

# Metamodernism: Navigating Discourse and Identity in Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*

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## Abstract:

This paper investigates the articulation of metamodernism at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how this new paradigmatic apparatus of interpretation of the world can be applied to Kate Atkinson's novel, *Life After Life* (2013). Metamodernism was firstly formulated by Dutch theorists Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen and comes as a response to postmodernism. Metamodernism explores the topics of informed naivety, affect in fiction, authenticity, transcendence and the function of historical hybridity, while acknowledging and using the postmodernist pastiche and parody, combined with the modernist ambiguity, openness to innovation and importance of grand narratives. This paper examines the applicability of metamodernism to Kate Atkinson's novel, *Life After Life*, a historical fiction novel about the multiple lives and deaths of Ursula Todd as she navigates through various historical events in 20th-century Europe, exploring the themes of fate, resilience, and the impact of individual choices on the course of one's life. By incorporating the metamodernist "manifesto", a theoretical and critical corpus and by using a close-reading method on the novel, this paper demonstrates that metamodernism is a paradigm that tries to adapt to the contemporary state of constant crisis and its applicability to Atkinson's fiction. This analysis showcases the degree to which metamodernism contributes to understanding the complexity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and whether it fits the aesthetic of the novel.

**Keywords:** metamodernism, historicity, crisis, identity, memory, affect, body

## 1. Theorizing metamodernism

Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker proposed the term *metamodernism* as a new paradigm that would aid the contemporary reader to achieve an understanding of the socio-historical and cultural presentness of the twenty-first century. The main thesis of metamodernism, according to what the two Dutch cultural theorists proposed in their manifestos, both in the 2010 philosophical article and in the 2017 collective volume, is to be authentic by appealing to contemporary practices and patterns of acquiring knowledge and experience. This paper attempts to discuss the paradigm from a theoretical perspective. The proposed analysis in this paper is diachronic because the article mostly states the main characteristics of the movement while the 2017 volume offers a more in-depth conceptualisation of the theoretical apparatus of metamodernism, which is characterised by a renewed

focus on/interest in affect and historicity. Both of these critical essays debate the development of metamodernism while testing its applicability to contemporary art, media and materials that can constitute subjects of interest for the authors. By formulating a theory, the contemporary becomes able to outweigh the destructive outcome of its own faultiness. The crisis of ideology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century resulted from the economic discrepancy caused by globalization, politically divided and governments and institutions, climate change, the sudden progress of technology and the minority-oriented political discourse which outweighs the efficient financial and real political struggles of the world. The crisis of ideology is the moment where the traditional left-right political paradigm is challenged because it does not grasp the complexity of the world. Theory would be a suitable response to this crisis because it brings a sense of understanding of the current situation in society and offers an ideological structure onto which a new potential mode of thinking can be built. This crisis might not be solved by the metamodernist philosophy, but it is nonetheless a theory that tries to offer a solution that is more adapted to the contemporary era and that surpasses postmodernism in terms of interpreting the world. This world seems to have lost all of its meaning, and thus the literature and philosophy of the present cannot stagnate because they have to make sense of the world.

### **1.1. Metamodernism against itself**

In the 2010 article, entitled “Notes on Metamodernism,” a first possible definition of metamodernism is attempted by Vermeulen and van den Akker. However the result is not a definition, but rather an outline of what metamodernism chose to select from what preceded it. Metamodernism is described initially as an “emerging structure of feeling (...) [an] oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment.” (2) There are three main keywords that contour this conundrum. The first is what Raymond Williams initially formulated in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) as “structure of feeling”, the other two being “modern commitment” and “postmodern detachment”. They stand out because they lead the reader to think that it is a combination between the two trends of theory and responses to the world of the twentieth century. This reformulation denotes a lack of immediacy and originality, because they strive to bring back to the contemporary era the re-emergence of authenticity, which is what the postmodernists rejected. Further in the article, Vermeulen and van den Akker define metamodernism as something fluid that “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.” (5-6) This oscillation is suggestive for the way in which both modernism and postmodernism defined the era they were used as ways of reacting to the world. However, according to Vermeulen and van den Akker, the third millennium is a more complex world where attributes of both modes of interpretation are necessary to create a new ideology, a new theory.

Regarding discourse and the aspect of history integrated in it, metamodernism faces yet another conundrum. Although it advocates for history as an epitome of presentness, it dismisses

what Fukuyama called the postmodernist end of history. The concept of the *end of history* was analysed and critiqued by Fredric Jameson in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (1998), where he referred to the theory of American politics scholar and researcher Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama indicates in his political work, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) the fact that humanity reached an ideological climax after the resolution of the Cold War and this is supposed to represent the end of history, also associated with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eradication of totalitarianism in Europe. Jameson associated this terminology in relation to the postmodernist view of historicity. Metamodernism rejects Fukuyama's ending of history, but it "acknowledges that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist." (Vermeulen, van den Akker 2010, 5) From this perspective, it is safe to assume that ideology without purpose is illogical, which is doubled by the tragically impressive turns of history that the 2000s faced. Seeing as, further in the same article, they support the idea that "history is moving beyond its much proclaimed end." (5), the interpretation of history surpassing its own end is contradictory to seeing history moving on without purpose. History for metamodernists is both continuous and catastrophic. Although the concept of history refers usually to the past and to what can be discovered by the return to it, metamodernism places under the umbrella term of history the events that have not yet been made part of it, like the future or the present.

## **1.2. Defining metamodernism and the contemporary**

Apart from the article discussed in the previous section, which is a mere thesis statement in comparison to what Vermeulen and van den Akker tried to formulate seven years later, their arguments that mark the foundations for the metamodern theory are developed further in the opening chapter of the 2017 collective volume. They argue that crisis of ideology is so strong and so deeply entrenched in the universal consciousness that it turns into a philosophical weapon. In this context, metamodernism tries to seem like a natural transition to the philosophy following postmodernism, making the contemporary era understandable for the reader, even though it is characterised by the authors themselves as a paradigm that "moves for the sake of moving" (5) This movement is generated by the need of movement itself and not determined by a specific need for a certain philosophical theory. Society's highly dynamic nature makes the people in it searching for a way in which they can make sense of reality. This social unrest is caused by the vast informational turmoil which, as important as it is in the process of human evolution, creates confusion in identity, as people tend to position themselves in a more relative position to the surrounding reality.

For an ampler theoretical context, in order to understand the metamodernist strategy of oscillating between modernism and postmodernism, there needs to be a cleared delimitation between the two paradigms. According to Professor Stephen Kern in his critical overview, entitled *The Modernist Novel* (2011), modernism is defined as the "epistemological uncertainty (and) artistry that embraced pluralism" (229-230). This uncertainty is depicted in modernist works by a subjective narrator that does not acknowledge the full implications of reality, unlike Victorian realist narratives.

This polyphony and multiplicity of voices – supported by the modernist aesthetic and the discourse of constant progress and knowingness perpetuated by writers such as Woolf, Joyce and Lawrence – are relevant for the fragmentarity of human experience. In modernist fiction, the characters and the narrator – fictional entities which mostly coincide in modernism, as the first person narrator is a preferred literary technique of the modernist novel – are not fully aware of the reality that surrounds them. This exact uncertainty and fragmentation of experience is what causes the rise of the modernist affect, because only through this affect, through this the interiorised processing of emotions in the consciousness is the character able to understand reality and make sense of the world. Kern also theorises that although “modernists were acutely aware of the limits of language, they coupled such insight with broad recognition of its creative and generative power.” (124) For modernists, the use of language is crucial to the understanding of the world because they believe that language offers access to a new universe and also constitutes an instrument of shaping reality. In novels such as Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) or Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), the function of language is to anticipate reality and to offer a mode of response to the world that, when deconstructed and analysed, provides meaning to an otherwise ambiguous and uncertain storytelling. The modernist model of a present dominated by affect is what inspired metamodernists like Vermeulen and van den Akker to shape their theory in terms of presentness and producing a language of representing the contemporary world, just like the modernist language and focus on the present shaped the way in which the readers of the early twentieth century responded to the world.

Regarding postmodernism, literary critics such as Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale theorised a new emerging aesthetic following modernism, a response to the world that is adapted towards the new capitalist regime and the rising liberalist political tableau of the second half of the twentieth century and the modalities in which this aesthetic fits in the context of writing fiction. Hutcheon argues in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1998) that postmodernist parody “uses its historical memory, its aesthetic introversion, to signal that this kind of self-reflexive discourse is always inextricably bound to social discourse.” (35) Parody is used as a device of subversion tied to the societal background of the novel, using traditional genres in order to invalidate their own artificiality and create a pastiche. The use of parody in the postmodernist fiction can be linked to the ironical stance of this literary mode of interpretation, because irony is integrated in postmodernism with the role of critique towards traditional literary practices. Irony also can be considered a commentary on fragmentarity and on the discontinuity in terms of the postmodernist world. Another fundamental element of postmodernism is the aspect of history, which is heavily documented and researched through fiction. McHale argues in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) historicity in the case of postmodernism in relation to the name of this theoretical and ideological response to the world by the fact that “the presence of the prefix *post* in literary nomenclature (...) merely signals the inevitable *historicity* of all literary phenomena.” (5) McHale suggests that fiction reached its full authentic potential leading to postmodernism and there are no original stories to write. This is why postmodernist authors turn towards the reinterpretation of the past, because only through this regression in timeline is literature able to become original and

closer to authenticity. Authors such as Barnes, Rushdie and Amis used this technique in their novels in order to further augment the fact that history is a continuous stream of authentic stories that wait to be told, the only struggle being finding the modality in which these unrecorded fictional stories to be transgressed and perpetuated. Metamodernists, although trying to depart from these postmodernist literary practises, integrate some of the most important aspects into their own theory because they can still be made relevant in a contemporary context.

To a superficial eye, metamodernism is supposed to include an act of both critique and acceptance towards postmodernism, leaving the previously mentioned modernism aside. It is not entirely the case, because modernist qualities have heavily influenced the contemporary mind, making it long for the ambiguity and consciousness that seem to have been lost in the world of concrete irony. Many critics have argued over the course of the past decade that there is a return of modernism in terms of literary creation and mentality amongst the public. Modernism returns to the subjectively critical analysis of society, becoming inclusive in relation to the modern values which need to be perpetuated. The modernist qualities borrowed and validated by metamodernism are the importance of language and the affect that apparently return in this century.

Language in discourse is used by metamodernists to elevate affect and the inner self, and to reinvent the self and identity. Language becomes itself a vision of the world and an interpretative dimension of society and reality due to its dynamism because it is a critical and lively reflection of the way the reader lives in this world. This elevation is not achieved through the modernist fragmentarity, and neither through a detached and disinterested postmodernist pastiche, but through a discourse that resembles realism and a type of mimesis that rejects the Victorian tradition. This is a realism that makes it possible for the reader to excavate what the modernist psyche and the postmodernist ontology and possibilities wanted to showcase. The mimesis that gives the contemporary reader the impression of a realist aesthetic is dominated by affect. The metamodern narrative is subjected to the ever-returning solidified act of reflection on the self that the modernists supported. Mimesis comes back as a new mode of interpreting identity. In order to satisfy the reader's necessity to deliberately adhere to a model of behavioural and philosophical orientation that fits the age where there are no models anymore, metamodernism aims to create a new aesthetic of arbitrariness. The censorship of individuality is hardened and more totalitarian than in the past century, and this arbitrariness is the aesthetic of the self that metamodernism tries to support.

The authors even define the theory as being the invention of the language that would allow the contemporaries to sync with the age that they have been placed in and with the plagued social context that they have been subjected to. According to Vermeulen and van den Akker:

what is needed is a new language to put into words this altogether weirder reality and its still stranger cultural landscape. This book is an attempt to create such a language, or at least series of linked dialects, to come to an understanding of our current historical moment, a language that allows us to come to terms with the gap between what we thought we knew and the things we experience in our daily lives. For us, this language is metamodernism. (3)

The dialectical form of this new metamodern language is supposed to induce the idea of a dialogic expression and transition of ideas and sentiments between the vernacular and the conceptual. Our present day is a “historical moment” because it registers as a string of moments rooted in *presentness* that culminate in another momentum, and only narrative is able to fully encapsulate such a burdensome weight that the contemporary crisis of identity and ideology brings along. The gaps between knowledge and experience can only be filled with discourse, which is supposed to exist in a context which allows for a new ideological language to develop. Language for metamodernists is a tool of reconstruction of the world. It can only be understood as a modality of creating form from discourse itself, but this form is closer to what the realist form of the novel proposed because the world is supposedly too disturbed to be able to be comprehended by the complexity of the postmodernist form any longer. A mimetic discourse makes the reader aware of the disturbances of reality because it investigates the issues of the contemporary world in the narrative, while reflecting on the ambiguity and uncertainty of the future. Like in the case of modernism, Vermeulen and van den Akker argue that the metamodern language is the only instrument that represents a finite infinite of possibilities that organises identity in a way that makes it possible for the contemporary to relate to it. Metamodernism is a language which provides a means of grasping the complexity of contemporary identity and which aims to provide a transparent understanding of history. History is integrated into the present without a link between assumed, pre-existent knowledge of the world, and direct experience with the world. The political cannot impose any longer the means through which the individual relates to the world, because the subject wants to act on its own agency in relation to the universe.

Mary Holland attempts to define metamodernism as a:

modernism that is crucially self-aware, literature that is aware of being literature operating in a modernist vein, through postmodernist literary techniques turned towards modernist goals: metamodernism. (2013, 201)

This definition of metamodernism points to another similar standpoint to Vermeulen's and van den Akker's, which is that the postmodernist self-awareness is engaged in a modernist-conscious narrative. The reader of the twenty-first century is not fully aware of the experiences that they get and how they relate to the world. There are no parameters that can be used in order to measure the level of complexity and serious engagement with the present that the reader needs in order to get accustomed to the immediate reality. Vermeulen suggests in his essay entitled “The New ‘Depthiness’” (2015) that the contemporary reader navigates the intricacies of the contemporary age in the same way in which the snorkeler “imagines depth whilst never experiencing it”. (41) This is the other plague of the contemporary man, because direct experience is so mediated by digitalisation, technology, superficiality and artificiality that authenticity is more difficult to achieve than ever.

Metamodernism attributes to itself this *trademark*, meaning that it has an inherent quality of self-validation, even though the validation of a paradigm comes from its applicability and the means

through which society as a whole identifies with the said trend. Readers need to individually determine and formulate their opinion and interpretation of their contemporary reality and to create themselves a chronology that would fit the universal consciousness of the 2000s

### **1.3. Metamodern historicity, affect and postirony**

Historicity is the combination between history and authenticity. The purpose of history hand in hand with narrative and fiction offer meaning through written discourse, but if this discourse is void of historicity and is not rooted into a politically rich present it will not be able to emulate the source for novelty and renewal. Politics constitutes an important factor in our identity and conscience, leading to the perpetuation of certain cultural values. The prospect of historicity presupposes both the deconstruction of previous narratives that predetermined beliefs, as well as training an individual capable, through their own agency, of intuiting the truth value of a written discourse. The historical narrative is only a starting point, and historicity provides for discursive analysis and reinterpretation in current terms, constantly questioning universal truths. If in the past, a cosmocentric view prevails, at present, the status of the individual is changed. The postmodern universe, including the metamodern, is anthropocentric and places the human condition on a pedestal. History is a subject where metamodernists seem to quarrel over feature-checking and validity with their predecessors. There are two opposing – but somewhat complementary – standpoints on historicity, the first being whether history can continue or not after the end of Western capitalism as a fundamental key to the organisation of the world. The continuation is immediately questioned and followed by the ending problem of whether history can be assigned true and authentic value. Metamodernists like Vermeulen and van den Akker agree that some points made by postmodernists are relevant in order to explain temporality and the limits that ideology and spatial world politics are legitimate and can aid the interpretation of the world in its current timeline.

Metamodernism tries to become what postmodernism was for that which preceded it, because postmodernism used irony and pastiche to try to subvert the tropes of realism and modernism while employing their tactics of expression and narrative. Metamodernism promotes pastiche and uses it to validate its ideology, but in a way that fits its agenda, which is to disengage from the neoliberal political belief that history ended. This belief that there is a continuation of the qualitative feature of history beyond what Fredric Jameson called “Fukuyama’s end of history” (90) is dubbed by Vermeulen and van den Akker in the collective volume as the “bend of history” (2).

This bend represents that which shapes the contemporary discourse and formulates it in relation to the direct experience of history and to what counts as historical contexts in this century. This is an aspect contrary to the postmodernist constant reinterpretation of history, because metamodernists are not only interested in reinterpreting the past, but also the contexts of the present that can be considered to make up for historical times and situations in the future that seems more uncertain than ever. According to the authors, this previously discussed “bend of history” represents the:

new metamodern regime of historicity that has, as a defining trait, that its present opens onto – in an attempt to bring within its fold – pasts possibilities and possible futures (defined as being with or among residual and emergent structures of feeling) (...) the metamoderns open a back door while walking through a front door as if re-enacting an M.C. Escher drawing. (van den Akker 2017, 22)

History returns for the metamodern, and that is the solution to the crisis of discourse and ideology that haunts the contemporary. The cultural phenomena of this century have to be mapped and conceptualized in order to be understood and integrated in discourse, because history determines a metamodernist narrative that manages to tie the present to the future and to make it *its* history. The exclusion of postmodernism in this case is erroneous because postmodernism reinterpreted history to grasp the complexity of the world.

At the other less objective pole of the metamodern ideology, there is affect. Vermeulen and van den Akker described this concept, in the context of the emergence of the new theory, as “structure of feeling” (4) This “structure of feeling” suggests that the emotion of the reader, following the interaction with the literary material, is a structurally independent formation that resuscitates the awareness of the text, because the reader is directly exposed to the psychology of the text itself. Moreover, the “structure of feeling” can be understood by relating it to another term, *mapping*. Mapping affect for metamodernism tries to provide an ideological objective framework that organises and explains the order of the world today. Emotions have to be organised in order to access validity and meaning after the turn of the millennium, making sense of the world through affect. However, the feeling of the metamodern, although inspired by the modernist sentiment, tries to escape its own trap of clustering the individual’s inner accordance with itself and with the outside world and does not know whether it will succeed or not. The reason for this possible failure is that the twenty-first century society is subjected to a much faster change. The reader is thus left perplexed by their own lag in syncing with their contemporary timeline. Modernist fragmentarity of knowledge and of the self is reverted here into an attempt at rebuilding identity and creating a link between the pieces that are lost amidst the chaos of the world.

The metamodern affect is formulated as a modality that transgresses theory and is interpreted through the subjectivity that modernism promoted. Allison Gibbons argues in the collective volume on metamodernism that “identity is also acknowledged as a social category that is constructed by subjects and by larger structures of social power.” (120) This involves the existence of the perception of the individual as subject again, as centre to the narrative and as a solution to the problems of the contemporary. Metamodernists support the modernists’ opinion that individuality is the key that offers the reader access to the better comprehension of history and the time that stacks the cards against him. The navigation of identity represents the salvation of the world. Gibbons uses the word *subject* to show the metamodern reconstructionist approach to narrative: “in a crisis-ridden world, subjects are once more driven by a desire for attachment to others and to their surroundings” (130).

The aspect of the “in-betweeness” (10), of the “metaxy” (152), that Vermeulen and van den Akker attribute to the prefix *meta* and is interpreted in relation to the word *metamodernism* is

relevant for the way in which "readers want to be told how they should feel about an event – ethically, socially, politically – in place of authentically feeling." (Gibbons 2017, 117) One of the greatest problems that postmodernism formulated was the ethical turn, which was relevant for the rapidly changing world of that time. Now, the contemporary reader faces the same ethical problem. This ethical and interpretative conundrum differentiates itself from the postmodernist ethical turn because it is oriented towards the reader. This self-oriented paradigm of interpretation negotiates its status as a metamodernist conundrum only through identity and the manipulation of how the self is perceived. Metamodernism describes how the contemporary self is engulfed by affect, because it needs to be subjected to emotion and raw feeling in order to surpass the distanced and ironic style of postmodernism in the present-day society.

By surpassing the ironic postmodernist aesthetic of responding to reality, the metamodernist paradigm uses another mechanism that constitutes a source for satirical subversion of traditional genres and conventions. This new theoretical device of processing and producing knowledge of the world is more rooted into the technologically advanced world of media and communications of the contemporary: *postirony*. The precursor to the postironic movement is David Foster Wallace, an American writer and essayist who theorised postirony in two of his critical pieces: "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (1988) and "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993). In these two critical works, Wallace argues that "the pop informs our generation's ways of experiencing and reading the world, so too will it naturally affect our artistic values and expectations." (1988, 5) worrying that the young authors of fiction would perpetuate a not-so-applicable detached postmodernist irony in a literary context which needs closeness and sincerity in order to engage truthfully with the world. He also discusses the influence of television and pop culture on American fiction and how the postmodernist response to the world becomes outdated, anticipating a new literary movement in fiction taking its place. He argues for an imminent return of sincerity in fiction, a sincerity which can be ironic in order to make itself available and accessible for the grand public. Wallace's postirony is a device which allows for both scepticism and emotional bonding to mix and form a post-postmodernist literary technique that applies to the tumultuous contemporary world. Wallace's perspective on postirony is perpetuated and developed by Vermeulen and van den Akker in metamodernism and the contemporary cultural and political context.

According to Gibbons, the need for closeness with the historical context of the present and with the inner psychological state and take on it can only be achieved through the new metamodernist postirony. Postirony is the process that allows the reader to achieve the seemingly impossible capacity to comprehend the context of contemporary history and presentness and to create a reconstruction of the world, a puzzle that is put together using the fragments that modernism and postmodernism left behind. Gibbons proposes as a definition of affect that it is the

ability to process intensities so that we can articulate meaningful emotional reactions or cognitive responses to today's social situation in which another affective modality has substituted yesterday's fragmented and fragmenting euphoria. (86)

The euphoric fragmentation of modernism and postmodernism was necessary for a time in which continuity had no sense for the world, and reality itself was fragmentary and illusory, misleading and cold towards the individual. Postirony connects the continuously growing affect of the twenty-first century and historicity in the narrative, allowing for an interpretation that conveys all the answers. Postirony's ideological intention is to manage to enunciate and bring a solution to the rising issues that condemn the contemporary reader to being the prisoner of a society that does not allow the reader to express his uncertainty towards the chaotic system that the world of technology brought about. By conversing in the terms of affective postirony, the reader is able, through narrative, to understand reality.

As a partial conclusion, the metamodernist ideology, in theory, attempts to grant humanity the wish of a concrete and immediate instrument of making sense of the world. Unless the world does not define its own specific necessity, the insertion of ideology becomes totalitarian, aspect which has been discussed extensively by the authors in their manifesto. Metamodernism is thus argued to be a "wishful attempt to think, feel and perceive historically, spatially and corporeally." (Vermeulen 2017, 149)

## **2. Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*: a case study on applied metamodernism**

When Kate Atkinson published her novel, *Life After Life*, in 2013, the metamodern collective manifesto was not yet released. The only conceptualisation of this theory was the article published in 2010 by Vermeulen and van den Akker, which was not as extensive as the 2017 volume. Nevertheless, the context of the 2010s allows for this interpretation of Atkinson's novel, surpassing the constraints of postmodernism because the collective volume proposes the characteristics of the literature of the 2000s. Even though many critics consider Atkinson's novel to be a late manifestation of the postmodernist aesthetic, there are considerable facets of the novel that illustrates the metamodernist aesthetic as well.

One of the most visible indicators of this metamodernist aesthetic is the postironic coming-of-age genre. Both of Atkinson's novels – *Life After Life* (2013) and its companion piece *A God in Ruins* (2015) – engage in this type of narrative, because they follow a structurally complex and socio-historically rich story of Ursula, who is reborn repeatedly throughout the novel. For the metamodern Bildungsroman, the postironic element is quintessential, showcasing how the progression of the character through society and life is written using the mimetic element. The postmodernist constant reinterpretation of a history that is very much relevant for the third millennium is outperformed by the contemporary necessity of feeling and of emotional complexity. The postironic realism that the metamodernists propose is subjected to affect, and as a direct consequence, it becomes the parameter with which the complexity of life is portrayed in the twenty-first century literary discourse. Atkinson's novel starts in 1910, with the Birth of the protagonist, Ursula Todd, and follows the life of the main character and her experiences until the end of the twentieth century, but the timeline always returns to 1910 every time Ursula Todd dies. This type of realistic engagement with style, by

placing the individual once again at the beginning of another century in the central position of the novel and then breaking the temporal development of the narrative to return to the same beginning, is contrasted by its preclusion of traditional realism, because there is an open ending. According to Lee Konstantinou:

the most popular postironic mode is the postironic Bildungsroman. (...) They ostentatiously revive historical forms of realism (and other outmoded genres) to show that these conventions retain their emotional, intellectual and representational power. Such novels are a type of Bildungsroman because they often dramatise the development of central characters from a naïve origin through a phase of irony en route to a final postironic condition. (96)

Kate Atkinson's novel is from this perspective metamodern due to its quality of always changing its course and outcome throughout the text, just like the existence of the contemporary is constantly and prematurely challenged by the rapidly-paced social changes of the world. The Bildungsroman as genre is recycled as a mode of understanding experience and it is heavily subjected to the real struggles and issues that threaten the contemporary reader, thus resembling realism. With each revival, the protagonist is faced with an arbitrary corporeal direct contact with society, in which her choices predetermine an outcome that is acknowledged already: imminent death. Regardless of how much time she wins by deflecting a situation that would lead to a premature death, the temporary quality and the fragility of human life constitute matters of a universal conscious effort that characterises the metamodernist understanding of the world and construction of narrative. By employing techniques that have been dubbed outdated by modernism and postmodernism, Atkinson brings back chronology and order in the narrative, an organisation of discourse that implements structure in a society that has lost its own, only to subvert it immediately. This means that for her, the solution to the chaotic contemporary world is literature and writing, which offers the postmodernist quality to the novel. The twentieth century French critics of the literary movement that shared characteristics with postmodernism in France and in the Francophone countries is called *le Nouveau Roman*. The theorists of the *le Nouveau Roman* (translated into "the New Novel") literary movement argued that this convention of recycling of traditional genres perpetuates the fact that literature is the salvation from the issues of reality considered. According to Denis Labouret, the aesthetic of the *le Nouveau Roman* is a polarizing movement and that it is "radically questioning literature as institution"<sup>1</sup> (2018, 178). This practice transgressed into the next contemporary French literary movement, called *l'Extrême Contemporain* (translated into "the Extreme Contemporary"). Regarding the new French contemporary orientation in terms of genre and aesthetic, Denis Labouret argues this recycling of genres in *Histoire de la littérature française des XXe et XXIe siècles* (2018) by pointing out that:

these 'returns' are not regressions, and the history of literature is not cyclic. The contemporary authors integrate the critical spirit and the playful meaning of the previous decades. (235-236)<sup>2</sup>

This transgression into the latter movement is important because it shows that the metamodern initiative of inspiration from what comes before is not singular and is a sentiment that developed in other cultures and literatures as well, metamodernism trying to be for Anglophone literary theory what *the Extreme Contemporary* is for Francophone literary theory. This seems to be the case for Atkinson's novel, as well, adopting a new emerging theory and mode of thinking and writing literature which can be considered as a new apparatus of interpretation: the revival of the genres and of tradition is connected to the constant rebirth of Ursula. Thus, by embracing the literary inheritance of the nineteenth century and by combining it with the literary ideologies that dominated the twentieth century, Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life* is a "stepping stone toward a full appreciation of the power of tradition." (Gibbons 2017, 97)

Another literary strategy recycled by Atkinson that can be considered a metamodernist technique of re-adapting the history of literature to a discourse of presentness is the use of the archetype as a mythopoetic strategy. From this perspective, it can be argued that one of her direct sources of inspiration was D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1914), because there are many similarities between the way both Atkinson and Lawrence employed the genealogy of interconnected history and mythopoetic strategies as devices for their novels. In order to understand the contemporary world, Atkinson creates Ursula Todd in order to formulate the myth of the contemporary woman, an epitome of the twenty-first century individuality and self, just as Lawrence centres Ursula Brangwen as the myth of the modern woman, almost one hundred years apart. According to Caroline Edwards, the narrative becomes contemporary because it contains "transtemporal, transmedial and transnational patterns of connection experienced in the twenty-first-century, in which time and space are felt as increasingly compressed, accelerated and abstracted." (2019, 6) The narrative always returns to the year 1910, which is a year in which modernism was rising to the top of the emerging trends of the century. Ursula Todd is born at the end of the season associated with death to which she always returns, which is another metaphor for the revival of mythology. This can be interpreted as a way in which Atkinson pays tribute to Lawrence and continues his creation of myths by making Ursula Todd a prototype of the contemporary, just like D.H. Lawrence made Ursula Brangwen the prototype of the modern woman.

## 2.1. Memory and historicity

The World Wars have been the most discussed topics in the history of world literature after the 1900s, and it is because they portray moments in the history of Europe when the world was at crossroads and when the masses were objected to the destructive forces of totalitarianism and war. Like many other contemporary writers – such as Martin Amis, Anthony Doerr and Kristin Hannah – Kate Atkinson offers a new perspective on the wars, starting with the first pages of the novel, when Ursula shoots Hitler in the chest and dies herself, too, shot by his agents and security guards. Atkinson integrated this scene at the beginning of the novel, although it reappears in the second half of the novel as well, for two reasons. The first reason is that she knows a shocking scene will attract the

reader, using a *click bait*-like technique that the contemporary reader is so accustomed to through the media. The second reason is because she announces a fragmentarity that will be reconstructed in the narrative later on, underlining a new mode of writing that will cover the history of the century and which will solidify the course of Ursula's development as a character. The novel's alternative history is articulated by the need of multiplicity and oscillation because in the twenty-first century the narrative needs to be challenged and because the reader, through these two above mentioned strategies, is supposed to search for authenticity in the novel, to explore divergent timelines and futures that would otherwise be ambiguous.

The metamodern feature of Atkinson's novel stems from this fusion between the modernist fragmentarity, postmodernist research and reinvestigation of the past and the contemporary forms and allusions to media and the way in which all of these external factors affect the reader and the world. Through these devices, Atkinson manages to excavate a past that is no longer available through direct experience but whose outcome shaped the century she lives in, while finding a way of bringing forth the imminent coagulation of technology and its effects on the mind and on the universal perception of presentness. Historicity comes from perception, where there can be no objectivity, because truth, covered in a reconstructionist postironic layer of engaged attempts at understanding the world, lies in the individual and is subjected to the plagues of the contemporary.

Atkinson combines these techniques with Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory*, which refers to the memory of an event transmitted to the "generation after" that had no direct experience with the event itself, but the event is so rooted into the history of the world that it becomes a cultural inheritance which develops the reconstruction of identity of these descendants of trauma. Their existence is "dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousnesses, (the authors) risk having one's own life stories displaced" (2008, 5). For the concept of postmemory to make sense in the context of *Life After Life*, there has to be a relationship between the author and the history that she tries to investigate. Seeing as Kate Atkinson was not born at the time of the World Wars, she is part of the "generation after" and that is why this novel can be considered postmemorialistic. In her novel, besides the thorough research of the time of the wars, there is a certain necessity of dissipating the trauma that marked the reality that immediately followed the wars. Being born at the time right after World War II, the when the world was still plagued by totalitarianism – as Europe had not yet recovered from the Nazi sentiment and was at the time facing the threat of communism – the consciousness of her generation was plagued, as well, but by the trauma that was transmitted to them through the collective sentiment. In the case of the novel, postmemory is both corporeal and ideological because Atkinson wants to dissipate it using affect. Postmodernists had access to available sources of direct experience with the war, whereas Atkinson's writing is solely based on research and on the collective consciousness that carried the effects of the war all the way to the contemporary age. Her novel is considered metamodern because she does not only reinterpret the past, but she researches it thoroughly, as at the end of the edition used for the writing of this paper there is an impressive bibliography that Atkinson read before writing this novel.

This showcases again that there has been a mutation in approaching writing narratives of the past, which is that direct experience with history is exchanged with the availability of the sources that the internet and the media provided its readership with. What is authentic about this novel is the engagement with an event that is out of touch but has been corporalised, interiorised and made real through a discourse that validated what is considered otherwise distant and impossible to identify with.

The prevalence of historicity and memory in contemporary criticism in recent years has led to a turn to the past; meanwhile, the future has attracted less attention, being understood only as potentiality of the present, as I will explore later. However, Atkinson's *Life After Life* stresses the drive towards the future and the inherent connections between past and future as another way of memorialising the past. (Arias 2015, 125)

For Ursula, history, and particularly her history, is temporary but can be made new again through revival. The protagonist's consciousness is unaware of her unconscious and repetitive timeline and of her possibilities of development in a society and world dominated by uncertainty, but her unconscious is and transmits signals through the body. This discourse of uncertainty makes it possible for Atkinson to exploit overly debated topics in a contemporary manner and through a contemporary character and prototype that tries to navigate the world through the lens of the discourse she is part of: "Ursula still harboured the feeling that some of her future was also behind her but she had learned not to voice such things." (Atkinson 2013, 108) Her story is authentic because it becomes an unrecorded history of progression and evolution, a prototype of metamodernist singularity due to its quality of parallelism between the history of the world and the history of the self.

Atkinson's novel is a novel of connectedness, where history plays the role of the link between timelines. The narrative is formed of gaps that need to be filled in order to counter-balance history's lack of certainty. The contemporary society is void of meaning, which is why the novel has to fill that void, because it is the only instrument left to humanity that can offer a consolation to the status of undeniable worry about the imminent dangers and threats of the world. According to Rosario Arias:

Arguably, Atkinson succeeds in including "futureness" in *Life After Life*, and in so doing, she proposes a future-oriented approach to historicity. In fact, she looks back to the past by proposing alternative futures, in which repressed events are unlocked, thus connecting past, present and future, and activating change. (127)

Historicity in the novel is attained by Atkinson's unconventional take on the World Wars and on the twentieth century, the events of the narrative having no finality because they are always cancelled by the next narrative. This changing nature of narrative can be considered a metamodernist

technique, because it allows for many types of discourses to manifest themselves through the process of writing and to progress in the text just like it progressed throughout history.

The historical aspect of the novel is outlined in another two sections and scenes of the novel that make sense for the metamodern paradigm, which this paper will cover, because they add into the contemporary thinking by the displacement of timeline: thinking the contemporary in modernity. The first relevant scene is when Ursula Todd's first husband, Derek tries to write an official history textbook. Derek is an abusive husband and a scholar at a university and a researcher of history. The episode where he cannot write an official history textbook is important because it is metatextual for it suggests that authentic history is not recordable and it can be subjected to political bias, whereas individual histories are authentic because it is through these singular consciousnesses that the reader is able to access a direct experience with the world. Even though subjectivity is itself a sort of bias, it is not considered one because it is not written on paper, not documented or made official, it is arbitrary. Also, Atkinson through the character of Derek creates a sort of dialectic between fiction and reality by placing the political in relation to the textual: Derek is a patriarchal and violently traditional, which is a reality from both the perspectives of the political world – the twentieth century was threatened by male tyrants and totalitarian rulers like Hitler and Stalin – and the social world, because Ursula was also through this narrative made the prototype of the abused and neglected wife. Atkinson saves Ursula with a fictional death and revival whereas no women had this opportunity, which makes the novel metamodern precisely through this awareness that fiction is privileged and, just like life itself, unjust to some. The second relevant episode of the novel is when, almost at the end, Nigel, Pamela's eldest son, tells Ursula that: "History is all about 'what ifs'" (Atkinson 2013, 253) and summarises the novel's main principle, because the novel itself is a narrative of *what ifs* and of arbitrariness rather than fragmentarity.

## **2.2. Affect and corporeality**

Andre Furlani wrote in 2002 that metamodernist history "is not subordinate to myth but to a web of narratives scored not, as in myth, upon collective consciousness but upon the individual body" (713-714). So, the body in the twenty-first century discourse is one of the only means through which the contemporary can access a direct experience and contact with the society that they live in. This contemporary opinion on the body was borrowed by Vermeulen and van den Akker when formulating metamodernism because only by reinforcing "the corporeality of bodies, of the self in the body and in connection with others" (Gibbons 2017, 129) is the contemporary able to make sense of the world and to actively engage in direct experience with history and with society. The body is individual for metamodernism whereas consciousness is not, because the generational trauma transmitted through post-memory from the previous century determines a distance between narrative and interiority, leaving way for physicality to become the means through which the "structure of feeling" can manifest itself. Consequentially, the discourse of fiction marks the anticipated return of modernist corporeality, making it the means through which fiction is inspired from reality.

The metamodern affect manifests itself in *Life After Life* via the body because Atkinson employs this strategy to impose an imperative of action on the readers of the novel. Aside from the transnational and transtemporal elements – that constitute reminiscences of the postmodernist novel of globalisation – the novel is what Caroline Edwards called a *networked novel* (2019, 7). According to Edwards, the networked novel is a twenty-first narrative of interconnectedness between different spaces and timelines across history and the globe, which culminate into a cluster of narratives that form a new mode of interpretation of the globalised world. These new aesthetical dimensions of the networked novel can “engage with the idea of transmigration” (2019, 7). “Transmigration” is defined as the realistically impossible movement of characters across space and time, such as Virginia Woolf’s biographical work *Orlando* (1928) – where the protagonist lives for 300 years – or David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004) – where the six concentrically structured timelines create a history of the text parallel to the history of the world. In the case of Atkinson’s novel, there are no concomitant distinct timelines, but a multiplicity of variations of the same timeline of a narrative which contains many smaller narratives, spanned over many spaces. This sort of mapping suggests an ambiguity and uncertainty in the outcome of the novel, but creates anticipation and the feeling that there are numerous alternatives to a pre-determined timeline. The aesthetic of the networked novel can be considered as a pillar for the way in which the metamodernist apparatus makes sense for *Life After Life* because, through the novel, Atkinson also creates “distinctly new temporal engagements that move us beyond modernist and postmodernist timeframes.” (Edwards 2019, 6) This oscillation also favours the metamodernist response to literature, because it develops on the idea of continuity and constant progress in terms of understanding time and creating genres that both fit and have the ability to encapsulate the complexity of the world.

In Atkinson’s novel, the aspect of corporeality provides the novel its interconnected status, the body being a network in itself. It is the instrument of change and connection, and it is one of the few instruments through which interconnectedness and intraconnectedness can be realised, because it established links and relations between both the individual and the world and the individual with himself. A repetitive sequence that suggests the importance of the body in the novel is any gesture related to the hand, because these gestures are used in reality to establish connections and to mediate between people, like the shaking of the hand. One of the suggestive scenes for the importance of the body in the novel is when Ursula goes to London to have an abortion at Belgravia. The abortion turns out to be a very complicated and painful procedure, after which the protagonist needs to be hospitalised. In the hospital, where she thinks she will die, her father, Hugh, comes and holds her hand and helps her recover. In a later part of the same chapter, before being killed by Derek in a moment of fury and jealousy, Teddy Todd, her brother, holds her hand. This is a moment when she recalls her corporeal feeling and assimilates it to the moment when she was hospitalised and felt “very cold and tired. She remembered feeling this way in the hospital, after Belgravia. Hugh had been there, he had held on to her hand and kept her in this life.” (Atkinson 2013, 154) This line is relevant for

the metamodern affect, because it is a scene which encapsulates raw and unmediated affect. Hugh is not only grasping Ursula's hand after she has been a victim of abuse and thus having her body and agency rejected for her. Hugh is holding on to something much greater than the body, which is time itself, but a time that is lost and that is so valuable in the twenty-first century. According to Peter Boxall, the understanding of time in the contemporary context of the novel is important because it allows the reader to make sense of a timeline that is unusual for the existing conventions. This contemporary "shifted temporality" is defined as a fluid component of fiction which fluctuates between a movement that is too rapid and one that is too slow. This fluctuation of time is suggestive for the metamodernist perception of its passing in the contemporary context, because it does not allow the reader to assimilate time's own limits, being left with piecing together a tableau of fractures and gaps. The twenty-first century fiction is characterised by a "time that passes in a way that we cannot quite capture, that eludes our narrative grasp" (Boxall, 2013, 9) Boxall's remark is relevant for the timeline of Atkinson's novel in a metamodernist dimension, because the author does not announce her programmatic time representation and the reader is expected to catch up with the displacement of the spatial and temporal frame of the novel.

By supporting his daughter, Hugh also accedes to a prototype of the contemporary, because, due to his being unaware of Ursula's repetitive rebirths, he is simply a supportive father in a time when things like abortions were taboo – which is a rejection of patriarchal domination, because her father provides her with agency and validation to stand up to her rapist, Howie, in the next timeline. Hugh is a father who tries to stretch time and to reach out to Ursula for healing her in a situation of crisis through hand touch, even though he is aware that he can only be a witness to suffering and to the constant challenge of history. This awareness of lack of power against a history that will move on regardless of what it brings about combined with the intention of meaningful connection with the self and the other is what makes this narrative metamodern.

Ursula's life can be considered an alternative manifestation of *postmemory* because she is unaware that she has already experienced history, but her body is the only source that doubles as intuition and that is sensitive of her repetitive timeline. The metamodernist quality of this manifestation of corporeality comes from the fact that her temporalities are so complex and overlapped with each other that the body is the only compass which allows her to navigate the world and her identity amidst the chaos of the British society afflicted by wars. Her body is intuitive because it somatises every decision from her past life that lead to a negative experience with the world that eventually directed her to death. Ursula's "unique form of corporeal memory" (Domínguez García, 4) withstands history and connects her to the contemporary instinct of deflecting crisis and impending doom. In the episode after she pushes Bridget, her maid, down the stairs, she realises that even though her action can be dubbed diabolical or even cruel, a "wicked thing" (70), it was the instinct of the body that made her do it, as she let herself be driven by her own corporeal consciousness.

Ursula crept along the carpet runner. Took a quiet breath and then, both hands out in front of her, as if trying to stop a train, she threw herself at the small of Bridget's back. Bridget whipped her head

round, mouth and eyes wide in horror at the sight of Ursula. Bridget went flying, toppling down the stairs in a great flurry of arms and legs. Ursula only just managed to stop herself from following in her wake. (...) Bridget might have died and she would have been a murderer now. All she knew was that she *had* to do it. The great sense of dread had come over her and she had to do it. (Atkinson 2013, 70)

This constant reliance on the corporeal suggests that her identity is no longer just enclosed in her consciousness, because even though subjectivity returns in the third millennium to offer a solution to the crisis of ideology that the world finds itself in, it cannot formulate a stable literary aesthetic without something material that would make it belong to the contemporary era. It is interdependent and thoroughly implanted in her body, in the physicality that allowed her to operate her place and status in a world of uncertainty. This instinct is suggested by Atkinson in the narrative, as well, but it is a feeling, an affect which cannot be encapsulated in words. Even though the highly experimental Woolfian or Joycean stream of consciousness is no longer a strategy of portraying the mind and the self, it heavily influenced Atkinson's discourse of self. The way she engages in the description of interiority is unique, reorganising the discourse mimetically in order to make sense to the reader who rejects instability and disorder because these are the only things that the world seems to be able to provide.

Ursula's personal identity is linked with the identity of the world in the twentieth century, and the novel is not only a representation of the European society in the age of the wars and afterwards, but a recording of a parallelism between the concrete, factual and sometimes misleading history of the world and the historicity that is achieved through a discourse that is "a constant movement towards her survival, towards self-realisation, but with most of them ending in annihilation" (Norquay, 126). Atkinson's novel is metamodernist because it demystifies the rationality that textbooks and totalitarian approaches to history try to impose and implement in the world and because she replaces them with original and authentic narratives that are able to connect the world of today to the world of the past through affect and memory.

## **Conclusion**

Metamodernism is an emerging theory that culminates in the contemporary era in its undeniable quality of presentness and by offering the reader a new paradigm through whose lenses the contemporary can make sense of the society and digitally oriented world the reader lives in. Through the research of history and reconstructing authentic discourses that manage to encapsulate the complexity of the 2000s, metamodernism is a reconfiguration of two modes of thinking and perceiving the world simultaneously: modernism and postmodernism. This emerging theory selects the postmodernist irony and transposes it into a new form, that of postirony. Metamodernism combines this postironic element with the modernist subjective consciousness and subverts it to affect, underlining the emotional awareness of society. From a literary standpoint, metamodernism proposes that the novel is a complex instrument of change. The contemporary readers have the capacity to reach full awareness only through serious research of their individuality. Kate Atkinson's

*Life After Life* can be considered a metamodernist novel because through these innovations in theory, it can be multifaceted. Through the historical postmemorialistic content, heavily researched by the author and subverted to affect, which is manifested through the corporeal and the body as a physical manifestation of timeline and alternative history, the novel succumbs to presentness and to what it means to be contemporary.

### Endnotes:

1. “[...] mise en question radicale de la littérature comme institution.”
2. “[...] ces ‘retours’ ne sont pas des régressions, et l’histoire de la littérature n’est pas cyclique. Les auteurs contemporains intègrent l’esprit critique et le sens ludique des décennies qui précèdent.”

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