Metamodern theatre: A spotter's guide

This chapter begins to develop a heuristic system in which to unpack and contextualize certain strategies within current theatre practice as part of the wider metamodern structure of feeling. In this sense, the following is an inventory of the constituent elements of metamodern theatre to – at long last – answer the question troubling everyone who initially picked up this book: just what *is* metamodern theatre? I have subtitled this chapter 'A spotter's guide' to contextualize how I envision this chapter can be used as a model through which to determine noticeable strategies to pinpoint *why* a particular production *feels* metamodern. However, as Dember reiterates regarding his own catalogue of metamodern strategies in popular culture – *Eleven Metamodern Methods in the Arts* – this 'should be thought of as a proposal, a theory in progress' (Dember 2018), and I offer the following as a proposition for further development, debate and dialogue around just what constitutes metamodern theatre practice. As Radchenko rightly questions, 'How can we study something that has not been completely described yet?' (Radchenko 2019: 495). It is with this paradoxical positioning in mind that I attempt this analysis.

In Radchenko's application of metamodernism as a hermeneutic tool used to understand the aesthetic and narrative shifts seen in contemporary literature and videogames, he suggests that 'the important part of studying the contemporary novel (or any other genre) is to employ the instruments that will reveal its core ideas' (Radchenko 2019: 496). When focusing on the post-postmodern turn, Radchenko implores that

> searching for the right code requires a number of attempts before the more or less complete scheme of the new structures is created. For now, the concept of metamodernism is probably one of the most complex ideas that integrates a variety of tools allowing us to draw some conclusions. (ibid.)

Radchenko admits that that the 'use of the features of metamodernism in literary research demands careful adoption of them for this purpose, defining

the basics of their principles and meanings' (Radchenko 2019: 497), and this chapter intends to follow such careful adoption in my application of metamodernism towards theatrical practice. Whilst Dember's Metamodern Methods are purposefully broadly applicable across a range of cultural mediums, this chapter follows Radchenko's provision of artform-specific catalogues of metamodern attributes by providing one tailored to the field of theatre and performance.

Theatre, of course, is an inherently multifaceted medium. Even at its barest – a performer, an audience and an empty space – the intersections of these various elements are numerous. As such, rather than simplifying this chapter to a list of individual attributes which would mean that, on the surface, such elements may seem equally weighted in their positioning within the theatrical metamodern structure of feeling, I have divided the following guide into three interconnected sections to, in part, delineate between the form and the content of such practices. The first section, 'Overarching Sensibilities', describes certain sensibilities that are essential to the wider understanding of metamodernism and that, I proffer, are found infused throughout all metamodern theatre practice. The second section, 'Aesthetic Strategies', then begins to define the theatrical aesthetics and forms of performance that are used within such practices that mark a break from previous/postmodern work and emulate metamodern aesthetics as defined within other cultural practices, and therefore serve to create, develop or strengthen the overarching sensibilities. Finally, 'Themes' addresses both the narrative and intertextual topics and ideas that are explored through these strategies. As the experience of theatre is a complex interplay between form and content, between staging and text, this chapter offers an example of how both aspects can be considered in assessing why certain contemporary theatre and performance projects *feel* metamodern. As described throughout the previous chapters, when experiencing a production as an audience member, my initial understanding in regard to it being metamodern or not is a *feeling* – an embodied awareness that what I am experiencing *feels* different/new/post-postmodern/metamodern. The following is an attempt at isolating and defining the particular aspects within contemporary theatrical practice that induce, lead to or support such feelings.

Overarching sensibilities

By overarching sensibilities, I refer to certain modalities that are ingrained throughout both the form and content of metamodern theatre. These modalities permeate a production in such a way that the aesthetic strategies

and themes utilized within the performance serve to deliver or enhance these overarching sensibilities. Whilst examples of metamodern theatre don't need to exhibit all of the following aesthetic strategies or themes – some may exhibit two or three, some may exhibit them all and some may exhibit strategies that are not covered in this list – I proffer that these overarching sensibilities will be present throughout. In this sense, the following sensibilities are the predominant and initial points in sensing that a piece exhibits a metamodern quality, in part because they reflect two of the main modalities that are associated with metamodernism at large: oscillation and new sincerity/felt experience.

Oscillation

As covered in detail in Chapter 2, the concept of oscillation is so ingrained within the general understanding of metamodernism that the terms are often synonymous. The oscillatory sensibility within metamodern theatre reflects an inherent dynamic 'between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony' as defined by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010), within which reside subordinate oscillations between intersecting modalities, some of which are detailed by the pair as oscillating 'between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity' (ibid.). It is important to remember that this oscillatory movement indicates a continual fluctuation between such polarities whilst refusing to remain congruent to either. As mentioned earlier, as one of two overarching sensibilities within metamodern theatre, this oscillation is made possible through several of the aesthetic strategies discussed further on, as well as evident throughout several intertextual themes. In the previous chapters, such oscillation is palpable in the together-apartness of Uninvited Guests' *Love Letters at Home*, or the continual switch between the performed and the authentic in The Gramophones' *Playful Acts of Rebellion*.

To return to Dember's modes of oscillation as detailed in Chapter 2, oscillation in metamodern theatre is both structural and hermeneutic. If oscillation is evident in both the form and/or content of a piece, it is therefore a structural feature of such work. Whether this is evident through juxtaposing, braiding or within reconstructive pastiche, structural oscillation refers to when 'the artwork itself includes pieces from both sides of a duality and it switches back and forth between them in time' (Dember 2023). In the analyses throughout the following chapters, my attention regarding oscillation will be largely focused on that which is structural, as the aesthetic strategies within the following pieces, and the archival material available to others, are concrete

articles through which such oscillation can be observed. However, it would be remiss to then eliminate Dember's hermeneutic understanding of oscillation, which is based within the audience's experiencing of such performances. Rather than structural oscillation between polarities throughout the performance itself, hermeneutic oscillation occurs throughout the audience's experience of such – in that their response to a piece fluctuates between disparate polarities. As Dember explains, 'As the viewer swings to, say a postmodern pole in interpreting the object, the very logic of that reaction compels the viewer to swing back to a modernist pole, and then it reverses again and the cycle continues' (Dember 2023). Whilst there might not be a clear oscillatory movement within the structure of the piece itself, it is the audience that are doing the oscillating within their response. Of course, Kirsty Sedgman's audience-centric research (Sedgman 2018) reminds us that there is 'not really any such thing as "the audience" at all' (Bakk 2016), and when discussing 'the audience's experience' we are negating the fact that an audience is necessarily made up of various individuals with various modes of interpretation and individual experiences of the same production. In keeping with my approach to centring on my own embodied experience throughout this volume, when referring to hermeneutic oscillation in the experience of viewing or participating in a particular performance, I only refer to my *own* embodied experience of such. Of course, such an understanding of oscillation can only *be* a personal, embodied experience. I cannot claim to speak to what you, reader, or any other audience members *felt* during a performance, or how you/they interpreted it throughout. Neither can I claim to assert whether that feeling oscillated between an ironic and a sincere, or an empathetic and an apathetic state, for instance. Instead, in reference to Fuchs's *The Death of Character* (1996), I remain centred on my own embodied experience of hermeneutic oscillation, continuing to centre feelings – and protecting the solidity of felt experience – within this understanding of metamodern theatre.

Felt experience

My approach to understanding metamodern theatre being feelings driven first and foremost is – in part – because, as Dember asserts, 'the essence of metamodernism is a (conscious or unconscious) motivation to protect the solidity of *felt experience* against the scientific reductionism of the modernist perspective and the ironic detachment of the postmodern sensibility' (Dember 2018; emphasis in original.). In this respect, I see felt experience as part of the second overarching sensibility that permeates metamodern theatre. This is, to some extent, because both sensibilities are integrally

intertwined – with the oscillatory movement enabling the centring of the felt experience. Structural oscillation, according to Dember, 'allows for the expression of the fullness of the [artist's] interiority, not being limited by the doctrine imposed by either one of [the polarities] alone' (Dember 2023). Whilst metamodernism and oscillation are inherently interwoven, a structural *juxtaposing* of tones could, of course, be evident in a postmodern production. However, in 'a postmodern version, the [polarities'] opposition might cancel each other out, each undermining the emotional reality of the other, but in this metamodern [oscillatory] version they add together' (Dember 2023). This paradoxical positioning, in which the work oscillates between sensibilities *and* 'adds together', constructs a liminal space in which both polarities are accessible, expressed and essential to the space's construction. This space is also where the audience/writer/performers' felt experience can then be centred. To clarify this, Dember (Dember 2022; The Oscillator's Stone 2023) offers a visual metaphor of a postmodern 'pole' and a modern 'pole' leaning against each other in a two-sided tent formation. Both poles are required to support each other, and yet are working against each other – the pressure of each pole's desire to succumb to gravity, push the other pole down and fall to the ground, in effect, propping up the other pole. This support-through-opposition tension effectively creates a new space between these two poles which would not be able to exist within a postmodern work, and in which, Dember suggests, the solidity of the felt experience can exist (see Figure 4.1). As Dember explains, the 'aesthetic benefit of leaning two or more tones against each other, like tent poles in tension, is to prop all of them up, thus creating a "safe" space for the fullness of a person's felt experience' (Dember 2022). Such an understanding of the aesthetic effect of oscillation within a tent-pole structure reflects Alison Gibbons's focus on a (re)turn towards affect within metamodernism. Such affect is based on essentialism and postmodernism being seen as inherently unhelpful when separate but now existing in tension with one another. In this respect, the tent space created by such tension is where a 'distinctly metamodern subjectivity, to which affect is central … both driven by a desire for a meaningful personal emotional experience while being aware of the constructed nature of experiences' (Gibbons 2017: 86), can exist. Where my use of felt experience differs from Dember's in this respect is that I, following Radchenko's (2019, 2020) analysis, see it as inherently connected to both Gibbons's understanding of metamodern affect as a desire for meaningful emotional experience whilst understanding the artificiality of the cultural constructs that engender and enable such, and Foster Wallace's new sincerity as 'the desire to feel and be emotional instead of being ironic' (Radchenko 2020: 249) whilst remaining inside, and part of, ironic sensibilities. Through
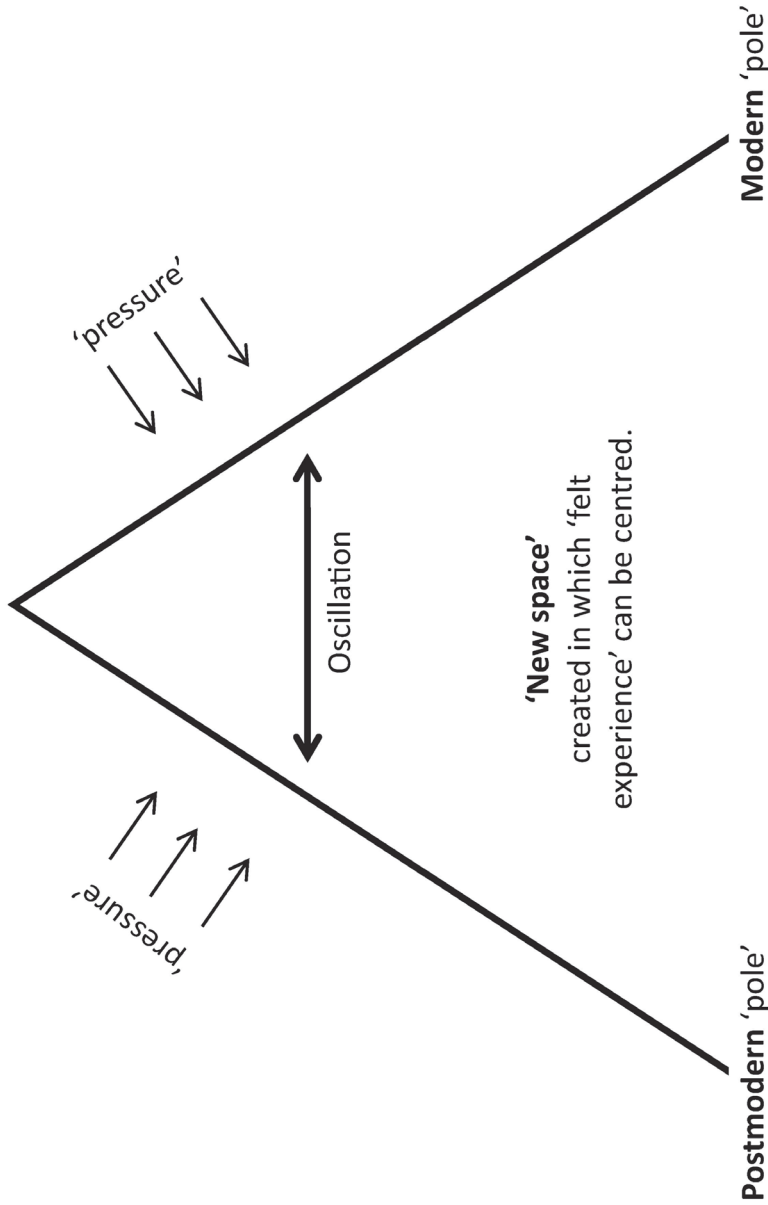
Modern 'pole'

'pressure'

Oscillation

'New space'
created in which 'felt
experience' can be centred.

'pressure'

Postmodern 'pole'

Figure 4.1 Diagram based on Greg Dember's 'tent-like' structure

Source: Produced by the author with kind permission from Greg Dember.

this, I inherently connect the focus on felt experience (within the audience member's response to metamodern theatre) to Foster Wallace's new sincerity. This second overarching sensibility is therefore, in part, a space that is constructed for emotions to be felt throughout the experience of a production. However, it is important to note that this space is only constructed through the tension between a modern engagement and a postmodern detachment. It is not wholly sincere but aware of the insincerity and artificiality of the constructed nature of such sincerity, at the same time as *trying* to be sincere. It is a felt sincerity, or a *feeling* of sincere feelings that are at once in tension with, and admitting the existence of, the artificiality of the mechanisms that led to such feelings. In this sense, my use of the term felt *experience* in naming this second overarching sensibility could also be labelled felt *sincerity* to encompasses both the space created through oscillation in which the felt experience of an audience is centred, strengthened and protected (cf. Dember 2018) and the awareness of the fact that these feelings are centred, strengthened and protected through artificial mechanisms. To return to Jerry Saltz's original observation of the post-postmodern artists' mentality being that 'I know that the art I'm creating may seem silly … but that doesn't mean this isn't serious' (2010) – as an overarching sensibility within metamodern theatre, felt sincerity states that 'I know the theatre is fake, but that doesn't mean that these feelings don't feel real'. It points to works that embrace this paradoxical dichotomy, that are open about the surreal nature of the in/authenticity of theatrical performance, that ask the audience to *sincerely* feel again whilst also knowing that we, and performance as an artistic method, remain inescapably inauthentic. It is centred, too, on our embodied, felt, experience throughout this. For, as Dember reminds us, whilst we attempt to develop an understanding of performance in a post-postmodern paradigm, we are building upon the facts that postmodernism dealt us: that truth is individual, that responses to a text are multiple – possibly infinite. But that 'what we really *know* is what we feel and what's our interior experience. In the end, if you don't have that, there's no point' (The Oscillator's Stone 2023).

Aesthetic strategies

As overarching strategies, both oscillation and felt experience permeate metamodern theatre and are the first touchpoints with which an audience member might notice – or feel – that a performance exhibits metamodern tendencies. You might observe a continual fluctuation between the fictitious and the factual, or the performer and the performed, for instance. Or you may notice that the work – despite being open about the fact that it

is inherently an inauthentic medium – is concerned with authenticity and eliciting surprisingly authentic emotions from you *at the same time* as being transparent about the construction of these emotions. As oscillation functions to support a space in which the felt experience or – slightly ironest – felt sincerity can be expressed, the following aesthetic strategies are examples of particular aspects within metamodern theatre that serve to create and develop these overarching sensibilities. As an attempt at forming a definition of metamodern theatre, I offer an initial definition of six aesthetic strategies in this section, through which we can examine metamodern theatrical tendencies. Some of these strategies are interconnected, and the definitions of some bleed into each other, in part because such strategies are examined in the wake of a performance and are, essentially, attempts at unpicking interconnected modalities from the perspective of a critically reflective audience member. They are not, it has to be said, intended to be seen as definite and discrete building blocks through which to create metamodern performance. As Dember rightly warns us, 'Those of us who discuss metamodernism do not have the job of bringing it into being, nor (to a large extent) the capacity to do so' (Dember 2018), and it would be remiss of me not to, again, emphasize that theatre makers do not go into the creative process with a toolbox of aesthetic strategies through which to intentionally develop metamodern theatre. These aesthetic strategies are defined after the fact and are an attempt to unpack what the specific elements are within contemporary theatre that indicate a break from previous modern and postmodern practice. In this sense, these are the markers of metamodern theatre and will be employed throughout the remainder of the volume as methods through which to unpack how metamodernism is both reflected in and developed through the work of contemporary British theatre companies.

Authenticity

I have spent enough of this volume already discussing the metamodern (and millennial) interest in the (strive towards the) authentic whilst accepting that authenticity is, perhaps, an impossible goal. Regarding its position as an aesthetic strategy within metamodern theatre, my use of authenticity, here, similarly refers to an attempt at working *towards* something authentic within a performance, or evidence of an interest in 'the authentic' throughout a performance alongside a simultaneous, or oscillatory, acceptance of the complexity, messiness and ultimate un-achievability of this preoccupation. By referring to the authentic within performance, I do *not* mean to indicate

that this is a return to the modern dramatic attempt to authentically represent 'real-life' onstage as per the naturalistic, representational drama of modernist playwrights and directors. This is not a return to fourth-wall dramatics, or – indeed – an acceptance of the naturalistic actor's ideal of producing an 'authentic performance' (whatever that actually means). Such a metamodern interest in authenticity is balanced against the fact that it is impossible to be 'authentic' within a performance, as performance itself is inherently an 'act'. Daniel Schulze's (2017) focus on how the resurgence of an interest in authenticity throughout contemporary forms of theatre is essential to understanding post-postmodern practice is also not concerned with a modernist dramatic version of authentic representation, but it leads him to concentrate on contemporary trends concerning an 'authentic experience' for the audience through intimate forms of theatre, immersive theatre and the forms of authenticity within documentary theatre and verbatim practices. Whilst all such forms are exemplary of the resurgence of interest in the authentic and an 'authentic experience' within contemporary theatre practice, my own understanding of a metamodern drive towards authenticity within theatre is that such a desire to be authentic, to offer an 'authentic experience' (whatever this means) or to portray something 'authentically' (whatever *that* means), is always met with, or fluctuates/oscillates towards (and then back away from), the fact that the succeeding of this desire is an inescapable impossibility. As will become clear in Chapter 5, the forms of authenticity evident within this metamodern theatre practice exist as an interjection of an authentic acceptance about the reality of the construct of the performance or an interjection of the audience/performer/writer's (dare I use the term) 'real life' into the performance itself. Such an aesthetic is inherently connected to the use of metatheatre (see further on) as well as specifically enhancing the overarching sensibility of felt experience, in that the *authentic* can both be manifest as an acceptance of the disconnected nature of performance and an attempt towards authentic connection between performer-audience or between participants. Rather than a belief in the power of performance to achieve authentic representation (which, of course, can never actually escape the inherent inauthenticity of the medium itself), authenticity as an aesthetic strategy within metamodern theatre is manifest as an interest in how the authentic can be approached and utilized within a performance in a way that serves to at once remind an audience about the disconnected (and inauthentic) nature of performance whilst also striving *towards* authentic connection – centring the paradoxical felt sincerity of such a performance – which, in itself, is at once both authentic and inauthentic.

Metatheatre

In referring to metatheatre, I am, of course, talking about theatrical work that comments in some way on its own form and/or construction. In the barest sense, metatheatre is theatre that is open about the fact that it is theatre. Throughout performance studies, the definitions of the term are numerous, being 'variously understood as theatricality, reflexivity, auto-referentiality, forms of theatrical illusion, or what is called play-within-the-play' (Paillard and Milanezi 2021: 1). Of course, metatheatre is not a distinctly metamodern aesthetic. In fact, as William Eggington rightly points out, 'There can be no theater that is not already a metatheater, in that in the instant a distinction is recognized between a real space and another, imaginary one that mirrors it, that very distinction becomes an element to be incorporated as another distinction in the imaginary space's work of mimesis' (Eggington 2003: 74). It is also not a distinctly contemporary movement. Paillard and Milanezi proffer that 'while in the past some have considered metatheatre to consist in the breaking of the theatrical illusion or the crossing of the fourth wall, others have argued that such a phenomenon does not apply to the ancient theatre' (Paillard and Milanezi 2021: 1–2) as modernism's fourth wall had not yet been constructed; therefore elements of what we would now label metatheatre are observable within the theatre of ancient Greece. Whilst metamodern elements can be found throughout cultural artefacts from various eras (with some metamodern scholars referring to such as proto-metamodern), my own precept regarding metamodernism as a structure of feeling is that it is distinctly post-postmodern and must be understood as part of the epistemological chronology as defined in Chapter 1. Whilst elements that we might consider part of the metamodern structure of feeling now may, indeed, be seen in traditional, modern and postmodern works, metamodernism as a collection of aesthetics or strategies is only viably understood when historically situated against that which came before. Just as the rejection of the fourth wall in postdramatic theatre is only possible through the construction of the fourth wall within the modernism that preceded it, metatheatrical elements in postmodernist work differ from metatheatrical elements in Shakespearean drama *because* of the modernism that directly preceded postmodernism, as does the metatheatricality within metamodern theatre subsequently. Building on Paillard and Milanezi's cataloguing of metatheatrical elements (2021: 1) and Richard Hornby's understanding of five devices of metatheatre – the play within the play, self-reference, the ceremony within the play, role-playing within the role and literary and real-life reference (Hornby 1986: 32) – I proffer that

a metamodern use of metatheatrical elements is based on three specific modalities: self-reflexivity, performatism and beyondness.

In the first instance, metamodern metatheatre absorbs Dember's notion of metamodern (or hyper-) self-reflexivity, which was defined in detail in Chapter 2. In brief, postmodern reflexivity draws attention to the work being a piece of work to highlight that it is therefore not to be trusted (Dember 2018), whilst metamodern self-reflexivity draws attention to the fact that the work was created and is being experienced in order to centre the felt experience of the creator(s) and/or audience/participants, respectively. This can occur through a more human-centric self-reflexivity that focuses on the writer, performer, company or individual audience members (see sections on The Gramophones, Poltergeist or YESYESNONO in Chapter 5) or one that focuses on the act of performance or the piece itself (see sections Arinzé Kene or Middle Child in Chapter 5). Either enables a centring of the felt experience of the piece – whether in highlighting the humanity behind the creative team or in highlighting the realities of the construct of the performance. In this sense, a metamodern, self-reflexive metatheatricality serves to highlight, support or develop the experience of the overarching sensibility of felt experience.

Secondly, a metamodern metatheatricality absorbs Raoul Eshelman's notion of performatism through Dember's understanding of this as one of many methods within metamodernism rather than, as Eshelman originally proposed, an overarching cultural structure of feeling. Whilst the ostension (the act of demonstrating and not just describing a fictional world) of theatre reveals its duplexity (cf. Eversmann 2004: 141), because 'theatre is simultaneously produced and received, it contains two frames: that of the fictional and that of the actual' (Krüger 2016: 244), a metamodern performatist framing works to, in some ways, reveal several 'fictional' levels working in tandem. Savyna translates the artistic technique of placing a smaller copy of an image within itself – the *mise en abyme* or 'placement in abyss' – to a performance context through her analysis of Tim Crouch's *The Author* (2009), in that the actual play that the audience experience in Crouch's production is about 'the process of creating [a fictional] play and its further reception by the audience' (Savyna 2021: 71). She labels this initial, outer level the 'semantic frame of the play' (ibid.) and the fictional play within the play – the *mise en abyme* – as 'its "heart", the narrative on which all the thematic layers are strung' (ibid.). This reflects the double framing within Eshelman's performatism which consists initially of an outer (sometimes fantastical) frame requiring a commitment to a (performance of) belief from the audience. In *The Author*, this outer – or semantic – frame is that of the audience engaging with 'Tim' – played by Crouch – as the author of a *fictional* play. As Dember explains, this outer frame forces the audience 'to make a

choice to buy into all of it, if they are going to commit to engaging the work' (Dember 2018) within the second, central frame – its 'heart', as according to Savyna – inside which is a narrative that an audience can unironically engage with after accepting the logic of the initial outer frame.

Nathan Sibthorpe presents a similar understanding of metatheatrical levels within contemporary theatre in his analysis of Charlie Kaufman's play *Hope Leaves the Theater* (2005). Intentionally emulating the act of recording a radio drama, the piece sees the cast sat on stools, delivering their lines into microphones accompanied by live sound effects performed by an onstage foley artist. For Sibthorpe, the levels of (metatheatrical) narrative in this production can be understood as a series of three concentric circles, starting with the outer level A, inside of which sits Level B, inside of which sits Level C (Sibthorpe 2018: 24) (see Figure 4.2). The innermost Level, C, represents the 'play within the play' of Kaufman's production – 'a whimsical narrative about a man and a woman meeting in an elevator, performed by Meryl Streep and Peter Dinklage' (ibid.). This level of narrative is continuously interrupted by Level B, in which 'Streep and Dinklage play scripted renderings of themselves and Hope Davis plays Louise, a member of the audience' (ibid.). Level A, in this sense, indicates the 'real' audience experiencing the 'real' production, the felt experience of which is heightened by the narrative construction of the continually interwoven Levels of B and C. As Sibthorpe explains, *Hope Leaves the Theatre* focuses an audience's engagement on their own experience of watching/listening to the piece by engaging them in a story of an audience member 'who struggles to encounter a theatre work' (ibid.: 25). Sibthorpe argues that this 'gives dramaturgical relevance to the world of A, which represents the actual reality of our given circumstances as an audience and the nature of the real performance encounter. Where A is a real event, B is a dramatization of that event. The relationship between B and C [then] becomes an allegory for the relationship between A and B' (ibid.). Additionally, by placing the character of Louise (Level B), played by Hope (Level A) in the actual audience (also Level A), Sibthorpe argues that the audience then occupies a position of impossible fictionality – 'a paradoxical state of being [in which] we become hyper-aware of the activity we are engaged in, and must intellectually assert our presence as a genuine receiver of the work' (ibid.). In Chapter 5, we will see how companies such as Poltergeist exhibit this form of metamodern metatheatricality in ways that – in contrast to the bleakness of Crouch's attempt to remind an audience that 'we have lost a thread of responsibility for what we choose to look at' (Crouch 2009) through a harrowing inner-frame story about child abuse – attempt to centre the elements of joyful connection within the felt
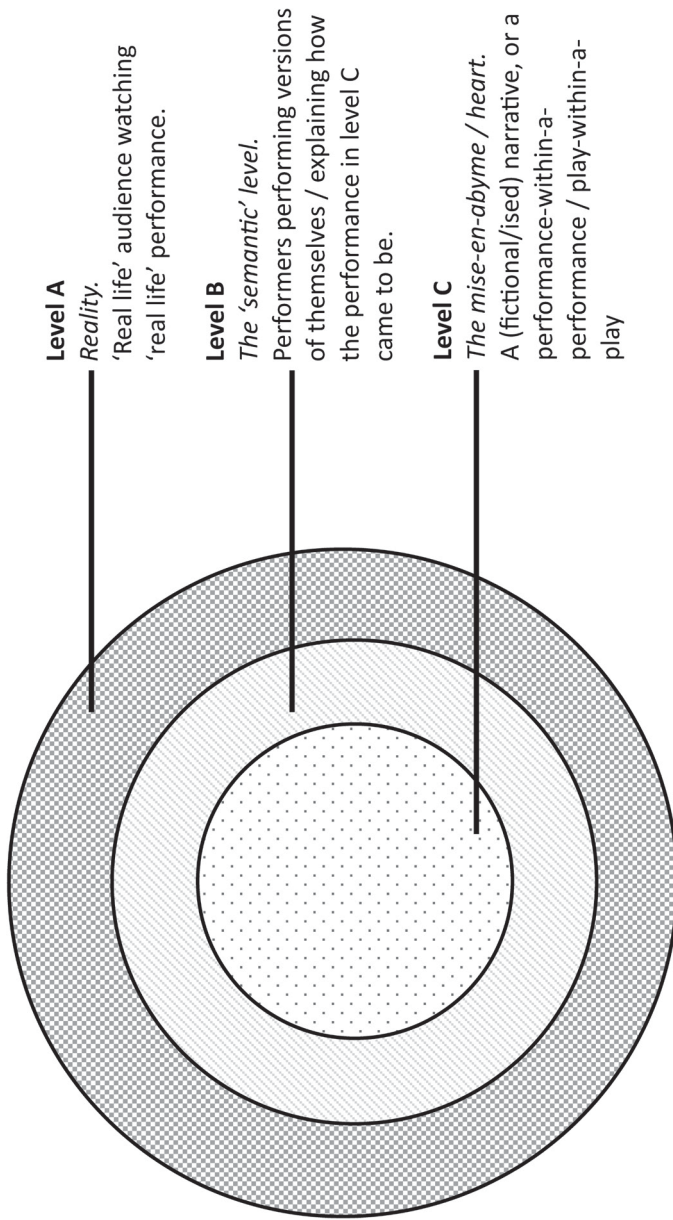
Level A
Reality.
'Real life' audience watching 'real life' performance.

Level B
The 'semantic' level.
Performers performing versions of themselves / explaining how the performance in level C came to be.

Level C
The mise-en-abyme / heart.
A (fictional/ised) narrative, or a performance-within-a-performance / play-within-a-play

Figure 4.2 Diagram illustrating levels of metatheatricality in metamodern theatre, Combining elements of Eshelman's Performatism (2008), Sibthorpe's levels of narrative (2018) and Savyna's metatheatricality (2021)

Source: Produced by the author with kind permission from Nathan Sibthorpe.

experience of both the audience and that of a company's attempt to develop such a self-reflexive piece. This is not, however, to say that such shows are purely altruistic, joyful or hopeful in comparison to Crouch's *The Author*, although some will trade in the creation and manipulation of such feelings at points through their application of metatheatre – as will become clear.

Finally, in reference to metamodernism's prefix 'meta' referring to being between, betwixt and beyond, Nina Mitova offers a forward movement in metamodern theatre studies from the inbetweenness afforded by oscillation and contends that 'performances that have *gone beyond* their boundaries in terms of materiality and physicality and have changed their structure with regards to the time, space and agency of theatre [should] be considered metamodern' (Mitova 2020: 2; emphasis in original). For Mitova, this is particularly acute in the use of technology as both a tool to extend the traditional stage space into the virtual sphere and in productions staged entirely outside of the boundary of a theatre space or the boundary of a physical space – with such theatre '*going beyond* the physical dimension of the "here and now", as the "here" becomes a virtual location and the physical presence of the audience is not the same place as it would be in a theatre setting' (ibid.: 36; emphasis in original). I appropriate aspects of Mitova's focus on the beyondness of theatre within this second aesthetic strategy – metatheatre – in that I propose that a metamodern approach to metatheatrical elements can reach 'beyond' the boundaries of a performance without necessarily leaving the boundaries of the performance space whether physically or virtually. As Mitova contends, 'Paradoxically, bypassing the boundaries can actually enhance the awareness of the boundary itself' (ibid.: 2) – hence, by extending an audience's focus outside of the boundaries of the performance or performance space through a metatheatrical awareness of the construction of the performance, the focus also reflects back towards the limitations of the performance itself.

Storytelling

Anne Bogart's (2014) observance of a return to an interest in the power of stories and narrative within contemporary theatre, and the championing of a participatory, individualistic and political form of such, reflects the third aesthetic strategy of metamodern theatre detailed here – storytelling. Importantly, I want to clarify that I am specifically referring to the act of story*telling* and the use of *stories* within a performance, which is not synonymous with an interest in narrative drama or a return to centrality of dramatic narrative. As detailed in previous chapters, metamodern theatre does not remove itself from the postdramatic or return, naïvely, to modernist

or dramatic drama. Instead, what I am observing across contemporary theatre practice reflects Bogart's own observation of an interest in the efficacy of storytelling within a performance framework. This is a postdramatic-adjacent appreciation of stories in that a narrative need not be the central drive of a performance but, in contrast to the 'traditional' postdramatic 'levelling out' of theatrical aesthetics in which story or narrative either becomes one of many equally valid semiotic-driven foci or, in some cases, is removed entirely, storytelling (and a critique of storytelling) is a central tool in the metamodern theatre maker's arsenal. As we will see in Chapter 5, this may manifest in such a way that characters within a piece tell stories to each other or the audience but most prominently manifests as performers directly addressing the audience as (seemingly) themselves to tell them a story. Often these stories serve as a constituent part of the metatheatrical element – with works such as The Gramophones' *End to End* (2012) or Poltergeist's *Lights Over Tesco Car Park* (2018), for example, being built around the conceit that the company members of each show are telling the story of the development of that show to the audience throughout the show itself. Other times, this focus on storytelling relates to Bogart's own reflection on the power of stories and the act of storytelling in regard to the communication and communion that storytelling enables, despite an inherent awareness of the limitations of the storytelling medium and the complexities that come from the relationship between storyteller, story and audience that postmodernism revealed to us, as evident, for example, in Eager Spark's *Beneath the Albion Sky* (2013). In this sense, the use of storytelling in metamodern theatre embraces (a return to) the power of storytelling whilst also remaining critical about the act itself.

Reconstructive pastiche

As previously explored in Chapter 2, pastiche generally refers to cultural products that apply elements from different, possibly conflicting, genres. In a postmodern sense, these genres may be pitted in conflict to deconstruct or poke fun at each other (Le Cunff 2019) whilst metamodern, constructive pastiche follows Dember's tent-like structure, in which the separate elements lean against each other like tent-poles, 'holding up a structure that allows a kind of feeling that wouldn't otherwise be expressible' (ibid.). The use of reconstructive pastiche in metamodern theatre arises from the groundwork laid by Fuchs's death of character and Lehmann's 'theatre of states' (Lehmann 2006: 68) built from a 'deconstructive project from within the theatre [concluding in the fact that the] stage is no longer a site of mimetic transcription of action and dialogue; therefore, signification is not the be-all and end-all of performance [and] text and stage are set free from

one another' (Defraeye 2007: 214). Through postmodern deconstruction, theatre was broken down into constituent elements which could then be juxtaposed against each other in new and surprising ways but remain largely dissociative – with elements remaining in tension or opposition to each other. Reconstructive pastiche, in contrast, combines the constituent elements revealed through postmodern deconstruction in ways that enable a new space in which these otherwise inexpressible feelings would not be able to exist. Of course, reconstructive pastiche is essentially connected to the oscillation between modern and postmodern polarities within metamodern theatre and, in some ways, is a focussed subcategory of such an overarching sensibility. In Chapter 5, we will see how reconstructive pastiche is evident in works such as Middle Child's *All We Ever Wanted Was Everything* (2017).

(Post-immersive) dialogical engagement

I was reticent, here, to introduce another 'post-' prefix this late into the game, as it were. However, in discerning the following aesthetic strategy evident within the framework of metamodern theatre, it becomes clear that the term post-immersive, as defined by Jorge Lopes Ramos, Joseph Dunne-Howrie, Persis Jadé Maravala and Simon Bart in their *Post-Immersive Manifesto* (2020), best encapsulates the developments in the performer-participant relationship evident within metamodern theatre practice. The authors argue that the term immersive has become 'one of the most overused terms to describe theatre productions that aim to involve audiences in unconventional ways' (Lopes Ramos et al. 2020: 196). Whilst immersive theatre began life as an experimental form that disrupted both traditional theatrical boundaries and expected behaviours between audience and performers, it has 'become detached from its radical origins [and its] appropriation by advertisers, events promoters and PR consultants has rendered it a shorthand for selling tickets to elaborate and expensive fancy dress parties' (ibid.: 197). As an antithesis to this corporate appropriation, Lopes Ramos et al.'s *Post-Immersive Manifesto* seeks to address the fact that 'the term immersive was not enough' (ibid.: 199) to describe the efforts of companies creating work outside of this corporate appropriation of immersion, as the term is now synonymous with 'irresponsible and poorly conceived practice, and in fact was risking alienating audiences from theatre for life' (ibid.). The authors propose that new forms of immersive practices are being developed that move beyond the neoliberal takeover of immersive work and are therefore *post*-immersive. These practices 'validate intimacy, tenderness, empathy and care over immersive spectacles' (Lopes Ramos et al. 2020: 196), valuing the act of connection and communion between participants or performer

and participants over spectacle. At their core is 'human social interaction and the constitution of a kind of performance collective, a temporary community' (ibid.: 204) that should be open to the crucial role that diversity and inclusivity of audiences should play in the creation of these communities – a contrast to the privileged few able to afford tickets to an immersive production staged by the popular, if expensive, companies such as Secret Cinema or Punchdrunk.

The concept of the post-immersive builds on Grant Kester's dialogical art as 'collaborative, and potentially emancipatory, forms of dialogue and conversation' (Kester 2005: 154) within an artistic product. Essentially, whilst dealing with forms of immersion and embodiment, Lopes Ramos et al.'s post-immersion is concerned with the immersive quality of dialogical interaction between participants and performers. As such, Kester's understanding of an aesthetic that is 'based on the possibility of a dialogical relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience' (Kester 2009), the boundaries and definitions of which might be 'relatively intuitive or unconscious' (Kester 2009), reflects the core of the post-immersive drive. Kester references Mikhail Bakhtin's (1982) theories surrounding dialogical interchange being an open system that is less combative and more open to facilitating cooperation than a more dominant dialectical (closed) exchange (Sennet 2012). Dialogical art aims to categorize what Kester observed as an 'emergence of a body of contemporary art practice concerned with collaborative, and potentially emancipatory, forms of dialogue and conversation' (Kester 2005: 2). He describes the emergence of this shift as occurring within the mid-1990s, highlighting particular works that 'solicit participation and involvement so openly' (ibid.). Marissia Fragkou suggests that such an '"affective turn" towards relations of intimacy and relationality' (Fragkou 2018: 184) within British theatre is inherently connected to the precarity of contemporary neoliberal structures. The proliferation, she indicates, of 'notions of responsibility, solidarity and care for Others' (ibid.) in such theatre is reactive to the 'neo-liberal narratives of "responsibilization"' (ibid.), indicating that such performance offers alternative narratives of responsibility and social solidarity in the public sphere. Grant Kester's use of Habermas's concept of the public sphere in his defining of dialogical art is reflective of such alternatives, in that he contends that such art works to curate a discursive space free of the 'coercion and inequality that constrain human communication in normal daily life' (Kester 2005: 4). In this way, Kester encapsulates Habermas's communicative action in which the 'very act of participating in these exchanges makes us better able to engage in discursive encounters and decision-making processes in the future' (ibid.). As Fragkou surmises, such theatres of 'intimacy and

relationality' may offer methods of 'transforming the shape of contemporary subjectivities' (Fragkou 2018: 185).

As an aesthetic strategy throughout metamodern theatre, dialogical engagement that reflects the post-immersive drive is evident in a levelling out of the performer-audience/participant hierarchy, with a drive towards co-creation and communal solidarity through an immersion in the dialogical act. Reflecting the paradoxical positioning of other aesthetics, this drive is inherently altruistic whilst also being aware of the limitations of the construction or medium that the engagement sits within. Such engagement is post-immersive, as it develops alongside and beyond the corporate appropriation of immersive theatre's radical origins and, through this, looks in towards the felt experience and felt sincerity of the participants involved. In Chapter 5, such an aesthetic is clearly seen in Hidden Track's *Drawing the Line* (2019) or Nathan Ellis's *work.txt* (2022), with the main precept of this dialogical engagement not only reflecting a focus on the felt experience of communion and communication through post-immersive participatory structures but also reflecting Freinacht's claim that we will 'come closer to the truth if we create better dialogues' (Freinacht 2017: 4).

The quirky

Borrowing predominantly from film scholarship, I appropriate the term quirky in order to attempt to describe an aesthetic throughout metamodern theatre that shares certain similarities to the use of the term within contemporary film theory – chiefly by film scholar James MacDowell – to discern a metamodern structure of feeling that reflects an ironest sensibility within the visual and narrative structure of a film. MacDowell's use of the term quirky refers to 'a contemporary comedic sensibility that is intimately bound up with the tonal combination of "irony" and "sincerity"' (MacDowell 2012: 21). In response to what he sees as the lazy use of the word within film criticism (MacDowell 2010: 1), MacDowell has defined 'such a seemingly intangible thing' (ibid.: 2) via Susan Sontag's understanding of a sensibility (such as camp) being 'almost, but not quite, ineffable' (Sontag 1969: 267), through Raymond Williams's understanding of a structure of feeling and, inevitably, as a constituent part of the wider frame of metamodernism (MacDowell 2017). In film marketing, the use of the term quirky suggests that the film being advertized is something other than the 'norm' but 'not *so* unique as to discourage those who might be repelled by descriptions such as "strange" or "avant-garde"' (MacDowell 2010: 1; emphasis in original). MacDowell's developed use of the term, however, draws on how films labelled as quirky – including those by Wes Anderson, Greta Gerwig, Noah

Baumbach, Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze – combine various forms of comedy – including deadpan delivery, the comedy of embarrassment and an intermittent use of slapstick – with 'moments that come closer to melodrama [in such a way as to] form a comic address that invites us to remain removed from *and* emotionally engaged with the fiction, [to] view the fictional world as both artificial *and* believable' (MacDowell 2012: 8). In reference to Wes Anderson's distinct aesthetics, MacDowell describes a quirky landscape of 'static, flat looking, medium-long or long shots that feel nearly geometrically even, depicting isolated or carefully arranged characters, sometimes facing directly towards us, who are made to look faintly ridiculous or out-of-place by virtue of the compositions rigidity' (MacDowell 2010: 6). MacDowell draws distinct connections between the quirky as an aesthetic sensibility and the metamodern through a tension between the flatness of these aesthetics and the depth of emotions portrayed, arguing that

> the common mixture of comic registers means we can simultaneously regard a film's fictional world as partly unbelievable, laugh at its flat treatment of melodramatic situations and still be invited to be moved by characters' misadventures. Its aesthetic can both seem self-conscious and promote an appreciation of naïveté. Evoking innocence allows many films to both recapture some of the enthusiasm that comes with childhood and simultaneously remind us that it must finally remain forever out of reach. Together these elements help create a tone that exists on a knife-edge of comic detachment and emotional engagement – or, put in another, blunter, way: a conflicted tone dealing in tensions between 'irony' and 'sincerity'. (MacDowell 2012: 10)

As I define metamodern theatre in relation to the postmodern theatre that came before (and continues to exist alongside) it, MacDowell defines the quirky's particular application of sincerity by drawing a distinction 'between these movies and another strain of 1990s and 2000s indie film regularly discussed in terms of its irony and cynicism' (MacDowell 2012: 11). He refers to the work of directors such as Todd Solondz and Quentin Tarantino in regard to this, using the popular term for such work – 'smart cinema' – to define 'one cinematic manifestation of the postmodern as one especially prevalent late twentieth-century structure of feeling … a central characteristic of which is the ironic tone' (MacDowell 2012: 12). In contrasting quirky films to those of the 'smart cinema' sensibility, MacDowell inescapably links the aesthetics of the quirky to the ironic-sincere oscillation of metamodernity in contrast to 'smart' cinema's singular focus on (postmodern) irony. In a theatrical sense, the filmic aesthetics of the quirky don't necessarily translate altogether to the

stage. The aesthetic language of film and the language of the stage contain inherently different methods of visual storytelling, for instance. Importantly, I am not suggesting that all metamodern theatre looks like a Wes Anderson film – although a stage production that emulated the quirkiness of Anderson's ironic-sincere aesthetics would, of course, most likely feel metamodern, and examples of Anderson-style theatrical productions (*Rushmore* 1998; *Moonrise Kingdom* 2012) and theatrical aesthetics (*The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar* 2023) are littered throughout his films. Rather, I see elements of the aesthetics utilized in the metamodern projects in this volume reflecting, or working in tandem with, the quirky as a sensibility predominantly defined within film theory. Alexander Legget is perhaps the only scholar to have applied the term quirky in a dramaturgical context. However, Legget's application specifically relates to access and inclusion within approaches to dramaturgy – proposing a form of 'quirky dramaturgy [that can be] utilized alongside access policies to make more effective and holistic legislation for autistic people' (Leggett 2023: 3), and his application of the term has little relation to the term as defined by MacDowell. I apply quirky towards the theatre in a different way to Leggett, therefore – as an attempt to describe some of the comedic and aesthetic choices utilized by companies creating metamodern theatre in ways that reflect MacDowell's understanding of quirky as both a visual aesthetic and comedic choice, which enhances an ironic sincerity by somehow augmenting the audience's felt experience in connecting with characters and performers *through* a distancing or dampening effect created *by* the quirky elements. I see this as inherently tied to the generational identity of the millennial theatre makers developing this work. Not only is millennial humour steeped in ironic-sincerity, which can be visualized and staged through an application of the quirky, in that such a sensibility allows us to be both silly and serious – as per Saltz (2010) – at the same time. But, as explained in Chapter 3, a number of the productions and millennial companies that I am concerned with throughout this volume are working with very limited or precarious budgets. This lack of budget, and the requirements of fringe productions to be able to either set up and strike within a small black-box space at speed straight after the previous show and before the incoming one, or to be able to be packed away into a tour van (if you're lucky) or carshare/bus/train (if you're not), means that a lo-fi, minimalist aesthetic becomes the go-to design for such companies. Whilst, of course, the companies in this volume are not interested in a modernist authentic re-creation of real-life onstage, such budgetary and practical limitations also lead to inventive, minimalist approaches to staging which, often, then lead to a silly-but-serious staging that is analogous to MacDowell's understanding of the quirky in cinema – as a constituent element of metamodernism.

As will become clear in Chapter 5, The Gramophones' *End to End* (2012) and *Wanderlust* (2014), Feat.Theatre's *The Welcome Revolution* (2018) and Poltergeist's *Lights Over Tesco Car Park* (2018) all make use of the quirky as an aesthetic in ways that echo MacDowell's understanding of the sensibility's ability to enable an 'overarching tone of defiant affirmation, commitment and sincere engagement in the face of an implicitly acknowledged potential for despair, disillusionment or ironic detachment' (MacDowell 2017: 39) through an aesthetic oscillation between the silly and the serious.

Themes

So far, this chapter has focused on how the structure of performances, rather than content, exhibit metamodern elements. Specifically, it has concentrated on the overall aesthetic sensibility evidenced throughout the form of such pieces and the constituent structural elements that coalesce together to construct such sensibilities. The aesthetic strategies are, however, not strictly limited to being evident only within the staging, form or structure of such performances. An oscillation between irony and sincerity, for instance, can also be evident in a metamodern performance's text. Whilst a shift from a postmodern to a metamodern theatre is predominantly a shift in terms of aesthetic and methodological approaches to the theatrical form, there are certain intertextual topics or narrative themes that connect several of the productions exhibiting this metamodern trend. Such themes may not be explicit within the arrangement of a metamodern performance but, instead, are revealed in the content of such. The following is not a comprehensive list of all the themes addressed within the broad umbrella of metamodern theatre, and it is important to note that a performance could still feel metamodern even if it didn't address any of the following themes. However, the inherent connection of such thematic interests to the wider structures of feeling of metamodernism and the millennial mean that the inclusion of such themes throughout the text of a performance reinforces the inherent association between such performances and the metamodern as a wider cultural structure of feeling.

The as if

As Luke Turner states, the metamodern structure of feeling includes a certain pragmatic idealism, or informed naïveté (Turner 2015), which Seth Abramson expresses as '*knowing* your optimism is naive — but plowing on anyway' (Abramson 2018; emphasis in original). Within the metamodern paradigm,

Abramson contends, we understand that our metanarratives are 'insufficient, they're fragile, they're false – but they help us' (Owls at Dawn 2017) and that, now that we have moved beyond the deconstruction of metanarratives through postmodernism, the metamodern paradigm is 'very much about living *as if* something were true' (Owls at Dawn 2017). Vermeulen and van den Akker appropriate Immanuel Kant's 'negative' idealism (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010: 5) towards their understanding of the metamodern structure of feeling regarding this paradoxical 'as if' (performance of) belief, summarizing his philosophy of history as 'as if' thinking – in that 'each … people, as if following some guiding thread, go toward a natural but to each of them unknown goal' (Kant 1963: 12).

A further application of Kant, specifically transcendental aesthetics, allows for deeper understanding of the levels of belief in unreality, or in structures that we know to be false (or at least frail) as an observable trend within post-postmodern culture. Such thinking is reflective of certain, contemporary political trends that Vermeulen (Krumsvik & Co. 2017) and Turner (2015), amongst others, have ascribed to metamodern modes of thought, in their application of the concept of a form of truth that is somehow, as yet, unobtainable. In this respect, Kantian aesthetics can be used as a lens to comprehend particular, metamodern shifts within contemporary politics, including the rise of agonistic, populist discourse. In *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant posited that we can never understand or experience *true* reality due to the limitations of our biological senses:

> All our intuition is nothing but the representation of phenomena; the things that we see are not by themselves what we see … It remains completely unknown to us what objects may be by themselves and apart from the receptivity of our senses. (Kant 1934: 151)

According to Kant, the structures we perceive to exist, therefore, are mediated through how our own understanding and senses have developed over time. 'When the mind looks at the world, it has no choice but to view it with ideas that are built into the mind' (Blumenau 2001), such as spatial and temporal distance. Kant termed this act of perceiving *Anschauungen*, literally translated as views or opinions, but a more appropriate interpretation would be tools of understanding. Whatever we are truly viewing, however, cannot be experienced outside of the *Anschauungen* as the act of viewing dictates that the 'view' is mediated through the 'tools'. Bertrand Russell (1998: 624) uses an analogy that encapsulates Kant's *Ding an sich* by imagining a world in which everybody wore blue tinted glasses. In such a world, the layman would posit that the universe was blue, but the

philosopher, upon realizing that they wore blue glasses, would posit that they could not know whether or not the world *was* blue, as the experience was always mediated through the spectacles. In Radchenko's cataloguing of metamodern aesthetics, he draws distinct links between the 'as if' and Foster Wallace's new sincerity:

> Besides the wish to have feelings and act according to them, the 'new sincerity' leads to the belief (mostly blind) in the existence of the transcendent and unreachable truth somewhere beyond the horizon of the known. This belief is the motivator for acting and searching, *as if* it were possible to find the truth. It motivates the metamodernist despite the postmodern understanding that the search is fruitless, so the metamodernist is *ready to believe*. This determines the naïveté of the metamodernist – faith in spite of reason. (Radchenko 2019: 498; emphases in original)

Such endeavouring towards a seemingly unreachable goal is inherently reflective of certain tendencies within the metamodern structure of feeling. If each of us proceed through life 'as if' there is a purpose despite knowing – whether at face value or deep down – that 'there is no purpose in history or nature' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010: 14), we are, in essence, believing in structures that we know not to be true – a key component in how the metamodern structure of feeling differs from the postmodern. Kant's concept of the unreachable truth, then, aids us in understanding specifically contemporary *political* endeavours occurring as part of a post-postmodern paradigm in their reapplication of specific metanarratives as part of what Luke Turner describes as a 'climate [of] yearning for utopias, despite their futile nature' (Turner 2015). This unexpected 'figure of utopia' has reappeared 'across the arts in the past few years, often alongside a renewed sense of empathy, reinvigorated constructive engagement, a reappreciation of narrative and a return to craftswo/manship' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015b: 55). This (re)emergence of utopia and concerns surrounding the notions of authenticity and truth are inherently connected to the political mindset of the millennials

> [who] know too much of today's exploits, inequalities and injustices to take any meaningful decision, let alone position themselves on a convenient subject position, yet they appear – from the political left to the political right – to be united around the feeling that today's deal is not the deal they signed up for during the postmodern years. (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015b: 58)

This 'sense of … hope' (van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017: 8) is present in a range of contexts and phenomena alongside the political, 'without being reducible to any of them in particular' (ibid.). Such utopic rhetoric is seen within both ends of the political, and populist, spectrum; in the United States, Trump offered to 'make America great again', whilst, in the UK, Brexit was a similarly symbolic offer of a 'return' to a false-nostalgic (cf. Campanella and Dassù: 2019) fake narrative of Britain's own 'former glory'. Metastasizing throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, and continuing to build beyond it, we also see the popularization of a range of conspiracy theories feeding, in part, on the public's desire for clarity and culpability in the face of chaos and multiplicity – with conspiracies such as QAnon permeating populist discourse and political parties across the Global North, and Lewis et al. (2018) noting the transferal of populism from the fringes of the political debate to the mainstream as inherently connected to the period of the 2000s, alongside the shift from the post- to the metamodern. Brexit, Momentum, Occupy, Trump and Corbyn are all exemplary of a politics of *it can be different* (cf. Krumsvik & Co: 2017) manifest in populist rhetoric focused on a strive for forms of utopia outside of the current construction. These politics, and other displays of these impossible (and often nostalgic) utopic ideologies across popular culture, such as the development of the literary genre of solar punk, or the contemporary relevance of magical realism (van den Akker 2017: 22), are 'as diverse in their aims as they are similar in their libidinal investments, modes of organization and, indeed, utopian longings' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015b: 58).

As an intertextual theme, a fascination with the 'as if' is threaded throughout several of the works in this volume, whether this is evident in work that deals with the complexity of (im)possible utopias such as Hidden Track's *Drawing the Line* (2019), or utilizes magical realism within a performatist framing such as Eager Spark's *Beneath the Albion Sky* (2013), or politically charged work that strives for change through the power of theatre *as if* it has the ability to effect meaningful societal impact despite being aware of the limited possibilities of such effects such as Feat.Theatre's *The Welcome Revolution* (2018).

Lost futures

Mark Fisher's concept of lost futures (2014), as discussed in Chapter 3, builds upon Jacques Derrida's hauntology (1994), though which Derrida initially refers to the paradoxical positioning of (conceptual) ghosts existing at once both within the past and the present. Derrida bases this understanding partially through a theatrical lens, linking the expectant tension in the opening of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's opening of *The Communist Manifesto* – 'Ein

Gespenst geht um in Europa – das Gespenst des Kommunismus' (Marx and Engels 1848: 1) – 'a ghost is haunting Europe – the ghost of Communism' – to the similarly ghost-focused, expectant tension at the opening of *Hamlet*. As Derrida explains, in two similarly 'rotten State[s], everything begins by the apparition of a spectre' (Derrida 1994: 2), whether manifest as Hamlet's father's ghost or the ghost of a failed Communism. This similarity persists through the act of

> waiting for this apparition [or these apparitions]. The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated: this, the thing ('this thing') will end up coming. The *revenant* is going to come. It won't be long. But how long it is taking. Still more precisely, everything begins in the imminence of a *re*-apparition, but a re-apparition of the spectre as apparition for the *first time in the play*. (ibid., emphasis in original)

Derrida builds on this interconnection by referring explicitly to the Prince of Denmark's proclamation that 'time is out of joint' (Hamlet I.v.189) and neologizes the word hauntology in his problematizing of Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of the end of history (Fukuyama 1989) – the declaration that asserted the dominance of Western Capitalism and, therefore, the death of ideology. Whilst, as Magnus and Cullenberg describe in their editors' introduction to the 2006 edition of Derrida's text, in 'the wake of the orgy of self-congratulations which followed the 1989 crumbling of the Berlin Wall [and] the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union [… the] contagious optimism was best exemplified by the confidence and popularity of Francis Fukuyama's claim' (Derrida 1994: vii). But, the pair assert, at 'the same time many of us felt a vague sense of foreboding, a haunted sense that international changes of such magnitude were as likely to result, at least initially, and perhaps for a long time to come, in transformations as malign as they are benign' (ibid.). Whilst I have touched on Jameson's understanding of a waning of affect (1991) through postmodernity regarding the subsequent return of (a strive towards) affect within metamodernity (Gibbons 2017), Jameson also connects, as Mark Fisher describes, the 'postmodern "waning of historicity" with the "cultural logical of late capitalism"' (Fisher 2014: 13). Fisher draws an inherent connection between Fukuyama's end of history, Derrida's hauntology and Jameson's waning of historicity when he describes a 'dyschronia' in reference to a feeling that culture has failed to progress and a system of simultaneous nostalgia and longing for unformed, and now seemingly impossible, futures as a kind of dominant sensibility – or structure of feeling – throughout, roughly, the first decade of the twenty-first century. 'This dyschronia', writes Fisher, or

> temporal disjuncture, ought to feel uncanny, yet the predominance of what [Simon] Reynolds calls 'retro-mania' means that it has lost any *unheimlich* charge: anachronism is now taken for granted. Jameson's postmodernism – with the tendencies towards retrospection and pastiche – has been naturalised. (Fisher 2014: 14)

Fisher describes this cultural stagnation throughout the turn of the millennium as a 'slow cancellation of the future [that] has been accompanied by a deflation of expectations' (ibid.: 8). The chronological complexity of Derrida's hauntology and Fisher's lost futures, in that the ghosts that are haunting contemporary culture are not simply based in past events but in events that did not – and now *cannot* – come to be, differentiates hauntology from pure nostalgia. The definitively British hauntological framework initially developed by Fisher, and taken forward by his contemporaries such as Alex Niven (2019), Andy Sharp (2020) and Matt Colquhoun (2020), shifts Derrida's hauntology towards a specifically British mindset based largely in the haunting of mid-to-late twentieth-century pop-culture sensibilities throughout the current period – due to, in part, the inability of contemporary (2000s–mid-2010s) popular culture to, according to Fisher, offer any meaningful progress: 'What has vanished', states Fisher, 'is … a virtual trajectory' (2014: 22) at a time in which culture has even 'lost its ability to grasp and articulate the present' (ibid.: 9).

In Chapter 3, I detailed how the millennial structure of feeling is moulded by this mourning for futures that can no longer come to be. Whilst Fisher's framework is largely based in the culture of his own Gen X contemporaries, the concept of lost futures is just as applicable to the general experience of the millennial generation in regard to our own specific issues of generational grief, nostalgia and hope/lessness, as well as the connection between an inescapable 'nostalgia for modernism' (Fisher 2014: 133) (albeit alongside an inherent postmodern scepticism) within metamodernism. The issue here, however, is the disjunct between Fisher's observation of a stagnation of cultural development and Vermeulen, van den Akker and their contemporaries' contention that the advent of the metamodern is evidence of a culture that is transcending beyond cyclical hauntology. Fisher argued that perhaps the inability for Britain's cultural output to move forward and offer new forms was because, despite 'all its rhetoric of novelty and innovation, neoliberal capitalism has gradually but systemically deprived artists of the resources to produce the new' (Fisher 2014: 15), acknowledging that the

> postwar welfare state and higher education maintenance grants constituted an indirect source of funding for most of the experiments

in popular culture between the 1960s and the 80s [and the] subsequent ideological and practical attack on public services meant that one of the spaces where artists could be sheltered from the pressure to produce something that was immediately successful was severely circumscribed. (ibid.)

This relates explicitly to the lost futurity of the artists of the millennial generation as their coming of age convened with the permacrisis. Fisher contrasts this contemporary precarity to how the cultural progression in London across the 1970s and early 1980s in the punk and postpunk scenes 'coincided with the availability of squatted and cheap property … since then, the decline of social housing, the attacks on squatting, and the delirious rise in property process have meant that the amount of time and energy available for cultural production has massively diminished' (ibid.: 15–16). Such analysis also holds true when applied directly to the UK theatre scene, as detailed in Chapter 3 in regard to UK theatre graduates working in an increasingly precarious economic situation. In contrast to Fisher's stagnation, however, the companies addressed in this volume offer evidence of work that moves beyond the postmodern practice of the late twentieth century – whilst continuing in some ways to engage with it – and also to make us of a melancholic nostalgia for modernist tendencies, too, paving the way for new forms that, simultaneously, embrace the old.

In the context of this volume, the theme of lost futures refers to Fisher's application of Derrida's hauntology within a British context but shifts this from Fisher's Gen X cultural melancholia to the generational scarring (Brown et al. 2017) of the millennials. We see this theme manifest in works that explicitly address this generation's being haunted by futures that did not come to be, such as Middle Child's *All We Ever Wanted Was Everything* (2017), or in works that address im/possible futures, such as YESYESNONO's *we were promised honey!* (2022). It is an inherently metamodern preoccupation, dealing, as it does, in a liminal space between, betwixt and beyond the past, present, and future in a desire for / belief in / mourning for things that have not (yet) come to pass. Whilst a positivistic desire for utopia, and for hopeful betterment, may be more advantageous in the face of the overwhelming convergence of contemporary crises – the rise of far-right populism and global heating, for instance – it seems a particularly paradoxical, and inherently millennial and metamodern, position to also face such utopic desire with a matching conviction in the inescapability of it all – remaining trapped within an oscillating hope/lessness in a reflection of Fisher's nod towards Wendy Brown's (1999) critique of a melancholic left that 'makes a virtue of its incapacity to act' (Fisher 2014: 24).

The desire for belonging

The final theme addressed in this guide (which of course is by no means an exhaustive list) is appropriated from Radchenko's cataloguing of metamodern narrative trends within contemporary literature and will become evident in the following analysis of Eager Spark's *Beneath the Albion Sky* (2013), Poltergeist's *Lights Over Tesco Car Park* (2018) and Arinzé Kene's *Misty* (2018). For Radchenko, several of the narrative themes that he associates with metamodernism – 'sincerity, the willingness to connect with another human being and to transmit feelings' (Radchenko 2019: 499) – all stem from the same desire 'to be a part of something more, to be bound with something' (ibid.). He refers to Nicoline Timmer's understanding of a post-postmodern syndrome as a contemporary, 'structural need for a 'we' (a desire for connectivity and sociality)' (Timmer 2010: 359). Whilst Dember (2023) asserts that metamodern aesthetic strategies stem from an overarching need to protect the solidity of (inner) felt experience, Radchenko, whilst not negating such an internal focus, also looks outwards. A metamodern 'contrast to the postmodern individuality and the wish to be remarkable [works to] avoid the chaos of postmodern deconstruction', states Radchenko, 'In the search for the unreachable truth … the metamodern character looks for sociality and for the possibility of belonging to any kind of system' (2019: 499). He refers to Hanzi Freinacht's assertion that metamodernism 'reintroduces hierarchies as a unit of analysis, as a reaction against the postmodern relativistic attitude stating that all hierarchies are bad' (Freinacht 2015). However, rather than espousing a (return to) highly problematic (and frankly dangerous) hierarchies – or the appropriation of the language of metamodernity onto the theoretical framework of stage theories or models of hierarchical complexity, as has been done by scholars building from Freinacht's theories – I understand this desire to belong as an individualistic attempt at finding or creating an identity, a strengthening of individual felt experience in relation to others. Whilst a rough postmodern understanding of such a challenge to find an identity may be crafted around the importance of individuality and 'sticking out from the crowd', a metamodern understanding of such a desire envelops the developments in online socialization over the past decade, in that it has become easier than ever to find and engage with like-minded people in a way that is no longer limited by geographical location, only by the ability to access the internet, through which both an individual and group identity can be forged. Therefore, Radchenko's assertion that the 'metamodern character needs the feeling of belonging' (Radchenko 2019: 500) is not in opposition to the postmodern ideology of individualism but enables a forging of identity both within and between these two spectrums. Whilst a teenager might be

able to carve out an individualistic identity within their school year through their niche interests, for instance, or even feel unfairly subjugated due to differences they can't control such as gender identity or sexuality, Web 2.0 now enables easy access to and engagement with like or like-minded individuals across the planet – enabling an existence at once individual in one area and part of a tribe in another. Of course, the ability for young members of the LGBTQ+ community currently living in traditionally conservative areas, for instance, to be able to have online access to groups of similar and supportive individuals is an important positive aspect of such a metamodern drive, but the far-right radicalization of young men through figures such as Andrew Tate and the interconnected incel movement, or the increasing number of millennials drawn deeper into the QAnon conspiracy theory through the 'in-on-a-secret' group mentality of Q-focussed online forums (Djupe 2021), is the other side of the same coin. Such is a healthy reminder that, whilst I am clearly advocating for the use of the term metamodernism and the terminology surrounding this, and in opposition to the appropriation of metamodernity towards a political ideology by Freinacht and their contemporaries, not everything 'metamodern' is inherently positive. It is simply metamodern.

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to provide a preliminary guide to the main 'markers' of the way in which I understand how the framework of metamodernism as a cultural structure of feeling – as initially crafted by Vermeulen and van den Akker and then developed through the subsequent elaboration of this framework by cultural scholars across fields other than theatre – can *also* be observed within contemporary theatre practices. By breaking this down into three separate areas, I have endeavoured to provide a streamlined guide to several metamodern elements as they relate both to theatre and their wider cultural context. The *overarching sensibilities* of oscillation and felt experience are the initial touchpoints in this – sensibilities that permeate the totality of a metamodern performance. The secondary *aesthetic strategies* are the elements that come together to create and strengthen the two overarching sensibilities; authenticity, storytelling, metatheatre, reconstructive pastiche, post-immersive dialogical engagement and the quirky being examples of how the contemporary theatre practices that make use of such strategies exemplify, are situated in and develop the metamodern. Finally, the three narrative *themes*, whilst obviously not requirements within metamodern theatre, offer examples of how the metamodern-adjacent preoccupations within the content of a piece also add to its overall situatedness within a metamodern framework. This 'spotters guide', as I have at once both somewhat optimistically and sarcastically labelled this section, is used as a framework in the following chapter in order

to unpack how the works of certain British millennial theatre companies over the past decade exemplify not only a generalized post-postmodern progression within contemporary theatre practice but are evidence that shifts in theatrical trends are also following a similar route as to that of other cultural products and practices which have already been understood as part of this particular structure of feeling – metamodernism. At this juncture, however, I turn to Dember's important reminder that, whilst I offer this 'spotter's guide' in some attempt to catalogue, combine and demarcate elements of contemporary theatre practice that can be understood to be part of the same general shift, 'not everybody who has an opinion even agrees on exactly how to define metamodernism in the first place' (Dember 2018). However, I feel that this act of attempting to discern this interconnectivity is important, despite the possible impossibility of or flaws inherent in such an attempt as, in Dember's words, 'there is something happening out there — art and film and music and culture [and theatre!] are being produced that share a certain sensibility [which] would exist regardless of what name we gave it, and regardless of whether or not we even named it at all' (Dember 2018).