

## Modernism, Post-Modernism, and Sagmeister

After watching the documentary film “Helvetica”, and hearing various designers describe their love or hate of the now ubiquitous typeface, you simply can’t leave the conversation without talking about Modernism, Post-Modernism, and the designers who epitomize both movements.

First thing’s first – what is Modernism? While there really is no concrete definition, Modernism, at its core, is basically a movement ushering in a new school of thought in nearly all aspects of culture. Though associated with the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Modernism – like all movements – is a timeless thought process that can be applied to any discipline. The aesthetic of The Bauhaus School in Dessau, Germany (originally located in Weimar) captures the spirit of Modernism in terms of art and graphic design. Modernism pioneer, Walter Gropius (German architect and founder of the Bauhaus School) believed that all design should be functional as well as aesthetically pleasing. A school unlike any other, the Bauhaus sought to marry art with the fast emerging needs of the industrial revolution.

Modernism in graphic design dealt with grid, clean lines, and minimalism - a departure from the overly designed and crowded design aesthetic of previous periods. Due to the ability to mass produce, mass marketing and advertisement became necessary components of the industrial revolution. This gave rise to the Modernist aesthetic of bold use of negative space and increased use of sans-serif typefaces found in what is known as The Swiss Style, which spawned iconic typefaces that are still heavily in use today such as Univers, Akzidenz-Grotesk, and its ubiquitous successor, Helvetica - celebrated (or reviled) as the de-facto typeface of Modernism.

All things considered, Post-Modernism can be accurately described as a reaction to the perceived limitations of Modernist thinking. Post-Modernism eschews the practical sensibility of the Modernist movement, destroying absolutism and asking the questions, “why does it need to be useful?”, “why does it need to be ordered and reproducible?”, and “why do we accept prescribed definitions of fine art and commercial design?”. These questions gave birth to the centerpiece of Post-Modernism: conceptual art.

Conceptual art centered meaning and inspiration, rather than practical function. To Post-Modernists, the *raison d’être* for creating a piece was more important than the piece itself. In his TED Talk “Happiness by Design”, Post-Modernist designer Stefan Sagmeister illustrated this aesthetic by presenting a list of things that he had learned so far, then showing how an item from that list influenced his design concept for an Austrian magazine. The design itself is not as important as the process, which – in Post-modernist thought – is everything. Embracing analog and digital art,

Post-modernist art has been lampooned as “pretentious”, “frivolous”, and “meaningless”, also being dubbed “art for art’s sake”. The Post-modernist movement gave rise to the personal drama of the artist and its accompanying narrative as the selling point for art - not so much the art itself. From this we get the caricature of the eccentric who scribbles on a canvas, then sells it for \$70 million (Cy Twombly, Mark Rothko, et al.) based on a superfluous, verbose narrative.

Though the debate between Modernism and Post-Modernism rages on, no one can deny that both thought processes can be found in commercial design. Whether you lean towards Modernism or

Post-Modernism – or somewhere in between – being disciplined and knowledgeable in both will make you a more marketable designer.

## Bibliography

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