

Oscillating Realities: Hyperreality and Hegemony in Metamodernist Films

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Abstract

In an era marked by visual dominance, technological disruption, and political polarization, cinema transforms itself into a cultural critique that challenges the resulting social inequalities. Stylistic choices in cinema today reflect power dynamics through visuals and contribute to the portrayal of this reality. This paper examines how dominant cultural norms and illusions are reinforced within metamodernist films to influence the construction of reality. Drawing on critical theories of (hyper)reality and simulacra, the study analyzes a selection of films to explore how dominance is represented and negotiated, focusing on how directors employ metafictional devices to subvert illusions. By critically interrogating these aspects of power in metamodernist cinema, the paper sheds light on the intricate ways in which films engage with contemporary perceptions of existential themes such as identity and individuality.

Keywords: Cinematography; Cultural critique; Metafiction; self-reflexivity.

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1- Introduction:

Metamodernist films are visions of reality that refuse to systematically represent history and instead offer a precession of the real. They invoke external referents, providing clues to an unfolding present, unveiling to audiences hidden thoughts through dynamic and self-reflexive aesthetic choices. Screens uncannily simulate for viewers mental images, duplicating their unconscious as reconstructed memories. Their discourse is self-conscious and hegemonic, marked by the era's transformative forces. Jean Baudrillard views art "with its power of illusion, its capacity for negating reality, for setting up an 'other scene' in opposition to reality, where things obey a higher set of rules" (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 14). Metamodern narratives feature swings between modernist authenticity and its postmodernist annihilation. It is "characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment" (Vermeulen & Van Den Akker, 2010). In "Notes on metamodernism", authors Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Den Akker introduce the concept of metamodernism as a cultural framework that responds to the failures of both modernism and postmodernism, arguing that its structure of feeling embraces both optimism and skepticism. The dynamic interplay between opposing attitudes and emotions is apparent in contemporary culture, including literature, art, and cinema.

This oscillation between commitment and detachment resonates with recent analyses of cinematic temporality. For example, Djamila Houamdi (2024) shows how Christopher Nolan's manipulation of time in Dunkirk and Tenet stimulates both cognitive and affective engagement, foregrounding the viewer's active role in negotiating fragmented and unconventional narrative structures. Such reflections underline how metamodernist cinema similarly mobilizes spectatorship, compelling audiences to oscillate between immersion and reflexive awareness (Houamdi, 2024).

Meta- is a prefix that can be identified across times and disciplines, but in art, it implies that which is self-referential. "Metacinema, one among several varieties of the usefully alienating arts, helps us better recognize the commingling of form and content" (Carter, 2018, p. 312). In creative productions, a work is meta when it engages in folding citations and allusions back upon themselves, making art's own existence a subject of inquiry. In Metacinema: The Form and Content of Filmic Reference and Reflexivity (2021), David LaRocca explains how metacinema "presents an alternate reality in order to give us back to our own reality anew, differently; it serves as a perpetual reminder that we must process what befalls us, transform it—think and then rethink it—and then return again to extra-filmic experience with its conditions remade" (LaRocca, 2021, p. 10). It challenges traditional discourses about power, the self, and our awareness of both, channeling them in



medium-specific modes in set of themes that often involve “doubleness and multiplication” and “repetition and recursion” (LaRocca, 2021).

In fact, by crossing into the space of the screen, spectators no longer see a doubled, repeated, or represented reality, but its simulation. The real is not masked, but rather has its signs detached and substituted. According to Jean Baudrillard, simulation “stems from the Utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). When the real is no longer what it is, it is a simulacrum, a copy that bears no relationship to the original, resulting in its resurrection as “the neoreal and the hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 7). Metacinema is a working model of staging an illusion because the real is no longer possible in the face of power. Today, “power plays at the real, plays at crisis, plays at remanufacturing artificial, social, economic, and political stakes” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 22). Narratives are controlled by a discourse of hegemony and power that no longer exerts its influence traditionally, but plays at it. They construct a version of reality that serves their own interests providing authority holders with meta ways to assert their dominance and shape public opinion. By exploiting both temporal and atemporal crises, they actively remanufacture artificial problems to distract and manipulate the public.

Epistemologically, the oscillatory sensibility of the metamodern condition, that understands reality as a dynamic interplay between conviction and doubt, redefines knowledge as a phenomenological process rather than a fixed truth. This paradoxical stance, that both mediates and desires truth in the age of hyperreality, is where Baudrillard exposes the collapse of the real into simulation. Amidst skepticism, metamodernist thought restores the will to believe and the search for truth even while knowing of its uncertainty. In a further sense, the epistemological position assumed here implicates ontology itself in the act of perception. That is, what exists within mediated realities embeds the question of what is known. It juxtaposes the condition of existence, or being, with the aesthetic interpretation of reality, or representation. Films, read as philosophical spaces of intersections, become sites in which opposing modes, such as resistance and compliance within manufactured hegemonic structures, operate within the hyperrealistic framework of metamodernist cinema.

The manufacturing of the cultural negotiation of consent within visual productions stems from an interpretation of hegemony not as only political dominance but as the subtle exercise of power through ideology (Gramsci, 1971). This study situates metamodernist cinema within a site oscillating between the coexistence of conflict and compliance, reproducing and resisting hegemonic narratives. Building on Gramscian notions, it analyzes filmic self-reflexivity as a counter-hegemonic tool that shapes what seems real within

hyperreality's aesthetic manifestation in metamodernism that tries to navigate and resist both. Accordingly, metafilms blur the line between the real and the simulated. They portray exaggerated versions of reality, a form of hyperreality, difficult to associate with any referential knowledge. It is however through self-referentiality that spectators see the reflexive nature of the film. While it comments on its own nature distancing itself from authentic reality, the film manufactures consent reinforcing dominant values and power structures. This may be explored visually, investigating how manipulated cinematic techniques represent dominance, negotiate power dynamics, and subvert hegemonic discourses.

*Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation, this paper reflects on the visual and stylistic choices in metacinema today, emphasizing how they depict acts of resistance against hegemonic power structures. It contributes to existing scholarship on Baudrillard's hyperreality and hegemony in media productions by revealing how cinema's dual role simultaneously sustains and subverts dominant narratives. The study employs a qualitative interpretive method grounded in visual and semiotic film analysis. Three films, *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve, 2017), *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders, 2017), and *Watchmen* (Snyder, 2009), were selected as representative case studies of metamodern cinema due to their explicit use of self-reflexive visual techniques and thematic engagement with identity, individuality, and dominance. The analysis focuses on visual metaphors (color, framing, texture) and metafictional strategies that reveal oscillations between hyperreality and hegemony. This approach reads stylistic forms as ideological expressions within contemporary cinema.*

2- Visuals as Self-reflexive Directions:

Directors are turning their cameras inwardly to examine an escalating loss of power and identity. Without losing the essence of the film itself, they direct their own cameras towards spectators in a similar self-reflexive manner. Screens are thus objects of inward capturing rather than outward delivery. In fact, it is through unconventional cinematic choices that directors create a hyperreality that resembles an extension of a viewer's unconscious at play. The real is an illusion, and its simulation is what was kept hidden in the memories of the spectators. The film phenomenologically and retrospectively illuminates what was annihilated by a hegemonic discourse of dominance, containing deconstructive and subversive criticism.

*In 2017, spectators saw the philosophical inquiry in *Blade Runner 2049* as an inward exploration of identity and memory. By blurring boundaries between the human*



condition and artificial intelligence, Denis Villeneuve cloned a body “destined to serial propagation” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 99) that transcends art. He found that the ultimate form of simulation within the context of contemporary culture and technological possibilities is the creation of copies with unique cinematography. Following Baudrillard’s cloning concept, Villeneuve challenged the notion of authenticity to epitomize the hyperreality of our culture. His visual simulations of memories and the manipulation of visual perception have rendered the film more real than reality itself. With meticulous attention to detail, cinematographer Roger Deakins created in *Blade Runner 2049* stunning visual aesthetics, reconciling reality and illusion.

Officer K, played by Ryan Gosling, engages in two oppositional attitudes throughout the film. While he is compliant and dutiful in carrying out his role as a *Blade Runner*, hunting down rogue replicants without questioning their nature, K, as a replicant himself, grapples with existential questions that lead him to a self-reflexive journey to discover his nature and true identity. The film’s aesthetic choices evoke the oscillating emotions that swing between contradictions, challenging some and subverting others. In a pivotal scene where Officer K’s chief, Lieutenant Joshi, played by Robin Wright, speaks to him about the concept of the soul, he remains stoic and reserved in his response. K does not offer any significant opinion, but the scene foreshadows the central conflict of the film. Lit with artificial lighting to set the cold and impersonal nature of Joshi’s office and attitude, the sequence is visually dominated by futuristic aesthetics such as smooth surfaces, metallic materials, and stark contrasts. But the color palette, dominated by a monochromic minimalist style, unifies the visual motifs and the cold atmosphere with the introspective quest of K.

One of the main colors of the film, introduced with monochromic shots, is blue. Compared with warmer colors, blue represents feelings of loneliness, coldness, and melancholy distancing the Officer from any personal endeavors. He is always dressed in low-saturation grey, black, or brown to accustom the viewers to his compliant nature while reflecting on the moral and ethical dilemmas and lack of certainty in the sterile nature of the futuristic world. Blue, seen while scanning the skeletal remains of a female replicant K uncovered during one of his investigations, becomes the color of introspection and inquiry. While it represents the decaying existence of a Jane Doe replicant, it underscores K’s own existential questions about the soul and humanity.

The following frame within frame sequence of Joshi and K expressing disbelief in what they discovered about the pregnancy of the scanned remains of the replicant emphasizes the oscillating attitude and the challenging of the defining lines between reality and illusion. The double visual framing of characters constructs a multi-



dimensional visual field that reinforces the idea of multilayered reality. Uncertainty about what was believed to be the truth, its illusion, is further highlighted with a blurring rain effect falling in between the frames. Characters are forced to confront an ambiguous (new) reality and audiences, along with them, embark on a reflexive journey about humanity.

*The same artificiality is noticed in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) in a scene early in the film. Major Mira Killian, played by Scarlett Johansson, wakes up in a cold artificially lit laboratory, after a tragic accident, with a new cyborg body after losing her human one. Similarly to *Blade Runner 2049*, the color palette counts shadowy hues contrasting blue and red to visualize Major's mixed feelings about her new identity, a cyborg body with a human mind and soul (aka: a ghost in a shell). After one year from that rebirth, Major is back investigating suspicious individuals who are discussing "individuality, identity, and messing with the human soul." She breaks through a glass separating two sides only to appear as blurred and transparent as the shattered glass itself. The visual positioning of Major Mira Killian within the fractured edges mirrors her fragmented sense of self and the blurred boundaries between her human consciousness and her machine body.*

The following frame within frame shot suggests Major Mira Killian's struggle to grasp her new reality. Although she is home, a sense of internal conflict marked by emotional turmoil dominates the sequence reflecting on her disorientation and dislocation. She is still unable to reconcile her human memories and emotions with her new cybernetic form. Throughout the film, Major Mira Killian's environment is depicted through reflective surfaces such as mirrors, glass, and water. The reflections of her surroundings become visual metaphors of the juxtaposition of her reality highlighting parallels and doubles. In fact, scenes that feature superimposed layers of images immerse audiences in Major Mira Killian's surreal journey into her mind. The unconscious is replicated and visually overlaid on her conscious mind reinforcing the distorted and dislocated sense of reality. Building on the ways metafilms manipulate perception and challenge audience assumptions about reality and identity, these strategies can also be understood in terms of hyperreality, where the distinction between original and copy becomes blurred. In cinematic and graphic adaptations, the replication of characters, narratives, and visuals further amplifies this sense of disorientation, reinforcing self-referential loops that question the very nature of authenticity and reality.

Replicating the real is reproducing hyperreality without any original referent. Clones that are indistinguishable from their originals lose meaning and create a sense of disorientation. But if the same is replicated, it reflects the obsession of the hyperreal with uniformity. Baudrillard argues that a copy can circulate endlessly to substitute the real if it stands without any external references. Frank Miller, along with Robert Rodriguez, perpetuated the storyworld of Sin City by adapting Miller's comic book series to two films: Sin City (2005) and Sin City: A Dame to Kill for (2014). Without any grounding in external reality, director Zack Snyder perpetuated Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' graphic novel Watchmen in a 2009 production. This doubleness results in a multiplication of images and excess of signs disrupting the meaning of dominance and control. Recursion simulates itself in a loop of self-reference reinforcing the subversive new reality replacing any previous representations.

In Watchmen, Doctor Manhattan witnesses the killing of a pregnant woman he could have saved. Being the only character with superhuman abilities in the story, he experiences time in a nonlinear fashion due to his quantum powers. The shot composition of his standing over the body of the dead pregnant woman coupled with the contrasting hues and dim lighting calls for reflexive thoughts. Similarly to the other films, the scene's color palette is characterized by muted tones and desaturated colors, creating a sense of somberness and detachment. The oscillating sense of distortion is contrasted with vibrant colors such as yellow and red, with Doctor's Manhattan's blue fluorescence present in many shots to highlight the introspective nature of the sequence.

Metallic textures that reflect technological aspects are also present and juxtaposed with organic textures to evoke themes of nature and humanity. What makes this scene, and the following ones, blur between reality and illusion is the way it juxtaposes moments of brutality with elements of surrealism and symbolism. The sense of unreality that challenges viewers' perception, blurring the line between truth and deception, is presented in frame within frame shots that separate insides from outsides with a persistent blurry rain effect. As Doctor Manhattan reflects on his past and contemplates his future, the boundaries between reality and illusion become increasingly blurred. The scene challenges viewers to question the nature of time and perception, inviting them to consider the subjective nature of reality and the limitations of human consciousness.

3- Subverting Illusions:

Metafilms use frame within frame shots, monochromic color palettes, artificial lighting, metallic textures, and cold atmospheres to simulate a distorted reality dominated by loss of identity and self-awareness. The hyperreality directors present to audiences subverts the illusion that the world cannot be anything else but what it is, by



introducing blurring effects, contrasting cold and warm colors, and capturing juxtaposing moments of order and chaos. Frame within frame shots symbolize Officer K, Major Mira Killian, and Doctor Manhattan's limited perspectives of the nature of the real. They inwardly struggle to reconcile the constraints imposed on them by a hegemonic dominance and their own quest for an identity. Accordingly, frame within frame shots convey a sense of existential isolation as characters are visualized within smaller enclosed spaces while a larger truth extends beyond their own perception. They are alienated and disconnected from others acting as agents of the will of the dominant power. These characters oscillate between the possibility to perceive reality and the impossibility of being able to escape the constraints of hegemony.

Monochromatic color palettes, often dominated by shades of grey or muted tones, create the uniformity of illusion and a detachment from reality. In metamodernist films, this lack of vibrant colors, in establishing shots mainly, evokes feelings of emptiness, alienation, and ambiguity. Officer K and Doctor Manhattan are often portrayed with dissonance. While the first stands next to a pregnant woman's skeleton and the second over a pregnant woman's dead body, they are each distracted by an existential dilemma. Both deaths contrast the emptiness of these characters with the confirmed pregnancies of these women. Officer K and Doctor Manhattan become aware that a soul is the essence of all existence perceiving and understanding what line separates humans from nonhumans. Life juxtaposed with death reinforces the idea that the characters inhabit a world devoid of humanity.

Metallic textures and cold atmosphere in laboratory scenes in Blade Runner 2049 and Ghost in the Shell reflect the dehumanizing effects of a society obsessed with progress and efficiency at the expense of the human soul. These scenes are characterized by a pervasive sense of emptiness and the sterility of the characters within their own reality. They reinforce how isolated, detached, and alienated from reality Officer K, Major Mira Killian, and Doctor Manhattan feel. All three join in their struggle to connect with themselves. Their own world is increasingly superficial and hostile to human emotions. It is, in fact, a visual manifestation of technological determinism that prioritizes advancement over human well-being and individuality.

By defying traditional conventions of visual storytelling, directors challenge viewers to reconsider their preconceived notions and interpretations of the narrative. In order to subvert the illusion of a dominating reality, they introduce blurring effects in Metafilms as one of the primary metafictional devices. They are often employed to destabilize the audience's perception of reality. By distorting the image of the boundaries



and limits separating the two, reality and illusion are questioned. Blurred frames shift the focus from one perception of the world to another challenging the viewers' ability to distinguish between what is real and what is imagined. In doing so, directors invite spectators to question the nature of existence and identity.

When Officer K was questioning the existence of the soul, an establishing shot of the outside world created the transitional movement from the laboratory to Lieutenant Joshi's office. This frame established the viewers outside the office granting an omniscient eye from the outside reality into the inside illusion. Officer K and Lieutenant Joshi became undefined shapes when looked at from the outside. The degree of blurriness was higher than the usual to convey the characters' shifting moods and psychological states creating a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty in the visual narrative. By blurring the boundaries between foreground and background or between characters and their surroundings, lines between truth and illusion are removed and contradictions reconciled.

*A similar effect emerges in Nolan's cinema, where the manipulation of time itself becomes a destabilizing device. Houamdi demonstrates that in *Dunkirk* and *Tenet*, fractured timelines and inverted chronology disrupt conventional story-following, requiring viewers to actively reconstruct meaning both cognitively and affectively. This parallel underlines how metamodernist films use disjunctions—whether visual, temporal, or narrative—to subvert illusions of coherence and force spectators into reflexive engagement (Houamdi, 2024).*

*The contrasting of cold and warm colors further enhances the emotional resonance of narratives. Directors and cinematographers subtly shift between them to create a disorienting atmosphere, reflecting the characters' altered states of consciousness and distorted perceptions of reality. The yellow orange hue introduced in Lieutenant Joshi's office symbolizes the newly discovered sun in a dim world of ignorance and illusions. Along with the blurring effects, this hue represents the emergence of enlightenment and clarity in a world previously shrouded in darkness and deception. In fact, the cave in which K learned everything about the nature of the world no longer held the truth. Officer K was inclined to journey towards self-discovery and enlightenment, seeking to uncover the truth about his identity and the nature of reality, and escape the lie. *Blade Runner 2049* becomes a moder allegory of the cave subverting the shadows of the (hyper)real.*

The juxtaposition of colors within the same scene of Doctor Manhattan and the woman's corps creates visual tension and ambiguity. When he stood over the pregnant dead body, cold colors, such as blue, green, and grey were contrasted with the warm



yellow, red, and orange conveying his questioning of the nature of free will, fate, and determinism. Viewers could visualize the tension between order and chaos along with the powerful agents' detachment from humanity. Doctor Manhattan was removed from reality as he struggled to understand human emotions and experiences. While his constant blue color represents impersonality, surrounding warm colors, such as red and orange, symbolize human emotions of passion and vitality. By combining these contrasting elements, viewers can realize the complex interplay between reality and illusion. Ultimately, colors simulate themselves in a loop of self-reference reinforcing the subversive new reality.

4- Conclusion:

In contemporary societies, the value of the real is anchored in an equivalently simulated reality: metacinema. Entertainment is no longer passive. Art concerns itself with multidimensional consciousness with self-reflexivity bridging the gap between artists and audiences. Reality is simulated and defamiliarized, hence, metamodernism is as self-reflexive as postmodernism but with less pessimistic features and newly established oscillating dynamics that take us back to modernist optimism. Film directors and cinematographers adopt visual techniques, such as artificial lighting, metallic textures, monochromatic desaturated color palettes, muted tones, frame within frame shots, blurring effects, and replications on reflective surfaces, to represent the newly drawn grey paths swinging contrasts and reconciling contradictions. In doing so, they engage audiences in self-reflexive subversive thoughts about power dynamics present as a hegemonic discourse they defy at different metafictional layers.

Directors negotiate power structures, challenge imposed social hierarchies, and re-establish cultural norms all through a perception of reality that attempts to influence social attitudes and behaviors. Through these techniques, metafilms not only depict existential and ethical dilemmas but also invite audiences to critically reflect on their own perceptions of reality and identity. Viewers are encouraged to reconsider human agency, identity, individuality, social power structures, and the ethical implications of a hyperreal world. Looking forward, self-reflexive experiences are being augmenting through continuously evolving, cutting-edge cinematographic technologies, such as virtual, participatory, and AI-generated realities. They offer new ways for cinema to simulate consciousness and immerse audiences in complex experiences, positioning them as active negotiators between illusions and truths. Ultimately, fostering awareness of the mutable boundaries of identity and the complexities of existence requires questioning the ever-shifting nature of reality.



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