

A Metamodernist Reading of Multiple Subjectivities in Orphan Black

Abstract

From a metamodern viewpoint, human subjectivity is an oscillation between two or more intrinsic extremes in the spectrum of self. The Canadian science fiction TV series Orphan Black uses clones to portray the concept of multiple subjectivities.. The goal of this study is to examine the manifestations of this multiplicity in order to gain an understanding of the existence of the subject in the contemporary metamodernist world. In order to locate the subjects from the selected texts in the metamodern world, the study will use textual analysis as a method under the qualitative paradigm.

Key words: *Metamodernism, Oscillation, As-if mindset, Subjectivity*

INTRODUCTION

In this research article, I attempt to explore the notion of human subjectivity with respect to the contemporary theoretical advancement of thought and how it is portrayed in the cultural productions of the present times. For this, I have chosen to examine the science fiction TV series *Orphan Black*. I intend to discuss the dynamic nature of the subject in the selected text and what allows it to manifest in a way that is characteristically different and unique as compared to how subjects are presented and discussed generally. The contemporary theoretical perspective of metamodernism discusses subjects as multi-faceted beings (Lipovetsky 2005 p.2), and all these dimensions to an individual make up the sense of self, so to speak. I argue that this multi-dimensional manifestation of subjectivity is achieved through the angle of human cloning in the selected text and allows the audience to view the said manifestation in a way that other productions, forms, and genres do not. I employ the method of textual analysis to explore the said notion of subjectivity in the light of metamodernism to answer the following question:

Q. In what ways do the characters in *Orphan Black* manifest their subjectivities, and how does this enable viewers to comprehend the metamodern sense of self?

Metamodernism

Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, in 2010, put forward the idea that the “postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over” (p. 56) and have been abandoned for a “structure of feeling” (p. 57) which they call metamodern. They describe this structure of feeling as an oscillation between the enthusiasm of modernism and irony of postmodernism and highlight the resulting condition of in-between-ness as metamodern. This suggests that in the neither-nor and both relationships, a subject in the metamodern world is continuously oscillating between the polarities of (post) modernism and even beyond. The said structure of

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feeling for them is “. . . characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment. . .” (p. 57). This structure of feeling, for Vermeulen and van den Akker, is epistemologically aligned with the negative idealism of Kant; unlike modernism and postmodernism which are associated with Hegel’s positive idealism and the view that history can (has) come to an end. The metamodern belief is an oscillation between the two polarities; highlighting a position of in-between-ness and making an impossibly possible commitment of finding the purpose of history as if it existed knowing fully well that it does not: keeping in line with Kant’s negative idealism. Therefore ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between modernism and postmodernism:

It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. (p. 67)

In doing so, the metamodern subject negotiates between the modern and the postmodern, but it does not entail that it adopts an either-or approach as at all times, the metamodern is in the position of oscillation, moving between numerous polarities; signifying a search for a truth that it knows does not exist. It would also mean that the subject would continuously be in motion: never really stopping at either polarities to take its complete characteristics and its nature swings it back to the other end and so forth. The authors explain it in a way that “one should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance; however, rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles” (p. 68). If the positions and the poles are ‘innumerable’, the subject never really stops like a pendulum normally would, between two poles, but because here the polarities are infinite, the subject would adopt and adapt in accordance to the need in that particular moment giving rise to multiple subjectivities. The idea puts forth the notion that human beings living in the present day metamodern world occupy multiple or numberless subjective categories and can even temporarily let go of one position or category and adopt another position deliberately; signifying and reinforcing the idea that people are aware of the fact that they themselves and others, occupy these infinite positions. Furthermore, the need for letting go of a subjective category would highlight the need to ‘share subjectivities’ with others who are different from us.

The mentioned multiple positions allow the subjects to behave as agents in a manner that also makes use of the as-if mindset in the metamodernist sense. The said mindset puts forth this notion of progressing and improving as if progression is possible and it is not an “impossible possibility” (Akker and Vermeulen p. 8). Vermeulen and van den Akker discuss this idea with reference to Kant and his positive idealism and say that human history and development is studied in retrospect and in doing so it is acknowledged that the present moment cannot be discussed with surety. This is further explored with Kant’s idea of humanity being guided by a thread as if moving towards something whereas the reality of the matter is that everyone is unaware of what lies ahead and still is progressing in a forward direction. The importance of such a movement cannot be denied as the reverse and being stuck in the present is not possible; it is evident to the theorists here that with this movement, all one is doing is pretending to move towards a goal as if it will be meaningful. A metamodern subject, in this sense, tends to move because of this awareness, and in doing so strives to find a natural outcome or reach the truth

knowing fully well that such a search and movement would be futile. It is interesting because this knowledge does not stop the movement; in fact, the movement is the only point which gives the subject its agency and makes it act in a particular way and towards a particular direction.

***Orphan Black* as Science Fiction**

Orphan Black deals with the enthralling experiences of human clones and how they are a result of an experiment. The inclusion of clones and genetically enhanced individuals in the selected works make them fall under the category of Sci-Fi, making the series relatable in a sense that they cover different aspects of the contemporary technologically enhanced human subject. Moreover, the elements discussed in the series include human evolution, manufacturing creatures with human qualities, the ramifications and consequences of such an experiment, the clones considered as property of the manufactures leading to the moral and/or ethical dilemmas, and/or the notions of awe, terror, and speculation. Science Fiction as a genre allows both the creator and the reader to think beyond the usual way of looking at the subject matter because as a genre, it is speculative in nature and as such has the flexibility to entertain various alternative narrative possibilities. This makes *Orphan Black* a text which not only addresses the recent developments in science and technology but also brings to the forefront how the seemingly human characters (later identified as clones) struggle to break through these boundaries of singular selves coming in line with the metamodernist thought of the subject's oscillation.

Science Fiction, as Aldiss and Wingrove define it, is: “. . . the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mode” (1986 p.30) The important thing here is the mention of Gothic and post-Gothic, as it takes us back to Mary Shelley's work *Frankenstein*; which according to Aldiss is the beginning of this genre of Science Fiction in many a ways. The sense of desolation, the bleak scenery, and the protagonist's dilemma are all the characteristics of Science Fiction. No doubt, all of these features combined together give a ghastly appearance and feel to the story/work, but this is the requirement of the said genre. It was not till 1920s that the term science fiction was used for works which incorporated the above-mentioned features in the effort to demonstrate the diversity of the genre. Diverse in a sense that in and after 1920s, Science Fiction dealt with stories such as published in the pulp fiction magazines in America like *Amazing Stories*; it also dealt with stories about people going to other planets and exploring different species which was the focus of the work published in 1950s for which Aldiss states that “. . . the rocket-ship became SF's trade mark, and SF became 'space fiction'” (p. 29). Other than that, Science Fiction saw remarkable change in its content because with every passing year or so, new advancements found their way into the genre. And, it was not necessary for the writer to talk about interplanetary flights and new technological developments; largely it depended on the author's personal inclination which leads us to the notion of exploration and evolution in this genre.

Science fiction, among all other genres, is very much concerned about its own nature as a genre; thereby focusing on the evolutionary aspect as well, along with the much acknowledged and traditional aspect of technological development. This is vital to the understanding of the

genre because mostly, technological development is associated with the genre and things like space travel, scientific inventions and innovations, etc. make their way into the stories that fall under the category of Science Fiction. But at the same time, the evolutionary aspect cannot and should not be ignored as it is because of this aspect that we see human beings (protagonists or otherwise) adapting to their new environments and trying to survive despite the bleak state of circumstances. This double fold concern makes the subject matter of Science Fiction both diverse and richly complex in terms of human beings coming to terms with their ever-changing surroundings.

The present study makes use of metamodernism as a reading prop to highlight the nature of the subject under discussion and explore what it means to be an aware subject – in the sense of being multifaceted and usually conscious about it – in the current times with reference to the cultural development of thought on human subjects. This idea is interesting considering that it not only explores the subject as depicted in the selected texts but also makes a case for the present state of affairs when it comes to being human in the present times. The work, therefore, is an attempt to define and decipher the ways in which the subject from the selected text can be looked at from a metamodern perspective.

In this article, I attempt to answer the research question proposed in the beginning. The aim is to develop an understanding of how multiple subjectivities exist within the fictional narrative of the TV series. It is pertinent to mention here that the analysis takes into consideration a variety of positions that different subjects take within the narrative, irrespective of the chronological order of the series.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this section, I focus on Catherine Belsey's essay titled *Textual Analysis as a Research Method*. Belsey highlights how to analyze a visual text, and here I list the five points I gathered from the said essay and have used to analyze the selected text. First, she asserts that the researcher should "let the text set the agenda for research" (p. 161) and by this she means that a visual text presents a lot of information to the audience and one should find a starting point which is simultaneously useful for answering the question one wants answered and making a contribution to the field. In this article, the focus is to highlight the multiple positions that the subjects take simultaneously; the data taken from the selected text corresponds to these concerns. Belsey further states that "there is no such thing as a pure reading" (p. 163) as one gathers information and deciphers the text based on their own cultural and ideological foundations. This, of course, is extremely important in a qualitative study like this one, and it is because of this point that I believe a contribution to the field can be made, considering that the question designed for the study and how I answer it is situated within a cultural and ideological paradigm. Belsey argues that the text exists in its difference from us as readers (p. 166) and therefore requires a lot of attention from the reader or viewer. This signifies the importance of how the claims a researcher makes while analyzing a text have to be always backed up by logic, reason, and previous research and that there is definitely no room for vague assertions just because the analysis is subjective in nature. Belsey also places importance on dialogue between the reader and the text (p. 168). She argues that the meaning of any text comes to the forefront based on that back-and-forth communication between the audience and

the text. I rely on this the most, considering the present study is a qualitative one and the primary source of information is the selected text. The last and fifth point from the essay that I follow in my analysis is Belsey's assertion that "any specific textual analysis is made at a particular historical moment and from within a specific culture" (p. 169). This entails that the analysis is culturally grounded within a specific time period and forms one of the many possible readings that can exist for a particular text. The listed points make for a detailed analysis and I have attempted to answer the question employing the said method of textual analysis.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In this study I have employed two conceptual metamodernist categories, in an attempt to answer the question at hand. The concepts of oscillation and the as-if mindset are used to explain the multiplicity of positions that the clones in *Orphan Black* occupy. The selected text revolves around the story of human clones and that establishes all of them as parts of one; this way of looking at the clones considering their evolutionary similarities allows the audience to situate them as multiple manifestations of one genetic code. This can be seen in the way the series portrays all of them and how one actor is playing all the parts; changes in hair, dress, and accents aside. This portrayal is unique in the sense that it becomes difficult for the other characters to distinguish between the clones and there are many instances throughout the series where the clones impersonate one another. While doing so, the clones are occupying multiple positions because they are neither completely one nor the other and are simultaneously performing as two individuals although they are portrayed as one. This back-and-forth movement between different subjective positions is inherently metamodern and is in line with how the theorists describe the concept of oscillation in relation to the subject.

This continuous oscillation creates a sense of motion and does not let the audience and/or other characters settle for one kind of representation which creates layers in the narrative, and it keeps functioning on all the different levels. For instance, in the opening sequence (Manson 2013), when Sarah observes Beth jump in front of the train, the audience is made to realize that these two women look alike and must be connected in one way or the other. When Sarah decides to take hold of Beth's bag, cards, and ultimately her life, the narrative already has two layers on which it is functioning; Sarah's own life with her daughter Kira and her foster mother S and brother Felix, and the other with Beth's life as a police officer considering that people in both their lives are unaware of these new revelations of Sarah and Beth being clones. Sarah soon discovers other clones and is made to stay in the police force (as Sarah-as-Beth) for as long as she can manage to gather information regarding Beth's involvement which can help the clones and figure out who Beth's monitor was and how much do they know about Beth being alive or dead (Manson 2013).

Sarah Manning is the central clone who is introduced to the audience in the opening sequence as a street-smart criminal who is returning to Canada to be near her daughter Kira and eventually gain custody (Manson 2013). In this sense, it is through her character that the audience gets to know other clones and hence she becomes the subject when the series starts. The discussion, then, looks at Sarah's character as the subject who initiates the action and then allows the audience to meet other clone characters. The five major clones are therefore looked at as off-

shoots of Sarah who function in relation to her and are evaluated to be further extensions of the LEDA project. By holding a subjective position, I mean that the subjects would occupy a place where they are agents, are active, and can take decisions as far as their own individual self is concerned. This generally holds true before and after the clones become self-aware of the fact that they are human clones and are a result of an illegal experimentation carried out by the Dyad Institute and Neolution. The agency to wield power to work against these corporations and work towards their survival, however, stems from the knowledge of being clones and being aware, they decide consciously to take a subjective stance. Subjectivity, with reference to the said discussion, narrows down to the way an individual acts, the reasons for their actions, and the context in which the action takes place.

When the characters of Sarah, Beth, Cosima, Helena, or Alison are observed, it can be seen that all these clones are not only aware of being clones but are also aware that they have to keep this a secret from their respective communities such as neighbors, colleagues, friends, and/or family members. This awareness results in metamodern oscillation; the to-and-fro movement from being aware to being unaware, from being extraordinary to ordinary, and from being a clone to a normal human being. The narrative itself functions on both these levels; the layers that this constant and continuous move from ignorance to knowledge and back to ignorance creates and allows for the subjects to assume multiple subjective positions. Moreover, there is another level that this oscillation creates, the movement from being one clone to impersonating another and back to being their own self. This back-and-forth motion results in a continuous motion in the narrative and can be described as metamodern oscillation.

One clone, then, is simultaneously functioning as themselves, the other clone they are impersonating in a particular moment, their old self who was unaware of the fact that they are a clone and keeping up the act for their friends and family, and their actual self who is aware of being a clone and working towards their survival. This oscillation is, then, a form of negotiation in terms of not only coming to terms with the identity and agency that the subject occupies but also with reference to the context in which the transition from one position to the other takes place. This transition and the ability to morph into a variety of subjective positions makes the subject fall under the metamodern category. Akker and Vermeulen, describing this, state: "Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates . . . One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance. . . rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles". (6)

This movement of the 'pendulum' becomes extremely important as it is because of the subject continuously negotiating between being one and the other, taking a decision to occupy one place or the other, and assuming multiple identities in doing so. This movement is not a balanced movement per se as it is not necessary that the subject stays in two or more positions for an equal amount of time or remains in a position for an indefinite amount of time. This swinging motion is also indicative of the fact that the subject does not remain in a/any place long enough to assume the characteristics of an occupied position; meaning that the traits keep shifting and transitioning in relation to the continuous motion of the subject. The sense of

movement does not allow the audience to settle for one or the other representation and the audience is ready to accept the clones as much as a whole as they are accepted as separate individuals. Oscillation, then, manifests as this expectation in the audience, especially when they are ready to accept the shift from one subjective position to the other and are not only accepting of the multiple portrayal of the clones but are also keeping up with all the back-and-forth motions. To experience the series completely and in an immersive sense, then, the audience is also engaged in a continuous negotiation between different subjective positions that the clones occupy. For instance, when Sarah impersonates Beth (Manson 2013), or when Alison goes to visit Kira as Sarah (Fawcett 2013), or when Felix identifies Beth's body as Sarah (Manson 2013), the audience is aware of the transition that the clones go through whereas the characters in the series are not; the metamodern element of oscillation thus functions on this level as well. Audience involvement, in this way, is not fixed and keeps shifting from one story arc to another, from one clone to another, and how they are brought together as a whole. This type of active direct engagement aids in extending the metamodern oscillation beyond the confines of the fictional work. Oscillation, in a metamodern sense, then, extends beyond the confines of the work itself which manifests as an act of negotiation between the creator and the audience and how constantly the swinging motion helps in generating meaning with reference to the work under consideration.

The same can be said for *Orphan Black* as a text because it engages the audience on different levels, as a viewer given the visual nature of the TV series. In this way, this shift or oscillation, is not fixed and results in the audience's displacement as far as their focus is concerned and might also play with their sense of presence with regards to the engagement with content. This oscillation on the audience's part is something that fascinates me in terms of their subjectivity in relation to the characters' subjective stances. Despite knowing that one actor is playing all the clones, the audience chooses to resonate with one character at a time or perhaps with different character traits from different clones.

The form of the narrative allows the characters to occupy multiple positions and behave as agents in a manner that also makes use of the as-if mindset in the metamodernist sense. The said mindset puts forth this notion of progressing and improving as if progression is possible and it is not an "impossible possibility" (Akker and Vermeulen 8). Vermeulen and van den Akker discuss this idea with reference to Kant and his positive idealism and say that human history and development is studied in retrospect and in doing so it is acknowledged that the present moment cannot be discussed with surety. This is further explored with Kant's idea of humanity being guided by a thread as if moving towards something whereas the reality of the matter is that everyone is unaware of what lies ahead and still is progressing in a forward direction. The importance of such a movement cannot be denied as the reverse and being stuck in the present is not possible; it is evident to the theorists here that with this movement, all one is doing is pretending to move towards a goal as if it will be meaningful. A metamodern subject, in this sense, tends to move because of this awareness, and in doing so strives to find a natural outcome or reach the truth knowing fully well that such a search and movement would be futile. It is interesting because this knowledge does not stop the movement; in fact, the movement is the only point which gives the subject its agency and makes it act in a particular way and towards a particular direction.

When *Orphan Black* is looked at from this perspective, it can be said that the subjects are aware of their movement throughout the plot development, it is the very act of movement which gives them their agency and allows them to multiply. Whether it is Sarah observing Beth's suicide, Sarah acting as Beth, Alison acting as Sarah to meet Kira, or Helena acting as Sarah-as-Beth and entering the police station, it is clear that the clones are aware of their actions and movements and their subjective positions make them decide when and where they undergo transformation. Other instances such as Sarah watching the tapes to copy Beth's movements and accent (Manson 2013), Sarah coming to terms with the fact that Beth's boyfriend Paul was her monitor (Manson 2016), using Beth's surveillance tapes and data to dig out the truth, or Alison finding out that Donnie is her monitor (Pascoe 2013) and installing her own surveillance equipment to get ahead of Dr. Leekie and Neolution (Levine 2013), or Helena working against her captors and working with her sestras, all point towards the clones' decision to actively pursue what they believe is right in the moment they are making the decision and then further directing the course of the plot. This oscillation stems from the as-if mindset in a way that the clones believe as if there is a way to outrun the Dyad Institute and establish their own identities outside of being clones, which even towards the end of the TV series is not what they can achieve.

Despite the fact that Sarah, along with the other clones, topples over the Dyad Institute and Neolution, it can be seen that there are still clones that they do not know about, Rachel hands Felix a document with the details of 274 clones (Fawcett 2017) and it is very evident from this revelation that there is still a lot that they have to work towards; highlighting the metamodern move forward. This is significant because the clones looked at Dyad and Neolution as if finishing them would be the final step but the disclosure of the document and the list in the last episode speaks about their struggle and what is yet to come; moving ahead being completely aware that the move may be futile. Vermeulen and van den Akker use the metaphor of the donkey and the carrot to illustrate this notion, explaining that the metamodern donkey will keep chasing the carrot it never manages to eat, the reason being that the carrot is always out of its reach, but because it is out of reach and it does not get to eat the carrot, the donkey keeps chasing it (9).

This behavior is not confined to the characters within the TV series, it has its implications on a larger scale. The franchises keep producing the content (moving forward) because they are aware that it will be consumed by the audiences in one way or the other. The audience is equally invested to know if the clones will proceed further and doing so to create their own as-if tautology thinking that this matters and allows them to proceed further and expand the narrative further. When Vermeulen and van den Akker state that the "the metamodern discourse acknowledges that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist" (7), it becomes relevant with regards to the text under discussion considering that the subject here, the clones, struggles for something that is beyond their reach. In doing so, they uncover parts of their history and development; being agents is important to them in this regard because the awareness of being clones takes away from them their sense of identity and individualization; the struggle to find out the truth is in fact a struggle to establish themselves as agents. The metamodern discourse, so to speak, can be understood here as the narrative itself, regardless

of the form it takes, because the narrative and its inherent sense of struggle is the thing that makes the characters exhibit this multiplicity. This said and discussed multiplicity manifests in terms of oscillation and the to-and-fro movement itself stems from the as-if mindset. This movement is made possible because of the nature of the plot and the clones therefore act accordingly and ensure the forward motion.

The site for exploring the kind of subjects in the selected text also provides an opportunity to see what kind of subjects exist in the metamodern world, since television is such an impactful medium for cultural representation. Portraying characters in search of truth and trying to establish themselves as agents is what makes the clones relatable as human subjects despite being clones. Their sense of identity and determining who they are outside the zone they are relegated to becomes an important part of the audiences' struggle.

CONCLUSION

This study deals with the idea of multiple subjectivities in *Orphan Black*. The methodology adopted reveals that the visual nature of these mediums shows not only separate appearances for different clones but also distinct storylines for each of the said clones, which establishes that the positions these clones occupy are very distinct from one another. It is further illustrated that the nature of the narrative made approaching the text from multiple positions possible, hence establishing the point that the clones do in fact capture multiple subjective positions. Another insight that follows is that the text makes it possible for the audience to enter and explore the narrative from multiple entry points, from the perspectives of different clones and create a world where they all come together to drive the story forward. An important finding, therefore, would be that the metamodern possibility of the existence of multiple subjectivities with reference to one individual is made possible within the selected narrative because of its form. This places the audience in a unique position with respect to the performative nature of the said subjectivity and how it manifests in keeping the plot going forward with regards to all the clones and their multiple subjective positions.

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