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## Shaping Metamodernism

# THE ASIAN AMERICAN FILM *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE*, NORM MACDONALD'S COMEDY, AND THE METAMODERN MOMENT

### ABSTRACT

Metamodernism, as described by Vermeulen and van den Akker, is a “structure of feeling” that describes the contemporary cultural moment. They view metamodernism as a neo-Romantic “structure of feeling” that oscillates between modernity and postmodernity. This is exemplified in contemporary works like the 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, and in the stand-up comedy of Norm Macdonald. Both works share a commitment to an ethics of care, invoking acts of necessity through messages urging kindness and love, and contribute to our understanding of the metamodern “structure of feeling” by advocating and embodying these sentiments.



## KEYWORDS

Metamodern, Norm Macdonald, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, Ethics of Care

While postmodern cynicism and irony were certainly in vogue for much of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, seminal artistic works like *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, represent a shift in contemporary art from postmodern irony to “ironic sincerity” and “sincere irony.” At this time, a quarter way into the twenty-first century, the contemporary “structure of feeling” appears to oscillate between both postmodern irony, cynicism, and irrationality, on the one hand, and modern sincerity, grand narratives, and rationality on the other (“Notes on Metamodernism 2010”). Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker define this inchoate and newfound understanding of post-postmodernity as “Metamodernity,” a neo-Romantic artistic ethos, or as they describe it a “structure of feeling” that oscillates between the modern and the postmodern (Ibid). While *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (EEAAO) is now becoming popularly recognized as a work of metamodern cinema, a less popularly explored medium in reference to metamodernity is that of standup comedy. By comparing the film EEAAO to Norm MacDonald’s two latest standup comedies, *Hitler’s Dog, Gossip & Trickery* (2017) and *Nothing Special* (2022), it can be seen that Macdonald’s comedy in many ways more aptly represents the metamodern than that of the cultural phenomenon that is EEAAO. This is both due to Macdonald’s style and rhetoric as well as the research-creational form of standup comedy in which his works operate. While working in vastly different forms and having considerable tonal differences, EEAAO and Macdonald’s standup, to varying degrees of success, embody metamodernism, oscillating between and simultaneo-

usly occupying the ironic and sincere. Both in terms of methodology and scope these works are also deeply research-creational in that they are instances of practice-led research and innovative inquiries into an emergent artistic structure of feeling.

### **1. Understanding Research-creation and Metamodernism**

Research-creation and Metamodernism are two relatively recent terminologies used to refer to a number of theories, methodologies, and practices both within and outside of academia. While neither term is conducive to any absolute definition, I will provide the understandings of these terminologies which this essay employs. The term “research-creation” refers broadly to methods of research that involve artistic practice as a form of research. Natalie Loveless, in her book *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* offers the explanation: “Research-creation is a geographically specific term that works in tandem with alternatives such as practice-based research, practice-led research, research-based practice, research-led practice, creative-praxis, arts-driven inquiry, arts-based research, and, increasingly, artistic research (2019, 4).

As Loveless explains, the term “research-creation” is used to broadly define a number of means of production that involve research and practice in an academic and/or artistic context. The term’s usage is often confined to an academic setting, but there is no good reason that it must remain there. Many scholars and artists alike produce their work through processes that integrally involve both research and creation. If research-creation can generally be understood as the scholar adopting an artistic praxis, it can also be understood as the artist adopting a scholarly praxis.



Metamodernism, in the context of cultural studies, is also an emergent terminology; it conceptualizes the contemporary moment as characterized by an oscillation between modernism and postmodernism, notably oscillating between modern sincerity and grand narratives, and postmodern cynicism and irony to create a “metamodernity” operating as “both-neither” modern and/nor postmodern (“Notes on Metamodernism” 2010). The term “Metamodern” holds many different meanings and definitions in various regions and contexts, but this essay works with the understanding of the term illustrated in the essays of Vermeulen and van den Akker.

In the context of cultural theory, the most popularly cited definition of Metamodernism comes from Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s 2010 essay “Notes on Metamodernism.” In this essay they describe metamodernism as that which “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” (2010, 5–6). They are very clear in their 2015 essay, “Misunderstandings and Clarifications,” which is largely in response to their 2010 essay, that they do not understand metamodernism as a movement or philosophy, but instead a “structure of feeling” that represents the contemporary moment. They use Raymond Williams’ definition of a “structure of feeling” as being “a particular quality of social experience . . . historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period” (*Metamodernism* 2017, 8). Vermeulen and van den Akker explicitly state that as cultural theorists their goal is “to be descriptive rather than prescriptive,” in that they are only interested in describing what they deem the contemporary structure of feeling, rather



than remarking on whether its implications are positive or negative (“Misunderstandings and Clarifications” 2015).

Vermeulen and van den Akker do not offer concrete definitions for the constantly shifting signifiers of “modernism” and “postmodernism” with which they are working, but they do sketch a broad image of the former as encompassing grand narratives, optimism, and sincerity, and the latter encompassing plurality, nihilism, and irony. They say about the two movements:

[T]he initial heralds of postmodernity, broadly considered to be Charles Jencks, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, and Ihab Hassan, each analyzed a different cultural phenomenon—respectively, a transformation in our material landscape; a distrust and the consequent desertion of meta-narratives; the emergence of late capitalism, the fading of historicism, and the waning of affect; and a new regime in the arts. However, what these distinct phenomena share is an opposition to “the” modern—to utopism, to (linear) progress, to grand narratives, to Reason, to functionalism and formal purism, and so on. These positions can most appropriately be summarized, perhaps, by Jos de Mul’s distinction between postmodern irony (encompassing nihilism, sarcasm, and the distrust and deconstruction of grand narratives, the singular and the truth) and modern enthusiasm (encompassing everything from utopism to the unconditional belief in Reason). (“Notes on Metamodernism” 2010, 4).

For Vermeulen and van den Akker, postmodernism and modernism are largely grounded in these broad definitions, which they argue, in the

contemporary moment are often oscillated between and create what they call a “metamodernity.”

Because Metamodernism is still an inchoate idea that is currently being redefined by new and innovative contemporary artworks, all instances of meta-modernism, insofar as they serve to define and redefine the metamodern through creation, are necessarily acts of research-creation. In fact, this emergent hopefully cynical and ironically sincere structure of feeling requires research-creation for the metamodern to at all be considered as defining the contemporary moment. This essay seeks to show how *Everything Everywhere All at Once* and the comedy specials of Norm Macdonald variously exhibit the metamodern, and how their research-creational nature itself shapes our understanding of metamodernism; or, in other words, how these works contribute to understanding the contemporary era’s “structure of feeling.”

## **2. *Everything Everywhere* as a Classic Example of Meta-modernism**

Undoubtedly, the recent artwork which has been most critically ascribed as metamodern is *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, the 2022 Asian American film starring Michelle Yeoh and directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert. EEAAO is both an absurdist and sincere comedic action-adventure-drama, which is in many ways considered a characteristic example of metamodernism in both its structure and values. The film follows Evelyn and Waymond, a Chinese-American couple who own a laundromat in Los Angeles, and their second-generation daughter, Joy, who feels increasingly alienated from her dispassionate and traditionalist mother. In many ways the film resonates with Anne Anlin Cheng’s formulation that “To be an immigrant is to live



in a fractured multiverse, one riven with geographic, temporal and psychical dissonances” (2022).

*Everything Everywhere All at Once* is a deeply Asian American film. At the outset, the film’s multiverse-centric plot seems to invoke ideas of the postmodern: chaos, randomness, entropy, and as Cheng argues, a characteristic example of “Asian-pessimism” (2022). She argues that, in a manner akin to Afro-pessimism, “Evelyn experiences an intergalactic version of what it means to have a target on your back, as she is pursued not only by social forces but also by Asian-pessimism itself,” in the form of her daughter Joy, the film’s main antagonist (2022).

However, despite what might first appear as the makings of a postmodern setting and outlook, the film repeatedly and explicitly exhibits what can aptly be described as a modern sincerity and hopefulness. In doing so, it questions the naiveté of such sensibilities in the face of an absurd reality. It is this philosophical struggle between the sincere and the ironic, the nihilistic and the optimistic that characterizes the metamodern. However, Corberdt suggests that Vermeulen and van den Akker’s use of the word “oscillation” to describe this shift is not appropriate in the case of this film; he argues this terminology leads readers to imagine a “‘Pendulum’ [which] evokes images of a slow, rhythmic back-and-forth, whereas, given the individual cultural product that movement may be more radical, speedy and arrhythmic—as is the case with *Everything Everywhere All at Once*” (2023, 3). Given the fractured, fast-paced, and volatile nature of EEAAO’s diegesis, the word “oscillation” does not always seem appropriate. Vermeulen and van den Akker themselves refer to metamodernism as operating in relation to modernism and postmodernism “as a ‘both-neither’ dynamic” (2023, 6). So, while at times these two poles are oscillated between, at others they are simultaneous extant, and at still others their relationship—or



presence at all—becomes ambiguous. For the most part, EEAAO skillfully exhibits this counterplay, oscillating between and at times simultaneous inhabiting both postmodern irony and modern sincerity. Daniel Kwan, one of the co-creators and directors of the film states that from the outset it was their goal to create a metamodern film; he says in an interview, “that’s the version of post-postmodernism that we’re hunting for—that metamodernism” (Puchko, “How ‘Everything Everywhere All at Once’ is a Love Letter to Moms” 2022). This hunt, and potentially successful venture into the metamodern is also what makes this film characteristically research-creational; its goal is to, via artistic practice, create a work which investigates the “post-postmodern” moment by creating within that context. The explicit intentionality of EEAAO’s filmmakers in creating a metamodern film, and its consequent reception as such, shows this work to be both metamodern and research-creational.

The fact that EEAAO is so heavily influenced by multiverse theory, both in its plot and philosophical underpinning, can be described as a metamodern phenomenon. In the contemporary era, multiverse theory is both a popular scientific theory and an often-used plot device in film, literature, and other media. In short, it is the theory that our universe is merely one of an infinitude of parallel universes—and therefore parallel realities—existing within or outside our own universe. The logic of multiverse theory necessitates that anything that can happen does happen in at least one of the infinite parallel universes. This is a notion that EEAAO makes evident in the variously poignant and humorous universes it depicts; to name a few: a universe in which Evelyn and Joy are rocks with plastic googly eyes; a universe in which Evelyn is an actress, playing a role that is actually a reality in another universe; and a universe in which everyone has hotdogs for fingers. In the realm of art,





multiverse theory is characteristic of the metamodern in its investment in, to crudely simplify, the rational or scientific, and the artistic or irrational. In the realm of science, multiverse theory can similarly be seen as metamodern. While multiverse theory is certainly a topical and currently tractable scientific theory, it is far from being universally accepted in the scientific community. Many scientists argue that the theory is inherently unverifiable, due to the inability of the theory to view the entirety of our own universe, let alone observe universes that exist outside of ours (Chan 2023, 1-2). This is itself a kind of metamodernistic outlook, the idea of belief in a greater multiverse while also acknowledging its unknowability. The scientific deals with the knowable or verifiable and philosophical deals with the unknowable, the arguable and the interpretable. It is in this seemingly contradictory arena that multiverse theory and, on a wider scale, metamodernism operates.

In *EEAAO*, multiverse theory variously inspires feelings of postmodern existentialism and modern optimism. In the second act, the film's conflicted antagonist, Jobu Tupaki/Joy, says to her mother Evelyn that after having lived in every possible universe she has learned a single truth: "Nothing Matters" (2022, 1:01:00-1:01:23). This is of course a very loaded statement. What does matter mean? In reference to whom? Merriam-Webster defines the verb form of matter as "to be of importance: signify." The very statement "nothing matters" is signifying a linguistic communication from one person to another. If nothing mattered, and Jobu truly believed this, conveying this to her mother would of course be redundant. At the very least her nihilistic beliefs paradoxically matter enough to her that she feels she must convey them to her mother. Jobu says herself that the reason she brought her mother into the multiverse with her is because she was "looking for someone who could see what I see ... feel what I feel" (2022, 1:34:50-

1:35:01). Therefore, if nothing else, her mother matters to her, and so too does her mother's empathy and understanding. This is a perfect example of how the film initially positions itself as ostensibly postmodern, only to lend itself to notions of modern sincerity soon thereafter.



Figure 1. Image from *Everything Everywhere All at Once* depicting Jobu (left) and Evelyn (right) looking at “the everything bagel,” a bagel which encapsulates the entire multiverse. Source: A24. [https://www.primevideo.com/detail/oOGS49QMOKJSEBRYHCDSWSP8MQ/ref=atv\\_sr\\_file\\_c\\_Tn74RA\\_1\\_1\\_1?sr=1-1&pageTypeIdSource=ASIN&pageTypeId=BoB8K3S53N&qid=1717989594663](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/oOGS49QMOKJSEBRYHCDSWSP8MQ/ref=atv_sr_file_c_Tn74RA_1_1_1?sr=1-1&pageTypeIdSource=ASIN&pageTypeId=BoB8K3S53N&qid=1717989594663)

In the third act of the film, the oscillation into modern sincerity becomes much more overt. It is at this point that the character Waymond, Jobu's father and Evelyn's husband, after quietly acquiescing to Evelyn's condescension towards him for most of the film, feels that he must convey to her that she has no reason to condescend. In a universe in which he is a successful businessman, he says to her, “When I choose to see the good side of things, I'm not being naive. It is strategic and necessary. It's how I've learned to survive through everything” (2022, 1:45:55-1:46:11). This moment is then audibly overlaid over a scene showing the main universe, in which Waymond is a bumbling and effervescent laundromat owner, who says “I'm confused too ... The only

thing I do know is we have to be kind. Please. Be kind. Especially when we don't know what's going on" (2022, 1:46:11-1:46:37). To "know" anything with certainty to is risk being condemned as naïve. Moreover, the idea that kindness can fix anything substantive in our absurd reality would certainly be treated with a great degree of skepticism by any postmodernist. But it is this fear of venturing into naivety that leaves postmodernism directionless. The notion that people can strive to be kind in an otherwise absurd reality presents a modern hopefulness and direction in direct response to postmodern cynicism. These two forces serve to create a metamodern outlook, depicted as "a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism" ("Notes on Metamodernism" 2010, 5). The self-contradictory nature of metamodernism is the foundation of its coherency. We live in a world full of contradictions, and the metamodernist structure of feeling acknowledges both rationality and irrationality as necessary and complementary in understanding the contemporary moment.



Figure 2. Image from *Everything Everywhere All at Once* depicting Waymond (right) and Evelyn (left) in the scene in which Waymond declares "we must be kind." Source: A24.

[https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0OGS49QMOKJSEBRYHCDSWSP8MQ/ref=atv\\_sr\\_fle\\_c\\_Tn74RA\\_1\\_1\\_1?sr=1-1&pageTypeIdSource=ASIN&pageTypeId=B0B8K3S53N&qid=1717989594663](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0OGS49QMOKJSEBRYHCDSWSP8MQ/ref=atv_sr_fle_c_Tn74RA_1_1_1?sr=1-1&pageTypeIdSource=ASIN&pageTypeId=B0B8K3S53N&qid=1717989594663)



This notion that kindness should be a guiding philosophical light in people's lives certainly raises the question, what is kindness? The adjective "kind" is derived from Middle English "kinde," and from Old English "cynd," meaning "affectionate" or "loving" (Merriam-Webster). This understanding of kindness as an act of affection or love can be usefully elucidated by looking at the writing of Simone Weil, who argues that love is an act of obligation. For Weil, love, affection, and kindness are all acts of obligation; she writes that "we should do only those righteous actions which we cannot stop ourselves from doing, which we are unable not to do, but, through well directed attention, we should always keep on increasing the number of those which we are unable not to do" (Weil 2023, 44). For Weil, acts of kindness, or love and affection, are at their most basic levels, acts of "well directed" attention. From this it can be derived that love and kindness are dependent upon the attention we pay to all things but especially to others. Her writing on time is also very useful in understanding a metamodern conception of spacetime:

The past and the future hinder the wholesome effect of affliction by providing an unlimited field for imaginary elevation. That is why the renunciation of past and future is the first of all renunciations. The present does not attain finality. Nor does the future, for it is only what will be present. We do not know this, however. If we apply to the present the point of that desire within us which corresponds to finality, it pierces right through to the eternal (Weil 2023, 19-20).

While Weil's writing may appear somewhat heady for the purposes of this essay, her argument serves to illustrate a key element of



metamodernity; this being that given contemporary media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and other streaming services which allow instant access to every part of the world at once, succumbing to this fractured and discordant attention economy can cause a person to exist in a kind of half-life. With mass media disrupting and dividing attention, and other acts of love and kindness, it is only when acknowledging the inevitably strange and fractal absurdity of life that moments of sincerity may arise. This represents the metamodern oscillation between irony and sincerity: for sincerity to arise, irony must precede it. Weil's prescription that people should "apply to the present the point of that desire within us which corresponds to finality" is also of particular pertinence to the purposes of this essay; "desire," in this context being akin to eros, the erotic form of love which Loveless argues to be the passionate force that drives research-creation projects; and as Vermeulen and van den Akker explicitly state in their essay, "Metamodern irony is intrinsically bound to desire" ("Notes on Metamodernism" 2010, 10). This notion of "desire" connects the structures of feeling, ethics of care, and motivations respectively laid out by Vermeulen and van den Akker, Weil, and Loveless.

To return to the metamodernity of EEAAO as a "work of desire," this ascription becomes circumspect under closer analysis. While Corbett, Flight, and, implicitly, Cheng, argue the film to be more or less a paragon of metamodern art, I argue that while it certainly presents many metamodern elements, the film verges on the quixotic by not striking a careful enough balance between postmodern irony and modern sincerity. Cheng claims that "the conclusion of EEAAO suggests that the solution to Asian-pessimism is neither reactive violence nor exactly hope, but something in between," but I am not convinced that is necessarily true. Metamodern art is that which exhibits a both-neither dynamic, at times



plunging into the depths of postmodern nihilism and absurdism, and at others becoming naïvely elevated to the unrealistic ideals of modern grand narratives. The both-neither dynamic of metamodernism denotes that these two notions paradoxically coexist and therefore neither exists. Despite its ostensibly postmodern premise, EEAAO appears to lean more strongly into the camp of modern sincerity and idealism. This film is undoubtedly a tremendously useful example when speaking about metamodernism due, among many things, to all the metamodern and hypermodern tools it uses to construct its sprawling narrative, but one scene in particular provokes doubt as to its being characteristically “metamodern.” In a scene wherein Evelyn voices her doubts as to the notion that, across the infinite multiverse, her instantiation of “Evelyn” is in fact ‘the chosen one’ whom Alpha Waymond is seeking; he reassures her by saying, “I’ve seen thousands of Evelyns, but never a Evelyn like you. You have so many goals you never finished. Dreams you never followed. You are living your worst you” (2022, 1:03:35-1:03:48). The Evelyn of whom he is speaking seems by all accounts to be in a poor position: on the verge of bankruptcy, recently served divorce papers by her husband, and struggling to communicate with her millennial daughter. Nothing about her life seems particularly good, but the notion that she is ‘living the worst her’ seems dishonest in a world in which human life can and does express itself in far more abject ways than can be seen in Evelyn’s life. Genocide and crimes against humanity are characteristic of human history, and so to claim that Evelyn is living her worst life in a somewhat lackluster state is also to not engage honestly with the postmodern absurdism and existentialism that multiverse theory lends itself to. Of course, for the purposes of EEAAO’s narrative, veering too far into true human evil and abject suffering would have been tonally inappropriate, and likely only disruptive to the larger frame of



the story, but it does make the film's postmodern sentiments seem only token gestures which were never seriously considered, and merely serve as plot devices. This being said, the story EEAAO tells is a nuanced one, and it has clearly resonated with many people, as can be seen in its rave critical reviews, awards, and massive box office success. So to say that EEAAO is not a paragon of metamodernism is by no means a judgment on the quality of the film, but a critique as to how well it fits into metamodernism's specifically defined structure of feeling.

### **3. The Absurdity and Sincerity of Norm Macdonald's Standup Comedy**

What I argue to be more fitting exemplars of metamodern research-creation are Norm Macdonald's two most recent standup comedy specials. What may seem an oblique comparison from the outset, that of film to standup comedy, under examination presents far more formal similarities than is at first apparent. Like EEAAO, Macdonald's work can be understood as research-creational, both in terms of methodology and in its contribution to the field of metamodernism. If anything fits the criteria of research-creation it is standup comedy. Standup comedy requires comics to *create* material and intensively *research* its funniness by repeatedly performing and editing that material in front of a live audience. For the standup comedian, the relationship between research and creation is largely indivisible. In the case of 'big name' comedians, this research-creation process is usually conducted with the end goal in mind of creating a 'standup special.' A standup special is typically the culmination of months or years of honing an act until it is in a sufficiently presentable state to be recorded. It is usually recorded in an audio-video format, with extra care taken to produce and shoot this performance. Both Macdonald's standup specials and EEAAO were



initially performed or shown in theatres, before shifting to a video-on-demand platform, but while Macdonald's special began as a piece of performance media, its adaptation into an audio-visual recording makes its viewing experience more closely resemble watching a film than that of being a live audience member, as both standup specials and movies are typically conveyed in an audio-visual medium. There are of course many differences in how these two artforms are received. Standup typically relies more heavily on the auditory component of its performance, while movies typically afford more weight to the visual. In the case of EEAAO, the visual and auditory components of the film are critical to conveying their narrative; in the case of Macdonald's standup, the visual aspect is significant, but not absolutely necessary to convey his humor and narrative arc. It is useful in this context to look at Linda Hutchinson's differentiation between 'telling' and 'showing' as distinct modes of storytelling and engagement with an artwork:

A shown dramatization cannot approximate the complicated verbal play of told poetry or the interlinking of description, narration, and explanation that is so easy for prose narrative to accomplish. Telling a story in words, either orally or on paper, is never the same as showing it visually and aurally in any of the many performance media available (2006, 23).

In this sense, standup seems to borrow from oral storytelling as well as performance, as both modes are critical to the success of a comic. For a standup special, the comic's role is to perform an intensively honed comedic act, usually practiced hundreds of times beforehand. This is both an act of telling and an act of performance. While material is an integral component of a comedian's act, the delivery of that material is





what is most imperative. A comic may be able to hold an audience's attention with poor jokes if they have a winning charisma or a commanding stage presence, but that same comic will rarely be able to hold that audience's attention if the inverse is true. In the case of a standup special, a comic's job is typically to perform a painstakingly choreographed performance for an audience, but this by no means suggests that they are merely a static entity relating jokes on stage; instead, they are engaging in a rhythmic interplay between themselves and the audience, feeding off their laughter, and building their jokes around the ebbs and flows of energy in the room. It is for this reason that it is said a good comic is an expert at "working a room," rather than just performing in front of a room. While an audience member at one of the live performances of Macdonald's specials would have been engaged in a tangible dialogic relationship with the performer, primarily using laughter and inversely silence to communicate with them, in the case of the directed and edited Netflix specials of Macdonald's comedy, that relationship between audience and performer becomes intangible. But what is gained by this adaptation is a tightly shot, directed, and edited depiction of a standup special. In Macdonald's 2017 special, *Hitler's Dog, Gossip & Trickery*, together these formal tools work to narrativize an almost caricatured image of Macdonald. The cinematography is stark and understated, seamlessly alternating between wide angle shots of him dressed in a suit and tie, standing with his microphone in front of a brick façade, his broad and slightly hunched shoulders looking a little silly and unbecoming crammed into his jacket, and close up shots of his crinkled eyes, which show a subtle childish glee. These tools importantly control the narrative of his special in a manner that tightly orchestrates a static representation of Macdonald's performance, much like as in a film.



Figure 3. Still image of Norm Macdonald performing his special *Hitler's Dog*. Source: Netflix.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80134780?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2C2%2C119e736a-2e14-4c85-b715-dc1b3aa91130-125097009%2C119e736a-2e14-4c85-b715-dc1b3aa91130-125097009%7C2%2Cunknown%2C%2C%2CtitlesResults%2C80134780%2CVideo%3A80134780%2CminiDpPlayButton>

Macdonald's comedy can be characterized as long-winded, meandering, and typically absurd. His material is deeply ironic, but also often deeply sincere, dealing with topics of which Macdonald is personally deeply invested. It is this framework of ironic sincerity that Macdonald works under when creating his standup specials, and other creative works. Along with having been a prolific standup comedian, Macdonald published a novelized memoir titled *Based on a True Story*, which much like his standup, is absurd, ironic, and also deeply sincere. In a 2017 interview with Larry King, about his book Macdonald says, "It's not facts, but it's truth if that makes any sense," to which King promptly responds, "No" ("Gambling, Trump, Seinfeld, and Leno" 2018, 3:15-3:23). In that same interview Macdonald relates that his standup is similarly invested with his personal conceptions of "truth," saying, "I don't feel I have anything to say ... I guess my overall feeling is life is sort



of absurd ... You know who changed me in standup is Sam Kinison ... [he] told me you can talk about anything you want ... so my entire standup set will just be about one thing. I did a special and it was all about death” (“Gambling, Trump, Seinfeld, and Leno” 2018, 4:49-5:49). It’s unclear to which standup special Macdonald is referring because all his later specials appear to prominently feature death as a theme. A topic relevant to all living people, it makes particular sense that Macdonald would “want” to build his acts around it, because at this time he had secretly been suffering from cancer for years.

This personal approach to his standup comedy allows him to seriously engage with topics of sincerity, while also heavily investing his act in the utterly absurd. In his 2017 special *Hitler’s Dog, Gossip & Trickery*, Macdonald speaks at length about the concept of autoerotic asphyxiation, and the shame it would cause someone to be found dead from such an act: “you don’t want your son walking in, going, ‘Ah! What the fuck? What the fuck is Dad... What kind of... Huh?’ And that’s how you’ll be remembered forever, you know” (2017, 14:25-14:40). This macabre joke, is framed in such a way that shame and remembrance are related to a father-son dynamic, which is likely due to the fact that Macdonald himself has a son. Macdonald then transitions into reflecting upon the way in which sons remember their fathers more generally. He speaks long-windedly about a hypothetical son, whose father’s life is characterized by acts of care for his son: standing in line to get Mickey Mouse’s autograph at Disneyworld; working two jobs; and one late night coming into his son’s room to kiss him on the forehead and whisper “I love you” while he slept (2017, 14:50-16:25). Macdonald foregrounds this story with seeming sincerity, depicting the father figure as an unsung modern-day hero, whose one noble goal in life is to show his son love. With all this established, Macdonald abruptly cuts himself off



midsentence to say, “Anyways, they don’t remember that all. All they remember is AH!” At this point Macdonald pantomimes simultaneously masturbating and hanging himself (2017, 16:25-16:28). This sudden and crude punchline to an otherwise poignant story about a father’s love for his son shows an oscillation between the ironic and sincere which goes full swing in either direction. This punchline is at once humorous and sobering, and the winding path that leads to it is variously deeply ironic and sincere, so when the punchline finally does come, distinguishing between the two becomes a moot effort. Unlike in EEAAO, where irony seems to be a narrative tool used to promote a message of sincerity, Macdonald’s comedy stridently oscillates between the ironic and sincere. He does not use irony as a means to evoke sincerity, but instead gives both irony and sincerity narrative credence. To illustrate this further, near the end of this same special, he begins to take on a grave tone and says:

Nothing I have said, really, is of substance ... Like, most of my act is just, you know ... gossip and trickery. Like some cheap magician, you know? So, I’ll tell you the only thing I know for a fact, and it’s something that we all know. Everybody knows it, but it’s hard to act on it. But the only really true thing is that... we all must love each other. And it’s very difficult, you know? It’s very, very hard (*Hitler’s Dog, Gossip & Trickery* 2017, 54:50-55:37).

There are few comedians who would, at the risk of sounding mawkish, state something so unabashedly sincere on stage. This injunction that “we all must love each other” is not something Macdonald employs to an ironic end. While there is plenty of irony in his act, it is relational to his sincerity, he does not use it to renege on the notion that we “must love



each other,” but instead to build on it. The metamodernity of this message lies in the fact that Macdonald employed both the ironic and sincere to arrive at it.

In their essay “The Joke That Wasn’t Funny Anymore: Reflections on the Metamodern Sitcom,” Rustad and Schwind, writing in 2017, contend that “mediatised forms of humour now seem to be more interested in ‘laughing with’ rather than ‘laughing at’ the butt of the joke” (2017, 131). This notion of ‘laughing with’ bears importantly on the “meta” prefix of metamodernism, a word to which Vermeulen and van den Akker attribute the Greek meanings “with or among, between, and after” (*Metamodernism* 2017, 8). Macdonald explicitly establishes this notion of “laughing with” rather than “laughing at” by his frequent use of the pronoun “we” as in “we must love each other.” This “with or among” understanding of metamodernism also means that it exists “with or among older and newer structures of feeling” (*Metamodernism* 2017, 8), a notion that Macdonald exhibits in his act through its variously postmodern and modern premises and conclusions. What he calls “gossip and trickery” is in fact an integral component of his act. By establishing an absurd and ridiculous reality he wins the audience’s trust, proving that he is not merely standing on a soap box, but instead positioning himself with, above, and below the audience. As Vermeulen and van den Akker say of metamodernism: “like a donkey it chases a carrot that it never manages to eat because the carrot is always just beyond its reach. But precisely because it never manages to eat the carrot, it never ends its chase” (“Notes on Metamodernism” 2017, 5). The donkey metaphor is particularly apt in the case of Macdonald, because for him he must make one of himself in order to convey what he deems a fundamental truth; a truth of which he himself says, “Everybody knows it, but it’s hard to act on it.” This notion of striving



towards a universal truth which is ultimately unrealizable is a fundamental characteristic of metamodernism. As Vermeulen and van den Akker put it, “that is the ‘destiny’ of the metamodern wo/man: to pursue a horizon that is forever receding” (“Notes on Metamodernism” 2017, 12). Macdonald’s comedy is fundamentally horizontal, broaching on messages of sincerity by meandering towards them in often convoluted and bizarre ways. In his act, he seldomly explicitly states sincere messages such as “we must love one another,” but his variously sarcastic and heartfelt rhetoric leads the reader to such a message, so it is unsurprising when it arrives.

In 2021, a little more than a year prior to his death from cancer, in what would be his final comedy special, Macdonald’s rhetoric becomes even more evidently sincere in its messaging, all the while maintaining its deep-seated irony (Edgers 2022). In the eerie posthumously released “Norm Macdonald: Nothing Special,” MacDonald performs his standup material in his assistant’s apartment, staring directly into the camera, with his sole audience member being his assistant. The closing bit of this special takes on a similar note of love and sincerity to that of its predecessor, all the while oscillating back and forth into irony:

One time I’m with this guy, we’re having dinner, and I take a glass of milk. I’m drinking the milk. The guy says, “Hey! You know why you’re drinking that milk, Norm?” I go, “No, why?” I know something’s coming. He goes, “That’s because you miss sucking on your mother’s breast.” And I’m like, “Ah!” “What did you have to say that for?” ... I remember growing up with my mother. She’d be cooking, she’d be in the kitchen. “Do you have enough gravy? Oh! There’s some more turkey. Oh, the turnips! The turnips!” She’d get the turnips out. Then I’d go, “Ma, you got



enough to eat?” She’d go, “Oh, yes.” But she’d just be eating what was left from us. ... I love my mother, you know. She lives right beside me here. She’s great. I don’t think my mother has ever spoken a word that had any irony in it. You know what I mean? She’s just earnest, she’s just happy. She knows how to love, she doesn’t judge ... She’ll go sometimes to the grocery store and come back—the other day she did this. She’d come back, she’d say, “A funny thing happened at the grocery store.” I said, “What happened, Mom?” She said, “A woman came in and bought a grapefruit and it cost \$1.69 and last week it cost \$1.19.” And I said, “Well that’s not a story, let alone a funny story. I don’t even think that would be considered a story.” Anyways, my point is that I would trade my... I don’t know what my point is, really. Oh, yeah! I know! I don’t want to suck her tits! That’s what my point was. Maybe that makes me shallow. I don’t know. Stay safe, folks. I love you (2022, 51:16–54:15).

I chose to include this closing bit largely unredacted because it shows the how the discursiveness of Macdonald’s rhetoric is essential to conveying the absurdity and sincerity of his comedy. But despite its apparent discursiveness, Macdonald’s style of narration is deceptively careful, appearing at times to meander into a tangent, only to then lead into a humorous moment: irony, genuine sincerity, or both at the same time. It is this intrinsic relationship between the ironic and the sincere that makes Macdonald’s rhetoric both funny and endearing. In the passage above, he relates a common mother figure whose seemingly trivial comments momentarily belie her deep maternal love and the sacrifices she made in raising Macdonald. But all this sincere foregrounding leads to the obscene punchline: “I don’t want to suck her tits!” This punchline



does not negate the sincerity of his previous statements but rather emboldens it. His comedy is not built on a foundation of nihilism that covets a laugh at any cost, but sincere and absurd rhetoric that uses both to convey its metamodern irony.

Similarly, the rhetoric of EEAAO closely ties absurdity and irony to sincerity, much like in Macdonald's comedy, wherein, gossip and trickery segue into injunctions to love. Cheng argues that

There's a kind of hot-dog philosophy here, an insistence on quirkiness as a stay against the claustrophobia of pessimism ... All the zany, distasteful, irreverent and at times scatological excursions dramatize the multiplicity and fragility of Evelyn's daily life. Being able to parse and command all these worlds and modes seems a basic requirement for Asian American survival.

She also, in a sense, is saying that an acceptance of metamodern sensibilities, of coexisting with quirkiness and pessimism, silliness and depravity, is imperative to existing as an Asian American. And while this certainly appears to be the case, these sensibilities also seem necessary for existence more broadly.

In a scene in the third act of the film, Evelyn and Joy, both incarnated as rocks, and aware of the absurdity of this, begin to laugh; they laugh about feeling stupid, being rocks, and the inundating absurdity of life. It seems that at this moment irony and sincerity collide. Until this point, Evelyn and Joy seem to have been so overwhelmed by the reality of literally being everything everywhere all at once, that the notion of peace appeared impossible. But in this moment, with the reality of ubiquity and omnipotence weighing down on them, the only



sensible thing they can think to do is laugh, and this seems to empower them:

JOBU ROCK: And then we find out that the Earth is revolving around the Sun, which is just one sun out of a trillion suns, and now look at us: trying to deal with the fact that all of that exists in one universe out of who knows how many. Every new discovery, is just a reminder—

EVELYN ROCK: We're all small and stupid.

JOBU ROCK: Who knows what great new discovery is coming next to make us feel like even smaller pieces of shit.

EVELYN ROCK: Language.

JOBU ROCK: Seriously?

EVELYN ROCK: I'm joking. That was a joke (laughing). A big fucking joke (2022, 1:41:14-1:41:54).

This scene has no audio, and the dialogue is conveyed via subtitles, yet the feeling it provokes is profound: both melancholic and heartwarming.



Figure 4. Image from *Everything Everywhere All at Once* depicting Jobu (left) and Evelyn (right) in a universe in which they are incarnated as rocks. Source: A24. [https://www.primevideo.com/detail/oOGS49QMOKJSEBRYHCDSWSP8MQ/ref=atv\\_sr\\_fle\\_c\\_Tn74RA\\_1\\_1\\_1?sr=1-1&pageTypeIdSource=ASIN&pageTypeId=BoB8K3S53N&qid=1717989594663](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/oOGS49QMOKJSEBRYHCDSWSP8MQ/ref=atv_sr_fle_c_Tn74RA_1_1_1?sr=1-1&pageTypeIdSource=ASIN&pageTypeId=BoB8K3S53N&qid=1717989594663)

#### 4. Urging Audiences to Adopt an Ethics of Care

While I argue that Macdonald's comedy does a better job than EEAAO of wholeheartedly oscillating between irony and sincerity, and therefore characterizing the metamodern, it cannot be denied that the overarching messages of each are very similar. While the means by which they arrive there are very different, these seemingly disparate artworks, operating in different and the same mediums ultimately come to more or less the same conclusion. EEAAO reaches its philosophical thesis in "we must be kind," and Macdonald's comedy does so in "we must love." In each of these instances, these works call for their audiences to take up an ethics of care.

Both Macdonald's works and EEAAO arrive at this sincerity by a necessary "meanderingness." Both follow seemingly convoluted and desultory narrative structures to arrive at their message. This "meanderingness," or apparent directionlessness, is imperative for these texts to reach their affective culminations. The absurd means by which these works come to their philosophical conclusions is the journey which reflects their metamodern structures of feeling. As Vermeulen and van den Akker describe "a structure of feeling is a sentiment, or rather still a sensibility that everyone shares, that everyone is aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down" (*Metamodernism* 2017, 6). Linear means of progression to a rational conclusion are no longer satisfactory or believable, but instead this fractal way forward, progressing and regressing by means of absurdity and self-contradictions, creates an authentic reflection of contemporary life which makes resonant these works' affective messaging. With the preconditions of absurdity and the vagaries of life established, only then is it possible to arrive at a sincere affective conclusion.



Lauren Berlant, in her book *Cruel Optimism*, defines the present as an impasse, something in which people are stuck or suspended. Metamodernity does not see the present as an impasse. However, EEAAO and Macdonald's comedy show that only once the postmodern absurdity of life is accepted can notions of hope and sincerity arise, and through which the impasse that is the present may be negotiated (or surmounted?). In their initial 2010 essay on metamodernism, Vermeulen and van den Akker say about metamodern spacetime, "Thus, if the modern suggests a temporal ordering, and the postmodern implies a spatial disordering, then the metamodern should be understood as a spacetime that is both-neither ordered and disordered. Metamodernism displaces the parameters of the present with those of a future presence that is futureless" ("Notes on Metamodernism" 2010, 12). What this means is unclear, as it seems their vernacular is mired in the paradoxical parameters they set out for themselves. However, in their later introduction to the 2017 book *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism* they acknowledge that "Notes on Metamodernism" "is a flawed essay" (6), and in this book make clearer their meaning, saying that metamodernism allows works to "resignify the present and reimagine a future" (*Metamodernism* 2017, 12). The research-creational nature of the works mentioned in this essay is crucial here, because "Metamodernism—as a structure of feeling or cultural logic—is developed through a systematic reading of dominant tendencies in contemporary artistic and cultural production" (*Metamodernism* 2017, 6). If Metamodernism is still an emergent field, and EEAAO and Macdonald's latest specials can be interpreted as metamodern, then they themselves have the capacity to shape the definition of metamodernism. The fact that Vermeulen and van den Akker saw fit to edit and reclarify what was said in their initial essay is



proof in itself of the malleability of metamodernism. EEAAO and the later specials of Macdonald show that while the chaotic nature of life can encourage a kind of social paralysis, or “nothing matters” mentality, it is only when this chaos is embraced, rather than allowed to overwhelm as an omnipresent anxiety, that grand narratives such as finding purpose in sincerity, kindness, and love may emerge.

While directors Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert had explicitly set out to make a work of Metamodern film from the outset, and I argue in part succeeded, it seems that Norm Macdonald, likely completely oblivious as to the term “Metamodernism,” created in his stand-up special works which more wholly exist in the metamodern structure of feeling laid out by the works of Vermeulen and Van dan Akker. These works being research-creational means they contribute to a conception of metamodernism and allow for new ways of thinking about the metamodern as still a structure of feeling characterized by the oscillation between and the modern and postmodern, but also one which is deeply invested in “[resignifying] the present and [reimagining] a future” through an ethics of care. Both Macdonald’s stand-up and EEAAO invoke acts of necessity, directed at their audiences: “we *have to* be kind” and “we *must* love.” These invocations can be conjoined under Weil’s declaration that “we *have to* love necessity” (2003, 44). These acts of necessity are ultimately horizontal, calling for action from a future audience, to be realized in their own respective ways. In a sense these works never arrive at a destination, because they are ultimately interested in “reimagining a future.” But while their agendas are horizontal, their messaging is realized in the very artworks which invoked such calls to purpose. As Evelyn says in one universe, and realizes in another, “There is always something to love. Even in a stupid, stupid universe where we have hot dogs for fingers” (2022, 1:52:48-

1:53:08), and as Macdonald says in the closing words of his final special, “Stay safe folks. I love you” (2022, 54:05–54:15).

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