

GIF Art in the Metamodern Era

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Abstract

This essay offers an exploration of the recent phenomenon of GIF art, in light of the cultural attitude that has come to be known under the term of 'metamodernism'. Unlike other recent theories (New Realism, Hypermodernity, Altermodernism, and so on) that have tried to conceptualize the 'cultural logic' of the present age as a kind of neo-modernist dismissal of postmodernism, metamodernism is not intended to dispose of the notion of postmodernism all together. Instead, it is defined as 'an oscillation between aspects of *both* modernism and postmodernism' (Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker). The article argues that GIF art can be held as a major contemporary expression of a truly metamodernist 'structure of feeling', following a refunctionalizing, in artistic terms, the Graphics Interchange Format. GIF art is today an extraordinarily vital, well-diffused and fragmented field of experimentation, where new uses of the moving image are continuously developed and tested. Its interest for film studies lies in the fact that it almost literally reinvents the cinematographic device (*dispositif*) in a digital context, to the point that it has been termed 'a form of minicinema entirely native to the Internet' (Tom Moody).

The Metamodern Dialectic

Statements about the end of postmodernism have acquired wide currency in cultural discourses for at least two decades now. Linda Hutcheon, one of the leading scholars in postmodernism, declared it had reached the condition of 'a thing of the past' as early as 2003.¹ Many since then have attempted to offer a convincing description of the 'cultural logic' of our post-postmodernist times. The resurgence of certain modernist traits (like a new interest in history and a distinct experimental attitude) in current cultural production has spurred various theoretical formulations and definitions, from Remodernism to Automodernism, from Digimodernism to Hypermodernity, and more.²

¹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 165.

² For a critically informed presentation of all of these trends, and more, see David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris, *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

The problem with all of these different theoretical paradigms is that they conceive of the contemporary cultural landscape as the result of a rupture with, or a departure from, postmodernism, while at the same time structuring their definitions of the 'new' around aspects that can be said to belong legitimately to the postmodern condition. If, as Alan Kirby states, 'postmodernist culture was rooted in all kinds of historical, social, economic and political developments', then one can certainly agree with his conclusion that 'it would take something wrenchingly huge to sweep this away'.³ However, his identification of this 'huge' transformation with the advent of the digital era seems quite inadequate to play the role of what, in Fredric Jameson's terms, should be characterized as the end of 'the cultural logic of late capitalism', that is, as a systemic reversal that we are far yet to experience.⁴

A more persuasive attempt to describe the present configuration of contemporary cultural production in relation to postmodernism has been advanced by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. Their notion of 'metamodernism' is particularly intriguing since it allows one to explain why so many aspects of the previous paradigm still survive today within a cultural frame that does not comply with the nihilistic stance of postmodernism. Defined as 'a kind of informed naivety' or 'a pragmatic idealism', metamodernism is offered as a tentative synthesis, or, more precisely, 'an oscillation between aspects of *both* modernism and postmodernism'.⁵

The strength of this concept is that it does not attempt, as other recent theories, to dispose of postmodernism by proposing a simple, linear progression from one paradigm to another, but (just as postmodernity did not dispose of modernity) it incorporates major aspects of the postmodernist attitude (like irony and deconstruction) into a new 'structure of feeling' that revamps the typically modernist tension toward experimentation and discovery, sincerity of expression, pursuit of truths, critique and *détournement*, and many more cultural practices that all speak of a new urge for utopia even in a context dominated by pessimism.⁶

The main novelty in the oscillating attitude of metamodernism is the return of the dialectic after a long period in which it was displaced in favour of a playful

³ Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 27.

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

⁵ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 2 (2010), 1–14 <<http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/5677/6306>> [accessed 20 March 2016].

⁶ The notion of 'structure of feeling' is derived from Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 132–34: 'The term is difficult, but "feeling" is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of "world-view" or "ideology". [...] we are concerned with meaning and values as they are actively lived and felt.... Structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available'.

indifference for conflict and history.⁷ Where poststructuralist thinkers such as Deleuze, Lyotard and Derrida worked to pulverize the dichotomies of modernist dialectical thought (as well as the negative energy on which they were based) into an infinite multiplication of affirmative differences that no longer aimed at a synthesis, metamodernism rediscovers contradiction to simply inhabit it, and even rest in it, in a way that does not show any confidence in the modernist faith in linear progress, or what Jameson calls ‘the ideologic conviction of gradualism’.⁸ In other words, whereas modernists conceived of conflict as a moment in a dialectical process moving toward the *telos* of history, the metamodernists see it as a permanent reality that will never be overcome by the advent of a final synthesis. At the same time, Vermeulen and van den Akker acutely retrace the origin of so many post-modernist discourses about the end of history in the very matrix of all modernist dialectical thinking, that is, Hegel’s ‘positive’ idealism. For some, they write,

this notion of history dialectically progressing toward some predetermined Telos had ended because humankind had realized that this Telos had been achieved (with the “universalization of Western liberal democracy”). Others suggested that it had come to a conclusion because people realized its purpose could never be fulfilled — indeed, because it does not exist.

Yet in fact ‘history never ended’. The reaction to this new awareness generates the suspended dialectics that they call ‘metamodernism’:

The current, metamodern discourse also acknowledges [as in the most critical versions of postmodernism] that history’s purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it *as if* it does exist. Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility.⁹

The metamodern dialectic then bears some extraordinary similarities to Walter Benjamin’s ‘dialectics at a standstill’, a notion he developed as an alternative to the triumphant teleology and unabashed faith in linear progress of orthodox deterministic materialism.¹⁰ Introduced as a strategic conceptual tool to preserve

⁷ Of course things here are more complicated than that. As Jameson has shown in *Valences of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), the explicitly counter-dialectical thought of ‘Hegel’s contemporaries critics’ (a chapter devoted to discussing authors like Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault) is just another articulation of the dialectic that contributes to the general movement ‘towards a spatial dialectic’ that the author sees announced in contemporary culture. While I cannot discuss Jameson’s view in more detail here, I want to remark that what I call ‘metamodernism’ bears many similarities with his concept of a ‘spatial dialectic’.

⁸ Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, p. 29.

⁹ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, p. 4.

¹⁰ ‘Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image therefore dream image’. Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century: Expose of 1935’, in *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, trans. by Rold Tiedeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,

hope as a 'weak messianic force' in front of the impending catastrophe of World War II (the material demonstration of the fallacies of progressive teleology), Benjamin's crystallized dialectic seems to offer the only adequate 'impossible possibility' for the metamodern subjectivity to deal with the anxieties and the threats of global war, impoverishment and environmental collapse generated by contemporary capitalism.¹¹ Neither the gradualist dialectic of modernism, nor the postmodern disavowal of dialectics are better equipped to cultivate resilience in front of what is felt as a looming disaster. The metamodernist structure of feeling responds with an invitation to look for an improbable way out in any way. If postmodernism can be characterized as a navigation between islands that appear deprived of any intrinsic value of their own, whereby meaning is created by the interconnection provided by the navigation itself, metamodernism can rather be described as the experience of a sea captain whose ship is sinking and

has to set sail for one island whilst understanding that each island has its value. For us metamodernism is this moment of radical doubt, of constantly, at times desperately, repositioning between the islands, finally choosing one. The terms we chose early on were [...] oscillation and metaxy. Perhaps elasticism could be another way to describe it, in the sense that the captain is tied by an elastic to different islands and the further he stretches the band to one island, the more violently the pull, the swing, back to another will be — until it snaps, of course.¹²

The Dialectic as Image

Metamodernism is then the name for the condition of a subject who inhabits the contradiction, who finds him/herself in-between a hoard of tensions and has to choose how to position for the sake of his/her own existence. The sense of urgency attached to this choice is another element that points to a similarity with Benjamin's dialectic at a standstill, and that which makes contradiction appear in a spatial form, that is, in the form of an image. Benjamin formulates this concept by writing that 'image is dialectic at a standstill'. In other words, the dialectic of now-time (a wording used to express the form that present takes on for a subject in danger)

1999 [1935]), p. 10. Elsewhere, Benjamin describes the dialectical image as the product of a sudden clash between the past and the present. A good illustration of how this peculiar dialectic works in Benjamin is the ambiguous treatment he reserves to the notion of 'aura', whose demise is seen in completely positive terms in his essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility*, and in extremely pessimistic terms in *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*.

¹¹ Here again, the notion of an 'impossible possibility' meets Jameson's discussion of Benjamin's dialectical messianism: 'You would not evoke the messianic in a genuinely revolutionary period, a period in which changes can be sensed at work around you; the messianic does not mean immediate hope in that sense, perhaps not even home against hope; it is a unique variety of the species hope that scarcely bears any of the latter's normal characteristics and that flourishes only in a time of absolute hopelessness'. Benjamin, *Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 177.

¹² Vermeulen and Van den Akker, *Notes on Metamodernism*.

does not take place by means of concepts, but in form of images. This explains why it cannot perform a conciliatory role, since it is only the work of conceptualization that which can overcome/abolish effectual contradictions, transforming them into *discourse* — while the image *contains* all antagonist polarities, without offering future solutions [...]. The dialectic at a standstill is the image that blocks the real into a constellation charged with tensions.¹³

If my linkage of metamodernism to the notion of a spatialized dialectic is correct, we should now be able to find examples of metamodernist dialectical images. Some work has been done in the field of film studies to track down the presence of a metamodernist sensibility in contemporary cinema. James MacDowell has brought up the case of what he calls ‘quirky cinema’, a trend he sees represented by the films of, among others, Michel Gondry, Wes Anderson, Miranda July, Charlie Kaufman, Spike Jonze, Jared Hess, Alexander Payne, David O. Russell. Quirky, he writes,

is a sensibility made up of tensions: between indie and mainstream, comedy and drama, naturalism and artificiality, innocence and experience, and — perhaps above all — ‘irony’ and ‘sincerity’. More precisely, it can be broadly described as ‘walking a tightrope between a cynically ‘detached’ irony and an emotionally ‘engaged’ sincerity.’¹⁴

Coherently with his search for what he calls ‘the tone’ of metamodernist cinema, MacDowell tends to concentrate more on the film’s content, than on its visual structure. However, when looking for images, and specifically for dialectical images, it seems to me that an even more poignant embodiment of the metamodernist spirit can be found today outside the field of traditional narrative cinema. GIF art is an excellent case in point. Having emerged as an effort to re-functionalize in artistic terms the Graphics Interchange Format, which has been ubiquitously in use in the Internet since 1987, GIF art is today an extraordinary vital, disseminated, as well as fragmented field that explores new possible uses of the moving image. The interest of the GIF medium for film studies lays in the fact that it almost literally reinvents the cinematic device (*dispositif*) in a digital context, to the point that it has been termed ‘a form of mini-cinema entirely native to the Internet’.¹⁵

¹³ Guido Boffo, *Nero con bambino. L'antropologia impolitica di Walter Benjamin* (Milano: Mimesis, 1999), p. 98 (my translation).

¹⁴ James MacDowell, *Quirky*, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’ (13 August 2013), <<http://www.metamodernism.com/2010/08/13/quirky/>> [accessed 20 March 2016].

¹⁵ The definition is by digital artist Tom Moody, *IMG MGMT: Psychotronic GIFs* (2008) <<http://www.artfagcity.com/2008/08/05/img-mgmt-psychotronic-gifs/>> [accessed 20 March 2016]. See also Moody’s interview in the booklet issued by Distributed Gallery to accompany a 2009 exhibition in Los Angeles <<http://e-rat.org/Distributed%20Gallery/dg.telic.info/>>. On Tom Moody and two other gif artists see Sally McKay, ‘The Affect of Animated GIFs (Tom Moody, Petra Cortright, Lorna Mills)’, *Art and Education* [n.d.] <<http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/the-affect-of-animated-gifs-tom-moody-petra-cortright-lorna-mills/>> [accessed 20 March 2016]. More literature that explores the

Suspended between stillness and movement, GIF images embody the meta-modern dialectical principle in their own technological structure. Of course they move, right, but their movement is frozen in an endless repetition of the same few frames. A new temporal form emerges where fixity coexists with mobility, variation with monotony, change with stability. The paradoxical constitution of GIFs thus appears to mimic on the formal level the blocked dialectic of capitalism, its incessant pursuit of change that never changes anything — or what Benjamin first characterized as the ever-new appearance of the ever-same in the experience of modernity. In a way, the flood of looping images that saturates the metamodern mediascape has disenchanting the techniques of image reproduction, by generating a new perceptual habit that provides an automatic ability to recognize the ever-same in the ever-new. In shrinking the duration of a moving picture to a few seconds, the GIF image reveals the structural sameness that is inherent to every product created by means of a recording technique (and what is a film, ultimately, if not a recording that loops each time it is reproduced?).

GIFs as Dialectical Images

Characteristic to the GIF image is the short circuit it produces between some of the most advanced digital technologies (such as motion photography, motion graphics, or software like Processing and Cinema 4D) and cinema's history, and even cinema's pre-history, reactivating a wide constellation of ancient forms and techniques of perception such as the stereoscopes, the zoetropes, the phenakistiscopes, chronophotography, lenticular print, and so on.¹⁶ The emerging field of GIF art offers numerous interesting examples. Dain Fagerholm, an illustrator who specializes in stereograms, presents the viewer with glimpses into a melancholic world of adolescent alienation drawn in blue tones, where monstrous puppet kids with big heads and huge eyes sit in front of luminous cubes or prisms, either alone, or without seemingly attempting any kind of interpersonal communication.¹⁷ The principle of Marey's chronophotography is revived and put in motion by Erdal Inci, a Turkish artist based in Berlin who produces his GIFs by cloning himself into dozens of identical doubles. In his series titled after

gif-cinema-precinema connection includes the following: Hampus Hagman, 'The Digital Gesture: Rediscovering Cinematic Movement Through GIFs', *Refractory* (29 December 2012) <<http://refractory.unimelb.edu.au/2012/12/29/hagman/>> [accessed 20 March 2016]; Jane Hu, 'GIF Typologies and the Heritage of the Moving Image', *Hyperallergic* (28 September 2012) <<http://hyperallergic.com/57585/gif-typologies-and-the-heritage-of-the-moving-image/>> [accessed 20 March 2016]; A. D. Jameson, 'Are Animated Gifs a Type of Cinema?', *Indiewire* (17 April 2013) <<http://www.indiewire.com/2013/04/are-animated-gifs-a-type-of-cinema-133784/>> [accessed 20 March 2016].

¹⁶ GIFs can be said to revive, in a very precise way, the aesthetic of the 'cinema of attractions', as they many characteristics with early cinema: silentness, brevity, multiplicity, the sensationalism or exhibitionism of visual effects. See Wanda Strauven, *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ See <http://dainfagerholm.blogspot.com> [accessed 20 March 2016].

a famous essay by Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament* (1927), his own body dressed in black is replicated multiple times, so as to create disturbing arrays of marching figures that suggest different, and even opposite readings: a fascist troop or an anarchist rally, an official parade or a ritual choreography performed by a group of hooded street artists.¹⁸ In a more playful mood, artists like Neil Sanders, Nicolas Fong and Matthias Brown have been experimenting with digital phenakistoscopes. Sanders, one of the animators (in the double sense of the word) of the Australian Loop De Loop team, crams his virtual discs with crowds of little elastic creatures dancing and bouncing in a classical cartoon style.¹⁹ Fong's mesmerizing mandalas, featuring the perpetual mutation of strange zoomorphic figures, have been included in a music video he made for the BNRS band, *Many Chances* (2015).²⁰ Matthias Brown (who also experiments with GIFs in videomaking) employs the traditional technique of rotoscope animation to produce digital phenakistoscopes and other looping compositions (which include sequential plates that is reminiscent of Muybridge), all exclusively rendered in black and white.²¹

These examples persuasively suggest the metamodern, dialectical nature of the GIF image. These tiny visual loops plunge the viewer into a perceptual experience that goes back to the prehistory of cinema, producing a clash between our digital present and the distant past of the analogic moving image — a perfect illustration of a spatialized dialectics. What appears as most modern today allows the resurrection of a host of ancient optical toys, the actualization of the movement that is virtually inscribed in them: just type 'Dick Balzer' on Google and you witness a true explosion of nineteenth-century moving taumatropes, phenakistoscopes, zoetropes, and animated magic lantern slides from one of the largest and most amazing collections in the world. At the same time the forms of so-called pre-cinema are constantly recreated in the work of present-day digital practitioners. The marvel of the chromatrope, a spectacular display of moving colors, once a major attraction for magic lantern (and later early cinema) audiences, is today revived online in hundreds of GIFs.²² James Kerr, who is exceptionally popular in social networks as Scorpion Dagger, makes compelling *détournements* of Renaissance paintings by means of an elemental type of montage that brings to mind the mechanical animations of the magic lantern.²³

¹⁸ Search for Erdal Inci on Tumblr, Vimeo and Instagram.

¹⁹ See <http://neilsanders.com.au>. See also the website of the collective <http://loopdeloop.org> [accessed 20 March 2016].

²⁰ Search for Nicolas Fong on Tumblr and Vimeo.

²¹ See <http://traceloops.com> [accessed 20 March 2016].

²² Some intriguing examples are provided by the anonymous artists who conceal their identity under the pseudonyms of Hexeosis and Admiral Potato.

²³ Search for Scorpion Dagger on Tumblr. James Kerr has been experimenting with the use of GIFs in his recent augmented reality art book, *Do You Like Relaxing?* (Montréal: Anteism, 2015). Animations can be played live on an iPhone from the pages of a handcrafted art book: <<http://anteism.com/shop/scorpion-dagger-augmented-reality-soft>> [accessed 20 March 2016].

The subterranean connection that links the GIF phenomenon to the prehistory of cinema is made explicit in the construction of new analogical optical toys. The most intriguing example is the Giphoscope, a machine assembled by Alessandro Scali and Marco Calabrese at the Okkult Motion Pictures studio in Turin, Italy.²⁴ Based on the principle of the flip-book, this elementary, and yet extremely elegant device allows the user to play GIFs by hand simply by turning a crank. The machine is sold together with an optional number of printed GIFs from a catalogue featuring both works by contemporary artists and brief sequences from public domain early cinema collections. But the Giphoscope is just one among several more examples that document the contemporary trend toward the 'descent' of GIFs 'in real life', through analogical as well as digital devices. GIFpop is an initiative created to commercialize the work of digital artists in the form of large cards produced by means of a lenticular printing process. Again, GIFpop lenticular animations sold in this form include the work of digital artists like Davidope, Patakk, Zack Dougherty (Hateplow), Zolloc and others, alongside a serpentine dance from the early days of film history and a phenakistoscope from the Richard Balzer collection. IRL GIFs are also the business of Meural, a digital canvas connected to the Internet that allows you to view high quality GIF animations on your home wall.

All of these developments suggest that GIFs can become an extraordinary field of inquiry for media archaeology. GIF archaeology has become a specific subject of research in the work of Olia Lialina, a scholar and a net artist who finds her material in elements from the Web 1.0.²⁵ More generally, we can see how widely GIFs contribute, through the practice of frame capture, to the continual remediation of film history, now delivered in the form of tiny fragments to the voracious cinephilia of a large number of web users. Frame grab GIFs are giving a strong impulse to the ongoing cinematization of the web,²⁶ but they do so only collapsing the whole history of the moving image into an eternal present where hand-colored films exist side by side with 16mm documentary productions, panoramic formats in Technicolor, television programs, videoclips, home movies, and so on. These scattered fragments, most often generated by anonymous users, provoke an

²⁴ Loops visible on the giphoscope.com website include sequences excerpted from Edison and Méliès films, as well as from Muybridge's plates on animal locomotion. For more information about Calabrese and Scali's other artistic projects, look for their personal websites <<http://okkultmotion-pictures.tumblr.com>> [accessed 20 March 2016].

²⁵ See Olia Lialina's continuing reconstruction of the history and prehistory of GIF culture in her *Vernacular Web* multimedia essay series (2005–2010): <<http://art.teleportacia.org/observation/vernacular/>>; <<http://contemporary-home-computing.org/vernacular-web-2/>>; <<http://contemporary-home-computing.org/prof-dr-style/>>. See also Paddy Johnson, 'A Brief History of Animated GIF Art', parts 1–4, *Artnet News* (2 and 15 August, 2 and 17 September 2014) <<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/a-brief-history-of-animated-gif-art-part-one-69060>> [accessed 20 March 2016].

²⁶ The process that I call 'cinematization of the web' is certainly involved in the ongoing 'relocation of cinema' discussed by Francesco Casetti in *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

archaeologic, metamodern reading of the media experience, in which the perception of history is given on a synchronic, i.e. spatialized, rather than diachronic, ground.

An intriguing example is the reinvention of certain visual *topoi* of both abstract cinema and optical/kinetic art, a common practice among ‘generative’ artists in the field of so-called ‘creative coding’. The most fortunate of these *topoi* is perhaps the circular movement of Marcel Duchamp’s ‘rotoreliefs’, famously used in *Anémic Cinéma* (1926) to create a hypnotic impression of depth in a two-dimensional image. Duchamp’s concept of his spinning discs, where sets of concentric circles move in eccentric fashion, has been exploited dozens of times in GIFs. The ‘anemic’, i.e. Duchampian, genealogy of much optical and kinetic art is made explicit in those works that use designs by Victor Vasarely, Marina Apollonio or Bridget Riley to create mesmerizing bidimensional sculptures in motion. In this way, artists like Davidope (dvdp), Dave Whyte (beesandbombs), Dylan Fisher (xverdxse), Joe Winograd, among many others, have opened up a new enthralling season of digital experimentation for abstract kinetic art.²⁷

Research in this field has gone in parallel with a process we might describe as the ‘toyfication of the web’. Several abstract artists have been engaged in developing online tools that exploit interactivity to produce perfectly gratuitous perceptual experiences, which again revive the nineteenth-century tradition of optical toys in the digital context. Hardcore experimentation meets a kind of childish taste for playing with images that for once is not subjected to the competitive logic of gamification, and can be seen in many examples such as Chris Shier’s *Gifmelter*, Vince McKelvie’s *Klear.me* and *Clickdragclick*, or Andrew Benson’s *Pusher*. Bill Domonkos, a digital artist and talented videomaker who works with found footage, distributes *Stereopsis*, a free iOS app that allow to watch his surreal GIFs in stereoscopy.²⁸

GIFs and the Metamodern Critique

If GIFs embody the metamodern sensibility already at the level of their formal structure, nothing is more telling of their departure from postmodernism than the peculiar kind of social and/or political critique some artists try to communicate through their loops. While their satirical wit can be quite aggressive — as in the case of Peekasso’s political spoofs, which turn Donald Trump, and Hillary Clinton no less, into grotesque artificial puppets — their most characteristic attitude is a melancholic irony that leaves little place for the euphoria that both modernism and postmodernism had expressed toward, respectively, engagement and disengagement.²⁹ The metamodern sensibility arises from the exponential

²⁷ Search for their names and nicknames on Tumblr, Vimeo, YouTube and Instagram.

²⁸ See <http://www.bdom.com> [accessed 20 March 2016].

²⁹ An eloquent example of Peekasso’s net-artistic strategies is the glittering *découpage* of a cat,

disenchantment experienced by a young generation as it witnesses the collapse of postmodernism's re-enchantment strategies, and finds itself facing giant global problems that seem beyond any possible solution. Maybe metamodernism is the only true postmodernism, since it is only too painfully aware that those problems are just the heritage of modernity, and it is left with a longing desire for a utopian way out, which it despairs will ever be found. The *naïvete* that is often associated to metamodernism can be compared to that of a grown up child who reacts to a trauma by embracing her toys and singing a lullaby — she knows this is not going to change her condition, but helps.

A grim representation of the artist's destiny in the age of digital reproduction is offered by Milos Rajkovic — an artist from Serbia who signs his GIFs as Sholim — in the loop that opens his *The World Was Wonderful* series.³⁰ All the images in this series are characterized by slow movements of only a few figures, which create a *tableau-vivant*-like effect, while the only recurring element is a swarm of flies that keeps turning over piles of waste: the rest of what was once a 'wonderful world'. The scenes range from Father Christmas and his reindeers hung up by their feet, with Christmas lights used as rope (*New Year*), to a headless couple who tries to orientate themselves within a field encumbered with rubbish, using their white canes as dowsing rods (though actually the woman is using her stick to position her cell phone and take a selfie of her non-existent head: *Relationship*).

In this context the artist is no more than a survivor too. He is portrayed as a beggar, sitting on a plastic box, slightly waving as if under the effect of too much alcohol, his head hanging on his chest, surrounded by fastidious flies. The cartoon board at his neck reads: 'Gif art veteran needs help. God bless' (*Veteran*). Rajkovic other works are extremely biting too. He specializes in mechanical heads with all kinds of improbable elements moving in and out of empty orbits, mouths, craniums etc. Five of these GIFs are freakish portraits of as many characters chosen to embody the American militarist spirit, represented by an American flag in the background. In *Join the Army 2*, the Coca Cola logo in the flag connotes the optimism of a smiling military. The man has no eyes, as his upper head hosts instead a couple of puppet clowns, perpetually going up and down with a piston-like motion: the smaller clown emerges rhythmically, dressed in uniform and blowing in a trumpet that spurts blood, from the bust of a larger McDonald's clown, who in turn keeps his hands closed in prayer. All of Sholim's heads oscillate slightly and usually smile while the movement in their head reveals the agony that is going on inside: a brain with legs keeps walking endlessly in a Hamster wheel, inside

posted on 15 February 2016, he uses to forward the viewer to a YouTube link featuring General Wesley Clark's public declaration that the American military plans after 9/11 was 'to take out seven countries in five years, starting with Iraq, and then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and, finishing off, Iran'. <<http://peekasso.tumblr.com/post/139376478483/httpswwwyoutube.com-watchv-9rc1mepksw>> [accessed 20 March 2016].

³⁰ See this and Rajkovic's other series at <http://sholim.com>.

a cage filled with dollars (*Manager*); baroque mechanisms allow a shining black car to spin in the head of an orthodox priest, as on a display platform (*Faith*); a machine pumped by two athletic blond women exercising with their sport equipments bears a faceless head of a woman with a fashionable haircut, which becomes a frame for a headless female figure seen in the act of taking a selfie (and the earrings of this *Selfie* are two spinning skulls used as hooks to hang a couple of vinyl bags). Each of Sholim's GIFs is an allegory that is simultaneously satirical and terribly serious, ironic and grave, suspended between a cheerful cynicism and the solemnity of a *memento mori*.³¹

One more glimpse in the condition of the contemporary GIF artist is offered by the intriguing work of Michael Green, a net artist whose creative trace is dispersed across multiple media (from social networks to commercial sites, from music to video, from GIFs to Second Life)³². His *Balloon Dog Deflated* uses a GIF to perform a complex conceptual deconstruction of the ultimate icon of postmodernist art, Jeff Koons' famous stainless-steel series of sculptures reproducing the shape and the surface of an inflated balloon dog, in different variants of color. Koons' balloon series (reproducing a dog, a swan, a rabbit, a flower and so on) are the epitome of postmodern seriality; based on the concept of an indefinite replication of identical 'originals', they were met with a commercial success never attained before by a living artist. In 2013 Koon's *Balloon Dog (Orange)* 'was sold to an anonymous telephone bidder for \$58.4 million, surpassing initial \$55 million estimates, to become "the most expensive work by a living artist sold at auction"', according to *Time*.³³ The meaning of Green's 'deflation' of such an obviously 'inflated' artwork (in both senses of the phrase) is made clearer by the commercial operation put in place by the artist himself to sell his GIF. In 2014 *Balloon Dog Deflated* was put on auction on eBay for \$ 5800, accompanied by a long explanation by the author that resembles a mix of a commercial announcement and an artistic manifesto.³⁴ This text merits to be quoted at length, not only because it is an organic part of the work itself, but also because it shows the penetration of a metamodern sensibility in an artist's metadiscursive reflexion about art in the digital century.

Balloon Dog Deflated, Green writes, 'was conceptually crafted with the same principles of the original [...]. Like Koons, Michael Green was the CEO of the project, overlooking every detail without ever actually having to create the 3D

³¹ It is worth noting that Sholim has been experimenting with transforming his GIFs into sound minimovies of just one minute. GIFs thus become extraordinarily suggestive moving tableaux accompanied by a sound environment that makes them even more expressive. See <<http://coub.com/milosrajkovic>> [accessed 20 March 2016].

³² See Michael Green's official website <<http://officialmichaelgreen.com>> [accessed 20 March 2016].

³³ Olivia B. Waxman, *An Orange Balloon Dog Sold for \$58.4M So Here Are 10 Other Cool Jeff Koons Balloon Pieces*, *Time* (14 November 2013) <<http://newsfeed.time.com/2013/11/14/an-orange-balloon-dog-sold-for-58-4-million-so-here-are-10-cool-jeff-koons-balloon-pieces/>> [accessed 20 March 2016].

³⁴ The page is still available at <<http://www.ebay.com/itm/Balloon-Dog-Deflated-GIF-file-by-Michael-Green-/321516528404>> [accessed 20 March 2016].

sculpture, or write code to produce the animation'. Green's purely conceptual work focuses on deflation, situating itself in the historical place 'where it is once again time to destroy the values of the tradition of modern art', since 'modern art has exhausted its own frame with postmodern maximalist expression of all that was left'. Today '*physical museums, like compact discs and books are dead*' and '*the museum of 2014 is the internet*'. In a typically modernist stance, Green affirms the need 'for our culture to evolve to the logical next step, the digital medium'. This turn is anticipated by 'a young generation of artists [who] have found inspiration from new tools that represent their time on earth'. But the disenchantment with both the modern and the postmodern versions of euphoria keeps assailing these avant-garde practitioners with the awareness that they 'will never have a name like Jeff Koons did 20 years ago, because culture has divorced itself from relating to the concept and value of a painting. *It's over*. The deflation of "Balloon Dog Deflation" represents this death, letting go of all the optimism Koons blew into it 20 years ago'. In a truly metamodern, oscillating attitude, though, the end of art is described as an eternal, recursive ending, one that allows for the serial reappearance of the new: 'Innovation is taking place in this medium', because '*It's over and it begins again...*'. Consequently, purchasing Green's GIF means 'to be making history', to give 'artists around the world an opportunity to MAKE A LIVING from their own work. Today's best artists are on the internet and they do it for free. Jeff Koons is dead. If he was alive today, and made a 'balloon dog deflated', he would be as poor as Michael Green'. Green's denunciation of the living conditions of contemporary digital artists acknowledges that 'it is difficult for artists who make digital work to gain any capital from it, because the work is all in the hyperreal. Where is the object physically? No such object exists'. Finally, the aim of his piece of conceptual net art is 'to open up a discussion on how digital art jpegs/GIFs/etc. could be sold and collected, just like how paintings are currently auctioned', so as to allow 'Michael Green and his contemporaries [to] support their lifestyle by selling their work to the public'. That Green's GIF was finally sold for just \$200 is a gloomy commentary to his artist's intervention.

Selling a GIF on eBay is no doubt a perfect allegory for the destiny of art in the post-postmodern age of digital reproduction. The story of *Balloon Dog Deflated* reflects a more general 'structure of feelings' that can be said metamodern insofar as it effectively positions itself beyond the end of the end of history (and art), but only to discover that history is just the experience of a present that does not end. Yet this permanent feeling of historical loss is viewed as the condition for the birth of something new, an 'impossible possibility' that it still worth to pursue beyond any rational calculation. In their permanent state of suspension between stillness and motion, GIFs are graphic expressions of the metamodern urge to reveal the looping horizon that history has become for us contemporaries.