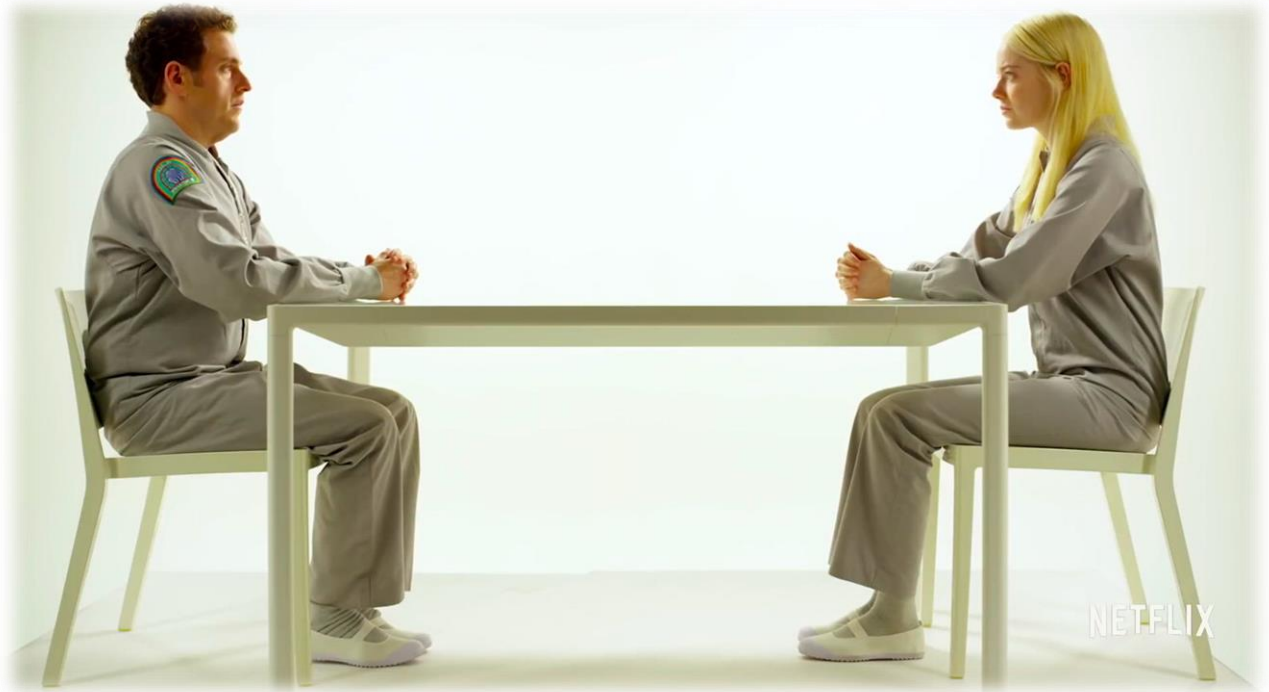


# **“We’re Lost Without Connection”: Metamodernism, or Exploring the Afterlife of Postmodernism**



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## Introduction

In September 2018, the miniseries *Maniac* aired on the widely known web platform Netflix. This bizarre production, fruit of the collaboration of director Cary Joji Fukunaga and television writer Patrick Somerville, draws more than simple inspiration from the homonymous tv show devised by the Norwegian Espen PA Lervaag. While the Norwegian version narrates the story of Espen, a delusional patient lost in his imaginary world whilst confined in a psychiatric hospital, the American *Maniac* adopts a different take to portray mental illness – a more human, more subtle approach, but still an effective one. The new *Maniac* offers a variety of elements that evoke a sense of familiarity; yet, these very same elements are pushed beyond their boundaries and presented in an innovative way that demands attention in times when representational methods are put into question. A dystopian reality, a spasmodic abuse of technology and a cassette futurism trope all participate in the dream-like quest for identity and meaning that makes for the narrative of the show.

The protagonists Annie and Owen immediately appear on the screen whilst caught in a critical moment of their respective lives. Owen's persistent schizophrenia does not combine well with the wealthy and prestigious name of his family, and he finds himself facing his own demons when requested to cover up for his brother's crimes during a trial. On the other hand, Annie, coming from a very different background, struggles with her addiction to drugs and the symptoms of withdrawal when shortage hits her. In an apparent twist of fate, the two meet upon deciding to sign up for a pharmaceutical trial which can allegedly cure any patient from any illness, in an attempt to “[.] replace old-fashioned talk therapy forever” (*Maniac*, ep. 01). From that point onward, Owen and Annie will develop a connection by experiencing oneiric adventures together thanks to artificially induced dreams that drugs and a powerful AI computer help devising. Their stories get intertwined in multiple frames dealing with their social environment as well as the setbacks affecting the scientists handling the trial – making

Dr Azumi Fujita, Dr. James K. Mantleray, his mother Dr. Greta Mantleray and the smart computer GRTA all key characters for my following examination.

*Maniac* appears to be the perfect candidate on which to build a discussion concerning the postmodern paradigm of representation. As a matter of fact, this tv show seems to incorporate features in line with the postmodern semantic: the setting, the psychological struggles affecting the characters by which the show taps into the debates on the schizophrenic subject of late postmodernism and the general mistrust concerning the truth of public images, the unfolding of multiple narratives, the uncertainty concerning the distinction between reality and truth hitting both the characters and the audience, the use of technology and the representation of social disconnection pervading the show, the countless references to other cultural artefacts. However, the implementation of all these features seems also geared towards taking a step past them: the ambiguity is here exploited to convey meaning, to overcome postmodern solipsism, to stress the role of connections in the formation of identities and realities. Therefore, *Maniac* ultimately combines postmodern components with post-postmodern ones, more specifically metamodern ones, opening up the possibility of outlining a new paradigm.

The postmodern era may not have reached its end, yet its very characteristics invite research into a number of issues that postmodernism has so far failed to address in a satisfactory way. As a matter of fact, postmodernism channeled into a conceptual structure those uncertainties intrinsic to what has been delineating human history in the last century. This thesis originated from the urgency of confronting those recently felt priorities that seem to dispute some of the prevalent dynamics and elements specific to postmodernism. Nevertheless, rather than striking postmodern tendencies off the list, my research aims at exploring the afterlife of postmodernism as a newly generated formula that not only

intertwines elements of both postmodernism and metamodernism but inscribes the metamodern movement inside the postmodern framework.

In the last three decades, many have declared the death of postmodernism and demanded a theoretical system that could better represent the current sociocultural scene. In this post-postmodern fever, metamodernism offers itself as a cultural philosophy able to gather some important sociocultural and artistic tendencies of the last decades and illuminate the contingencies that shaped them by interpreting these tendencies as one single responsive wave to postmodern culture. Postmodern dry irony has not been abandoned, and yet it has been reformulated to adapt to a new sensibility that calls for a reemergence of romanticism and sincerity. The metamodern current intends to combine optimism and doubt, nostalgia and acceptance. Metamodernism and postmodernism present an overlap inevitably bound to render a research complex. In fact, both movements are difficult to pin down, due to their highly intricate nature, the multiple applicability and the divergent interpretations which together constitute the research performed under their respective labels so far. Therefore, I will try to narrow down as much as possible the definitions underlying these labels and channel their study into specific parameters of applicability, in order to avoid creating new ambiguities.

By now, postmodernism has obtained a well-established position in the field of cultural research, and the growing sense among artists and intellectuals that postmodernism had run its course has opened the doors to diverse approaches: innovative terms such as new sincerity, new realism, alter modernism, accelerationism and metamodernism emerged in reference to new cultural currents that definitely draw on postmodern features, but that, at the same time, explore alternatives by treating the postmodern dead ends as newly found paths. Hence, I will discuss metamodernism as an increasingly spreading sociocultural philosophy and aesthetic paradigm not as a criticism of alternative currents, but as a phenomenon

rendered possible thanks to postmodernism and whose characteristics do not strive to dismantle postmodernism itself; instead, they attempt to adapt the postmodern beliefs to the latest cultural agenda.

The aim of my thesis is to prove the relevance of metamodernism as the demand for a new paradigm takes shape, and to delineate the characteristics of metamodernism as those best representing some major critical tendencies of today's Western sociocultural framework. In the first chapter, I will provide an overview of postmodernism, depicting its major features through some relevant theoretical studies. Authors such as Best and Kellner (1991), Ihab Hassan (2003), and Hans Bertens (2003) will help me lay out the commonly recognized aspects of the movement, its problematics, and its reception in the academic field. This premise will function as a probing into some crucial changes in the aesthetic production of the last decades. For the sake of the argument, it will prove necessary to analyze postmodernism by treating its characteristics as outcomes of either a positive or a negative phenomenon. However, my aim is not to pass judgement on the movement, but merely to introduce a comprehensive understanding of it. It is relevant to remember that there is no unified interpretation of postmodernism; hence, the submission of local feedback, along with the general features, appears indispensable for a more comprehensive outline.

My following step concerns an examination of the postmodern aesthetic, with a focus on those features that will prove useful for the analysis of my case study. As John Hill states, "the identification of what constitutes postmodern cinema has not been straightforward" (100); hence, my research will take into consideration a wide spectrum of elements generally applicable to postmodern artistic production. Here, I will explore characteristics such as intertextuality, problematics related to the representation of reality and identity, the blurring of hierarchies, and emotional aspects.

In my second chapter, I will proceed to a provisional definition of metamodernism as a synthesizer of both modern and postmodern values and retrace the use of the term ‘metamodernism’ through the last decades. My thesis will revolve around the delineation of metamodern concepts through artistic production, as metamodernism plants its understanding into aesthetic judgments rather than determining them. Therefore, my premise being that artistic impulses bring together and can illuminate predominant sociocultural tendencies, I will examine the aesthetic implications of metamodernism. As mentioned above, the term has already been widely applied in disparate contexts. For my argument I will focus on the definition of metamodernism offered by Robin Van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, who published a collaborative book called *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism* (2017). Furthermore, I will invoke Alexandra Dumitrescu’s studies on metamodernism, since her research adds an evaluative critique that I believe may help to give a more definite shape to the core of the paradigm.

Finally, in my third chapter, I will proceed by examining *Maniac*, calling attention to those elements that will prove a link with the postmodern and metamodern paradigms. For my analysis of the tv show, I will focus on relevant topics and tropes appearing in the narration, examining how the main themes of the show contribute to the development of the characters and what significant questions the combination of these elements may raise in light of my research. My motivation to embark on this project stems indeed from what I perceive as its possibilities of retracing patterns and tendencies that reformulate the typical postmodern characteristics into new artistic developments. Along with *Maniac*, I will invoke the recently released tv series *The Good Place* (2018) and *The Newsroom* (2012) as some valid examples of metamodernism since, like *Maniac*, they lend themselves to an analysis of typical postmodern features yet also take a step forward and include metamodern artistic tendencies. In my analysis I will confront postmodern film characteristics with metamodern ones,



highlighting the new metamodern priorities and devices. Thanks to my thesis, I hope to clarify the functioning of the metamodern paradigm, and specifically of the metamodern narrative strategy, and to contribute to the legitimation of metamodernism, as well as to future research.

## **CHAPTER 1: Discussing postmodernism**

Post-postmodernism is a label that combines all those movements that originated mainly in the last two decades in the attempt to respond to postmodernism. Metamodernism represents one of these movements. However, before delving into it, I will analyze the cultural context leading to the birth of post-postmodernism overall. Hence, I will proceed to outline a preliminary stance on those features associated with postmodernism. By reasoning with scholars and critics on the alleged demise of postmodernism and the need for an aesthetic successor, I will uncover the possible reasons behind postmodernism's failure.

Postmodernism is a movement that spreads through the entire Western cultural consciousness; therefore, the postmodern debate concerns arts, politics, economy, social sciences, philosophy and aesthetics. While the overview of postmodern characteristics that I will provide can be considered as generally applicable to all the domains mentioned, the thesis will elaborate more on those features related to the aesthetic sphere. Throughout my discussion of the conflict dividing many critics of postmodernism, as well as the ambiguously threatening nature of some of the concepts brought forth by the movement, I will highlight that appearance of insufficiency permeating postmodernism, which ultimately fostered the birth of a new cultural philosophy.

### **1.1 Postmodernism: theories, receptions and the crisis of representation**

The concept of postmodernism has triggered a multitude of different, at times discordant definitions. In the words of Douglas Kellner and Steven Best, "one is struck by the diversities between theories often lumped together as 'postmodern' and the plurality – often conflictual – of postmodern positions" (2). Ever since the birth of the movement, both positive and negative accounts of postmodernism have emerged – enough to found a theoretical research but not to reach a unified conclusion on its actual nature. The term postmodernism was first

used in relation to architecture and literature, mainly to express the belief that art could not be considered as an autonomous discipline, as the modernists had insisted. Postmodernism has therefore been explained as the antagonist of modernism from an artistic point of view. But it has also been explained as a reaction to the larger concept of modernity, a period starting from the Enlightenment and emphasizing rationality and progress - with all its ethical, philosophical and political implications.<sup>1</sup>

According to postmodernism, art is unavoidably affiliated with social, economic and political domains, and cannot exist as an untouched category, a pure field. In light of this belief, postmodernism started to refuse concepts such as universality and purity, and affirmed the impossibility of distinguishing between high, fine art and popular art – hence, the impossibility to judge a work as superior to and qualitatively better than another one. As an overall sentiment extending even beyond the artistic sphere, postmodernism tried to challenge those values that modernity had brought forth, such as a utopic sentiment towards the future, a belief in progress, and the possibility of universally true values. Two postmodern keywords are then relativism and fragmentation: the movement looks at history with suspicion and reconsiders the way knowledge is commonly constructed.<sup>2</sup>

With postmodernism claiming an interdisciplinary nature, it becomes difficult to discuss the movement whilst sticking to a single domain of knowledge. However, the main focus of this thesis is on aesthetics, with a particular emphasis on methods of representation in art and shifts in narrative techniques. The postmodern stance on ethics will also play a role in my analysis of postmodernism.

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<sup>1</sup> See Shusterman, especially chapter 47

<sup>2</sup> See Strohm 149-153; Jameson 25-27.

## 1.2 Postmodernism: introduction to the crisis of representation

As Hans Bertens highlights, the matter becomes even more complicated when we realize that there are multiple postmodernisms: one pushing the self-reflexiveness typical of modernism to its extreme, one powerfully remarking the necessity of representation, one ambiguously combining the two methods just mentioned and one rejecting both (4). However, he also remarks how all these postmodernisms present a common trait, that is, the attempt to “transcend what they see as the self-imposed limitations of modernism, which in its search for autonomy and purity or for timeless, representational, truth has subjected experience to unacceptable intellectualizations and reductions” (5). Indeed, postmodernism has attempted to ban all those beliefs stemming from the Enlightenment era, questioning the objectivity of reality, science, truth, and ethics, shaking up hermeneutics, history and the way humans have categorized knowledge on human nature throughout time.<sup>3</sup>

With postmodernism, a crisis of representation has taken hold, and “no matter whether they are aesthetic, epistemological, moral, or political in nature, the representations that we used to rely on can no longer be taken for granted” (Bertens 10). As Bertens states, Clement Greenberg claimed that in the modernist period the rebuttal of representation translated into the attempt by artistic disciplines “to achieve complete autonomy by purging themselves of all foreign elements and focus self-reflexively on their own formal possibilities” (64). Modernism started to break ties with institutions and artistic canons, showing less interest for the historical and more for the human consciousness. Modernist creations seemed to focus on an exploration of the interiority, questioning representational standards and rules, and language as an effective means for true representation, all the while experimenting with the latter (Currie 138).

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<sup>3</sup> See Best and Kellner 2-5, 38-39; Shusterman 775; for further insight into postmodern theory regarding ontology and epistemology, see Littlejohn and Foss 772-774.

This approach was driven by different intentions than postmodernism, as the latter drew on poststructuralist theories, relating the representational veto to deconstruction (64). As Bertens notices (8), “no matter how one would want to draw such lines, in the later 1970s a broad complex of deconstructionist/poststructuralist practices became firmly associated with postmodernism”. In the hands of the French poststructuralists Derrida and Barthes, the distrust of representation in general became focused on the realm of language, which was regarded no more as the medium of reality but as reality itself. With Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, poststructuralist discussion shifted to topics such as power relations and the nature of the subject. Poststructuralism affected the postmodern approach to meaning, time and linearity, disputing language as a medium leading to any truth outside language itself and redefining meaning as an effect never inherent to an object, but always determined by context; in the same fashion, the present is never really present, as the nature of the present is made up of a trace of a past and one of a future. As any object and any time slot become integral to each other and cannot be defined as independent units having their own consistency and demarcation lines (Currie 78), linearity is lost, and meaning takes the shape of a multitude of concepts borrowing and lending to one another.

The connection between poststructuralism and postmodernism is evident in the postmodern skepticism towards representational modes and grand narratives, including the intricate quest for identity, which becomes chaotic once subjects cannot rely on a linear account of their own lives and surroundings, and the promotion of relativism, with meaning being considered arbitrary and not institutionally given as according to commonly accepted conventions and beliefs. These subjects will be discussed in relation to postmodern narrative in the next section. If, as Lyotard states, “all forms of representation rely upon narrative in order to validate themselves” (Crews 12), the rejection of a linear narrative by postmodernism signals a change in our perception of reality. In the following sections I will

examine postmodern narrative with reference to new aesthetic conventions and sociocultural responses.

### **1.3 Postmodern aesthetics**

#### **1.3.1 Sociocultural and economical premise**

First of all, it is necessary to take a step back and integrate the artistic and cultural characteristics of postmodernism into a broader periodization of economic and social contingencies. In fact, as notices, many postmodern features could be effortlessly catalogued into modernist aesthetics if it were not for the social context that shaped them. Historically speaking, postmodernism is considered a time period that follows modernity and identifies a moment of mass production and late capitalism. In this post-industrial era, technological development and mass communication gained the spot on the pedestal, abruptly transforming any other aspect of life (Jameson xviii). Drawing on the Marxist theory on commodity fetishism<sup>4</sup>, Jameson highlights how with postmodernism, the entirety of culture took the form of capitalism, with the latter entering a stage of oversaturation through unparalleled reproduction on a global scale. Western society became a crowd of consumers, and everything assumed the shape of a commodity. Inevitably, “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally” (Jameson 4), and the words ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ intersect with artistic creation – hence the upsurge of Andy Warhol as the emblem of postmodern capitalist art (Jameson 8, 157).

The sociocultural and economical transformations ran parallel to a change in aesthetics. The movement questioned all those conventional narratives offered by hermeneutics to define which historical productions and aspects are allegedly of value –

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<sup>4</sup>On the fetishism of commodities, see Marx 47-59.

which elements ‘are worthy’ enough to be making it into the historical sequence (Jameson 11). Consumerism and mass communication boosted the transformation of the cultural production, rendering it impossible to differentiate between what were referred to as high arts and low arts. The seemingly elitist methods of evaluation gave space to a mass culture. .. “[..] in our time, it is technology and the media which are the true bearers of the epistemological function “(Jameson 110), and learning models based on those scientific and moral precepts collectively recognized as definitive and true are dismantled and reinterpreted. As the aesthetic field gradually merged with diverse social spheres, not only did it gain qualities that diverged from modern aesthetics, but it also developed new priorities and intentions. Indeed, ‘the aesthetic turn’ - or the ‘return to the aesthetic’, as Jameson calls it – in the postmodern era signifies the end of ‘l’art pour l’art’: art stops being autonomous and acquires an economic and political agenda (Jameson 76, 157).

### **1.3.2 Time, space and meaning**

With globalization, new technologies and a revolution in the use of capital, the postmodern age witnesses a time-space compression, as David Harvey called it (1990). In the social and cultural experience, the time compression translates into a concomitant mass production and fast disposability of the aforementioned production, all fostered by a commodification of images rendered way too appealing and easily available thanks to the world of advertisement. “Capitalist culture issues us temporary contracts with everything” (Currie 101), a mechanism that transforms us into the “throwaway society” (Harvey 286).

The space compression is explained by the ever-increasing simultaneity in communications as well as in the broadcasting of news and events, worldwide shipping and fast travelling.

One good example offered by Mark Currie (1998) to illustrate time-space compression can be found on the shelves of supermarkets, as “for the consuming classes, the supermarket offers a

kind of compressed tourism which erodes the traditional relationship between identity and place” (104). The consequence is, as Currie argued,

an experience dedicated to cultural diversity which offers the shopper an international spectrum of possible identifications, where the signs of other cultures compose the shopper's identity through affiliation with various ethnicities, as if shopping itself were a process of identity construction” (104).

This new experience of space and time became a focus of attention for the aesthetic and cultural fields, although, according to Harvey, the aesthetic turn is also doomed by the plague of mass production and overaccumulation (327). The postmodern conceptions of time and space found their way into narrative theory through Derrida’s idea of trace<sup>5</sup>, for which any sign acquires meaning only through its being embedded in a context, and only through the meaning of adjacent signs. Following his post-structuralist theorization, any textual element could be conceived as a sign which does not contain meaning within itself, but necessarily relies on the elements surrounding it, creating perpetual waves of references going back and forth in all directions. However, since “neither the beginning nor the end of a sentence or a book can stop this movement” (Currie 78), this configuration of time and space into the narrative discourse does not allow for linearity. In fact, any present sign is indebted to, and simultaneously debtor to, a multitude of signs, which denies any autonomy to the sign whilst granting only a provision of meaning. Meaning exists in a swirl of intertextualities, with signs constantly leaving their traces on each other: therefore, “if time and history are being readmitted here, it is in an unrecognizable form that destroys the linear sequence of past, present and future with the logic of the trace which understands the components of any sequence as constitutive of each other” (Currie 78).

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<sup>5</sup> For further insights on the concept of trace, see Derrida 6-65.



This does not happen in a naïve or unconscious way: both the author and the audience of texts and discourses participate in the creation of this knowledge web, imposing meaning on the interlacements they create and receive. The environment that is subsequently forged is one of traces, continuous references and repetitions. Such a system of production succeeds precisely thanks to an audience aware of the interconnections, whilst the production modes keep reinforcing this narrative modality: “there is an aesthetics of serial forms that requires an historical and anthropological study of the ways in which, at different times and in different places, the dialectic between repetition and innovation has been instantiated” (Eco 201).

The interlacement of texts and the recontextualization of information render any quest for a point of origin futile and shift the focus of creative production onto the procedure of re-interpretation. Intertextuality implies not only the borrowing of one text from another, but also that of one artistic sphere from another: “traditional forms give way to mixed-media experiments, and photography, film and television all begin to seep into the visual work of art (and the other arts as well) and colonize it”. (Jameson 110). Intertextuality and the consequent recontextualization are always accompanied by typically postmodern irony. Hence, while the operation of recontextualization may seem a way to legitimize an element, irony works as an opposite force. The ironic component gives media the possibility to construct a new mode of communication, one that is constantly literal and ironic. First, media create an “authority vacuum” (Wallace 180) by mocking and delegitimizing those codes, conventions and canons that have traditionally determined our narrative perspective. They do so by pointing out how these said conventions, taken as undeniable truth, are mere constructs and discourses arbitrarily and conveniently inserted into a specific narrative. Then, the media themselves exploit these codes in an attempt at establishing a self-ironic communication. By constantly reminding the audience of the artificiality of these codes, not only do they render themselves immune to accusations of delivering meaningless, depthless content, but they also

create a new connection with the audience. As a matter of fact, the audience is left with the impression of having an ally that helps them to see through “the pretentiousness and hypocrisy of outdated values” and induce “the feeling of canny superiority” the audience has always longed for (Wallace 180).

### **1.3.3 Pastiche, parody and nostalgia**

Two devices related to the postmodern irony signaled above that are often associated with postmodernism are pastiche and parody. These concepts have given rise to two authoritative yet divergent interpretations. The expedient of pastiche refers to a recycling of past styles and productions. According to Jameson, pastiche overrules parody, presenting itself as a “blank parody, a parody that has lost its sense of humour” (5). In a mildly negative tone, Jameson describes how postmodern pastiche breaks away from the modernist focus on uniqueness, resorting to “the cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion” (18). On the other hand, Linda Hutcheon insists on the still dominant role of parody as it “works to foreground the politics of representation” (94). Hutcheon claims that postmodernists generally tend to use pastiche – a practice of imitation deprived of parody - to willingly neglect any continuity with the past, ignoring the context of the references and styles they recycle. However, according to Hutcheon, “postmodern parody does not disregard the context of the past representations it cites, but uses irony to acknowledge the fact that we are inevitably separated from that past today – by time and by the subsequent history of those representations” (94). Hence, the use of parody is to mark the real function of pastiche.

Among all the ways in which intertextuality can be utilized, Umberto Eco (2005), professes a particular interest in the version that intentionally highlights the presence of a quotation. As he states, “it is typical of what is called postmodern literature and art [...] to quote by using (sometimes under various stylistic disguises) quotation marks so that the reader pays no

attention to the content of the citation but instead to the way in which the excerpt from a first text is introduced into the fabric of a second one” (176).

The topic of pastiche inevitably intertwines with yet another postmodern aesthetic feature: nostalgia. Retrieving past techniques becomes, in postmodernism, the symbol of a nostalgia for a past that never was: “the invocation of a partial, idealized history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present” (Hutcheon & Valdes 20). Since postmodernists are aware of this ultimate failure in recollecting, the aesthetic of nostalgia assumes ironic traits. Irony is indeed a natural response to the impossibility of finding the comfort of authenticity and truth in present times; but with the past being idealized, “nostalgia itself gets both called up, exploited, and ironized” (Hutcheon & Valdes 23). The longing for a phantom past is signaled by the “crisis in historicity” (Jameson 25). Contrary to the modernist period, when “the past was invoked [...] to deploy its ‘presentness’ or to enable its transcendence in the search for a more secure and universal value system” (Hutcheon 88), the postmodern era regards history – as well as the nature of any matter - as a discourse rather than a real object, and the boundaries between fiction and history get blurred. This blurring becomes aesthetically visible in the “postmodern ironic rethinking of history”, the “co-existence of heterogeneous filmic genres” and historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 5). All of them question the conformity between reality and the narration of it, foregrounding a subjective recounting of events that does not strive to adhere to historical accuracy or reality. Our inability to access the past as an archive goes hand in hand with the new perception of temporality, the loss of linear narratives and the conception of a kaleidoscopic truth. Hutcheon emphasizes the relevant role of postmodern art in raising the problem of historicity and the “acknowledgement of the meaningmaking function of human constructs” (89).

### 1.3.4 Reality and identity

The mimetic view of art is abandoned as the notion of reality becomes deceptive and the methods of representation must adapt. As Jameson states, “art does not seem in our society to offer any direct access to reality, any possibility of unmediated representation or of what used to be called realism” (149); reality is replaced by an idea of reality, presented through a never-ending parade of images. This condition is best described in Baudrillard’s terms as the age of simulacra: the rise of technology and mass media contributed towards manufacturing a cultural production of signs completely disengaged from reality (2-3). Reproduction beats production, and any original referent or conventional meaning is lost, or found to never have been there. Beyond the famous and clear examples of Las Vegas and Disneyland, we witness an artistic creation focused on proposing simulations as the new way to conceptualize reality. This is especially true of TV and filmic products, as we can see in the acclaimed film *Matrix* (1999), in *The Truman Show* (1998), as well as in the more recent tv series *Black Mirror* (2011). Such a disengagement from reality is symptomatic of what Jameson defines as a ‘schizophrenic society’, with the concept of schizophrenia drawn from Lacan’s theory and pointing to “a breakdown in the signifying chain” (25).

The difficulties mentioned in relation to the postmodern conceptualization of space and time apply to any narrative, including the one on personal identity. As Currie argued, the interpretation of a sentence depends upon 'a certain temporal unification of past and future with the present before me', and the same can be said of the narrative of personal identity, the linearity of which serves to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life (103).

The protagonists of this mutated hyperreality can only be schizophrenic themselves, condemned to a life of fragmentation and “to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (Jameson 26). As a consequence,

the subjects in postmodern narratives are “no longer assumed to a coherent, meaning-generating entity” (Hutcheon 11); rather, they become artificial products of their times, situational, deprived of their nature – hence the ‘death of the subject’. The ‘depthlessness’ of reality, the new paradigms involving time and space, the irretrievableness of meaning, all give rise to a subject that results as a mere construct incapable of claiming an identity of its own. The postmodern subject “is seen to be a composite of roles or “stories”, living in ‘a large number of fragmentary possible worlds’” (Hoffman 65).

The lack of depth in the postmodern era corresponds in the artistic field to a parallel lack of emotions - what Jameson calls ‘the waning of affect’. Jameson explains that this emotional lack might ensue from the end of an era of monad-like artistic expression, one relying on the self-sufficiency of the individual and on the duality of expressive channels: the source is a self-centered subject and the solipsistic sentiment gets processed as the “things felt are then expressed by projection outward” (14). However, what used to constitute the individual fails as the subject assumes the shape of postmodern constructs and discourses. With no need to dig deeper into an individual’s profundity, flatness becomes a major aesthetic feature. This “is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings [...] are now free-floating and impersonal” (Jameson 16). Both Jameson and Hoffman praise the liberation that the postmodern aesthetic seems to bring along; nevertheless, they also point to the fact that despite overcoming the modernist “feeling of alienation, loss and disorientation by the play of the artifice”, the postmodern mode “cannot finally overcome the feeling of defamiliarization and estrangement” (Hoffman 77), nor cure the anxiety of the ‘schizophrenic’ individual, an “anxiety which is the fear of and confrontation with disconnection” (Hoffman 136).

#### **1.4 How is postmodernism problematic?**

Postmodern aesthetics are the expression of a tumultuous society that is always in frantic motion. The postmodern movement has been associated with a threatening moral relativism which renders the assessments of ethical dilemmas problematic. Relativism overall seems to be paradigmatic of postmodernism, regardless of the field of discussion. As a matter of fact, a lot of postmodern theory derives from Nietzsche's critique of objectivism, with the philosopher claiming that reality is a matter of interpretation and not of explanation (327). If there is no privileged perspective on matters, it becomes impossible to take a standpoint when faced with multiple options. While this reasoning may foster an attitude of openness and acceptance towards different views, it can create issues when applied to moral arguments. With no value recognized as objectively true, and a tendency to validate any position as equally legitimate, postmodernism negates the possibility to give a value judgement on any issue.

Therefore, in postmodern times, truth is not considered an objective entity to be achieved or achievable in any way, as all 'facts' are constantly constructed and can count as truth. The recoil from any pretense to objectivity is accompanied by the postmodern conception of meaning, which becomes a fleeting, unstable sign deprived of innate properties and dependent on external contingencies. Hence, there is no chance to dig deep into a subject in search of a hidden meaning: subjects are rendered devoid of depth, as their significance is always shifting and always only superficial. Jameson claimed that postmodernism refutes at least four types of depth, negating the dialectic of essence and appearance, the Freudian latent unconscious, the conflict between authenticity and inauthenticity and other opposite ideologies, and finally, the opposition between signified and signifier (62). Hence, postmodernism has left a trail of despair, as no one can trust anything to be real or authentic or meaningful.

## 1.5 Conclusion

In sum, postmodernist aesthetics appear to be dry, flat, and skeptical, with no depth but only surfaces, no meaning but ephemeral contingencies, no reality but simply simulations. Narrative subjects become unable to take a look inside themselves and identify within themselves, being contingent constructs of ever-moving signs. A subject is unable to collect and order information, so to create a linear, chronological narrative; hence, said subject can only resort to a schizophrenic assemblage in the process of identification.

Postmodernism has been associated with concepts such as extreme relativism, nihilism, anti-realism. With no perceived need to take a radical standpoint, I believe the movement leaves no space for authenticity, and that the concept of a fragmented identity, the moral relativism, as well as the view of reality as a solipsistic simulation, foster a sense of disorientation and a stasis in many subjects of sociocultural and scientific interest. If on the one hand, postmodernism promotes the questioning of metanarratives and welcomes a broad range of perspectives, on the other, it seems to impose a lifestyle and reasoning permeated with artificiality. Hence, post-postmodernist movements have attempted to counteract the sense of dissatisfaction caused by postmodernism with a focus on sincerity and trust, as well as new adaptation of postmodern concepts. These movements, which emerged in the last decade and which I will discuss in my next chapter, have proposed alternatives for postmodern culture as well as its aesthetics.

## CHAPTER 2: Delineating metamodernism

### 2.1 Post-postmodernism(s)

From the 1990s onwards, the sensation of insufficiency concerning postmodernism has increasingly spread into various fields: from art, to philosophy, to theory. Postmodernism seemed to have brought its own death upon itself: its paradigm, professing self-reflexivity and relying on a system of continuous self-references, rendered originality inconceivable. Cultural and artistic products were either creations undermining their own legitimacy and authenticity – as a work could not stand on its own anymore and would have to constantly point out the impossibility of representing reality in favour of fictionality, as well as never escaping citationality -, or critiques and deconstructions of past works. A cultural dogma tirelessly dismantling any concept and object clearly impedes any sort of progress –with progress itself being pointed out as a mere illusion. As discontent kept rising, scholars Linda Hutcheon (1988), Garry Potter & Jose Lopez (2001), Ihab Hassan (2003) and many others began declaring the death of postmodernism and expressing the feeling that something else needed to take its place.

Postmodernism had lost its power: once every concept, truth, value had been debunked and unveiled as a construction, and theorizations of the current had been out there for a long time, postmodernism became increasingly embedded in the cultural and artistic production. Hence, the nihilistic drive and the urge to scream out about the groundlessness of knowledge turned from condemnation and critical statement into an artistic tool and a basis to mold new creative works. Despite its rejection of canons, postmodernism itself developed one - with literature, authors, works of art and architecture explicitly being labeled as postmodernist.

The widely supported proclamation regarding the death of postmodernism outlined above does not imply the movement has been, or needs to be, swept under the rug. On the



contrary, cultural and artistic fields continue to live off postmodernist teachings and they shall keep on doing so. In spite of all the ambiguities, disagreements and pessimism postmodernism brought along, in spite of the paradoxes and the inaccessibility of its precepts and productions, it offered new insights into epistemology, a renovated emphasis on small, forgotten narratives and more space for a multiplicity of voices.

Yet, over the last few decades the feeling that postmodernism had run its course spread more and more, and the urge to define a newly felt sensitivity and priority with something other than postmodernism arose: hence, the emergence of post-postmodernism, an umbrella term that includes a variety of recent currents and –isms – such as altermodernism, new sincerity, metamodernism, digimodernism and so on.<sup>6</sup> Despite the many developments subsumed under the label of post-postmodernism, and notwithstanding the pessimistic perspective of Alan Kirby with his digimodernism, some common denominators can be identified. Post-postmodernism seems to be interested in a project of reconstruction. As Neil Brooks and Josh Toth state a “renewed faith in the possibility of what postmodernism narrative has repeatedly identified as impossible: meaning, truth, representational accuracy” has emerged (8). As mentioned before, according to postmodernism clear definitions are unreachable, breaks between subjects and objects and within subjects and objects are imperative, and real meaning is unattainable. In response to these negatives, post-postmodernism appears as an attempt to accept and transcend the postmodern condition.

Whilst it is impossible to negate the impact of postmodernism and salvage truths and values as they used to be before the postmodern era, it seems possible to acknowledge the

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<sup>6</sup> First conceptualised by Nicolas Borriaud, altermodernism professes to be a progression of postmodernism, and entails a positive merging of cultures as the standard, starting point on which to build a new cultural paradigm. For further information, see Holloway 7-21.

New sincerity is a cultural movement as well as a trend and made its first appearance in the 1980s; it represents a tendency to favour sincerity over postmodern irony and cynicism.

Digimodernism embraces new aesthetic parameters originating from the developments of digital technology; see Kirby, especially chapters 2 and 4.

deconstructive process that took place and start a project of reconstruction, possibly one based on more humane inclinations and shared sensations. Thus, Ihab Hassan outlined the contours of an aesthetic of truth that encompasses postmodernism, “a realism that redefines the relation between subject and object, self and other, in terms of profound trust” (314) and empathy. Far from trying to pursue a sort of spiritual inclination in this thesis, I believe there exists a common ground of feelings, sensations and humanity that may not be solid enough to claim any objectively recognized truth, but that might be a more than powerful incentive to seek and see some form of authenticity and meaning. With post–postmodernism, there seems to have emerged a renewed interest in conferring creational power to the subject, along with a new dimension of purposefulness. In the following sections I will further analyze how this sensitivity translates into cultural artefacts, placing the focus on one paradigm: metamodernism.

## **2.2 Why metamodernism?**

As previously mentioned, various sub-types of post-postmodernism have appeared throughout the last years, but in this thesis, I will focus only on one of these: metamodernism. Unlike other post-postmodernisms, metamodernism has actually gained fair exposure and theorization: a quick research on the internet will reveal the manifold publications – books, dissertations, papers and blogs-, conferences, podcasts, and exhibitions dedicated to metamodernism that appeared from the 90s up until the current year. On September 25, 2014, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam organized a symposium on metamodernism, with the controversial author Francis Fukuyama opening the discussion and the famous actor Shia LaBeouf running a symbolic marathon around the Stedelijk building. The commitment of the actor to mapping out this new cultural philosophy certainly helped in raising a general curiosity among the masses, but the word about metamodernism also kept spreading inside

the academic field. In 2017, scholars Robin Van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen published a study called *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, in an attempt to define this recently felt sensitivity; in July 2019, a conference on metamodernism was organized by the AHRC Metamodernism network at Radboud University, in The Netherlands.

Therefore, as the metamodern paradigm keeps gaining followers, I believe it interesting to examine this specific post-postmodernism and see what it has to offer. My main reason for choosing this specific cultural philosophical approach is that it seems to correspond to a general trend identifiable in recent artistic works. In my chapter 3 I will analyze this correspondence further through a case study on a recently released TV show, *Maniac* (2018). Moreover, I will present some additional contemporary audiovisual works – such as the American TV series *The Newsroom* (2012) and *The Good Place* (2016) - that seem to present metamodern characteristics, in order to investigate the legitimacy of the paradigm.

Another reason why I decided to focus on metamodernism is the peculiar interest it seems to evince in retaining postmodernist precepts instead of declaring itself an opponent to postmodernism. If it is true that overall post-postmodernisms do not seek to break ties with postmodernism, metamodernism goes one step further by really committing itself to incorporating postmodernism into its paradigm and making postmodernist axioms an inevitable part of the metamodernist theorization. I will analyze this commitment in the following section.

To this day, however, there is no clear successor of postmodernism. I would like to highlight the fact that all of the post-postmodernisms mentioned here, including metamodernism, and the many others that have been semi-theorized have not been developed enough, both in or outside the academic field, and have not been properly legitimated by the

academic world. With specific regard to metamodernism, I believe the paradigm as it is emerging today still lacks clarity and precision: whilst it yields compelling points of discussion, its theories still need to be clarified and further elaborated. It is to this end that I wish to contribute with my own research, with the hope to foster future discussions on metamodernism.

### **2.3. Metamodernism: narrowing down the focus of the research**

The term metamodernism first appeared in the 1975, when Ma'sud Zavardeh used it a couple of times in his study *The Apocalyptic Fact and the Eclipse of Fiction in Recent American Prose Narratives*. This first usage, however, is strictly linked to newly perceived aesthetic norms that Zavardeh was trying to identify when examining the American literature of the 1970s. The term as I use it in the following elaboration refers to actual cultural and artistic theories that have been defined as metamodern in the last two decades, specifically to two of them: Van den Akker and Vermeulen's theory, with their implementation of performatism<sup>7</sup> as a narrative strategy, and that of literary theorist and poet Alexandra Dumitrescu.

The two Dutch authors are generally considered the ones to have started an official debate on metamodernism as a sociocultural and artistic replacement for postmodernism. Indeed, their participation in the metamodern debate has been passionate and devoted: thanks to their website *Notes on Metamodernism*, their conferences and the recently released book *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism* (2017), the approach started to acquire increasing recognition and the discussion assumed a more construed body – with their publications tracing the history of the term and its use in academic discourse. Therefore, I believe their work will prove useful in tracing the sociocultural atmosphere that brought about the emergence of metamodernism.

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<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth analysis on performatism, see section 2.6

Moreover, Van den Akker and Vermeulen's work aligns with the goal of this thesis. In fact, the scholars managed to collect an impressive amount of artistic material – paintings, visual art, films, architecture and TV shows – on their blog *Notes on Metamodernism* in order to showcase the traces of their version of the metamodern paradigm in recent aesthetic expressions. This dissertation aims at doing the same, as I will try to track metamodern tendencies in my third chapter by analyzing the TV series *Maniac*.

Nevertheless, I decided also to introduce Alexandra Dumitrescu's version of metamodernism, which in some ways differs from that of the Dutch scholars. The idea of metamodernism as it is known today is quite homogeneous: it is recognized as a post-postmodernism that implements both postmodernism and modernism, that shows a renewed interest in ethics, and a stronger concern for the emotional sphere. However, Dumitrescu stands for a more passionately elaborated theory where the metamodern subject is concerned. All three scholars recognize a return of that subject whose death had been proclaimed during postmodernism. Nevertheless, while Van den Akker and Vermeulen state that the subject “appears, in moments of intersubjectivity, in reciprocal spaces of belief, trust and love”, they also stress the ephemerality and the always present postmodern cynicism. Dumitrescu, instead, truly puts value on the authenticity, self-realization, joy and meaning that a subject can attain, in spite of the postmodern legacy.

The Dutch scholars, for their part, present performatism as a valid metamodern creative approach and narrative strategy. I will proceed to define and analyse their use of performatism, so as to deepen the study of metamodern subjects and reality as they are represented in metamodern aesthetics. With the help of Dumitrescu's theory, I will broaden my exploration of metamodern subjects further. Dumitrescu's theory shows more interest in overriding postmodernism and focusing on a work of reconstruction and tries to do so by offering an integrative yet transformative paradigm. By comparison, the Dutch scholars, as I

will demonstrate, present a theory which is continuously swinging between modernism and postmodernism without ever finding a precise point of balance between the two, and always rejecting a postulation of metamodernism as a self-sufficient paradigm in itself; they only desire to define metamodernism either as a structure of feelings or a cultural logic. Contrary to Dumitrescu, they refuse to call metamodernism a philosophy, a movement, or a trope, and they emphasize how their approach is merely descriptive and not at all prescriptive.

Dumitrescu, for her part, contests their commitment to an ever-oscillating sensibility by describing it as an actual lack of stance, stating that “vacillation, acknowledgement of longings that cannot ever be fulfilled... a reluctance to take a position, the oscillation between possible options, and hesitations between truths and fear of commitment” signal a spirit still critically stuck in postmodernism and surely not an interest in synthesizing postmodernism into an alternative paradigm that stands for something different (Dumitrescu 197).

Van den Akker and Vermeulen, responding to this charge, contest Dumitrescu’s desire to find a solution to postmodern problematics through metamodernism. According to the Dutch scholars, metamodernism should not aim at providing a solution, but merely at describing the current cultural logic: being a direct descendent of postmodernism, with postmodernism still carrying and cradling metamodernism in its arms, the movement actually bursts with “productive contradictions, simmering tensions, ideological formations and – to be frank – frightening developments” (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 5).

Dumitrescu is not unaware of the postmodern coefficient: as she clearly states on her blog *Metamodernism*, the movement “acknowledges its debt to its predecessors, and does not abandon them”. However, she is resolved to put more stress on the positive features of the paradigm and the possibilities it unlocks, stating that metamodernism “returns, unashamedly, to modernism’s search for meaning, common bonds, and values, but through the lens of postmodernism’s knowledge, perspective, diversity, skepticism” (Dumitrescu). The main

difference between the two theorizations appears to be the focus on a paradigm (or, alternatively, the refusal to do so): on one side, the Dutch scholars promote an interest in individuating a sensibility emerging from postmodernism; on the other, Dumitrescu manifests a concern for what an individual can gain from this newly perceived cultural current in terms of ethical principles and self-discovery. I hope that a balanced analysis of metamodernism as envisaged by me will benefit from a combination of the two theories.

#### **2.4 The emergence of metamodernism**

The movement as conceptualized by the Dutch authors seems to start in the 2000s and is marked by the appearance of a wide series of overlapping, aesthetic phenomena such as: “the New Romanticism in the arts (Vermeulen and Van den Akker 2010), the New Mannerism in crafts (van Tuinen, Vermeulen and Van den Akker 2010), the New Aesthetic in design (Sterling 2012), the New Sincerity in literature (Konstantinou 2009, 2016), the New Weird or Nu-Folk in music (Poecke 2014), Quirky Cinema and Quality Television (MacDowell 2012; Vermeulen and Rustad 2013), as well as the discovery of a new terrain for architecture (Allen and McQuade 2011)” (Van Den Akker 2,3). Rather than pinpointing a moment in time for the beginning of the movement, Vermeulen and Van den Akker provide a series of events aimed at representing the overall sentiment of the last decades and the geopolitical environment. Hence, when explaining the cultural context that gave birth to metamodernism, they present circumstances which evidently display a degree of destabilization followed by a somehow disenchanted quest for solutions. Everything that globally took place before the 2000s seems to have paved the way for the metamodern cultural logic in their view: technology developed, the BRICs rose to geopolitical prominence; the era of ‘facile fossils’ and fantasies of nuclear abundance gave way to ‘extreme oil’ and dreams of fracking-induced energy independence; the so-called fourth wave of terrorism hit Western shores; the Iraq War

destabilised the Middle East and bankrupted the US treasury and war chest; ‘Project Europe’ got de-railed with the Dutch and French ‘no’ to the European Constitution; immigration policies and multicultural ideals backlashed in the midst of a revival of nationalist populism; US hegemony declined; the Arab Spring toppled many a dictator that had long served as a puppet for foreign vested interests; bad debts became, finally and inevitably, as much a problem for the Global North as they had always been for the Global South; and the financial crises inaugurated yet another round of neoliberalisation (this time by means of austerity measures of all sorts), thereby exposing and deepening the institutionalised drive towards financial instability, economic inequality, labour precarity and ecological disaster” (Van den Akker 11).

These circumstances fostered a feeling of unbearable destabilization that in its turn generated the need for a reaction: hence, the call for “a reform of the economic system [...], a restructuration of the political discourse [...], alternative energy”<sup>8</sup> (Vermeulen and Van den Akker), sustainability, and a renovated cultural climate. It is worth mentioning that metamodernism has bloomed parallelly to and in interaction with the growth of the Internet: “the 2000s have been marked by the waning of the logic of television (or mass media) culture and the emergence of the logic of network (or social media) culture” (Van den Akker 14). As this sociocultural philosophy envisages an opening to the entirety of western culture and possibly further,<sup>9</sup> the manifold platforms, connections, and sources of self-education that the Internet offers represent both one relevant reason for the existence of the movement and the main ground for metamodernism to plant its roots and blossom.

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<sup>8</sup> The terms of such reformations are still vague, but metamodern politics seem interested in the welfare state overall and endorsement of environmentally friendly policies. For further insights, see Freinacht in *Metamoderna*.

<sup>9</sup> On their blog in 2015, van den Akker and Vermeulen stated: “It is true that, thus far, we have theorized the metamodern structure of feeling in ‘western’ culture predominantly... Assuming that these observations have currency outside of these contexts, we feel, would be arrogant at best and old-school hegemonic at worst”.



While embodying a tendency to go forward rather than experiencing the backlash caused by the previous decades, metamodernism as described by Vermeulen and Van den Akker takes the view that “history is moving beyond its much-proclaimed end” (5); actually, it holds that there was never an end to history.<sup>10</sup> Metamodernism reconfigures history with the same approach it applies to any subject: it “moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find” (Vermeulen and Van den Akker 5). Van den Akker identifies a change in the ideological consequences that different conceptualizations of history bring along. The regime of historicity<sup>11</sup> in postmodern times was permeated by the sense of an ending, one concerning space rather than time. Similarly to David Harvey’s idea of time-space compression as the motif behind postmodern globalization, Vermeulen and Van den Akker point out that space has in a way been annihilated and time has assumed a different connotation: the globalized market encompasses every corner of the planet, the mass-media system has made communication instantaneous, and economic transactions happen in a blink of an eye. These late-capitalism dynamics entailed a “blocking of historical imagination”, and it “became increasingly impossible – or seemingly unnecessary – to imagine a historical moment before or after an unchecked capitalism” (Van den Akker 22). Postmodern time is then defined by multiple and disconnected presents, working all on the same level. Metamodernists, instead, like to describe their approach as ‘multi-tensed’; using a more picturesque image, they compare it to one of Escher’s artworks, as the metamodernists “open a back door while walking through a front door” (Van den Akker 22).

This explanatory simile, as well as the reconfiguration of history the paradigm adopts, help me to understand the overall attitude that metamodernism fosters: a sort of disenchanting

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Francis Fukuyama’s essays; Van Den Akker and Vermeulen 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> The concept of historicity refers to the historical nature of beings and events, questioning their historical attributes in terms of past, present, and future. Vermeulen and Van den Akker affirm there are many ways in which a being relates to history, and these ways can differ according to time and culture (21).

hopefulness, a conscious naivety. I will now further discuss how the metamodern spirit is presented in Vermeulen's and Van den Akker's theory in relation to aesthetic production, and how the metamodern subject is identified.

## **2.5 Metamodernism: theory and aspects**

Vermeulen and Van den Akker describe metamodernism as “a structure of feeling that emerges from, and reacts to the postmodern as much as it is a cultural logic that corresponds to today's stage of global capitalism” (5). It is worth noticing that the movement is characterized by them as a structure of feelings<sup>12</sup>, a term borrowed from Raymond Williams that refers to the historical relevance of affective responses and relationships (128). In metamodern terms, the expression designates “a discourse that gives meaning to our experience” (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 11), and meaning, along with authenticity, becomes achievable once again. Metamodern meaning and authenticity are modeled on the postmodernism premises that these concepts are only constructions and cannot be attained. I will now further elaborate on how the metamodern subject accesses such values in the postmodern aftermath, enriching the discussion through Raoul Eshelman's performatism and Alexandra Dumitrescu's work.

As previously mentioned, metamodernism does not backfire from postmodernism; instead, it stems from it and makes sure to value its legacy when formulating its theoretical counteraction. As a matter of fact, the whole movement sets the rejection of any solid standpoints and dogmas as a premise: Vermeulen and Van den Akker like to highlight how

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<sup>12</sup> The choice of terminology is also interesting inasmuch as ‘structure of feelings’ coined and further elaborated by Raymond Williams to indicate an element intrinsic to any community and participant in the making of the collective framework; yet, the term also tries to distance itself from anything resembling an ideology. This whole idea appears very much attuned to the concept of metamodernism itself – a new cultural paradigm that strives not to impose itself as a set of beliefs.

metamodernism “oscillates between [...] postmodern and pre-postmodern (and often modern) predilections, between irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity, between eclecticism and purity, between deconstruction and construction and so forth”<sup>13</sup> (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 11). Metamodernism, then, does not claim to find a middle point between postmodernism and modernism: it is in constant tension, moving back and forth very much like a swinging pendulum.

This continuous swinging is additionally marked by the prefix *meta-*, which is drawn from Plato’s Symposium. In fact, Plato uses the word *metaxy* to “describe a sense of in-betweenness” when inquiring about the nature of Eros, who is not a complete human nor a full god (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 10). This terminology best represents the sensibility that the movement tries to convey, as “to speak of *metaxy*, thus, is to speak of a movement between (opposite) poles: not a binary so much as a continuum that stretches from one to the other” (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 11). This cultural philosophy, then, explicitly establishes a perpetual oscillation as its intrinsic and irreducible characteristic.

The possible problematics when describing a paradigm as a nonstop oscillation between two movements rests in guaranteeing the existence and a clear understanding of such movements – which is no easy task when talking about modernism and postmodernism. Firstly, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, postmodernism has had a hard time being defined and categorized into a clear paradigm. Moreover, as proved by multifold studies, it is hard to decide when modernism ended and when postmodernism began, where the movements overlapped and where they diverged. Nevertheless, I believe that Van den Akker, Vermeulen and all scholars theorizing metamodernism discuss modernism and postmodernism in those terms most commonly associated with each of the two movements,

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<sup>13</sup> Luke Turner drafted a *Metamodernist Manifesto* in 2011, summarizing Van Den Akker’s and Vermeulen’s paradigm in eight points. The format of choice purposefully refers to modernist manifestos, such as the *Manifesto of Futurism* published by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909. Interestingly, Alexandra Dumitrescu also incorporated a manifesto of metamodernism into her own theory.

in a way that does not try to dismiss their complexity, but that helps track the development of cultural logics and aesthetic trends throughout time. Hence, emblematic modernist concepts such as purity and enthusiasm are combined with the irony and pastiche that are commonly identified as postmodernist.

## **2.6 Metamodern subject: performatism, authenticity, epiphany**

One strategy that van den Akker and Vermeulen identify as metamodern is performatism. Performatism as a practice itself was defined many years before metamodernism by Raoul Eshelman.<sup>14</sup> Eshelman described performatism as a cultural development that started in the 1990s and completely replaced postmodernism. Moreover, Eshelman identified performatism as an autonomous cultural movement, without any influence from previous paradigms – which represents a different approach compared to the metamodern one as defined by Vermeulen and Van den Akker. Nevertheless, upon examining the theory of performatism, it becomes apparent why Van den Akker and Vermeulen would want to incorporate it into their theory.

Performatism pertains solely to art and is mainly envisaged by Eshelman as a narrative strategy that aims at creating specific developmental conditions for the protagonist of a narrative, be it literary, filmic or artistic. The entire performatist movement revolves around restoring said narrative subject and giving it an active role in the narrative frame. First of all, performatism privileges subjects that seem able to transcend, at some point of the narration, from the postmodern clusters of discombobulated signs and already present themselves as unconventional, quirky, geniuses, fools. The transcendence is key to the narration and envisages “passing on some sort of value to another person or reaching some

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<sup>14</sup> The first theorization of performatism dates back to 2000. For more insights on performatism, see Eshelman 1-30.

higher state of consciousness or development him- or herself” (Eshelman). Therefore, one of the conditions for the subject to transcend is the development of interconnections, that is, its meaningful relationship with other subjects. The second condition concerns the environment in which the subject gets to be located. Performatist reality relies on artificial conditions that allow the subject to “experience all kinds of things that postmodernists think are metaphysical illusions, e.g. love, beauty, belief, reconciliation, and transcendence” (Eshelman). Subjects are always aware that the experiences in this reality are crafted and mediated; nevertheless, they resolve to abandon themselves to such experiences. As Van den Akker and Vermeulen state, performatism appears as a “willful self-deceit to believe in - or identify with, or solve - something in spite of itself” (317): considering the tension created by a subject aware of the artificiality of it all and still willing to accept it and push on, it becomes evident why performatism gets labelled as a metamodern strategy. In fact, this cultural development provides a narrative strategy typical of the metamodern informed yet naïve subject.

Alexandra Dumitrescu has contributed further to theory on the metamodern subject through her publications.<sup>15</sup> By analyzing literary subjects she developed a theory that revolves around self-realization and a rediscovery of the creative, prolific aspect of the self. Dumitrescu defines metamodernism as follows:

The search for roots in times of uprootedness. It is the self’s longing for innocence, beauty, and simplicity in times of sophistication, shifting aesthetic standards, and excessive complexity. It is the search for that vantage point from which both complexity and simplicity can make sense, coexist, and complement one another. (19)

From this definition, it can be deduced that such a paradigm can be achieved only with a willingness to restore the subject to some sort of power – power to shape reality and

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<sup>15</sup> See Dumitrescu 151-168; 227-239

meaning, to transcend the isolation and the lack of content advocated by postmodernism. As promoted by performatism, the subject is active and able to achieve transcendence. As a matter of fact, the self assumes a central role in metamodernism: the metamodern self actively seeks reconnections, within the self and outside of it. Self-realization is not only possible but occurs thanks to the possibility of establishing connections, intended as relations with other subjects and relations with whatever “challenge that forces the self out of its shell shaped by ego and conditionings” (Dumitrescu 245). The novelties offered by metamodernism lie in the satisfactory feelings one can gain in acknowledging the existence of a common ground – which metamodernism mostly identifies as emotional and able to transcend the solipsistic self; the consequent idea of the self as a unity, that a metamodern subject constantly seeks through interconnections with other subjects; the new disclosure of an emotional depth, which becomes especially accessible through epiphany<sup>16</sup>, according to metamodernism, and the restoration of meaning and authenticity.

Authenticity, meaning, unity, self-realization are then reinstated as legitimate values and experiences, achievable in spite of the always pending postmodern sabotaging attempt to dismantle values. Dumitrescu has theorized the metamodern epiphany as that moment when a subject finally reaches plenitude, self-realization, transcendence, when the full restoration of the self occurs (221). Both Dumitrescu and the performatist movement stress how this moment of full development of the subject takes place thanks to interconnections with others, as “no one acquires the languages needed for self-definition on their own” (33). A renovated interest in the role of other selves for one’s self-realization provides the basis for a restoration

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<sup>16</sup> The concept of epiphany can be traced back to modernist literature. Metamodern epiphany shows plenty of similarities to the modernist one; however, Dumitrescu explains how modernist epiphany focuses more on a rational revelation and has less of a transcending aspiration compared to the metamodern concept. Moreover, while the modernist epiphany is interested in achieving and retrieving a deeper meaning, a grand scheme beneath the surface of a seemingly fragmented reality, the metamodern epiphany does the same whilst never forgetting that such an achievement is only attainable through specific conditions, and that, an epiphanic experience is necessarily mediated by postmodernist restriction. See Dumitrescu 220-222.

of ethical principles as well. All of this translates into a narrative starred by subjects acknowledging the value of the other(s), engaging in an ethics of care and reaching plenitude through meaningful connections. The inescapable postmodern condition does not drag subjects into discouragement as they face it with a conscious and deliberately candid attitude, acknowledging the constraints posed by postmodernism yet deciding to commit to a transcending attitude.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

So far, I have outlined metamodernism, presenting it as a cultural logic caught in constant tension between sincerity and skepticism, a paradigm that promotes a candid yet informed approach towards postmodern cynicism and irony. I described metamodernism as a movement that aims at identifying the sociocultural situation of the western world mainly through artistic productions, individuating new aesthetic parameters and strategies. Additionally, I elaborated the metamodern attitude by discussing how metamodern values and beliefs are presented in aesthetic practice. Moreover, I examined the new opportunities and features that metamodernism offers to narrative and subjects.

The theory discussed above and the characteristics of metamodern art will be further explored through my analysis of a case study in my next chapter. I will proceed to examine the TV show *Maniac*, using it as a case study to test metamodernism, and the theories above gathered, against it, and tracing those characteristics that can be attributed to the cultural trend, as well as those that might clash.

### CHAPTER 3: Case study

So far, I have given an overview of both postmodernism and metamodernism and outlined the aesthetic approaches of the two movements. In this chapter, I will discuss the mini-series *Maniac* as a relevant case study to examine the principles of metamodernism. I will structure my argument by dividing it into multiple analyses of topics and themes, outlining how they are presented in terms of narration, settings, and characters. My analysis will focus on those features that may appear postmodern but decisively present a metamodern twist.

#### 3.1 Synopsis *Maniac*

*Maniac* is a mini-series labeled as a psychological comedy-drama and released on the widely known platform Netflix in 2018. The story centres on two main characters, Annie Landsberg and Owen Milgrim, and their employment of self-defense mechanisms. Owen, constantly battling against his schizophrenia, faces the pressure of being descended from a wealthy family, with the father owning a company producing robots that automatically scoop dog poop from the street - the Poop Bots. The family also pushes Owen to lie in order to defend his older brother Jed, who is facing a trial for sexual misconduct. Owen's female counterpart, Annie Landsberg, deals with the unfortunate loss of her sister through the abuse of drugs. After the abandonment of his wife and the death of his younger daughter, Annie's father has isolated himself from the world, leaving Annie alone and unable to cope with her grief.

Both Owen and Annie end up participating in a pharmaceutical trial set up by scientists Dr. James Mantleray, who has a disturbing relationship with his mother, and Dr. Azumi Fujita, who created the empathetic artificial intelligence system GRTA. The trial, designed to work through a combination of pills and virtual simulations, is meant to cure the patients from all their traumas; however, the experiment hits a wall when AI GRTA falls into a depression and begins malfunctioning. Annie and Owen oddly experience simulated



scenarios together throughout the trial and develop a strong friendship thanks to their adventures. Once the pharmaceutical experiment is completed, Owen is forcefully ostracized and hospitalized by his family as he has refused to lie, thereby causing his brother to be found guilty at the court trial. Annie, who has regained a relationship with her father in the meantime, rescues Owen from the psychiatric hospital and the two run away together.

### **3.2 Introducing the *Maniac* universe: hyperreality and human interactions**

*Maniac* is set in a reality and time frame similar to our own, as in a sort of parallel universe. In geographical terms, the series starts in a New York resembling the real one – save for the presence of a second Statue of Liberty, the Statue of Extra Liberty. The technological features that are part of *Maniac*'s narrative universe all cooperate to create a vision combining past, present, and future. At first, this might appear as a world imbued with retrofuturism<sup>17</sup>, an aesthetic “engaging between the future and the past, as well as broader paradigms such as history, (post)modernity and progress” (Guffey and Lemay 434): cell phones have not been invented, but signs advertising space travels pop up here and there around the city; computers physically remind the viewer of ‘80 tech but are capable of experiencing emotions. “The society is post-industrial, but only primitively digital” (Troy Patterson): yet, many elements in the universe of *Maniac* appear as stretched or alternative versions of services and dynamics displayed by current postmodern societies. The series introduces the concept of the AdBuddy: when characters cannot afford to pay for products and services, they can resort to real-life ads as a form of payment. This means that characters can acquire goods, pay their bills, get a train ticket, in exchange for letting a person read them advertisements right in front of them, even publicly. In fact this dynamic of trading services for advertisement is

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<sup>17</sup> Guffey and Lemay state that “retrofuturism encompasses multiple strands and meanings in twentieth-century culture, including the identification of ‘the future’ as a style, as well as content that highlights nostalgia, irony, and time-bending dislocations” (434).

already used in today's society, especially in the virtual realm: many websites allow users to access specific interfaces for free only after watching promotional videos, and many videogames give out rewards whenever gamers spend their time clicking on ads. Another similar service offered in the series is FriendProxy, which allows characters to hire a person that will pretend to be a good friend for a limited amount of time.

The juxtaposition, and sometimes combination, of technological devices and human elements, as well as technological developments and emotions, is continuously showcased throughout the series. Through the two examples mentioned above, AdBuddy and FriendProxy, the tension that the series creates seems to foreground and question the characters' sense of alienation and loneliness, dominated as their society is by a ridiculous abundance of services and goods, a spasmodic consumption and sovereignty of the object at the cost of the annihilation of the subject. Even something as easily associable with genuineness such as human interaction gets reduced to a mere commodity, with human beings being defined only through the role they assume. As Baudrillard stated, "the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects" (25), and in this case, the human becomes the object. The grotesque role of the AdBuddy as a human-shaped advertisement represents a paradoxically unwanted yet requisite kind of human interaction, which occurs only to circumvent a monetary transaction highlighting the misery and loneliness of all parties involved. The AdBuddy service signals the degeneration of interactions and the resulting disconnections among individuals in a late-capitalist society, which manifests itself in the postmodern culture as the impossibility to achieve meaningful, constructive and authentic connections, resulting in postmodern isolation.

The FriendProxy service may be even more iconic, especially in light of a statement made by a character who makes use of the service in the second episode, *Windmills*: "I have

real friends, this is just more convenient” (00:17:00 – 00:17:03). The element of convenience is strengthened when the series reveals that a character can design a specific background story and draft a script to personalize the appointment with the FriendProxy. The need for a tailor-made experience of friendship symbolizes here not the non-existence of dialogue and interactions per se, but their perceived inconsistency; the comfort of the experience of friendship substitutes for a potentially real relationship, something hardly attainable in postmodern times – with the value of authenticity being lost. A simulation of a friend, a performance of friendship, appears then to be more real and consistent than actual relations. Performance and simulation are elements intrinsic to postmodernism: if everything is exposed as being constructed, performances, roles, and simulated experiences are conversely perceived as real, and indeed, the series points out that a performant friend of FriendProxy is perceived as being more realistic and more defined than any allegedly real friend.

The world of *Maniac* offers yet another useful tool to subdue the feeling of isolation. Characters can purchase an object called A-void, a machine resembling a sensory deprivation tank into which a person can withdraw and lay down to cut all ties with the external world. The show first introduces one of these machines in episode 2, when Annie visits her dad and finds him locked up in the A-void as a consequence of his depression. In episode 3, *Having a Day*, the audience is presented with yet another case of sublimation of real experience into its perfected, virtual counterpart, as another main character is first introduced in the show: the scientist James Mantleray, who will at some point take charge of the pharmaceutical trial, makes his entrance in a scene that showcases his paraphilia<sup>18</sup>. Here, his condition is portrayed by his attachment to a technological device meant to stimulate the genitalia, which signals his sexual attraction to objects and virtual realities more generally. Later on, the audience will

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<sup>18</sup> The term paraphilia refers to an abnormal sexual response towards objects or circumstances; for further insights, refer to DSM-5

learn that Mantleray's fetishism substitutes for his intimate relationships, having caused the end of his love affair as well as the loss of his job.

These representations of failed or inauthentic human interactions, sublimation, and reliance on simulations stand for those elements that characterize the postmodern culture of late capitalism. The New York of *Maniac* is covered by cynical advertisements, like the neon sign switching from Oral-B - a well-known brand of toothpaste and dental hygiene products - to Jolly Rancher, a famous American brand of candies, jelly beans, and all things usually threatening oral hygiene; or the ads offering people the chance to play pretend by taking the place of a recently deceased husband for their mourning family. This constant game of ironic duality and replacement reveals an overall lack of meaning and profound elaboration: everything is equally valid since everything is replaceable. Even emotional depth is treated as an object, as any emotional problem or lack of excitement can be easily remedied by a service or an object offering the simulated experience of that emotional depth. Subjects and objects merge with one another, the distance between them seems to be eliminated, and the condition presented in the show appears one of hyperreality, a concept which refers to "a state supposedly more real - more sensation-packed - than reality, which can seem flat and dull"(Mayhew 251). The world of *Maniac* as it is shown manifests an overriding concern with a perception of authenticity, a concept that does not seem unattainable if not through mediated, mechanic means: hence, the inhabitants abandon themselves completely to hyper-spaces, in a dynamic that explores how "the world is absorbed by an individual's preference for illusory objects over authentic ones" (Torikian, 100).

A preference for tailor-made interactions is further highlighted by the constant failure of dialogue between characters. In episode 4, *Furs by Sebastian*, Annie walks into a cafeteria, and from her viewpoint the audience witnesses a group of people socializing a few tables away from her. In the middle of the group, a guy who works for FriendProxy – as the logo on

his shirt reveals - is evidently trying to talk about himself, recounting a personal experience; however, the characters around him – presumably, the people who hired him to hang out with them- abruptly stop listening to him, and for a moment the audience is forced to face the sight of a lost, lonely face. The two AdBuddies in episodes 1 and 2, who are called by Owen and Annie to pay for transports and food, try to engage in small talk with the protagonists while performing their jobs. Both AdBuddies give away a small glimpse of their personal lives by sharing their daily preoccupations and inner desires, revealing that their voices go unheard and that they are in search for sympathy and genuine emotions; even these attempts to authentic dialogue are cut off, as the other parties involved are unable to respond empathetically. Another interesting interaction occurs in episode 1 between Owen and one of his colleagues. The latter communicates to the former that the company they both work for is granting Owen a furlough. However, after Owen asks when he will be allowed to go back to work, the co-worker reveals that he was simply joking and that the company is firing Owen permanently. He then proceeds to explain himself by stating: “I was using your kind of humor, when you say something you don’t mean and nobody laughs” (00:11:07 - 00:11:12), and is surprised that Owen did not catch the irony of the statement. Not only does this interaction signal a failure of communication, but a failure of irony as well: while a cynical brand of irony is the primary communicative strategy of postmodernism, in this scene irony gets crushed under the pathos of the situation presented and fails to reach both the protagonist and me, the viewer.

### **3.2.1 Hyperreality and human interactions: a reading**

The universe of *Maniac* seems to perfectly recall a Baudrillardian hyperreality, in which fulfillment is sought through the simulacra of reality, as well as the idea of a seduction performed through objects on subjects, who become passive receptors of experiences and

pleasures. The characters appear to be defined more by their environment than by inherent properties: they are depicted as receptacles of external stimuli, bombarded by ads and services which seem to redirect their life choices and ultimately, their identities. However, I would argue that this postmodern setting is counter-acted by a striking focus on the human sides of the characters. The moment that services and commodities get offered in the form of human beings, as happens with the AdBuddies and the FriendProxy service, the show raises a tension through which the misery and loneliness of the characters shine through, counterposing the comforts of a depthless hyperreality with the anguish of human depth. The twist lies in the merging of hyperrealistic technology with the human on a commercial basis to the point where the one cannot be distinguished from the other. The comforts and services offered by the *Maniac* society mainly deal with the possibility of establishing connections, interactions and a sense of fulfilment, as characters can replace a deceased relative, have intercourse with virtual beings, gain or pretend to be a tailor-made friend, and even play chess with mechanical, technologically advanced koala bears in a public park. Yet, paradoxically, these same comforts highlight the sense of alienation and disconnection that the characters taking advantage of or subjected to such experiences perceive towards society itself, which stops being a community of people only to be a community of objects, or rather, of commercially exploited people-objects. The two polarized elements of hyperreality and dissatisfaction work in combination to create constant tension and showcase the paradoxical disconnect occurring in each attempt to connect.

The representation of this dynamic between hyperreality and humanity, constructed connections and authentic disconnections, recalls a metamodernist debate on the integration of different sensitivities and the manipulation of such themes in a combinatory yet dynamic mode (Van Den Akker and Vermeulen 6). The postmodern element of hyperreality and the concomitant, slightly modernist sense of dissatisfaction regarding the *Maniac* society evinced

by the characters work together to shift the thematic focus to the search for authentic connections. The pervasive sense of loneliness and the alienation from the outer world as shown in the series acquires a taste of the postmodern the moment it gets entangled with the idea of simulation and the overwhelming presence of commercials. The irony of portraying this environment by mimicking humanity in the shape of simulative services and advertising buddies who become flesh and blood presences in characters' lives might be considered postmodern in its paradoxicality. However, this irony is effectively counterbalanced by the constant attempts at achieving a sincere depth by the characters.

### **3.3 Examining the plot: Freud and the pharmaceutical trial**

After a couple of episodes aimed at presenting the overall environment and background story of the protagonists, Annie and Owen find their way into a pharmaceutical trial organized by the company Neberdine Pharmaceutical Biotech (NPB). The trial they participate in is advertised as a drug-induced process designed to eliminate any disorder, trauma or condition holding back an individual from living a peaceful life. The experiment appears to be a mix of traditional psychoanalytic methods and simulation. Throughout the tests, the subjects, eleven in total, are requested to take three pills, A, B and C, which help induce a specific mental state; upon taking it, the subjects are connected to a computer that puts them into a dream-like state and generates a simulation they have to experience.

The references to modern psychoanalysis, and specifically to the modernist father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, start even before the actual trial. In order to take part in the experiment organized by the company, the participants need to pass a test of free association. Hence, in episode 2 a group of scientists invites them to name the first emotion they experience in association with certain pictures. This first phase is meant to test the subjects' defense mechanisms. The technique of free association and the principle that the human ego

is upheld by defense mechanisms are both related to Freud's studies. Once the participants get accepted for the experiment, they are sat around a table and invited to watch an explanatory video on the pharmaceutical trial. Two scientists appear on the screen: Dr. Muramoto, who is in charge of the trial at the beginning, and Dr. Mantleray, who will eventually take over once Dr. Muramoto dies. In the video, Dr. Mantleray explains how the pills used for the experiment are meant to eliminate the core problem of all personal troubles and replace the usually long, face-to-face therapy prescribed by modern psychoanalysis. A quick, ironic remark makes its way to the explanatory tape, "Sorry Sigmund" (00:25:04 - 00:25:06), as to finally seal the reference.

Paradoxically, the trial consists of three phases, each one involving the administering of pills that recreate an experience similar to a psychoanalytical therapy treatment. Pill A, as in Agonia, makes the subject relive the one trauma that affected it most deeply, molding the resulting behavioral pattern, habits and coping dysfunctionalities; pill B, which stands for Behavioral, exposes the subjects' defense mechanisms, inducing them to realize their self-deception by making them behave in self-disrupting or subversive ways; finally, pill C, Confrontation, induces a healthy process of dealing with the trauma until the point is reached where the subject can accept it and move on. Characteristically, these psychoanalytical sessions can only work when combined with simulations crafted by GRTA (also called Gertie), a supercomputer capable of human-like interactions. This AI agent connects her circuits to the subjects' brain, putting them to sleep and projecting them into tailor-made virtual realities, each one involving different scenarios designed to trigger them.

The most evident reference to Freud probably occurs during the introduction of Dr. Greta Mantleray, Dr. James Mantleray's mother. The relationship between the two appears highly disturbing. Dr. James Mantleray, seemingly unable to cope with his mother's constant reprimands, admits to having taken his distance from his mother for a long time. Greta



Mantleray, who is a famous, somewhat mainstream therapist, seems to establish a doctor-patient interaction with her son, analyzing any remarks and behaviors of his as a symptom of a psychological condition. After years of silence, James K. Mantleray has been forced to call upon his mother for help, as the supercomputer GRTA is facing some behavioral problems. As a matter of fact, on top of the similarity mirrored by the names Greta/GRTA, the AI's behavioral pattern has been modeled on Greta Mantleray's personality, in spite of James's constantly professed hatred of his mother. The moment mother and son meet, an evident sexual tension rises between them. First, James responds with frustration upon seeing his mother's sexual companion standing next to her. Then, the mother proceeds to kiss her son on the lips with passion and for a considerable amount of time; despite some signs of objection on his face, James surrenders to the kiss. Later on, he confesses his anger towards his mother for being too loving and having shared her bed with him too many times. The relationship between these two characters recalls a sort of positive Freudian Oedipus complex<sup>19</sup>. The well-known Oedipus complex refers to a sexual drive manifested by a child towards the mother, until the castration complex kicks in (Freud 53) and the love towards the mother gets sublimated into different emotional and behavioural responses; yet, if the first developmental stage is accompanied by traumatic experiences, it allegedly results in a problematic adult life. When James confronts his mother about their problematic relation, he experiences sudden, temporary blindness, referencing yet another Freudian's theory, the Conversion Disorder (CD). A CD involves a failure in communication between the nerves and the body: an episode of psychological stress gets converted into a physical condition, which most times consists in paralysis or blindness.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The theorization of the Oedipus complex is developed throughout various works by Freud; the concept puts in a first appearance in Freud 1899.

<sup>20</sup> For further insights, refer to Freud and Breuer, 101-121

Beyond the clinical implications of the above-mentioned conditions, it is relevant to analyze the way the Freudian factor is implemented in the show. As I have previously examined, *Maniac* appears to be set in a world affected by the late-capitalistic logic of postmodernism; this logic has been theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in terms of an Anti-Oedipus complex (1972). Their Anti-Oedipus theory aims at criticizing Freud's psychoanalysis centered on the Oedipus complex. The two authors contested the Freudian reading of the unconscious in terms of repressed material and redesigned the unconscious as a cluster of desire-producing relationships. The postmodern anti-oedipal subject is one deprived of any agency: the possibility of the subject being sovereign has been exposed as a mere illusion, the subject being a passive receptacle of capitalist stirrings. Nevertheless, however much the show is imbued with postmodern elements and postmodern logic, the Freudian Oedipus complex is developed here by following the interpretation of traditional psychoanalysis, framing it as an unsolved traumatic relationship between a mother and a son. Overall, the show seems to follow classical precepts of psychoanalysis, both in constructing an effective therapy for the patients and in visually interpreting modern psychoanalytical complexes and disorders.

However, there is also a desire to reject psychoanalysis, and it is this rejection that introduces features and approaches commonly associable with postmodernism. First of all, one intentional attempt to make use of modern psychoanalysis whilst rejecting it is manifested by the scientists's desire of getting rid of the patient-therapist relationship, replacing the role of a professional doctor with AI. Then, there is a striking use of irony in each scene presenting a reference to Freud: this irony is not only verbally conveyed by scientist James Mantleray; it is reflected in the characters' performances. Whenever a disturbing moment occurs, such as the first encounter between James Mantleray and his mother, or when an allegedly serious condition presents itself, as in the episode about CD, the

gravity of the circumstances is counterbalanced by the ridiculous and exaggerated acting of the characters. All three scientists, Dr. James Mantleray, Dr. Greta Mantleray, and Azumi, constantly overact and overreact, rendering the scenes grotesque. In particular, the two Freudian episodes between mother and son come across as parodies and appear to mock the psychoanalytical reference.

### **3.3.1 Freud and the pharmaceutical trial: a reading**

Interestingly, both the oedipal trauma and the psychoanalytic/not-so-psychoanalytic therapy find a final resolution when the characters open themselves up to genuine human connections and use these connections as a key to bringing meaning into their lives.

The pharmaceutical trial, aimed at eliminating the need for a patient-therapist interaction during therapy, encounters some technical issues along the way. The intelligent computer GRTA alias Gertie is designed to substitute any therapist with her capacity of creating simulated scenarios for the subjects; through these tailor-made scenarios, each patient faces core traumas induced by the three-steps pills mentioned above. In episode 6, *Larger Structural Issues*, it is revealed that Dr. Azumi installed the faculty of empathy inside the AI in order to make the computer more protective of the subjects. However, this choice backlashes the moment Gertie starts to have problems dealing with her own newly found feelings and begins behaving unpredictably with her subjects. At this point, Gertie's actions become erratic and the trial seems doomed to fail. Yet the two protagonists, Annie and Owen, unexpectedly manage to continuously meet one another throughout the simulations in all three phases of the trial, and their connection, which transcends the delimitations imposed by the AI and digresses from the regular path established by the therapeutical process, saves the trial and brings it to a successful end. The relevance of meaningful connections is especially extolled by metamodernism, and such connections become the main drive for both characters

and narrative development. I will examine this topic in regard to Annie and Owen's evolution further in the next sub-chapter.

The disturbing relationship between Dr. James Mantleray and his mother is also redefined as an incapability to embrace human connections on the part of Dr. James. After confronting his mother, sharing a kiss with his lab partner Dr. Azumi, and experiencing a spell of CD, Dr. James is faced with the difficult choice of either putting at risk the subjects' lives and continuing the trial or shutting off the computer once and for all. Still blind, Dr. James is guided by Dr. Azumi's hand into the control room. He proceeds to sacrifice his life work and destroy the machine. This act assumes a symbolical signification, considering that Gertie's personality was modelled on Dr. James's mother's personality. More specifically, the scientific sacrifice equals the symbolical killing of the mother at the hand of the son.

The last episode of the show, *Option C*, features a version of Dr. James which seems much more at ease with talking to his mother, to the point of his willingly arranging lunches with her. Upon leaving the NBP offices, Dr. James and Dr. Azumi share an intimate conversation in the elevator:

DR JAMES: I'm starting to think that your kiss, not my mother's behavior, was the catalyst for my temporary failure of my visual cortex. During my hysterical blindness, I had this vision that -

DR AZUMI: An internally generated vision. It's called a fantasy, James.

DR JAMES: Yes. A fantasy. You and I were at sea. You were my first mate and nurturing life partner and we were on a journey. (00:06:48 – 00:07:35)

The focus shifts from the Oedipal relation as the source of all problems to James's renewed connection with Azumi as a sort of liberating key to his repressed emotions. The CD episode is no longer considered a consequence of a stressful interaction with the mother, but an epiphanic moment guiding the character to a final shattering of any emotive walls. This

particular conversation presents a subject that actively reconfigures his life, applying a personal interpretation to a specific circumstance: hence, a subject that gains authority over his narrative. Furthermore, the turning point reached by the subject occurs when he is finally ready to open himself up to an authentic human connection, which provides meaning to his overall life situation. The turning point itself takes the form of a vision, striking James much like an epiphany; yet, the lofty tone with which he describes his epiphany is immediately diminished by Dr. Azumi, who reduces the experience to a mere fantasy. Nevertheless, James seems to achieve a sense of self-realization, which appears to be triggered by this epiphanic moment. This character's development responds to the process of epiphany envisaged by metamodernism, which entails the achievement of plenitude and self-realization through interconnection with other subjects, as I analyzed in my Chapter 2, section 2.6.

### **3.4 Characters: identity, reality and meaning**

#### **3.4.1 The protagonists' development**

The evolution of the two protagonists is the central drive behind the narrative. Both Annie and Owen struggle to achieve a clear notion of their identities, the former because of constant denial, the latter because of his schizophrenia. Annie has a drug problem: refusing to overcome her trauma, she willingly keeps taking the A pill to mentally relieve the traumatic car accident which caused the death of her sister. She is completely unable to cope with intimacy and any interactions she engages in before the pharmaceutical trial are of a transactional nature. Her perception of reality is blurred as well, due to the combination of drug withdrawal symptoms and the inability to solve her core trauma. For instance, in episode 2 Annie seems finally determined to put her struggles behind her and collects money to realize her ultimate goal: travelling to Salt Lake City, where her sister tragically died. However, once she arrives at the train station, she glances at the departure board and the

letters start rearranging themselves, morphing into a giant A; she turns back and starts looking for A pills again.

Owen's relationship with reality is inevitably complicated, due to his schizophrenia causing him a lot of hallucinations. While *Maniac*'s intent does not seem to be to romanticize mental illness, for the audience it is quite easy to sympathize with Owen, as this naive character gets introduced into a hostile environment. Owen tries to battle his hallucinations, yet seems to find a sort of meaning in them. The show does not try to fool the audience into believing Owen's visions might be real; however, they certainly appear more meaningful than anything else around Owen. First of all, the character is set off against his bourgeois family, which from the very first scene treats him in a condescending way and asks him to lie for a trial concerning his brother. This request alone comes across as quite selfish, considering that the family is aware of Owen's struggle to get a grip on reality. Overall, the family presents itself as an imposing antagonist deprived of empathy, dictating the terms for normality and treating Owen as an outcast. Furthermore, the contrast between Owen and the series' cold, hyperreal setting, which I analyzed previously, contributes to enhancing his image as an authentic character. As a matter of fact, the protagonist is presented with an emotional depth that his co-characters and his environment lack.

Schizophrenia helps to mold Owen into a vulnerable, genuine character who is openly struggling in his quest for truth, being tossed between layers of reality in a world that already plays with the concept of reality quite a lot – the 'real' universe merging with hyperreality, Owen's hallucinations, GRTA's simulations, and an ambiguous finale which I will examine later on. Owen's visions give him a sense of self-acceptance and purpose, as he hallucinates that he is a secret agent commissioned to save the world and that he finally has a brother who loves him. His occasional faith in these manifestations seems guided more by the desire for something meaningful than for something real. Yet, while his visions push him to believe that

Annie is his partner in crime and drive him to initially engage with her, they are not the ultimate provider of meaning. Halfway through the pharmaceutical trial, Owen is interviewed by Dr. James Mantleray to check his progress. Here, Owen reveals that the problem is not that he is sick, but rather that he does not matter (episode 6). Hence, the root of his problem does not lie in his difficulty to identify reality, but in his inability to find a narrative where he fits in. His hallucinations provide him with the narrative of the hero; GRTA also provides him with the narrative of the family man; ultimately, Owen abandons both for Annie.

Although this turn was not anticipated in the pharmaceutical trial, the protagonists start experiencing shared simulated scenarios. First, they appear as a married couple living in Long Island in the '80s. Then, they are divorced con artists participating in a séance. Finally, they impersonate a UN member and a CIA agent who fight off an alien invasion. Their roles in each scenario uncover behavioral patterns that they have been subconsciously subjected to in their real lives. Nevertheless, it is thanks to their interactions, both in and out of the simulations, that Annie and Owen learn to look into themselves. The defining moments for these two characters occur when each of them takes control of the situation in order to support the other, disregarding any external obstacles. In the course of the simulations, Owen progressively gives up on the idea of the hero narrative as a meaningful one, only to transform into a hawk and try to rescue Annie, who is having troubles in another scenario at that point. The metamorphosis is yet another relevant symbol, as it refers to an event from Owen's childhood. In episode 1, Owen's brother Jed recalls the day when baby Owen rescued a hawk in a park and brought it home; once it was strong enough, the hawk ended up eating Jed's gerbil. While Owen has always been assigned the role of the outcast, pitied and ostracized by his family, Jed has very clearly been the talented, flawless, favorite son, despite his facing a trial for sexual misconduct. Hence, the hawk seems to stand for Owen's renewed strength and an act of vengeance towards a narrative that has humiliated him and confined

him to a corner. Owen the hawk is an empowered subject, who takes action to escape from all those narratives that ultimately do not reflect his true desires and being. His self-realization coincides with a quest for meaning, which he finds in Annie, the one person who helps him on his journey of self-discovery.

Simultaneously, Annie is also affected by the interactions in ways that become manifest especially after her return to reality. Upon meeting Owen, she acts dismissively, taking him for a lunatic whenever he brings up their alleged bond as secret agents on a mission. However, the more they experience joint scenarios in their dreamlike state, the more she is convinced that they must be connected in a unique way. In episode 5, *Exactly Like You*, after being pulled out of her drug-induced state of unconsciousness, Annie gets interrogated by Dr. James Mantleray. During this interview, she reveals that Owen sees her as she is, and she learns that their connections during the simulations were never supposed to happen, according to the scenario of the pharma trial. This is the moment when Annie opens herself up to the possibility that her bond with Owen might be something of a cosmic, transcendent nature, something meaningful that needs to be investigated. This connection gives her the key to gain control over her life: while in episode 2 she is certain that there is a specific narrative one has to follow in order to be a healthy, normal human being, after the pharmaceutical trial she is finally able to structure her life according to her inner desires and reconnect with her co-characters in a meaningful way.

### **3.4.2 Reality: a journey inside and outside the characters**

The series plays a lot with the concept of reality, oscillating between hallucinations, real-life, and simulations. One of the themes carried on in the show revolves around the idea of a pattern, a sort of cosmic design guiding the story. The number of coincidences that pop up throughout the episodes is almost too big to keep track of. These coincidences can be



logically explained when they appear inside the simulated reality, as the state the subjects experience during the trial is similar to a dream: the AI implants scenarios in their mind by drawing material from their subconsciousness. For instance, certain secondary characters, like the ADbuddies, materialize again in the following episodes with a minor role. After Owen and Annie get appointed as subjects 1 and 9 by the scientists, these numbers keep appearing over and over in the simulations: on the license plates of a couple of cars in episode 4, on a card during a magic trick in episode 5, in the address of a mortuary in episode 7, *Ceci N'est Pas Une Drill*, and so on. In the second episode, Annie picks up a copy of the novel *Don Quixote*<sup>21</sup> from a scattered box on the streets: the book has a special meaning for her, and will also guide the story of the simulated scenario in episode 5 when Annie and Owen impersonate con artists looking for Cervantes' lost chapter. Again, in episode 2 a painting of a lemur shows up in Annie's house, which foreshadows the rescue of a lemur by Annie in the simulation of episode 4. The word Snorri first appears in episode 1, on an advertisement about Icelandic fish; it will be the name of Owen's roleplay character in the simulation of episode 9, *Utangatta*.

Things start to get more complicated when such coincidences occur in the characters' reality – or better, what is presumably presented as reality, as opposed to the simulations, although at this point the lines are blurred. For instance, Annie's and Owen's counterparts use the code 5-6-7-8 to crack a door lock and rescue the lemur in episode 4; this is the same security code used by the pharmaceutical laboratory at NBP. The protagonists could not possibly have known about it, as the opening of the mainframe room happens while they are undergoing the trial and on a different scene frame as well. The two cars that Owen's simulated alter ego drives in episode 4 and episode 8 respectively reappear in the final

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<sup>21</sup> The famous work by Miguel de Cervantes will make for an emblematic parallelism inside *Maniac*; much like *Maniac*'s characters, *Don Quixote*'s protagonist deal with the inability to distinguish between fiction and reality. More on the connection between *Maniac* and *Don Quixote* will be developed in the next sections.

episode, parked in the underground garage of NBP. As it turns out, these cars are identical to the ones owned by Dr. James Mantleray and Dr. Azumi, and it is unlikely that Annie and Owen could have caught a glimpse of those vehicles before the pharma trial.

The most ambiguous moment takes place in the very last scene of the series. After the pharmaceutical trial, all subjects are free to go back to their lives; Annie and Owen momentarily split up. While Annie pursues her dream of going to Salt Lake City and rekindles the bond with her father, Owen gathers the courage to testify against his brother at the trial. Because of his betrayal, Owen is subjected to one final act of ostracism: his family crafts a story using Owen's schizophrenia to justify his unreliability and has him committed to a psychiatric hospital. The show does not specify whether Owen has been cured or not during the pharma trial; alone once again, the protagonist stops believing that he can assume any control over his life, and accepts whatever the external circumstances impose on him. In the meantime, Annie realizes how important her connection with Owen is and upon finding out that he is confined in the hospital, she decides to rescue him. They manage to escape from the facility, sprinting away in Annie's car, smiling while being chased by a flock of doctors. Coincidentally, this scene had already been foreshadowed by Owen in episode 6. After finishing phase B of the pharma trial, Annie and Owen have a private conversation on the simulation they just experienced together. During the simulation, the two were con artists looking for the lost chapter of the *Quixote*: this chapter would have granted its reader the possibility of locking oneself up inside a never-ending fantasy. When Annie interrogates Owen on what fantasy he would have wished for, he states:

OWEN. We were gonna go somewhere together. We were in a car. We were driving really fast. Someone was chasing us, I don't know who. It felt like an escape. I was just laughing. And I had this huge smile on my face. It hurt it was so big. We were just two people looking out for each other. (00:20:44 – 00:21:17)

This perfect description of the last scene, disguised as a simple piece of conversation, leaves the audience wondering whether what they are watching in that scene is real or simulated. Furthermore, right before the credits show up, another bizarre event takes place: while Annie and Owen drive away, a hawk riding a poop bot and a dog that Annie owned and lost years earlier appear on the road. This might simply be an intermission of the creators of the show aimed at giving the series the idea of a happy closure through Owen's fantasy coming true. Such a reading would chime with the appearances of the hawk on the poop bot and the dog, which might respectively symbolize Owen's final victory over the pressure by his family and Annie's recovered sense of home and inner peace. However, the combination of these final elements with the multiple coincidences taking place throughout the show raises the question whether the characters have really escaped from their simulated universe or not. As a matter of fact, the viewer knows that the pharmaceutical trial has been carried out seventy-two times before, with some collateral casualties. On top of that, the AI GRTA has been malfunctioning and threatening to keep the subjects inside her core memory before being shut down. There are, in other words, enough clues to allow for the possibility that Annie and Owen might have died during the trial, and what the audience is watching is just another simulated reality projected by GRTA.

### **3.4.3 Reality and simulation: a reading**

The suggestion of radical uncertainty regarding the possibility of telling truth from fiction and grasping an objective reality is retained throughout the show through multiple strategies. Not only does the blending of reality with hyperreality work to redefine the concept of authenticity in a distinctly postmodern fashion; Owen's condition also contributes to generating uncertainties. Interestingly, the confusion affects both the characters and the

audience, in different ways. The final scenes focus on the characters' problematic struggle with the notion of reality, but also seem to offer a solution. When Annie sneaks into the psychiatric hospital, Owen is at first quite skeptical about running away with her. He admits to being afraid that she may be a figment of his imagination, a fruit of his schizophrenia; he also confesses that if she is real, then his incapability of coping with reality will eventually drive her off, as happens every time he gets close to someone. However, Annie assures him that she is real, she is a friend and it does not matter if he imagines things that are not there: strengthened by her support, Owen musters up the courage to escape with her. From here on, Owen's narrative is no longer dictated by his condition: by grace of the fulfilling connection he shares with Annie, he is capable of taking control of his life once again. This turn of events strikes Owen as a sort of epiphany: the chance that it might be all a lie and that Annie might be fictional is still looming in his mind, yet he chooses to take a leap of faith. The meaning provided by the connection with the other transcends Owen's concerns about what is real. During the entire show Owen struggles to find a sense of self, to the point where he abandons the quest and passively lets external forces shape his identity. Finally, he embraces the idea of escaping this precarious situation to pursue the one thing that convinces him that he matters and gives him a narrative that provides him with meaning. His self acquires materiality by trusting another being, regardless of his uncertainties concerning the reality of the circumstances.

This tension between reality, fiction and meaning is not only characteristic of the character, but of the entire show. The audience is also left wondering whether what the characters are experiencing is real life or whether they are still trapped inside a simulation. The question itself does not receive an answer but achieves a sort of resolution in the same way Owen does. The final scenes sum up the rising confusion created throughout the series thanks to the constant references, coincidences, and ontological transgressions between

different layers of reality. Yet, the insufficiency of reality is overshadowed by the sufficiency of meaning: being able to tell truth from simulation is not a priority for the characters anymore, nor for the series. The awareness that what the protagonist experiences may be just a fantasy is still daunting, yet Owen, trapped in this inescapable uncertainty, finds a new fulfilment; in the same way, the audience is provided with a possibly artificial yet candid, meaningful ending. The possibility that the characters are living in a simulation does not degrade the purity nor the sense of their experience. The process presented perfectly resembles the metamodern strategy of performatism, it is possible to achieve authenticity and meaning despite the constraints imposed by the cynical and discouraging postmodern paradigm.

### 3.5 A game of references

The series is packed with intertextuality, which is incorporated both visually and narratively. Some of the references appearing in the episodes are openly pointed out by the creators of the show, others have been spotted by various critics and reviewers. Considering the clarity and directness of these quotations, the show appears to take advantage of intertextuality as a visual and story-telling device. Some references concern the entire setting, as in episode 7, when Annie undergoes a simulated experience where she impersonates an elf amidst the mountains. Both the scenery and the magical avatar stand as an evident hint to the famous trilogy *Lord of the Rings* (see figure 1). Again, in episode 9, *Maniac* pays tribute to Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*; the shot in question showcasing a simulated Owen as being subjected to a UN interrogation is highly reminiscent of the main setting in Kubrick's film (see figure 2).

Other quotations are more subtle; some of the technology and settings in *Maniac* resemble the memorable space station of *Alien*. The same can be said of the patches sewn

into the suits that the subjects wear during the pharmaceutical trial, which are almost identical to the Nostromo patches on the space crew's suits in *Alien* (see figure 3 and 4). The title of episode 7, *Ceci N'est Pas Une Drill*, plainly points to René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*; at least two more references to the painting pop up in the series (see figure 5). The final scene of *Maniac*, with Annie and Owen escaping and driving off into an unknown future, has been compared to the last scene of *The Graduate*, which displays the protagonists doing a similar thing while fleeing a wedding (Dockterman; see figure 6). Moreover, the subjects whose brains AI GRTA is said to have fried in the course of past versions of the trial are called McMurphies. This is a clear allusion to Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and its film adaptation, whose protagonist Randle McMurphy gets hospitalized and ends up being lobotomized.

Finally, the concept of the series has reminded some critics of Michel Gondry's film, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Both productions employ the tension between virtual reality and human connections, with a focus on what the power of human connections can achieve against all odds. Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* also plays a big role as an intertext enmeshed with the narrative of *Maniac*. The *Don Quixote* makes a first appearance in episode 1, when Annie shows her interest in reading the book, and again in episode 2, with a shot of a windmill and the title of the episode itself echoing Don Quixote's memorable fight against the imaginary giants. But it is in episode 5 that the reference is really foregrounded for the entire episode, merging with the expedient of virtual reality during phase B of the trial. The con artist alter-egos of Annie and Owen participate in a private seance at a house allegedly treasuring the final lost chapter of the *Quixote*. Legends have it that this chapter is so powerful that whoever reads it, remains trapped into a world of fantasy until death. Cervantes's masterpiece is appropriated and reabsorbed into *Maniac* by virtue of semantic similarities - the tragicomical adventures of a

character afflicted by the inability to distinguish between reality and fiction and the search for the meaning of it all.

### 3.5.1 A game of references: a reading

Intertextuality is a strategy widely used among postmodern artists, through various techniques ranging from direct citation to pastiche and parody. *Maniac* does not seem immune to this postmodern convention: on the contrary, the show appears to unashamedly yet creatively rely on external references. The influences and hints in the show are so various and so obvious that intertextuality seems to be used more as an intentional device here than as a general statement concerning the inevitability of intertextuality and loss of originality advocated by postmodernism. However, the references are molded into harmonious elements that do not redirect the viewer's attention to the external references but are organically inserted into the narrative.

The similarities between *Maniac* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* are visible in the semantic focus on the tension between human connections and virtual reality, promoting faith in the strength of meaningful bonds despite the discouragement, skepticism, and disorientation regarding issues such as meaning and the reality of things. For instance, the protagonists of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* are subjected to a therapy process that makes use of simulated reality, much alike the protagonists of *Maniac*. The intensity of their genuine affection keeps the protagonists of Gondry's movie deeply connected both inside and outside the simulation, even after their memories of each other get completely erased; the relationship established between Annie and Owen presents a similar dynamic, with the two backing up each other in spite of the reality they are thrown into. As a result of its portrayal of this typically metamodern informed naïveté, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* has been associated with the metamodern trend on the internet platform *Notes on*

*Metamodernism* (Vermeulen & Akker). Hence, I read the choice of this specific film as a source of inspiration and the adoption of similar parameters by the makers of *Maniac* as signalling an interest in narrative strategies and tropes that, if not intentionally labeled as metamodern, could still be identified as such.

The *Quixote* also serves as a narrative drive in *Maniac*, which not only makes use of the original novel as a device guiding the plot but also of its thematics and various plot elements. The protagonist of *Don Quixote* mixes up the tragic and the comic at all times, lost in his insane vision of the world; the situation is not so different for Owen, who navigates between the tragedy of his condition and the absurdity of each of his confrontations with the outside world. However, contrary to Don Quixote, Owen is constantly aware of his mental instability and never fully abandons himself to possibly imaginary narratives. Moreover, *Maniac* expands this instability to the entirety of the show, redirecting the quest for meaning towards human connections, and specifically the relationship between Annie and Owen. The fight against the windmills remains a relevant symbol in *Maniac*, with Owen being aware that he might be allegorically fighting windmills instead of giants, yet choosing to fight them nonetheless. His faith and perseverance are in line with the condition of the metamodern subject, which already knows it is fighting a lost cause, yet decides to face the world with a candid, idealistic attitude.

### **3.6 In search for metamodern applications: further examples**

To establish the presence and legitimacy of a trend it would be paramount to research the concepts and strategies analyzed above through multiple works. I believe that in the last decade the field of television production has focused on releasing content that might prove helpful in identifying such a specific trending taste. I will therefore proceed to briefly investigate a few recent tv shows in search of metamodern elements.



### 3.6.1 The Good Place

Released on Netflix in 2017, *The Good Place* toys with the canonical idea of an afterlife divided into Heaven and Hell. After her death, the protagonist Eleanor is mistakenly sent to what is referred to as the Good Place, a universe reserved for morally deserving souls, designed by a divine character called Micheal. Eleanor is assigned an alleged soulmate, Chidi, a professor of ethics. Eleanor eventually confesses to him that she has no right to be there, and Chidi agrees to teach her the path to righteousness through ethics and philosophy, so she can earn her place in this world. The two continue on their mission for redemption, interacting and creating strong bonds with other residents of the Good Place; however, bizarre disruptions keep taking place due to Eleanor's as yet undeserved presence in this world, until she finally divulges the truth about her misplacement. In a twist of events, Micheal is revealed to be a demon, who created the Good Place as a torture playpark to torment the souls inhabiting it. Micheal is not pleased by Eleanor and Chidi discovering the truth about the universe and his demonic nature, as his travesty is now inevitably disrupted. He proceeds to erase the memory of the residents, only to fail again and again when repeating the experiment. Micheal ultimately decides to collaborate with Eleanor and Chidi to bring them to the actual Heaven; in return, he submits himself to Chidi's lessons about ethics.

Life in the hereafter is here modeled on the parameters defining any standard community and city of a real, earthly society; yet, the otherworldly elements appearing throughout the show, along with its premise, give this universe the appearance of virtual reality. Concepts such as the good or the bad appear blurred and relative as well, in a postmodern fashion, unveiling the futility of definitions and dualities. However, in this universe, Eleanor learns to open up, rely on others and use the help of her friends to embark on a journey of self-discovery. The power of the connections that she establishes with Chidi

is so intense that throughout over 800 iterations of the experiment, even with their memory wiped out, the two protagonists are still able to rekindle and help each other, and Eleanor is still able to fall in love with Chidi. Eventually, her goal shifts from achieving a place in paradise to protecting and fostering the bonds she created with Chidi and other souls.

Interestingly, her process of self-discovery is accompanied by the reintegration of ethics and philosophy, promoted as useful tools to understand morality, as Eleanor, facing the ethics classes with total ingenuity, still manages to take advantage of Chidi's teachings.

Furthermore, the show also promotes the reinstatement of classical studies and the validity of the epistemological concepts of truth, right and wrong; however, the series' contrast with a reality where there cannot be any clarity concerning what is good or bad makes it hard to simply implement rote teachings into everyday life. Therefore, even after learning about Aristotelian virtues, Kantian imperatives, Peter Singer's utilitarianism and committing to good behavior, Eleanor admits to missing the true point of it all and senses an unfulfilled void inside her. Only upon discovering about Tim Scanlon's *What We Owe To Each Other* and starting to rely on Chidi once again, is she able to fill that void.

Scanlon's book acts as the backbone of the storyline: he preaches about morality as a social contract, fostering a line of conduct that takes into account our duty towards our fellow humans. In the context of *The Good Place*, where all the characters are tossed around by uncontrollable circumstances, the protagonists assume an active role in establishing "their own kind of moral system to live by, one that doesn't necessarily abide by the rules being enforced by the authorities governing the afterlife" (Dylan Matthews). Therefore, if on the one hand the show fosters an interest in classical precepts of ethics, on the other hand, its teachings concerning morality get filtered through subjects who redefine ethics according to personal terms but redirecting them so as to be the most beneficial terms possible for the

well-being of the others. Character development and identity formation are quite clearly related to the interactions among beings in the show.

Another instance proving the power of connections as a key theme of the narrative occurs later on in the show, when Eleanor has had her memory wiped out one more time. Chidi resorts to John Locke's theory of consciousness as created through the accumulation of memories and the consequent establishment of a narrative: hence, he starts recounting Eleanor's memories so that she can gain her identity back. However, ultimately the only way Chidi is able to awaken her memories is by kissing her, "suggesting that personal identity somehow exists on an even deeper level than memory, and Eleanor and Chidi are inherently wired to be together" (Ellen Gutoskey).

The world of *The Good Place* is thus based on uncertain parameters, with a universe in-between reality and simulation, and the moral duality between right and wrong constantly shifting. These postmodern elements intertwine with more traditional values concerning ethics and philosophy. However, the theme of morality in the show seems to respond primarily to Dumitrescu's metamodern interest in ethics mentioned in the previous chapter, which is centered on the care for the others and intersubjective relationships as the key for self-discovery. In a postmodern setting imbued with uncertainties over reality and values, the characters, although inevitably trapped in an inescapable world and condition, manage to find meaning and a sense of self through human connections, in what I identify as a distinctly metamodern strategy.

### **3.6.2 *The Newsroom***

In 2012, HBO aired Aaron Sorkin's new production, *The Newsroom*, a political tv show centering on events taking place in the backstage of Atlantis Cable News (ACN). Under the genuine yet authoritative president of ACN Charlie Skinner, talented anchor Will McAvoy

and executive producer MacKenzie McHale strive to craft a fresh news channel, based on unbiased facts, as opposed to the general trend towards relativism afflicting news cables. As a matter of fact, the show delivers a clear critique of post-truth culture, the term ‘post-truth’ referring to the habit of endorsing emotions instead of facts when debating.<sup>22</sup> While the episodes revolve around real historical events, like the capturing of Osama Bin Laden or the 2012 US presidential elections, the spirit of the show is quite idealistic and romantic. The small staff of ACN sets off on a mission of hope, decided to awaken the spirits of the American citizens which are daily polluted by inauthenticity and cynicism. Affirming that “being cynical is easy”, MacKenzie encourages her staff to create “a place where we all come together” (The Newsroom, season 1). Aware that they are fighting windmills, the three main characters make the *Quixote* their main source of inspiration to guide their work, citing Cervantes over and over throughout all three seasons.

A correlation between postmodernism and post-truth may be identified in their shared beliefs regarding relative truths and the necessity to eliminate “hierarchies of knowledge”; for said beliefs, it follows that truth belongs to everyone, but ”gets rid of its significance, [in] a condition in which facts do not matter anymore” (Diego Han, 40). Beyond the larger topic of post-truth and any possible debate on its relation to postmodernism, the show retains the cynicism, skepticism and dry irony typical of the postmodern, combining these elements into the overriding sentiment of those critics opposing the mission of the ACN staff. The series makes broad use of intertextual references as well, thereby underwriting the postmodern precept that no human artefact can escape citationality. On various occasions, the characters resort to literary or cinematic citations to explain a situation or convey an idea. Yet, in many

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<sup>22</sup> Much content has been published around the concept of post-truth in the last years; for further insights, I recommend D’Ancona; McIntyre; as well as the debate on Truth Decay published by Kavanagh and Rich.

cases they either end up misquoting lines or assigning the citation to the wrong source.<sup>23</sup> One example of this is offered in season 1, episode 1, *We Just Decided To*, where MacKenzie tries to quote Cervantes in her motivational speech, yet gets corrected by Will for her wrong claim of the source.

MacKenzie: Now I'd like you to listen to these words which were written 500 years ago by Don Miguel de Cervantes. 'Hear me now, O thou bleak and unbereable world. Thou art base and debauched as can be. But a knight with his banners all bravely unfurled now hurls down his gauntlet to thee!'. That was Don Quixote."

Will: Those words were written 45 years ago by the lyricist for Man of La Mancha.

MacKenzie: Didn't think you'd know that. But the point's still the same, it's time for Don Quixote." (00:40:56 – 00:41:30).

These failed references are countered by the actual message that the characters try to pass on: citationality loses its ability to arrive at the source of meaning, yet it is incorporated in speeches and actions to create meaning. Interestingly, the main intertext is the *Quixote*, which gets quoted both in the speeches and in the title of an episode (episode 10, *The Greater Fool*). In addition, it also serves as a parallel to the storyline – something we already witnessed in *Maniac*. The characters truly embark on a mission against the entire world, actively stating its impossibility from the start, yet deciding to pursue it nonetheless. Their aim in delivering authentic news is to restore a sense of humanity and respect both to the audience and the tormented anchorman Will McAvoy, who starts off with no faith in humanity and no wish to take matters in hand. While knowingly acting as naive dreamers, the team builds trust, meaning and hope through their work and the emotional growth they experience, always defying a cynical outside world ready to undermine and redefine them on its own

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<sup>23</sup> For further clarification, see for example the reference to Shakespeare in season 1, episode 9, *The Blackout Part II: Mock Debate*; the reference to The Man of La Mancha in season 1, episode 1, *We Just Decided To*; and the ones to *The Goodfellas* and *The Godfather* in season 2, episode 3, *Willie Pete*.

diminishing terms. Inevitably, the promotion of ethics permeates the whole show, which constantly deals with moral issues whenever the staff needs to decide whether or not to air some news item, how to piece information together and how to handle the audience's response. Even at the hardest times, the characters find strength in one another: by the end of season 1, the most cynical anchorman will fully transform into "the greater fool" (episode 10), committed to a candid yet conscious sincerity. This metamodern approach might not ultimately shake the entirety of the audience's consciousness, but it is powerful enough for all the protagonists to find meaning and authenticity in their absurdly skeptical world.

### **3.6.3 *Russian Doll***

Just like *Maniac*, *Russian Doll* is another tv series aired on Netflix, in February 2019. The show presents themes akin to both *Maniac* and *The Good Place*, combining addictions, mental conditions, and the afterlife. The protagonist is Nadia, a woman in her mid-thirties making her way through life with cigarettes, drugs and a dry cynicism. In the opening scene, Nadia is staring at a bathroom mirror: it is the night of her thirty-sixth birthday. After leaving her birthday party, she gets hit by a taxi and dies, only to be brought back in time to the opening scene. This is the start of a temporal loop: she keeps dying over and over, returning to the same bathroom and starting the night all over again. Nadia is unable to figure out how to break free from the loop until she finds Alan, a guy who is experiencing the same deadly routine.

The two protagonists are diametrically opposed. Nadia is the incarnation of all those features ascribable to postmodernism: cynical and ironic, she deconstructs every situation she runs into. Any decisions she makes or actions or she performs are ultimately meaningless; nothing can be either good or bad because everything is relative. Nadia practices these beliefs in her human relationships as well, avoiding any intimate connections, living in constant

denial and acting with impunity. On the other hand, Alan has buried his identity under an obsession with self-control and routines: he is terrified to do the wrong thing and has completely deprived himself of any sense of positive self-worth. This negative attitude causes him to suffer a total breakdown the moment things start going off track: significantly, Alan's time loop starts with him committing suicide.

Upon their meeting, the protagonists discuss the possibility of their being trapped in a simulation or in a sort of divine punishment similar to a purgatory they need to get out of. However, their debate does not linger on virtual reality and God for long, as Nadia and Alan progressively understand they have to embark on a journey of self-discovery. Upon dying, each time both of them return to a bathroom, standing in front of a mirror. In episode 6, *Reflection*, Nadia's therapist reveals the relevance of mirrors as "proof of existence; another pair of eyes", but adds that without a person to confide in, "we are very unreliable narrators of our own stories" (00:05:47 – 00:05:53). With each death, objects figuring in the protagonists' scenarios keep disappearing, until they start looking after each other and the mirrors disappear as well. This shift marks the emergence of an orientation towards the other that will crack the code so as to enable the protagonists to escape the temporal loop in which they are caught up. There is no certainty that once out of the loop, Nadia and Alan are going to proceed with their lives; the finale presents the audience with an open ending, with the protagonists successfully out of the loop, but also parading with people in skeleton masks, in a scene that resembles Charon crossing the Styx.

Throughout all twenty-two deadly iterations, the characters are trapped in this cynical, repetitive nightmare made up of constant temporal jumps. The progression of the narrative relies on the development not of the plot but of the characters. Just as according to the postmodern paradigm, temporality is not to be perceived as linear anymore, reality is uncertain, moral values are relative, cynicism overrules any hope to find authentic meaning.

Yet, the protagonists find their own terms for dealing with reality in the genuine bonds they forge together. This happens, for instance, in episode 6, when Nadia asks a homeless guy she befriended and saved in previous iterations: “how do you know you’re real?”; and the man replies, “I’m here; that’s where you know” (00:17:21 – 00:17:35). Ultimately, the priority of the series lies with the intimate friendship between the protagonists as the key to self-development and finding authentic meaning to push through an inescapable, cynical reality.

In the final episode, *Ariadne*, Nadia and Alan die one last time, only for their timelines to shift and catapult them into different temporal windows: the ‘final’, healed version of Nadia ends up on the night of Alan’s first death, and vice versa. It is now up to the emotionally matured version of each to save the other from certain death. Alan rushes to find Nadia and states: ”metaphysically speaking, you and I are intrinsically and inexplicably linked. And I'm convinced our true purpose is to connect with each other, if not help save each other's life” (00:20:54 – 00:21:07). Parallely, in another temporal universe, Nadia is able to stop Alan from throwing himself down a building:

ALAN. You promise if I don't jump, I'll be happy?

NADIA. I don't know, man. Absolutely not. But I can promise you that you will not be alone. (00:26:53 – 00:27:06)

With these lines, the show sums up the theme that seems to guide the entire narrative and offers a resolution, despite the unexplained reasons behind the start of the time loops and the carnivalesque ending. Just as in *Maniac*, the characters “ [...] find this common ground in each other a reason to continue to show up for life, if not only for themselves then for each other” (Esther Zuckerman). The world they inhabit is unnervingly relative, cynical, inescapable; still, Alan and Nadia soldier on (see figure 7), trusting each other and tasting their newly found sense of plenitude in a quite metamodern way.



### 3.7 Final observations

In this chapter, I have tried to identify a creative desire to move past the postmodern movement, which has generally been established as the ongoing sociocultural, political and artistic trend in the western world from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. I have focused on one specific artistic medium, namely TV series and internet-based content, such as Netflix shows. By analyzing themes, tropes, plots and narrative strategies, I have outlined those features that can be associated with methods of postmodern expression. Then, I investigated if it is possible to identify a different use and function of said postmodern features. Specifically, my analysis aimed at correlating the artistic traces of postmodernism within the metamodern paradigm. In fact, metamodernism seeks to retain postmodern artistic tendencies and does not dismiss its relation to the values and critiques postmodernism propounds. However, metamodernism does not implement postmodern elements just to make use of an ongoing trend; rather, postmodern features are employed in a strategic way that allows the shows to focus on something beyond them. In the previous chapter, I have presented metamodernism as a paradigm oscillating between postmodern critiques and pre-postmodern values: always acknowledging postmodernism, a metamodern subject would still try to find a way, albeit limited by postmodern constraints, to reinstate values such as truth, authenticity, unity.

Metamodernism offers itself as the proper response to the entire sociocultural scene of today's western world, but it mostly utilizes arts as a channel of expression. Translated into cinematography, the metamodern envisages narratives, characters, and settings that comprise elements typically associated with postmodernism, like relativity, hyperreality and a confused perception of reality overall, a non-linear expression of time, fragmentation afflicting characters and plots, a crippling cynicism and a skeptical attitude looming in the atmosphere. However, these elements simply constitute the frame that allows for the emergence of a new sensitivity: the metamodern characters remain conscious of these postmodern premises yet

still decide to see authenticity in the artificiality, meaning in the loss of significance, unity in relativity.

In this chapter, I started by analyzing the Netflix series *Maniac*; then, I briefly examined three other shows that seem to share similarities with *Maniac* both visually and thematically. Some of the characters in these shows have to deal with hyperreality, multi-universes and temporal jumps; all of them inevitably face a cynical, inescapable environment. While none of them forget how crippled the world and their selves are, they still embark on a quest for authenticity. The focus then shifts to the power of trust, the faith in a delusional mission, the hope they can find by relying on others. The characters' quixotic attitude may as well be the recipe for a lost cause, but it is still perceived as one worth experiencing. All of them regain control of their own narrative, finding in the connections with other beings a meaning that the outside world might not be ready to provide - not now, or ever. Their ingenuity is not one to be cynically ridiculed: it is a naiveté open to the exploration and legitimation of those values denied by postmodernism, that "self-defeating character of radical relativism, of extreme particularism, which denies reciprocity, denies both empathy and obligation"(308) that Ihab Hassan mentioned when professing an aesthetic of trust encompassing postmodernism.

It is through mutual trust and faith that the characters in the shows are able to experience reality in their lives and gain the courage to live in a way they perceive to be meaningful in spite of continuous external attempts to deny such meaning. The characters seem to adopt the precept of a performativity which envisages a "willful self-deceit to believe in - or identify with, or solve - something in spite of itself" (317). The inspiration of these series seems then to be a metamodern one, with the subjects undergoing a self-development aimed at giving them a sense of plenitude; finally, as Dumitrescu theorized, these individuals are able to acquire the language needed for self-definition only thanks to the connections they

establish (33). In the final episode (*What Kind of Day Has It Been*) of *The Newsroom*, season 3, protagonist Will McAvoy makes a remark which I believe perfectly sums up the metamodern sensitivity:

WILL. I have faith.

MACKENZIE. Why?

WILL. There's a hole in the side of the boat. That hole is never going to be fixed and it's never going away and you can't get a new boat. This is your boat. What you have to do is bail water out faster than it's coming in (1:00:44 – 1:01:06).



Fig. 1. Parallelism between *Maniac* and *The Lord of the Rings*.



Fig.2. Parallelism between *Dr.Strangelove* and *Maniac*.



Fig.3. Parallelism between *Alien* and *Maniac*.



Fig.4. Parallelism between *Maniac* and *Alien*.

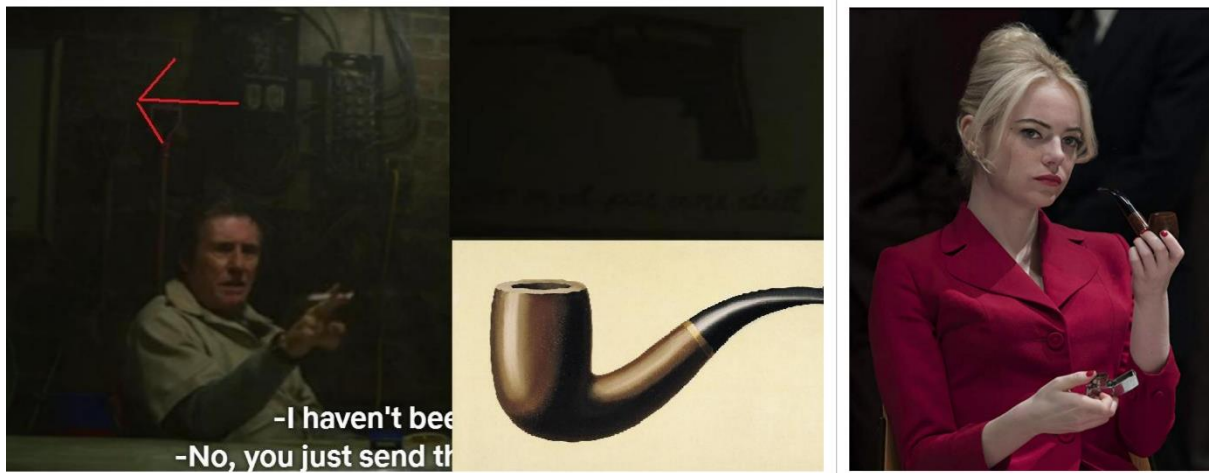


Figure 5. References to Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* in *Maniac*.



Figure 6. Parallelism between *The Graduate* and *Maniac*.



Fig.7. Last scene of *Russian Doll*.

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