in metamodernism, an anarchistic absence of belief, but rather that in metamodernism all beliefs, however fragmentary or ill-formed, regain the utility of promoting new forms of unity.

Kant hypothesized the "sublime" as an aesthetic experience, a construction that implies the sort of temporal transience we don't normally associate with a cultural dominant like metamodernism. Elongated into a paradigmatic structure of feeling, however—one that frames knowledge and knowledge-production operations for a large group of persons over a period of years or even decades—we may think of the sublime as a sustained existential state. This state is typified not by the alternation of or oscillation between polarized affective and psychosocial states (for instance, pleasure and fear; sincerity and irony; optimism and doubt; or truth and relativism) but by a juxtapositive suspension in which all poles disappear at once and entirely. If "atopic metaxis" has been envisioned by metamodernists Vermeulen and van den Akker as

"here, there, and nowhere," this new reading of the metamodern condition connotes ubiquity and indecipherability simultaneously. In the transcendent metamodern, there is no relational "here" or "there," yet we are richly and indubitably "somewhere." In sociological terms, this can be termed a "normalized anomie"—a normlessness whose very intransigence over time produces new norms.

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In the reading of metamodernism I propose here, we do better to think of the "meta-" prefix of "metamodernism" as relating to the "metabole" of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Epstein, not the "metaxis" of Plato. Originally described by Epstein in 1999, and positioned, at the time, as a speculative feature of literary postmodernism in the post-Soviet era, I here treat the term as endemic to the cultural paradigm to which late postmodernism has given way, metamodernism. Briefly defined, "metabole" is, paraphrasing Epstein, an intermediate link between the literal and the figurative that, in being raised to the level of discourse, is centralized and therefore paramount. As compared to metaphorical processes, which emphasize at once a single literal and figurative term to be placed in relation to one another—usually through superimposition—metabolic processes emphasize the unspoken "middle term" between these two, and thereby offer "a new phase of wholeness established among disparate phenomena," and a "unifying link between two realities, by virtue of which they can achieve

mutual transformation." Ironically, we find in the counter-metaphorical term "metabole" a resemblance to Kant's distinctly metaphoric "as-if" formulation of subject formation (described by Vermeulen and van den Akker as the metamodernist's insistence on proceeding as though something known not to be true actually is). Metabolic reasoning takes a space that is essentially hypothetical—a waystation between literal truth and figurative fiction that doesn't exist in practice—and treats it "as if" it is a language in which all persons may speak. While we can reify such a language with new language, as many metamodernist poets and novelists have already done, experientially this hypothetical space produces only a persistent sensation analogous to Kantian sublimity.

The above definition of "metabole" bears further scrutiny, as Epstein's reference to "two realities" simultaneously operative calls to mind the multiple realities of the fifth dimension and the interactions between those realities that can hypothetically occur in the sixth dimension. Normally hidden, the proving ground upon which individuated realities intersect and interact rises to the level of discourse in the metabolic, and to the level of cultural paradigm in metamodernism. If Vermeulen and van den Akker and others who have spoken of metamodernism emphasize the "between" and "beyond" of the Greek *meta*, Epstein and transcendent metamodernism emphasize, instead, the sense of word that is roughly translatable to "place of transfer." Explicit here is that the metamodern is indeed a place, a "somewhere," but also that this place is a site of continual translation and mistranslation that is locomotive rather than locational.

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It goes without saying that transcendent metamodernism is the product, in the first instance, of a paradigmatic transcendence. That is, it presumes the movement out of one dominant paradigm and into another; discussions of metamodernism that posit it as a mere extension of, reaction to, or even mediation between modernism and/or postmodernism misread the qualities and functions of transcendent metamodernism. This said, to declare a paradigm distinct from several others and presently dominant is merely to say that it is the new *dominant* paradigm—an altogether different premise from saying it is the *only* operative paradigm (either generally or for any given subject) on scene. Modernism and postmodernism are "dead" only hegemonically speaking; existentially, they remain discrete, observable, and viable.

Recently, modernist literary and cultural scholars—those whose careers are predicated upon syntheses of phenomena associated with the once-dominant paradigm of modernism—have taken to discussing "metamodernism" as though it were a novelty simultaneously within their purview and ripe for differentiation from the academic research of their peers. In other words, there's been brisk trade in entertaining the possibility of a "metamodernism," as doing so allows modernists to break new ground while remaining recognizably in-field. This is important at a time when "modernist studies" is among the small number of specialties acknowledged and valued by university hiring committees. We see this tendency, for instance, at the recent British Association for Modernist Studies conference, at which J.T. Welsch

circumscribed metamodernism as merely a "whiggish narrative" of productive degeneration layered atop existing modernist discourse. We see this, too, in David James and Urmila Seshagiri's recent article in the *PMLA*, "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution," which positions metamodernism as little more than a terminally cloudy lens through which to reexamine modernism. These readings of metamodernism by modernists render metamodernism not as a discrete paradigm, but as a light-weight adjunct to the studies these scholars have already been expertly engaged in for years.

The same might be said, changing only the word "modernism" to "postmodernism," of postmodernist scholar Jennifer Ashton's recent essay "Poetry and the Price of Milk." In Ashton's hands, metamodernism is merely moral dilettantism, an excuse to "swing[] from one aesthetic or political commitment to another..." Indeed, to Ashton even the term itself suffers from an inexcusable inconstancy, as—far from being born of a definable Greek construction, Kant, Deleuze, Epstein, Sagan, and much else—"metamodernism" is so insubstantial that "in another five minutes, we might wish to call it something else." In an act of wish-fulfillment, Ashton does exactly this, ending her essay by concluding that metamodernism is "nothing if not capitalism's fantasy of the market, one in which what we 'like' can also masquerade as a poetics."

Ungenerously, we might term this poststructuralist analysis of metamodernism "unipolar," inasmuch as it treats new terms as sooner or later entering the orbit, qua satellites, of a single entrenched ideology (here, neo-Marxism); more generously, Ashton offers to metamodernism a bipolar synthesis in which the metamodernist simply refuses to choose between the two perfectly coherent and purportedly exhaustive alternatives placed before her: neo-Marxism or late capitalism. That metamodernism not only operates but must be engaged with in a

language and dialogic space beyond the very notion of *polarity* renders either approach to the term inadequate.

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Arguably, the fault for such confusions as those above lies with us metamodernists. It is we who have thus far offered the academy only two metaphorical models for the new cultural dominant: oscillation and mediation. Luke Turner, in his 2011 "Metamodernist Manifesto," argues that metamodernism is merely an oscillation between two poles (modernism and postmodernism), which paradigms, in being visualized as poles, must be so roughly drawn that metamodernists are ever open to the sensible objection that they speak of metamodernism's two paradigmatic predecessors reductively. Is postmodern thought reducible as merely a "pole of cynicism"? Is modernism merely a "pole of knowingness"? Just so, when metamodernism is spoken of as simply an extension of the project of modernism, or an extension of the project of postmodernism—in the form of a mediation of or intervention with one or both—the claim that metamodernism is a discrete paradigm becomes counterintuitive if not unthinkable. It is, in this imagining, no more than a subcategory of either modernism or postmodernism or both.

The initial premises of a "transcendent metamodernism" were posited in a February 2014 essay (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/seth-abramson/on-american-metamodernism_b_4743903.html) I published in *The Huffington Post* entitled "On American

Metamodernism," which principles were then expounded upon, albeit still embryonically, in "The Metamodern Intervention," a two-part essay misattributed to "Aart Naaktgeboren" ("Art, Naked Born") and published (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/seth-abramson/the-metamodern-interventi_1_b_5516404.html) on *The Huffington Post* in June of 2014. In response to the former essay, several metamodernists, among them Turner, observed that as transcendence is an impossibility, it can play little if any substantive part in programmatic metamodernism. In fact, transcendence is already a given in both aesthetics and quantum mechanics, with the only remaining questions being its duration and precise field of manifestation. I've submitted here that the period is the present; the exact manifestations, briefly discussed in the context of the literary arts in "The Metamodern Intervention," will surely be discussed much more by literary, cultural, and political theorists in the years to come.

As metamodernism generally becomes a topic of much debate and additional theorizing, what will be required of literary theorists is a willingness to speak of the language of realities rather than (or in addition to) the realities of language; of cultural theorists, a long view of history that avoids essentializing the present period or fetishizing as singular its fixtures and forces; of political theorists, a willingness to allow metamodernism to put multiple self-contained yet still imperfect realities in conversation, the better to encourage presently unthinkable political commitments that are not merely reactions to, or even revolutions of, any ideology with which we're now conversant. Indeed, a basic premise of metamodernism is that, no matter how much we may complicate their core valences, modernist constructions and postmodernist deconstructions both metaphorically posit a single four-dimensional reality to be stabilized or destabilized, worked toward or pushed off from; by contrast, metamodernism

de- and re-contextualizes these sometimes contradictory ideas and ideals and then puts them in a state of not just juxtaposition but trans-dimensional, non-hierarchical, non-didactic exchange. Metamodernists do this not because conventional political commitments (whether reified in creative or critical or activist energies) are beside the point, but because our present roster of discernible commitments, arranged in whatever aggregation, do not suit the moment and in any case have yielded poor results.

Only an exploratory juxtaposition of multiple realities in the crucible of error offers an appropriate response to the times. As "The Metamodernist Manifesto" wisely declares, "error breeds sense"; we must glory in Zavarzadeh's "fabulous reality" before we can even arguably be directed toward whatever comes next.

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