

Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm. *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. xii + 360 pp. ISBN-13:978-0226786650. \$30 (paperback).

For the last four or five decades, the humanities have been rather inescapably linked to *postmodernism*. Critical lenses such as the hermeneutics of suspicion, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and semiotics have required scholars to reconsider the solidity of basic categories and conceptual premises before attempting to assert truth claims. Even as the prominence of the term *postmodernism* itself recedes in the discourse, its assumptions remain, perhaps with even more influence when unspoken. The postmodern outlook has undoubtedly been helpful in saving scholarship from universalizing, dominant-culture epistemic blind spots. Nevertheless, the continual self-criticism required by a postmodern approach can be intellectually paralyzing, and interfere with robust, eager consideration of new ideas.

Into this dilemma steps historian and philosopher of religion Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm with his new monograph *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*. The purpose of this project, in Storm's own words, is to seek "to establish a new model for producing humble knowledge that is capable of tracing the unfolding of de-essentialized master categories in their full complexity" (ix). From the start, Storm makes it clear that the work is about not only his home disciplines (East Asian religions, European intellectual history), but all of what he calls the human sciences (both the humanities and the social sciences).

Metamodernism, as a term, has been in use here or there since at least 1975 in literary studies, but gained a major boost in attention with the 2010 publication of the essay "Notes on Metamodernism" by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, and then their 2017 edited volume (with Alison Gibbons), *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*. For Vermeulen and van den Akker, metamodernism is the name of a *structure of feeling* that emerged

around the turn of the millennium and was increasingly noticed by a variety of observers of culture (i.e. journalists, art critics, and scholars) within the decade thereafter. (“Structure of feeling,” a term they borrow from Raymond Williams, indicates the background of a period in a particular place, expressed through its art and other cultural products.) The metamodern structure of feeling, as characterized by Vermeulen and van den Akker, “oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.” Additionally, they propose, “Metamodernism 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.”

Since the publication of Vermeulen and van den Akker’s essay, scholars and arts journalists have utilized the notion of metamodernism to explain developments in a variety of fields, from architecture to literary fiction to television. For example, apropos of the study of religion, Linda C. Ceriello has proposed a shift visible in some contemporary iterations of religions in the West, using the notion to theorize the spiritual but not religious (SBNR) and “the accidental mystic” in popular culture and practice. My own major research interest lies in observing how contemporary cultural artifacts often utilize metamodern oscillations as observed by Vermeulen and van den Akker to uphold personal interiority in the face of degradations potentially imposed by postmodern relativizing and modernist reductionism.

So, what does Storm’s particular metamodern philosophy entail? Essentially, Storm proposes an approach to conducting scholarship, not an account of broadly found tendencies in thought and aesthetics. The conceptual tools that Storm draws together under the umbrella of his metamodern philosophy include: metarealism, process social ontology, social kinds, hylosemiotics and Zeteticism. (Each of these terms is to varying degrees invented by the author or recruited by him from existing work.) Storm does not lay out how he arrived at the decision to use “metamodernism”

as the term for his own project, although he does take pains to distinguish his work from those who are making periodizing claims with metamodernism, and indeed, expresses a degree of caution about the project of periodization in general (16). With this in mind, the author offers that “previous scholars of metamodernism are welcome to take this work as being a particular metamodern philosophy and not an attempt to define the entirety of metamodernism, per se” (5).

By his own account, *Metamodernism* represents a departure from Storm’s prior work. In the preface, the author owns up to the fact that he has built his career on being something of an epistemological anarchist. Each of his two previous monographs involved interrogating and deconstructing established categories. In *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (2013), Storm sought to demonstrate how “religion” as a category was imported—under duress—into Japan from the West during the late nineteenth century. *The Myth of Disenchantment* (2017) challenged the prevailing idea that the Western world rid itself of a belief in magic as part of its modernization. Thus, he argued for the presence of and interest in esoteric knowledge, and hence, a greater degree of cultural continuity between the present day and periods that are often designated “pre-modern,” undermining assumptions that arguably form the basis of key inquiries undergirding much of the study of esotericism. Here Storm declares an interest in building something new, after the “destruction” he has participated in previously. He has the audacious and laudatory goal of asking the reader to “come with me and experience a paradigm shift—one that turns on my previous work not in order to repudiate it, but to work through my own critical presuppositions and out the other side so that a new way of thinking can be born” (x).

In chapter one, Storm begins by reexamining the conventionally accepted division between realism and anti-realism. First, he shows how neither realists nor anti-realists are as extreme in their positions as is often assumed. Anti-realists understand that there is a world out there and that when you slam your fist on a table there will be a loud noise. Similarly, realists understand that phenomena

that exist primarily as a function of the human mental and social world, such as religions, political parties, etc., can be treated as objects of study. The chapter culminates with a proposal for a *meta-realism* that, for any question about the “realness” of a given thing, asks the question: what is it real with respect to? In any particular case, what does the opposite of “real” imply? To which Storm replies that “there are as many different ways to be not-real as there are kinds of things” (41).

Chapter two is a playfully presented guide to strategies that have been commonly used by postmodernists in their attempts at the *demolition* (Storm’s term) of received intellectual categories such as “religion” and “art.” Step-by-step sequences are provided for three different kinds of critique: immanent, ethical, and relativizing. By unpacking *how* this sort of deconstruction is carried out, Storm sets the stage for his own deconstruction of the deconstruction, which then leads to a new, *reconstructive* way forward.

Chapters three and four are where the author develops his notions of process social ontology and social kinds. The first is—as it sounds—an ontology that covers *social* phenomena and which is based on *processes* (a la Whitehead), rather than things. The second is a key tool for implementing this ontological approach. For Storm, social kinds are distinguished from natural kinds, which are much more rigid in their categorization rules. For example, if a particular natural kind (such as “cats”) requires an entire list of qualities to be checked off, a social kind (such as “jazz”) requires only some combined subset of qualities on a list. Storm also notes that social kinds can’t be determined merely by shared qualities, there must be some sort of *causal anchor*, binding the set together. As in, the members of the set exhibit the qualities that they share because of some common causal process that they also share (135).

Chapter five is devoted to “hylosemiotics,” a term invented by Storm and his brother, Seth Josephson. Evidently, the two of them plan a more complete treatment of the idea in a future project, with this chapter serving as a starting point (151). Hylosemiotics (“Forest Signs”) extends conventional semiotics to include the study of sign systems in the non-human realm (including not only

the biological world of animals and plants, but other non-human entities such as robots), and to involuntary as well as voluntary utterances. The hylosemiotic approach promises to undo the common bifurcation between natural and non-natural meaning (173) that perhaps is accepted without sufficient examination by modernists and postmodernists alike. Add another tool to the tool kit.

In chapter six, after arguing that postmodern skepticism doesn't go far enough because it is not skeptical of skepticism itself, the author calls for a kind of "humble knowledge" in the human sciences which he identifies as "Zeteticism," a term he has revived from ancient Greek and offers as "an alternative to modernist certainty and postmodern doubt" (216). As Storm lays it out, a Zeteticist is willing to act on what seems very likely to be true, even while maintaining an ever-vigilant awareness of the likelihood of mistaken knowledge. This does seem to echo a metamodern approach to epistemology (per Vermeulen and van den Akker's formulation), although a more reluctant reader might say it is simply how good empirical science has always been done.

Chapter seven is perhaps the one with which I might quarrel the most, to the extent that it is in conflict with a construal of metamodernism that is politically neutral or open-ended. In this chapter Storm contemplates the place of *values* in scholarship, observing that scholars under postmodernism had a confused relationship with them—often proclaiming the cruciality of neutrality while nevertheless advocating activist positions in their work (237). Storm seems to argue that a metamodernist approach to human sciences should have a place for activism as long as the activists are not sneaky about it. Furthermore, he proposes (as part of this metamodernism) that the human sciences should promote what he names "Revolutionary Happiness," by which he means an expanded sense of happiness that includes not just the pleasure or satisfaction of the individual, but a sense that the needs of all, especially the marginalized, are being pursued (266–70).

My concern here is that, while metamodernism (as construed by others outside of Storm's project) has the potential to liberate scholars and other creatives from an inhibition against including advocacy in their work, nevertheless, I would argue that

it neither requires nor *necessarily includes* advocacy but merely *allows for it*. Crucially, where advocacy does occur, metamodernism would allow for the advocacy of any and all value systems, whereas I suspect that Storm has a particular set of values in mind (probably progressive values to which many including myself subscribe.)

Regardless, overall, Storm’s philosophical project *does* fit in rather well with the more broadly observed cultural sensibility/structure of feeling that others before him have called metamodernism. A *cultural* metamodernism researcher like myself might identify a film, novel, or song as being a metamodern artifact because of its oscillating juxtaposition of modern/postmodern dualities such as earnestness/irony, hope/cynicism, or unity/fragmentation. Along those same lines, we might take note of the way Storm proposes moving the human sciences forward out of the cul-de-sacs that postmodernism—and modernism before it—can lead to; by sometimes balancing modernist and postmodern methods, sometimes pitting them against each other, and sometimes pitting each against itself. One could thus classify Storm’s intellectual toolkit as indeed one more metamodern cultural product, in that it exhibits its own oscillating juxtaposition of dualities and emerges in this purported metamodern period. In short, Storm’s project might be described as “applied meta-theoretical metamodernism”—advocating that the sorts of oscillating dualities observed by other metamodernism researchers in the culture be consciously brought back into scholarship itself. In fact, I would have liked to see the author explore this connection in greater depth, even if to ultimately reject it.

No matter how Storm’s *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* fits into the broader metamodernism discourse, I find the methodologies offered to be promising tools for those in the humanities considering methodological innovations writ large. Regarding esotericism specifically, though I consider myself a researcher and not a scholar in the field, I should expect Storm’s philosophical tools—metarealism, in particular—would be useful in approaching the study of new religious movements, spirituality, and supernatural phenomena that are

considered real by some and dubious by others. The notion of social kinds could be helpful with categorization problems in esotericism studies, and perhaps hylosemiotics for making sense of non-linguistic communication in the esoteric spiritual realm. Indeed, perhaps esotericism, among all fields, is one that is especially in need of what Storm's metamodernism project has to offer, given its inherently comparative nature and that it aims to bring academic light and rigor to the study of phenomena that tend to inhabit shadowy places with fuzzy borders, both intellectually and literally.

All in all, Storm has packed a great deal of broad research and original thought into this text which will surely benefit scholars in a variety of fields and in esotericism studies specifically. Though it may take some diligence on the reader's part, unpacking this work will surely reward the effort.

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