



## Investigating the “Infinite Real” in Egan’s *A Visit From The Goon Squad*: A Metamodernist Approach

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### Abstract

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature has experienced a shift of ideas reflected in metamodernism, introduced by Vermeulen and Akker in 2010. Although metamodernism is a critical approach in its naissance, it is observable in a large body of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature through certain narrative and thematic features which have proven to move in line with contemporary socio-cultural issues. Although metamodernism plays with and modifies specific elements of modernism and postmodernism, it is exclusive to the artworks of the last two decades in which certain terminologies such as the “infinite Real,” an aversion of the “Real” in former philosophical and psychological disciplines, suggest that truth and reality are infinite and that the past and the future are connected through a plastic connection. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) by Jennifer Egan makes a good example of the metamodernist novel regarding the author’s network of characters in their approaches toward the reality of their lives as it is constantly redefined in association with their past. In this light, the novel is to thematically embed the concept of the “infinite Real” in the first decade of the third millennium.

*Keywords: A Visit from the Goon Squad, infinite Real, historioplastic metafiction, Jennifer Egan, metamodernism*

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## Introduction

Since 1990s, a new critical, artistic, and literary taste has been developing among writers and scholars as numerous critics and theorists formerly involved with postmodernism have begun to turn their gaze toward a new horizon that better suits the 21<sup>st</sup>-century condition. Out of the various suggested terms to grasp the spirit of the age, “metamodernism,” a term introduced by Vermeulen and Akker in 2010, has had the upper hand to reflect the dominant artistic and literary tendencies of the era. Metamodernism offers a new perspective on the apprehension of belief systems, critical theories, and literary styles, applying certain modifications to preceding and / or current philosophical and theoretical concepts when necessary.

Central to metamodernism is the concept of the “infinite Real,” as Vermeulen and Akker (2010) put it, which is an overturning of the concept of the “Real” as a metanarrative before the rise of modernism, toward multiple perspectives on reality in modernism, toward the ontological rendering of reality in postmodernism, and toward the presentation of reality as a plethora of viewpoints on life in metamodernism. However, what makes metamodernism distinct from its predecessors is its sense of closure and realism which differs from those of modernism and postmodernism. Metamodernists, although they have mostly built upon postmodernists, never give up on the Real as closure and do not wander in an oscillating state of life once encountering the infinity of *possible approaches* to the Real. In this regard, history itself becomes an object of inquiry in so far as all approaches in re-reading history highlight each other. 21<sup>st</sup>-century authors like Johnathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace, and Jennifer Egan no longer turn their back to history nor treat it violently. Their modification of older historiographic fiction now transcends what Waugh (1984) once called “historiographic metafiction” toward what Toth (2017) calls “historioplasic metafiction” in order to depict a limitless array of comprehensions within narrative forms.

“Historioplasic metafiction,” introduced and developed by Toth (2017), builds upon “metafiction” and “historiographic metafiction” in postmodernism as well as the concept of “plasticity” – as the bridge between the temporal dimensions of the past, present, and the future are blurred – to accommodate a large body of contemporary fiction. “Historioplasic metafiction” is thus an attempt to eradicate the duality working through fictions which are “historically charged” by reviewing and even rephending history (p. 76). Meanwhile, “historioplasic metafiction” makes readers aware of the linguistic restrictions and historical modifications in recounting truth or versions of truth. In this regard, the concept of the “infinite Real” plays a key role in rendering “historioplasic metafiction” in so far as it begets a vast array of perspectives on a single action or even a historical event.

The effectiveness of “historioplasic metafiction” in conveying the “infinite Real” in life can be demonstrated by analyzing Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, henceforward *VGS*. The novel, a Pulitzer Prize winner, contains various issues concerning the contemporary generation such as the rise and culmination of terrorism and its effect on society, social media and its influence, global warming, and digitization. *VGS* can be labeled as a metamodern novel due to the range of the

21<sup>st</sup>-century issues it explores and the diversity of metamodern techniques it contains. Accordingly, this metamodern novel offers a variety of realities to temper and sympathize with while being a case in point regarding Toth's theory of "historioplactic metafiction."

### Literature Review

A few studies, due to the short life of metamodernism, are available on it and the related fiction, and critical essays and books on the subject are thus developing. Regarding Egan's *VGS*, few studies have explored its innovations in narrative and subject matter concerning its potential as a post-postmodernist or metamodern fiction in the contemporary era, or "1990s onward" (Hutcheon, 2002, p. 165). Meanwhile, some studies have investigated the novel regarding certain themes and narrative strategies that can be considered as metamodernist.

Cowart (2015) examines the way Egan has embraced postmodernists' "formal and ideational deconstructions of vestigial metanarratives," evident in language, history, and the human unconscious, while extending some aspects of modernism in *VGS*. Egan's rather late situation in the history of literature turns her into a rebel against modernists while she oscillates between modernism and postmodernism in *VGS*. Thus, Egan is somehow obsessed with such major aspects of *high* modernism as "time and consciousness," "temporality and sentience as features of language," as well as Proust and Eliot's insights at the beginning of a new century (p. 241).

Moling (2016) investigates the rock songs mentioned in *VGS* regarding their effects on time, either slowing it down or pausing it, to deepen the musical experience. He believes that Egan uses punk rock as a time modulator to evolve her literary form, thus introducing her novel with "punk time". This development helps Egan to provide fiction writing with "new possibilities" and "a future" which is simultaneously hopeful and hopeless (p. 74).

Helmy (2017) seeks to explore the problem of the genre in *VGS* in light of Dunn and Morris in *The Composite Novel* (1995). He attempts to prove that *VGS* is a "composite novel" as it involves "fragmented individual stories." However, for Helmy, these stories possess "unifying ties" that make a "narrative wholeness" out of them (p. 33).

Highlighting temporal twists in *VGS*, Strong (2018) believes that Egan attempts to show time as a ravaging and dazzling force in *VGS* concerning "the nonlinear way" she narrates *VGS* in thirteen chapters with "alternating perspectives." However, Strong argues that the use of time as a fragmenting tool is not always nonlinear. Considering the "Kairos time" introduced by Paul Tillich "for the possibility of the eternal," Strong concludes that certain occasions for mending and completion reveal themselves in "a work formerly characterized as near dystopian." As such, "the concept of Kairos" nurtures human beings' connections by linking younger and older generations and "offers possibility to characters who fear time is running out" (p. 471).

Focusing on character analysis, Plaksin (2019) believes that "punk aesthetics and technological communication" in *VGS* affect the characters' perception of their "identities," "sense of belonging within a community," and opinions on "personal and artistic integrity." Characters from older and younger generations in *VGS* have "differing interpretations of punk ideology," a fact causing "contrasting views of authenticity among them," hence their different versions of reality. However, what they share is "a desire for a meaningful connection to those around them" and "a sense of belonging" to their community (p. 2).

In terms of genre, Toth (2019) believes that while *VGS* maintains many postmodern elements and historiographic conceits, it directs our attention to the concept of the "infinite Real" which evades any symbolization (p. 60). That is due to the fact that Egan "sublates the symbolic tendencies that have paralyzed postmodernism" (p. 64). Toth argues that Egan is romantically renewing a classical mode of the symbolic while retaining something of postmodernism. Thus, for Toth, *VGS* acts as a post-postmodern metafiction and is called an example of "historioplasmic metafiction" (p. 61). In this regard, *VGS* insists on an "aesthetic responsibility" to reveal how the "infinite thingness of experience" is merely expressed at the "mediating point that differentiates the finite form from its always *infinite* truth" (p. 70). In the same token, Scherr and Nünning (2019) believe that the new wave of Anglophone novels since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century includes a "'documentary' and/or 'fragmentary' aesthetics" as the "common denominator" working through them. Drawing on David Shields' *Reality Hunger* (2010) that touches upon questions about the place of literature in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century media societies, where "reality" and "fiction" have experienced considerable changes, Scherr and Nünning consider Egan's *VGS* as a novel about the crisis of reality (p. 79). However, reality as such in *VGS* can be argued not to be critical but neutral to embed an infinity of realities, all working together to give us the Real.

### **Method**

The present paper attempts to apply a content-based analysis of *VGS* through the theoretical approach of metamodernism. The research method, due to the nature of the field, is thus a library-based one. The authors will read Egan's novel to highlight its thematic and structural elements that contribute to metamodernism, considering Vermeulen and Akker's critical arguments and Toth's the "infinite Real".

### **Discussion**

In order to fully analyze the problem of the "infinite Real" in *VGS*, a critical overview of the concept, as it unfolds through metamodernism, is essential to make sense of it in theory and practice. The analysis will be thus narrowed down to investigate how the "infinite Real" in Egan's hands can lucidly depict the contemporary generation's attitude toward the increasing pace of change in our global village.

### The “Infinite Real” in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

Metamodernism has transformed many 20<sup>th</sup>-century critical concepts to better express the 21<sup>st</sup>-century atmosphere and artistic works. One of these changes befell the concept of the Real that has been considered either as a metaphysical and an unchangeable fact or a relative concept in accordance with humanity’s limited knowledge throughout the history of ideas. However, in terms of philosophy, to be precise, we may not just limit the Real to such division. From Plato’s “theory of Ideas,” to Aristotle’s “law of non-contradiction,” to Judeo-Christian doctrines, to Medieval Scholasticism, to Descartes’s “mind-body dualism,” to the Enlightenment, to German Idealism and Hermeneutics, to Deism and Transcendentalism, and to Derrida’s Deconstruction, among the plethora of philosophical schools, the Real has taken many shapes. Lacan, for example, differentiates the Real from the symbolic world, considering the Real as that which is impossible: “since the opposite of the possible is certainly the Real, we would be led to define the Real as the impossible” (1978, p. 167). Such impossibility of the Real might arise from the impossibility of imagining or expressing it; as the Real escapes the system of the signifier and the signified it results in a traumatic expression of it in a Derridean way. This traumatic apprehension of the Real left its imprint on postmodernism, resulting in its ontological behavior under that movement. This *crisis* of representation, as it may be called, exposed the historical events to mockery and left everything to open interpretations in postmodern artworks, regardless of how far-fetched from facts those renditions might have been. Toth (2017), investigating the devastating effects of postmodernism on the sense of responsibility toward history and reality, holds that many contemporary authors and critics such as Johnathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace attempt to distance themselves from postmodernism since “postmodernism’s tendency to fixate on the signifier’s game running its course” has risked “sanctioning the affectation of a certain problematic irresponsibility, pervert[ing] playing at pointless games.” As such, the postmodernist representations of the Real are distortions of the truth, mostly based on individual desires (p. 75). In order to redeem this effect, Toth (2019) points out that “the representation of the Real” is better to maintain its loyalty to the borders of undeniable truths and should clarify that what is being represented “necessarily exceeds the formative moment of its expression” (p. 58).

To present the contemporary challenge with a defining term, Toth applies the concept of “plasticity” to the notion of the Real, transforming it into the “infinite Real”. “Plasticity” has its roots in Hegel, as discussed by Malabou in *The Future of Hegel*. According to Malabou, the concept of “plasticity” comes from the Greek *plassein* (πλασσειν), meaning “to model” or even “to mould”. In this regard, a plastic thing possesses the “capacity to receive form and a capacity to produce form” (2005, pp. 8-9). It is noteworthy to add that Hegel’s concept of plasticity resided in Greek mythological and historical heroes: “in the beautiful days of Greece,” Hegel says, “men of action, like poets and thinkers, had this same plastic and universal yet individual character both inwardly and outwardly.” For Hegel, gods made humankind on the model of their own figures and left all the other creatures to human “freedom and self-will”. And such exemplary men like Pericles, Phidias,

Plato, and Sophocles formed their own life and destiny as "ideal artists," giving shape to their lives, their artworks resembling "immortal and deathless images of the gods" (1815 / 1975, p. 719). On the other hand, such heroes and their actions shaped the face of gods and gave form to what the ideal should be in the human eye.

It is in the light of Hegel's notion of plasticity that Malabou claims that the plastic can simultaneously "receive" and "produce" form (2005, p. 9). For example, not only the conversers or readers are affected by the form to which they are subjected, but also they "construct and form what they hear or read" (p. 10). When the reader / listener is concerned, "a plastic discourse" requires "a plastic sense of receptivity and understanding" on the listener's part. Thus, "plasticity" can be the "process where the universal and the particular mutually inform one another" (p. 11); it is the course during which one is simultaneously influencing and being influenced by a concept. The other formulating concept, the "infinite Real," drawing upon "plasticity," thus helps us with the new rendering of the Real: "The Real – history itself," Toth says, "is necessarily and essentially 'plastic'" (2017, p. 74). Toth suggests that not only the past molds the future but also the future has a significant effect on the way history is interpreted, hence "plasticity" and the infinite loop of the Real.

Egan in *VGS* provides us with characters in different points of their lives in a way that their present outlook on life affects what has transpired in their past, reflecting the plastic quality of history discussed above. Such an approach in characterization and plot making on Egan's side helps with understanding the concept of the "infinite Real" at work in *VGS* as its characters' various and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the same events unfold. Each chapter is completely dedicated to a character and revolves around a certain time or event in his / her life which is later, in other chapters, given a new light and perspective through other characters' worldviews.

Chapter 1 recounts the life of Sasha, a woman in her 30s with a rough past of parents' divorce, her father's sudden absence from her life, her drug addiction, and a time of homelessness in Nepal far away from her home in New York. She has managed to recover from most of her difficulties thanks to her mother and step-father's efforts. However, when we are introduced to her in Chapter 1, she is suffering from kleptomania and seeking psychological help against it. She is the first and mostly mentioned character in *VGS* in so far as she leads a multiversal life based on who is judging her past and present lives. In this chapter, we see her from her own eyes as a kleptomaniac with a troubled past and no certain direction to follow, as the environment around her suggests:

The whole apartment, which six years ago had seemed like a way station to some better place, had ended up solidifying around Sasha, gathering mass and weight, until she felt both mired in it and lucky to have it—as if she not only couldn't move on but didn't want to. (Egan, 2010, p. 19)

Sasha's stagnancy is caused by her reluctance to solve her past problems and let go of her burdens, represented by "a heap of objects" she has stolen: "To Sasha's eye, it almost shook under its load of embarrassments and close shaves and little

triumphs and moments of pure exhilaration. It contained years of her life compressed” (Egan, 2010, p. 20). Her outlook toward her collection is an equivocal feeling of shame / guilt and triumph / excitement. To explain Sasha’s mental state, it is crucial to note that kleptomania is an impulsive control disorder which arouses an “unavoidable urge to steal” (Adamec, 2008, p. 45). Adamec continues that this disorder carries with it a strong feeling of shame to the individual committing theft while igniting the momentary pleasure that triggers him / her to repeat the action (pp. 47-49). This dual nature of kleptomania has symbolized Sasha’s stagnancy in the novel: the items she steals keep her memories and past vivid, marked by a load of excuses to account for her misdeeds, yet she takes pride in those stolen objects, revealing “a tenderness that was only heightened by the shame of their acquisition.” The result of all her risks is “the raw, warped core of her life” (Egan, 2010, p. 20). Against this “core” of memories and emotions Sasha is seeking to cure her kleptomania by consulting a psychologist, Coz, who tries to convince her to put aside her stealing habit by bolding out its shameful aspect. Coz reminds her how she feels by thievery and how it improves her mood but he warns her against others’ feelings and reactions when she steals something from them.

Furthermore, Adamec (2008) holds that kleptomania is not very responsive to psychotherapy, and this ineffectiveness is depicted in the futility of Coz’s methods. Sasha understands Coz completely and hopes to recover. The morality solidification that Coz attempts to apply to Sasha’s action and his expectation of her behavioral change come without comprehending the possible reason behind her kleptomania. She takes nothing from stores any longer, as “their cold, inert goods didn’t tempt her.” However, she steals on personal grounds to punish the owners. For example, when she steals a screwdriver from a plumber who is to fix her tub, that is because she hates his demeanor for no apparent reason. Taking the screwdriver gives her an “instant relief from the pain of having an old soft-backed man snuffling under her tub.” However, after the plumber is gone, his screwdriver is insignificant and looks like “any screwdriver.” On a second occasion, Sasha takes a woman’s wallet, carelessly left somewhere in a public bathroom out of “blind trust” in people while urinating to teach her a good lesson: “you leave your stuff lying in plain sight and expect it to be waiting for you when you come back?” Besides the punishing aspect of her act, Sasha introduces her action as a challenge: “It seemed so dull, so life-as-usual to just leave it there rather than seize the moment, accept the challenge, ... and *take* the fucking thing” (Egan, 2010, p. 9).

Moreover, in Chapter 11, narrated from Sasha’s uncle Ted Hollander’s perspective, Ted presents us with his own version of reality about Sasha’s childhood and teens. His account of Sasha’s parents’ conflicts and memories, that he “would take Sasha outside” when they had a fight (p. 207), highlights the hardship she has gone through throughout her life, including a strong sense of loss due to her father’s absence. This sense of abandonment by itself can prove to be a cause of kleptomania, as “psychological issues” and “unhappy childhood full of turmoil” are considered as strong initiators of this impulsive disorder (Adamec, 2008, pp. 2-3). Ted also reveals that once he had traveled to Nepal in search of Sasha when she was a 19-year-old runaway from home, living a hard time through pick-pocketing, even

being sexually abused. However, according to another version of Sasha's reality, that of her college friend Rob in Chapter 10, her spiritual damages begin to manifest themselves mostly at college, as she cries breathlessly in her sleep, only to become normal again by a roommate's hug. Living an established life in Chapter 12, free from kleptomania, Sasha keeps the apparition of her past alive, although it may refresh her spiritual scars. However, it is crucial to note that every time Sasha steals something she decides not to steal anymore, a fact which "confirms the text's overriding ethics" that there is an "infinite pliability of a single moment." In other words, a single decision must happen even if it cannot "justify" itself. This process inevitably forces the reader to make "an impossible judgement, or interpretive casting, about that decision," a judgment difficult for readers who are not "in possession of all the facts" but necessary for them to make one way or another. Therefore, every interpretation must be "informed by yet imposed upon the infinitely pliable" (Toth, 2017, p. 81). Sasha's behavior might thus suggest that she needs a replacement for her kleptomania and the hoarding pieces of the past; if she were to completely erase her memories, which are symbolized by the stolen objects, she would solidify her plastic past and break the promise of change.

Moving on to Chapter 12, Sasha is in her 40s, happily married, still refusing to discuss her past, but equipped with a unique skill developed throughout years. She uses "found objects," items that other household members have thrown away, to make sculptures (Egan, 2010, p. 9). She resorts to art for expressing her deepest desires, including the possibility to change the shape of the past by molding the trash in a shape she desires. She has realized that everything which is built upon the old ultimately falls apart and eventually fades away. Burdened with past regrets but blessed with future hopes of change, Sasha represents a metamodern character in constantly keeping the past alive while never allowing it to be solidified and spoil the promise of a better future.

Chapter 2 of *VGS* provides us with a case in point for the concept of the "infinite Real." Bennie, a successful music producer but a failed husband, is struggling to maintain a positive presence in his son's life after his own extra-marital affair and divorce. At the time we meet Bennie in his early 40s, Sasha is working as his assistant. Bennie, simultaneously struggling with his recently broken marriage, working problems, and fatherly duties, gradually forms a relationship with Sasha. As such, two different realities cross one another in two instances of apparent misunderstanding. While in Chapter 1 the readers witness Sasha and her kleptomania, in Chapter 2 they can speculate that she constantly steals from Bennie, as he is always looking for his lost objects. However, Chapter 2 turns the thief into a benevolent helpmate who constantly helps Bennie with *finding* his lost possessions, "sometimes before Bennie even knew they were missing," making him feel dependent on her (Egan, 2010, p. 38). Although we come upon Sasha's confession that she has a sense of resentment regarding her kleptomania, for Bennie she is helpful and trustworthy, even inspirational. Where Bennie sees loss and frustration, Sasha finds a source of inspiration and injects it to Bennie, making him feel "love" and "safety" while she herself feels like "hanging on by a thread" (p. 16), carrying a constant sense of staleness. Although Bennie's and Sasha's realities are different



from each other, their musical collaboration and occasional intimacy make their realities collide to form a *plastic* reality. Sasha touches the Real, positive side of her life which Bennie seeks but cannot achieve while this brighter side of life is sterile for Sasha's gloomy world.

Chapter 3 offers a character who struggles to find what is the Real in her life. Rhea, a friend of Bennie back in their teens, lacks self-confidence due to her freckled face and has several insecurities in life. Her major question in life regarding what the Real is includes the identity of the authority: "[w]ho decides" what the Real is (Egan, 2010, p. 49). Rhea is perplexed by the search for the "universal truth" which is roughly negated and mocked by Lulu, her junior, in Chapter 13 when Rhea is in her forties: "There are so many ways to go wrong," Lulu holds, "All we've got are metaphors, and they're never exactly right. You can't ever just say *The Thing*" (p. 270). At first glance, this statement candidates Lulu as a champion of postmodernism, for in "postmodernism there is no such thing as truth" (Lucy, 2016, p. 190). However, further analysis of her character gives a subtler role to her.

Lulu, a young woman in her early 20s and a representative of the Generation Z, is one of the iconic figures in *VGS*. Being the daughter of a formerly famous publicist in Hollywood, she is a confident young woman who has a contradictory moral and philosophical compass compared with the older characters. She belongs to the digital age when many former beliefs have been scrutinized or completely rejected. First met in Chapter 8 as a self-assured and bold child, she is working as Bennie's assistant in her adolescence later in the novel. Her words reject Rhea's hopes throughout years for something definitive, as Lulu states how no one has the authority to "judge" another human being and that every ethical rule is a "calcified morality," bound to be broken sooner or later with the new generation (Egan, 2010, p. 269). However, there is a contradiction in her philosophy, as the reader learns that her generation has a clear-cut border of actions that are wrong in their opinions. Such distinctions of what can be considered right or wrong contradict postmodernism's "impossibility of truth" (Lucy, 2016, p. 190). Meanwhile, Lulu's refusal to acknowledge a universal truth goes against modernist concepts. Therefore, her alliances are best placed with metamodernism and its specific concept of the infinite Real as her motives bring the "infinite yet bound pliability" of the truth to the attention of contemporary readers (Toth, 2017, p. 76). Therefore, in representing the Generation Z and its ideologies, Lulu's beliefs can be considered as metamodernist in perspective with its multiplicity of approaches to the Real. She is assured of what she desires and what she despises, while Rhea is generally lost in her decision about the truth.

The metamodernist aspect of the "infinite Real" in contemporary poetics is Hegel's "negative ideology," which, according to Toth (2019), is to apprehend the "infinite Real" paradoxically by embracing the will to tolerate the failure of doing so. In other words, the essence of infinity can be realized only when human beings' perceptive ability reaches its cognitive limit. It then follows that the impossibility of infinity becomes possible since "its necessary negation (in the finite limitation of sensory experience or expression) is itself negated." Thus, understanding infinity is only possible when its "finitude" is denied. Investigating the infinity of the Real

through "plasticity" as such, Toth attributes the "impossibility of ossification" to "the Real," bereaving it from absolutism in so far as it constantly creates various forms of self-expressions (pp. 60-61). For Toth, "The Real, plastic-like, can yield (to) an infinite number of symbolic formulations;" however, "some formulations are simply incorrect, simply irresponsible, self-serving" (p. 58). This aspect of the "infinite Real" is best presented in Chapter 9 in *VGS*. The radical Jules Jones, a tabloid reporter and journalist who is roughly dealing with his broken engagement and job insecurity, is to have a 40-minute launch with Kitty Jackson, a 19-year-old famous movie star, and save his career by making it a successful event. However, he ends up attempting to assault and rape Kitty in Central Park, ending up prosecuted and imprisoned. During his sentence he writes a sort of confessional writing, in the form of a metafiction, in which he stands adamant in defending his treatment / abuse of Kitty, arguing that:

Why do I keep mentioning—"inserting," as it may seem—myself into this story? Because I'm trying to wrest readable material from a nineteen-year-old girl who is very, very nice; I'm trying to build a story that not only unlocks the velveteen secrets of her teenager's heart, but also contains action, development, along with ... some intimation of meaning. ... Janet Green, my girlfriend of three years and my fiancée for one month and thirteen days, dumped me two weeks ago for a male memoirist whose recent book details his adolescent penchant for masturbating into the family fish tank. (2010, p. 165)

Jules is narrating his tale so smoothly and convincingly that the reader, unaware of his heinous action until the end of the chapter, falls into his shoe and even sympathizes with him. Jules even goes so far as to say how his assault has helped Kitty with popularity. Furthermore, it can be argued that Jules's reality is a self-serving window from which he projects whatever he desires onto what is taking place. For example, Kitty's fingering a bowl of salad dressing and sucking off the dressing is nothing but a sexual invitation: as Jules wanders, "can it possibly be that this ravishing young girl is coming on to me?" Additionally, Jules' sadistic desire to use Kitty for utmost sexual gratification is justified not as "crazy" but an outburst of "rage" against Kitty's early fame in contrast to his failure: "longing ... to break her in half and plunge my arms into whatever pure, perfumed liquid swirls within her." Jules wants to rub that liquid onto his "parched skin in hopes that it will finally be healed" (p. 171), metaphorically to sooth his anguish against personal failure. Jules' "negative ideology" to compensate for his personal and social failures turns reality for him into a radical one, compared to the rest of the world, which he sincerely believes and persuasively shares with the audience. However, sacrificing another's life to fulfill one's own version of reality is not tolerated in light of civil and human rights, because one's so-called *subjective* decisions might negatively affect those who do not consent to them. That is why Jules is imprisoned because of his rape attempt and no absolute freedom of action is granted him in the story, which points to the fact that actions bring about responsibilities in so far as the community is concerned.

Another character with an interesting view about the Real in *VGS* appears at length in Chapter 6. Scotty Hausman, a friend of Bennie's in Chapter 2, begins as a

vibrating and talented guitarist in his teenage years only to fail later in life. He is now profoundly buried in a simplistic life; he is working as a school janitor and living alone in a small apartment, obsessed with watching TV to get to know what others have experienced in life. His philosophy of life is that all people are equal, and concepts like luxury are merely mental fabrications and illusions. Scotty's concept of reality is quite radical as all human actions and interactions are of equal value for him:

there was only an infinitesimal difference, a difference so small that it barely existed except as a figment of the human imagination, between working in a tall green glass building on Park Avenue and collecting litter in a park. In fact, there may have been no difference at all. (Egan, 2010, p. 92)

Furthermore, Scotty's theory of knowledge is to know all human experiences by either reading about them or watching them on TV:

it had been a while since I'd spent much time in public. But was such a fact even relevant in our "information age," when you could scour planet Earth and the universe without ever leaving the green velvet couch you'd pulled from a garbage dump and made the focal point of your East Sixth Street apartment? (p. 93)

Scotty sees no difference between himself as a man in the lower strata of the society and those standing on higher grounds. Meanwhile, being antisocial, he seems to be digital phobic: "real computers scared me; if you can find them, then they can find you, and I didn't want to be found" (p. 96). He keeps his distance from computers and the Internet to the point that, in the age of social media, "Scotty has disappeared. No computer can find him" (p. 84). His reality is thus unaffected by the politics of the world although he believes that he can know about them through the media. His philosophy of "X's and O's" can hence stand as a representation of what the Real or the truth is for him:

If we human beings are information processing machines, reading X's and O's and translating that information into what people oh so breathlessly call "experience," and if I had access to all that same information via cable TV and any number of magazines that I browsed through at Hudson News ... if I had not only the information but the artistry to shape that information using the computer inside my brain ... then, technically speaking, was I not having all the same experiences those other people were having? (p. 96)

Scotty's explanation is close to what the "infinite Real" means in metamodernism in so far as there are as many ways to approach the Real as there are human beings: the Real is "X's and O's" that can be comprehended in various ways (p. 96). Scotty represents what Vermeulen et al. label as the "structure of feeling," originally proposed by Raymond Williams in 1954, pointing to a "sentiment, or rather still a sensibility that everyone shares, that everyone is aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down" (2017, p. 28). Essentially, each generation adopts the former cultural atmosphere and revises it to match its demands, and each historical period generates an exclusive structure of feeling which can be witnessed

through its culture and art. According to Williams, "it is in art, primarily, that the effect of the totality, the dominant structure of feeling, is expressed and embodied" (2001, p. 33). In other words, the artist can feel the atmosphere of an era completely and produce a work to fully embody it.

In this regard, when we meet Scotty again in Chapter 13, several years have passed and he is surprisingly set up to perform in a concert arranged by Bennie, only to back out at the last minute. However, after Lulu convinces Scotty to go onstage, he astonishes the audience by a superb performance of songs he wrote in his isolation back in Chapter 6. Scotty's isolation from the world and his unique philosophy of life go hand in hand in creating songs that move people of various social groups all at the same time. What takes place in the epic scene of Chapter 13 is the union of Lulu and Scotty's ideologies, as "Lulu twined her arm through Scotty's, and they moved straight into the crowd" (Egan, 2010, p. 283). It is the moment when the subjective freewill of interpretation and creation along with the hope for something authentic and real come together to create a myth for others. In the end, Scotty is the only one who can project an authentic and all-moving Real as he tries to observe matters from every possible viewpoint.

Observing life events from every possible viewpoint, as presented in *VGS*, provides for the concept of the "infinite Real" working at the background – chapters 2, 3, 6, 9, and 13 in the novel mostly bear this mark. In this regard, Egan's characters, each with a different view on the same event, do not end up with a labyrinth of paths to follow in the future of their lives but the right path of success at the end, such as what happens to Sasha in Chapter 2. Some characters reflect on the reality of the life of a character who is selfish and self-absorbed, like Jules in Chapter 9, while trying to legitimize him for the audience. Chapter 6 contains a possible description of what Egan believes to be the "infinite Real," as Scotty explains how the world is just X's and O's while there is an infinite number of ways to reach them. In Chapter 13, Lulu's strict ideology that no one has the right to judge others goes hand in hand with Scotty's philosophy and suggests the metamodern concept of the "infinite Real." And ultimately, the last chapter puts *VGS* on the "historiographic metafiction" pedestal. Mostly represented by Sasha's life in chapters 1, 10, 11, and 12 from four different viewpoints, the plasticity at work in Sasha's tendency and desire to constantly hold onto some memories serves to keep her past as present which can be shaped and reshaped as she desires. She is aware that everything eventually ends and that she may never be able to fix the problems in the past while keeping fragments of the past helps her to hope for better changes.

### **Conclusion**

Metamodernism attempts to describe a world where all humanely possible realities are given a voice. The oscillation between various perspectives in metamodern novels creates the ground for the transaction between different views on the same event, whether it is a specific character's view in different timelines of his / her life or multiple views simultaneously considering the same event. A metamodern novel as such offers the chance to not only see but to understand and even sympathize with various opposing realities. However, it is important to

emphasize that regardless of how many approaches to reality are deemed available in metamodern fiction, they will not violate the boundaries of the reality offered in *VGS*, meaning that not all versions of reality may be accepted or respected. Furthermore, metamodern fiction has found a way to return the urge to be responsible for reality and take the limitation of language as a tool to consider the Real as infinite and pliable. To display and understand this “infinite Real,” critics like Josh Toth apply it to the template of metafiction. Facing the same inability of language to articulate the Real as it is, Toth’s “historioplactic metafiction” thus bases reality on “plasticity” in the course of time, allowing the freedom of thought and expression in different realities and the flexibility of the past to be.

Egan’s *VGS*, in light of the argument above, is a collection of associated short stories which embed different versions of the Real to the same set of events, each story or approach to reality being an installment or issue of the journal of the world which has infinite pages. As a metamodern novel, Egan gives her readers multiple perspectives on the same set of events and allows them to take each approach to reality in consideration. However, she remains aware that some interpretations might be simply incorrect. Moreover, Egan applies the concept of plasticity to her novel, specifically to her characters in their reconsiderations of their past lives, to challenge any solidified version of reality at the cost of others. Such outlining helps Egan to try her hand in “historioplactic metafiction” with its emphasis on the plasticity and pliability of historical events. However, it must be emphasized that while metamodernist authors and their readers should embody as many diversities as possible, they must remain vigilant of realities tainted with colors of hate, selfishness, pessimism, and chaos as Egan did.

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