Metamodernism and the Return of the Premodern: A New Grand Narrative Struggle

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, the cultural landscape was framed as a contest between modernism and postmodernism. Modernity carried the legacy of Enlightenment rationality, industrial progress, and universalizing visions of history, while postmodernism emerged as its skeptical shadow, dismantling "grand narratives" and elevating irony, plurality, and critique. Yet, in the early twenty-first century, this binary seems exhausted. We are not simply oscillating between the seriou... This struggle is not merely intellectual; it animates politics, culture, and collective identity. The world feels at once reconciliatory and fragmented — an age where attempts to weave new wholes confront powerful pulls back toward sacred traditions, tribal identities, and mythic certainties.

The Premodern Resurgence

The "premodern" refers to modes of thought and organization where meaning is derived from tradition, myth, and sacred authority. Its social order is hierarchical, its truths embedded in scripture, lineage, or charismatic figures. For centuries, modern rationality and secular institutions eroded this foundation. Yet today, the premodern is returning with force. We see this resurgence in religious revivalism, in the fusion of myth and politics through conspiracy narratives, and in the attraction to strong, charismatic leaders who promise certainty in a chaotic world. Digital platforms amplify these energies: tribal stories, sacred identities, and prophetic voices find virality in a fragmented media landscape. Faced with global precarity — climate change, economic disruption, technological acceleration — people often turn to the premodern for security, ritual, an... The reassertion of the premodern is not simply nostalgia. It is adaptive. In conditions of high uncertainty, myth provides coherence when rational systems appear too abstract, compromised, or fragile.

The Metamodern Response

Metamodernism, by contrast, emerges as a cultural orientation that oscillates between modern earnestness and postmodern irony. It is neither the naive optimism of progress nor the pure skepticism of deconstruction, but a constructive mode that accepts contradiction. Metamodernism attempts to synthesize: to deploy science and policy while re-infusing them with moral seriousness, affective depth, and even ritual. In politics, this shows up in climate activism that combines data-driven policy briefs with performative rituals of mourning or celebration. In technology, it appears in movements like longtermism, which ground themselves in rigorous models while also projecting quasi-religious visions of humanity's cosmic mission. In art and media, metamodernism manifests through sincerity layered with self-awareness — a willingness to hope even while acknowledging irony. Metamodernism does not simply replace modernity or postmodernity. It is a way of metabolizing both — carrying forward critique while rebuilding constructive horizons.

The Struggle Between the Two

The central struggle today, then, is not between modern and postmodern, but between metamodern and premodern. **Authority:** Metamodernism locates authority in institutions, networks, and hybrid forms of expertise, whereas the premodern locates it in tradition, ritual, or charismatic figures.
Scale: Metamodernism tends toward global, systemic interventions, while the premodern privileges local, lineage-based communities.
Epistemology: The metamodern is experimental, oscillating between doubt and hope. The premodern offers certainty rooted in sacred or mythic truth.
Emotional register: Metamodernism thrives on paradox and oscillation, the simultaneous embrace of sincerity and irony. The premodern offers a steady, singular register: sacred conviction. The clash between these orientations structures contemporary politics. Global governance bodies articulate systemic plans for climate mitigation, while nationalist or religious movements assert mythic narratives of sovereignty and destiny. Progressive coalitions experiment with hybrid ritual-technocratic approaches, while populist leaders draw legitimacy from sacred symbols and the re-enchantment of the political stage.

A Reconciliation and a Fragmentation

This situation produces both reconciliation and fragmentation. On one hand, metamodernism seeks reconciliation by reintegrating elements of the sacred, ritual, and affective meaning into modern institutions. It is not hostile to the premodern; it borrows from it. Many metamodern projects — from eco-spiritual climate activism to new forms of civic ritual — deliberately stitch

the mythic back into rationalist frameworks. On the other hand, the premodern's resurgence leads to fragmentation. Instead of a single dominant sacred narrative, we have a proliferation of localized, tribal, often incompatible myths. Networked media accelerates this pluralization, producing cultural microclimates that resist integration. The "grand narrative" is no longer universal but contested across multiple fronts.

Historical Echoes and Future Directions

History offers parallels. The late Roman world witnessed similar tensions: rationalist philosophies of empire coexisted with and were eventually overwhelmed by resurgent religious mythologies that offered coherence in times of fracture. The early modern period, too, was marked by clashes between rationalist science and enduring sacred traditions. Our era feels like a new iteration of these transitions, but with the added complexity of postmodern critique... The outcome is unclear. Metamodernism could build resilient hybrid institutions capable of integrating meaning and expertise. Or premodern energies could continue to fragment the global order, pulling communities back into tribalized, sacralized enclaves. Most likely, the two will remain in tension — oscillating, colliding, and reshaping one another.

Conclusion

The grand narrative of the twenty-first century is not best described as modern versus postmodern. It is a struggle between metamodern synthesis and premodern resurgence — between the attempt to reconcile rational systems with renewed meaning, and the pull back into tribal, sacred, mythic worldviews. This struggle defines our political polarization, our cultural creativity, and our existential uncertainty. We live in an age that is both reconciliatory and fragmented: reconciliatory because metamodernism seeks to heal the rift between reason and meaning, fragmented because the premodern insists on multiple, often incompatible sacred truths. The future will be shaped not by whether one triumphs, but by how their oscillation creates new, unstable, and perhaps transformative forms of life.