1 How Digi-Romanticism, Metamodernism, and the Global Pandemic Set Art Free

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The Jada Art Movement Manuscript

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ABSTRACT: In this crisis-ridden, COVID-19 era world, it has become imperative that artists embrace the mission to spark deeper conversations and wonderment with one another and their viewers through the designing of new grand narratives and the stark retelling of the plight of The Other. Metamodernism, a movement built of a longing for art to investigate the world around and within oneself, is a manifestation of digi-romantic psyches and tendencies in context of an art world left hungry for raw sincerity and emotional authenticity; Modernism and Post-Modernism no longer meet the appetite created by the challenges of the present day. Jada, a collective of resonant thinkers and makers, advances Metamodernism through a manifestation of its ethos in action.

The global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 brought confirmation that socialization (the activity of social engagement) is of utmost importance for human well-being. After 100 days of self-quarantining and social distancing, the angst for social interaction became apparent, with vociferous complaints throughout the world and defiant uprisings of mass gatherings with outcries demanding a return to normalcy. As many were unable to rationalize the crisis, in North

America, South America, and Europe, social-distancing and mask-wearing became politicized issues, leading to protests, shootings, and a fresh slew of conspiracy theories.

By mid-March, the impossibility of going back to normalcy within the year began to settle in, and by mid-June – as contagion and fatality numbers increased in the United States– a new reality dawned: The old normal would never return. Despite the certainty of a future vaccine, one could never again fully trust the system, as the fragility of the West had quickly unfolded before our very own eyes – through an untimely economic, political, and racial crisis amidst the greatest health crisis since the 1918 flu pandemic ("The Spanish Flu").

This prolonged social isolation triggered a deeper reflection upon – and a much-anticipated response against – our overworked, socially broken, highly anxious, and poorly examined priorities, as the majority of Americans expressed being unhappier than at any other time in the past 50 years. As the quarantine continued, people sought safe and immediate ways to socially congregate in order to experience meaningful interactions and quell anxieties. Zoom became the go-to platform for virtual gatherings, along with Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitch,

and many other applications.

By July of 2020, activities that usually require a higher degree of human closeness found their virtual equivalents: One could cherish the opportunity to virtually craft significant moments with quarantined family and friends, and engage in more socially complex tasks, by joining live group discussions, meditations, meal sharing, studio visits, faith-based services, schooling, births, and funerals, all through virtual interfaces. It also became clear that some activities had no virtual equivalent or that the COVID risk was overshadowed by a calling to address a greater societal threat of deeper concern and emotional urgency. Despite personal and civic COVID concerns, mass gatherings protesting civil rights inequities occurred around the globe in reaction to the May 25, 2020 murder of George Floyd and President Trump hosted indoor political campaign rallies.

As the year continued to force upon us a new kind of normal, we were reminded that this hyper-engagement with the digital sphere was not a new trend, but only the latest manifestation of a gradual process that started decades prior with the birth of the first Millennials, the generation born between 1981 and 1996. Since Millennials would

eventually constitute the first true Digi-Romantics, revisiting some of the specific conditions that shaped the largest living adult generation of the United States today provides the foundational context for the central topic of this essay.

The early childhood of Millennials resembled that of the Baby Boomers in many ways. However, while Millennials still had plenty of unsupervised experiences with nature and the world around them, as teenagers, they would encounter the blunt of the greatest technological, cultural, and social transformations since the Industrial Revolution.

Arguably, the innocence of Millennials would first be challenged in 1986, when the arcade was brought home through the release of the Atari 7800 – a home videogame console that marked the beginning of the exchange of outdoor play for indoor gaming. Three years later, the first massive adoption of the internet took place with the advent of email, the fastest means of communication. In 1997, with the founding of the first recognizable social media site, Six Degrees, Millennials were exposed to the all-encompassing social power of virtual communities. In 1998, blogging became an active force in society,

projecting individual voices onto the masses – and almost bringing down the Clinton presidency. In 1999, Napster was founded, changing the relationship between musicians and listeners and forever transforming the recording industry. In the early 2000s, Myspace gave rise to customizable and identity-based social media platforms. In 2005, YouTube would unleash the age of user-based content production for massive consumption. And just one year later, Twitter was founded and Facebook became open to the general public, leading to today's dynamics of communication, social mobilization, and the formation of tightly knit online communities.

While these technological booms were happening, events of cataclysmic proportions were also occurring at the social, economic, and political levels: As Millennials were entering adulthood, they would experience the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the Great Recession of 2008, and finally, the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

These constant ruptures would make Millennials a generation well acquainted with having their resiliency tested. The instabilities they experienced during their formative years resulted in an adulthood

marked by dichotomies, and their condition today still attests to that reality: Millennials are the most educated generation ever to exist (67% percent have attended college, in comparison to 57 percent of Gen Xers), yet they constitute 40 percent of the unemployed in the United States. Although digitally hyperconnected, Millennials report feeling isolated and suffer with high rates of depression and anxiety, more so than all previous generations. And to make matters worse, Millennials feel economically strained, as research shows that their top financial concern is student-loan debt, which creates an inability to accumulate wealth or to save enough to buy a home.

All of these conditions would create the framework for the development of the phenomenon known as 'Digi-Romanticism,' which would arise from some of the elements inherent to the Millennial condition – namely, information overload, technological expertise, and hyperconnectivity, all while carrying a deep feeling of unfulfilled potential and likely experiencing financial instability.

Digi-Romanticism, therefore, stems from the feeling of being deprived of life's most important social experiences, while experiencing filtered and screened versions of those experiences – all

within the confines of a highly curated and fenced-in reality. Defined by Jada as a term that depicts a social paradigm-shift among creatives, whose works contain an emotional appeal that clashes and contrasts with the fast-paced technological ethos in which they exist. Their production is often narrative-based, and aims to reclaim grand-narratives and utopian themes — as a reaction to the search for meaning and deeper content in daily life during confinement, which deprived all of the constant multi-sensorial stimulation of life pre-Covid19 Pandemic.

Notably, this condition was not the norm throughout the world, but typical of the West, among city-dwelling and suburban parents who benevolently wished to shelter their children from the kind of trauma they once experienced – caused by such events as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War, the Vietnam War draft, the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and of Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., the Watergate scandal, and so much more.

This deep feeling of longing, desire, and yearning for a happiness that may never come has continuously pushed Millennials to search for

more connectivity and deeper meaning in all their endeavors – causing them to prefer to hike the Himalayas than climb the corporate ladder. Within this context of the pursuit for substance and intent, we finally arrive at what may be the most crucial socio-cultural shift of contemporary times: the birth of Metamodernism.

As London-based artist Luke Turner points out in The Metamodernist Manifesto, this generation is palpably rejecting many of the central tenets of late 20th-century Post-Modernism. More specifically, Turner argues that this generation is actively rebuffing the Post-Modernist idea of indiscriminate deconstruction, irony, relativism, nihilism, and the rejection of grand narratives. Turner explains that the Metamodernist generation yearns for a resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, without forfeiting all that was learned from Post-Modernism. Thus, Turner considers that our era is characterized by an oscillation between aspects of *both* Modernism and Post-Modernism.

As Metamodernism wavers between aspects of opposing worldviews, one recognizes that the pendulum within the current cultural schema swerves from Romanticism to Realism, finally arriving at Digi-

Romanticism – while signaling the need to rally beyond that condition. Thus, for the sake of deeper insight, it is crucial to understand how past cultural shifts affected the social order of their times, as that understanding may similarly inform how today's social order is affected by Metamodernism.

In the case of Romanticism – a movement that lasted from the beginning to the end of the 1800s – the emphasis was placed on emotion and the glorification of the past and of nature. It was best known as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, which challenged the artistic, social, and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment and the scientific rationalization of nature. Romanticism defended intense emotion as an authentic source of the aesthetic experience, paying greater attention to such sentiments as love, nostalgia, apprehension, and the sublime in art. It assigned a high value to the achievements of heroes, legends, philosophers, explorers, and artists, whose examples it maintained would raise the quality of society. Romanticism, as a movement, had its demise at the end of the 1800s, mostly due to sweeping social and political changes, in combination with the overwhelming spread of nationalism. Romanticism is associated with

Modernism in the sense that both defend the existence of universal human truths and tendencies; both assert that reason transcends and exists independently of our existential, historical, and cultural context.

Realism, on the other hand, emerged as a movement in Europe in the 1840s as a reaction against Romanticism. The movement organized itself in contradiction to the exaggerated emotionalism and drama of the Romantic Era. It sought to portray stark truth and accuracy, not avoiding unpleasant or sordid aspects of life. Realism was primarily concerned with how things appeared to the eye, rather than containing inspiring, idealistic representations of the world. This period is widely regarded as the beginning of the Modern Art Movement, as it pressed to bring art together with modern life. Congruently, Social Realism – an offshoot of Realism – emphasized the depiction of the working class, treating them with the same seriousness as other socio-economic classes in art. Since subjects of heroic or sentimental natures were highly rejected at this time, Realism is associated with Post-Modernism, as it holds that there are no eternal truths, no universal human rights, and no overriding narrative of human progress.

This leads us back to the Metamodern Digi-Romantics of today, who – contrary to what seems to be the case – have no linear narrative to easily explain their socio-cultural disposition. Instead, their situation can only be understood within a multigenerational continuum, combined with the socio-technological transformations of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, and the inheritance of a socially disengaged Post-Modernist legacy.

As this disengagement was followed by several economic crises, public and private opinion swayed away from further funding of the arts, especially within the public education system. This resulted in repeated attempts by U.S. President Donald Trump to extinguish the National Endowment for the Arts, and the European Union's exclusion of any cultural funding from the $826 billion received as part of the 2020 Coronavirus Recovery Plan.

As one can see, the systemic defunding of the arts cannot be solely blamed on any single factor, as all of the aforementioned would be further exacerbated by the STEM (Sciences, Technology, Math, and Engineering) arms race of the past decade. That is precisely the reason why this generation cannot afford to fully embrace Post-Modernism's

rupture with structure at the pragmatic level (and perhaps more so at the conceptual level) – as the current creative class so desperately needs to rebuild infrastructure to reclaim places that art once occupied.

Therefore, contemporary artists must devote all of themselves to the transcendent goal of rescuing artistic purpose, application, responsibilities, and roles within the cosmos of the 2020s – making art and successful art careers an essential part of the New Normal. The echoes of wistfulness in this mission come from the fact that, indeed, from times immemorial to the Modern Art Period, a central part of the Master Artist/Apprentice model dealt with teaching how to build fulfilling art careers while developing a framework to achieve groundbreaking artistic discoveries. It was not until the Romantic Movement in the 18th and 19th centuries that the construct of "the starving artist" became a common assumption of the artist condition.

In this crisis-ridden world, it is now imperative that artists embrace the mission to spark deeper conversations and wonderment with one another and their viewers through the designing of new grand narratives and the stark retelling of the plight of The Other—The

suffering Other. It is time once again to engage with the wondrous and the folkloric, just as much as with the scientific and the observational. It is now vital that art investigate the world around and within oneself, despite the post-Google impression that there is nothing new under the sun. Art must once again analyze the human condition through the philosophical, the political, the didactic, and the many realms of mortal existence, as well as those of the eternal human spirit. Indeed, at the risk of being ridiculed, criticized, and invalidated by the Post-Modernist art establishment, liberated artists must now insist that the painted surface will not be their only valid concern.

As expected, murmuring voices of dissent are rising – and they are now found at the individual and organizational levels, in the establishment and in the margins, in the ivory towers and in the real world, and across members of multiple generations (Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials, and now Generation Z) – who collectively understand that artists in the 2020s will need great tenacity in order to manifest the necessary breakthroughs at the social, political, economic, psychological, and spiritual levels.

That is the impetus of Jada – a U.S. based Metamodernist art movement born in 2019, which has inspired a growing number of art leaders to reconsider the unthinkable option: to rise up to challenge the hegemony of the establishment, to formalize an artistic discourse that functions outside of the predictable, and to radically transform the perception of art in society today.

Through the Jada Manifesto, the movement forges an ever-adaptable structure that encourages an absolute faith and confidence in themselves (the artists), by remaining true to their intention as makers, and by defending a system of mutual assistance as they methodically challenge the gatekeepers of contemporary art within intellectual, institutional, and commercial circles.

At the core of the movement, Jada holds a belief in artistic exceptionalism, deeming that – regardless of pressures, morals, dogmas, and conventions of society – the overall artistic temperament cannot be judged by the same measure, token, or expectation by which others are judged, for their innate condition is intrinsically different in priority, system of morality, spiritual insight, and sense of Self.

Particular to the movement is Jada's non-rejection of history, for

it embraces it as both a guiding light and a warning sign, by confronting the shortcomings of the past and addressing the disenfranchisement of The Other. In alignment with this, Jada questions the echoes of colonialism, nepotism, and bigotry within the gallery, the museum, and academic spaces – highlighting that Puritanism, self-righteousness, and fear of dissent must also be rejected for the honest pursuit of artistic discourse.

Essentially, Jada proposes the building of a much-needed structure, not in the form of meaningless rigidity, but instead in a new inspiring condition, which enthusiastically calls for the devotion to one's craft and the search for truth in one's practice. Only through this can the art of this generation be honored according to its worth.

Jada understands that as a movement, it cannot achieve the entirety of its ambitions – and if it ever does, its demise must be welcomed by all of its members, for the birth of a movement is the redemption of its predecessor. Jada will gladly be no more, as it is swallowed and digested into the next movement once this generation of artists is fully redeemed – both in practice and in recognition – within themselves and society.

Signed,

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