

## Manoeuvring Metamodernism: An Oscillating Culture

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### Abstract

Metamodernism might be one of the most recent terms that hold the definitional problems for the Humanities. As an age after postmodernism, metamodernism straddles the space between the modern and the postmodern. As Luke Turner (2015) writes, “the discourse surrounding metamodernism engages with the resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, while not forfeiting all that we’ve learnt from postmodernism.” As the world enters a metamodern age and takes cognizance of the milieu, one notices the recent phenomenon of *Barbenheimer* that manifests metamodern sensibility in a powerful manner. The paper manoeuvres the theoretical underpinnings of a metamodern age as it oscillates between the two grand bygone ages, and reads the cultural phenomenon of the box office ‘coming together’ of *Barbie* (2023) and *Oppenheimer* (2023) as opposed to a ‘box office clash’ that alters the sensibility of our age forever. The paper engages with metamodernism, analyzing it through the aforementioned phenomenon that allows for new imaginings in the literary and the cultural world.

**Keywords:** Metamodernism, box office phenomenon, *Barbenheimer*, metamodern culture

### I

Metamodernism might be one of the most recent terms that hold the definitional problems for the Humanities. As an age post the multiplicity and plurality of postmodernism, rather than taking a sharp leap, metamodernism straddles the space between the modern and the

postmodern. Modernism has never been easy to grasp but modernism was in contrast with the high ideals of the bygone ages and the collective disenchantment as evoked by the times. The First World War added to the understanding of modernism which was daunted by existentialism and individual crisis. Postmodernism, on the other hand, as a phoenix child of modernism took the debate further vis-à-vis art and literature, subsuming anything and everything. Postmodernism, in its heyday was often viewed as a telos for history but metamodernism furthers the story for both. As Luke Turner (2015) one of the key figures in relation to metamodernism writes, “the discourse surrounding metamodernism engages with the resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, while not forfeiting all that we’ve learnt from postmodernism” (para 3). What Metamodernism does in its wake—rather than dismissing the plinth on which its two predecessors stood, erecting the domes of literature which was unconventional, revolutionary and challenging for all times—is that it takes from the both and walks the twenty-first century with a newfound hope. As Turner (2015) observes:

Thus, rather than simply signalling a return to naïve modernist ideological positions, metamodernism considers that our era is characterised by an oscillation between aspects of both modernism and postmodernism. We see this manifest as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism, a moderate fanaticism, oscillating between sincerity and irony, deconstruction and construction, apathy and affect, attempting to attain some sort of transcendent position, as if such a thing were within our grasp. The metamodern generation understands that we can be both ironic and sincere in the same moment; that one does not necessarily diminish the other. (para 5)

Metamodernism straddles two equally powerful and avant-garde ages in the history of literature, but in the twenty-first century the kind of literature that springs forth questions our understanding of this oscillatory practice in which metamodernism is forever caught. When metamodernism is subjected to this oscillation, the understanding of its aesthetic nature as proposed by Turner is of a kind of oscillation where the idea of contestation is superseded by something that expands the horizon of metamodernism infinitely.

As Turner alludes to the new age with juxtaposing ideas, one cannot help but notice that postmodernism was also understood as something

that sanctioned all within its broad umbrella. As critics have commented, postmodernism bridged the gap between the high art of the canonical status and low art of the popular domain. It allowed all debates to take place at the heart of it and become the playing ground for all isms and movements that conflated within postmodernism. But what makes metamodernism different is the attitude it has vis-à-vis these dyads. Postmodernism had a challenging stance where every new understanding of the idea was constantly trying to oust the other. If postmodernism was radical, it was radical against hope, if it embraced the avant-garde, it did so against the conventional ideas of form and practice. Metamodernism on the other hand has an attitude which is akin to a calm that one senses after a storm. As it straddles or oscillates between the two ages and enters the twenty-first century with a renewed consciousness of what all it is capable of accommodating, it does so with resilience and hope. And therefore Turner (2015) writes, "The metamodern generation understands that we can be both ironic and sincere in the same moment; that one does not necessarily diminish the other" (para 4).

An enunciation of this idea is evident in the art forms and cultural trends of recent times. The recent phenomenon of *Barbenheimer*, which referred to the box office release of the two movies, namely *Barbie* (2023) and *Oppenheimer* (2023) at the same time and the unique response that it spawned has led to the practical amplification of metamodern sensibility. "The "*Barbenheimer*" *pheno-meme-non* is the popularization of the reflexively absurdist idea of watching the *Barbie* movie and the film, *Oppenheimer* as a double feature—two products that would seem to have zero in common aside from their having been released on the same date: July 21, 2023" (Ceriello, 2023, para 1). It became a global cultural thing transcending borders everywhere, but it also highlights something greater than the phenomenon that people became witness to.

Box office, since time immemorial, has seen multiple clashes where two movies as they release hand in hand with each other are almost always in a quest *against* each other. Each one strives for maximum audience support and the discourse verges on a necessary ousting of the one for the other to succeed. When the two are put together, they are always facing each other as if in a battle, and box office history is full of such examples. But the phenomenon of *Barbenheimer* was like a watershed moment for both the cinema and the culture that sustained and led to this kind of confluence. Charles Bramesco (2023) writes, "Oppenheimer

may be the first tent pole in history to profit from stiff competition, its informal packaging with Barbie leading not to a standoff but a mutually beneficial centring in the zeitgeist" (para 4). The reception of the two movies and the phenomenon that was replete with memes and buzz vis-à-vis both changed the dynamics of the cinema for once and forever.

Both the movies had a lot riding on them. *Oppenheimer* came from Christopher Nolan and as Bramesco (2023) opines, "To bet against Christopher Nolan is to bet against the house—which is to lose like a fool..." and as he continues in the same vein, he writes, "...– and yet he still came into summer movie season looking like something of an underdog." Competition with *Barbie* looks hard to beat:

In the great Barbenheimer clash of 23, Mattel's smiley plastic plaything had a handful of built-in advantages: it was a peppy, colourful, feel-good comedy featuring one of the brightest movie stars of her generation as a pop-culture fixture already known and loved by the general public. Its rival, *Oppenheimer*, started to sound like a tough sell in comparison, a historical drama about the crushing depths of all-American guilt with a three-hour runtime, long stretches of black-and-white photography, a not-quite-name-brand leading man in Cillian Murphy, and an R rating restricting its audience. (Bramesco, 2023, para 2)

The response that the phenomenon sought world over was overwhelming in terms of a new praxis that saw the two together, not as opposites but rather as allies for the first time. This humbling cultural response was aided and abetted by the meme culture, which emerged well in advance of the release of two films. This culture of memes which led to this exciting moment in the history of cinema is quintessentially metamodern. As Linda Ceriello (2023) discusses in her essay, this cultural moment spiralled out of the "activity of memeing in the sense used in the twenty-first century—the use of a visual, viral quip existing on the internet" and Metamodernism becomes the "most serviceable lenses through which to consider the character of this *cultural moment*" (para 8).

## II

In my understanding, this cultural phenomenon reaches far more than a simple desire of the masses to see the two polar flavours, one that is plastic and pink, other that is grey and gritty, together. It taps into the very consciousness of the masses that has forever been radical

with a sense of opposition. Even a cursory view of history shows that things have always existed in a dyad and even though modernism and postmodernism were never opposites, they did have their moments when modernism preserved its elitism and postmodernism thwarted it as against the modern attitude in a radical fashion. Modernism distanced itself from the past but also from the radical potential of the past. Voicing this concern in his essay titled "Modernism, Myth, and Monopoly Capitalism", Terry Eagleton (1988) writes: "In disassociating itself from increasingly exhausted national traditions, modernism was in many respects genuinely progressive; but it also, as William points out, cut itself off from what was still potentially alive and politically subversive in those lineages..." (p. 283).

Eagleton's idea points towards the radically subversive nature of modernism which separated it from all the other ages which preceded it. But at the same time, modernism was never always fully appropriative of the revolutionary surge it had. When distinguishing it from postmodernism, the only thing that plays out characteristically is the attitude that modernism had towards various social, cultural and political changes of its milieu. Modernism viewed the past ages with nostalgia and forever tried to recuperate the high ideals of the golden ages which were lost in its time. The subversive potential of the modern, as it has been recognized was of an almost apologetic nature, and the radical manner in which the literature of the age sought to upturn the traditional narratives was also limiting. When Ezra Pound refers to his work as 'rag-bag' (*Cantos*, 1925), his implication is that only such a fragmented sort of literature is possible. The various passages of Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922) written in a fragmentary tone lament the loss of full, harmonious structures which were the pride of the previous ages. As Eagleton (1988) writes, "Modernism works are after all 'works', discrete and bounded entities for all the free play within them" (p. 140). Modernism has looked back more often than it has looked ahead. It is this lamenting attitude of fall from the golden ages that separated modern from the postmodern:

What is amiss with old fashioned modernism, from this perspective, is just the fact that it ostensibly refuses to abandon the struggle for meaning. It is still agonizedly caught up in the metaphysical depth and wretchedness, still able to experience psychic fragmentation and social alienation as spiritually wounding, and so embarrassingly enmortgaged

to the very bourgeois modernism it otherwise seeks to subvert. (Eagleton, 1988, p. 143)

Modernism resisted popular literature because, as Eagleton notes, it resisted commoditization of art which was inevitable in the capitalist age in which modernism ushered itself. Eagleton (1988) notes that, "Fredrick Jameson argued somewhere that high modernism was born at a stroke with mass commodity culture" (p. 139). Modernism resisted all the attempts in which the art of modernism was degraded to an exchangeable subject. Popular art, by the virtue of the fact that it was popular, was closely tied with the question of economics which art had never answered before. With rapid industrialization and mechanical reproduction coming in the picture, art ossified as a commodity in the modern age. Modernism forestalled all such attempts and cocooned itself in a parallel discourse which was autarkical and tried to side-line the ossification of art as a commodity. But when modernism resisted reduction of art into an easily exchangeable commodity, it fell prey to the other side of the coin which is its fetishism. Modernism also problematized the ideology of the bourgeois self in a capitalist society. Falling from a very liberal humanist category of the self, the fragmented, socially and historically haunted modern man was ideologically created in a radically capitalist manner.

Modernism's never-ending struggle for meaning and depth, its attitude of struggle and search for truth in a Nietzschean world wherein not only God is dead but all the possibilities of His existence have also been obfuscated; its nostalgia to recuperate past ideals and its sorry attitude about what it is—all this makes and defines modernism. And it was in radical juxtaposition with the age that succeeded it, that is, postmodernism. Metamodernism, on the other hand, takes from the both and slides into a discourse that is harmonious and accommodating of a world that is rapidly changing and would only harm itself from the game of competition and ousting. And as Timotheus Vermeulen defines this oscillation, it is "between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (WiM, 2021, para 1).

### III

The phenomenon of *Barbenheimer* not only manifests the metamodern sensibility but also accentuates the practical dimension of this new age.

The two movies walked hand in hand and the audience welcomed both. It becomes a dare, a task and a welcoming challenge to respond equally to the two movies in a manner never seen before. In her paper, "I Double Dare You': Barbenheimer as Metamodern Pheno-meme-non", Linda Ceriello (2023) strikes at the heart of the current debate when she writes, "What I'm interested in here is the feeling of inclusivity central to the *Barbenheimer* dare. The shared-experience component distinguishes it from a more cynical, zero-sum style of public pranking often tagged as a postmodern takedown" (para 11). As Ceriello (2023) further avers:

The oscillative tone of the event avoids acting out a takedown of either side, however. It is not out to generate an "our team against yours" vibe, or a cynical move of taking *both* films down by pitting each against the other (i.e., *Barbie* challenging the over-seriousness of *Oppenheimer*; *Oppenheimer* calling out the shallowness of *Barbie*). None of that is at the core of the *Barbenheimer* meme. The event is also not styled for the purpose of deconstructing anyone's personally held convictions or beliefs. Again, those sorts of agendas that, generally speaking, reflect more postmodern sensibilities, are not present. (para 13)

By eliminating contestation, this phenomenon opened doors to something which was akin to an awakening. It allowed people to embrace the two extreme poles of artistic production which represented the history of America. The universe of Barbie since its inception in 1959 changed the face of dolls in America. Created or invented by Ruth Handler at a time when most dolls looked like infants, Barbie heralded a cultural storm, and "has gone through six decades of transformations and rebranding, becoming a cultural icon over the years and appearing as an astronaut, doctor, physicist, and just about any other professional you can think of" (Froio, 2023, para 1).

Oppenheimer on the other hand reflects upon a necessary signpost in history which changed the fabric of the world forever. His name does not only represent a physicist who made American theoretical physics great but a man who oversaw the inception of a new world, based on the edifice of nuclear power. Oppenheimer's life swayed between the two poles and as Matthew Wills (2024) writes, "Celebrated and damned as the "father of the atomic bomb," theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer lived a complicated scientific and political life" (para 1). Nolan's directorial masterpiece is based on biographies and books about Oppenheimer, one of which is *American Prometheus: The Triumph*



and *Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (2005) by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin. The idea of Oppenheimer beyond the person is in equal parts revolutionary and in equal parts damning, something that the title of the book captures distinctively. Similarly, the universe of Barbie also sways between the world of dream and reality, between what could be and what is, in the life of an average teenage girl. Interestingly though, these oscillations have not ousted each other but have rather sustained the corpus of these two identities. The opposites or differences sit right next to each other in a single line, allowing the enterprise to become complex, plural, multifaceted, radial but with a sense of compliance. As Ceriello (2023) puts it: "It's the close-ups of the face of Cillian Murphy as Oppenheimer—his oscillation between moral positions, realizations of the twin terrors of carrying out his duty, and of not doing so—in sum, Nolan's choice to bring the individual viewer into Opp's felt experience" (para 20). And this is what makes the Oppenheimer itself a metamodern work of art that gets launched into the world through an equally powerful metamodern cultural discourse of *Barbenheimer*. And it sits comfortably with *Barbie*, whose

"many metamodern features show up right away. Actually, before butts are even in the seats. There's simply no other era in which a production about the life of Barbies would have been intended as something other than a children's movie. The surprise of its mature plot, as has been discussed quite a lot by critics at this point, is in proffering a pointedly feminist social commentary while never losing sight of the Barbieland feeling of fun" (Ceriello, 2023, para 22).

These two movies, one of which represents a cultural icon and the other that is almost viewed as a damned hero, amalgamate amongst the two a sensibility that can exist side by side in the American imagination. The merging of the two ideas through memes allowed the audience to comprehend them together as symbols of American history in their own right. As Ceriello (2023) puts it in a succinct manner:

What the metamodern structure of feeling offers us a perspective on the sensibility referred to as "informed naivety" (as coined by Vermeulen and van den Akker in 2010) that allows us to look straight into the 1950s pink world with all of its problems and delights, as well as into the atomic world developed in the decade prior. In at least one respect, the portrayal of Robert Oppenheimer's struggle echoes a similar reckoning to Barbie's: world-building is rarely merely theoretical. In the end it



comes with really huge, real-world consequences. In both films, what's purely fun/purely theoretical to one person or population may wind up oppressive or even deadly to another. (para 28).

The phenomenon ushered us into a metamodern world more forcibly but it was not a push but a gentle pull into a discourse where multiplicity is the flavour that upholds the work in a collage like fashion that underlines a unique unity. Metamodern culture paves the way for artworks that are often defined in a multiple fashion as works of satire, comedy, drama, sci-fi and each unique representation of the work complements the other. These works couch within themselves characters and ideas which are forever oscillating between the two worlds of every dyad with a sense that demands working with it and never against any of it.

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