



# A Metamodernist Utopia: The Neo-Romantic Sense and Sensibility of the *Bridgerton* Series

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**Abstract.** The paper addresses the cultural paradigm of metamodernism as conceived by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010). Ontologically, metamodernism is perceived as oscillating between the modern and the postmodern, whereby the tools of postmodernism (such as irony, sarcasm, parataxis, deconstruction, scepticism and nihilism) are employed to counter (but not obliterate) modernist naivety, aspiration and enthusiasm. This oscillation results in what the above authors have termed “informed naivety,” a phrase denoting a state of wilful pragmatic idealism that allows for the imagining of impossible possibilities. Vermeulen and van den Akker’s two key observations about the shift from postmodernism to metamodernism in contemporary art are discussed in this paper, namely the (re)appearance of sensibilities corresponding to those of Romanticism and the (re)emergence of utopian desires, in an attempt at a metamodernist analysis of the Netflix adaptation of the *Bridgerton* book series, aimed primarily at elucidating its popularity as one of the most watched programmes of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** metamodernism, utopia, Neo-Romanticism, informed naivety, *Bridgerton*.

## Introduction

Streaming services and content platforms have become increasingly popular over the past ten years and some also evolved into production companies that generate their own content. At the forefront of this revolution in visual media consumption is Netflix, Inc., an American company that, according to statista.com (see Stoll 2022), boasted 192.95 million paid subscribers as of the second quarter of 2020 and is available in almost every country across the globe. With the global Covid-19 pandemic confining people to their homes, demand for online entertainment increased (see e.g. Ofcom’s *Media Nations 2020* report) and services such as Netflix benefitted greatly. According to BBC News from

October 2020, the “firm reported a record \$790 million in quarterly profit, as revenue increased more than expected to \$6.4bn” (Sherman 2020), cementing the company’s dominance among subscription-based video streaming services.

On Christmas Day 2020, Netflix premiered the first season of *Bridgerton*, a series created by Chris Van Dusen and Shonda Rhimes, which quickly became its most watched content in 76 countries, reaching a viewership of 82 million households that saw it either partly or in its entirety (Andreeva 2021). In spite of Netflix’s problematic 2019 change in methodology when it comes to their audience metric (the company having switched from previously counting 70 percent of an item viewed as a “view,” as opposed to the two minutes of viewing that constitute a “view” present; see: McClintock 2020, Coates 2020), and the fact that their viewing figures are not verified by a third party, the numbers presented are nevertheless impressive and exceed Netflix’s own four-week projection (that the company issued ten days into the series’ run) by about 19 million (Andreeva 2021). *Bridgerton* thus very quickly became one of the most watched programmes of the Covid-19 pandemic and even though its success was later eclipsed by other series (see e.g. Bean 2021), *Bridgerton*’s perplexing popularity is worthy of further investigation in several directions. In the present article, I shall be focusing on the idea that the series appears to exhibit metamodernist characteristics that could help shed light on an emerging sensibility that is likely to replace postmodernism as the cultural dominant, with postmodernism no longer being able to offer a satisfying response to the crises of the contemporary world.

### **“Why Settle for a Duke When You Can Have a Prince?”**

Netflix’s *Bridgerton* is based on American author Julia Quinn’s novel series of the same name, with nine books published between 2000 and 2013. The novels themselves are typical historical romances set in London during the Regency era, each book following one of the eight alphabetically named siblings of the upper class Bridgerton family in their pursuit of romance and the loves of their lives. The ninth and final instalment, called *The Bridgertons: Happily Ever After* (2013), is a collection of so-called “second epilogues” to all the previously published storylines, as well as an additional story about the family’s widowed matriarch Violet Bridgerton. Netflix has thus far only released the first season of *Bridgerton*, which consists of eight episodes and is based on the novel *The Duke and I* (2000), but has renewed the series for a second season in January 2021 and, additionally, for a third and fourth season in the spring of the same year (Kanter 2021).

Quinn was already a best-selling author prior to the success of the Netflix series, having won the Romance Writers of America Award in 2017 and her books regularly ranking on the *New York Times* bestseller list, yet the novels are fairly typical representations of the Austen-inspired historical romance genre and do not exhibit many of the characteristics that I wish to discuss here, therefore I shall primarily be focusing on the televised version. While the Netflix adaptation does stay true to the plot, the characters (with some additions and subtractions) and the wit of the original, with the viewer also being informed at the beginning of the first episode that the story is supposedly set in London of 1813, it is very clear that the makers of the series wanted, as Chris Van Dusen put it, “to make the show reflect the world that we live [in] today” and also desired “modern audiences to be able to relate to it” (Jean-Phillippe 2020).

This has led to some interesting choices in terms of structuring the narrative, but the most striking change was the fact that the creators opted for so-called colour-blind casting, i.e. not settling on a character’s race before choosing the actor for a specific role. The result was a racially diverse cast, which inevitably led to several multiracial relationships, not least between the two protagonists of the first season, the white Daphne Bridgerton (played by Phoebe Dynevor) and the black Simon Basset, the Duke of Hastings (played by Regé-Jean Page). Other multiracial relationships include the real-life white British king George III, whose queen consort Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Sterlitz is played by the Guyanese-British black actress Golda Rosheuvel, with the character never actually appearing in the novels themselves in any capacity whatsoever. The idea for casting the Queen as a black woman may be a combination of two factors, namely the fact that the real Queen Charlotte was rumoured to have been mixed race (a speculation that resurfaced in the media after Prince Harry’s engagement to Meghan Markle in 2017, see e.g. Brown 2017 or Blakemore 2018), and the fact that the televised version of *Bridgerton* uses the monarch’s relationship with a black woman as an explanation for the racial equality that we witness in the world of Netflix’s *Bridgerton*. Interestingly, the question of race is only addressed once in the entire first season, when Lady Danbury (played by the black actress Adjoa Andoh), a good friend of Simon’s late mother, explains that black and white people used to belong to separate societies and were divided by colour until the king fell in love with a black woman, adding that “love, Your Grace, conquers all.” Racism therefore effectively ceases to be an issue, with black characters presented as equal members of the British aristocracy that partake in all of its activities, from being presented at court as debutantes to competing for suitable love matches during

“the season.” Colour-blind casting was certainly a novel choice for a period drama and enabled the creators to also venture into the realm of fantasy and utopia in fields other than race, ensuring that the lack of historical accuracy is seen by the viewers as a choice rather than a series of *faux pas* on the part of the creators.

While some critics find the series problematic for fear that the “Netflix generation has lost its grip on history,” as it “doesn’t take much to swing the balance of historical knowledge further and further away from the truth” (Strimpel 2021), others see colour-blind casting as a great opportunity for casting diversity, but stress that “continued colorblindness after casting can result in the perpetuation of stereotypes, however unintended” (Luders-Manuel 2021). Luders-Manuel draws our attention to Marina Thompson (played by mixed race actress Ruby Barker), a character whose fate in the novels is considerably more tragic than that on screen, and yet “her storyline closely mirrors the stereotyped role of the ‘tragic mulatta,’ a popular trope in abolitionist fiction” that was often used “to garner sympathy from white readers” (2021). Marina Thompson is the distant cousin of another prominent family called the Featheringtons, is a member of the upper middle class rural gentry and is sent to London to live with her relatives. It is later revealed that she is pregnant and therefore sentenced to “a sensationally tragic courtship season, used as a counter to Daphne’s chastity and innocence and as a cautionary tale to the other young debutantes” (Luders-Manuel 2021).

Other considerable deviations from historically accurate portrayal abound, among the more prominent being the lack of poverty on the seemingly immaculate streets of London (with the exception of one short and aesthetically non-traumatic scene), costumes that do not seem to make more than one appearance per piece of clothing, and the behaviour of characters that is often closer to how we would expect people to react to certain situations nowadays, as opposed to the early 19th century.

*Bridgerton* does, however, generally follow in the tradition of period romances, with the rather unoriginal storylines, the shallow dialogue and the constant pursuit of yearning for true love. Instead of content that has come to be known as “something for the dads,” the show unashamedly targets female and gay audiences by, for example, brimming with largely unnecessary footage of the Duke of Hasting’s glistening torso during boxing matches – the sport only having become a hobby of the Duke’s in the series as the character exhibits no such interest in the novels. So why is it that this vacuous, gaudy, “expensive assemblage of clichés that smacks of the American’s-eye view of Britain’s aristocratic past” (Strimpel 2021) and appears to be a product of some strange, if seemingly well-intentioned,

historical revisionism, resonated so much with audiences around the world in the midst of a global pandemic?

## **Enter Metamodernism**

According to Vermeulen and van den Akker, postmodernism has run its course and “lost its sway on contemporary aesthetics and culture” (2015, 56). Similar observations have been put forth by many other scholars (see e.g. Eshelman 2008, Kirby 2009, Toth 2010 and Nealon 2012), including some previously at the forefront of research into postmodernism, such as Linda Hutcheon (2002) or Ihab Hassan (2003). Although postmodern(ist) legacy in the form of various discursive and ideological approaches continues to inform contemporary artistic and cultural production, recent decades have seen postmodernism decline and wane as the cultural dominant, giving way to an emergent, if presently still elusive, post-postmodernist sensibility. Many attempts have already been made to try and make sense of the multitude of changes and developments that have occurred in the last two decades and could no longer be suitably critically appraised or understood through the prism of postmodern discourse. These propositions have been branded as various -isms, such as altermodernism, hypermodernism, digimodernism, remodernism, automodernism, renewalism, performatism and metamodernism, to name but the most prominent ones, and tend to focus on different aspects of art and popular culture. It is currently too early to predict which, if any “of these movements will develop into a fully-fledged school of thought of the magnitude that the postmodern had” (Rudrum and Stavris 2015, xxvii), as there is as yet no consensus on what exactly is to (or has) replace(d) postmodernism. These attempts, however, nevertheless represent important starting points to analysing the contemporary social situation and related newly emerging sensibilities.

In their influential 2010 paper, *Notes on Metamodernism*, Vermeulen and van den Akker attempt to identify and articulate a new cultural sentiment within a framework sufficiently flexible to accommodate the various ongoing developments of our age. Luke Turner, another key proponent of metamodernism and author of *The Metamodernist Manifesto*, notes that for the generations brought up in the 1980s and 1990s, “postmodern irony and cynicism is a default setting, something ingrained in us” that is now nevertheless being countered with “a yearning for meaning – for sincere and constructive progression and expression” (2015). In other words, with our existence very much “characterized by a deepening of the

neoliberalization of the institutional constellations surrounding (a hence purer form of) capitalism” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015, 57), in combination with a multitude of crises (be they ecological, financial, political, or even medical in nature), there is a growing desire and need for contemporary culture to go beyond “deconstruction, irony, pastiche, relativism, nihilism, and the rejection of grand narratives” (Turner 2015) that defined postmodernism. Instead of cynical judgements and a constant sense of doom emanating from postmodernist ideas such as Jameson’s “senses of the end” (1991, 1) or Fukuyama’s “End of History” (1992, xii), metamodernism proposes a re-introduction of optimism, collaboration, “sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, whilst not forfeiting all that we’ve learnt from postmodernism” (Turner 2015).

Rather than re-invoking modernism in its original form or rejecting postmodernism altogether, a key concept of metamodernism appears to be that of oscillation between the two. Metamodernism, therefore, does not completely negate what it is trying to surpass, nor does it attempt to simply replace one set of elements by (re)introducing others. Instead, it aims to articulate the present condition by ontologically continuously shifting, repositioning and negotiating between the modern and the postmodern, history and ahistoricity, sincerity and irony, optimism and pessimism, “hope and melancholy, [...] naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 6) and so forth. Whatever the poles, which do not necessarily represent binary opposites and of which there may be many, the tensions between them cause the pendulum to swing incessantly, constantly being pulled back and forth due to neither/none of the options being intrinsically better, optimal or even necessarily the ultimate one, thereby creating the metamodern moment. Vermeulen and van den Akker describe metamodernism as a moment of radical doubt, of “constantly shifting and repositioning between [...] the innumerable poles, before ultimately having to choose, despite knowing it may not be the best choice” (Southward 2018, 78–79).

## **Neo-Romanticism and Informed Naivety**

Proponents argue that metamodernism is “most clearly, yet not exclusively, expressed by the neoromantic turn of late” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 1) and propose “a pragmatic romanticism unhindered by ideological anchorage” (Turner 2011) as one of the ways of understanding the new sensibility. Much

like postmodernism, Romanticism has many ambiguous, vague and sometimes conflicting definitions. Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010, 8) turn to Romanticism as identified by Isaiah Berlin, who saw it as a collection of co-existing binaries such as “unity and multiplicity,” “beauty and ugliness,” “art for its own sake and art as instrument of social salvation,” “strength and weakness,” “individualism and collectivism,” “purity and corruption, revolution and reaction, peace and war, love of life and love of death” (all 2001, 18). Such understanding of Romanticism allows for an interpretation of Neo-Romanticism as a key element of the emerging metamodernist sensibility, since Vermeulen and van den Akker propose that “the Romantic attitude can be defined precisely by its oscillation between these opposite poles” (2010, 8) as observed by Berlin. They then proceed to narrow this down to the (perhaps somewhat too) general notion of “the Romantic as oscillating between attempt and failure” or “a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony,” claiming that it is this very oscillating movement that leads to the hesitation from which “the Romantic inclination toward the tragic, the sublime, and the uncanny stem, aesthetic categories lingering between projection and perception, form and the unformable, coherence and chaos, corruption and innocence” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 8).

This brings us once again to the metamodernist use of oscillation as a key tool in dealing with the postmodern legacy of contemporary ontological dissatisfaction and general state of nihilism. The imperative of having to make one choice while being persistently drawn to others leads to what metamodernists have termed “informed naivety,” which Vermeulen and van den Akker also describe as “pragmatic idealism” (2010, 5) and Turner as “a moderate fanaticism” (2015), with all perceiving it as going beyond (yet still taking into account) the modern fanaticism or naivety, as well as postmodern apathy and scepticism. Informed naivety (and especially its occurrence in the context of Neo-Romanticism) may sound as somewhat reminiscent of the great Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s concept of “willing suspension of disbelief,” yet informed naivety differs from it substantially in that its main goal is not merely the facilitation of escapism but providing a methodology that enables an examination of various alternatives. In contrast to the postmodernist resignation and dystopian acceptance of all attempts as futile, but also in partial opposition to modernist enthusiasm, informed naivety represents a situation in which “two opposing or alternative ideological positions [...] that in some way negate one another, are sought to be occupied simultaneously” (Southward 2018, 78) as one attempts to “turn the finite into the infinite, while recognizing that it can never be realized”

(Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 8), yet still attempting to “attain some sort of transcendent position, *as if* such a thing were within our grasp” (Turner 2015). The Neo-Romantic sensibility of metamodernism therefore attempts to be both ironic and sincere at the same time without one eliminating or diminishing the other, although without the two necessarily co-existing in a balanced state.

*Bridgerton* is an interesting example of the metamodernist understanding of Romanticism, yet not (solely) because the story itself is set in (a version of) the Romantic period, although it does exhibit a myriad of typical Romantic traits, such as obsession with childlike innocence, emphasis on individuality, the positioning of emotion above reason, devotion to love and beauty and so on. Yet the key elements linking it to metamodernism do not lie in its setting as such, but in its easily discernible oscillation between irony and sincerity or the previously mentioned modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony (as introduced by Mul 1999 [1990], 25). The creators of the series were well aware that they were not filming a traditional historical romance and they convey that in many different, occasionally deliberately ironic ways, from conscious colour-blind casting to distinctly period-inappropriate choice of wardrobe colours and models, as well as opting for classical renditions of popular contemporary songs (such as Nirvana’s *Stay Away* or Taylor Swift’s *Wildest Dreams*) as the accompanying score. *Bridgerton* simultaneously reinforces and challenges the traditional tropes of the genre, the above-mentioned deviations being a clear signal to the viewer that the content they are watching is determined to come across as more progressive than anticipated, yet also (knowingly) failing to fulfil that goal. The viewer is constantly being pulled back into the 19th century reality of misogyny, gender and class inequality that continues to flourish in spite of many of the key characters (e.g. Queen Charlotte, Lady Danbury and the mysterious Lady Whistledown) being powerful females and the male leads perhaps exhibiting more gentleness and emotion than are to be expected in more traditional incarnations of the genre. And that is exactly what Vermeulen and van den Akker’s New Romanticism focuses on, “the swing between attempt and failure” and “the idea of failure in spite of itself” (Southward 2018, 80), with *Bridgerton* behaving *as if* certain more pleasing aspects of it (such as complete racial equality) were a viable option and at the same time being fully aware that they are not.

## The Return of Utopia

In addition to a sensibility not unlike that of Romanticism, another stand-out element to recur throughout the (as yet relatively slim) body of metamodernist research is the pronounced presence of utopian desires. Over the course of the last two decades, many scholars have observed signs of re-emergence and reappraisal of utopia in a variety of contemporary cultural milieux, be it in performance art or architecture (e.g. Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015 or Turner 2015), film (e.g. MacDowell 2017) or literature (e.g. Southward 2018). Vermeulen and van den Akker argue that “the utopian turn is part and parcel of the shift from postmodernism to metamodernism that took place in the 2000s” (2015, 55) and view it as a tool in trying to generate feelings of sincerity, community and hope. These goals also represent one of the major differences between the postmodernist and metamodernist understanding of utopia, with the latter aiming for re-, rather than de-construction. Postmodernism may have accepted utopia to an extent as a platform for exploration of societal and other changes, but rejected it as a “blueprint for the future” because it does not conceive of it as a “politically radical process of ongoing critique” (Wagner-Lawlor 2017, 234), but rather understands it as a static and final ideological construction that is naïve of anyone to anticipate and should therefore be viewed with cynicism. Utopia in postmodernism “was avoided as something suspiciously totalitarian while it morphed into its generic “dystopian” cousin (in cyberpunk, for instance) or turned into debris after the operations of deconstruction” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015, 57).

Metamodernism takes these considerations on board, “reappropriates conventions associated with postmodernism” and “redirects and resignifies them towards new horizons” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015, 60), therefore attempting to rehabilitate utopia by focusing on its role in the process of (re)imagining (im)possibilities with a renewed idealism much more typical of modernism. The importance of utopia as a tool in the search for alternative possibilities, rather than an ideological end goal has, of course, been noted before. Wagner-Lawlor turns to two authors who emphasize the importance of utopia’s plasticity more than one hundred years apart, with Oscar Wilde observing in his 1891 essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* that “progress is the realization of Utopias” (1910, 27) and Jeanette Winterson, in her essay *Art Objects*, noting that (as paraphrased by Wagner-Lawlor) “without the possibility of difference and change, utopia tends toward the fascistic or the dictatorial. A process utopia requires possibility, awaiting” (Wagner-Lawlor 2017, 234).

The recurrence and reimagining of utopian desires is also not an unexpected consequence of living in uncertain times in general, with the Covid-19 pandemic contributing the proverbial cherry on top of the cake of pre-existing political and economic instability. The social and economic tendencies behind the shift from postmodernism to metamodernism (that can very generally be summed up as intensification of neoliberalism or a shift from what Jameson (1991 [1984]) termed late capitalism to what has come to be labelled as global capitalism) appear to have also significantly contributed to the millennial generation in particular feeling that “today’s deal is not the deal they signed up for during the postmodern years” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015, 58). According to Turner, “we have witnessed the emergence of a palpable collective desire for change” (2015) in recent decades, and consequently utopia “as a trope, individual desire or collective fantasy – is once more, and increasingly, visible and noticeable across artistic practices” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015, 57).

While the awareness of utopia as a tool has been previously noted and the re-emergence of utopia is also not an unexpected companion of turbulent times, metamodernist utopia differs from its predecessors in the awareness of its own limitations, as we witness a “yearning for utopias, *despite* their futile nature” (Turner 2015, emphasis added). Turner notes that there is a desire for “sincere and constructive progression and expression” (2015) present in contemporary society, meaning that the re-emergence of utopia is not to be disregarded as mere wishful thinking, but perceived as part of a new narrative of longing and belief. Even if a certain goal, for example complete racial or gender equality, can never truly be achieved, metamodernism treats all goals *as if* they were achievable. The combination of modern(ist) naivety and postmodern(ist) scepticism inspired “the metamodern discourse [to] consciously commit [...] to an impossible possibility” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 5) and therefore progress for the sake of progression, move for the purpose of moving, attempt for the sake of attempting, regardless of potential failures that it may recognize as unavoidable. A metamodernist utopia is not an existent perfect society, but rather a facilitator of longing that may (or may not) help in exploring alternatives to the existent state, a notion that can also be detected in the first season of the *Bridgerton* series.

## ***Bridgerton* as a Metamodernist Utopia**

Utopia fits in well with the metamodern idea of oscillation precisely because it is an inherently contradictory phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> With Western societies increasingly characterized by diversity, the various desires, tendencies and politics expressed cannot all be satisfied concurrently as at least some are likely to conflict (Sargent 2010, 21) or be mutually exclusive. The *Bridgerton* series does not necessarily portray this in the sense of its utopian elements of racial equality being in conflict with or juxtaposed against any kind of utopian (or rather, dystopian) representation of racism. The setting, however, is a version of the British Georgian period and the creators use that to highlight the injustice of how the realization of a utopian state in one sense (arguably complete racial equality) does not necessarily bring about a utopian resolution of similar issues (such as, for example, lack of gender equality) that remain much more firmly embedded within the walls of historical accuracy. It does, however, invoke another essential component of metamodernism – hope.

While marrying history and fantasy and creating a utopian society of sorts, the creators intentionally do not do away with all the injustices of the actual Regency period. With racial equality seemingly achieved and consequently almost completely brushed aside, the focus then turns to the characters trying to realize their own dreams and desires, most of them in some way tied to societal expectations. The first season of the series offers a colourful array of otherwise rather flat and not entirely developed characters conveniently representing the “remaining” societal issues of the day and, indeed, the present. The inferior position of women, for example, is still necessary in order for the storyline to progress. This includes Daphne’s protective brother Anthony (Jonathan Bailey), who has to give his permission for Daphne to marry, as well as countless examples of supposed chivalry where damsels in distress are rescued by gentlemen, their honour fought

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1 There is already confusion surrounding its very etymology, with the word utopia (famously coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516 by combining the Greek words *ou* and *topos*) translating to ‘nowhere’ or ‘no place,’ but with some later suggesting that the word actually derives from a combination of *eu* and *topos*, meaning ‘a good place’ or ‘healthy place.’ The latter has been disputed by many scholars (see e.g. Carey 2000), although More himself pointed out the similarities between utopia and eutopia in his seminal text and eutopia is, arguably, closer to what is understood as utopia today. The original use of the word to mean any non-existent society therefore quickly evolved and acquired the prerequisite for this society to be significantly better than contemporary society (Sargent 2005, 11), leading to the need for the introduction of an expression to denote a non-existent bad society – dystopia. In her article on Aldous Huxley, Margaret Atwood even suggests that More may have treated the expression as a pun and himself thought of utopia as “a good place that doesn’t exist” (2007).

for with fists. As was genuinely the case, women's reputations could be ruined by mere rumours, not to mention unwanted pregnancies out of wedlock, and their knowledge about sexual matters is virtually non-existent before marriage.

In order to somewhat make up for this outburst of historical accuracy and swing the oscillating pendulum back in the direction of utopian yearning, several characters are introduced that portray strong, independent women who, at least to some extent, defy the rules of society. Among them we can find Dowager Viscountess Violet Bridgerton (Ruth Gemmell), the wise widowed matriarch who continues to hold some power over family matters in spite of the fact that her eldest son and Viscount Anthony is the lawful head of the family, as well as heir to the family title and estate. One of the daughters, Eloise (Claudia Jessie), seems strangely out of place in 1813 London with her brazen behaviour of a modern teenager and rebellious proto-feminist ideas. She is an intelligent and well-read woman who does not wish to make her societal debut or marry, but strives for an education instead. The character is obviously meant to embody the struggle for gender equality with her insistence on intellectual improvement over finding a suitable husband, the only meaningful task for a young lady in the eyes of Georgian society.

Other examples of characters battling societal prejudice *en route* to happiness include Penelope Featherington (Nicola Coughlan), Eloise's best friend, who is the token overlooked, overweight girl suffering from unrequited love, while her sisters, Philippa (Harriet Cains) and Prudence (Bessie Carter), struggle to find a husband due to their family's financial difficulties. The Featheringtons' distant relative Marina Thompson (Ruby Barker) is a pregnant yet unmarried damsel in distress who is also in desperate need of a spouse and the aforementioned Anthony Bridgerton is having a long-term affair with a woman of a lower social standing.

Benedict Bridgerton, the artistic and possibly homosexual brother, is another case in point. The creators have even been accused of "queerbaiting" (see White 2020 and Meszaros 2021) after prominently featuring gay sex scenes in the trailer but then only including one minor queer character whose presence had no particular relevance to the storyline in the first season. According to Meszaros, "*Bridgerton's* inclusion of gay characters ends up feeling performative, disappointing and truly like queerbaiting" (2021). While it can hardly be considered a significant contribution to the history of queer cinema, it does tick a box, one of many the show appears to have on their list. Ironically, all the portrayals of Otherness somehow lose any potential they may have had for meaningful representation and become token appearances overshadowed by the main storyline of two perfect human specimens and their fairytale love affair.

However, based on the denouement with regard to race, the viewer cannot but be optimistic that the above-mentioned societal obstacles to happiness will one day also be overcome, just like racism appears to have magically disappeared. The creators of the series intentionally make it seem incredibly simple, as if they were sending a message to the viewers in the best tradition of postmodernist cynicism, telling us how ironically little it could take to eradicate racism, yet also accompanying this sentiment with modernist enthusiasm, naivety and a sense of hope that swings the pendulum away from postmodernist meaninglessness.

In spite of their troublesome social position, inspiring strong women overcoming various hurdles are a staple of the series and another set of symbols for hope of a different future. A prominent case in point, in addition to Eloise and Violet, is Queen Charlotte, who appears to be ruling the country herself as her husband experienced bouts of physical and mental illness, which in reality resulted in the appointment of the royal couple's eldest son as Prince Regent in 1811. Instead of the fifteen children that the actual queen gave birth to during her lifetime, Netflix prefers to surround her and her ladies-in-waiting with fluffy Pomeranians (which the real Queen Charlotte was, indeed, fond of) that better match the lavish backdrop of courtly life as imagined by Van Dusen and Rhimes.

Even though the viewer may be (and likely is) entirely aware of the contemporary as well as 19th century state of affairs with regard to equality in terms of gender, race or sexual orientation, *Bridgerton* does provide that minute glimpse of possibility that is necessary to kick-start the oscillation between our utopian desires and dystopian fears, the ember that sparks in us the desire to attempt in spite of anticipating failure we perceive as certain. To a postmodern mind such augmentation of history as witnessed in *Bridgerton* may seem like a futile exercise, but to the metamodernist this futility coexists within the moment of radical doubt alongside a sincere desire and yearning for change, essentially leading to the viewer experiencing what Vermeulen and van den Akker have termed "informed naivety."

## **Conclusion**

The *Bridgerton* series, which my postmodern-oriented mind initially cynically perceived as nothing more than an annoying gimmick for the historically illiterate, has therefore revealed itself to be a potential example of an emerging cultural dominant that seems to place much more emphasis on humanity, hope and empathy than its predecessor. Living in a world of perpetual crises, with

Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine only the latest additions, we should perhaps not be surprised that a desire for change is making us rethink and reshape our postmodern penchant for irony, sarcasm, deconstruction and general nihilism. While occasionally vague in their argumentation, Vermeulen and van den Akker correctly observe that trends and tendencies that can no longer be satisfactorily explained within the confines of the postmodern are likely to “express a (often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, intimating another discourse” (2010, 2).

The above observation fits in well with the characteristics detectable in *Bridgerton*, which is at the same time a traditional period drama series (and sometimes even an exaggerated parody thereof) and a vehicle for distinctly modern sentiments, as well as timeless wishes, desires and yearnings of humanity. The latter are partly conveyed through deliberately controversial choices by the series creators, most notably colour-blind casting that enabled them to imagine a racism-free early 19th century London. This particular decision was always going to come under fire, which is why it was essential that other historical inaccuracies (such as the clothes, the music, the proto-feminist characters, etc.) be included and presented with a degree of self-irony, yet with all of them also falling within the metamodern epistemology of “as if.” For “metamodern irony is intrinsically linked to desire” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 10), as opposed to postmodern apathy, and *Bridgerton* thus taps into the key component of metamodernism, that of oscillation.

Neither metamodernism nor *Bridgerton* propose any kind of definite utopian vision, but focus on the yearning for (a never-to-be-reached) utopia instead by offering glimpses of hope. Interestingly, opting for colour-blind casting enabled the creators of the series to highlight the problem of racism by eliminating it from a fictional setting, but consequently also bringing attention to it in reality, as well as enabling actors of colour to take on roles they would not usually be offered to play. The *Bridgerton* pendulum can therefore be found oscillating in more directions and ways than we could possibly list here, and its metamodernist potential could certainly be seen as one of the reasons for the immense popularity of the series that has, at least for a short while, replaced doomscrolling during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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