

Metamodernist, Millennial Milieu in performance

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I want to open this with a quote from Luke Turner, the British third of the Performance Art collective LaBeouf, Rönkkö and Turner, about the philosophy of the millennial generation [1]. He states;

‘Ours is a generation raised in the ‘80s and ‘90s, on a diet of *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, for whom postmodern irony and cynicism is a default setting, something ingrained in us. However, despite, or rather because of this, a yearning for meaning—for sincere and constructive progression and expression—has come to shape today’s dominant cultural mode.’ (Turner 2015)

We can see this manifested within a multitudinous mixture of art, culture, politics and philosophy that all clash upon the interstice of the confusing, often-mocked and sometimes derided idea of the ‘millennial’ generation. My research concerns this emergence of sincere irony as an example of metamodern structures of feeling within the performance work of the millennials, and how this is consecutively affected by and affecting millennial politics.

In order to explain this, and, as this is a forum of ideas and questions, to lay the ground for further discussion, I first want to delineate what I mean by the millennial and the metamodern.

The millennials [2] are the generation that were ‘raised during the boom times and relative peace of the 1990s’ (Williams 2015) and who came to age at the turn of the millennium - ‘emerg[ing] into an

adult world where only one rule exists – the certainty of uncertainty.’ (Huntley 2006, 15). The term was first coined by American historians Howe and Strauss in 2000, when they noted that the generation had ‘never, on the whole, witnessed economic trouble.’ (Howe & Strauss 2000, 100). Fast forward 18 years, and the Houses of Parliament themselves have even admitted that a range of unique crises, which includes, but is not limited to; the financial crash and recession, imposed neoliberal austerity, increased rent and the removal of housing benefit for the under 25’s in 2014, the rise in 0-hour contracts and the gig-economy, the impact of social media upon mental health, increased University intake and lack of graduate opportunities, the fourth wave of terrorism and the global climate crisis as ‘having a major impact on millennial’s socio-political outlook’ (Brown et al 2017, 5), occurring, as they have, in the generation’s formative adult years. The same report details ‘long term scarring’ (Brown et al 2017, 5) developing from such events. For a generation ‘raised during the boom times and relative peace of the 1990s’ (Williams 2015) our coming of age in a time of economic, political and social crises meant that ours ‘is a story of innocence lost’ (Williams 2015).

I think Hanzi Freinacht describes the millennial condition best [3] when he depicts a ‘subtle but pervasive sadness that seems to lie in the background’ of his adult life (Freinacht 2017, 6). A sense that is ‘shared by many people... a sense of the tragedy of the world, of the suffering of others, and perhaps even more, an awareness of beauty lost, of potentials that never materialize.’ (Freinacht 2017, 6).

However, UK millennials, on the whole, only expressed indifference and cynical disinterest (White, Bruce & Ritchie 2000, 12) politically until fairly recently. In a move that typifies the hypocritical nature of our generation, we claim ourselves victims of the gig economy, whilst also being the most ‘enthusiastic users of gig-economy apps and services’ (Parkinson 2017), we are constantly connected to social media, but ‘feel that it is depriving [us] of deeper personal relationships’ (Huntley 2006, 10). We claim that the system is set up against the young, but, until recently, didn’t make use of our votes

in elections. We occupy a specifically contradictory position, one that oscillates between cynicism and hope, one that embraces hypocrisy, a conflicted movement between poles; we are a 'Paradoxical Generation' (Huntley 2006, 10).

I refer here to the concept of the metamodern [4], as inherently linked to the paradoxical nature of the millennial generation. The metamodern was first popularised by Dutch theorists Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen in their 2010 article *notes on metamodernism*, in which they described a cultural modality 'oscillating between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony' (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010), a structure of feeling that attempted to explain shifting cultural and political trends that could 'no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern' (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010). These trends tend to oscillate between 'a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment' (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010).

The metamodern, as an emerging field of study, is multiple and contradictory in its meanings. However, this oscillation between sincerity and irony, between hope and hopelessness is integral to my understanding of this attempt to speak to the current structure of feeling that is both inherently post-postmodern and tied strongly to the psyche of the millennial generation in the global north.

In current politics [5], we can look to Corbyn, Trump and Brexit as all being examples of metamodern thinking. Brexit was an example of a symbolic attempt to reconstruct Britain as per its 'former glory', Trump offered to 'Make America Great Again' – both exemplified a certain cultural urge to return to a grand narrative through the deconstruction of the current system. These narratives offer hope ('Yes We Can', 'For The Many Not The Few', 'Make America Great Again') of a new (or return to an) alternative outside of the current political construction. As politics itself is constantly distancing itself from centralist discourse, a re-appropriation and re-construction of political metanarratives emphasises this 'yearning' for a 'utopia' outside of the current system. Metamodernism speaks to

these multiple utopias, and multiple struggles, that all encapsulate a feeling of breaking down (or out of) the current system to build (or re-gain) a new political norm.

My research, however, concerns theatre, and how the metamodern and millennial meet upon this interstice.

Particular companies in the UK, headed by millennial artists, are creating work that speaks to this hopeful/lessness paradigm, and I have noticed a particular strand of artists that seem to strive for change – or for a utopic vision – through political platforming of voices, but are also inherently critical about the efficacy and overall point of their own work. [6]

Manchester based LUNG worked with the Focus E15 campaign, just up the road from here, for a number of years, campaigning with the group of women who had been forced to leave their council accommodation. Their 2015 play *E15* was created from verbatim accounts of the group's fight against the ex-Mayor Robin Wales. When the show transferred to the Battersea Arts Centre in 2017, the company decided to open the run by marching into the theatre from the local train station with the *Focus E15* group themselves. The performance then opened with banners, protestors and even babies on the stage (Woodhead 2018), emphasising the reality of the situation – that real families' lives are still at stake. The company's work with the campaign group continues weekly; every Saturday, Matt Woodhead and Helen Monks travel to Stratford to campaign and protest with the group.

LUNG's work, then, is in impassioned attempt at continuous platforming of voices. They are, however, not impervious to criticism. Within *E15* itself, they offer a critique of their own process that jarringly disrupts both the performance and the audience's engagement. A voice cuts in midway through a scene, disrupting the actors on stage who, after the audience member doesn't stop talking,

ask for the house lights to be brought up. The speaker, who claims to be homeless, criticises the company's singular focus on the *Focus E15* campaign, and the fact that audience members most likely would have walked passed homeless people on their way to the theatre without a second look. (Monks & Woodhead 2016, 80) In the performance I attended at the Edinburgh Fringe, the audience didn't know how to react. Some shifted awkwardly, others tutted, some even told him to be quiet. However, at the end of his speech, a number of audience members applauded his statement. The houselights came back on, the play awkwardly continued, and it wasn't until the actor joined the others onstage for the bows that many of the audience members realised it was staged.

It is this continual critique of the process within the process itself that frame's *LUNG*'s work as a metamodern and millennial construct. They engage in a continual dialogue but are also critical of the effects of engaging with these communities and of the efficacy this theatre can produce. They strive for utopia, through the theatrical platforming of voices, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the inevitable failure, frailty and falsity of such engagement.

Other companies following similar trends include *Feat. Theatre* and *Write By Numbers*, both of whom have constructed shows around the platforming voices and an inherent critique this platforming. They oscillate between hope and hopelessness.

This year [7], I have run a number of workshops in London and other major cities, engaging with millennial participants and offering them a space to voice their 'worries, hopes, concerns and anger' about the society they live in. The input gathered within these workshops is being formulated into a new play, *Like Lions*, that mixes verbatim accounts and storytelling in order to interrogate the millennial, metamodern condition onstage. Focusing on a pair of twins who have wildly different experiences of University and the years after, the piece interrogates the rise of Momentum and the yearning for these Utopias, as well as critiquing the millennial's paradoxical position of ironic

detachment. Taking modes of engagement and performance methodologies from the companies I have chosen as case studies, who use their work to platform the voice of others, *Like Lions* turns these tools inwards, to focus on the millennial generation itself.

[8] As the metamodern is emerging alongside the millennial, this research does not attempt to answer a specific question, but to speak to and reveal a number of concepts and ideas formulated around the overlap of both theoretical frameworks. How can theatre interrogate a generation, and the surrounding mess they find themselves in? What methodological tools can be extrapolated from the work of millennial companies creating work within this field? How can it platform a generation's voice in an engaging and critical way? In a way that strives for change and for hope, but is also questioning of this method – of its frailties, falsehoods, and - essentially within theatre – its ephemerality?