

“Sincerity is Scary”: A Metamodern Approach to Popular Music in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Since its formal introduction by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their 2010 essay “*Notes on Metamodernism*,” the concept of metamodernism has gained significant traction in cultural theory. Scholars such as Christian Moraru, Alison Gibbons, and others have expanded this framework across literature, visual arts, and film. However, popular music remains an underexplored domain within metamodern discourse. Even in Vermeulen, van den Akker, and Gibbons’s 2017 volume *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, music is only marginally addressed. This poster seeks to redress that gap by exploring how the key characteristics of metamodernism can be applied to twenty-first century popular music. Drawing from Linda Cieriello and Greg Dember’s pioneering online project “What is Metamodernism?”, which includes a modest but meaningful foray into music analysis. This poster further expands the conversation by offering a case study of British artist Matty Healy and The 1975. I analyze the song “*Sincerity is Scary*” by examining its lyrics and audiovisual elements, exploring how they evoke metamodern themes. The analysis is contextualized within the broader literature of metamodern theory and demonstrates how popular music can be both a reflective and generative space for metamodern sensibilities. This research contributes to an emerging body of scholarship that positions popular music as a vital site of metamodern expression. It invites scholars and practitioners alike to consider one-of-many analytical frameworks rooted in cultural theory that can enrich our understanding of contemporary music and its role in shaping the emotional and philosophical terrain of the present moment.

Central Questions

[IQ]: Why does the music of the 21st century sound different?

What is metamodernism?

Can a metamodern lens be used to understand and interpret popular music of the twenty-first century?

Metamodern Strategies or Methods

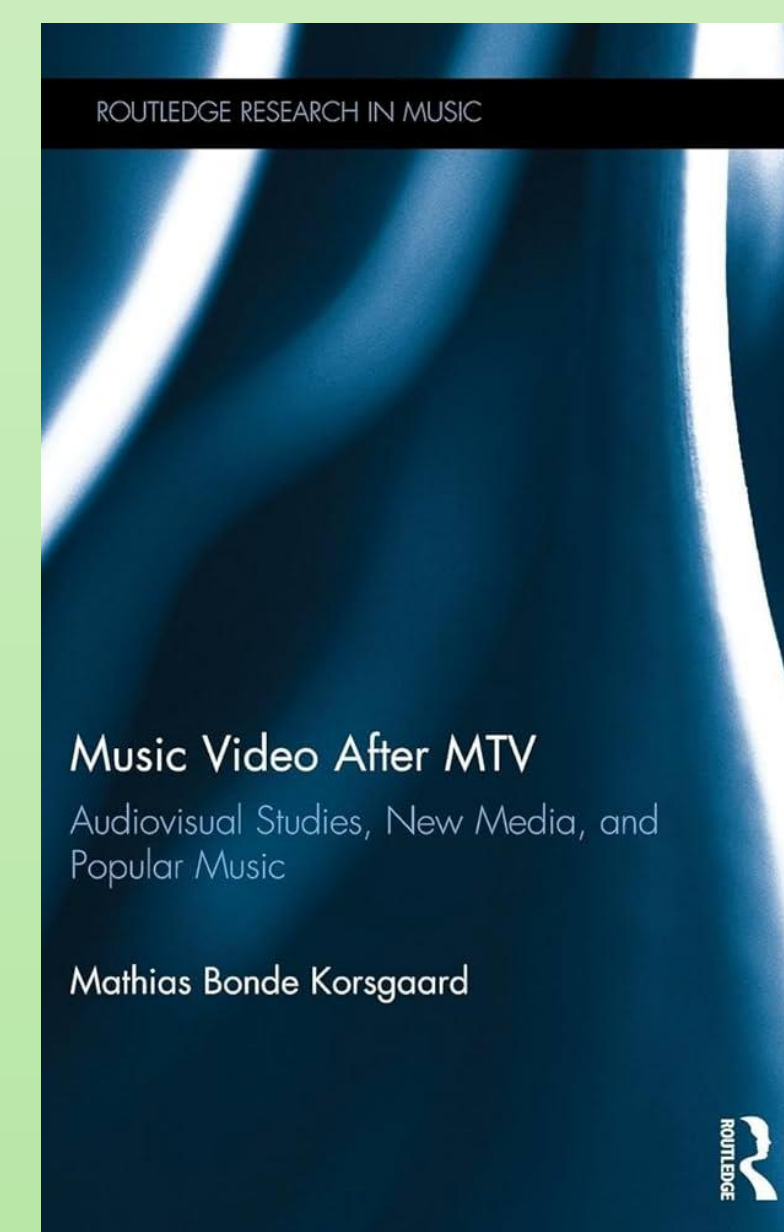
Vermeulen and van den Akker

- 1.) Performatism
- 2.) Quirky sensibility
- 3.) Neoromanticism
- 4.) Oscillation between beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes

Dember and Cieriello

- 1.) Empathic Reflexivity (Including Cieriello’s “Life-as-Movie”)
- 2.) The Narrative Double Frame
- 3.) Oscillation between opposites
- 4.) Quirky
- 5.) The Tiny (metamodern minimalism)
- 6.) The Epic (metamodern maximalism)
- 7.) Constructive Pastiche
- 8.) Ironesty
- 9.) Normcore
- 10.) Over-Projection (Anthropomorphizing)
- 11.) Meta-Cute

Audiovisual Studies: Two Methods of Analysis

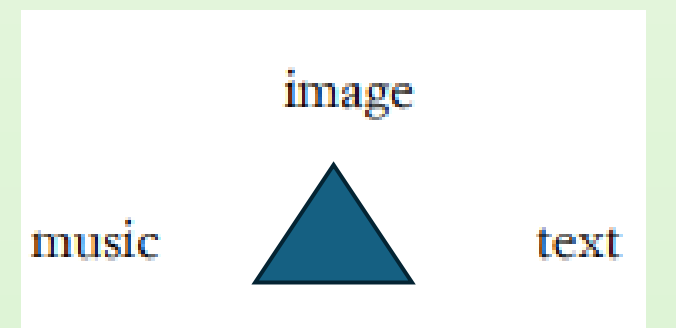


Danish scholar Mathias Korsgaard’s method for analyzing music videos is based on its multimodal and multimedial nature, emphasizing the interaction and negotiation between music and image rather than prioritizing one over the other.

Gunnar Strøm, a Norwegian scholar who specializes in animated music video analysis, proposed an analytical model that divides music video into three triangles: one concerned with its semiotic levels (music – image – text); one pertaining to the different agents in its production (musician – director – record company); and one describing its different genres (concept – concert – collage).

My own analysis draws on two methods: Strøm’s and Korsgaard’s.

I applied only the first triangle in Strøm’s analytical model - (music, image, and text) - to analyze the selected music videos.



Korsgaard’s method acknowledges that music videos are not merely visual accompaniments to songs but complex audiovisual texts in which sound and imagery work together to create meaning, mood, and narrative. Korsgaard asserts that meaning arises from the constant interplay between sound and image.

Application into Case Study

I draw on both Mathias Korsgaard’s and Gunnar Strøm’s methodologies for analyzing one post-millennial music video by Matty Healy and The 1975: “[Sincerity is Scary](#)”.



I first provide background information on the song to contextualize my analyses within existing discussions about the work, followed by a descriptive inventory of the video and identify instances of metamodern characteristics.

I then examine the music video in its entirety, from the character’s actions and interactions to the smallest details, such as clothing choices and objects.



Finally, I address the question: Which metamodern methods and characteristics are evoked within both case studies?

Conclusions

I explored the complexities of metamodernism in contemporary popular music, using Matty Healy and The 1975 as focal points for understanding how this cultural paradigm manifests in musical and visual expression.

This project expands upon Greg Dember and Linda Cieriello’s metamodern methods, applying their analytical framework to The 1975’s music to identify key methods such as oscillation, constructive pastiche, ironesty, and quirky (to name a few), drawing as well upon the work of other theorists writing on metamodernism as Vermeulen, van den Akker, Gibbons, Dember, and Cieriello.

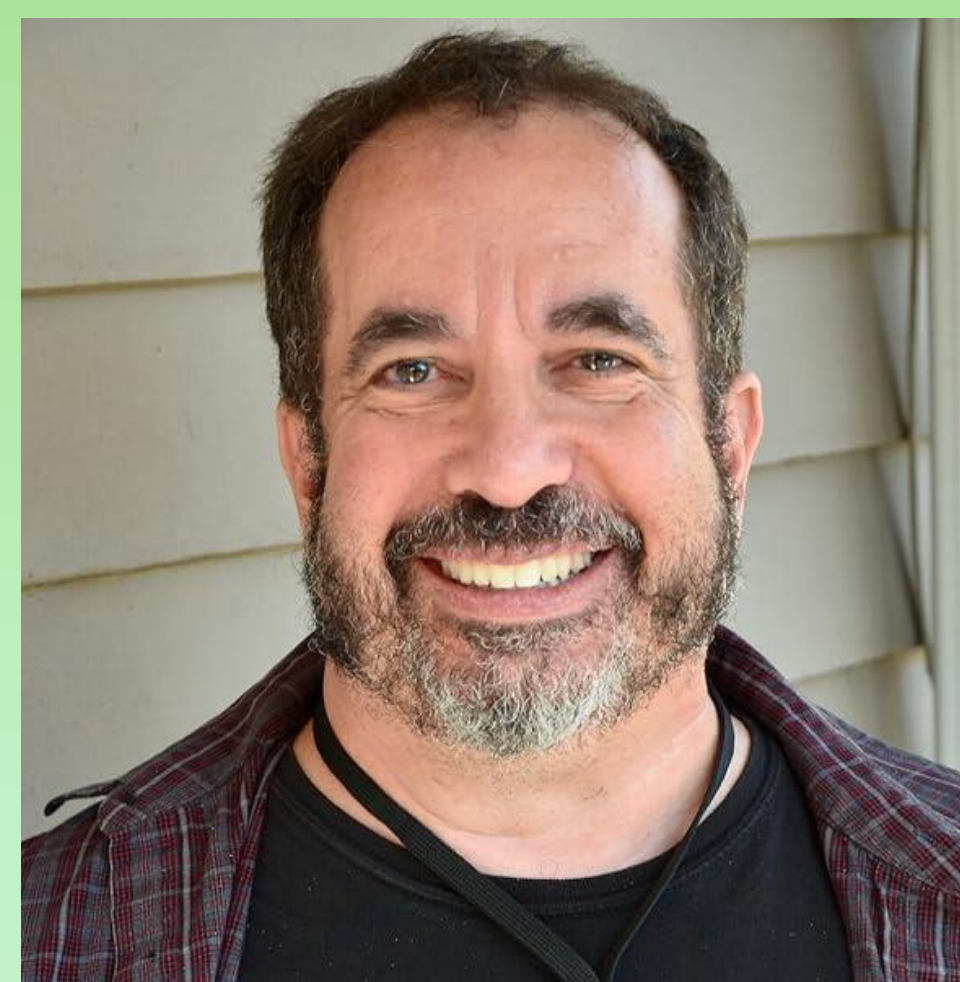
Bibliography

<https://tinyurl.com/yrd6apae>

Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker

Metamodernism, as Vermeulen (2017) and van den Akker (2017) posit, is a structure of feeling that emerged in the 2000s and has become the dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies.¹ It is a label that attempts to chart and make sense of the aesthetic and cultural phenomena that is unique to this century.

It is both a label and an expressive sensibility which can be seen in contemporary architecture, artworks, literature, film and music.



Greg Dember and Linda Cieriello, Ph.D.

The central motivation of metamodernism is to protect interior, subjective felt experience from the ironic distance of postmodernism, the scientific reductionism of modernism, and the pre-personal inertia of tradition (2024).

Metamodern artworks do not fully abandon or critique postmodernism but oscillate between inhabiting the postmodern playfulness and inhabiting the modernist mission or purposefulness.