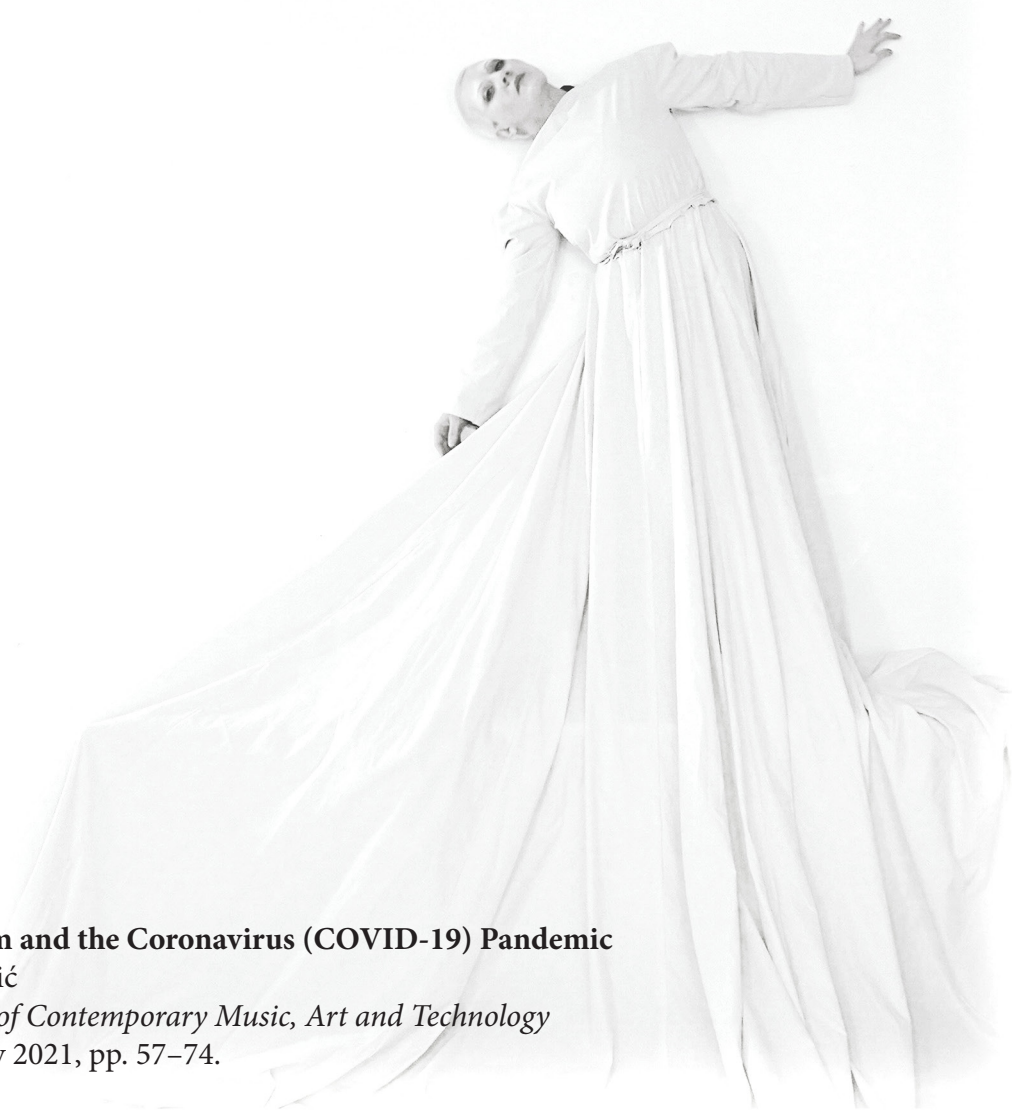


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**Metamodernism and the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic**

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# **METAMODERNISM AND THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) PANDEMIC**

**Abstract:** Metamodernism is understood as the dominant cultural logic of the 21st century. Metamodernism's breadth and complexity, as well as its theory's advocacy for contemporaneity, invite for consideration whether the notion could address the most recent global events and the crises after 2020. Therefore, this study designates and explains the five key concepts of metamodernism – metaxy, abstraction, reconstruction, historicity, and a structure of feeling – and uses them to discuss the current state of affairs, the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. The study evaluates the interpretative and discursive potentials of metamodernism, finding that the crisis we now live in can be well-conceptualised from the metamodern perspective, yet at the same time the enormous impact of the crisis brings the usual metamodern perspectives into question and puts the key concepts to test.

**Keywords:** metamodernism, historicity, structure of feeling, metaxy, abstraction, reconstruction, the coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis, pandemic

## **INTRODUCTION**

Metamodernism is a contemporary cultural paradigm sustaining the idea of a political, cultural, and aesthetic change that, according to its advocates, emerged at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and marked the end of postmodernism (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010, 3). Metamodernism is a “movement representing a post-ideological, open source, globally responsive, paradox resolving, grand nar-

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rative” (Cooper 2017a), recognised and elaborated within a variety of disciplines, from philosophy and aesthetics to political theory, cultural studies, literary and art theory, sociology, and education.

The term “metamodernism” appeared in the literary theory of the 1970s, most notably that of Zavarzadeh (1975), where it was used to convey the transcendence of the typically modernist narrational plane (the inner plane of the character) in the direction of metafiction (the interpenetration of facts and fiction, life and art), irony, black humour, or pastiche.<sup>2</sup> Some decades later, still in the domain of literary theory, Furlani (2002, 713) ascribed additional and somewhat newer meanings to the term “metamodernism”: the type of aesthetics that comes after modernism but utilises modernist means. Such purport of “metamodernism” will grow into the term’s wide-accepted meaning, first taken by Vermeulen and van den Akker in their seminal article “Notes on metamodernism” (2010). Here the authors carry the term outside its earlier context, applying it to art and culture from around 1999 onwards. In the decade that followed, different writers started seeing metamodernism fit other scholarly disciplines, too, such as political theory (Freinacht<sup>3</sup>) or sociology (Cooper). More recently, metamodernism has become recognised outside of traditional academic platforms as well; it is debated in podcasts and streaming videos and presented through popular performances and memes across social networks (Bastiaanse 2018; Wisecrack 2016).

The discourse on metamodernism is rooted in the perception that the 21<sup>st</sup>-century cultural, political, and artistic currents cannot be explained anymore (merely) in terms of postmodernism. According to Vermeulen and van den Akker (2017, Ch. 1/8), metamodernism is a suitable term to name “a specific stage in the development of Western capitalist societies, in all its many forms and disguises” – neoliberalism, the Anthropocene, climate change, the widespread use of the Internet, a string of social and right-wing movements (such as the “Occupy” movement, the “Tea party” movement, UKIP under Nigel Farage’s leadership), and the changes in the global economy (like the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath, or the new “geopolitical hegemony”, i.e. “China’s state-regulated market system”). The authors propose metamodernism as a dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies, “a structure of feeling”, a multifunctional and heuristic label for “a range of aesthetic and cultural predilections”, “stylistic registers”, and philosophies, as well as a period in history (Ibid., Ch. 1/11). Other writers define and explain metamodernism by a similarly magnificent scope of etiquettes – “the mindset or sensibility or cultural code”, “a post-postmodern grand meta-narrative”, “a developmental stage

2 Zavarzadeh (1975, 75; see also Abramson 2015) regarded the term “postmodernism” too narrow to encompass different strains in the literature of the 1950s and later. He distinguished the “modernists” (Joyce, Woolfe, and Faulkner) from the “anti-modernists” (Amis, Wain, and Snow), “paramodernists” (Beckett and Nabokov), and the “metamodernists” (John Barth and Thomas Pynchon). Metamodernism in this early sense could be interpreted as a variant of postmodernism.

3 Hanzi Freinacht is the pen name of Daniel Görtz and Emil Friis.

of society”, even “a relatively late and rare stage of personal development (Henriques 2020), the “meta-cultural consciousness”, “a vision and a possibility”, “a more complex form of meaning-making” (Andersen 2019, 16), “a particular lens for thinking about the self, language, culture, and meaning – really, about everything” (Abramson 2017).

The breadth of the concept of metamodernism, as well as the theory of metamodernism’s drive toward contemporaneity, make us wonder if the term could address the most recent global events and the crisis that came in 2020 with the coronavirus disease. Have today’s cultural, political, social, and artistic currents cut across those from a couple of years ago, hence, can metamodernism sustain the same interpretative and discursive potential it had in previous times? This study aims to answer these questions first by overviewing and explaining the key notions of the theory of metamodernism – *metaxy*, reconstruction, abstraction, historicity, and a structure of feeling – and then by relating these notions to the Covid-19 pandemic. The study’s goal is to show that metamodernism reveals significant potential for conceptualising contemporary tendencies, even though it has set certain ideals that still seem too far to reach – and that might even be too ambitious now that the corona crisis has hit and is bearing unimagined consequences.

## 1. METAMODERNISM: KEY CONCEPTS

The most influential ideas about metamodernism, in Cooper’s (2018) opinion, come from two “schools of metamodernism”: the Dutch school (Vermeulen, van den Akker, and their associates) and “the Nordic school” (Freinacht and Cooper himself leaning most toward Freinacht’s writings). The Dutch authors focus mostly on metamodern art and culture (Bakirov 2019; Cooper 2017a) and emphasise the concepts of *metaxy*, *historicity*, and *a structure of feeling*. The other mentioned authors accept these concepts as “foundational” (Cooper 2018) but insist more on the principles of *abstraction* and *reconstruction* in the domains of politics and sociology.<sup>4</sup> Despite differences in focuses, the theoretical paths of all of these thinkers converge and “strive towards similar plateaus” (Cooper 2018), where the core common node is the “developmental lens” (Görtz 2018) through which all thinkers see the coming of metamodernism.

In a succession of supposedly opposed and demarcated historical eras (modernism–postmodernism–metamodernism), metamodernism has been envisioned as “the discourse [...] to replace postmodernism” (Cooper 2017a).<sup>5</sup> Aligning their

4 There is another circle of Dutch authors, gathered around the *Freedom lab* web platform, whose insights into the connections between metamodernism and the coronavirus pandemic proved to be valuable for the present research.

5 It is (still) not an easy task to designate precisely what type of discourse different ideas of different theorists are shaped into: some discourses seem to be a philosophical/aesthetic platform

early ideas with many of their colleagues' readings of the "decline and demise of the postmodern" (Hutcheon, Lipovetsky, Kirby, Samuels, Bourriaud, etc.), Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010, 1) find the postmodern terms outdated and inadequate to describe not only the contemporary aesthetics but the "ecosystem", "the financial system", and "the geopolitical structure" of today's world as well. The changes that the Dutch authors analyse the most are in the visual arts, where there seems to be an increasing abandonment of "the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favor of aesthetical notions of reconstruction, myth, and metaxis" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010, 2). But the shifts are noticeable in the cultural, economic, and political sense, too, like in the politicians' and CEOs' expressions of a "desire for change" in many interviews, or in the planners' and architects' replacements of "their blueprints for environments with environmental 'greenprints'" (Ibid.).

While Vermeulen and van den Akker's initial denunciation of postmodernism immediately prompted elaboration of metamodernism and warranted the duo's recognition within the theory of post-postmodernism,<sup>6</sup> it was soon toned down significantly by the authors themselves as they continued to theorise metamodernism's far more complex relationship with postmodernism than a mere negation or a critique. The outbalance of the previous censure of postmodernism came in Vermeulen and van den Akker's remarks such as that metamodernism "attempts to incorporate postmodern stylistic and formal conventions while moving beyond them" (van den Akker & Vermeulen 2017, Ch. 1/5) and that it oscillates "between what we may call [...] postmodern and pre-postmodern (and often modern) predictions" (van den Akker & Vermeulen 2017, Ch. 1/22).

So, metamodernism finds its impetus in an active dialogue with postmodernism and also (pre-post)modernism. It embraces some typically modern and some typically postmodern solutions, integrating "rationality and emotions, logic and imagination, scientific truth, and belief or faith" (Dumitrescu 2014, 15). Dember (2018) posits the "subjective Felt Experience" as the "central motivation of metamodernism", and in the light of this preoccupation, metamodernism is able to conduct its critique of "the ironic distance of postmodernism, the scientific reductionism

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and an analytical approach to art and culture ("the Dutch school of metamodernism" – but not exclusively), while others seem more socially and politically engaged, proposing even political and social programs ("the Nordic school" – but not exclusively). Some discourses (this study included) tend to systematise other discourses on metamodernism (many of Cooper's texts, for example, also fall into this category).

6 Although widely in use, the term "post-postmodernism" to Vermeulen and van den Akker seems "syntactically correct but semantically meaningless" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010, 3). Other authors proposed different terms as umbrella-terms for the times after postmodernism: "hypermodernism" (Lipovetsky), "digimodernism" (Kirby), "automodernism" (Samuels), "altermodernism" (Bourriaud) (Ibid.), "postirony", "cosmodernism", "re-modernism", (Konstantinou 2017, Ch. 6/1), or "reflective modernism" (Mitrović 2017, 6, 191).

of modernism, and the pre-personal inertia of tradition”<sup>7</sup>.<sup>8</sup> “Something seemed to have changed in the new millennium that made it cool again to express unabashed feelings – joy, wonder, sadness, vulnerability, triumph – in our art, and in everyday life, unfettered by the ever-present ironic snark that controlled the nineties and earlier”, notes Dember (Ibid.).

The interplay between postmodernism and modernism produces the “both-neither dynamic” and leads to the principle, or rather, the state of *metaxy* (μεταξύ) – a term that Vermeulen and van den Akker trace all the way back to Plato’s *Symposium*, where it was used to describe “a sense of in-betweenness” (van den Akker & Vermeulen 2017, Ch. 1/21). In Vermeulen and van den Akker, *metaxy* becomes a metaphor for the “metamodern condition” (van den Akker, Gibbons, & Vermeulen 2017, Acknowledgements; Cooper 2018). The authors use it as the iconic embodiment of what they take to be the three main meanings of the Greek word “meta” relevant in the context of the theory of metamodernism: 1. with or among (metamodernism is situated with or among older and newer historical periods), 2. between (metamodern aesthetics is “characterised by an oscillating in-betweenness or, [...] conflicting positions”), 3. after (refers to the “shift from postmodernism to metamodernism”, so it is the chronological aspect of metamodernism) (van den Akker & Vermeulen 2017, Ch. 1/18–25).

In Cooper (2017a), the prefix “meta” is used differently. It is joined with words of cognitive and epistemic meaning (“metacognition”, “metanoia”, and “meta-analysis”), and as such, it is supposed to signify intellectual advancement aided by fast, technological communication. The meta-epistemology refers to deep and profound thinking and learning, the kind of mental endeavour that strives to arrive at some complex, “totalistic” solutions (Cooper 2017b) to our equally complex, heavily politicised problems and crises (like climate change, racism, drug policy, or war). Such an endeavour in the theory of metamodernism is called **abstraction** – thinking about the multifaceted problems by raising them on “the level of general understanding” (Benjamin Bratton, TEDx Talks 2013), using “demystification and reconceptualisation” (Ibid.), with a goal of revealing “unknown common truths across conceptually related studies” (Cooper 2017b).<sup>9</sup>

Metamodern epistemology, as seen by another advocate of metamodernism, Bratton (TEDx Talks 2013), criticises the postmodern oversimplification of the issues of our world. Postmodern epistemology had a habit of “taking something with substance and value and coring it out so that it can be swallowed without chewing” (Ibid.). Bratton (European Graduate School Video Lectures 2016) advis-

7 In Dember (2018), the tradition refers to the pre-modern era.

8 Dumitrescu (2007) similarly notices that metamodernism is “a reaction to [(post)modernism] (especially to its fragmentarism, individualism, excessive analyticity, and extreme specialization)”.

9 The Dutch authors do not insist on the concept of abstraction, however, van den Akker (in collaboration with Kloeg (2020, 61)), explores the possibility of the *universal*, which is close to abstraction by assuming the “rais[ing of] this or that from the status of the lowly particular to the high ground of the universal”.

es that now in metamodernism we are to face “our most frightening problems” by over-viewing the issues and *reconstructing* some of the old narratives. Smith (cited in Cooper 2017a) also underlines such an epistemological approach and calls it a solution to the “Derrida trap”, which with its endless cycle of deconstructions led to “mindless relativism”. **Reconstruction** is supposed to “re-assemble whatever you have deconstructed into a ‘better’ version” (Ibid.), and at the same time, it is supposed to bring practical solutions to problems, which is something that post-structuralism rarely offered. To follow deconstruction with reconstruction – this is “the metamodern dictum”, Freinacht insists (2019, Ch. 17/79). However, while rooting for reconstruction, Freinacht embraces some limitations that postmodernism used to shed light on and warns: “We must accept ... that we will never obtain the truth in any absolute meaning of the term”; the reconstruction can only happen in a form of a “provisional synthesis, a synthesis that can never be considered final or as absolute truth” (Ibid.).

Reconstruction, therefore, is not meant to recreate old narratives but should produce “meta-narratives” (Freinacht 2015; Henriques 2020), like universal and encompassing Knowledge (not only a focused understanding of something), or a History that is a shared sentiment (not a pure chronology). The existence of History in the times after its meticulous postmodern deconstruction and proclaimed end – especially in Fukuyama’s article “The End of History?” (1992) – has been a huge inspiration and a driving force of Vermeulen and van den Akker’s theory.<sup>10</sup> The authors discuss changes that occurred within the “social situation” of the early 2000s and how these changes created an impression in people that a new era, a continuation of the history, happened (2017, Section I/1).<sup>11</sup> It is exactly the impression itself, the *feeling* of something appearing, that Vermeulen and van den Akker insist on. Metamodern historicity is less about a (revival of a) particular historical moment and much more about the production of a *zeitgeist* and the renewed sense of **historicity**.

Historicity is a layered notion. Ricoeur (cited in van den Akker 2017, Section I/1) describes it as a “specific modality in which ‘man is present to himself as a being in history’”, hence, it is inherently spatial as well as temporal. Minding its complexity, Heiser, whose writings heavily influenced the Dutch authors, sees historicity as “super-hybridity”, a plenitude of historical, geographical, and cultural

10 Explaining metamodernism, van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017, Ch. 1/3) assert that the phenomenon “is about the bend of History and its associated ‘senses of a bend’ that have come to define contemporary cultural production and political discourse”. The authors explicitly sustain Jameson’s (1992) idea of “cultural logic”, according to which there has to be some cultural dominance in every era. Possibly, they also implicitly endorse Bourdieu’s (1990, 52–65; 1993) concept of “habitus” or Dalhaus’ (1979, 97) notion of “aesthetic habituation”, which both assume some set coordinates in art and culture of a period, much like the concept of “cultural logic”.

11 Fukuyama (2012) himself revised some of his earlier premature claims, making History potent again by questioning the survival of liberal democracy, which for him previously used to mark the final stage of human evolution.

contexts, intertwining in the era of advanced technologies and the Internet (Heiser 2010a; 2010b; 2017). By the quality of super-hybridity, metamodernism extends and embraces postmodernism and reconstructs History. In its ever-recycling endeavour, the aesthetics of metamodernism is equated with a pleiad of “new” aesthetic phenomena, such as the New Romanticism (arts), the New Weird or Nu-Folk (music), the New Sincerity (literature), the New Mannerism (crafts), etc.<sup>12</sup> But, Heiser (2017, Ch. 4/9) considers the jeopardy of metamodern recycling that often-times goes beyond the aesthetics and, by way of loose and asynchronous selection and re-usage of mythical symbols, goes to produce seemingly “autochthonous” political and ideological practices of, for example, racisms, terrorism, and tyranny (in these terms Heiser (2017, Ch. 4/15) investigates “the practices of the infamous Islamic State group”, and reads the symbols and emblems of the Nazi party).

Because they focus on the sentiment and a feeling of a time, Vermeulen and van den Akker, in a manner of abstraction, create another metaphor for metamodernism: “**a structure of feeling**” (van den Akker & Vermeulen 2017, Ch. 1/14-17). They borrow the phrase from Raymond Williams, relying also on Williams’ notion of “a culture of a period”. Adding “feelings” to the otherwise adamant notion of structure makes the phrase “a structure of feeling” somewhat of an oxymoron. It is a deliberately complicated notion because it is taken to permeate all of our lived experience, marked by an overall sentiment of a *zeitgeist*. According to Williams (1962, 63), our understanding of culture always fails to encompass the whole previous cultural experience which could inform us about the culture; therefore, our understanding is limited, it is bound to be somewhat faulty, even biased, as we are confined to our present moment. We tend to gain a feeling toward a particular culture, rather than a firm body of knowledge about it based on pure historical facts. A structure of feeling is “a particular quality of social experience [...] historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period” (Williams, cited in van den Akker & Vermeulen 2017, Ch. 1/16). Even though van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017, Ch. 1/14) see this structure most strikingly in arts, they emphasise its irreducibility to any movement, style, or phenomenon; it is “a sentiment that is so pervasive as to call it structural”.

Bearing in mind the key concepts of the theory of metamodernism and their features, the following is an attempt to relate them to the Covid-19 pandemic, with the goal of discovering how successful the conceptualisation of the current “structure of feeling” (the pandemic) might be from this perspective.

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<sup>12</sup> These names of “movements” and their respective appearances in arts and crafts are displayed in van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen 2017.



## 2. METAMODERNISM AND THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS, OR, THE CRISIS OF METAMODERNISM?

Metamodernism is taken to be omnipresent but to still hold a lot of promise as it is yet supposed to reach its full potential and define the entire 21<sup>st</sup> century (Cooper 2020). Some years ago, Freinacht (cited in Cooper 2017a) outlined policy objectives of metamodernism, elaborating them from an ideological stance but also as a political programme: “clean energy, demilitarization, universal basic income, universal health care/drug legalization, universal education, human rights”, a society that is unalienated, equal, and ecologically sustainable, functional socialism, and a world without wars. However, last year the coronavirus crisis began, marking a turning point in the lives of all of us.

On the global level, the pandemic has laid enormous divisions across the countries in multiple domains – political, economic, humanitarian, educational, etc. (Makau 2021; Parkinson 2021; Stiglitz 2020). Its twofold effect is that it has “exposed and exacerbated inequalities between countries just as it has within countries” (Stiglitz 2020). The Covid-19 virus “has not been an equal opportunity virus: it goes after people in poor health and those whose daily lives expose them to greater contact with others” (Ibid.). The disease hits poor countries and, at the same time, countries with advanced economies but unevenly accessible health care (like the US). In a joint statement by ILO, FAO, IFAD, and WHO<sup>13</sup> from last October (2020), the following implications of the coronavirus pandemic are listed as most notable and problematic: a dramatic loss of human life worldwide, the risk of extreme poverty for “tens of millions of people”, undernourishment and poor health, an existential threat for enterprises, the risk of losing livelihoods for nearly half of the global working force, a “lack [of] social protection and access to quality health care”, “a lack of safety and labour protection” for the workers, and the fragility of the food system due to trade restrictions. There has been a severe drop of the Financial Times Stock Exchange (by “14.3% in 2020, its worst performance since 2008”), while “many people have lost their jobs or seen their incomes cut” (Jones, Palumbo & Brown 2021).

Stiglitz (2020) summarises comprehensively the main reasons for this huge vulnerability of the systems as we know them: “the preexisting state of health care and health inequalities; a country’s preparedness and the resiliency of the economy; the quality of public response, including reliance on science and expertise; citizens’ trust in government guidance; and how citizens balanced their individual ‘freedoms’ to do as they pleased with their respect for others.” The preparedness of individual countries to handle and resolve the pandemic, as well as to cope with

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13 ILO - The International Labour Organization, a United Nations (UN) agency; FAO – The Food and Agriculture Organization, a United Nations agency; IFAD – International Fund for Agricultural Development, a United Nations agency; WHO – World Health Organization

its hardly conceivable consequences, was obviously insufficient and unsatisfying. While some significant efforts to confront the pandemic have been made – notably the obtainment, distribution, and administration of the COVID-19 vaccine doses – certain such efforts only further uncovered the “deep fissures in the global governance systems for health” (Ekström, Berggren, Tomson, Gostin, Friberg & Ottersen 2021; see also United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 2021). The current global health situation is far from what Freinacht had envisioned for metamodernism. The pandemic seems to have pushed the metamodern ideals farther in the future, or, it has set back a lot of assumed progress that metamodern thinkers counted on.

Yet again, does that necessarily mean that the pandemic is creating some kind of an anti-metamodern shift? Some of the biggest advocates of metamodernism, like Vermeulen, van den Akker, and their circle, seem to be pretty restrained when it comes to this topic, possibly waiting to better see the aftermath of the pandemic. For some we can only implicitly guess that their answer would be “no”: Cooper, for instance, theorises metamodernism as an “ultimate”, “totalizing ideology [...]”, because it implies building permanent peace and sustainability based on conciliating between past, present, and future” (Cooper 2017a). There can be “nothing beyond metamodernism” (Ibid.), he claims, utilising the oscillatory nature of metamodernism, by which the pendulum can go beyond the past and the present so that metamodernism could tie in with anything that has come in the last couple of decades and will come next – the corona crisis included. Finally, there are writers who explicitly consider the coronavirus pandemic as a true metamodern phenomenon. The researchers at *Freedom lab* (Freinacht included) support such claims by viewing this pandemic as “one of the first hyperhistoric phenomena” (FreedomLab 2020) – where the term “hyperhistory”, as we will see, stands very close to Heiser’s “super-hybridity” and Vermeulen and van den Akker’s understanding of historicity.

It can be said that hyperhistory is historicity immersed in technology. Hyperhistory is “a convergence of different histories and mutual connectedness of formerly separate information regimes”, enabled by digital technology and gadgets (FreedomLab 2020). Hyperhistory is a “worldview” based on “dephysicalized flows and digital objects” (van der Schalk 2018, 1). The broken-down, binary information is cheap and easily transferable and re-blocked into “meta-information systems” (Ibid., 2) i.e. reconstructed systems. In the Digital Age, the coronavirus is not only a global health issue but is also a real-time mediated event (with interactive maps, counters, statistics, live streams, etc.) and a “viral phenomenon”. “Rather than a local problem (such as Ebola, which remained mainly limited to West Africa), for the first time in history, there is a phenomenon that captures the attention and interest of almost all people on Earth” (FreedomLab 2020).

The technological aspect of hyperhistory – and metamodernism for that matter – is (luckily) more substantial than solely spectacular. As a bright example, by using advanced and efficient technological means, South Korea managed to put the

virus under control and minimise its impact on the country's people already in the first couple of months after the outbreak of the corona disease (Campbell and Heesu 2020). "A comprehensive contact-tracing operation was put in place, partnered with a rapid expansion of testing. On March 20 [2020], South Korea was carrying out 100 tests for every positive one that came back, the same day it recorded its 100th death" (FT Visual and Data Journalism Team 2020). As a point of comparison, "it took Italy three more months and 34,000 deaths to reach the same testing levels" as South Korea (Ibid.).

As with the concept of historicity, the corona times fit perfectly the metaphor of a structure of feeling, too. Our present is marked by occurrences, activities, complications, policies and measures, attitudes, topics, and vocabulary so distinctive and so pervasive that together they create a very unique and characteristic sentiment, a sense of a *zeitgeist*. Social distancing, isolation and self-isolation, the disruption of our regular schedule, the containment and quarantine – these and many more make up a "specific modality", the habitus, or the cultural logic of the corona crisis. In one of his writings (FreedomLab 2020a), Freinacht identifies the "mood of corona", or "the different moods that characterize the corona crisis and the accompanying period of (relative) isolation and quarantine". The moods are not (only) experienced on the level of an individual subject, but are a social state, interpersonal, shared emotions – "intersubjective atmospheres" (Ibid.).

By trying to detect these moods, Freinacht conducts an abstraction of the current crisis and "prepares" it for theoretical acceptance and embedding (for him, as a definitely metamodern concept). It is a valuable endeavour, given what now seems like the still inescapable state of metaxy that is getting in the way of the theory's grasp into the further future. We are presently living in the state of blatant metaxy/in-betweenness – between the "often opposing ends of a continuum (fear and hope, stress and boredom)", amidst the "ambiguity in how we experience the corona crisis" (FreedomLab 2020). We are between quarantining and running errands, between social distancing and vivid online interaction, between intimate concerns and global trends and statistics, between different beliefs, effective and inefficient measures, true and false data. And in this state, we are trying to hold on to something – a reconstructed value or narrative, be it family, science, education, entertainment, going outdoors, training, or a hobby.

While metamodernism was conceived as an answer to different political and social crises (Cooper 2018) – and we can add global crisis/the COVID-19 pandemic to that now – it assumes progress, too, or "a progressive project" that would embody Freinacht's ideals in the end. According to some writings of van den Akker and Kloeg, Freinacht himself, and Cooper, the metamodern progressive project must in fact be political. Van den Akker and Kloeg (2020, 62–63) devise the project in Gramscian terms: a project that is "serious about hegemonic politics", but at the same time, "populist in its appeal". It is supposed to "raise popular thought from its muddy, particular position by re-articulating it in the light of a universal position".

It is not a simple task, making a different set of values and ideas – those beyond the current state of affairs – into a hegemony; but it can be achieved, judging by the words of van den Akker and Kloeg, through abstraction.

In his metamodern political philosophy, Freinacht (2019, Ch. 13/56) similarly considers the importance of the particular (he sees it in the intimate, subjective, personal, “inner experience of humans”<sup>14</sup>) and its imprint on the ideas of a higher order. The main metamodern goal is for society to work “actively and seriously with the development of inner experience!” (Ibid.).

For Cooper (2017a), the metamodern political “project” was Bernie Sanders’ politics back in 2017; this is when Cooper called Sanders “a metamodern politician”, whose “defeat was the failure of American society to learn the lesson at hand. The result was the election of the nightmarish-cartoonish wildcard Donald Trump”. Now that Trump’s presidency is over, the prospects of metamodernism in America could maybe consolidate on the “meso level” – the level of local civil institutions and organisations, and universities (Franks 2020). For Freinacht (2019, Ch. 13/56), the goal is to save (and reconstruct) democracy, which is particularly hard in a world where there are seemingly democratic values and procedures (e.g. voting), yet decisions are “made in a closed room”. “We are approaching a final countdown for democracy. [...] The clock is ticking. Either we begin the slow and cumbersome process of continuously reinventing and updating democracy, or it simply drifts away into space” (Ibid., Ch. 10/30-37).

But besides the failed and only theoretically designed metamodern political projects, has there been a solid example of a state that outlines metamodern progress, especially with respect to the coronavirus crisis? New Zealand comes to mind as it has dealt with the disease mainly very successfully (Ministry of Health 2021; McClure 2021; Melinek 2021) and “is working to redeploy some underused resources to build the kind of economy that should mark the post-pandemic world: one that is greener and more knowledge-based, with even greater equality, trust, and solidarity” (Stiglitz 2020).

Based on all of the above, the key metamodern concepts are satisfyingly applicable to the node points of the coronavirus pandemic and, overall, our current times. The suspense ending of the pandemic, and the pandemic’s still not quite clear but for sure immense consequences, prevent us from predicting whether the platform of metamodernism will fully suit the post-pandemic overall cultural sentiment/*zeitgeist*. In return, the flexibility of the theory of metamodernism and its key concepts could substantially determine how metamodern the future state of affairs will be – to put it in metamodern terms, the question is whether the “New Normal” (Corpuz 2021, 344) will become yet another metamodern “new/nu” structure of feeling.

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14 In this, Freinacht is close to Dember (2018), who, as we saw earlier, posits the “subjective Felt Experience” as the “central motivation of metamodernism”.

## CONCLUSION

Metamodernism is seen to have big aspirations as a theoretical concept, but also, it is set to bring pragmatic solutions to contemporary problems. Freinacht (2019, Introduction/48) claims boldly that political metamodernism “eats all of the existing ideologies alive”. Cooper (2017a) predicts that metamodernism “could evolve to be a superordinate philosophical framework”, fully capable of emancipation from the “matrix-like culture and systemic entropy”. Metamodernism’s goal is to address the meta-crisis by means of “social transformation to a permaculture ecology, a steady state economy, and the empowerment of secular humanist global civil society” (Ibid.). This process requires intellectual revolution that would rely on meta-thinking, metacognition (thinking about thinking), and metanoia (to change one’s mind), as well as on abstraction – raising the particular on the level of general understanding (Cooper), or the universal (van den Akker, Kloeg), in pursuit for all-around solutions to complex problems.

This study has accepted metamodernism as a philosophical, social, cultural, political, and aesthetic conceptualisation of recent decades and current times. It has tried to evaluate the possibility of viewing global crises – referring to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, its numerous causes and dreadful effects that are still to be recognised fully – from the eyes of metamodern cultural logic, its manifestations, and key theoretical concepts: metaxy, abstraction, deconstruction, historicity, and a structure of feeling. It has found that metamodernism is a potent explanatory platform offering a dynamic and stimulative approach to the pandemic and, overall, our present state of the world. However, given the open-ended quality of the crisis, how metamodern the future will be, or, what metamodernism could become, is yet to be determined. The oscillatory nature of metamodernism – metaxy – is taken to thrive from the friction and sometimes reconciliation of the postmodern and the pre-postmodern, often modern; but when there is the uncertainty of the future in the equation, especially the one initiated by hugely unexpected global events such as the Covid-19 disease, predictions complicate. To use metamodern vocabulary, what remains uncertain is how structurally appropriate for the metamodern structure of feeling can/will be something that brings to it a whole set of unique, distinctive feelings. On the discursive plane, the future is to uncover how reminiscent of other metamodern “new” aesthetics will the “New Normal” be; also, we are to mind the agenda/the purpose of how is the (Hi)story of the crisis reconstructed and told. Metamodernism aims to reconstruct sets of values (“or families of values, groups of values, structures of values”) that make up “bigger stories” (Görtz 2018), and Freinacht (2020), very similarly to Williams, warns that “we can only recount and reflect upon the past from our own historical vantage point”. It is indeed hard to know how we will, for example, recall and re-tell the coronavirus pandemic in 10 or 20 years.

Even though the connections between the selected metamodern concepts and the pandemic are narrowed and probably even simplified for this study's purpose, the overarching concern of today's metamodern thought certainly is whether we will, in Cooper's words (2017b), "collectively intervene in the right direction (and in time) to build a sane, healthy, and vibrant global society, or [...] continue to make catastrophic bullheaded policies that build the stack into a panopticon style matrix. This is the metamodern 'choice'". With the hopeful coming of less stressful and more reflexive times, metamodernism could potentially turn to the best, most efficient, and not purely necessary solutions.

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## **METAMODERNISM AND THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) PANDEMIC (summary)**

In 2010, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker proposed metamodernism as a term to name the "emerging structure of feeling" (2010, 2) of the 21st century, most evident in art and culture. Today, the notion of metamodernism is widely adopted. In the works of many authors, it surpasses creative and cultural domains and becomes a political (Hanzi Freinacht) and social (Brent Cooper) phenomenon whose goal is to seek practical solutions such as clean energy and ecological sustainability, universal human rights, health care and education, and a war-free, socially and economically equal world. As a new paradigm and a cultural logic, metamodernism is a concept charged with meaning, with a lot of interpretative and discursive potential. The present study explores this potential by relating the key

concepts of the theory of metamodernism (metaxy, abstraction, reconstruction, historicity, and a structure of feeling) to the newest global events and crisis – the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. Metamodern historicity refers to the sense of the return of History that emerged after postmodern deconstructions of the narrative. It assumes historical development – in Vermeulen and van den Akker especially with respect to postmodernism; in Freinacht especially with respect to the gradual shifts of epochs – but it is, even more, a *zeitgeist*, a feeling of a distinctive time and place. Since this feeling is so pervasive and unique, metamodernism is called “a structure of feeling”, a modality that is specific to our century. This “structure” is marked by a complex relationship between postmodernism and pre-postmodernism/principally modernism (Vermeulen, van den Akker), or the past, the present, and the future (Cooper). Metamodernism constantly oscillates between the mentioned poles and its singularity emerges from oscillations. The metamodern state of in-betweenness found its metaphor in the concept of metaxy. With the advent of metamodernism and the coming of Web 2.0, the process of abstraction started to permeate thought and learning, calling for a comeback of a profound approach to understanding things. Through abstraction, one is to recognise the particularities in the world as belonging to a “big picture”, the metamodern structure, and to be able to raise the particularities to the level of universal. The outcome of abstraction, therefore, is a reconstruction of some big narrative (like History). But through this “metamodern epistemology” (Cooper 2017a), practical solutions are to be found – complex problems invite equally complex answers. The corona crisis is precisely that, “multidimensional: it’s a crisis from a political, economic, social, geopolitical and humanitarian point of view” (FreedomLab 2020). It has revealed essential inequalities between people and between countries, and great vulnerability of the systems of humanity as we know them. Yet, even with holding off the presupposed metamodern ideals, the current crisis is not anti-metamodern: the pandemic is a hyperhistoric phenomenon (both tangible and digitally mediated), a structure of feeling(s) and moods (“the moods of corona” – Freinacht), an oscillation (metaxy) between many opposing ends and ambiguities (fear and hope, isolation and online social interaction, etc.), it bears reconstructions of “modern” notions such as family or science (medicine, vaccines), and finally, it urges a highly abstracted “political project” of “reinventing and updating democracy” (Freinacht 2019, 230–231), as well as attaining other metamodern ideals, hopefully, in the post-corona times.

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