

Paula Romero Polo, Carlos III University, Spain

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2025.49.3.9-19

Beyond Postmodern Panfictionality: Spanish Metamodern Fiction after 15-M

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction after 15-M and metamodernism. It argues that metamodern fiction often critically challenges neoliberalism by reviewing its connection to post-15-M literature. This convergence will also contribute to a broader understanding of the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction and its aesthetic strategies. The relationship between these two broad fields of study will be explored through a critical analysis of existing debates. We will suggest that this connection is particularly evident in a corpus of recent novels that invoke the materiality of the world for political, emancipatory purposes. This paper will conclude with a case study of a political metamodern novel: *Clavícula* [My Clavicle and Other Massive Misalignments] (2017) by Marta Sanz.

KEYWORDS

metamodernism; postmodernism; Spanish literature after 15-M; political literature

This paper argues that the notion of metamodernism can contribute to the discussion about literature after 15-M, which has been developed by scholars such as David Becerra Mayor (2021) and María Ayete Gil (2023). Metamodernism is a relatively new field of study that has gained theoretical and scholarly attention in recent years. This term attempts to describe how 21st-century Western culture is processing the legacies of modernism and postmodernism. Some authors have linked metamodernism with a right-wing political agenda, particularly with the rise of far-right populist parties and the notion of post-truth. This paper will attempt to show that, even if this connection is real and disturbing, metamodernism can be linked to a different kind of political fiction, too. This fiction is political because it places under scrutiny contemporary living conditions and questions the widespread narrative that neoliberalism is the best of all possible political systems. To prove this, this paper will focus on contemporary descriptions of the repoliticisation of Spanish literature, a movement that will be understood here, at least partially, as a consequence of the metamodern structure of feeling. While it can be considered

Paula Romero Polo, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Departamento de Humanidades: Filosofía, Lenguaje y Literatura, C/ Madrid, 133. 28903 Getafe (Madrid), paromero@hum.uc3m.es, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0336-2635>

problematic to use a conceptual framework originally written in English to analyse Spanish literature, we do not intend to uncritically apply this framework, metamodernism, to a new corpus of novels. Rather, this article intervenes in the ongoing discussion on metamodernism, adding theoretical references that have been conceived for the analysis of Spanish fiction specifically. The analysis will culminate in the case study of a contemporary novel that can be considered part of the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction after 15-M and the metamodern structure of feeling: *Clavicula* (2017), by Marta Sanz.

1. Metamodernism: Going beyond postmodernism

During the nineties, different authors announced the end of postmodernism. Gradually, the end of postmodernity, or at least of postmodernism, became a consensus. The main theoreticians of postmodernism, such as Linda Hutcheon (2004b), Brian McHale (2015) and Ihab Hassan (2003) claimed that this movement was over. Their declarations attest to a collective loss of interest in the theoretical possibilities of postmodernism. Soon, monographs and papers that described new artistic movements, which could not be understood through postmodern poetics, started being published¹. Mary Holland (2013, p. 15) considers that most of these authors agree on the reasons why postmodern hegemony ended: postmodern thought worked through negativity, opposing any consensus and showcasing the contingency of ideas that were once considered to be necessary. Thus, when postmodernism became the dominant cultural paradigm, it lost its meaning, as it could not oppose anything but itself. Moreover, its critical apparatus – grounded exclusively in the negation of previous systems and devoid of ethical or political alternatives – came to be seen as exasperating.

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the publication of theoretical works that tried to define the moment that came after postmodernism. Not all of these attempts shared the same scope: some tried to describe only an artistic or literary trend within the contemporary panorama, whereas others tried to theorise the cultural world as a whole. There was no consensus concerning the name that this cultural moment should receive². Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker joined this discussion in 2010, coining the term “metamodernism”. It has become a popular choice to name the moment after postmodernity within different disciplines, such as philosophy (Corsa, 2018), media studies (Vermeulen & Wilkins, 2024), religious studies (Ceriello, 2022), and literary studies (Kersten & Wilbers, 2018). Vermeulen

¹ Mary Holland (2013, p. 14) and Noah Bunnell (2015, p. 1) have listed these attempts to describe the moment after postmodernism.

² Among these concepts, we find new sincerity (Kelly, 2016), digimodernism (Kirby, 2009), post-postmodernism (Pignagnoli, 2023), post-irony (Konstantinou, 2016), and, of course, metamodernism.

and van den Akker understand that metamodernism is the “structure of feeling” that follows postmodernism. They borrow the term “structure of feeling” from philosopher Raymond Williams, to name “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” (van den Akker et al., 2017, p. 7). Aesthetically, metamodernism is “characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment” (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010, n.p.). It manifests itself as an oscillation between modernist and postmodernist traits. This oscillation does not imply a synthesis or a “balance” between these two cultural moments; “rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles” (n.p.). On the one hand, postmodern codes are necessary to criticise Modern narratives; on the other hand, modernist codes allow artists to show enthusiasm and hope for better, even utopian, configurations of reality.

Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) link the beginning of metamodernism to the awakening of History. They consider that the exhaustion of postmodern codes is due to their inability to offer solutions for the many contemporary challenges that we need to respond to. Among these challenges, they mention the ecological crisis, the wars on terror, the Islamic terrorist attacks, the 2008 economic crisis, and the 2011 social mobilisations that followed it. In other words, the 21st century starts with many events that contradict Fukuyama’s notion of the End of History: these events prove that history is not over and that there are many challenges that we need to address, through cultural production, too. Postmodern codes were unable to deal with these problems, as postmodern art could be political, but it could not engage with a particular political agenda. According to Linda Hutcheon (2004b, p. 3), “postmodernism works to ‘de-doxify’ our cultural representations and their undeniable political import”. That is to say, postmodern fiction reveals the contingency of discourses that were previously held as true and necessary. However, its irony and irreverence make postmodernism unfit for commitment to any political project.

As it was noted, metamodernism oscillates from this critical postmodern attitude towards a more engaged, utopian, modernist disposition. Literary-wise, this oscillation can be perceived in many different traits. Within the US canon, there is a consensus that metamodern fiction often employs postmodern techniques and resources with new aesthetic goals (Holland, 2013; McLaughlin, 2012; Timmer, 2010). For example, metafiction, which was typically used in postmodern literature to show the panfictionality of all discourse, to question the nature of reality and blur the boundaries between fiction and the real world, is employed in metamodern literature to connect with the readers and showcase the author’s and the protagonists’ sincerity.

Virginia Pignagnoli (2023) delves into this idea, borrowing Brian McHale’s notion of “dominant”. Pignagnoli (p. 4) defines the dominant as “an overarching

principle, a principle that for McHale is floating and depending on questions we aim at answering”. According to McHale (2004), modernist dominant is epistemological – as modern texts ask questions such as “What is there to be known?” –, whereas postmodern dominant is ontological – as postmodern fiction poses questions such as “Which world is this?” (McHale, 2004, pp. 9–10). Pignagnoli adds to the debate by stating that post-postmodern (or metamodern) dominant is guided by concerns about communication, sincerity, and intersubjectivity. Metamodern fiction foregrounds questions such as: “What is to communicate? What is to communicate earnestly and sincerely? Is it possible to communicate earnestly through a text?” (Pignagnoli, 2023, p. 4). Many scholars seem to endorse this vision of metamodernism: for instance, Adam Kelly (2010, 2016) uses the term “new sincerity” to refer to metamodern fiction, whereas different authors have praised the interest that contemporary fiction takes in sincerity and truthfulness (Gibbons, 2017; Pignagnoli, 2019).

For instance, Alison Gibbons (2017, p. 118) considers that autofiction is a metamodern genre, as she understands that “the affective logic of contemporary autofiction is situational in that it narrativises the self, seeking to locate that self in a place, a time and a body. It also pertains to represent truth, however subjective that truth may be”. She considers that this revalorization of sincerity allows contemporary authors to build a stronger sense of the self and to express truthfully their emotions, without fearing accusations of naïveté, as postmodern writers did. However, this subjective notion of truth might be problematic outside of the literary realm. Particularly, this revalorization of sincerity can be connected to the rise of post-truth within contemporary politics. *The Cambridge Dictionary* (n.d.) defines post-truth as “relating to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts”. As Barney Warf explains, the notion of post-truth is linked with right-wing politics and neoliberalism: “Just as truth was essential to the creation of modern democracies, post-truth is vital to neoliberal capitalism” (Warf, 2023, chap. 1).

The connection between post-truth and metamodernism was suggested by different online articles (Colton, 2016; Gravemaker, 2017) and developed by Timotheus Vermeulen (2023) during his keynote lecture at the *Glocal Metamodernism* conference. Metamodernism has produced an epistemic shift, which implies that truth is no longer objective but based on personal feelings and experiences. Thus, metamodern fiction’s concern with truth and sincerity can be linked with a right-wing political agenda and the notion of post-truth. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that metamodernism is transideological and should not be exclusively associated with the rise of the far right. Metamodernism, as it has been described here, is a structure of feeling that reacts to different historical and political events and tries to find solutions for them. Thus, metamodern fiction is often critical of neoliberalism and the systems of oppression it relies on. It is

necessary to examine the connection between metamodernism and political or engaged literature: to do so, this paper will focus on the repoliticisation of Spanish literature after 15-M and its relationship with metamodernism.

2. The repoliticisation of Spanish literature after 15-M

Different scholars have described a shift within contemporary Spanish literature and culture after 15-M (Ayete Gil, 2023; Becerra Mayor, 2021). The point of this paper is to showcase the connection between these descriptions of current Spanish fiction and Anglophone analyses of the moment after postmodernity.³ Scholars writing about the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction do not refer to the debate of the end of postmodernism, but they participate in a similar discussion. They understand that the 2008 economic crisis and the Indignados movement marked the course of literary and cultural production because they proved the idea of the End of History wrong. From that moment on, it was obvious that neoliberalism was not a perfect system that would eventually bring wealth to society as a whole, but a deeply flawed political organisation that needed profound modifications. These changes in the mentality of most of the population had an impact on contemporary literature and culture.

In *Después del acontecimiento*, Becerra Mayor (2021) explains how this shift took place. He understands that the 15-M movement and the 2008 economic crisis “cracked the ideological unconscious [abrieron fisuras en el inconsciente ideológico]”⁴ (Becerra Mayor, 2021, p. 25), borrowing terminology from Marxist literary scholar Juan Carlos Rodríguez. That is to say, these events were moments of rupture, of questioning power discourses and political and social configurations. The most important consequence of these ruptures is that “the political” was reconceptualised as a broad field for action, beyond the right to vote. To explain this new order of things, Becerra Mayor (2021) alludes to Rancière distinction between “policy” and “politics”: during the Indignados movement, citizens claim their right to be an active part of public life and not limit their political interventions to the possibilities offered by neoliberal Western democracies.

In literature, these changes are particularly striking because of the literary production that came right before. Becerra Mayor (2013) describes this kind of fiction in *La novela de la no-ideología* [The Novel of Non-ideology]. He analyses Spanish literary production from 1989 until the beginning of the 21st century and concludes that it tended to reproduce dominant ideology. Most of the novels

³ There are several studies that describe non-English fiction as metamodern (see Anttonen et al., 2024 and Krýsová, 2023), but here we use a theoretical corpus written in English that critically analyses mainly Anglophone literature. However, it is important to acknowledge the existence of previous studies that describe metamodern fiction in different literary traditions.

⁴ All English translations are by the author, unless otherwise specified.

that were published in that period did not depict political conflicts; the problems that characters faced were always individual, intimate, and psychological (p. 30). Literary production confirmed and reproduced unconsciously the idea of the End of History: in these novels, there were no political conflicts because they assumed that we already inhabited the best of possible systems (p. 32). In *Después del acontecimiento*, Becerra Mayor still theorises about this literary trend; he links the novel of non-ideology with postmodernity: “When we assume that the Grand Narratives have ceased to be operative in our way of conceiving and relating to the world, it is only possible to speak about the self [Cuando se asume que los grandes relatos han dejado de operar en nuestra forma de concebir el mundo y de relacionarnos con el mundo, entonces solo es posible hablar de yo]” (Becerra Mayor, 2021, p. 65). He refers to authors such as Perry Anderson and Mark Fisher, working in the field of political philosophy, to better understand this literary trend (pp. 62, 64). Spanish novels that were published in the nineties and the early 2000s reaffirm these thinkers’ main hypotheses: capitalism is a system that presents itself as natural; thus, it is very difficult to find alternatives, to think of a world outside of capitalism.

However, after the 15-M movement, a new kind of fiction started being published. Many novels showed that problems that were once regarded as personal were in fact political (p. 26). These new fictions introduced different themes, such as the economic crisis, labour precarity, or tiredness (pp. 84, 85). The Indignados movement undermined old truth regimes that were regarded as natural, allowing the formulation of new political and social truths. In this new political, social, and cultural space, literature began to denounce the establishment and to imagine new possibilities for political and social organisation. Becerra Mayor (2021) regards his essay as an archive that collects political fiction published after the Indignados movement, and references novelists such as Marta Sanz, Cristina Morales, Edurne Portela, Sara Mesa, and Isaac Rosa, for example.

It would be bold to claim that the works of all of these writers are metamodern without examining them in depth. The term metamodernism is complex, as it builds up from already elaborate categories, namely modernism and postmodernism. However, some of the works that are part of post-15-M fiction can be considered to be metamodern. I will refer here to a corpus of works written, mainly, by women writers who are interested in depicting the body as a place where different oppressions intersect. The novels are often written in the first person and follow an autofictional pact. In her account of the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction, María Ayete Gil (2023) dedicated a chapter, entitled “Cuerpo. Violencias y cicatrices” [Body. Violence and Scars], to this corpus of novels. These fictions were also the focus of my Ph.D. dissertation (Romero Polo, 2025), where I analysed six novels that could be considered to be a part of the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction and metamodernism. Novels such as *Leche condensada* [Condensed Milk] (2023),

by Aida González Rossi, *Panza de burro* [Dogs of Summer] (2020), by Andrea Abreu, *Clavícula* [My Clavicle and Other Massive Misalignments] (2017), by Marta Sanz, *Supersaurio* [Supersaurio. A Novel] (2022), by Meryem El Mehdati, *Vozdevieja* [Old Voice] (2019), by Elisa Victoria, *Las niñas prodigio* [The Child Prodigies] (2017), by Sabina Urraca and *La historia de los vertebrados* [The History of Vertebrates] (2023), by Mar García Puig, can be considered to be part of this literary trend.

The aforementioned novels are metamodern because, in order to introduce political questions, they often emphasise external, referential reality. They also pay attention to the characters' bodies and their materiality. These textual strategies can be regarded as ways to overcome postmodern panfictionality. They do not have perfect equivalents in the anglophone canon: as mentioned above, this paper does not intend to translate textual analyses from English literature to the Spanish context. However, different scholars (Gibbons et al., 2019; Kirby, 2009; Shields, 2010) have described a rising interest within contemporary culture in real stories and linked such interest to the waning of postmodernism. These authors understand the attention to reality and materiality as ways to overcome postmodern poetics. Postmodern literature blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction to showcase the panfictionality of all discourse, suggesting that cultural narratives are mediated by language and discourse. This blurring, whose main expression was metafiction, sometimes had political purposes, as it served to question patriarchal or colonial ideologies (Hutcheon, 2004a). However, metafiction was overused, and eventually it came to be perceived as a technique incapable of offering affirmative alternatives.

On the other hand, metamodern fiction refers to the reality outside of the text to underline that the problems faced by the protagonists are real and relevant. Gibbons et al. (2019) analyse two contemporary genres, true crime and autofiction, to understand how they go beyond postmodern panfictionality. These genres often rely on the production of a "reality effect", which "encourages readers to engage emotionally and empathetically with characters, on the one hand, and to reflect seriously on the crises that those characters experience and are subjected to – crises which resonate with, and are inescapable in, readers' sociocultural reality" (Gibbons et al., 2019, p. 180). Spanish political novels often put this reality effect at the service of political purposes, to signal that the protagonists' struggles are structural and affect real people in the real world. I will analyse a Spanish metamodern novel, *Clavícula* (2017), by Marta Sanz, to explain how this is achieved.

3. *Clavícula* (2017), by Marta Sanz: a case study

Clavícula (translated to English as *My Clavicle and Other Massive Misalignments* in 2025) is an autofictional work by Marta Sanz. Sanz is a prolific author who

started publishing in the early 2000s and has been mentioned to illustrate the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction after 15-M (Ayete Gil, 2023, pp. 271–290; Becerra Mayor, 2021, p. 86;). *Clavícula* describes in the first person the physical and psychological pain that the narrator is suffering and her regrettable encounters with the medical system. The novel begins when she suddenly experiences an imprecise but persistent pain in her chest during a transatlantic flight and describes her multiple and changing symptoms throughout the following months. Her personal journey is intertwined with tales of many of her female friends who also undergo different diseases, sometimes experiencing unconventional symptoms. As humans, we are doomed to experience pain in solitude, but *Clavícula* tries to create a collective account of female physical suffering. It focuses on some problems and obstacles that women have to face, for instance, the protagonist and her friends often receive psychiatric treatment when there is no clear medical explanation for their discomfort.

The novel pays particular attention to economic and material conditions. The medical system is unable to comfort the protagonist, as it does not care for these structural problems. Particularly, the protagonist is tired of working, writing, and travelling to promote her literary works. However, she cannot stop, as her husband is unemployed and it is extremely difficult for him to find a new job. The protagonist explicitly comments on their financial situation: she mentions the exact amount that she makes through several months (2017, p. 184) and reflects on how much she spends on utilities and food (p. 67). She constantly reminds herself of her need to work, showcasing that, even if creative work has been considered capable of unburdening us from material concerns, contemporary authors often inhabit precarity.

In *Clavícula*, the reader also finds several documents that bring reality into the text. This is particularly revealing to comment on the metamodern move beyond the panfictionality in which the novel partakes. For instance, the protagonist narrates a trip to Colombia through the emails that she sent to her husband, which shape one of the chapters (Sanz, 2017, pp. 119–126). She also includes some pictures that she took during a bus trip to a conference where she was invited (pp. 70–82). She does not show enthusiasm for the opportunity of participating in a literary event but describes her feeling of exhaustion. Following our previous argument, it is irrelevant if the pictures were taken during that particular trip, or if her email address or the content of the messages have been edited. These documents show that there is a reality beyond the novel and that the problems that the protagonist suffers are real and important. Nowadays, intellectual labour, like many other professions, requires a frenetic life rhythm and leaves us sick and exhausted. Moreover, the medical system cannot offer us solace, as it is unable to intervene in our living and material conditions.

This novel is a clear example of the overcoming of postmodern panfictionality in contemporary Spanish literature for political purposes. Many contemporary

novels try to convey a feeling of reality through different effects. For instance, they do so through the careful description of the body and the everyday (as it happens in *Vozdevieja* or *El Evangelio*, by Elisa Victoria), intertextuality (as in *La historia de los vertebrados*, by Mar García Puig), or the inclusion of references to pop culture and to the digital sphere (as it happens in *Panza de burro*, by Andrea Abreu, *Supersaurio*, by Meryem El Mehdati, or *Las niñas prodigio*, by Sabina Urraca). These techniques serve to bring referential reality within literary texts and to connect the fictional and textual worlds to the world the readers and the authors inhabit. They contribute to going beyond the sense of the unreality characteristic of postmodern texts. Thus, they can be understood as metamodern literary resources. Moreover, in all of these novels, this conveying of reality is tightly linked with political purposes and serves to critically depict contemporary society, as the novels address various issues, such as labour precarity, burnout, sexism, or xenophobia.

4. Conclusions

This paper has examined two distinct theoretical fields that attempt to describe contemporary fiction: metamodernism and post-15-M literature. Their intertwining has allowed us to better understand these concepts and the landscape of contemporary Spanish literature. Particularly, it has enhanced the analysis of a contemporary trend shaped by female authors who invoke materiality and extratextual reality to talk about political issues. Metamodern theory has allowed us to understand this literary device as a way to go beyond postmodern panfictionality. Contemporary fiction refers to the reality outside of the text through various devices – such as documentality and autofiction – not to blur the distinction between reality and fiction, as was the case with postmodern literature. On the contrary, this constant appeal to extratextual reality and the world's materiality serves to remind us of the need to find solutions for the multiple structural problems that late capitalism produces. The combination of these two fields of study has proven very fruitful and opens promising research paths. On the one hand, the role of materiality and extratextual reality in contemporary Spanish fiction could be studied thoroughly in a broader corpus of novels. On the other hand, there are surely other literary trends and genres that could be explored through the intersection between metamodernism and the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction after 15-M. More than offering an exhaustive explanation of the relationship between these two fields of study, this paper has raised a research question and outlined some partial answers, in the hope of opening a conversation that might shed light on the development of contemporary Spanish literature.

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