PLAGUE, ALLEGORY, AND METAMODERNISM AS CONTEMPORARY STUDIO PRACTICE IN *PLACING THE DECAMERON*

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As the first of two articles exploring how plague can be represented through allegorical art making, this article will seek to examine the logic of the metamodern to attest to ways of developing painting through a metamodernity from a topographical analysis of Boccaccio's *The Decameron.* As defined as a structure of feeling, metamodernism has yielded a coming to terms with the current state of anxiousness and uncertainty to be congealed in an amalgam of what we now understand as a new sincerity. Representing this contextualisation will be a test case from artist Shaun Wilson's *Placing the Decameron* artist in residency online at the Fremantle Arts Centre between 2021 and 2022, and concluding in 2023. The artefacts produced within this body of knowledge developed a new way to approach metamodernist painting, and by this, contribute to a new way of understanding how artists can use allegory to situate new ways of representing the global health crisis in contemporary art.

INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, artists (Kelzer, Holmes, Mandiberg) have sought ways to represent conversations about this event in their studio practice, from an understanding that the aesthetic by which they developed can take an approach through the lens of metamodernism. One hallmark of this thinking is the understanding that artists have been aware that art and society have changed since postmodernism declined in the late 1990s. Many of these conversations are centred around inequalities of wealth, race, and gender,

populations and borders, climate change, decolonisation, and governance, all of which intersect issues of place - a home, a network, a country, and a planet. In many respects, these conversations impact places and a sense of place, whether direct or indirect, and also in an objective or subjective sense. Topos, as it was known to the ancient Greeks, is as important as metamodernism and the art of responding to these ideas, theories, and debates.

As initial ideas termed this era as a post-postmodernism, we now consider that the first two decades of the 21st century have surmounted to a contextual summary of health and illness, society, technology trends, and world events. Such compartmentalisation can be evidenced through a global anxiousness proliferated through social media (O'Reily, Karim), a rejection of hetero-normative structures (Khuzwayo, Ferrari), and a collective distrust of political and public institutions (Badman, Enria, Millstone).

When considering metamodernism to contextualise art practice, a consensus of scholars (Van den Akker, Gibson, Vermeulen) has derived a centrality attentive to feelings about uneasiness in society and our identities which define ourselves and each other. What we now know as 'a structure of feeling', which can be thought of in a Hegellian sense as an attentive determinism - surmounts an oscillation of two opposing entities, whether irony and sincerity, relativism and singularity, or meaningfulness and insincerity. Such structures of multiplicity underpin implications for cultural artefacts, and from this, making art. For example, one of the most frequent misunderstandings of metamodernism is to claim artwork as 'of metamodernism' based on the mere fact that an artefact was produced during this era. One might argue that metamodernism as an era-based epistemology, irrespective of content and communication logic, defeats the purpose of having a structural methodology at the begging of the art-making process that can shape and guide the artefact in ways that maintain authenticity at the production and completion stages of the artwork. In this sense, I have used metamodernism in my studio practice to understand the context of plague through art by the deliverance of allegory as a meta-irony, in contrast to, say, metamodernism employed as an afterthought of painting; more to do with art criticism than art making. Moreover, scholars such as Stoev (2022) argue that a metamodernity and a metamodern are separated in relation to product versus era. So too does the commentary of Heiser (2017), expanding on questioning praxis epistemology in art, and Stefanov (2021) on the rejection of 'old art' by the avant-garde, who cancels classifications from an era-based absolute of 'new'.

In the readings of Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, an underpinning factor in his collection of novellas is indeed the structure of feelings among the characters who had recently escaped the Black Death plague ravishing Florence in 1348. Notable tension in the book is the urgency of evacuation, similar to contemporary reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic. The book's depiction of the uncertain, anxious Boccaccio era prompted me to consider parallels and allegorical structures that would permit an embodiment of these emotions. Given *The Decameron* is a collection of short stories nested as a compilation of novellas, the artwork produced by the Fremantle Arts Centre residency was constructed on the same formatting in terms of visual tableaux imbued by Boccaccio's writing style, often led by characters responding to tension, during the transition of literature in the early modern period.

Taking these aspects into account, the paintings developed into a diptych format, where the left panel would hold a conversation with the right through a logic understood as a postmodernist painting connected to a metamodernist painting. The contrast was noted in the communication aspects embedded within the aesthetic, which was an innovative approach in my studio practice, where places are an episteme valuing an oscillation between two modernisms that when combined define the entirety of the process as a metamodernity. Like Stoev, this paper argues for a separation between metamodernism and metamodernity. My take on this is that metamodernism is the effect of the metamodern, and metamodernity is the affect of the metamodernism.

An example of such is found in Figure 1 *Day 1* (Wilson, 2022), whereby a quintessential postmodern structure is created in the right panel by using irony to define the allegorical discussion of plague as historicity. Signs and signals pertaining back to Baudrillard make a visual assessment of its implied historicity, which is a visual assessment of itself through multiplicity, much like the reflection of a mirror within a mirror. The same logic used as to what Charles Green and Lyndal Brown's paintings convey is intentional from a memory point of view, as Charles was my university teacher in the 1990s, who introduced me to the teachings of postmodernism from the work of Baudrillard and Jenks. He thus represented in the residency paintings as a nod to his teaching by constructing this framework he defined in my student years as "of postmodern". The left panel works differently by using meta-irony within the landscape as attentive to new sincerity, guided by the allegorical sentiments of feeling bodied in the representations of the landscape conversing about the plague.

Sometimes, frozen-over landscapes have been consumed by illness, but need no further explanation to understand themselves. The viewer needs no further signs and signals to address the landscape, other than what is presented within the subject. The meta-irony is a self-explanation between landscape and illness, with no requirement to bring additional material to such analysis.

Two opposing values define this metamodernist painting technique in equal presence, without one dominating the other. The right panel may well be an example of the postmodern, but the painting itself as a diptych cannot be postmodern, because postmodernism cannot function through oscillation, but rather only to relativism, simply because outside of relativism, there is no ability to maintain an analysis of the world by making a copy of it to assess. In many ways, a postmodern painting has the same totality as a modernist painting, where both modes of communication don't share other forms of critical assessment outside its primordial structure. For example, the modernist paintings of Rothko are the totality of a modernist ideal and cannot function simultaneously with a postmodern context simply because the painting is in totality within its modern logic. To introduce relativism as a singularity ceases to continue its authenticity as a modernist artwork. Likewise, the postmodern works from Kruger cannot function through communication as a modernist work, because postmodern art can only exist through assessments of the structures it seeks to question – there is no questioning in modernism, only answers. When a singularity is introduced within relativism, postmodernism ceases to function because the communication of such can't survive outside of a relativist logic. So, when a postmodernist logic of the right panel is situated with an oscillation of both relativism and singularity in the left panel, the totality of the diptych is forwarded by metamodernism because it has the capabilities through its communication logic to facilitate both the contrasting of the postmodern painting in a metamodern painting within a metamodernity. This way, the paintings as artefacts are both postmodern and metamodern, but the outcome of their effect, when viewed together simultaneously, is metamodernity.

The task in creating these works was to interrogate new ways of representing painting within metamodernism by having this contrasting duality that was absent from contemporary painting as both a conversation and a critical theory structure. The new knowledge developed from the residency has now led to an understanding of metamodernity, metamodernism, and

the metamodern in painting that this paper argues is a defining point in the creation of the new painting practice.

BACKGROUND

Returning to topos and illness, Boccaccio contributed to the development of mediaeval literature, which propelled advancement into the Early Modern Period, along with Chaucer, Gower, and Langland, who had all lived through and survived the Black Death years in Europe and England. While many of their contemporaries succumbed during the crisis, notably William of Ocham (Ocham's razor), the event can be traced as an influential component in their works irrespective of their age at the start and end of the pandemic. Boccaccio's writings in *The Decameron* are specific to plague and human suffering, to make detailed accounts of the state of Florence during the height of the pandemics' reign.

However, the mainstay of the book is removed from the more graphic renditions of plague as a continuum. The Black Death is present throughout, and the reader knows this, but is seldom mentioned in context to more ongoing explicit accounts. Later works, for example, about the plague from Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* written about the Great London Plague of 1665-6 do not follow the same structures where Defoe constantly writes in an observational sense from his fiction-based-on-non-fiction accounts whereas Bocaccio writes fiction through allegory in oscillation by more multilevel prescriptions. As such, *The Decameron* is a book of allegory, but also of observation, where initially ten sections follow Boccaccio's introduction, followed by ten sections containing short stories. (Di Lauro) The magnitude of everyday life during the plague is described, with accounts of corpses, the dying, the sick, and the disbarred but in a way that does not repeat in all of the stories - what Boccaccio achieves is an overview of what these young people escaped from but contrasted by the lack of discussion thereafter - plague in this sense is an afterthought. The escape to the villa by the storytellers, who later unfold in the proceeding stories, amplifies resilience allegorically defined through the absence of the plague's effect and, in absence, Bocacccio amplifies the plague in our imaginations by not mentioning it again. In effect, the reader creates the horror from their imaginations between what is said and what not is said - an oscillation - within the affect of the book.

As much about the book has been discussed, especially in recent times during the current pandemic, scholars have tended to think about it in terms of 'the metaphoric patterns and the way metaphors shed light on one another' (Mazzota XV), but also in terms of narrational properties (Almansi), and more recently to gender (Migiel). Yet it is the work of Hastings (1975) that procures attention for the residency paintings, where he discusses the role of nature – both in the natural world – and the defiance of aspects against natural inclinations, such as love and desire – which becomes of special interest. Place-based analysis of *The Decameron* is of scant accessibility, thus being the most infrequent topic compared to more populous inquiries of people, the characters, and the historic.

Hastings draws attention to the formation of nature and reason in Boccaccio's writing, but from here, in this logic, one can piece together the allegory of nature to implicate referential linkage to the 'state' of nature and references to the natural world. There were complicated descriptors of the places of the stories told, as there were mentions of the places in and around the villa where each narrator would venture to tell the ten days of stories. In doing so, the comparative structure by which Boccaccio established was characters travelling to a place and then mapping stories about other places onto these locales. This is where the allegorical references in the book through the narrated tales were at their most heightened and profound. Boccaccio's constant reminder of nature and logic draws into the shift for medieval writers at the time, which, of course, led to the proliferation of what was to become the Renaissance. Yet prior to this transition, the darkened times of the pandemic in Boccaccio's era began with an utter catastrophe that was unlike anything known in recorded history since the Justinian plague and the great fog of 546 CE. His world at the time of writing *The Decameron* was of suffering and mortality, making the backdrop of these observations even more acute. It is understandable then that Boccaccio's insistence on nature and reason at a structural level can be adaptive if not allegorical, in contrast to what was occurring around him or, likely, what wasn't occurring around him, if the accounts of social breakdowns and civil order are to be understood as truths in the introduction of the book.

Irrespective of the acquisitions that scholars have laid claim to over the preceding centuries towards *The Decameron*, specifically in the Twentieth Century, the absence of place as a primary gaze in substantial analysis has given contemporary scholars a wider scope to address this gap in research to find ways of meaning that give rise to a better understanding

of the plight of the people from this era. A key barrier to this gap is a fundamental lack of recognition of the importance of place in determining the well-being of people's daily lives. Existing bodies of place-orientated critiques, such as digression about the gardens of the villa (Kern, Sillinger) and place orientation (McKenna), have contributed to places and their meanings, but are modest in terms of finding a sense of place with these domains.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, an expressed trauma from people experiencing quarantine or lockdowns was the barriers of isolation and restrictions of movement, elevating mental health crises that this paper argues as a topographical issue. Much of the dearth of research published, especially in psychology and ethnography, deliberated on the negative impacts of universal lockdowns, where a primary cause of concern was the inability to freely move from one place to another. The same barriers present in lockdown measures during the Spanish Flu pandemic, the Great London plague, the Florentine plague, and the numerous outbreaks of bubonic plague epidemics, etc., all categorically revealed a commonality among civilian populations who experience negative well-being as an effect of pandemic martial law provisions, inasmuch as they fear of dying from contagion. From the dossiers of plague literature over the centuries, written as observations during plague outbreaks (Pepys, Langland, de la Dene, Hodges), there is a repeated pattern in human society where sanctioned quarantine measures that slow transmissions are universally considered a conspiracy by governance to oppress its citizens or a precaution of safety to protect the lives of constituencies.Geography in this context is at the forefront of contagion, and our sense of place forged within our immediately sensed environment thus contributes to our awareness of well-being and feelings of belonging. Places and a sense of place are critical to coming to terms with contagion, and these relationships are the subject of the residency paintings explored through the visual logic of metamodernism and Bocaccio's order of allegory.

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Taking this in context, an absolute for the painting process had developed into a duplication of Boccaccio's comparative structure, whereby the metamodern painting is thought of as the location of the storytelling near or at the Villa embodied with a meta-irony of a structure of feeling – the emotion of landscape as frosted over by plague - and the postmodern painting

relates to the stories told within these locales extrapolate by elements of irony representative in the historicity of plague – the signs and signals associated through *The Decameron* and of plague literature. One of the emerging factors of the residency is the understanding through practice that this painting requires an oscillation between relativism and singularity within itself to be authenticated as 'of metamodernism'. And this is true of paintings made during the postmodern era with the central core of any postmodern work, such as David Salle, Julian Schnabel, Jeff Koons, and Barbara Kruger, who used relativism as the communication logic in their individual critiques and assessments. Yet simultaneously, modernism still prevailed during the postmodernist era in the art of Bridget Riley, John Walter Stephen, and Neil Williams, independent of what was occurring at the time when postmodern challenges of modernist assumptions were developing through the mechanical structures of 'new'.

Figure 1. Shaun Wilson, *Day 1*, 2022, oil on canvas, diptych, 100cm (W) x 200 cm (L)

With this in mind, it is permissible and factual to note that in the metamodernist era, artists still use the communication logic of postmodernism successfully, irrespective of claims that postmodernism is "dead," which, given any moment when a medium or era is proclaimed defunct, is speculative in the reasoning that a singularity driving whatever is new has the self-assessment in justifying the dysfunction of its former, which is a fallacy by default. When painting was officially "dead" in the early 2000s, some of the most important works of contemporary art to date in the 21st century were and continue to be produced by postmodern

painters such as Schnabel, Keifer, Baselitz and Green/Brown. Thus, the fallacy of announcing the "deaths" of art mediums is based on the presumption of extinction syndromes, which consider a point of view that acts as an absolute, which, as this paper argues, is fictitious at best.

Contributors of post-postmodern ideas (see Gans, Turner) acknowledged that postmodernism was in decline, defunct, or at least unable to function based on technological changes and social concerns of the time. What remains lacking in this argument is that caving into social fads gives no structural reasoning for the dismantling of a critical theory of a well-established philosophy, simply because people might seek to discredit what is known by what is based on social feelings of uneasiness and anxiety, as found in the proto-writings of what metamodernism responded to in the 2010s. This article argues that modes of communication through image making, like romanticism, modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism, can function within the subject if the artist who creates such work can know how to use visual logic pertaining to each of the said communication strategies. When ignoring approximations of trends, that is, what medium has supposedly "died" and what is claimed to be active, surmounts to nonsense based on peer pressure and misinformation as to how exactly the logic of a painting commands proximity to the subject and its value system. I may well produce a series of modernist colour field paintings, and thus, the body of work is born through a modernist ideal, where it will stay modernist for the entire life of the artefact, irrespective of when such a movement was supposedly concluded or had "died" by popular virtue just because scholars disagreed with it.

Given this reason, the ability to create a diptych painting with a postmodern panel connected to a metamodernist panel in unison is an act that reveals a play of contrast within the aesthetic and structural effects of the painting. Just as Stoev (2022, p.6) defines combines of contrast by saying that 'post-irony is used for affect, and meta-irony for ambiguity', metamodernism is defined in cultural reasoning as the balance of opposites on the provision that an empathetic authenticness is present in the outcomes of this oscillation. Therefore, I have experimented with diptych formats, as it allows me to create these contrasts together in the same way that metamodernism permits opposites within its logic.

ANGEL FORMALISM

Denoting that if zombie formalism (Robertson) has a structural intent to make art for the sake of populous taste, pastiche, and aesthetic commodity amongst the collector elites, then this article proposes to create an angel formalism reactive against the relational aesthetics of zombie formalism – a merger that will be debated in the field as of difference and of similarity - to counter the banality of bourgeois consumption of art and the artists who drive its demand, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, to enforce dominance of taste and style away from the academy and into a 'movement borne of opinion instead of theory.'(Hill) To become familiar with its presence, a more direct assertion by Wiley describes 'the reins of aesthetic power, which had for decades traded hands among critics, curators, and various moneyed interests, now belonged solely to the global collector class.' (Wiley) Yet how does this relate to the residency paintings?

The power of the ruling elite during times of pandemics has historically separated the sick from the healthy, the living from the dead, and freedom from the restrained. As Boccaccio describes in the book, the wealthy and elite fled the city early to avoid contagion, and those not of privilege had little option to leave for their livelihoods and means to support themselves. A noted commonality in plague outbreaks situates that people of lower income and social classes tend to suffer exponentially compared to those who are wealthy. As such, pandemics have two classes – the elites who flee and everyone else who is confined. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, similarities became commonplace, where society was divided into two main types of working people - the privileged middle and upper-class in most medium to higher-paying jobs stayed home to be serviced by those in lesser-paying jobs who had no such luxury to retreat. Even in *The Decameron*, young people fleeing to the villa are from privileged backgrounds and could easily escape the city without the constraint of desperation. More so, as pandemics in this sense are a continued example of wealth inequality over millennia, the paintings addressed this embodiment through a metamodernity that also considered what happens to the paintings after they leave my studio and into a public exhibition.

Returning to zombie formalism, a commentary about the influence of elite art collectors intersecting dominance over the academy and the artists driving this pastiche, demonstrates a need for allegory in metamodern painting, linked to the same kinds of critical lens cast on wealth inequality of workers during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Manifested in this is a consideration to establish a unique financial exchange for the paintings, akin to building conversations about the financial exclusivity and divisions that pandemics, and indeed, *The Decameron*, traversed. A working model thus created an exclusive financial system for the paintings that limits purchase, and restricts commercial trade based on an exclusivity episteme, not unlike the wealth inequality experienced by people in Boccaccio's plague era and my own lived observations during COVID-19. The paintings, therefore, are intentionally created to be for the image's sake, and to be held away from taste and commodity with the intent of never being sold, yet being available to be sold to not be sold.

Figure 2. Shaun Wilson, *Wreck Coin*, (2022) cryptocurrency token, Solana blockchain.

A way to bring this into art markets was to deem that the paintings could only be purchased through a proprietary cryptocurrency I founded in 2022 named 'Wreck Coin', which is both an irony and meta-irony, literally 'wrecking' any intention for art collectors to flip or acquire

these artefacts. The currency was registered on a Solana blockchain, formalised with smart contracts, and publicly listed as a non-trading currency. As the paintings were finished and then proposed for public exhibition, the price tag of each painting was a single Wreck Coin, enforcing that the only permissible currency to buy these paintings was not accessible. The issue for the art market is that only 200 Wreck Coins were ever minted, to which I own all the currency not available, nor will ever be available for public trading. This of course means I am the only person who can purchase these paintings, because I own the monopoly on the sole currency it can be traded against, not dissimilar to the idea of oligarchs holding a monopoly over news outlets, cryptocurrencies, and online shopping conglomerates during COVID-19. Therefore, the conceptuality that Wreck Coin establishes is first, a wealth inequality for art collectors, because I exclude them from the acquisition in the same ways that the people of meagre means were excluded from leaving Florence during the Black Death; second, an allegory for wealth inequality in art markets bolstered by zombie formalism during the current pandemic; and third, a basis for thinking about how a metamodernity can be derived from an oscillation between irony and meta-irony to be the subject of the second article once the residency concludes.

CONCLUSION

While the residency is incomplete and will continue into 2023, the findings of this paper represent a halfway point to the new knowledge I have found in my painting practice. It has sought to situate a visual response to *The Decameron* by finding a metamodernity in the artworks revealed in six distinct forms. First, that new knowledge has developed from a new way to approach metamodernism and painting; second, this new approach has contributed to a new understanding of how artists can apply allegory in responses to the global health crisis; third, to define how the visual logics of singularity and relativism can coexist within a painting without dominance or influence; fourth, how can irony and meta-irony communicate within the same painting simultaneously; fifth, the financial trading of a painting can be considered part of its metamodernity; and sixth, how these conversations can be used to think about alleviating social barriers encountered during pandemic eras. The outcomes of these forms have led to a new way of working in my studio, and have prompted ways to overcome the social obstacles of anxiousness and isolation during pandemics. Through this investigation, I have found reasons why people experience psychological suffering from

place obstructions in lockdowns, and found a solution to alleviate this by coming to terms with the importance of a sense of place in comprehending forced spatial separation of localities in times of martial law. Moreover, these barriers of separation can be attested to better and healthier relationships with places through care and access, inasmuch as a reduction in wealth inequality can reshape a more equitable experience in a pandemic crisis to experience these places without enforcement based on wealth. While contagion will always be an acute issue for human society, safe and measured responses to protect communities can benefit from meaningful understanding of the importance of place. With the guidance of scientific fact, these understandings further need to consider our relationships with topographies as an important symbiont between landforms and our own health and well-being. Further to this, I have demonstrated a new way to consider the visualisation of *The Decameron* from the perspective of place, by allowing topographies to be at the forefront of analysis. Such inquiry differentiates in part from the existing body of knowledge pertaining to Boccaccio's work, and leaves the future investigation to expand on the introductory investigation I have embodied in the artist in residency to date. These findings will locate a second article written at the conclusion of the project in 2023, with the aim of refining these deliberations in greater detail.

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