Everything, All the Time, Everywhere

How We Became Post-modern

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Introduction:

Creative Destruction

I

In 1982, a puzzling message appeared in midtown Manhattan. ‘Protect me from what I want’, read huge LED lettering in Times Square. What was it selling? Why would anyone want to be protected from their own desires? Who would do the protecting? And who had made us desire what we should not? The person responsible for installing the sign, the artist Jenny Holzer, did not do answers.

She might have told you, though, that her sign was not advertising, it was art – just not the kind of art you normally see in galleries. Holzer is perhaps best known for the slogans she put on T-shirts and baseball caps and even condoms in New York in the late seventies and early eighties. She also art bombed the street at night, putting up posters with texts culled from Karl Marx, Susan Sontag and Bertolt Brecht, and others of her own such as ‘The desire to reproduce is a death wish’ and ‘Romantic love was invented to manipulate women’. ‘I would sneak around the morning after I’d pasted them up to see if anybody would stop’, she recalled. ‘That’s the test of street art – to see if anybody stopped. People would cross out ones they didn’t like and would start others. I liked that people would engage with them.’[1]

‘The desperate things seem to require attention, the lovely things seem to elicit celebration’, she told me in 2012. ‘If I had to choose, I would go to the awful in the hope that doing something could yield a happier result.’ Perhaps her hope was that, in taking art from gallery to street, she might indict a rampaging culture of consumerism and get her subversive message to new demographics.

The ‘awful’ that Jenny Holzer gravitates towards is to do with how, in our post-modern era, the existential human tragedy of desire followed by disappointment followed by desire followed by disappointment has been exploited as never before. Holzer, possibly, was highlighting how that cycle of desire and disappointment helps keep capitalism in business: we need to be protected from being corrupted by desire in general, and by shopping in particular.

Her sign became a striking emblem of the new, post-modern world in which we live. It is a world in which we know that we are ensnared in a system we feel scarcely able to change. Indeed, it is one in which we are oppressing ourselves with the very things we desire.

Holzer’s piece invoked a different kind of 1984 from the one imagined in Orwell’s novel. Big Brother needed electroshock, sleep deprivation, solitary confinement, drugs and hectoring propaganda broadcasts to keep power, while his Ministry of Plenty ensured that consumer goods were lacking to ensure subjects were in an artificial state of need. In our deindustrialised, neoliberal era, such biopolitics is obsolete, argues Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han. What capitalism realised was that it didn’t need to be tough, but seductive. Instead of saying no, it says yes: instead of denying us with commandments, discipline and shortages, it seems to allow us to buy what we want when we want, become what we want, and realise our dream of freedom.[2]

In this book I will argue that post-modernism originated under the star of neoliberalism, a global economic ideology whose heroes or devils, depending on your political persuasion, include Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Deng Xiaoping and General Augusto Pinochet. It is an ideology that stands for liberating entrepreneurial acumen from the presumed dead hand of state intervention. Before neoliberalism got us in a chokehold, advanced industrial post-war states, especially in western Europe, had been committed to two things: the ladder and the safety net. The former gave the least fortunate the chance to rise; the latter caught them if they fell. Free education was part of the ladder, socialised medicine part of the safety net. Neoliberals such as Reagan and Thatcher kicked over the ladder and cut holes in the safety net. They shrunk the state to a humbler role. Its new task was to create a framework to defend and extend free trade, free markets and private property rights. Ameliorating poverty or creating equality of opportunity? The state could forget about such patronising nonsense.

Soon after neoliberalism was born, the world economy suffered economic recession. The 1973–74 recession and its successor in 1979–83 led to the collapse of the Fordist model of integrated industrial production. Instead, short-term contracts proliferated, work was outsourced from Walsall to Warsaw and still further east. The information age supplanted the manufacturing age, capital flowed more freely across the world, companies expanded globally. Your parents may have made worthwhile things for a living using now-obsolete skills, but you are more likely to work in a call centre for a loan-consolidation website.

In order that capitalism overcome recessionary crises, and indeed emerge stronger from them, neoliberalism required a populist, market-based culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism. 'As such it proved more than a little compatible with that cultural impulse called "post- modernism" which had long been waiting in the wings but could now emerge full-blown as a cultural and intellectual dominant', argued Marxist geographer David Harvey.[3]

But what is post-modernism? As the name suggests, it came after modernism. Post-modernism is a movement that disdained the modernist vision. Its enthusiasts saw it as a giddy, fun, libidinous carnival after the communal prison, a riot of colour and quotation that replaced modernism's acres of brutalising concrete. But post-modernism is more than cultural handmaiden to neoliberalism, as Harvey envisaged it. It is a paradox. It is at the same time both alibi for and indictment of the neoliberal order. Worse yet, its very indictments can serve as alibis.

Jenny Holzer's 'Protect Me from What I Want' is a case in point. She may have conceived of it as a radical subversion of consumerist mores, and maybe it was. But if, as she hoped, her art was 'doing something', it was not doing much to create a happier world, if by happier she means a more just one. Another of her street-art slogans from the 1980s captures this: 'Enjoy yourself because you can't change anything anyway.' No doubt that message was ironic, indicting the playful cynicism that some have found characteristic of post-modernism.

It could be decoded as saying that enjoyment and fatalism needed to be overcome in order to overthrow a demeaning economic system, and that such cynical fatalism in the face of overweening power was the problem.

But, at the same time, it could be taken at face value, as recommending quietism of a rather clever and self-satisfied kind. Irony is necessarily subversive because it means the opposite of what it says; but the risk of post-modern irony is that it subverts not what it sets out to critique, but the critical agency of the message itself.

Just as sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, irony is the feeblest kind of indictment. And yet it has become the go-to rhetorical stance of the post-modernist. By maintaining a cool, affectless stance, irony colludes, unconsciously or otherwise, with what it overtly disdains. Many of Holzer's texts appear on consumer goods – baseball caps, T-shirts, skateboards, mugs. 'Have you ever worn one of your T-shirts?' I asked Holzer. 'No, that would be mortifying. Shoot me if you ever see me in one.' It's a revealing remark: as if she hoped to remain immune to the corrupting merchandise her ostensibly subversive art has been reduced to. Jenny Holzer is too cool to put her heart on her sleeve or her slogans on her chest.

Holzer is not a politically conscious artist bombing the street with politics, but something more typically post-modern: a semiotic terrorist blowing up language and subverting her own authority as creator. Her fellow artist Dan Graham considered her street posters to be more than political: 'Unlike most "political" art, which a priori begins with a worked-out belief and then employs a methodology to prove it, Holzer's statements deconstruct *all* ideological (political) assumptions.'[4] She was producing what the Italian philosopher Umberto Eco called open texts, endlessly interpretable, shifting, unstable. French post-modern theorists such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault had recently argued for the sacrificial death of the author as guarantor of the meaning of a work. No longer, they gleefully argued, was the author of a work the one who decided for all time its immovable truth. 'We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God)', wrote Barthes, 'but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.'[5]

For Foucault, the author needed to be murdered, since he was stopping the free flow of intellectual capital: 'He is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition and recomposition of fiction.'[6]

Holzer's street slogans were, wittingly or otherwise, a product of these times: they served as celebrations of her own death as an authority figure, in favour of her work being erased, augmented and repurposed by a putative streetwise democracy of interpreters. Her slogans were akin to what Barthes wrote of literature: 'Literature . . . by refusing to assign a "secret", an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text) liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning in the end is to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law.'[7]

At the same time as Barthes and Foucault were killing the author, their countryman Jacques Derrida sought to deconstruct what he called the 'metaphysics of presence': the notion that the meaning of a word has its origin in the structure of reality and makes the truth about that structure directly present to the mind. He posited that all kinds of disciplines – philosophy, science, history – were prone to this metaphysics. Each supposed that their claims about the world were made true by the world. Derrida, rather, insisted that we are caught in a linguistic system that does not relate to external reality. All conceptual systems, he argued, were falsifying and distorting, precisely because they seemed to make claims about the world; but really those claims could not be sustained since language was metaphor-ridden and its terms relative to other terms.

'Deconstruction is not an operation that supervenes from the outside, afterwards, one fine day', wrote Derrida. 'It is always at work within the work.'[8] Viewed thus, Jenny Holzer's work was taking itself apart as fast as she made it.

Holzer started out making street art and ended up working for luxury car brand BMW. Her slogans appeared on marketable T-shirts, hoodies, handbags. Holzer, in the playful way of post-modernism, also collaborated with capitalism. In 1990 she became the first woman artist to win the prestigious Golden Lion award at the Venice Biennale. Commissions began to pour in from banks, arts organisations and museums across the globe. Holzer worked obligingly within the system she ostensibly indicted. In 1999, she became the fifteenth artist to be commissioned for the BMW Art Car Project. She wrote 'Protect me from what I want' in metal foil and outlined the slogan with phosphorescent paint on a BMW that was due to race in that year's 24 Hours of Le Mans rally. She added more slogans to the car's side-pods: 'You are so complex, you don't respond to danger' and

‘The unattainable is invariably attractive’. The car’s rear wing read: ‘Lack of charisma can be fatal’ and ‘Monomania is a prerequisite of success’. Holzer was perhaps deconstructing the boy racers’ self-image even as they pulled on their helmets.

I say ‘perhaps’ because she was not clearly saying anything. What was clear, though, was how Holzer’s art functioned as brand: her words were the brand even when it was not clear what they meant. And by associating their car with her clever oeuvre, BMW was itself burnishing its own image – even if what the slogans actually said might be taken to imply that those who drove BMWs were sociopathic narcissists.

Sadly, Holzer’s car did not in the end race at Le Mans. Nonetheless, it looked like it had been defaced by a politically conscious graffiti artist indicting the commodified world she lived in. And yet it was also the work of the opposite, an artist who had been co-opted into the system she despised. What looked like subversion was at the same time submission. What looked like sticking it to the Man was also self-abasement before his motorised altar.

In the post-modern world, subversive art often risks such submission or co-optation into the system it seems to be submitting to critique. Not because of the willing collaboration of artists, but because of a leading feature of that world – appropriation. Everything is up for grabs, for sale at the right price, because there is nothing outside the market.

II

There is another narrative of what post-modernism means. It’s one that doesn’t involve seeing post-modernism as more or less cynical collapse into accommodation with a new mutant form of capitalism. Rather, it’s the story of an idea as liberation from the constraints of the modern world that dehumanised us, reducing us to cogs in modernist machines. In this story, modernism has become oppressive; post-modernism is the revolution we need to restore our utopian hopes by means of a liberating free-for-all.

This is the story of post-modernism that David Byrne, one-time front man of New York indie band Talking Heads, told in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s catalogue to its 2011 exhibition *Post-Modernism: Style and Subversion 1970–1990*. At its inception, Byrne suggested, post-modernism felt akin to a giddy, joyful liberation movement:

> Like many others I felt [modernism] had both strayed from its idealistic origins and become codified, strict, puritanical and dogmatic . . . Besides, as lovely as it is, modern furniture is cruelly uncomfortable. If postmodernism meant anything is allowed, then I was all for it. Finally! The buildings often didn't get much more beautiful or the furniture more comfortable, but at least we weren't handed a rulebook.[9]

The great modernists of the early twentieth century were certainly idealistic. They called for creative destruction, for the detonation of frills, furbelwows and floral fuss in favour of the functional. The pioneer of the International Movement of modernist architecture, Le Corbusier, argued that 'a house is a machine for living in', and believed the modern world had evolved beyond the need for decoration. Useful, well-designed things would fill the void, not just in architecture, but for furniture, furnishings and fixtures, too. He wrote in 1925: 'The almost hysterical onrush in recent years toward this quasi-orgy of decor is only the last spasm of a death already predictable.'[10]

'The evolution of culture marches with the elimination of ornament from useful objects', wrote another pioneer, Adolf Loos, in his *Ornament and Crime*.[11]

Where modernism was, to critics like Charles Jencks, functional, self-denying, austere, mechanical, utopian, led by a revolutionary cadre of technocrats and like-minded artists, and committed to progress, post-modernism, in contrast, was exuberant, fun, irresponsible, anti-hierarchical, and had lost faith in progress.

According to Jencks, in his 1977 book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, the modern world died at 3.32 p.m. in St Louis, Missouri, on 15 July 1972 'or thereabouts'.[12] The dynamiting of the Pruitt-Igoe housing scheme was a noise that resonated around the world. Completed in 1954, the thirty-three eleven-storey buildings replaced entire slum neighbourhoods in inner-city St Louis, and were advertised as a paradise of 'bright new buildings with spacious grounds', indoor plumbing, electric lights, fresh plastered walls, and other 'conveniences expected in the 20th century'.[13]

Japanese-American architect Minoru Yamasaki, in common with the modernist architects who inspired him, believed that architecture could make people behave better. His design for Pruitt-Igoe followed the principles of the modern movement: cars and pedestrians were separated, open space was provided between the blocks, and flats were oriented to catch daylight. The austere blocks rising over the Missouri plains were designed to be machines for living in, part of a federally funded solution to rehouse poor folk from overcrowded slums. If there were to be crimes at Pruitt-Igoe, ornament was not to be one of them.

But, even from the start, the housing scheme was hardly paradise, but an expression of American racial segregation. The project was named after two soldiers: Captain Wendell O. Pruitt, an African-American fighter pilot in World War II, and William L. Igoe, a former US congressman of Irish ancestry. The Igoe apartments were intended for whites, the Pruitt for blacks. Yet, when it became clear that whites were unwilling to move into the development due to a racist unwillingness to live alongside African-Americans, it became all black.

Paradise soon became a dystopia. Federal money that had bankrolled the project did not cover maintenance costs. Rents were supposed to fund Pruitt-Igoe's upkeep, but they did not, not least because the residents were often poor: the median income of tenants was $2,718, the equivalent today of $25,000 (£19,000). Pruitt-Igoe became more of a slum than the ones its residents had escaped, notorious for violence, vandalism, chaos and squalor. It became an emblem of racially segregated America. 'Police must not sound sirens when approaching the Pruitt-Igoe homes', went one police directive. 'The residents come from the chain-gang and blood-hound country of the Deep South and are likely to react violently to sirens.'[14] Soon police stopped responding to calls from Pruitt-Igoe altogether.

What went wrong? Pruitt-Igoe 'would be here today if it had been maintained like it was when it opened up', one former resident told the makers of the 2011 film *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth: An Urban History*, 'but it went down and down and down and down'.[15] Down is right: less than twenty years after Pruitt-Igoe was completed, the first of its blocks were destroyed by controlled implosion. It was finally put out of its misery. 'Boom, boom, boom,' wrote Jencks, the arch-proselyte for post-modernism, triumphantly.[16]

Godfrey Reggio's 1982 film *Koyaanisqatsi* captured this destruction to the soundtrack of a doomy, minimalist piece by Philip Glass called 'Pruitt-Igoe'. In the Native American Hopi language, *Koyaanisqatsi* means 'unbalanced life'. That was the suggestion of the film: modernist architecture like Pruitt-Igoe was part of an off-kilter existence. Reggio showed this by means of slow-motion and time-lapse photography, speeding up traffic, slowing down demolitions. Reggio was dynamiting the modern world in his cinema. What we saw in *Koyaanisqatsi* was akin to the imposition of uniformity from above. Modernist architecture was, for its critics, totalitarianism in glass and steel, inhuman in scale, dismal to live in.

The blowing up of Pruitt-Igoe was a consummation devoutly to be wished by many American capitalists, too, who viewed public housing projects with suspicion. Such aspirations were un-American, smelling of socialism. And anything that smacked of socialism in an America obsessed with winning the Cold War between the capitalist West and the Soviet bloc was to be terminated with extreme prejudice.

What was terminated when Pruitt-Igoe fell was not simply a style of architecture. That was only the pretext for a more profound demolition: the commitment to the interventionist and regulatory powers of the state to improve the lot of society's most disadvantaged that had been orthodox in many advanced industrial nations since 1945. If post-modernism arose from Pruitt-Igoe's rubble, so did neoliberalism, the economic philosophy that sought to roll back the state and make the disadvantaged responsible for their well-being.

Both post-modernism and neoliberalism were couched in terms of liberation – the former from the tyranny of functional style, the latter from the state. And yet, the new neoliberal orthodoxy of minimal state and personal responsibility substituted one tyranny for another – namely the tyranny of the market. George Orwell foresaw this in his review of neoliberalism's bible, Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*: 'A return to "free" competition means for the great mass of people a tyranny probably worse, because more irresponsible, than that of the State.'[17]

Post-modernism's role in establishing this new tyranny was to extend that narrative of liberation into culture, to suggest that, instead of modernism's constraining rulebook, we were now in a free-for-all where anything goes. Behind the apparent free-for-all that David Byrne and others liked about post-modernism was a new system of control of the kind Byung-Chul Han describes, one that does not need torture chambers to keep its subjects compliant. Neoliberalism is at once more efficient than the totalitarian system of control that Orwell satirised in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and more insidious, since it makes its subjects into ones who imagine themselves to be free while at the same time desiring their own domination.

The myth, then, is that modernist buildings like Pruitt-Igoe were oppressive and dehumanising. In truth, what was inhuman was not the architecture but the system that failed to maintain it. Residents interviewed for the documentary recalled their utter joy when they moved in, not only at the plumbing, heating and electricity, but also at the views and the 'warmth of community'. 'When I moved in, it was one of the most exciting days of my life', said one interviewee. People remembered 'a wonderful building with so many different smells of cooking' and 'so many kids to play with'.[18] To start with, at least, Yamasaki's modernism was not alienating. No one called it grim and inhuman, and when it was compared to a prison it was because of the management regime, not the design.

Post-modernism is often cast as a liberation from an oppressive predecessor. But that modernist predecessor was neither oppressive nor dehumanising. Pruitt-Igoe was allowed to become hellish for its tenants. The rot was allowed to set in because Pruitt-Igoe looked too much like an un-American, state-funded, socialistic experiment in communal living. The existence of Pruitt-Igoe was a symbolic blot on the neoliberal landscape. So when Pruitt-Igoe was blown up, the noise heard around the world signified not just the end of a style of architecture, but the end of the social-democratic consensus that had dominated the advanced industrial nations since World War II.

Today the ruins of Pruitt-Igoe are swathed in resurgent forest that critics have compared to the setting for horror film *The Blair Witch Project* – as if the very ground on which a modernist paradise once arose has become cursed. It became the prototype for the detonation of modernist public housing around the world.

In Britain, for example, where modernist public housing had been envisaged as a solution to post-war slum clearance, 'the great kerflumpf of a collapsing tower block became a form of civic festival, in which politicians would preside over bacchanals of cascading masonry'.[19] As state support for public projects dwindled during the seventies, so post-modernism supplied an alibi. In 1979, Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister, and soon after embarked on a sell-off of Britain's council estates as part of her policy of reducing the public sector and giving the market free rein. The policy showed that the assault on state-funded property could not be solved with dynamite alone, but also required the expansion of the market into all corners of life.

This was the doctrine of the Viennese political economist Friedrich Hayek, a copy of whose *The Road to Serfdom* Thatcher famously brandished as she set out to explain her economic vision. This doctrine was, simply, one of minimal state intervention, negligible public ownership and a belief that private ownership of property was essential for civilisation. Socialism, by contrast, was slavery. Thatcher agreed: her dream of a nation of owner-occupiers was perhaps one of her most fully realised. Millions of Britain's better-off working class snapped up their own council houses at discounted prices under Conservative right-to-buy legislation. In 1981, two years into Thatcher's premiership, England and Wales had 10.2 million owner- occupiers. A mere decade later, their ranks had swollen to 13.4 million.

What arose in the place of these collapsing tower blocks and modernist estates? Just as Pruitt-Igoe went down, the World Trade Center in New York was going up. It was also designed by Minoru Yamasaki, but had very different occupants from those in his Missouri housing scheme. Indeed, the history of who worked in the Twin Towers exemplifies the rise of neoliberalism. Their initial occupants were government bodies like the State of New York. As the state was rolled back during the seventies and eighties, Wall Street firms relocated there, including Morgan Stanley, the Aon Corporation and Salomon Brothers. Yamasaki's Twin Towers were destroyed with an even greater ruthlessness than the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe when, on 11 September 2001, two airliners were flown into them by terrorists, murdering thousands of the people inside.

One of the first architectural icons of post-modernism was John Portman's Westin Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles. 'I am at a loss', the great critic of post-modernism, Fredric Jameson, wrote of this hotel, 'when it comes to conveying the thing itself.'[20] But he had a jolly good go: escalators and elevators were in dialectical relationship, the good Marxist noted, and effectively replaced the *flâneur*-haunted Parisian pedestrian arcades that modernists like Baudelaire and Benjamin had eulogised at the birth of the modern era; the cocktail bar rotated, making drinkers into passive consumers of the vista; the acres of glass were like 'reflector sunglasses which make it impossible for your interlocutor to see your own eyes and thereby achieve a certain aggressivity [*sic*] toward and power over the Other'. Not that Jameson was unimpressed: it was a kind of miracle. What he had already noted about post-modern literature and art was its depthlessness, its fixation on surface; he couldn't imagine depthless architecture as possible, but John Portman had realised it.

The whole complex of hotel, boutiques, restaurants and bars 'aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a miniature city', wrote Jameson. It was like a foretelling of the movie *The Truman Show*. Certainly, post-modern theorists had trouble leaving. 'Given the absolute symmetry of the four towers, it is absolutely impossible to get your bearings', wrote Jameson exasperatedly. He was not the only one to be baffled. In its first years, the hotel's many boutiques struggled because shoppers could not find them. Given that the Westin Bonaventure was designed by a post-modern architect who was also a millionaire developer, this was surprising. If post-modernism was the hand-maiden of neoliberalism, keeping capitalism going, it did not always do a very good job.

III

What does this paradoxical term post-modernism mean? In *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein considered games – tennis, ring-a-ring o' roses, chess, noughts and crosses, patience – and invited us to specify what is common to them all. 'Don't say: "There *must* be something in common, or they would not be called 'games'" – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all', Wittgenstein wrote. 'And the upshot of these considerations is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: similarities in the large and in the small.'[21]

Wittgenstein was trying to get us to see that games do not have to have a single essence. Rather, he argued, each game stands in family resemblance to others. Just as some family resemblances – nose, eyes, gait, hair, temperament – overlap and criss-cross, without all resemblances being shared by all members, so all games need not share any one thing in common.

If post-modernism is, like games, a family-resemblance concept, then that may help us realise why so many disparate phenomena appear under its umbrella. Madonna may be a post-modern artist for revelling in such knowing paradoxes as being a queer icon while apparently straight, for being a feminist hero while dressing as if for the role of a soft-porn fantasy, and for multiplying her personae (virgin, saint, mother, femme fatale) often by retooling past icons such as Marilyn Monroe or Mae West. Salman

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* may be a post-modern novel for having an unreliable narrator and for its postcolonial liberation of polyglot and polyvalent India from the exoticising gaze typified by E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, effectively doing in fiction what Edward Said had done in his 1978 book *Orientalism* three years earlier. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* may be a post-modern film for both its lack of affect and of linear narrative, and for its discombobulating suggestion that computers may feel more than humans. James Stirling's No. 1 Poultry may be Britain's leading post-modern building, its staircase quoting the Vatican's Renaissance Scala Regia, its clock quoting the fascist-era main post office in Naples, and the whole thing surmounted by a turret that looks like a submarine conning tower surfaced in the middle of London. But while these po-mo artefacts may share some resemblances, there need be nothing that all share in common.

But there's a problem. These post-modern phenomena seem to have no resemblance, family or otherwise, with another notion of what post-modernism is. The philosopher Daniel Dennett, for instance, thinks post-modernism is gibberish:

> Postmodernism, the school of 'thought' that proclaimed 'There are no truths, only interpretations', has largely played itself out in absurdity, but it has left behind a generation of academics in the humanities disabled by their distrust of the very idea of truth and their disrespect for evidence, settling for 'conversations' in which nobody is wrong and nothing can be confirmed, only asserted with whatever style you can muster.[22]

For Dennett, post-modernism has lost all relationship with what he values – truth, evidence and science.

There is a deeper reason for rejecting Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance in our attempt to understand what post- modernism means, if indeed it means anything. Families descend from common ancestors. That is why we speak of the family tree. You may share brown eyes with your uncle, and madness may fortunately have skipped your generation – but you share your ancestry with everyone on that family tree. This tree metaphor was troubling for two of the leading post-modern thinkers I will be considering in this book: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, they suggested that the tree is an image of centralised power that we need to uproot.

In contrast, they proposed another network structure as a substitute for the tree: the rhizome. 'As a model for culture, the rhizome resists the organisational structure of the root-tree system which charts causality along chronological lines and looks for the original source of "things" and looks towards the pinnacle or conclusion of those "things".' A rhizome is characterised by 'ceaselessly established connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles'. Rather than presenting history and culture as narratives with beginnings, middles and ends, the rhizomatic approach presents history and culture as a map or wide array of attractions and influences with no specific origin: a rhizome 'has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo'.[23]

If post-modernism is rhizomatic rather than arboreal, then that might suggest things falling under its description – Madonna's or Salman Rushdie's respective oeuvres, the MI6 headquarters or the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, the limpid prose of the best post-modern critics or the gibberish spooling from the Post-Modern Generator – have no common ancestors; and that each can get on very well on its own without support from other examples of post-modern culture.[24]

There is a third possibility. Perhaps post-modernism cannot be explained by a Wittgensteinian family-resemblance concept, and neither is it genitally fixated in an arboreal manner, nor loved-up, anti-essentialist, anti-foundationalist and rhizomatic in character, but is instead a semiotic black hole, consuming everything but signifying nothing.

The critic Dick Hebdige supposed as much when he suggested that post-modernism was crazily polysemous. It might be intended to describe, he wrote, 'a process of cultural, political or existential fragmentation and/or crisis, or the "de-centring" of the subject, an "incredulity towards metanarratives", the replacement of unitary power axes by a plurality of power/discourse formations, the "implosion of meaning", the collapse of cultural hierarchies, the dread engendered by the threat of nuclear self-destruction'. If post-modernism could mean all that, and more besides, we are, Hebdige concluded, 'in the presence of a buzzword', and a semantically overloaded one at that.[25]

If so, that would be fitting, since one strand of post-modern thought that Hebdige identified is that it problematises signification, inhabiting the semantic black hole into which meaning has imploded. How post-modern thought might express its critique of signification from inside that black hole is an interesting question for students, though one they would have trouble communicating to the world outside.

In any event, the term post-modernism has a prehistory. Among the first uses of it was in 1939 by the historian Arnold J. Toynbee, who wrote: ‘Our own Post-Modern Age has been inaugurated by the general war of 1914–1918.’[26] Precursors of post-modernism can also be found in 1964, with the start of US involvement in Vietnam (what Fredric Jameson calls the first post-modern war) and the publication of both Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* and Susan Sontag’s *Notes on Camp*. The former set the scene for humanity’s post-modern switch into the screen-based information age. The latter set the tone for a sensibility that would become post-modern in the next decade. Sontag wrote in her essay: ‘Camp is a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers’, ‘Camp sees everything in quotation marks’ and ‘The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious’.[27] She could have substituted ‘post- modernism’ for ‘camp’ in each of those sentences and captured the sensibility of post-modernism.

That said, post-modernism came out of the shadows in the early 1970s, just as neoliberalism was emerging as the new form of capitalism. The next ten chapters will dramatise the rise, fall and persistence of post-modernism, and how its cultural impulse did indeed change our lives. The book will not be a comprehensive history; rather, each chapter will focus on three striking moments from 1972 to today. Those moments might include, for example, the publication of a book, the first Gulf War, the release of a videogame or film or the first hip-hop single.

The juxtaposition of these narratives will show how neoliberalism and post-modernism shifted creativity from traditional arts and culture to new media industries that thrive online, and what its arrival meant for our economics and our souls. More broadly, I will be considering how the post-modern ‘anything goes’ philosophy took advantage of technological changes, and how the market-based culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism that post-modernism extolled was ultimately realised in Amazon, Facebook and Twitter.

One result of these changes is that we are today scarcely capable of conceiving politics as a communal activity, because we have become habituated to being consumers rather than citizens. Politicians treat us as consumers to whom they must deliver; we grumble about politics as consumers do about a disappointing product or service. Shock and buyer’s remorse are the only fitting attitudes towards politics conceived as an extension of shopping. Without post-modernism, such attitudes might not exist.

Finally, I will ask whether post-modernism is over, as radical movements since 2008 might suggest, or if we remain trapped in its embrace. Perhaps post-modernism is not dead; perhaps, instead, we’re all post-modernists now.