

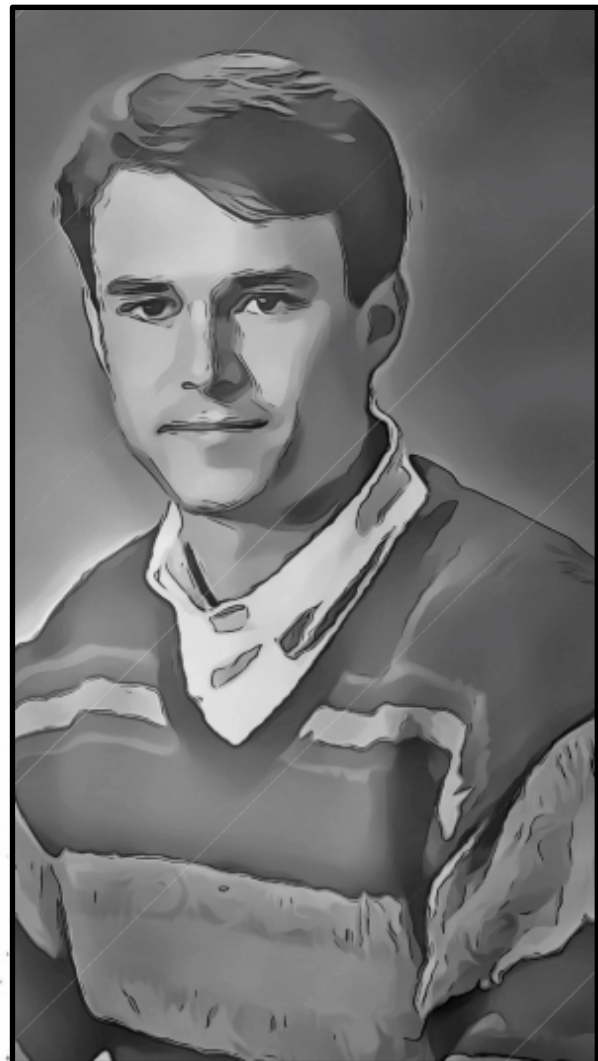
Graphic Narratives of the Affective Turn

British Millennial Authors and Metamodernism in the Post-2020 Era

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Abstract

This master's thesis explores the manifestation of the affective turn and metamodernism in a selection of five graphic novels by British millennial authors on the topic of mental health, published between 2021–2023. The literary analysis is approached through a close reading of the graphic novels. The analysis details portrayals of affect as experienced by the characters, and pays attention to features such as rationalisation, performance, and emotional distance and proximity. Manifestations of literary metamodernism are presented through different oscillations (irony and sincerity, and failure and utopia), the use of (visual) direct interior monologue and metamodern language utility, and the constructive nature of metamodern narratives. The graphic novel medium is considered as an affective medium, facilitating the presentation and transmittance of affect through the visual tools of “bleeding” and “colouring.” Finally, the graphic novel's hybrid form is presented to demonstrate its potential for the creation of metamodern art, for example by using its position between comics and literature, and the tension between showing and telling. The analysis demonstrates that the selected graphic novels present immersive narratives that prioritise affects, emotions, sincerity, human connection, hopefulness, and an ethical consciousness. As the first study on graphic novels in a context of the affective turn and metamodernism, this thesis offers insight into the position of graphic narratives in these respective discourses, and the scope of literary metamodernism.

Key words: Affective turn, metamodernism, metamodern affect, graphic novels, graphic narratives, millennial authors, British literature, mental health novel.

Preface

This thesis presents my concluding research project for the MA Literary Studies, with the specialisation Literature and Society, at Radboud University. The inspiration for this research question stems from the combination of two courses I attended during my MA program: Narrativity: Shaping Perspectives (Dr. Chris Louttit and Dr. Doro Wiese), and Change: Metamodernism (Dr. Dennis Kersten and Dr. Usha Wilbers). Will McPhail's graphic novel *In.* (2021) grabbed my attention during our class discussion in the Narrativity course, and I recognised thematical similarities with the metamodern structure of feeling. Hence, the idea for my thesis was born.

I would like to express my appreciation to my thesis advisor, Dennis Kersten, for both introducing metamodernism to me and guiding me during my thesis research. Your guidance and expertise have been invaluable throughout this process, and your enthusiasm about the topic was contagious. Thank you for your time, advice, and the entertaining conversations.

I would also like to thank Doro Wiese for the Narrativity course, and for agreeing to be the second reader for my thesis. Your feedback on the thesis proposal has helped me tremendously to get a better understanding of the direction for this study, and I hope that you enjoy reading the final product.

I hope that this work contributes to the discourses on literary metamodernism, the affective turn in the humanities, and the position of graphic novels as a hybrid medium and inspires further research in the fields of literary studies and comic studies.

Nathan de Waard

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Chapter 1: Introduction, Definitions, and Method

1.1 Introduction

Graphic novels have gained increasing recognition and scholarly interest in the last two decades. The hybrid medium, which displays literary qualities in addition to its comics form, shows a distinctive ability to convey complex emotions and societal nuances. Graphic novel authors employ the medium to show and tell personal stories, demonstrated for example by the steady growth of the graphic memoir genre since the late 1980s, when the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986) was published. The graphic novel genre has granted artists a unique way to bring together visual artistry and narrative storytelling and offers the reader the chance to be deeply emerged in the narrative.

In literary theory, the discourses on the end of postmodernism and the affective turn shape the perception of social, cultural, and political circumstances, and the treatment of these themes in contemporary literature. What succeeds postmodernism has not been decided unanimously, but the concept of metamodernism has been gaining ground as its successor since the 2010 publication of "Notes on metamodernism" by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. Concurrently, the affective turn took place in the humanities, and in 2010 *The Affect Theory Reader* was published by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, bringing together significant work on affect theory. These two theoretical concepts shape the background for literary studies in the early 2020s and will be treated in relation to the graphic novel medium for the first time in this thesis.

In this introduction, I will present the questions that will guide this study, to explore how graphic novels relate the affective turn and the metamodern structure of feeling. Additionally, I will expand on the research relevance, and end the introduction with an outline of the chapters to come.

1.1.1 Research questions and hypotheses

The research question central to this thesis is: how do post-2020 graphic novels by British millennial authors contribute to the metamodern structure of feeling that is associated with the affective turn? I have formulated this question on the basis of thematical patterns that I encountered during my research on contemporary graphic novels and metamodernism, and the previously established link between the millennial generation and affective literature, presented for example by Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse.¹ The affective turn provides a theoretical background for research in the humanities and is part and parcel of the metamodernism theory, as affect is recognised as an important feature of metamodern art. In order to answer the main question, I pose three sub questions.

The first sub question specifically focuses on the affect: how do the selected graphic novels reinforce the affective turn? The second question zooms in on metamodernism and asks: which storytelling techniques are used in the graphic novels to create an emotionally immersive graphic novel in accordance with the metamodern structure of feeling? Finally, the third sub question attends to the graphic novel medium: how does the graphic novel medium fit into the metamodern structure of feeling?

Through these questions, I expect to find that the affective turn can be seen in the graphic novels through an interest in and attention for human emotions, interactions, and experiences that evoke affective responses. In addition, I expect the visuals of the graphic novels to support the affective nature of the narratives and increase the immersive potential of the graphic novels. Turning to the metamodern structure of feeling, I expect that the graphic novels are in conversation with the modernist and postmodernist literary traditions, displaying (adapted) features of both traditions. Some will be more directly visible, such as the stream of consciousness technique, while other characteristics might be more hidden or strongly adapted

¹ Hans Demeyer, and Sven Vitse, *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel: de romans van de millennialgeneratie* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

to fit the metamodern structure of feeling. Furthermore, I expect the graphic novels to display a certain hopefulness in line with the tendency of British metamodern novels. Finally, I expect the graphic novel medium to be ideally suited for the creation of affective and metamodern literature, due to its hybridity and immersive potential. Through these different characteristics, the post-2020 graphic novels by British millennial authors will be demonstrated to reinforce the affective turn in literature and establish a type of metamodern graphic novel.

1.1.2 Relevance

In this section I will outline the relevance of the study. Firstly, the answer to my proposed research question would help to further establish the concept of metamodernism in literary studies. Since no prior research has been conducted into graphic novels in the context of the metamodern structure of feeling, there is a definite knowledge gap. Similarly, this study can further the understanding of affective literature, and specifically add new information on the potential for affective graphic novels. By introducing graphic novels to the discourses on metamodernism and affect theory, graphic novels can take a more established position in the humanities as a noteworthy medium to consider in academic research.

Additionally, there is an ongoing debate on the topic of graphic novel analysis, as the interdisciplinary field of comics studies is comprised of academics from different backgrounds who employ different methodological approaches. The literary studies approach that will be central in this research is not unprecedented for graphic novel research, and close reading has previously been used to analyse graphic novels, but the method is contested. With this study, I therefore also aim to demonstrate the applicability of close reading principles to graphic novel research, and how these can be adapted to fit the necessary visual analysis.

The societal relevance of the study pertains to gaining a deeper understanding of the current *Zeitgeist*, or “structure of feeling” as Vermeulen and Van den Akker use to describe

metamodernism.² Cultural products such as literature directly reflect societies' interests and values, and commonalities in different works can reveal the shared aspects of individual experiences. This helps to better understand the forces at work in society, and the effects they have on the people living in this society. With this study I specifically contribute to the understanding of the millennial generation, as the primary literature for this research project was written exclusively by millennial authors. As such, the topics, themes, and values in these graphic novels give insight into the elements that distinguish the millennial generation, or generation Y, from generation X and Z.

1.1.3 Outline

This thesis consists of five chapters. The introductory chapter contains an introduction to the topic and the research questions, followed by the hypotheses and research relevance. The second section of the first chapter provides the theoretical framework for the research and is followed by the methodology in the third section.

The analysis of the graphic novels is divided over the second, third and fourth chapter. Each chapter starts with the literature review of its respective topic, to facilitate the transition between the different topics and to prevent the need to return to the first chapter for the relevant background information. Chapter 2 first introduces the affective turn and affect theory, before moving to the analysis of the portrayals of affect in the selected graphic novels. This analysis is divided over three sections. The first section treats the contrast between emotional estrangement and direct affective provocation in the graphic narratives, this is followed by a section on the performance of codification and the chapter ends with a section on impulse excitation and distance in narratives.

² Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2 (November 15, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.3402/ljm.v2i0.5677>, 2.

Chapter 3 introduces the concept of metamodernism, the origins of the term, and its development since 2010. The analysis in the first two sections is based on two different metamodern oscillations: irony and sincerity, and failure and utopia. The third section focuses on two metamodern literary techniques: direct interior monologue and language utility. The final analytical section of the chapter details the constructive nature of the graphic narratives and emphasizes the metamodern ethical consciousness.

In chapter 4, the graphic novel is considered as a medium. The analysis starts with the presentation of two graphic narrative techniques, bleeding and colouring, which demonstrate the affective potential of the medium. The second part of the chapter is focused on the hybridity of the graphic novel, as a medium between literature and comics, and pays attention to the tension between showing and telling in the graphic narratives. Each of the analytical chapters ends with a chapter conclusion.

Chapter 5 presents the concluding chapter, starting with the key findings per chapter which answer the research questions. The second part of the conclusion consists of the critical reflection on the results and the hypotheses, the methodology, and the research approach, and mentions unexpected findings. This is followed by the discussion, which proposes subsequent research possibilities and delivers the concluding notes.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

In this section I will introduce the key concepts that form the theory for this thesis, based on the different questions that were posed in the introduction. I will provide the definitions for these concepts, which I will adhere to during the analyses of the graphic novels. I will start with metamodernism, as the overarching theoretical concept. This will be followed by the concept of metamodern affect. I will then turn to the concept of the graphic novel and explain my

working definition for this medium. Lastly, I will introduce the close reading method as a theoretical concept, to provide background information for my method of choice.

1.2.1 Metamodernism

The concept of metamodernism as it is theorised and employed today was introduced by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in “Notes on metamodernism.”³ Vermeulen and van den Akker explain metamodernism as a *structure of feeling*, a concept defined by Raymond Williams as “a mode of social formation, explicit and recognizable in specific kinds of art.”⁴ This structure of feeling has developed in a context of global crises; Vermeulen and van den Akker name the climate crisis, the uncontrollable financial system, and the unstable geopolitical structure.⁵ Following a time of postmodern deconstruction, Vermeulen and van den Akker note that metamodernism is more concerned with forms of reconstruction. This tendency towards reconstruction is paired with an ethical consciousness, which together form a reaction to the ongoing crises of our time that challenge our perception of the future.

In “Notes on metamodernism,” Vermeulen and van den Akker mention “*aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth, and metaxis” referring to the resurfacing of modernist aesthetics, a renewed interest in grand narratives, and the ethical awareness that metamodern art displays. The concept of metaxis is a defining characteristic for metamodernism. Taken from Plato, metaxis refers to a state of in-betweenness, central to the human experience.⁶ Further development of this term pays attention to the wide variety of polarities that human beings face in their lifetime, and the unending attempts to reach unreachable answers due to the nature of the divisions and contradictions we face. This idea is central to metamodernism, which moves

³ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism.”

⁴ Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling,” *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture*, ed. Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 25.

⁵ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 2.

⁶ Liz Falconer, “Metaxis: The Transition between Worlds and the Consequences for Education,” *UWE Bristol*, (lecture, 2011), <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/957720>.

between different poles such as modernism and postmodernism, commitment and detachment, and irony and sincerity; never settling but rather taking from both sides. Vermeulen and van den Akker define this movement as oscillation, which presents “a “both-neither” dynamic,”⁷ and position it as a key feature of metamodernism.

Speaking of metamodernism means talking about postmodernism’s successor. Vermeulen and van den Akker consider the postmodern as a “multiplicity of contradictory tendencies,”⁸ foreshadowing metamodern tendencies. They see the end of postmodernism in the return to a “modern enthusiasm,” establishing a break from postmodernism by moving away from its defining elements such as nihilism and irony. Alison Gibbons poses a similar argument in her article “Postmodernism is dead. What comes next?” As the title reflects, the departure from postmodernism is definite enough to look for its still unfamiliar successor. Gibbons offers several possibilities for the new “cultural logic,” such as altermodernism, cosmodernism, digimodernism, metamodernism, performatism, post-digital, post-humanism, and post-postmodernism.⁹ These different concepts have in common that their existence depends on the previous concepts of modernism and postmodernism. Metamodernism has developed a solid foundation through the work of other scholars, and Dina Stoev writes that it was a metamodern act from Vermeulen and van den Akker to establish metamodernism as the structure of feeling to replace postmodernism: they establish a grand narrative in modernist fashion.¹⁰ By doing this, they invited others to engage in the conversation. The publication of “Notes on metamodernism” became an experiment that would clarify whether other scholars would accept or refute such a proposed grand narrative. Thus, metamodern tendencies would either be confirmed or denied.

⁷ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on metamodernism,” 6.

⁸ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on metamodernism,” 4.

⁹ Alison Gibbons, “Postmodernism Is Dead. What Comes Next?” *TLS*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/postmodernism-dead-comes-next/>.

¹⁰ Dina Stoev, “Metamodernism or Metamodernity,” *Arts* 11, no. 5 (2022): 91, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts11050091>, 2.

Gibbons underlines how the cumulation of certain events has led to “an ensuing disillusionment with the project of neo-liberal postmodernity.”¹¹ Key events mentioned by multiple critics and repeated by Gibbons are the fall of the Berlin Wall, the turn of the century, 9/11 and terrorism, wars in the Middle East, and the global financial crisis. Gibbons refers to the “failure and unevenness of global capitalism as an enterprise,”¹² pointing to an important thematic characteristic of the metamodern cultural logic. Failure is thematically central, as described by James Brunton, “Failure for the metamodern artist becomes the center around which creative activity apparently revolves.”¹³ Vermeulen and van den Akker use examples of Wes Anderson’s film *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) and Bas Jan Ader’s fatal attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean to illustrate the diverging types of failure that metamodern artworks engage with. Brunton underlines that failure is not only expected, but to some extent desired.¹⁴

Vermeulen and van den Akker link the concept of failure to that of utopia, and the desire for both. Their article “Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism” speaks of a “utopian turn,”¹⁵ which they claim to be an essential element for the move from postmodernism to metamodernism. The utopian turn underlines the importance of hope for metamodernism; artists imagine utopia in an attempt to either escape or deal with the instability and uncertainty of the world.¹⁶ At the same time, utopia reinforces the notion of failure, by being unattainable. It is inherent to the concept of utopia that it does not exist and will thus never be reached. The pursuit of an unattainable goal is metamodernism’s fate, as it exists on account of different polarizations and the movement along those spectra.

¹¹ Gibbons, “Postmodernism Is Dead.”

¹² Gibbons, “Postmodernism Is Dead.”

¹³ James Brunton, “Whose (Meta)Modernism?: Metamodernism, Race, and the Politics of Failure,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 41, no. 3 (2018): 60, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.41.3.05>, 62.

¹⁴ Brunton, “Whose (Meta)Modernism?” 62.

¹⁵ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, “Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism,” *Studia Neophilologica* 87, no. sup1 (2014): 55–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2014.981964>, 64.

¹⁶ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism,” 64–65.

In order to classify literary work as metamodern, there must be tangible criteria that can be observed and analysed. Simon Radchenko's case study of videogame *The Last of Us* shows how a literary analysis can be employed to define a text's metamodern character. He tested metamodern characteristics and selected five of them for the purpose of literary analysis,¹⁷ offering a concise and useful overview that I will use as a guideline for my own analysis. The first characteristic he mentions is "oscillation, between modern and postmodern, old and new, skepticism and faith and other different poles."¹⁸ As showed in the literature review, many other dichotomies can and will be valuable additions to this list, as the very movement between two poles, whichever they may be, is the imperative. Secondly, Radchenko names metamodern affect, and additionally refers to the concept of New Sincerity; "a metamodern text is intended to be emotional and provoke emotions at the same time."¹⁹ This also forms the basis for the understanding of affect in literature that I will adhere to. The third feature on the list is language utility. The postmodern tendency "to hide behind the wall of text and symbols"²⁰ is replaced by a more straightforward use of language. Characters communicate more honestly and openly in line with the concept of metamodern affect. Fourthly, the will to belong is central to metamodern characters.²¹ They aim for connection and to be part of a group, community, or structure. Lastly, and according to Radchenko most importantly, metamodernism is constructive in its nature.²² To construct new truths, systems, sociality, and sincerity is the driving force behind the metamodern worldview. This is recognizable in metamodern literature by the search for solutions, and the presence of hope.

¹⁷ Simon Radchenko, "Metamodern Gaming: Literary Analysis of *The Last of Us*," *Interlitteraria* 25, no. 1 (2020), 246–259, <https://doi.org/10.12697/IL.2020.25.1.20>, 249.

¹⁸ Radchenko, "Metamodern Gaming," 249.

¹⁹ Radchenko, "Metamodern Gaming," 249.

²⁰ Radchenko, "Metamodern Gaming," 249.

²¹ Radchenko, "Metamodern Gaming," 249–250.

²² Radchenko, "Metamodern Gaming," 250.

To conclude, the different characteristics mentioned in this section outline the most important features of literary metamodernism for the analysis of text. Vermeulen and van den Akker provide the starting point for further conceptualization of these characteristics, while Gibbons provides the key definitions for literary metamodernism. Additionally, Radchenko offers tangible criteria in line with Vermeulen, van den Akker, and Gibbons that help to establish what an analysis of metamodern text entails. The literature review in the first section of chapter 3 will further elaborate on the origin and development of the term, demonstrating how the academic discourse around the structure of feeling has taken shape and what shows to be specifically relevant in the context of literary studies.

1.2.2 Metamodern affect

In this section, I will introduce metamodern affect specifically to define its boundaries, explain its key characteristics, and demonstrate how I will approach the concept in this thesis. The affective turn and the discourse on affect are much larger than the concept of metamodern affect and will receive further explanation in the literature review of chapter 2.

Affect is central to understanding the driving power of metamodernism. Doris Mironescu pays specific attention to the element of affect in disabled poetry, explaining that “metamodernism favours [...] a new type of affectivity, connected with the body and interpersonal relationality, at the same time building a sense of community and engaging in a hermeneutics of the self.”²³ This conceptualisation provides the definition for metamodern affect that I will employ in this study, and is substantively in line with the work on metamodernism by Vermeulen, van den Akker, and Gibbons as presented in the previous section. Mironescu quotes Gibbons to describe how “the return of affect in the last decades” demonstrates “a will and ability to process intensities so that we can articulate meaningful

²³ Doris Mironescu, “Poetry, Disability and Metamodernism: Ilya Kaminsky’s Deaf Republic,” *Word and Text - A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 12 (2022): 95–109, <https://doi.org/10.51865/jlsl.2022.07>, 109.

emotional reactions or cognitive responses to today's social situation."²⁴ I will follow Mironescu's explanation of metamodern affect, as it connects to the larger academic discourse on affect and the affective turn but focuses specifically on the metamodern structure of feeling in literature. This provides the necessary precision to apply the conceptualisation in this thesis.

The idea of metamodern affect stems from the simultaneous rise of the metamodern structure of feeling and the affective turn, and their thematical overlap. In the context of literature and literary studies, the affective turn is visible in prose and poetry that engages consciously with emotional subjectivity and places increased importance on the emotional state and environment. Affect and emotion are not synonymous, but emotion is mentioned as the visible counterpart, or surface representation, of affect. Literature that engages with these topics is exemplified for instance by the expansion of the mental health novel, and the concept of New Sincerity in fiction and poetry.

New Sincerity is periodically and thematically linked to metamodernism and refers to the conceptualisation of sincerity as both "naïve and necessary,"²⁵ thus existing in an in-between state as is characteristic for metamodernism. Jennifer Ashton describes New Sincerity as "poems written in the mode of a certain childlike artlessness or undefendedness."²⁶ As such, it is closer to bodily affect than rationality, and sincerity is driven by something in the self that is naïve and emotional. However, it remains challenged by the presence of irony; the challenge between the two signifies a metamodern oscillation between two extremes and keeps balancing out or undermining its opposite. Metamodern affect in literature thus foregrounds emotional subjectivity, and pays specific attention to sincerity, which provides a starting point for the analysis of the selected mental health graphic novels.

²⁴ Alison Gibbons, "Metamodern Affect," in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 83–131, 85.

²⁵ Elina Siltanen, "New Sincerity and Commitment to Emotion in Dorothea Lasky's Poetry," *English Studies* 101, no. 8 (2020): 979–997, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838x.2020.1847830>, 979.

²⁶ Siltanen, "New Sincerity and Commitment to Emotion in Dorothea Lasky's Poetry," 980.

1.2.3 The graphic novel

Formulating a definition for the graphic novel means taking a position on a much-contested term. Since the selected primary sources for this study are all labelled as graphic novels, it is important to define which elements define them as such. The graphic novel category was initially invented for marketing purposes, and generally referred to hardcover graphic narratives that were not serialised comics. Works such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), which should have been labelled as a graphic memoir, were sold as graphic novels. Spiegelman purposely wrote a work of non-fiction, but the market lacked the proper terminology to describe his work. Applying the label of graphic novel inaccurately has created a warped understanding of what it actually is, since prose novels are traditionally works of fiction. Graphic memoirs are still often labelled as graphic novels, which makes it difficult to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction. Perhaps this blurring of boundaries is welcomed in a context of postmodernism, or in the metamodern structure of feeling, as the line between reality and fiction fades, but traditionally the novel is positioned as fiction and should be recognizable as such; graphic or not. Hillary Chute recommends replacing the term "graphic novel" with "graphic narrative," as it more accurately represents the complete category of works that are currently labelled as graphic novels.²⁷

However, this does not mean that the term graphic novel should be taken entirely out of rotation, as there is quite possibly still a type of graphic narrative that fits the specific label. Eddie Campbell explains that there are at least four mutually exclusive understandings of the graphic novel: "as a synonym for comic books," "to classify a format," "a comic-book narrative that is equivalent in form and dimensions to the prose novel," or "to indicate a form that is more than a comic book in the scope of its ambition- a new medium altogether."²⁸ To compose an apt

²⁷ Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *Modern Language Association* 123, no. 2 (2008), 452–465, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25501865>, 453.

²⁸ Eddie Campbell, "What Is a Graphic Novel?" *World Literature Today* 81, no. 2 (2007), 13–15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40159289>, 13.

definition of the graphic novel that can be used for this research project, these four explanations can be a starting point.

First, it is important to rule out understandings one and two, on the basis of the aim for this project: to create a detailed, precise understanding of the graphic novel instead of the umbrella term that it currently is. Definition number three offers the important comparison to the prose novel but fails to recognise the wide variety of forms that graphic novels may exhibit. Explanation four positions graphic novels as superior to other comic books; this elitist perception has been the reason for opposition to use of the term in the past. However, it indicates that the graphic novel as it exists now, is a new type of medium. This observation has value because it acknowledges the intermediality of the form, and with this the heritage that shapes the graphic novel tradition. To accurately depict what qualifies as a graphic novel, it is thus prudent to stress the fictional aspect of the graphic narrative, while positioning it as a new type of medium, rather than a literary genre.

Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey define the graphic novel medium as a “self-knowing “play with a purpose” of the traditional comic book form.”²⁹ Their introduction to the graphic novel serves as a legitimisation of the medium and is meant to aid further academic engagement. However, the definition they offer leaves room for interpretation and as such does not help to establish clear boundaries for the graphic novel. Taking their definition, and those explanations offered by Campbell into account, I will offer my own definition: the graphic novel is a fictional, hardcover variation of the comic book, with the independency and scope of a prose novel. Addressing both form and content, this definition comprises the main defining features of the graphic novel as it is understood today. It is an attempt to redefine a concept surrounded by uncertainties, thus previous understandings or categorisations should be considered part of its

²⁹ Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey, *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 19.

formative history. In the end, knowing what the graphic novel is not (non-fiction, serialised, paperback), helps to define what it is.

1.2.4 The close reading method

In this section I will define how I approach the close reading method, based on its development since the initial formation of the method. The close reading approach finds its origins in the scholarship of I.A. Richards and William Empson, two esteemed English scholars and literary critics hailing from the University of Cambridge. They laid the foundation for what would become a method of literary analysis directed toward advancing a utilitarian model of aesthetic and practical education.³⁰ Richards, in his influential work “Principles of Literary Criticism” (1924), aimed to reshape the understanding of literature's aesthetic potential. He envisioned it as a powerful tool for enhancing intellectual development. This form of literary criticism encourages readers to adopt a more critical perspective beyond the surface of the text, effectively challenging the notion of “art for art's sake” by positioning art as an educator instead. While rejecting the idea rooted in aestheticism, Richards did not discard aesthetics in literature; instead, he sought to redefine its usefulness. He advocated for aesthetics as a practical experience intertwined with the physical world, context, and audience.

From Richards' perspective, close reading serves as a means to mould the reader's experience and reception of a literary work. William Empson, a student of Richards, took this concept further in his work *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1947). Empson's contributions expand upon the theory of close reading, emphasizing its role as a pedagogical approach to literary analysis, created to facilitate literary education.³¹ Empson's work clarifies how different types of intentional ambiguities in literary texts should be understood, differentiating them from

³⁰ Joseph North, “What’s ‘New Critical’ about ‘Close Reading’?: I. A. Richards and His New Critical Reception,” *New Literary History* 44, no. 1 (2013): 141–57, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2013.0002>, 142.

³¹ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “What Was ‘Close Reading’?” *Minnesota Review* 2016, no. 87 (2016): 57–75, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00265667-3630844>, 59.

vagueness. These ambiguities, rather than hindering comprehension, enrich the text and the reader's experience. Empson underscores the idea that comprehension is a skill that readers must actively cultivate, and it is honed through their mastery of the close reading method.

The evolution of close reading over the past century allowed it to move beyond its initial limitations. While its origins were firmly rooted in a select literary canon, close reading techniques have since been applied to a wider array of texts outside this canon. In this thesis, I will follow Barbara Herrnstein Smith's conceptualisation of close reading. Herrnstein Smith writes that "Close reading often involves attention to features such as word choice or, in connection with rhyme or alliteration, individual sounds or letters."³² But at the same time, "a close reading [...] is typically the occasion for more general observations and often for quite wide-ranging reflections."³³ This means that close reading has grown to depict a text-first analysis, which may encompass its technical aspects, yet it can also extend into the realm of interpretation by the perceptive reader. This dual nature underscores the impact of close reading techniques, surpassing mere theoretical guidelines and ideals to reach a practical method that can be applied to a variety of texts. Close reading places the text at the core of the analysis while refraining from artificially erasing all contextual elements or impeding the freedom of interpretation in the analytical process.

1.3 Methodology

In this section I will provide an overview of the research design and approach, outlining the literary analysis framework, the corpus selection, and the method for the textual analysis. Additionally, I will explain how the collected data will be analysed to formulate answers to the research questions. With this section I aim to transparently present the information needed to conduct the literary analysis and facilitate potential replication of the study.

³² Herrnstein Smith, "What Was 'Close Reading'?", 70.

³³ Herrnstein Smith, "What Was 'Close Reading'?", 69.

1.3.1 Research design and approach

The aim of this study is to demonstrate how post-2020 graphic novels by British millennial authors contribute to the metamodern structure of feeling that is associated with the affective turn. In extension, the study will provide an example for the literary analysis of graphic novels. In order to answer the research questions stated in the general introduction, I have chosen a qualitative approach. This will allow me to pay attention to the primary texts' nuance, ambiguity, and complexities. Additionally, qualitative research allows for more attention to the contexts surrounding the literary works, which is an essential element of this study as I am focused on the contexts of the affective turn and the metamodern structure of feeling. Finally, a qualitative research method offers necessary adaptability in the study design, which is valuable when working with the unpredictable nature of literary texts and subjective interpretation.

The research approach is mostly deductive, meaning that the analysis is theory-driven, or largely based on the theoretical concepts of affect and metamodernism. The hypotheses stemming from the theory will be tested against the evidence acquired through my analysis. However, there is an inductive element to this study as well, as no prior research has been conducted with regard to the visibility of the affective turn or metamodernism in graphic novels. This means that the data produced in this study can reveal previously unknown aspects of the affective turn or metamodernism, which can be used in further academic inquiry.

1.3.2 Literary analysis framework

I will approach the selected graphic novels from the field of literary studies, as I aim to reveal aspects of literary metamodernism. The field of comics studies struggles with the establishment of an apt methodology. Situated as an 'interdiscipline,' comics studies scholars were not trained in the field, but come from "literary studies, film and media studies, history, and so on, bringing

with them different research traditions and assumptions.”³⁴ Due to the variety in forms of comics, this collection of different approaches can be beneficial, as it allows for methodological freedom and adaptation as required. The graphic novel as a medium finds itself between the comic book tradition and the literary tradition. Anna Bobok calls the graphic novel “the bastard child of art and literature,” and writes that the illustrations in graphic novels take more from high art than “typical comic styles.”³⁵ Because of this, approaching the graphic novel from literary studies provides a productive background. At the same time, graphic novels can enrich literature, and with that the field of literary studies, as the medium provides a new source of literary material.

Literary analysis has proven to be an effective approach to graphic novels. For example, David Coughlan used close reading to demonstrate how Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* (1995) is in conversation with the literary detective canon.³⁶ Rosemary V. Hathaway published an article reading Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) as a postmodern ethnography. Though she did not specify the methodology in her article, the analysis closely resembles a close reading, as she cites frequently from the primary text to display the text’s postmodern features.³⁷ Karin Kukkonen calls close reading “the first stepping stone toward understanding how [comics] unfold their meaning.”³⁸ Her chapter on close reading comics offers guidelines on how to approach the comic’s or graphic novel’s text (i.e., all elements on the page), and even provides a checklist that poses some basic questions to help start a close reading analysis.³⁹

³⁴ Blair Davis et al., “Roundtable: Comics and Methodology,” *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society* 1, no. 1 (2017): 56–74, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ink.2017.0004>, 57.

³⁵ Anna Bobok, “The Bastard Child of Art & Literature: The Graphic Novel’s Appeal to High Art,” *Muhlenberg College Special Collections & Archives*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.35273706>, 1.

³⁶ David Coughlan, “Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*: The Graphic Novel,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (January 1, 2006), 832–854, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2007.0006>.

³⁷ Rosemary V. Hathaway, “Reading Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* as Postmodern Ethnography,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 48, no. 3 (2011), 249–267, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkrese.48.3.249>.

³⁸ Karin Kukkonen, “What’s in a Page: Close-Reading Comics,” in *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*, 7–30, (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 7.

³⁹ Kukkonen, “What’s in a Page: Close-Reading Comics,” 26.

1.3.3 Corpus selection

Considering the variable form and content of graphic narratives marketed as graphic novels, it is important that the corpus selection for this study displays uniformity and confirms my definition for the graphic novel.⁴⁰ I selected five graphic novels by authors from the British Isles: Luke Healy's *The Con Artists* (2022), Kim-Joy's, Alti Firmansyah's, and Joamette Gil's *Turtle Bread: A graphic novel about baking, fitting in, and the power of friendship* (2023), Will McPhail's *In.* (2021), Manjitt Thapp's *Feelings* (2021), and Debbie Tung's *Everything is ok* (2022). I chose to select five works in order to provide the necessary diversity in the corpus, while keeping the corpus small enough to carry out a detailed analysis for each work within the scope of this thesis. Including five titles provides the opportunity to delve into the specifics of each graphic novel, while ensuring a sufficient amount of material for comparative analysis with other works. The graphic novel authors come from England, Scotland, and Ireland. Three graphic novels are written by women, and two are written by men.

The titles that I have selected are all labelled as graphic novels by their publishers and fit the definition for the graphic novel that I provided in the theoretical framework. The selected graphic novels were published between 2021 and 2023, which means that the corpus' time period is limited to the early 2020s. I chose this limited period of time to create as much uniformity as possible in the corpus, for the sake of pattern recognition and comparability. Additionally, they were written by British authors from the millennial generation, which places them in a specific social and cultural context. This is vital when looking for thematic and structural similarities.

I opted for British millennial authors for three related reasons. Firstly, the British literary tradition is ideally suited for the study of metamodernism, as there is a large body of British modernist literary work that inspires the metamodern structure of feeling. This heritage is

⁴⁰ Chapter 1.2.3.

unique to the British Isles and provides a rich background to draw from. Secondly, growing up in the eighties and nineties, millennials were exposed to the postmodern cultural logic. This means that there was a large influence of elements such as deconstruction, fragmentation, irony, scepticism, and a lack of depth. Millennials did not grow up with hope on the horizon, but rather saw a future that lacked structure and certainty. As with any dominant narrative, counternarratives emerge. Millennials are eminently the ideal generation to create this narrative, which seems to be in close relation to the affective turn.⁴¹

This introduces the third reason, namely that millennials seem to be writing affective literature. In selecting this corpus, I aimed to find graphic novels engaging with social and cultural themes, that can reflect the metamodern cultural logic. Unintentionally, but significantly, all five selected graphic novels can be categorised as “mental health novels:” a work of fiction that aspires to reflect the intricacies of the mind, and especially bring to light the altered mental state of someone with a diagnosis of mental illness. The selection process has thus already revealed a thematical direction for graphic novels by millennial authors.

1.3.4 Method for textual analysis and data analysis

For the textual analysis in this study, I have chosen to use the close reading method. Close reading the graphic novel texts will include analysis of the visuals that shape the narrative alongside the dialogues in speech bubbles and captions accompanying the panels. For example, Harriet Earle explains that “Hannah Berry uses black gutters⁴² to heighten the unease and claustrophobia of her characters’



⁴¹ Demeyer, and Vitse, *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel: de romans van de millennialgeneratie*.

⁴² “This is what a comics page (sometimes) looks like. By Samuel Williams (2019).” Harriet Earle, “Definitions and mechanics,” in *Comics: An Introduction* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 26.

experiences.”⁴³ These types of observations are important for the analysis of the narrative because they are inherent to the text, thus shaping the readers’ experience and conception of the presented storyline.

The close readings will also be able to bring to light any modern and postmodern literary techniques that are used in metamodern literature. The characteristics of metamodern literature that will guide the analyses are primarily based on work by Vermeulen and van den Akker, Gibbons, Rachel Greenwald Smith, and Simon Radchenko. The features discussed in their work are presented in the relevant chapters, where they are utilized to interpret and extract meaning from the collected material in the graphic novels. Additionally, Andrés Romero-Jódar provides a detailed account of the visual stream-of-consciousness technique in Paul Hornschemeier’s *Mother, Come Home* (2003).⁴⁴ This sets an example for how to read literary techniques in graphic novels, and simultaneously provides valuable insight into the visual manifestation of the modernist stream-of-consciousness technique. Through such previously set examples on the particularities of close reading the graphic novel, I aim to collect both technical and substantive arguments in favour of my hypotheses.

⁴³ Harriet Earle, “Definitions and mechanics,” in *Comics: An Introduction*, 12-32, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 25.

⁴⁴ Andrés Romero-Jódar, “Through Traumatized Eyes: Trauma and Visual Stream-of-Consciousness Techniques in Paul Hornschemeier’s *Mother, Come Home*,” in *The Trauma Graphic Novel*, 35–70, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 38.

Chapter 2: The Affective Turn in British millennial graphic novels

This chapter aims to answer the question how the selected graphic novels thematically reinforce the affective turn. In order to answer this question, the concepts of affect and the affective turn will be considered drawing from the contributions of prominent scholars in the field. The literature review contains a reflection on the affective turn in literature specifically, which will help to establish a set of characteristics to guide the close reading analysis of the graphic novels that follows in the second part of the chapter.

2.1 Literature review: affect theory

Prior to delving into the manifestation of the affective turn in literature, it is vital to offer a summary of different approaches to affect theory. “Affect” is understood and explained in various ways, rarely synonymous with feelings and emotions, but most commonly as a more primal, bodily function. Psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins is known for his revolutionary work in affect theory, which underscores the significance of emotions and affective experiences within the spectrum of human existence, encompassing their biological underpinnings and their manifestations in cultural and interpersonal contexts. Since Tomkins’ work is generally understood to be fundamental, and simultaneously difficult to grasp, Adam Frank and Elizabeth Wilson wrote *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook: Foundations for Affect Theory*.

The book presents Tomkins’ concept of affect as an umbrella category that contains neurological, physiological, and aesthetic events.⁴⁵ The neurological describes a “certain profile of neural firing,” the physiological “sets of muscular, glandular, and skin responses,” and the aesthetic is the conscious experience of different feelings.⁴⁶ The aesthetic thus bridges the gap between affect and feelings, or emotions. Tomkins poses that emotions are the result of a

⁴⁵ Adam J. Frank, and Elizabeth A. Wilson, “Introduction,” in *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook: Foundations for Affect Theory*, 1–10, (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 4.

⁴⁶ Frank and Wilson, “Introduction,” 4.

combination of one or more affects and cognitive states. For example, Tomkins regards anger-rage as an affect, while hatred is an emotion that stems from the affect of anger-rage combined with a specific cognitive state.⁴⁷

Ruth Leys interprets Tomkins' division between affect and cognition as two separate systems,⁴⁸ but Frank and Wilson state that the interdependence between the affects and cognitions rather positions them as two features of the same system.⁴⁹ Leys' definition is instead closer to Brian Massumi's interpretation of affect as "an impersonal intensity that operates independently of systems of signification or language."⁵⁰ Affect is pre-conscious, an autonomic bodily response, whereas emotion "involves feedback loops between autonomic functions and conscious apprehension of those functions."⁵¹ Massumi's understanding of affect is leading for the conceptualisation of the affective turn, which is primarily working against the limiting quality of the linguistic turn on theoretical frameworks. The linguistic turn, focused on the system of language, extended its reach far beyond language and highly valued logic and meaning making systems. The objective of the affective turn became to emphasize the primacy of the pre-structural, pre-cultural, and pre-individual, by focusing on the bodily function of affect prior to placing it in a meaning making context. Frank and Wilson stress that this direction of affect theory closed the door to more comprehensive approaches to affect, which pay attention to its "narrativized and individualized" counterpart: emotion.⁵² Through Tomkins' work, they aim to find middle grounds between the oppositions of separate biological and socio-political systems.

⁴⁷ Frank and Wilson, "Introduction," 4.

⁴⁸ Ruth Leys, "Introduction: Setting the Stage," in *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique*, 1–25 (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 19.

⁴⁹ Frank and Wilson, "Introduction," 5.

⁵⁰ Frank and Wilson, "Introduction," 5.

⁵¹ Rachel Greenwald Smith, "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn," *Twentieth Century Literature* 57, no. 3/4 (2011), 423–446, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41698760>, 430.

⁵² Frank and Wilson, "Introduction," 5.

Sara Ahmed offers another approach to affect theory, writing about affective economies. Adopting a Marxist vocabulary, Ahmed explains that she employs ““the economic” to suggest that emotions circulate and are distributed across a social as well as psychic field.”⁵³ The production of affect stems from interpersonal interactions. Affect is not an individual or psychological state; rather, it represents an exchange among individuals. An individual is incapable of engendering affect, as their personal output falls within the categories of “emotions” or “feelings,” which lack inherent value. Value, in this context, arises through the interplay between individuals and the circulation of their emotions. Ahmed draws on the Marxist concept that value (in the form of money) is generated through the circulation of commodities. Similarly, in the case of affect, value is produced through the circulation and exchange of emotions among individuals. Ahmed thus proposes that affect can function as a post-individual instead of pre-individual state.

Rita Felski reflects on the position of affect in literary studies. In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski asks the question why “the affective range of criticism is so limited.”⁵⁴ She argues that the focus on critique often overlooks the emotional and affective dimensions of literature. However, scholarship is not “stripped of affect;” she uses the term “critical mood” to describe the position that affect holds: the mood functions as a background for scholarship, it determines how we engage with the world, what matters to us and in what way.⁵⁵ Felski suggests that the exclusive emphasis on critique limits our understanding of the diverse ways in which literature can engage readers. Instead, she proposes a more nuanced approach that takes into account the aesthetic and emotional aspects of literary texts.

Also in the field of literary studies, Rachel Greenwald Smith explains in her article “Postmodernism and the Affective Turn” how affect has come to the fore in (post-)

⁵³ Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 49, no. 2 (2004), 117–139, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/55780>, 120.

⁵⁴ Rita Felski, “Introduction,” in *The Limits of Critique*, 1–13 (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 13.

⁵⁵ Felski, “The Stakes of Suspicion,” 20.

postmodernist literature. Smith's article demonstrates how affect manifests in post-postmodern (she does not use the term metamodern) literature, and therefore provides an example of reading for affect. She determines that literature plays an important role in displaying the "seeping edge" between the unarticulated affect, and codified emotion.⁵⁶ Following Massumi's development of affect theory, affect goes through a process into the consciousness and comes to the surface as an emotion. Smith poses that literature functions as this codifying process between affect and emotion. She stresses the representation of consciousness in literature, and how this directly engages with the manifestation of affect and its codified emotions. In addition, she considers the (interrupted) process of identification that the reader experiences when engaging with the story world.⁵⁷ In describing manifestations of affect in (post-)postmodernist literature, Smith refers to the oscillation between familiarity and estrangement, postmodernist distance and realism's illusion of mimesis (denoting realism as an attempt to represent our 'reality'), impulse excitation and distance, and the provocation of physiological response and the performance of codification. She identifies the latter to be "at the root of literary production and reception."⁵⁸ The affective turn in literature thus refers to three domains: literary critique as introduced by Felski, affect in the narratives themselves, and affect in the reading experience.

Though the approaches introduced above differ in their understandings and definitions of affect, the amount of scholarship on the topic indicates the importance of its position in academics. The affective turn emerged as a response to the perceived limitations of previous theoretical frameworks and represents a recognition of the central role that emotions and affect play in human existence and the need to incorporate these aspects into academic analysis. The postmodern movement challenged notions of subjectivity, representation, and reality, which inspired a reevaluation of the positions that affect and emotions hold in both individual and

⁵⁶ Smith, "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn," 431.

⁵⁷ Smith, "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn," 432.

⁵⁸ Smith, "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn," 438.

communal contexts. The affective turn ultimately reflects a move toward a collective and interdisciplinary interest in emotions, that reflects society's and academics' challenge to value the non-rational.

2.2 Portrayals of affect in British millennial graphic novels

In the following analysis, the different oscillations mentioned by Smith will function as guidelines for determining how the narratives engage with affect. I will distinguish between affect and emotion as they are often considered separately in affect theory. The main focus of the analysis will be on the manifestation of affect and the portrayal of emotions in the narratives. Additionally, affect in the reading experience of the graphic novels is a valuable dimension to consider in the light of the position of literature in society, as these graphic novels offer reflections on society today.

2.2.1 Emotional estrangement and direct affective provocation

The first oscillation in this analysis is between a postmodernist distance and realism's illusion of mimesis in literature, which Smith explains as emotional estrangement and direct affective provocation, respectively.⁵⁹ Emotional estrangement can also be explained as a closed off attitude towards emotions, or a rationalisation of emotions. These characteristics are visible in both the characters of the graphic novels, and in the authors' approaches to writing emotion. Mainly, the characters struggle with connection, and feel emotionally estranged from other people or even themselves. However, the authors chose to write closer to realism than postmodernism in their extensive treatment of the characters' emotional lives, thus emphasising the emotions that the characters struggle with. In *Turtle Bread*, several characters struggle to

⁵⁹ Smith, "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn," 432.

feel their feelings. Through rationalising their experiences, they seek to elucidate the reasons behind particular events, facilitating a deeper comprehension of their own experiences.

The explanations that they offer are often at their own expense and the characters are incapable of escaping this pattern individually. Main character Yan suffers from social anxiety, keeping her from taking up hobbies or finding employment. When reflecting on her first meeting with the other members from a baking club, she imagines them feeling sorry for her as their motivation to be friendly to her.⁶⁰ She keeps a thought diary to process through these thinking patterns, reflecting on the “emotional intensity,” beliefs, and possible disputations. This practice of self-reflection leads to her conclude “I know I’m overthinking. I can **rationalize** it—but I can’t stop **feeling** it.”⁶¹ She finds herself feeling anxious, embarrassed, and sad,⁶² but does not find solace in attempting to rationalize her emotions. Instead, she gradually learns to feel differently, when she interacts with other people who dare to open up to her about their own insecurities.



The other members of the baking club are facing their own challenges: Amit was diagnosed with PTSD, Geraint is afraid to come out at work, and Bea is terminally ill. They all attempt to rationalize difficult emotions. Amit tells himself “it could be worse,” invalidating his

⁶⁰ Kim-Joy, Alti Firmansyah and Joamette Gil, *Turtle Bread: A graphic novel about baking, fitting in, and the power of friendship* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2023), 18.

⁶¹ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 21.

⁶² Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 20.

own feelings.⁶³ Geraint thinks he has to be tough at work, and he fears that coming out as gay will cause his colleagues to look down on him.⁶⁴ Bea decides to leave her friends with no explanation when she learns she has two weeks left to live, as she does not want to bother them with the gravity of her illness.⁶⁵ Through these different characters, *Turtle Bread* demonstrates the oscillation



between attempted emotional estrangement and the reality of affective provocation. It thematically engages with the occurrence of affects and emotions in daily life, and how they attempt to diminish these difficult feelings through rationalisation.

The idea of “feeling one’s feelings” is central to Manjit Thapp’s *Feelings*. The dedication of the graphic novel is “for those who feel all the feels.” Thapp relates the movements through different moods and emotions to the changing of seasons and describes winter as an emotionless time. The unnamed protagonist finds herself stuck in “a monotonous routine,” “going through the motions but feeling no emotions.”⁶⁶ The cold outside causes the protagonist to feel cold inside, keeping her from connecting to her feelings. She experiences emotional distance from herself. During summer, she finds herself on the other side of the oscillation: “leaving



⁶³ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 98–99.

⁶⁴ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 93.

⁶⁵ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 108.

⁶⁶ Manjit Thapp, *Feelings* (New York: Random House Inc, 2021), 100–101.

myself open to catching feelings,”⁶⁷ “I let myself be reckless and feel it all at once.”⁶⁸ There is direct affective provocation, because the protagonist allows herself to be in this position; she is open to experiencing emotions. Smith writes about the resurgence of tonal warmth in post-postmodernist literature, and Thapp narrativizes this literally by describing the warmer seasons as the seasons filled with affect and emotions, making use of warm colours in her illustrations, while the cold seasons are presented as lacking emotion.⁶⁹

In *The Con Artists*, postmodernist distance is similarly reflected in the characters. Giorgio is fully detached from his own emotions and uses this to present himself as a stable and successful person. In reality, he is refusing to deal with his financial problems and resorts to illegal practices to provide for himself.⁷⁰ At the same time, Frank suffers from severe anxiety and, much like Yan, is unable to find a way out of his negative emotions. Occupied as a stand-up comedian, he resorts to making jokes about his mental health and the emotional challenges that he faces in his daily life. Both characters display an inability to face their emotions, choosing to invest their energy in keeping up appearances instead.



Will McPhail’s *In* comparably displays Nick’s inability to emotionally connect to other people. He feels emotionally estranged from those around him and is actively looking for affective encounters to replace the meaningless theatre that composes his interactions with other people. He discovers that connecting to someone emotionally is a physical experience, presented in the graphic novel through vividly coloured illustrations in lieu of the grey

⁶⁷ Thapp, *Feelings*, 20–21.

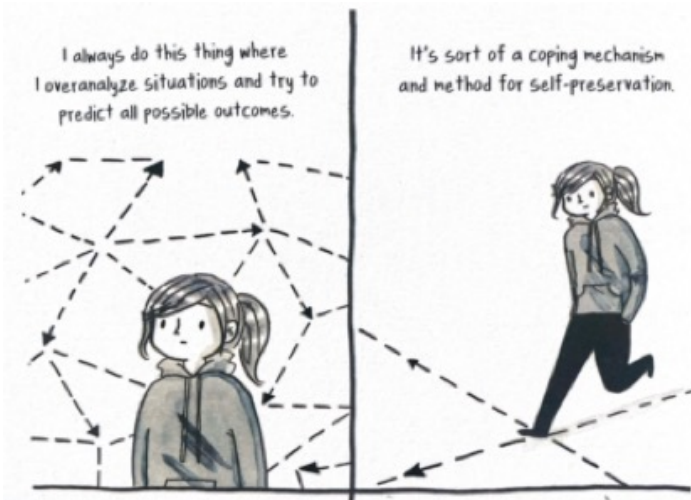
⁶⁸ Thapp, *Feelings*, 24.

⁶⁹ Smith, “Postmodernism and the Affective Turn,” 424.

⁷⁰ Luke Healy, *The Con Artists* (London: Faber & Faber, 2022), 71.

illustrations that form the basis of the narrative.⁷¹ *In.* utilizes Nick's character to demonstrate a breakaway from postmodernist distance, and a move towards an affective provocation that Smith would see as realist or post-postmodernist, but I call an example of metamodern affect.

Nick's sister Anne turns to rationalisation as a coping mechanism when she learns of her mother's illness.⁷² The same pattern is presented in *Everything Is Ok*, protagonist Debbie states that she overanalyses situations as "a coping mechanism and method for self-preservation."⁷³ Rationalisation is thus employed consciously, reflecting a desired distance from the intensity of the emotions at hand. This over-rationalising as a coping mechanism is an attractive approach to the processing of difficult emotions, but ultimately the characters feel a need for authenticity and choose to be open to perceiving their own emotions.



The authors of the graphic novels grew up with postmodernism, and in these works they are resisting the emotional estrangement that is familiar to them. Instead, they opt to offer detailed reflections of the characters' inner lives and their struggles with emotions. The graphic novels demonstrate how rationalisation can function as a default setting, used to avoid difficult feelings, but that this does not offer the characters the fulfilment that they seek.

2.2.2 Performance of codification

A key term in all five graphic novels is performance. As explained above, Smith suggests that the performance of codification is challenged by the provocation of physiological response. In

⁷¹ Will McPhail, *In.* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021), 79–89.

⁷² McPhail, *In.*, 190–193.

⁷³ Debbie Tung, *Everything Is Ok* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2022), 34.

other words, an authentic affective response can be obstructed by the performance of emotions that are befitting to the situation according to society's unspoken rules of interaction. For example, Nick feels that there are scripts for all social situations that he encounters during the day. These scripted interactions leave him feeling empty, and he has to force himself to break away from



“the weathered tracks of another hollow interaction”⁷⁴ to instead say “words that matter.”⁷⁵ In an attempt to make a real connection, he chooses to be honest about his feelings to the plumber working on his toilet: “I feel embarrassed about myself around people like you, Steve.”⁷⁶ Steve answers, “I feel like that sometimes.”⁷⁷ The vulnerability that both men show each other in this brief interaction is meaningful enough for Nick to feel genuine emotions instead of pretence.



In other instances, Nick is able to playfully construct his performed emotions, for example by stepping into a bar alone and hoping to have a chat with the bartender as characters do in movies.⁷⁸ However, similar to Healy's, Kim-Joy's, Thapp's, and Tung's protagonists, the continuous front he feels he has to put up with other people takes a toll on his mental health.

⁷⁴ McPhail, *In.*, 70.

⁷⁵ McPhail, *In.*, 75.

⁷⁶ McPhail, *In.*, 76.

⁷⁷ McPhail, *In.*, 79.

⁷⁸ McPhail, *In.*, 11.

Fake smiling has become the norm for Tung's⁷⁹ and Thapp's⁸⁰ main characters because they think their real emotions will be too uncomfortable for others. Performance is thus an easier choice than sincerity. Elina Siltanen writes, "Sincerity is about speaking truthful words and impressions, and it is seemingly unmediated, but can be viewed as performative."⁸¹

Performativity is produced through repetition, which means that the same expression can be sincere or authentic the first time, but performative by the tenth time, even though the expression and the motivation behind it did not change. Ultimately, this means that the struggle displayed by Nick to say "words that matter"⁸² does not necessarily mean that performed words are



unimportant, but they have been said too often to encourage an authentic affective response.

This tension is visible in the difficulty that Debbie has to share her mental health issues with those around her. The stigma surrounding mental illness inhibits her from sincerity. She compares having a cold and having depression and anxiety; physical illness generates sympathetic responses, while mental illness is met with doubt and disagreement.⁸³ A lack of sympathy in her environment causes her to perform, in order not to be judged or alienated. The graphic novel employs the vulnerability of mental illness to express "an interest in sincerity" as "part of a larger tendency to bring back a focus on affect and the self."⁸⁴ This is indicative of literature written in the context the affective turn, as it demonstrates the need to move towards a more affective society in place of superficiality and disinterest.

⁷⁹ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 21.

⁸⁰ Thapp, *Feelings*, 81.

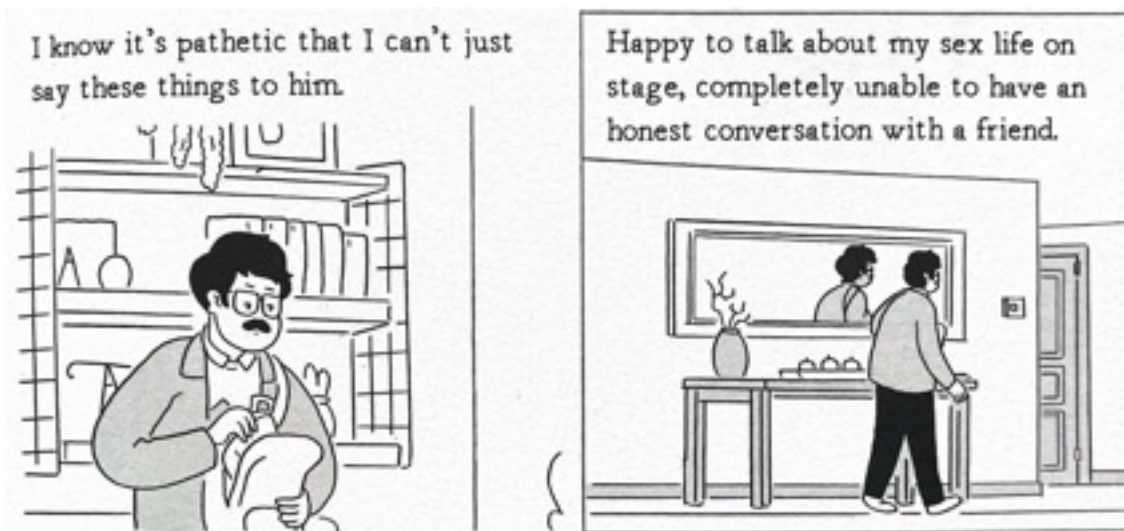
⁸¹ Siltanen, "New Sincerity and Commitment to Emotion in Dorothea Lasky's Poetry," 982.

⁸² McPhail, *In.*, 75.

⁸³ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 69.

⁸⁴ Siltanen, "New Sincerity and Commitment to Emotion in Dorothea Lasky's Poetry," 982.

The Con Artists similarly comments on the distinction between physical and mental health. Giorgio struggles with his mental health but refuses to look for help. However, as soon as he is hit by a bus and thus physically limited, he calls for help. As the title of the graphic novel indicates, both Frank and Giorgio are untruthful. Though Giorgio seems unbothered by this throughout the narrative (despite his suggestive alcoholism), Frank's mind is constantly occupied with (dis)honesty. After Giorgio explains his moneymaking scheme to Frank, Frank struggles with the fact that he is unable to confront Giorgio with the severity of this situation. He is "completely unable to have an honest conversation with a friend," and lives his life going from one performance to the next.⁸⁵ Frank sees a therapist for cognitive behavioural therapy, based on the fact that he expects himself to suffer from anxiety. However, it is revealed towards the end that Frank's levels of anxiety are well below the levels that would grant him a diagnosis. Instead, the reason for Frank's physical discomfort seems to be his chronic pretending to be



someone he is not. *The Con Artists*, then, similarly to *Feelings*, *Everything Is Ok*, and *In.*, displays an internal struggle to break free from the performance of codification, in order to move towards more sincerity in communication with both others and the self.

⁸⁵ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 85.

The graphic novels further demonstrate a distinction between body and mind that is in line with aspects of Massumi's affect theory. The idea that emotions are codified and intertwined versions of affects returns in the anxiety that four out of five protagonists' experience. Emotions tend to overwhelm the protagonists, the combination of the intensity of affects paired with the overthinking that the characters are prone to, causes them to spiral into panic attacks. There is a strong emphasis on the division between body and mind, as the body is employed as a tool to combat the overwhelmed mind. The act of breathing plays a significant role in the graphic novels and provides the characters with a moment of rest to feel their bodies instead of being stuck in their minds.

86 87 88 Breathe, Frank.



89 90



Allow yourself to
enter a space
that feels safe.



Breathe.

Enough with the
self-sabotage and
self-bullying.

⁸⁶ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 89.

⁸⁷ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 27.

⁸⁸ Thapp, *Feelings*, 117.

⁸⁹ McPhail, *In.*, 76.

⁹⁰ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 143.

2.2.3 Impulse excitation and distance in narratives

The third oscillation posed by Smith is between impulse excitation and distance in narratives. On the one hand this refers to the “retrospective fictions that explain affective changes or deficiencies,” and on the other hand these “fictions” can be “affective incitements in and of themselves.”⁹¹ This oscillation distinguishes between affect in the narrative and affect experienced by the reader in response to the narrative. *Everything Is Ok* demonstrates how a narrative can prioritise affect over the actual storyline. The graphic novel reads like a retrospective report of Debbie’s experience with anxiety and depression and incorporates mental health advice to such an extent that the graphic novel is reminiscent of a self-help book. Tung describes the graphic novel as a “journey to understanding the importance of mental health;”⁹² the graphic novel does not have a well-developed storyline but rather consists of a compilation of experiences and their respective results. As such, the reader follows Debbie’s personal progress through her diagnoses, which shows why Tung’s graphic novel is an example of retrospective fiction that explains affective changes.

On the other hand, narratives can function as affective incitements of themselves, for example through a traumatic event such as illness. In both *In.* and *Turtle Bread*, a person in close proximity to the protagonist falls ill with cancer and passes away. Due to the nature of the event, this facilitates the possible identification of the reader with the novel’s world. Nick’s mother, Hannah, is ill. This information is shared with the reader through colourful illustrations instead of dialogue or description.⁹³ The reader knows that Nick and his mother share a dialogue, but the events are communicated through illustrations depicting Nick’s affects and emotions. As the reader interacts with the graphic novel, the coloured illustrations are perceived differently than the black and white illustrations featuring captions and dialogue. As Nick

⁹¹ Smith, “Postmodernism and the Affective Turn,” 424.

⁹² Tung, *Everything is ok*, back cover.

⁹³ McPhail, *In.*, 180–183.

moves from his mind to his body, from the rational to the emotional, the reader moves with him from black and white into colour. His mother's news thus immediately enters the emotional perception of the reader, instead of the words being processed by the mind before making its emotional impact.

The continuation of the narrative of Hannah's illness is initially rational, largely because Nick's sister, Anne, is determined to find the best treatment plan. However, Hannah is terminally ill, and the oncologist advises the family to spend as much time together as possible.⁹⁴ The narrative continues largely without dialogues or captions, as the reader follows the family's time spent together and Hannah's declining health. Hannah's passing is illustrated by Nick sitting alone under the night sky, followed by him and Anne sitting in their mother's empty bed at the hospice.⁹⁵ The emptiness and quietness of these pages speaks louder than words, and the reader shares in the pain that Hannah's relatives experience in these moments. McPhail's storytelling provides a strong example of literature that facilitates an affective reader response.

In *Turtle Bread*, Bea, the leader of Yan's baking club, fulfils an important role in Yan's life as a mother figure, mentor, and confidante. When she disappears without an explanation, Yan fears that it might have been because of something she said or did. Yan eventually collects enough courage to look for Bea and visit her, which leads her to discover that Bea is terminally ill. The reader witnesses their dialogue, and Yan cries as they speak. The familiarity, combined with the severity, of this situation, allows the reader to find a personal connection or possible identification with the narrative. Though illness is an extremely personal experience, many have been or will be faced with a similar situation in their lives. The conversation between the two women opens up their story world and makes a palpable connection to the reader's life. As such, the graphic novel demonstrates how storytelling can evoke an affective reader response.

⁹⁴ McPhail, *In.*, 201.

⁹⁵ McPhail, *In.*, 235–237.

In addition to the narratives of terminal illness, the mental health graphic novels also engage with the topic of suicidality. In *Everything Is Ok*, Debbie is diagnosed with depression. Though never mentioned explicitly, the narrative implies that she struggles with suicidal thoughts in several instances. She feels incapable; she expresses that she thinks she is bad at life because her mind keeps overwhelming her with negativity.⁹⁶ She says to herself that “Life is pointless. Everything I do is pointless,”⁹⁷ and “I can’t do this. I should just give up,”⁹⁸ suggesting to the reader that life is an extremely heavy burden for her to bear, and it would be easier to give up. However, she is still able to recognise that her thoughts do not reflect the truth; her own thoughts are concerning enough for her to seek help: “Asking for help was the most courageous thing I ever did. It meant that I refused to give up and I wanted to give myself a chance to heal.”⁹⁹ The process that Debbie illustrates in the graphic novel requires an enormous acknowledgement of vulnerability. This encourages an affective reader response, as it either resonates with the reader or invites them to see life from a different perspective, namely through the eyes of someone who is unsure how to continue living.

In Healy’s *The Con Artists*, suicide is mentioned explicitly but treated in a more distanced manner than Tung’s narrative. Frank’s therapist asks why he decided to seek help with his mental health, and Frank answers that his friend Alex attempted to commit suicide.¹⁰⁰ Frank later reveals that he was Alex’ emergency contact for moments that they felt suicidal, but he told Alex to stop calling the night of their overdose.¹⁰¹ Frank seems to be motivated by guilt; he seeks mental help because he thinks he has severe anxiety, and this might excuse his careless behaviour towards Alex. At the same time, he takes care of Giorgio who constantly lies to him, which Frank is aware of, but he feels that he cannot leave another vulnerable friend alone. Frank

⁹⁶ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 82.

⁹⁷ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 41.

⁹⁸ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 103.

⁹⁹ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 67.

¹⁰⁰ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 53.

¹⁰¹ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 61.

even asks Giorgio if he wanted the bus to kill him the night that he was hit.¹⁰² Giorgio's disinterested expression changes to shocked,¹⁰³ displaying that Frank crossed an emotional line. Frank's personal trauma has made him fearful, which leads him to project these fears on those around him. The narrative that Healy shares is potentially relatable for the reader and demonstrates how affect both leads Frank and failed him in a crucial moment. Healy's treatment of this sensitive topic simultaneously maintains a safe distance by writing about a suicide attempt of a two-dimensional character, who is only mentioned briefly by Frank and displayed solely in Instagram posts. With a topic as emotionally heavy as suicidality, even such brief treatment of the topic as this can be sufficient to prompt an affective reader response.



2.3 Chapter conclusion

The analysis in this chapter has demonstrated how affect manifests in the selected graphic novels by British millennial authors. I analysed the graphic novels through different oscillations provided by Smith in the context of post-postmodernist literature. The first visible oscillation in the graphic novels was between emotional estrangement and direct affective provocation. Emotional estrangement is mostly noticeable in the characters' tendency to rationalise their emotions, but this is simultaneously challenged by the affective provocation of their

¹⁰² Healy, *The Con Artists*, 67.

¹⁰³ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 68.

experiences. This affective provocation extends beyond the characters, as the reader experiences the same events through the eyes of the characters and is invited to have an affective or emotional response to the presented events as well.

I then turned to the performance of codification and the provocation of physiological response. The graphic novels demonstrate how the protagonists tend towards performed emotions, both in communication with others and with themselves. However, interacting with others in dialogues and the occurrence of specific events induces more intuitive responses, which did not undergo the codifying process of the brain. This demonstrates the distinction between bodily affects and the codification of emotions that is part of Massumi's strand of affect theory. The tension between codified emotions and provoked affects inspires a need for increased sincerity in the characters and leads to a focus on honesty towards others and themselves.

The final oscillation in the analysis was between impulse excitation and distance in narratives, and paid attention to the graphic narratives' abilities to either tell stories of affect or be an affective incitement of itself. The selected graphic novels deal with topics of mental and physical illness. The presented stories extensively follow the emotional development of the characters, and *Everything is ok* highlights that a graphic narrative can prioritize the presentation of affect over the underlying storyline. Simultaneously, as these narratives surround the topics of mental and physical illness, they are likely to present a source of recognition for readers with similar experiences. As such, the graphic novels can function as affective incitements of themselves. The three oscillations presented above help to demonstrate how affect manifests in graphic novels by British millennial authors and expands on the understanding of affect in literature in a wider context.

Chapter 3: Literary metamodernism in British millennial graphic novels

Having established the relation between the affective turn and the graphic novels, in this chapter I will focus on the specific literary characteristics and storytelling techniques that have been identified as metamodern. The analysis will be based on four out of five characteristics mentioned in Simon Radchenko's case study focusing on textual metamodernism, omitting "metamodern affect" as this was discussed at length in the previous chapter. The other four characteristics comprise "*Oscillation* between modern and postmodern, [...] and other different poles;" *language utility*: the postmodern tendency "to hide behind the wall of text and symbols" is replaced by a more straightforward use of language; the will to *belong to some structure or system*; and finally, the *constructive nature* of metamodernism.¹⁰⁴ These criteria will be further developed in the literature review through articles on literary metamodernism specifically and supplemented by case studies engaging with the use of literary techniques in graphic novels. Together, this will provide an overview of the characteristics that indicate literary metamodernism in the selection of graphic novels.

3.1 Literature review: metamodernism

The term metamodernism was first introduced by Mas'ud Zavarzadeh in his 1975 work *The Apocalyptic Fact and the Eclipse of Fiction in Recent American Prose Narratives*. Writing about "a metamodern narrative" fifty years prior to our time, he describes what this emerging cultural phase entails and how it presents itself in fiction. Situated in the United States, Zavarzadeh explains that with "the overwhelming actualities of contemporary America" and "the increasing complexity of urbanized life"¹⁰⁵ the lines between reality and fiction have become so blurred, that "a condition of 'certainty' was replaced by a condition of

¹⁰⁴ Radchenko, "Metamodern Gaming: Literary Analysis of *The Last of Us*," 249–250, italicization retained.

¹⁰⁵ Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, "The Apocalyptic Fact and the Eclipse of Fiction in Recent American Prose Narratives," *Journal of American Studies* 9, no. 1 (1975): 69–83, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002187580001015x>, 69.

‘probability.’”¹⁰⁶ Reasons for this development include society’s extreme “contradictions, absurdities, violence, speed of change, science-fictional technology, weirdness and constant unfamiliarity.”¹⁰⁷ The “overwhelming actualities” that Zavarzadeh refers to are both structural and circumstantial. He cites Larry L. King who writes about “The America of 1968, with its assassinations, torched ghettos, campus wars, crime waves, [and] alienations.”¹⁰⁸ Though factual information on such events was broadcast, the extremities of these circumstances were not familiar to the reality that people knew. They were perceived as a type of fiction; they were the types of narratives that took place in novels, but not in real life.

As a result, fiction, which typically belonged to the realm of arts, was now intertwined with politics and reality. Zavarzadeh refers to operation “Gemstone” and its dramatic antics to illustrate how politics seem to be taken straight out of a thriller.¹⁰⁹ Contrastingly, authors that aim to present ‘the human condition’ and ‘real life,’ write narratives not half as thrilling as reality. Thus, these narratives start to present an imaginary world, “almost escapist” in their uneventfulness, instead of an aesthetic reordering of life events.¹¹⁰ This is where Zavarzadeh sees the break with the “Modern Tradition,” that “employed the novel as an extended metaphor for interpreting reality.”¹¹¹ Authors were able to restructure realities in an interpretative framework that helped answer life’s questions. This quality was now lost due to the complexities of real life; the clarity readers hope to find is unreachable, because there is an abundance of perspectives and rapid changes that prevent the existence of stability and truth.

Though Zavarzadeh wrote about the context of American society fifty years ago, he observed societal developments that are still relevant today. Because of this, there is merit in taking his explanation of “a metamodern narrative” as a point of departure. The term

¹⁰⁶ Zavarzadeh, “The Apocalyptic Fact,” 70.

¹⁰⁷ Zavarzadeh, “The Apocalyptic Fact,” 70.

¹⁰⁸ Zavarzadeh, “The Apocalyptic Fact,” 71.

¹⁰⁹ Zavarzadeh, “The Apocalyptic Fact,” 73.

¹¹⁰ Zavarzadeh, “The Apocalyptic Fact,” 73.

¹¹¹ Zavarzadeh, “The Apocalyptic Fact,” 74.

“metamodernism” was re-introduced thirty-five years later by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. Their article “Notes on metamodernism” was published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* and outlines the discourse oscillating between a modern enthusiasm and commitment, and a postmodern irony and detachment.¹¹² Using the term discourse to describe metamodernism, Vermeulen and van den Akker want to position metamodernism as a mode of thinking, writing, and creating that they have observed in architecture, art installations, collages, paintings, and films.

“Notes on metamodernism” was published as an overview of observations and an invitation to scholarly response. Reflections came from different directions, and through this multitude of work with different focal points and connotations, a common thread developed that demonstrates what metamodernism entails. David James and Urmila Seshagiri were one of the first to focus on literary metamodernism, which they define as “contemporary fictions distinguished by inventive, self-conscious relationships with modernist literature.”¹¹³ This early definition was refined by more exact analyses. Alison Gibbons importantly notes “a rehabilitated ethical consciousness” as a defining factor.¹¹⁴ Gibbons also demonstrates with a case study how imagining possibilities of the future “revivifies an affective sense of reality and human agency.”¹¹⁵ Later work by Vermeulen and van den Akker further establishes metamodernism by offering a case study exploring utopia in art since the 2000s. They note “a renewed sense of empathy, reinvigorated constructive engagement, a reappraisal of narrative and a return to craftwork/manship,”¹¹⁶ further defining the characteristics of metamodernism.

¹¹² Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 1–2.

¹¹³ David E. James and Urmila Seshagiri, “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 129, no. 1 (2014): 87–100, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.1.87>, 88.

¹¹⁴ Gibbons, “Postmodernism Is Dead.”

¹¹⁵ Alison Gibbons, “Metamodernism, the Anthropocene, and the Resurgence of Historicity: Ben Lerner’s *10:04* and ‘the Utopian Glimmer of Fiction,’” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 62, no. 2 (2020): 137–151, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1784828>, 139.

¹¹⁶ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism,” 55.

3.2 Back and forth: metamodern oscillations

Metamodernism, as developed by Vermeulen and van den Akker, is primarily characterized by different oscillations. The overarching oscillation between modernism and postmodernism can be divided into more specific oscillations, for example between a “modern commitment” and a “postmodern detachment.”¹¹⁷ Taking from both, metamodernism displays a continuation of specific characteristics but is not so attached to these features to suggest a true modernist revival. It simultaneously breaks with the postmodernist tradition because of its recalibrated aim, visible in its “rehabilitated ethical consciousness,”¹¹⁸ although it still employs postmodernist techniques.

Literary metamodernism goes beyond (post)modernism and takes from romanticism and realism. Identifying these characteristics as such in the analysis will demonstrate how metamodernism’s movement between four different traditions creates a blend of familiar elements working together to present a new objective. Apart from the movement between different literary traditions, I will focus specifically on the oscillations between irony and sincerity, and failure and utopia. The manifestation of these four topics in the graphic narratives can help to come to a deeper understanding of what is at the core of metamodernism, and how it reveals itself in the selected graphic novels.

3.2.1 Irony and sincerity

The first oscillation I will focus on is between irony and sincerity, as sincerity has previously been introduced in chapter 2. Though Lee Konstantinou warns that sincerity is not the opposite of irony,¹¹⁹ he fails to explain his understanding of the actual relationship. Generally, the two

¹¹⁷ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 2.

¹¹⁸ Gibbons, “Postmodernism Is Dead.”

¹¹⁹ Lee Konstantinou, “Four Faces of Postirony,” in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Post-Modernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 87–102, 89.

are understood to be antonyms. Sincerity refers to a form of communication where the expressed equals the underlying intention. On the other hand, irony presents information contrary to the underlying meaning. Irony is typically known as a feature of both modernist and postmodernist literature. However, literary modernism is known to have a more serious undertone and present a sense of coherence despite its ironic and satirical tendencies. In postmodernist literature, the ironic is even more persistent and steers towards a lack of meaning, and a nihilistic or fatalistic worldview. In metamodern literature, irony continues to shape dialogues, but takes a step back from nihilism and moves towards an increasing need for sincerity. It reflects the distinction between the surface and the deeper meaning below; a deeper meaning that was deemed unnecessary in literary postmodernism. Metamodernism continues to play with this ironic surface but is charged with a persistent longing for sincerity.

In *The Con Artists* and *In.* irony is an integral part of the main characters' humour. It can almost be seen as their defining quality, risking the impression that the characters are rather flat. For both Nick (*In.*) and Frank (*The Con Artists*), their ironic humour functions as a shield protecting them from sincere interaction with others. Frank is aware of his own protection mechanism and reflects on his behaviour towards his therapist after leaving her office; "Total inability to communicate sincerely bothers therapist. Makes sense."¹²⁰ He makes this *note to self*, following a conversation where he attempted to explain the development of his social anxiety. He recalls not being able to talk to strangers or order at restaurants, which led him to spending his teenage years playing online video games. As can be seen from his facial expression, raising his eyebrows, he opts to break the tension of discussing something that makes him feel vulnerable by delivering a punchline, as he would normally do during his stand-up comedy.¹²¹ Frank's therapist is visibly bothered by his self-deprecating humour. This type of

¹²⁰ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 80.

¹²¹ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 79.

humour can be considered a form of irony. As stated above, irony serves as a literary device characterised by a discrepancy between the expression and the underlying intended meaning. Self-deprecating humour often depends on the contrast between the speaker's dramatized self-criticism and the intention to provide amusement. Frank's stand-up comedy is centred around his own



insecurities, and he hopes to make the audience laugh at his own expense. The irony thus follows from the contrast between describing oneself negatively while aiming to gain others' approval.

Simultaneously, Frank is communicating highly personal and authentic experiences through his stand-up. He starts his jokes by sharing personal information, such as "I have a lot of trouble with my self-confidence,"¹²² "I've got a lot more material about being gay and anxious,"¹²³ "It took me a long time to realise I was gay,"¹²⁴ "Certain situations really trigger my anxiety,"¹²⁵ and "I'm very awkward."¹²⁶ He then proceeds to turn these sensitive topics into light-hearted stories about his experiences, for example when he explains that he considered being attracted to werewolves might be easier than being gay.¹²⁷ Healy's graphic novel can be read as an example of Konstantinou's concept of "postirony," which he explains as "the effort to move beyond the problems that irony has created for contemporary life and culture."¹²⁸ Frank

¹²² Healy, *The Con Artists*, 42.

¹²³ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 57.

¹²⁴ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 74.

¹²⁵ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 92, 116.

¹²⁶ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 98.

¹²⁷ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 75.

¹²⁸ Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony," 88.



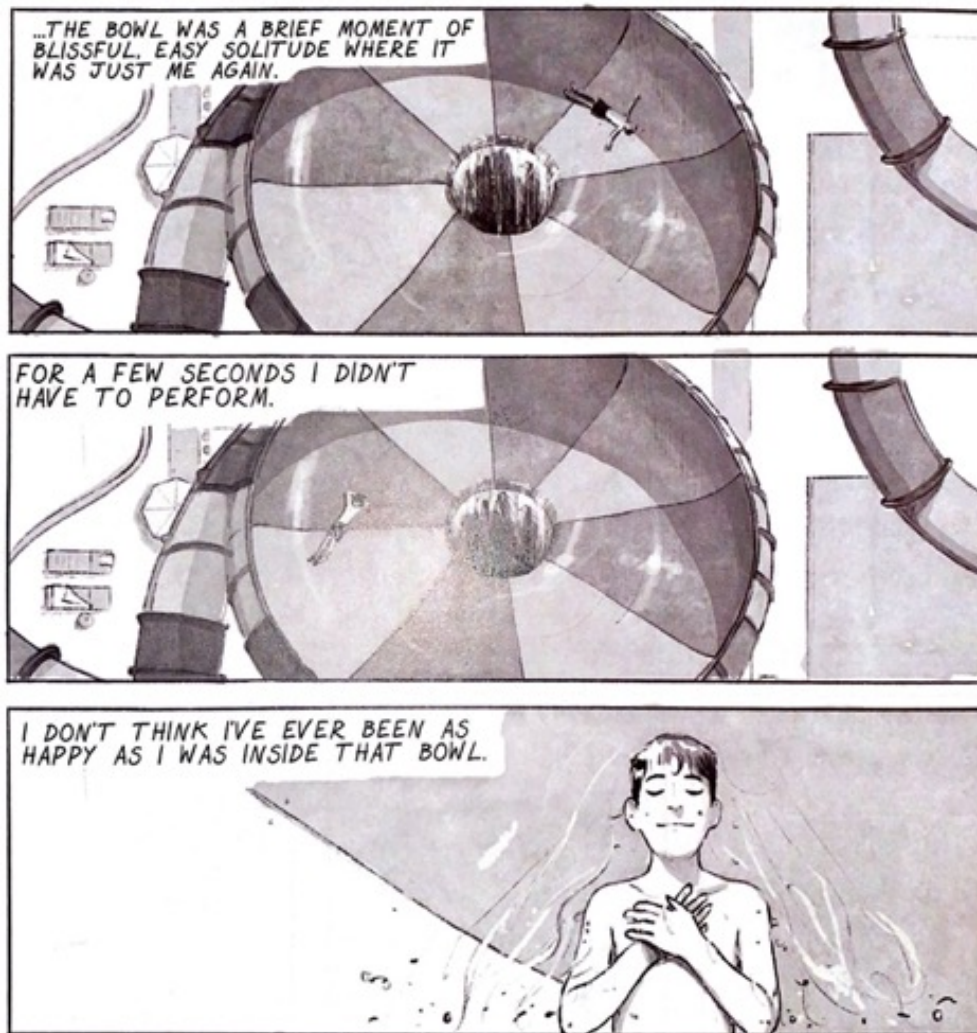
is attempting to come to terms with the complexities of contemporary life, but continuously gets stuck in his own defence mechanism of self-deprecating irony. He acknowledges that he needs help for his mental health and is learning to share personal stories with his therapist and audience. However, his sincerity is constantly being challenged by irony, demonstrating how the oscillation between sincerity and irony is present in his character.

Nick's character similarly oscillates between irony and sincerity but has a different relationship with his own coping mechanism than Frank. While Frank seems to feel safe behind his wall of irony, Nick does not want to be stuck behind it and actively looks for sincere conversations with other people. Konstantinou writes about four literary responses to postirony, "motivated postmodernism, credulous metafiction, the postironic Bildungsroman and relational art."¹²⁹ He defines the postironic Bildungsroman as a novel that "dramatize[s] the development of central characters from a naïve origin through a phase of irony en route to a final postironic condition."¹³⁰ This aptly describes the character development that Nick undergoes. *In*'s

¹²⁹ Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony," 89.

¹³⁰ Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony," 96.

prologue shows Nick as a young boy in a waterpark, as adult Nick narrates his experience with one specific waterslide that had a large bowl before the exit.

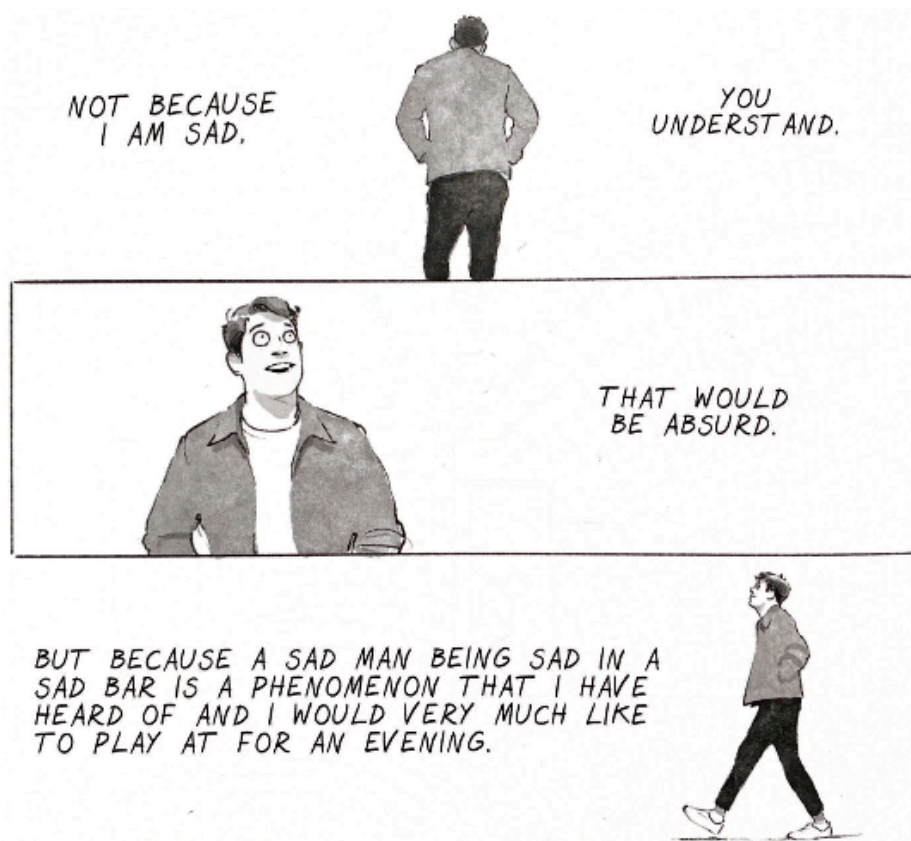


Nick describes the “blissful, easy solitude” that he experienced in those moments alone, where he was the happiest, he has ever been.¹³¹ The prologue shows his “naïve,” pre-ironic, origin, and the graphic novel details his journey through a phase of irony towards a postironic condition. To the reader, this may look like a journey towards sincerity, but Konstantinou would argue for a state of “postirony” instead of “sincerity” because the character has gone through a phase of irony and is thus no longer capable of true sincerity. Rather, the character can only consciously decide to not be ironic and aim for sincerity. This corresponds with Vermeulen and

¹³¹ McPhail, *In.*, 2.

van den Akker's theorization of a metamodern oscillation, which never fully reaches either extreme of the spectrum, but merely approaches it only to move away from it again.

Nick's irony surfaces in different ways, the most evident being his outlook on life and his daily interactions. This is immediately demonstrated in the graphic novel's opening scene, when Nick walks into "a tragedy of a bar" to play the part of a sad man.¹³²



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Nick approaches his evening plans as creating his personal play, a "one-man show" that needs the right stage,¹³⁴ and cooperating supporting characters. His pretend sadness manipulates those in close proximity to act with him, creating a real-life play of inauthenticity, which in turn gives Nick a feeling of contentment. The irony here is present in the contrast between Nick's expressed emotions and their feigned authenticity. The theatrical nature of the situation shows a complete lack of sincerity in Nick's approach to living his life.

¹³² McPhail, *In.*, 11.

¹³³ McPhail, *In.*, 10.

¹³⁴ McPhail, *In.*, 11.

During this evening, Nick meets Wren. Wren is a challenging but effective co-star for Nick: she returns the same ironic attitude and makes Nick break character for a moment, before he is able to resume his role.¹³⁵ Unsurprisingly, they both maintain their ironic attitudes over



the course of their budding relationship. This is mostly visible in their compatible humour, which is mostly a back and forth of ironic answers to genuine questions or personal information. Nick tells Wren that he is an artist, which she expected after seeing him draw on the underground. “Shocking,” she answers.¹³⁶ Later, Nick asks her how her date went the night that they met each other in the “sad” bar, “Good,” says Wren, and continues by proving the opposite; “we were completely incompatible.”¹³⁷ These interactions demonstrate how irony is part and parcel of their communication. Nick and Wren are genuinely getting to know each other, but constantly keep each other on their toes by giving mixed signals.



¹³⁵ McPhail, *In.*, 14.

¹³⁶ McPhail, *In.*, 42.

¹³⁷ McPhail, *In.*, 44.

As the illustrations show, Wren’s ironic answers are accompanied by a specific look; her eyelids are half down, and her face lacks the enthusiasm that would typically accompany her verbal expressions. McPhail uses this facial expression to indicate that Wren is being ironic. For example, the exclamation “Oh my God, finally”¹³⁸ would typically demonstrate excitement.



However, her facial expression counters the meaning of her words. If she would show the expected amount of enthusiasm for the words in her text bubbles, she would seem sincere rather than ironic. McPhail thus presents irony with his illustrations: Wren’s facial expression in combination with her answers demonstrates the discrepancy between the verbal expression and the underlying meaning.

Lastly, McPhail uses the establishments in his narrative as another source of irony. The variety of coffee shops he chooses as his offices carry names such as “Gentrificchiato,”¹³⁹ “Artisanal Kick in the Back,”¹⁴⁰ and “Just give us your money at this point.”¹⁴¹ The baristas add to the irony of the coffee shops. At “Twill & Sons” Nick is informed that they are a “cashless society,” where a cup of coffee can be traded for “a commodity or service of equal value.”¹⁴² Nick’s silence is answered by the barista with “We also take Apple Pay,”¹⁴³ undermining his



¹³⁸ McPhail, *In.*, 45.

¹³⁹ McPhail, *In.*, 34.

¹⁴⁰ McPhail, *In.*, 36.

¹⁴¹ McPhail, *In.*, 152.

¹⁴² McPhail, *In.*, 35.

¹⁴³ McPhail, *In.*, 35.

previous statement. There is another layer of irony to this interaction because the idea of a trading system can be considered to be a more sincere form of payment than money. Trading commodities is directly beneficial for both parties, creating a more authentic and equal connection between both traders. Contrastively, money introduces a need to sell, pushing the seller towards an unauthentic attitude aimed at maximising profit.

Through the coffeeshops and Nick's experiences with them, McPhail is able to comment on the late capitalist system and its influence on human connection. For example, Nick is greeted by a barista with "Hey, the usual?" but as she hands him his coffee, she calls him "Pete."¹⁴⁴ This interaction demonstrates how the coffeeshop aims to create a connection to the customer to make them feel seen and keep them coming back. McPhail instantly undermines this attitude by showing that the barista does not know who Nick is, nor does she know Pete in extension. Later, after Nick discovers his ability to feel a sincere connection to other people, he leaves the coffee shops behind. He realises that a cup of coffee and a croissant are not able to live up to the thrill of sincere human connection.¹⁴⁵ The coffee shop windows start displaying texts such as "Where are you going?"¹⁴⁶ "Wait come back. Please."¹⁴⁷ and "You need us."¹⁴⁸ These phrases communicated through the shop windows demonstrate how food service establishments feign a sincere connection to their customers with the aim of building a loyal clientele that will continue to buy their products. When Nick no longer feels compelled to look for the superficial recognition of a barista, or to feel a croissant-induced wave of happiness, the coffee shops try to convince him that he needs them, while in reality the shops need him. With Nick choosing the experience of sincere human connection over expensive coffees and croissants, McPhail is able to ironically address the reality of late capitalism.

¹⁴⁴ McPhail, *In.*, 36.

¹⁴⁵ McPhail, *In.*, 111.

¹⁴⁶ McPhail, *In.*, 152.

¹⁴⁷ McPhail, *In.*, 154.

¹⁴⁸ McPhail, *In.*, 156.

3.2.2 Failure and utopia

The second oscillation that I will discuss moves between the concepts of failure and utopia. These two concepts can be considered to weigh against each other, because a utopian world is characterised by a lack of failure. Failure typically refers to a lack of success, or an inability to achieve a desired outcome. On the other hand, utopia represents the epitome of success, free of any shortcomings or imperfections. Vermeulen and van den Akker write about the emergence of “Utopia” in metamodernist art as “a trope, individual desire or collective fantasy.”¹⁴⁹ Utopia does not manifest itself in full, but rather stays contained to the imagination. As such, it reflects how metamodernism is always moving towards something, but never reaching it: utopia is an unreachable ideal that can only be imagined, as it is too ungraspable to manifest itself.

Vermeulen and van den Akker mention failure only briefly in the conclusion of their article. They state that “metamodernism adheres to Kant’s philosophy of History in that it moves for the sake of moving, making attempts in spite of their inevitable failure.”¹⁵⁰ From this perspective, failure is thus inherent to the notion of history that metamodernism observes. At the same time, metamodernism demonstrates a resurfacing of utopia in art, which they attribute to the fact that “the millennial generation came of age determined to recreate the world in its own image;” enabled by the rapid development of global capitalism and digital technologies.¹⁵¹ Constructability, then, as similarly mentioned by Radchenko as one of the five characteristics of metamodern text, is a key concept for understanding the utopian impulse visible in metamodern art.

However, the oscillation between the notions of failure and utopia also implies that neither side is reached. An oscillation including failure is tricky to visualise as “unreachable,” because failure may in fact be the one thing that is frequently reached. Utopia can be placed on the end

¹⁴⁹ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism,” 57.

¹⁵⁰ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism,” 66.

¹⁵¹ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism,” 56.

of a spectrum as a goal, but failure cannot be placed on the opposite side of the spectrum because it will occur at different moments. When failure is reached, the move towards utopia may start again, but the point of departure will always be different. In this case, failure should not be positioned as unreachable, but instead as uninhabitable. When failure is reached, the movement does not come to a halt, but rather uses failure as a springboard. As such, failure keeps supplying energy for this metamodern oscillation.

This notion of failure as a springboard can be recognised in the selected graphic novels. The characters often face situations in which they fail but are never defeated by this occurrence. Instead, it seems to inspire them to try again. In *Feelings*, Thapp's main character reflects on the feeling of failure, set on during late summer and continued through the colder seasons. Thapp experiences the feeling of failure in a social and professional context, as her main character struggles to "reach as high as the highs of summer."¹⁵² While others enjoy the sun, she feels weighed down by the heat and unable to keep up. This feeling persists moving into the monsoon season; "the day asks too much from me."¹⁵³ Professionally, she struggles increasingly with her creativity and lacks the inspiration to finish her work, as her "creative fog grows denser by the day."¹⁵⁴ Finally in winter everything comes to a halt. Thapp's protagonist feels stationary, moving neither forward nor backward, she gets through the short days waiting for a new beginning. When spring arrives, she expresses that "everything felt like a failure,"¹⁵⁵ acknowledging that her feelings were leading in her perception of success.



¹⁵² Thapp, *Feelings*, 45.

¹⁵³ Thapp, *Feelings*, 56.

¹⁵⁴ Thapp, *Feelings*, 82.

¹⁵⁵ Thapp, *Feelings*, 124.

Thapp's protagonist did not experience success between late summer and winter, which she unfairly perceived as failure. However, the "fresh air" in spring offers her "a fresh perspective"¹⁵⁶ and inspires a restart. The oscillation between the feeling of failure and the feeling of success thus follows the seasons for her. Consequently, the movement will cyclically continue without the need for external influence. Thapp's main character takes no conscious decision to make a change following the feeling of failure, as she never practically fails. Instead, a fear of reaching failure keeps her imagining a better future that is destined to come in spring. This idealised version of spring subtly demonstrates the individual desire for utopia as mentioned by Vermeulen and van den Akker. As such, Thapp's graphic novel demonstrates the oscillation between entirely hypothetical notions of failure and utopia that are at play in the protagonist's mind.

Yan similarly faces the feeling of professional failure, as she has applied for twenty-six jobs without success.¹⁵⁷ Like Thapp's main character, she compares herself to those around her and believes that others have it easier or are better at living life than she is. Notably, the feeling of failure is introduced at the second page of the graphic novel's chronological narrative and is thus the point of departure for the story. Yan reinforces this position on page 23. She feels "stuck in [her] shell," and expresses her fear of confirming to be a failure if she does not attempt to escape her shell.¹⁵⁸ From this point, Yan starts working towards a more desirable future, envisioning her desires; finding a community where she feels welcome and enjoying her hobby, baking. Through overcoming her previous fears, she reaches her personal "utopia," she is part of a supportive group of friends, no longer feels stuck in her shell,¹⁵⁹ and spends her time baking.

¹⁵⁶ Thapp, *Feelings*, 124.

¹⁵⁷ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 2.

¹⁵⁸ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 23.

¹⁵⁹ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 55.



This character development seemingly presents a neat storyline from failure to success, but Yan is not allowed to enjoy her utopia for long. Her group falls apart after Bea leaves due to her illness, and Yan struggles with her mental health even more than prior to joining the baking club. Her inner dialogue reveals that she blames herself for the course of events,¹⁶⁰ and she gets fired from her job after spending a week at home.¹⁶¹ However, Yan is able to utilise this professional failure as her springboard and finds a way to bring her friends and the baking club back together. The graphic novel thus moves between Yan's perceptions of failure and success. She continuously stays in motion and settles in neither state. With her baking club, she is able to get a taste of her personal utopia, but she also learns to accept that this cannot be a permanent state, similar to how she knew she needed to come out of her shell.

Everything Is Ok discusses the same feeling of personal failure that was presented in *Feelings* and *Turtle Bread*. Again, the protagonist expresses that she struggles with the feeling of failure,¹⁶² underlining the subjectivity of experience, while there is no concrete or objective sign of failure. Debbie learns that she has to start treating herself with the support that she would offer a friend in a similar situation.



¹⁶⁰ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 82.

¹⁶¹ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 88.

¹⁶² Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 63.

This allows her to change her perspective on herself, from regarding herself as failing, to trying, and eventually succeeding. In Debbie's narrative, to be successful means "to accept that I'll always be a work in progress."¹⁶³ This means that Debbie does not present a form of utopia to the reader, but rather an everlasting process of approximation. Such a process is an example of Vermeulen and van den Akker's notion that metamodern art continues to strive towards those things it can never reach.

In *The Con Artists*, Frank never uses the word failure but implies it often enough for the reader to deduce that he struggles with the fear of failing as well. Chapter one starts with a table conversation between him and his friend, stating that this is "The year we become famous comedians."¹⁶⁴ This statement introduces a tension between a wished reality, the shared desire to be famous comedians, and the actual reality, where they are struggling artists. They are both working on their careers; thus, they are not failed comedians. At the same time, they feel the hot breath of impending failure on their necks, aware that they might never reach their goal. Frank describes what is making him insecure: "Anxious loser, closeted virgin, wannabe comedian," and "Mondo defence mechanisms, unemployment, self-hate, poverty, bad choices."¹⁶⁵ Previously, he worried that others would think he was a failure¹⁶⁶ and now he has started to feel it himself. Despite this fear, Frank is determined to keep going; the graphic novel ends with the same conversation as it starts with, taking place one year later.¹⁶⁷



¹⁶³ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 182.

¹⁶⁴ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 8.

¹⁶⁵ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 131.

¹⁶⁶ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 131.

¹⁶⁷ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 149.

Oscillating between the fear of failure and the desire for a better future filled with personal ideals is central to the character development in the four graphic novels. Though these ideals are far removed from the traditional idea of a utopian state, they reflect ambitious personal desires that are free of the characters' current problems, in line with the explanation that Vermeulen and van den Akker provide for a careful return of utopian ideas in metamodern art.

3.3 Direct interior monologue and language utility

In this section, I will introduce direct interior monologue as an example of metamodern language utility, because it provides the reader direct insight into the protagonist's mind. The graphic novels display mostly the "traditional" version of this technique, meaning the interior monologue is contained to the writing, as it was used in modernist novels. However, *In.* and *Turtle Bread* also demonstrate the visual direct interior monologue, explained by Andrés Romero-Jódar as "the disappearance of the visual narrator's mediation from the world represented so that readers have the impression of being granted direct access to the characters' world in unmediated form."¹⁶⁸ The different forms of the direct interior monologue serve different purposes, as will be demonstrated through the analysis.

Direct interior monologue reflects the character's thoughts, allowing the reader unobstructed insight into the character's most personal experiences and feelings. Considering the position of affect in metamodernism, this technique can be regarded as a highly functional way to transfer affects or emotions to the reader without going through a process of filtering and rationalisation that comes into play when the character is in dialogue with another character. This relates to the idea that affects are formed pre-consciously and become surface represented emotions as a result of the mind's filtering abilities. Thapp's *Feelings* is almost entirely narrated by the protagonist, with the exception of occasional text messages and one text bubble,

¹⁶⁸ Romero-Jódar, "Through Traumatized Eyes: Trauma and Visual Stream-of-Consciousness Techniques in Paul Hornschemeier's *Mother, Come Home*," 38.

belonging to the protagonist's colleague who tells her to "Smile!"¹⁶⁹ Because of this narration technique, and the frequent use of "I" in the narrated text, the boundaries between the narration and the protagonist's direct interior monologue are slightly blurred.

A clear visualisation of this shift can be seen on page 30, as Thapp illustrates the voice inside her head as a small head next to the protagonist's ear. At this point, the narration changes to a direct interior monologue: "I'm not good enough. I'll only fail, why bother? I'll never be as good."¹⁷⁰ This voice differs from the protagonist's narration in style, which is full of symbolism and poetics:



"The sun taunts me. I'm struggling through shadows. While everyone else bathes in the light, I'm stuck on the dark side of the sun."¹⁷¹ Though both quotes presented here express that the protagonist is struggling and sees herself as less successful than those around her, there is a clear contrast in style between the straightforward tone of the interior monologue, and the poetics of the narration.

This simultaneously presents how metamodernist literature can combine the postmodernist tradition, which Radchenko referred to as a "wall of text and symbols"¹⁷² with the resurfacing of a realist literary style, characterised by the use of more colloquial language to express thoughts and feelings transparently, with the aim to present realistic and relatable characters. Thapp uses a basic vocabulary and keeps metaphors rather simple. For example, "I'm enveloped by an icy mist"¹⁷³ gives a clear signal of feeling isolated and lacking the warmth

¹⁶⁹ Thapp, *Feelings*, 81.

¹⁷⁰ Thapp, *Feelings*, 30.

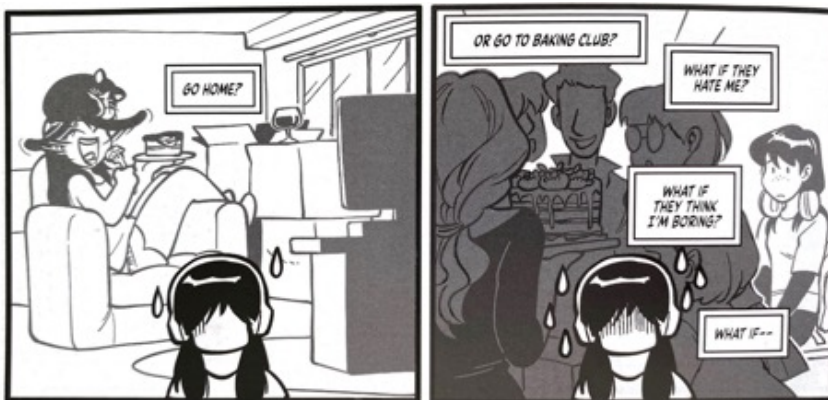
¹⁷¹ Thapp, *Feelings*, 46–47.

¹⁷² Radchenko, "Metamodern Gaming: Literary Analysis of *The Last of Us*," 249.

¹⁷³ Thapp, *Feelings*, 92.

of other people around her, which she confirms later when she states that she isolates herself.¹⁷⁴ She expresses this feeling in different moments, thus leaving little room for interpretation of the presented symbols, while still employing them.

Turtle Bread presents two intertwined storylines. One forms through the dialogue between the characters and tells the story of the development of the baking club. This storyline has the scope to exist independently but is complemented by the addition of Yan's direct interior monologue. Her interior monologue shapes the reader's perception of the events in the baking club's story since it presents the contrast between Yan's behaviour and her underlying thoughts and feelings. The graphic novel starts with Yan's thoughts, introducing the reader to her state of mind before she starts going to the baking club. This positions the baking club as an intimidating place for Yan, who fears that the other members will hate her or think that she is boring.¹⁷⁵



The fear that she experiences during her initial meeting with the baking club is also presented to the reader through use of the visual

direct interior monologue technique. When the other members are introducing themselves to Yan, the panels display Yan's direct perspective instead of the mediated illustrations with Yan as one of the characters. The members of the baking club look at Yan, and thus directly at the

¹⁷⁴ Thapp, *Feelings*, 102.

¹⁷⁵ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 4.

reader. When Amit goes to shake Yan's hand, he even breaks the left line of the panel.¹⁷⁶ Crossing the border of his frame reaffirms the blurring of the boundary between Yan's perspective and the reader's perspective, creating a moment of deeper emergence in the graphic novel. Additionally, the extension of his hand can be read as a direct invitation into his



world, reaffirming Romero-Jódar's explanation of the visual direct interior monologue technique in graphic narratives as "being granted direct access to the characters' world."¹⁷⁷

The modernist stream of consciousness technique and its visual adaptation are contrasted by the use of simple language that is related to realistic modes of writing. Both the dialogues between characters, and Yan's interior monologue are written in colloquial language, making it easy to follow the narrative and relate to the characters. This is similar to the use of language in *Everything Is Ok*, which aims to spread the message "to be kind to yourself."¹⁷⁸ Both graphic novels are mental health novels in the first place, dealing with complicated feelings of depression and anxiety. These topics are difficult to comprehend and made more approachable through the use of illustrations and colloquial language. Debbie's narrative demonstrates a process of acknowledging mental health issues and taking subsequent steps to get better. This is a challenging process that she makes more manageable to understand through transparent communication about her thoughts and feelings, both in her interior monologue and in dialogue with others. Debbie expresses that she sometimes feels misunderstood,¹⁷⁹ which



¹⁷⁶ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 7.

¹⁷⁷ Romero-Jódar, "Through Traumatized Eyes: Trauma and Visual Stream-of-Consciousness Techniques in Paul Hornschemeier's *Mother, Come Home*," 38.

¹⁷⁸ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, back cover.

¹⁷⁹ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 49.

emphasises her decision to use accessible language when sharing her experiences with mental health issues.

McPhail uses the direct interior monologue technique often in the first half of the graphic novel, and similarly to the protagonist in *Feelings*, Nick's voice shifts between narration and his direct interior monologue. His tone does not change considerably between the two different roles, but the distinction between them is made through the setting that Nick finds himself in. When Nick is alone, he is mostly narrating, but in company he has a direct interior monologue in addition to the dialogue with the other character. For example, he helps his mother with restorations of an old house, and he jokes that he will inherit it when she passes¹⁸⁰ – this conversation takes place before he knows that she is ill. He then turns to his interior monologue and reflects on what he will have to leave to his future children.¹⁸¹ His interior monologue is

interrupted by the dialogue with his mother, which provides a new perspective on the matter that Nick was just thinking about. For the reader, the direct interior monologue and the dialogue complement each other seamlessly. Following Nick's thoughts helps to see his mother's suggestion, "leave your sketchbooks to them,"¹⁸² with the same fresh pair of eyes as Nick does.



¹⁸⁰ McPhail, *In.*, 27.

¹⁸¹ McPhail, *In.*, 29.

¹⁸² McPhail, *In.*, 29.

In. also presents the visual direct interior monologue. When Nick makes a sincere connection with someone, the illustrations portray him in fantasy landscapes that reflect, to a certain extent, the content of the conversation he is having. When he is in conversation with his mother and she reveals to him that she has cancer, the reader follows this conversation in Nick's illustrated imagination. The moment that Nick hears the news is communicated to the reader by showing his imagined perspective, seeing that his mother is the, previously anonymous, person on Wren's operating table.¹⁸³ Considering the fact that Wren is an oncologist, the reader is able to put the pieces together and deduce that Nick's mother has cancer. This is confirmed when the reader turns the page, and sees Hannah say, "I've got an appointment to talk about options next week."¹⁸⁴ The image of Nick's mother is an example of Nick's visual direct interior monologue. The reader sees through his eyes as he imagines his ill mother in surgery, reflecting Nick's thoughts through visual means only.



3.4 Constructing better futures

Lastly, I will demonstrate the constructive nature of the selected graphic novels, by focusing on the representations of hopefulness and an ethical consciousness. I combine these elements with Radchenko's fourth criterium, the metamodern will to belong to a community.

3.4.1 Hope

Thematically, the five graphic novels all show a protagonist looking to connect with other people. In *Turtle Bread*, this forms the main storyline; Yan wants to be part of a community and

¹⁸³ McPhail, *In.*, 183.

¹⁸⁴ McPhail, *In.*, 185.

is able to find this in her baking club. The connections that she makes at this club enable her to be more constructive in her personal and professional life; she finds a job¹⁸⁵ and starts a relationship with a man.¹⁸⁶ The ending of the graphic novel shows Yan welcoming new members to the Turtle Bread Club, showing how the baking club members persevere after losing their leader, Bea. This simultaneously gives a preview of the future and shows the reader that the characters chose to continue following their goals despite their misfortune. These events demonstrate hope, and a sense of purpose, that Yan did not experience before. Hope is a key element to understanding the constructive nature of metamodernism, as it demonstrates the desire to create a better future after the nihilistic worldview that was dominant in postmodernist thinking.

Feelings similarly represents hopefulness, as the protagonist always maintains faith that she will feel better again when spring comes. Facing seasonal depression means that she goes through cycles. In the last chapter, Spring, she looks back on the dark winter and thinks, “I persevered through bitter storms. So when they come back around, I’ll be ready for them.”¹⁸⁷ This demonstrates that the protagonist is positive about her future, despite the hardships that she knows she will have to face again.



Tung refers to mental health struggles as bad weather as well. Thapp mentions “bitter storms,” and Tung talks about “dark clouds.”¹⁸⁸ This indicates that both see mental health issues as temporary; bad weather will pass, and the sun will come out again. Tung also ends her graphic

¹⁸⁵ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 71.

¹⁸⁶ Kim-Joy, Firmansyah and Gil, *Turtle Bread*, 75.

¹⁸⁷ Thapp, *Feelings*, 122–123.

¹⁸⁸ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, back cover.

novel on a similar note as Thapp. She writes, “Oh, and remember back when you were having a really tough time and you thought to yourself “How will I ever get through this?” Well... you did. You can, and you will.”¹⁸⁹ Both authors end their graphic narratives with a message of hope, and the promise of a better future.

In McPhail’s *In.*, hope holds a more challenged position but is still noticeable towards the end of the narrative. When Nick is grieving the loss of his mother, he decides to meet with Wren. She asks him what he misses about his mother, and he answers that he is grieving “the stuff that hadn’t happened yet.”¹⁹⁰ Nick concludes with the sentence “I was going to know her.”¹⁹¹ Nick is imagining what the future could have been like if his mother had not passed away but is forced to accept that this future will never come. From a metamodern perspective, this presents an interesting contrast between optimism and nihilism; Nick is hopeful about a non-existent future, bordering more on hypothetical hope, or wishful thinking.



This attitude is indicative of what Vermeulen and van den Akker call “informed naivety,”¹⁹² a metamodern response to postmodern nihilism. Informed naivety can be explained as the pursuit of certain goals, and maintaining the hope of achieving them, though being aware of the goals’ unattainability. Nick is aware that his mother is not in his future, but nevertheless remains hopeful that he would have gotten to know her had she still been alive. Embracing the metamodern perspective of informed naivety is an essential strategy for personal advancements

¹⁸⁹ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 188–189.

¹⁹⁰ McPhail, *In.*, 255.

¹⁹¹ McPhail, *In.*, 256.

¹⁹² Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on metamodernism,” 5.

in life because a postmodern acceptance of life as meaningless obstructs the possibility for progress; any progress made is eventually meaningless to the postmodern thinker. One must simulate the belief in attaining a goal, even in the face of acknowledged impossibility. For Nick to say that he was going to know his mother, demonstrates a sort of wishful thinking that the future would have been different, and better, than the past. The ending of *In*. thus demonstrates the move from postmodernism to metamodernism, by underlining the continuation of life after death, and not letting go of the hope for a sincere connection to his mother despite her passing.

Healy is also more ominous in his reaffirmation of a better future. Frank's therapist shares his test results with him and reveals that he does not have anxiety, but since he knows when to ask for help, she reassures him that he will be fine.¹⁹³ This is followed by the last scene in the park where his comedian friend and him reaffirm that they will become famous comedians and achieve their goals.¹⁹⁴ Healy presents a more ironic version of a hopeful ending, but nevertheless shares a positive prospect for the future. Additionally, he demonstrates how



reaching a professional goal will take time and work, and not to give up if it does not work out in the timeframe that was initially anticipated. As the graphic novel starts and ends with the affirmation that Frank and his friend will become famous this year, it sends a message of perseverance, as do *Turtle Bread*, *Feelings*, *Everything Is Ok*, and *In*. This pattern is part of the new narrative that is being created by millennial authors in response to postmodernist nihilism; the future is worth working for. This pattern simultaneously reinforces Radchenko's notion that metamodernist literature is constructive.

¹⁹³ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 147.

¹⁹⁴ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 149.

3.4.2 Ethical consciousness

In addition to the aspects of connection and hope, I turn to Alison Gibbons' notion that metamodernist literature displays "a rehabilitated ethical consciousness,"¹⁹⁵ to further explain how the authors write narratives with a constructive nature. As previously mentioned in the literature review on metamodernism, this ethical consciousness can be considered a result of the crises that shape twenty-first century society. With the knowledge of these environmental and social crises, there is an increased need for ethically sound decisions and attitudes. This is visible for example in "the transition from a white collar to a green collar economy."¹⁹⁶ In the graphic novels, an ethical consciousness can be discerned in the characters' attitudes, that contributes to the constructive nature of the narratives.

For example, Frank is obsessed with (dis)honesty. This is emphasised by his own name; Frank struggles with frank¹⁹⁷ communication but desires it more than anything else. He decides to confront Giorgio with the fact that he lies "about everything."¹⁹⁸ Giorgio does not deny this allegation but reflects the same accusation and adds that Frank's



motivation for helping Giorgio during his recovery time was "selfish,"¹⁹⁹ as he thinks that Frank only helped him to get a good story for his stand-up comedy.

The reader is aware that Frank feels guilty for not being a better friend to Alex when they needed him and can deduct that Frank's decision to take care of Giorgio may have been driven by this guilt, and the fear that Giorgio would hurt himself when left alone. The combination of

¹⁹⁵ Gibbons, "Postmodernism Is Dead."

¹⁹⁶ Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on metamodernism," 4.

¹⁹⁷ *The Cambridge Dictionary*: "honest, sincere, and telling the truth, even when this might be awkward or make other people uncomfortable." <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/frank>.

¹⁹⁸ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 104.

¹⁹⁹ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 105.

these different factors forces Frank to reflect on his own behaviour and makes him feel like he has the ethical upper hand in conversation with Giorgio, who earns his money illegally. This also moves him to inform Giorgio's father of his reckless behaviour, because in his eyes, it is "the right choice."²⁰⁰ Frank's decision proves his name right, as he chooses to go against Giorgio's wishes for the sake of Giorgio's own good. *The Con Artists* presents a narrative that continuously interacts with the notion of truth. By offering different perspectives, the graphic novel motivates the reader to reflect on both sides of the story and let one's own ethical consciousness lead the way.

Nick's journey towards sincerity similarly keeps his mind occupied with the need to speak honestly. He finds himself lying to his four-year-old nephew, out of habit of not speaking the truth. This realisation visibly saddens him, and the thought "Why are you lying to a four year old?" indicates that Nick feels guilt, or shame, for being dishonest with a young child.²⁰¹ These



thoughts and feelings speak for Nick's moral compass, or his need to behave in an ethically responsible manner, which he tends to struggle with. In addition to often being dishonest, he seems to have little understanding of what ethical behaviour entails. For example, he decides to draw a girl he sees in public. He fails to recognise that this behaviour is unwanted, and she informs him that his actions are "intrusive" and "gross."²⁰² This occurs early in the narrative and provides the reader with a starting point for Nick's ethical consciousness, or rather lack thereof. Throughout the narrative, Nick grows increasingly self-reflective, less selfish, and more honest. His character development displays Nick's need to construct a better future and demonstrates the rehabilitated ethical consciousness in literature as mentioned by Gibbons.

²⁰⁰ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 128.

²⁰¹ McPhail, *In.*, 137.

²⁰² McPhail, *In.*, 39.

3.5 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed the graphic novels on the basis of four out of five characteristics presented in Radchenko's case study focusing on textual metamodernism. I discussed two metamodern oscillations, namely between irony and sincerity, and failure and utopia. These sections demonstrated how the graphic novels move between these different poles and reflect the metamodern tendencies of New Sincerity and a renewed interest in utopia. Additionally, failure proved to be a central topic in the graphic narratives and provided insight into the motivation behind the pursuit of potentially unreachable ideals.

I then turned to the storytelling of the graphic novels, focussing specifically on direct interior monologue and language utility as characteristics of metamodern text. The graphic novels displayed the employment of direct interior monologue and visual direct interior monologue, as conceptualised by Romero-Jódar, speaking to the adaptation of modernist literary techniques in metamodern literature. In addition, the use of colloquial language in the graphic novels demonstrates the language utility that Radchenko names as a characteristic of metamodern text. Straightforward language is functional for the creation of accessible and relatable characters, which is especially important for graphic novels dealing with topics of mental health. Clear language reduces the chances of being misunderstood and facilitates the treatment of these sensitive topics.

In the final section, I looked at the constructive nature of the graphic novels, which was apparent in the presence of hope and an ethical consciousness in the characters. These features indicate literary metamodernism because they are in conversation with the postmodernist tendency towards nihilism and aim to recalibrate the potential meaninglessness of life. This can be seen in the characters that are working on their self-development and who aim to create a better future for themselves. The characters' self-development is driven by an ethical consciousness, which pushes them towards honesty or sincerity. At the same time, this can turn

towards the idea of informed naivety, for example in Nick's case, where the character remains hopeful against their better judgment. Despite certain goals or hopes being unreachable, all narratives present the characters' drive to keep going despite potential obstacles, or inevitable failure.

Chapter 4: Graphic novels as a metamodern medium

In this chapter I will reflect on the graphic novel as a medium and how its features align with the affective turn and metamodernism. In the analysis, I will focus on two characteristics with regard to the form of the graphic novels. The first aspect I will consider is affect, and how the storytelling through graphic novels facilitates both the sharing of stories of affect and generating an affective readers' response. The second section of the analysis is dedicated to hybridity, approaching the graphic novel as a medium between literature and comics, and reflecting on the tension between showing and telling in graphic narratives.

4.1 Literature review: the graphic novel medium

In chapter 2, the graphic novels have demonstrated a distinctive capability for the affective or emotional dimension of narratives to manifest. In a study published in *Psychology of Popular Media* on the reception of the portrayal of schizophrenia, graphic novels were shown to increase narrative engagement, and participants showed less judgement towards a sympathetic and positive portrayal of schizophrenia.²⁰³ Referring back to Gibbons, this study displays the ability to “articulate meaningful emotional reactions,”²⁰⁴ which can be ascribed to the visual aspect of the narrative presented in this study. Graphic novels have also been used as an effective tool for health communication, as they “facilitate the reader’s identification with characters.”²⁰⁵ In a similar fashion, mental illness graphic memoirs “provide vividness and easily digested expression, translating the sufferer’s altered mental perspective effectively for the reader.”²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Elizabeth L. Cohen et al., “Seeing Is Believing: The Role of Imagery Fluency in Narrative Persuasion through a Graphic Novel,” *Psychology of Popular Media* 9, no. 2 (2020): 176–183, <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000218>, 176.

²⁰⁴ Gibbons, “Metamodern Affect,” 85.

²⁰⁵ Laurel Hourani et al., “Graphic Novels: A New Stress Mitigation Tool for Military Training: Developing Content for Hard-to-Reach Audiences,” *Health Communication* 32, no. 5 (2016): 541–549, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2016.1140265>, 541.

²⁰⁶ Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Sweetha Saji, “Drawing The Mind: Aesthetics of Representing Mental Illness in Select Graphic Memoirs,” *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine* 25, no. 1 (2019): 37–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459319846930>, 37.

These factors considered, the graphic novel presents itself as a well-fitted medium for the materialization of metamodern affect. Due to its visual nature, complexities in emotion, subjectivity, and perspective are more easily transferred to the reader, and more subtleties can be presented by the author.

Research concerning graphic novel largely takes place in the interdisciplinary field of comics studies. The anglophone comics medium as it exists today is a result of the rise of comics as popular culture in the twentieth century. Initially featured in newspapers, comics were reprinted in magazine-format publications, which led to the development of comic books as an independent medium in the 1930s.²⁰⁷ The subsequent expansion of comic books spans over decades but witnessed an accelerated development since the late 1980s and early 1990s of the twentieth century. The eighties saw a mismatch in literary supply and demand; readers' desire for "socially and personally "useful" storytelling"²⁰⁸ was not met by the available literature, causing the public to look to other forms of literary storytelling. Between this, the continuous hybridization of media and art forms, and the postmodern blurring of boundaries between high and low art, exemplified by pop art, graphic narratives became recognized as a full-fledged literary form.²⁰⁹

In the 1980s, the label "graphic novel" was introduced as a marketing category, but there were no parameters for what this type of hardcover entailed. Without boundaries or guidelines, the form could not crystalize, as is confirmed by Art Spiegelman's winning of the Pulitzer Prize for *Maus* in a 'special category,' "because the Pulitzer board members had found the work "hard to classify."²¹⁰ The publisher decided to label *Maus* as a graphic novel, and though Spiegelman

²⁰⁷ Karin Kukkonen, "Comics and Their History," in *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 99–122, 106.

²⁰⁸ Jan Baetens, "Stories and Storytelling in the Era of Graphic Narrative," in *Stories* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 27–43, 31.

²⁰⁹ Baetens, "Stories and Storytelling in the Era of Graphic Narrative," 33.

²¹⁰ Robert Petersen, "The Return of Graphic Narratives for Adults," in *Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels: A History of Graphic Narratives* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 205–226, 222.

acknowledged that the work “had novelistic qualities,” he noted that the term validates the form more than its contents.²¹¹ This has remained an issue for the graphic novel medium, and has inspired a substantial amount of academic reflection.

Kathryn Strong Hansen’s “In Defense of Graphic Novels” stresses the need for a clear definition to resolve the current division on the term.²¹² Catherine Labio confirms this by critiquing the term for “denoting an entire genre.”²¹³ However, Labio does not see the term graphic novel as a valuable addition to the realm of comics and is not in favour of redefining it, but rather replacing it with more accurate terminology.²¹⁴ These diverging opinions are often repeated in a large corpus of work on the same topics and have resulted in a multitude of different definitions for the term in an attempt to validate it, while others plead to omit it entirely. This discussion is thus responsible for the continued unclarity on the definition of the graphic novel. Often misapplied, the term continues to be used in- and outside of academics, which offers possibilities to further investigate what the graphic novel could be and to establish a productive definition.

As introduced in the theoretical framework, I choose to use the term graphic novel because I see the value of a properly defined version of the term to specify a specific type of comic book. I adhere to my own definition of the graphic novel in this thesis, which I based on the overlapping elements in the different definitions that can be found in the literature. I define the graphic novel as a fictional, hardcover variation of the comic book, with the independency and scope of a prose novel. This definition addresses the content and the form of the graphic novel as a medium and provides a starting point for the analysis of the graphic novel as an affective medium.

²¹¹ Petersen, “The Return of Graphic Narratives for Adults,” 222.

²¹² Kathryn Strong Hansen, “In Defense of Graphic Novels,” *The English Journal* 102, no. 2 (2012), 57–63, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23365398>, 57.

²¹³ Catherine Labio, “What’s in a Name? The Academic Study of Comics and the “Graphic Novel,”” *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 3 (2011), 123–126, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23365398>, 126.

²¹⁴ Labio, “What’s in a Name? The Academic Study of Comics and the “Graphic Novel,”” 126.

4.2 The graphic novel as an affective medium

The selected graphic novels have been demonstrated to tell mental health stories, placing the impact of experiences and affective responses from the characters central to the development of the storylines. In this section, I pay specific attention to the visuals in the graphic novels that communicate either the characters affections or engage the reader's affection. Ian Hague refers to various "affective devices and techniques"²¹⁵ in the introduction of his book *Comics and the Senses*. The two affective techniques that I will elaborate on are "bleeding" and "colouring."²¹⁶

4.2.1 Bleeding

Bleeding in a comic book refers to the image filling the entire page instead of being contained to a panel, "there are no margins and no panel borders around the outer edges of the image."²¹⁷ Scott McCloud, author of *Making Comics* (2006), explains that panels without borders "'bleed' into our world,"²¹⁸ opening up a scene and creating a more immersive reading experience. Bleeding is a quality unique to graphic narratives, such as manga and comics. Thus, the position it holds as an affective technique is exclusive to these media. In the selected graphic novels, bleeds are often used to display the characters' emotional highs or lows. Regardless of the captions or dialogues, turning the page to reveal a full-page bleed prepares the reader for an important moment; often a moment of rest or the opposite, a moment where the character feels overwhelmed.

Debbie Tung utilises three different types of panels in *Everything Is Ok*. The classic bordered panels are used for scenes where the characters speak, either in dialogues or to signal

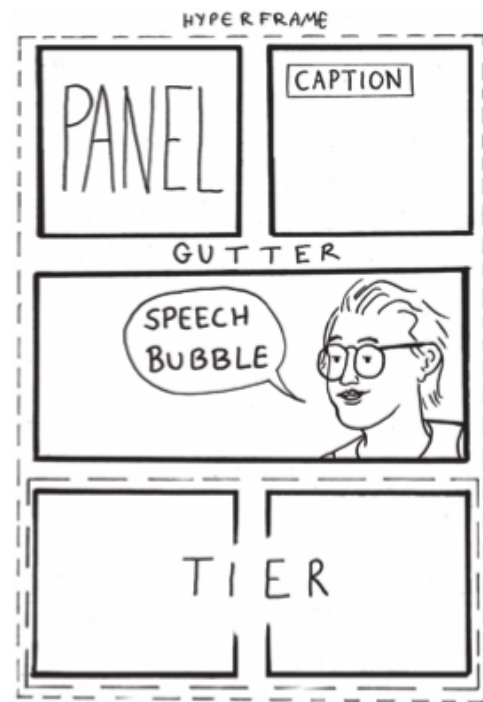
²¹⁵ Ian Hague, "Sight, or, the Ideal Perspective and the Physicality of Seeing," in *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels*, 34–62, (NY: Routledge, 2014), 57.

²¹⁶ Ian Hague, "Introduction," in *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels*, 1–8, (NY: Routledge, 2014), 5.

²¹⁷ Hague, "Sight, or, the Ideal Perspective and the Physicality of Seeing," 51.

²¹⁸ Scott McCloud, *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* (NY: Harper Collins, 2006), 163.

Debbie's interior monologue. She also employs borderless panels, where the illustrations are directly surrounded by the white gutters²¹⁹ of the page. Lastly, she uses bleeding. These illustrations are not surrounded by the white borders but are fully coloured. Looking at the closed graphic novel from the side, it is already visible from the outside where the bleeds are located in the graphic novel, as these can be recognised as black or dark pages in between the white pages. As a result, these scenes stand out



from the rest of the graphic novel prior to opening it. The emphasis on these scenes is already established by visual means exclusively, regardless of the storyline and content described on the bleeding pages. As McCloud noted, the story bleeds into the reader's world, and this quality is visible even prior to opening the book. As such, the graphic novel can be recognised – and positions itself – as an immersive work that has the potential to engage the reader's affects.

Looking at the bleeding in *Everything Is Ok* in more detail reveals that Tung employs these pages to display Debbie's lowest moments, moments of insights or revelations, and to communicate affirmations for herself and the reader. For example, after Debbie's first panic attack she hurries home and sits down on the floor after closing her front door. This is followed by a two-page bleed, where Debbie floats in a darkness that resembles the sea.²²⁰

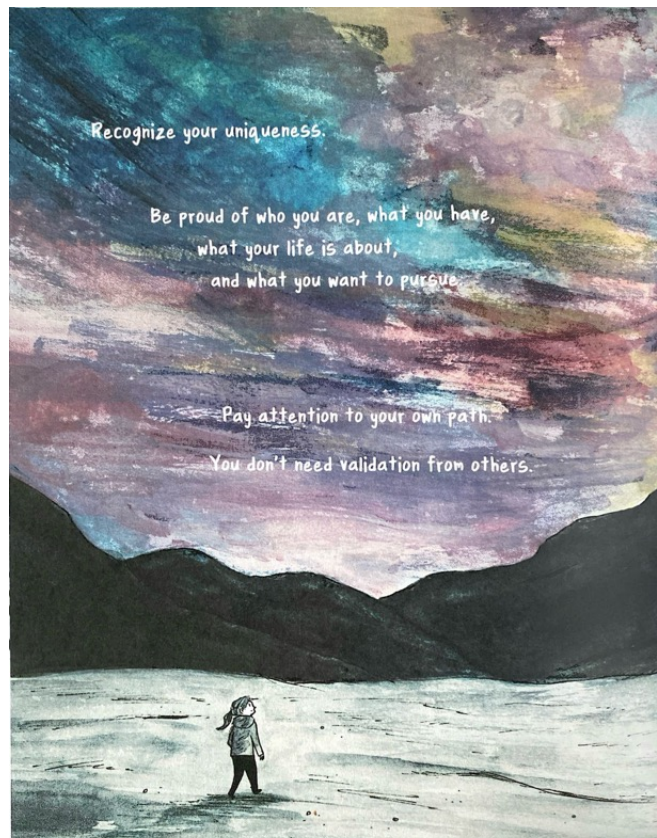


²¹⁹ "This is what a comics page (sometimes) looks like. By Samuel Williams (2019)." Harriet Earle, "Definitions and mechanics," 26.

²²⁰ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 58–59.

This is a pivotal moment in the story, as Debbie indicates herself on the next page, “This was when I knew my mental health took a turn for the worse...”²²¹ In order to communicate the importance of this moment for Debbie, and the deep despair that she experienced during and after her panic attack, Tung utilises the bleeding page. Debbie’s experience of a panic attack is both significant for the affective nature of the graphic novel’s storyline and the engagement of the reader’s affect.

On the other side of the emotional spectrum are Debbie’s moments of valuable insights and revelations about herself and her mental health that Tung similarly displays with bleeding. For example, Debbie realises that she does not need others’ approval to be satisfied with her own path: “Recognize your uniqueness. Be proud of who you are, what you have, what your life is about, and what you want to pursue. Pay attention to your own path. You don’t need validations from others.”²²² Debbie writes these affirmations for herself, as the narrator of the story, but they are applicable for any person who recognises the thoughts and feelings that Debbie struggles with. Because of this, reading these affirmations potentially invokes the reader’s affect. This potential is reinforced by the design of the page, as Tung uses bleeding to emphasize the message from the affirmations. As noted above, the bleeding pages ask for more attention than pages structured with panels. In addition, the affirmations are positioned in the centre of



²²¹ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 60.

²²² Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 116.

the page and seem to hover in the sky over the mountains. Debbie is watching the words, taking them in as a message from above. This scene creates the conviction that the words bear wisdom, or a type of truth, that people should be familiar with. In its totality, the page calls for attention, plays on the reader's affect, and asks for an affirmative response.

McPhail similarly uses bleeding in *In.*, though these pages have an entirely different look and feel than Tung's. His illustrations are centred on the page and surrounded by the whiteness of the paper, unlike Tung's use of colour. Because of this, the bleeds look similar to a page with one centred panel without borders. However, there is a visible difference between the two. The bleed²²³ below is followed by a borderless panel on the next page.²²⁴



²²³ McPhail, *In.*, 51.

²²⁴ McPhail, *In.*, 156.



The bleed page shows two pairs of jeans, taken off by Nick and Wren and left on the floor. There is no difference between the white of the page, and the white of the floor. Looking at the jeans, surrounded by the white floor, the reader is transported into the story world as if looking down at the floor themselves, in the same way that they are looking down at the page. The second scene, on the other hand, shows Nick running past a coffee shop. Though the panel has no black line as a border, it is framed by its own illustration. The coffee shop functions as the border of the scene, since there is nothing taking place outside of its front. This means that the white surrounding it, is simply the white of the paper, and has no further function.

Having established what bleeding looks like in *In.*, I turn to an example of bleeding that is employed to emphasise affect in the story. After Nick's mother tells him that she is ill, Nick embraces her.²²⁵ The two of them are positioned in the middle of the page, with only a chair and a coffee cup featured as their surroundings. The effect of this bleed is that the reader is allowed to take a moment of rest with Nick and Hannah.



²²⁵ McPhail, *In.*, 186.

Surrounded by nothing but the emptiness of the page, the only thing of importance is this moment of silence between mother and son.

Similar to the bleeding in *Everything Is Ok*, this scene can be considered to be a key moment in the storyline, and at the same time presents a spike in the affective intensity of the story. Both Nick and his mom visibly feel defeated, their hanging shoulders and Hannah's downcast eyes demonstrate that they are overwhelmed by sadness. The bleeding page allows the reader to be in the room with the characters and share in this feeling. Narratives of illness additionally hold resonance for a broad readership, as they often parallel the experiences of others. Consequently, this scene serves as a catalyst for stimulating an affective reader response. The visual component of witnessing sincere emotional responses is a direct benefit to the graphic novel's storytelling ability. The scene underlines how effectively the graphic novel can present stories of affect.

4.2.2 Colouring

In his chapter on sight, Hague discusses two contrasting positions from the early history of art theory on the use of colour. He quotes Louis Gabriel,²²⁶ who has stated that “masterfully applied colour always represents the truth, whereas design represents only a reasonable possibility.”²²⁷ This is contradicted by Charles Le Brun, who believed that “the role of colour is exclusively to satisfy the eye, unlike design, which satisfies the intellect.”²²⁸ As Hague notes, both share the conviction that “while design appeals to the mind, colour has a clear connection to the sensual aspects of human beings.”²²⁹ This notion is in line with the previously discussed distinction

²²⁶ Hague, “Sight, or, the Ideal Perspective and the Physicality of Seeing,” 44.

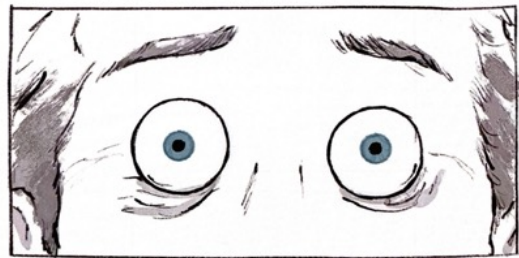
²²⁷ Louis Gabriel Blanchard, “Conference on the Merits of Colour,” in *Art in Theory 1648–1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger, 177–182 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 181.

²²⁸ Charles Le Brun, “Thoughts on M. Blanchard's Discourse on the Merits of Colour,” in *Art in Theory 1648–1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger, 182–185 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 184.

²²⁹ Hague, “Sight, or, the Ideal Perspective and the Physicality of Seeing,” 44.

between bodily functions and reflexes, such as affect, and the mind. In early art theory, thus, colour was already aligned with affect. To take from more recent academic work, comics scholar Pascal Lefèvre touched upon the same topic in 1999 and wrote that “it is certainly true that colours are particularly capable of generating powerful, nonrational (e.g., emotional, sensual, etc.) responses.”²³⁰ Because of this, Hague categorises “colouring” as an affective technique.

The way that McPhail utilises colour in *In.* is fundamentally connected to Lefèvre’s position. McPhail visualises Nick’s moments of sincere connection to other people through the use of colour. While the narrative is developed in black and white illustrations, the imaginary world that Nick enters upon the establishment of a sincere connection shows an abundance of colours. This is introduced by the colouring of the iris that shows before Nick launches into his imagination.²³¹



This is the moment that Nick switches from a rational conversation, based on the logical questions to ask and answers to give, to a sincere conversation, based on more honest thoughts and feelings. McPhail visualises this shift from mind to body by switching from black and white to colour. Following Lefèvre’s reasoning, the consequence of McPhail’s use of colour is that the reader will respond more emotionally and less rationally to the coloured illustrations than those in black and white. Supplemented by the fact that McPhail does not use words in the coloured passages, there is little in these pages that forces the scenes to be filtered by the mind

²³⁰ Pascal Lefèvre, “Recovering Sensuality in Comic Theory,” ed. John A. Lent, *International Journal of Comic Art* 1, no. 1 (1999), 140–149, 146.

²³¹ McPhail, *In.*, 78.

before entering the reader's body. Without this step of rationalisation, the coloured pages hold a more direct claim to the reader's affects than its non-coloured counterparts. Therefore, *In* demonstrates Hague's claim that colouring is used as an affective technique in graphic novels.

Manjit Thapp's use of colour in *Feelings* also effectively demonstrates how colours are connected to feelings. The graphic novel's illustrations are exclusively coloured, and the colour schemes that Thapp uses differ depending on the protagonist's moods that fluctuate with the seasons. The illustration below,²³² featured on both the title page and page 70, displays in one panel how the seasons affect the protagonist's mood, and the colours that she associates with these feelings. The three primary colours used for seasons and emotions are in line with typical connotations: yellow reflects happiness, red stands for heat, and blue suggests depression.

According to colour psychology, the colour green can represent a variety of different feelings, depending on its shade.²³³ Dark green is typically associated with nature, potentially alluding to feelings of escapism.²³⁴ McLeod also notes that in Southeast Asia, "green is unlucky and foretells illness and disease."²³⁵ Considering that Thapp's note from the author includes the information that "the book's structure is inspired by the six-



²³² Thapp, *Feelings*, title page.

²³³ June McLeod, "The Colours," in *Colour Psychology Today* (Winchester, UK: O-Books, 2016).

²³⁴ McLeod, "The Colours."

²³⁵ McLeod, "The Colours."

season calendar, used by some countries in South Asia,”²³⁶ it is not unfair to assume that the colour green bears typically South Asian connotations in Thapp’s graphic novel.

Looking at the colour schemes per chapter, the most notably different chapter is “Winter,”²³⁷ the season that the protagonist struggles with feelings of depression. The two most used colours are blue and grey, and many pages have a dark hue over them. Thapp’s use of colour is reflective of the protagonist’s emotions to such an extent that the reader does not need to read the captions to understand how the protagonist is feeling. For



example, the colours on page 95 are cold, this is reinforced by the protagonist trying to warm herself with a blanket and a hot beverage.²³⁸ The reader is able to deduct the protagonist’s mood from a brief glance at the page.

The same can be said of the first chapter, “Summer,”²³⁹ which is filled with warm and vibrant colours.²⁴⁰ As a result of using these warm and cold colours the way Thapp does, the reader adapts more readily to the protagonist’s mood as they are affected by the mood of the colours on the page. Thapp reinforces this contrast by consciously placing the different colour schemes of summer and winter on



²³⁶ Thapp, *Feelings*, a note from the author.

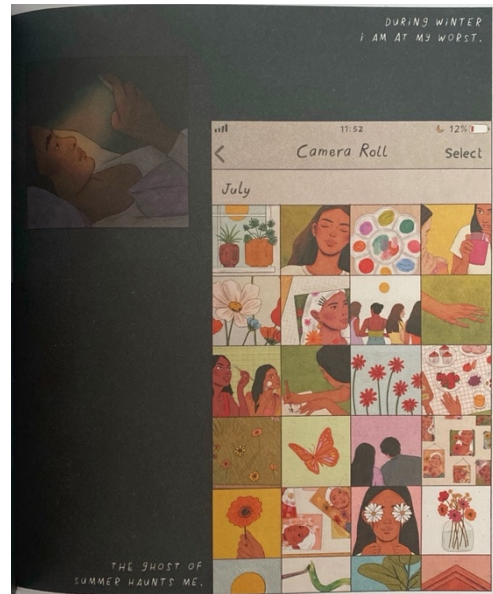
²³⁷ Thapp, *Feelings*, 88–109.

²³⁸ Thapp, *Feelings*, 95.

²³⁹ Thapp, *Feelings*, 2–25.

²⁴⁰ Thapp, *Feelings*, 12.

one page. Here, the darkness of winter becomes even more apparent next to the colourful memories of summer.²⁴¹ Additionally, the phone battery's power bar has the colour red, and is shown to be at 12%. For many readers, seeing this red power bar and the low battery percentage will give a feeling of discomfort. At the same time, the low battery reflects the protagonist's lack of energy during the season. Combined with the darkness of this moment in the narrative, "haunted"²⁴²



by the colours of summer, the reader is transported to the protagonist's point of view and invited to share in her feelings. This shows how the colouring in the graphic novel not only communicates feelings but effectively transfers them to the reader.

4.3 The graphic novel as a hybrid medium

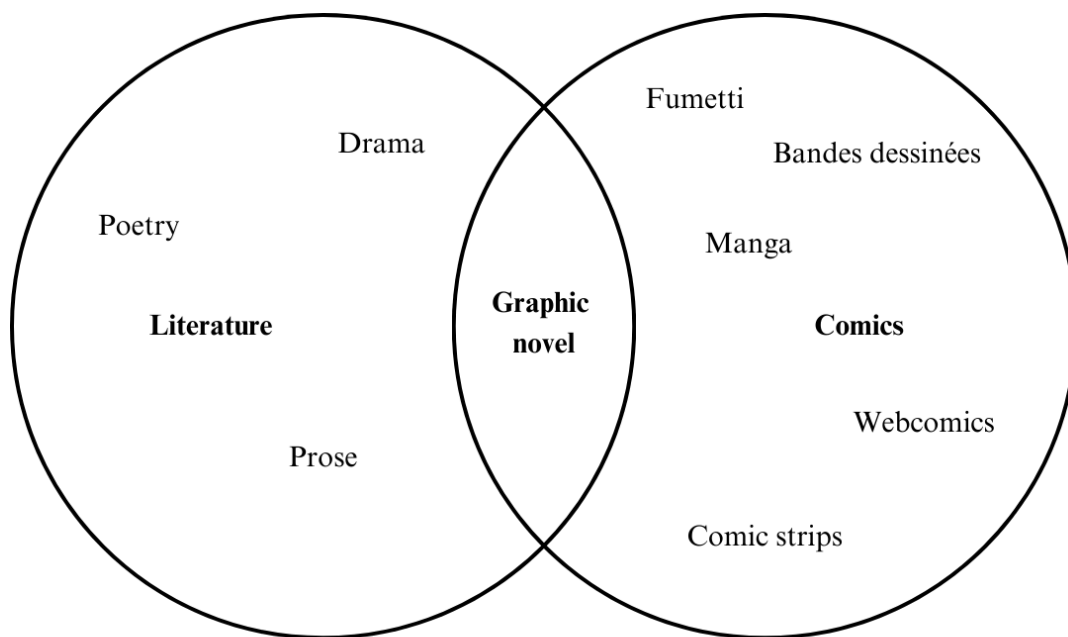
In this final section, I will demonstrate how the hybridity of the graphic novel makes it an interesting medium for artists creating in a time of metamodernism. The hybridity of the graphic novel aligns it with the concept of metamodernism that Vermeulen and van den Akker established. The different tensions at play in the medium show that the graphic novel moves between different conventional artistic concepts. In the first place, I will focus on the position of graphic novels in relation to literature and comics. Secondly, I will look more specifically at the way the selected graphic novels go between showing and telling their narratives. These two elements of hybridity will help to clarify how the graphic novel form lends itself to the creation of metamodern art.

²⁴¹ Thapp, *Feelings*, 91.

²⁴² Thapp, *Feelings*, 91.

4.3.1 Between literature and comics

In “Notes on metamodernism” Vermeulen and van den Akker warn against confusing the “oscillating tension (a both-neither) with some kind of postmodern in-between (a neither-nor).”²⁴³ The graphic novel, as stated before, is a new type of medium that stems from the comics tradition but has similarly been influenced by the literary tradition. This development demonstrates the both-neither dynamic of the medium, as the graphic novel displays aspects of both traditions, forming a new type of medium. In the introduction, I defined the graphic novel as follows: a fictional, hardcover variation of the comic book, with the independency and scope of a prose novel. As such, the graphic novel is positioned both as a type of comic book, and a form of literature, while fitting neither classification exclusively.



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Vermeulen and van den Akker write about Nicholas Bourriaud’s concept of “altermodernism,” and validate his observation that “postmodern reconstruction along the heterogeneous lines of race, gender, class, and locality”²⁴⁵ has been replaced by a “globalized perception, cultural nomadism, and creolization.”²⁴⁶ These three terms are connected by their

²⁴³ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 10.

²⁴⁴ Nathan de Waard, “Graphic novel Venn Diagram” (2023), created by the author.

²⁴⁵ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 3.

²⁴⁶ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 4.

inherent lack of rootedness and characterised by movement and hybridity, of perception, culture, and language. Vermeulen and van den Akker share Bourriaud's observations but conclude that altermodernism lacks a defining factor that gives the concept coherence. They identify this lacking quality as "oscillation" and position it as the defining characteristic for metamodernism. If metamodernism stems from this place of hybridity, it follows that the art produced in this structure of feeling similarly tends towards hybridity. Or in other words, hybrid media are especially suited for the art produced by the metamodern artist. The graphic novel came into existence as a marketing category but has created a space for itself moving between comics and literature. Though the term had no actual definition when it was coined, the space that it created was filled by artists influenced by the artistic hybridity of their time.

Hybridity is not an invention of metamodernism. Postmodernist artists were interested in the blurring and removing of boundaries as the goal itself. Postmodernists regarded everything as text, a form of surface representation, lacking meaning behind it. From this perspective, boundaries are without meaning, stemming from nothing, and there is little merit in observing them. Baetens mentions that

"it is commonly assumed that the opening of literature and literary studies to comics and graphic novels is a typically postmodern phenomenon, which firstly has to do with the continuous hybridization of media and art forms [...] and, secondly, the progressive dismantling of the frontiers between high and low art."²⁴⁷

For metamodernist artists, this blurring of boundaries is not seen as a goal in itself, but postmodernism left behind an interesting state of blurred boundaries. Metamodernist artists then, see hybridity and blurred boundaries as something to use to specific ends, moving towards something meaningful again. For example, as was presented in the earlier chapters, the stimulation of affect and the presentation of hope. The hybridity of the graphic novel medium

²⁴⁷ Baetens, "Stories and Storytelling in the Era of Graphic Narrative," 29.

can thus be employed to these ends but can also be recognised as a topic of interest in itself for the metamodern author.

The hybridity of the graphic novel is emphasised by the tension between literature and comics in the structure of Healy's *The Con Artists*. He starts the graphic novel with a prologue and introduces himself as the author of the book. With this prologue he positions his graphic novel in relation to literature in several ways. Firstly, a prologue is a literary characteristic. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines "prologue" as "a preface or introduction to a literary work."²⁴⁸ Consequently, Healy's inclusion of a prologue sends the signal that he regards this graphic novel as a work of literature. Additionally, The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states that "in a dramatic work, the term describes a speech, often in verse, addressed to the audience by one or more of the actors at the opening of a play."²⁴⁹ Healy's prologue loosely resembles a speech, and addresses the audience through an illustration of himself. Luke Healy's mirror self is preparing himself to play the character of Frank while he addresses the audience. He changes his glasses and his shirt and puts on a fake moustache, positioning himself as an actor in his own illustrated drama.²⁵⁰

Secondly, Healy uses the prologue to state the fictional nature of the characters and events, affirming that the graphic novel is a work of fiction. Finally, as the panels to the right display, Healy quotes William Shakespeare.²⁵¹



²⁴⁸ "Prologue." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed December 11, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/art/prologue>.

²⁴⁹ "Prologue." *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

²⁵⁰ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 6.

²⁵¹ Healy, *The Con Artists*, 6.

This brief mention of the well-known British playwright establishes a connection to the literary tradition of drama. Shakespeare's work is internationally regarded as valued literature, is read in secondary education, and has been the topic of boundless scholarship. By mention of his name, Healy manipulates the readers' perception of his work as he reminds them of their earlier experiences with literature before reading his book. Contrastingly, if he would have mentioned Stan Lee, the reader's associations would have been drawn towards superhero comics. By establishing a specific context, Healy is able to shape the reader's perception of his graphic novel.

The Con Artists is also divided in two by an intermission, during which illustrated Luke enters the stage again and addresses the audience. He comments on the fictional and dramatic nature of the narrative and urges the reader to take a break. Typically, intermissions in theatre and film allow the audience to take a break and are in part important for the theatres' and cinemas' revenue. In theatre, the intermission doubles as a break for the actors and allows for a scene and costume change. In the graphic novel, an intermission is redundant as the reader can choose to stop and resume reading at any given moment. Healy's intermission thus pushes his graphic novel even closer to drama.

These different characteristics of *The Con Artists* demonstrate the hybridity of the graphic novel. The hardcover looks like a comic book in its design, the pages are structured through panels, with a combination of speech bubbles, captions, and visuals driving the narrative forward. Despite the book's format, Healy treats *The Con Artists* as a drama, adhering to classic features such as a prologue, intermission, and epilogue. He consciously positions it in a literary context, while employing a non-literary form. This is an example of how the hybridity of the graphic novel, taking from literature and comics, makes the medium ideally suited for the production of metamodern art. It will never be a full-fledged play, but it is also decidedly not a comic book. Healy shows the tendency that Vermeulen and van den Akker

ascribe to metamodern artists, to consciously “employ methods and materials” that keep them from reaching the goal they seem to be striving towards; “their intention is not to fulfil it, but to attempt to fulfil it in spite of its “unfulfillableness.””²⁵² The metamodern is occupied with reaching for those things that are always just beyond its reach.²⁵³

4.3.2 Show, don't tell

The other important tension at play in the graphic novel is whether to show or tell information. “Show, don't tell,” is a well-known narrative technique that stresses the importance of allowing the reader to experience the story themselves rather than through the author's descriptions. In other words, the descriptions of the author have to present the information in such a way that the reader can imagine experiencing the event themselves, rather than being told about it retrospectively by someone else. Such direct experiences provide a source of identification and affective engagement with the text. In the graphic novel, “show, don't tell” can be implicated literally by illustrating the events instead of writing about them. As described before, the reader experiences illustrations more directly than written text because there is less to decodify. Two examples of this direct access to the events in the narrative that were discussed earlier are the visual direct interior monologue,²⁵⁴ and bleeding.²⁵⁵

However, the selected stories are still largely driven by words; both in dialogues and captions. Graphic novels have the potential to be exclusively illustrated without the addition of words but tend to present a combination of both for increased comprehension. In this final section, I will present examples from the graphic novels where the tension between showing and telling is apparent, to illustrate how the (metamodern) graphic novel is shaped through a combination of direct experiences and added layers of reflection and interpretation. In addition,

²⁵² Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 9.

²⁵³ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 5.

²⁵⁴ Chapter 3.2.

²⁵⁵ Chapter 4.1.1.

this will demonstrate how the graphic novel authors are able to employ the hybridity of the medium to generate affect.

Thapp's graphic novel is more dependent on its illustrations than the words. Most of the narrative develops in the introductory paragraphs at the beginning of each new chapter. The captions accompanying the pages and panels give additional descriptions of the protagonist's state of mind, bordering more on poetry than prose.

The page to the right displays the centrality of the illustration, with the poetic caption in the right upper corner, "Falling into bad habits. Bringing fears to life."²⁵⁶ The illustrations on the page are straightforward: the protagonist's mind is surrounded by money, the passing of time, death, heartbreak, illness, and the burning planet. Because these symbols are presented together and look



threatening (a skull, ambulance, and fire), the reader can easily identify them as her fears. Her facial expression is reflective of her mood, she feels sad and defeated; her body language shows a lack of energy.

These different elements are presented directly to the reader in a manner that does not invite different interpretations. As such, they allow the reader to identify with the information on the page and potentially evoke their affects. The clarity of the illustrations is challenged by the more cryptic and poetic caption. The "bad habits" are not specified, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps based on the presented illustrations. The reader may feel better informed after merely looking at the illustrations, than after reading the accompanying caption, which would typically offer additional information and help to clarify or interpret the images.

²⁵⁶ Thapp, *Feelings*, 104.

In *Everything Is Ok*, the roles are reversed. Tung uses straightforward language that does most of the interpreting work for the reader. Rather than adding new layers of interpretation, Tung employs her captions to ensure that the reader interprets the illustrations as intended. On the other hand, Tung's illustrations are more open to interpretation. For example, Debbie likes to keep her feelings bottled up, which Tung visualises as an actual bottle filled with darkness.²⁵⁷ Without the accompanying caption, the illustration of Debbie and her bottle would be open to different interpretations with minimal points of reference. She adds another description in addition to the caption, to ensure that the reader understands her visualisation of the presented idiom. In this case, the words thus prioritise direct experiences, while the illustrations add layers of reflection and interpretation.



Finally, McPhail's illustrations differ greatly in their interpretability. The black and white illustrations are direct in their presentation of the narrative; they display Nick's day to day life and show recognisable scenery, such as the conversation with the plumber in his bathroom.²⁵⁸ The coloured passages on the other hand, are filled with dreamscapes and symbolism without any clarification offered through captions or other descriptions. For example, in the visualisation of a conversation Nick is having with his young nephew, he ends up playing with small, sharp-toothed creatures until one of



²⁵⁷ Tung, *Everything Is Ok*, 29.

²⁵⁸ McPhail, *In.*, 71.

them bites his finger off.²⁵⁹ This can be interpreted as the moment Nick gets hurt by something his nephew says, in the middle of playing together. Illustrated quite graphically, McPhail triggers the reader's affects by presenting something primal, the physical pain of losing a finger to a sharp toothed creature.

However, McPhail offers no further clarification on either the conversation between Nick and his nephew, or the events depicted in the coloured passage, leaving the reader to interpret their evoked affects individually. McPhail embraces the tension between the words and illustrations by omitting clarification in the coloured passages entirely, except for the moment that his mom shares her diagnosis with him.²⁶⁰ For McPhail, the line between direct experiences and layers of interpretation is thus not drawn between words and illustrations, but rather between different illustration styles in the graphic novel. Straightforward illustrations are accompanied by captions and dialogue, while the more arbitrary ones are left to be interpreted by the reader, allowing the reader increased freedom of interpretation and affective response.



4.4 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined two different tensions at play in the graphic novel medium that display why the medium lends itself well to the metamodern structure of feeling. The hybridity of the medium itself, existing between the literary tradition and the comics tradition, inspires the metamodern artist to use these blurred boundaries to their own benefit. This tension came back in Healy's *The Con Artists*, which displays a strong identification with a literary drama while

²⁵⁹ McPhail, *In.*, 145.

²⁶⁰ McPhail, *In.*, 185.

the narrative takes place in the panelled structure of comics, allowing Healy to position his graphic narrative as a work of literature.

Additionally, the hybrid nature of the graphic novels allows the authors of the graphic novels to play with the (in)directness of their text, which for example increases the affective potential of the graphic novels. This was demonstrated by the combination of words and illustrations in the graphic novels, presenting varying levels of interpretability for these different aspects of the text. Regardless of the exact function that the words or illustrations hold, the tension between showing and telling remains present and works to engage the reader in different ways, providing more direct experiences and inviting different reflections and interpretations.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Key Findings

Over the course of the last three chapters, I have aimed to demonstrate how post-2020 graphic novels by British millennial authors contribute to the metamodern structure of feeling that is associated with the affective turn. In order to answer this question, I focused on three different topics: the graphic novels' reinforcement of the affective turn, storytelling techniques that facilitate an emotionally immersive graphic narrative in accordance with the metamodern structure of feeling, and the position of the graphic novel medium in relation to metamodernism. I will now turn to the key findings that were discussed in each chapter, to present my answer to the overarching research question stated above.

Metamodern affect brings together the academic discourse of metamodernism and the affective turn. The analysis of affect in the graphic novels was guided by three oscillations proposed by Smith. The first, emotional estrangement and direct affective provocation, was visible in both the characters and the readers' experience. Most prominently, emotional estrangement manifests in the graphic novels in the form of rationalisation and is challenged by the reality of affective provocation. When the characters face emotional challenges and affective provocation, this extends to the reader. As such, both the characters and readers are implicated in the affective provocation that the graphic novels instigate.

The second oscillation was between the performance of codification and the provocation of physiological response. The five protagonists displayed a strong tendency to perform their emotions in front of others, or even themselves. This is challenged by dialogues and events that cause them to respond more intuitively, without the mind being able to filter or interfere. Thus, the distinction between bodily affects and their filtered surface representations is made. The tension between the performance of codified emotions and provoked physiological responses

that the characters face, for example in the event of receiving shocking news, leads them to strive towards more sincerity in their communications with others and themselves.

Smith's third oscillation, between impulse excitation and distance in narratives, refers to fiction's ability to either be an affective incitement of itself or tell stories of affective change. Both can be recognised in the graphic novels, as (mental) illness narratives tend to be a source of recognition for the reader and can be an affective incitement as such. At the same time, the graphic novels extensively treat the characters' emotional developments, and especially *Everything Is Ok* demonstrates that a graphic narrative can prioritise the presentation of affect over the underlying storyline. The three tensions presented above help to understand how affect manifests itself in the graphic novels and demonstrate how the graphic novels reinforce the affective turn.

The analysis in chapter 3 started with the oscillation between irony and sincerity, which proved to be highly relevant for the characters and their development in *The Con Artists* and *In.* A typically postmodern irony shapes the characters' behaviour and can be observed as a surface representation in line with the previously mentioned codified performance. Nick (*In.*) and Frank (*The Con Artists*) both rely on their ironic humour to communicate with others and use irony as a protection mechanism against feeling sincere emotions. However, both have an underlying desire for sincere connections with other people. This longing for sincerity allows Nick to reach a state of what Konstantinou describes as postirony. Due to his previously ironic attitude, he is supposedly no longer capable of true sincerity and will forever reach for the unreachable, which is defining for a metamodern oscillation.

The oscillation between utopia and failure diverges from the typically unreachable extremes on either side of the oscillation, as failure is not unreachable. However, I stated that failure should be regarded as uninhabitable instead, to indicate that failure is not a permanent state but rather a point of departure. For the characters in the graphic novels, the feeling of

failure is more present than actual failure. This is contrasted by their desire for a successful future, an imagined personal utopia, in which they manage to reach their personal goals. The oscillation between the possibility of failure and the desired future resonates with Vermeulen and van den Akker's observation of metamodern art that displays a careful return of utopian ideas while dealing with the reality of reaching for the unreachable, which ultimately implies inevitable failure. The centrality of irony, sincerity, and failure confirm how the graphic novels thematically align with the metamodern structure of feeling.

In addition to oscillation, metamodernism displays a renewed interest in language utility,²⁶¹ after postmodernism's inclination to use excessively vague text and symbols. This can be seen in the characters' use of colloquial language and the straightforward tone in the narratives. This is indicative of the authors' need to be understood, which they facilitate by leaving little room for interpretation. The complicated topics of (mental) illness in the graphic novels are made more approachable by use of comprehensible language. I also displayed the use of (visual) direct interior monologue as an example of metamodern language utility, as it allows the reader direct insight into the protagonist's mind.

Finally, I turned to Radchenko's two remaining metamodern characteristics, namely the constructive nature of the graphic novels and the characters' will to belong. These two elements are displayed through the characters' hopefulness and a noticeable ethical consciousness. The five graphic novels end their narratives with a message of perseverance and hopefulness, after the protagonists' overcome their personal challenges, which reaffirms the constructive nature of metamodern literature.

In chapter 4, I paid attention to the graphic novel medium in relation to the affective turn and metamodernism. I reflected on the use of two affective techniques, bleeding and colouring, to demonstrate how certain illustration techniques can influence the reader's perception of the

²⁶¹ Radchenko, "Metamodern Gaming," 249.

scene. Bleeding and colouring were shown to create a more immersive reading experience, increasing the potential for an affective reader response. These affective devices thus help to demonstrate why the graphic novel is a suitable medium for stories of affect, which are central to metamodern literature.

I then turned to hybridity, and how this relates to the metamodern structure of feeling. The tension between literature and comics is visible in *The Con Artists*, which is introduced by Healy as both a book and a drama. He demonstrates the tension between comics and the literary traditions, while simultaneously displaying the metamodern tendency to reach for the unreachable: by writing a work of drama in the form of a graphic novel, it will never be a traditional work of drama.

In the final section, I focused on the tension between words and illustrations in the graphic novels and reflected on their abilities to present direct experiences, or to add layers of reflection and interpretation. The graphic novels exhibited how the words and illustrations can either complement or undermine each other. Metamodern language utility is at times challenged by more interpretable illustrations, while straightforward illustrations can be complicated by their accompanying captions. The hybridity of the medium results in tensions that allow it to keep reinventing itself.

5.2 Critical Reflection

I selected the corpus for this thesis out of recently published (2021–2023) British graphic novels, that showed thematical potential for analyses in the light of the affective turn and metamodernism. As no previous research has been conducted with regard to graphic novels in the context of the affective turn or the metamodern structure of feeling, I opted for a narrow corpus of British graphic novels written by millennial authors, to confine this thesis to a specific setting. However, the choice for this narrow corpus in a specific setting also introduced certain

limitations, for example because metamodernism and the affective turn are not confined to the British Isles. For this thesis, the corpus was a productive choice, as the graphic novels collectively displayed a movement against the postmodern influences that millennials grew up with. Their tendency to write stories of affect stems from growing up with a postmodern lack of affect, and metamodernism has adopted this tendency towards affect as one of its key features. The visibility of mental health issues in these graphic novels point towards an inclination to prioritise the emotional state and development of characters in literature, and simultaneously indicates that mental health is an important societal topic. In extension, this demonstrates that the affective turn is not limited to artforms such as literature but plays a role on an individual level for the authors and readers who are able to identify with the themes presented in the literature. This observation reaffirms that the affective turn transcends the boundaries of art and holds a considerable position in society's perception of social relations and emotional lives.

Because the selected graphic novels were written by millennial authors, the analysis presents a selection of topics that interest the millennial generation. In addition to the above-mentioned mental health, the graphic novels extensively treat the lack of sincerity in interactions with other people, and present irony as the most common form of humour. The need to belong to a group or community and make sincere connections is presented as a characteristic of metamodern literature, but indicates a bigger societal issue, namely the gravity of feeling isolated. The graphic novels show protagonists' that struggle internally and feel alone with their problems. Though communicating their feelings to those around them is seen as an intimidating challenge, doing so shows that they do not have to struggle alone, and the mere act of sharing helps to lighten the burden. This is a valuable observation that displays how graphic narratives, and literature in extension, reflect and are in conversation with societal issues.

Metamodernism is positioned by Vermeulen and van den Akker as a structure of feeling, meaning that it reflects not a specific artform but rather a societal context that reflects political, social, and economic circumstances. The work on literary metamodernism has expanded considerably over the last ten years, which has made metamodernism simultaneously more established and less uniform. I chose to adhere to Vermeulen and van den Akker's original conception of the metamodern structure of feeling, complemented by a limited number of concepts developed by other scholars, such as Gibbons and Radchenko. Smith played a central role in chapter 2, regarding the affective turn in literature, and she markedly never uses the term metamodernism. Instead, she chooses to employ the term post-postmodernism. This choice demonstrates that metamodernism is not unanimously recognised as the successor of postmodernism. However, this thesis can help to present additional arguments for the acceptance of metamodernism, as it displays how post-postmodernism and metamodernism are similar in their characteristics, for example due to the centrality of affect.

The sources that I selected to conceptualise metamodernism and literary metamodernism automatically exclude other sources and perspectives. In addition to Vermeulen and van den Akker, Gibbons provided me with the most concrete conceptualisation of literary metamodernism with the important acknowledgement of metamodern affect as a key component. I chose to exclude other sources that mention literary metamodernism from my theoretical framework, such as James' and Seshagiri's "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution" (2014). I mentioned their article in the literature review but did not use their conceptualisation of literary metamodernism as their approach was not shared and replicated after the publication of the article. Though this was a conscious choice, I acknowledge the possibility that other approaches to metamodernism could have led to other results in this research project.

Overall, the methodological approach for this thesis proved to be successful as it allowed me to present the graphic novels' different textual aspects in the argumentation. It was crucial to include the visuals in the close reading analysis to demonstrate the techniques applied by the authors, which align the works with affect theory and ideas of metamodernism. My approach allowed me to look at the structures of the graphic novels in addition to close readings of the pages. The different characteristics that Radchenko outlines for the analysis of metamodern text showed to be applicable to the visual elements of the graphic novels, which are also considered "text." For example, language utility goes beyond the use of colloquial language in the graphic novels and additionally comprises the readability of the visuals. By analysing graphic novels from a context of literary metamodernism, it becomes apparent that literary metamodernism goes beyond novels and poetry, which means that it might extend to other forms of graphic narratives as well.

My approach to the graphic novels was based on the close reading method, but I included some comics studies-based analysis, for example in regard to different types of panels and pages. However, doing this more extensively could help to uncover more valuable features of the graphic novels that relate to the affective turn but have their origins in the comics tradition. Through my literary analysis I have presented the immersive character of graphic narratives as ideally suited for stories of affect, and with no prior research in comics studies on metamodernism, the potential in this field can only be imagined.

5.3 Discussion

As a suggestion for further research, I noticed a grouping together in the analysis of the presented examples of *In.* and *The Con Artists* on the one hand, and *Feelings*, *Everything Is Ok*, and *Turtle Bread* on the other. Notably, the first two graphic novels are written by men, and the last three are written by women. The reason behind this apparent clustering presents a new

research question and could be the topic of subsequent research into the influence of the author's gender on affective or metamodern literature. In general, this thesis presents a first step towards an understanding of graphic novels as a metamodern medium and can be used as a stepping stone for further explorations of graphic novels and the metamodern structure of feeling. Considering that this thesis focused on the British literary context, further research could also focus on graphic novels in different languages with other literary heritages. Metamodernism may take a different form in other countries as they have their own relationships with modernism and postmodernism.

By entering into the debate on metamodernism, I chose to delve into a theoretical concept that is rooted in our current social, political, and economic structures. Consequently, the works that I discussed engage with these elements in their own distinct ways. However, certain notions, feelings and tendencies revealed themselves as patterns and started to paint a picture of the components that define this era. At times, this picture looked bleak, and I was occasionally caught off-guard by the realisations that followed from my own analysis. For example, the graphic novels opened my eyes to the problem of feeling alone or isolated, and the impact that this has on an individual's mental health. This cause-and-effect relationship is known, but to simultaneously read five graphic novels that show five protagonists struggling with the feeling of isolation allowed me to reflect on the gravity of this phenomenon and made me believe that awareness on the issue could be the first step to counter it.

The link between the millennial generation and the affective turn demonstrates a notable longing for connection and sincerity that might be lacking in society today. As such, literature allows us to reflect on our needs and wishes, and metamodern literature specifically presents a much-needed hopefulness for the future to come.

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