

Modern Art, Cynicism, and the Ethics of Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

In his recent book, *Mediumism: A Philosophical Reconstruction of Modernism for Existential Learning*, René Arcilla makes an important and unique contribution to the ongoing conversation on aesthetic education.¹ Arcilla's book is especially distinctive in that it explores specifically how the genre of modernist art functions pedagogically.² Starting from the received definition of modernism — the one famously put forth by the critic Clement Greenberg³ — as the movement in which artworks intentionally stress their medium, Arcilla highlights how modernist art brings the viewing subject into closer relation to her existential situation as a stranger to herself, thus igniting a quest for existential learning in which the self achieves a form of “presentmindedness” toward pure existence. This form of learning equips the self with the virtues of gratitude and generosity in the face of the givenness of existence, bringing the subject authentically to herself and others.

In this essay, I take up an exploration of similar scope, but of ultimately different outcome. I offer a modest contribution to the conversation concerning aesthetic education, and to the modernist turn initiated by Arcilla, by grafting the question of how modernist art educates to two texts of Michel Foucault. The first text, *Manet and the Object of Painting*,⁴ is a lecture delivered in Tunisia in 1971 on the painting of Édouard Manet; the second, *The Courage of Truth*, is Foucault's final lecture course in 1984 at the Collège de France, dedicated to the theme of *parrhēsia*, or “frank speech,” as it emerges in ancient philosophy.⁵ Following Foucault's provocative suggestion in the final lectures that modern art is “the vehicle for the Cynic mode of being,” I explore how the pedagogical function of modernist works of art resides in how such works embody an ethics of teaching insofar as teaching reflects a manner of existence in relation to oneself and the world (*CT*, 187). In short, I argue that modern art educates by virtue of its manifest Cynicism and, in doing so, invites teachers to take up the Cynic mode of being as a way to establish a special form of integrity through the practice.

The first section of this essay discusses Foucault's interpretation of Manet, focusing on two main points: the first is the manner in which Manet inaugurates modern art through his use of the material properties of the painting itself, which is to say, through the medium in which Manet works; the second point is Foucault's argument that Manet dislocates the viewing subject through this play of the painting's materiality, thrusting the viewer into a space in which she becomes responsible for locating herself, no longer assigned to a stable position by the ideological determinations of representational art.

In the next section I link this interpretation of Manet to Foucault's reading of ancient Cynicism, and to his assertion that modern art is the “vehicle for the Cynic

mode of being.” Two critical themes concerning the Cynic mode of being emerge from this section. The first is that Cynicism, like modern art, refers to a mode of being in which truth and meaning are conveyed through the medium of the self’s lived existence rather than through any predetermined principles designed to serve one’s existence. In this way, Cynicism embodies a distinctive mode of self-relationship. The second theme is that Cynicism refers to a distinctive form of the philosophical critique of truth, insofar as such critique is directed at the dominant political, social, and cultural forms in which truth is deployed. Much like the dislocation of the viewing subject brought about by modern art, Cynicism functions pedagogically to dislocate the subject of truth by taking up a position outside of social convention. In this way, Cynicism embodies a distinctive mode of relationship to the world.

The final section of this essay draws upon the prior themes by presenting an ethics of teaching rooted in the Cynic mode of being. I argue that the model of the Cynic-teacher helps us hear the call for developing personal integrity within the practice.

FOUCAULT AND MANET ON THE RUPTURE OF MODERN ART

Foucault sees Manet as bringing about a profound rupture in the history of art. Though Manet is often credited as the forerunner of Impressionism, Foucault instead regards Manet as having an even more radical influence on the history of painting: “It seems to me that, beyond even Impressionism, what Manet made possible was all the painting *after* Impressionism, is all the painting of the twentieth century, is all the painting from which, in fact, contemporary art developed” (*MOP*, 28, emphasis in original). Foucault recognizes Manet, therefore, as the painter who inaugurated a significant break between the representational tradition of Renaissance painting — a tradition that employed various techniques to hide the material properties of the canvas — and all subsequent painting. In effect, Foucault says, Manet is the one painter who, for the first time in Western art, was to “use and in a way to play with, at the very interior of his paintings, even at the interior of what they represent, the material *properties* of the space on which he paints” (*MOP*, 29, emphasis in original). It is through this play of the materiality of the canvas that Manet invents, what Foucault dubs, the “picture-object,” or “the picture as materiality ... the reinsertion of the materiality of the canvas in that which is represented” (*MOP*, 31).

How does Manet achieve this radical rupture from the tradition of representational painting so as to invent the picture-object? Foucault offers three rubrics with which to assess these effects in Manet’s work. The first rubric identifies the manner in which Manet plays with the space and architecture of the canvas itself. The second identifies how Manet works with the problem of illumination in his paintings. The third rubric aims at revealing how Manet plays with the location of the viewer in order to dislocate the subject from an expected, stable location from which to view the painting.

In order to delineate each rubric, I will discuss a somewhat familiar example from Manet’s corpus, “The Fifer.”⁶ Of the play of space in “The Fifer,” Foucault says

that Manet has “entirely removed the background of the picture ... [there] is no space at all behind the fifer; [and] not only is there no space behind the fifer, but the fifer in a way is placed nowhere” (*MOP*, 57). What is interesting is that Foucault suggests that Manet has “removed” the background of the painting, as if background and depth are *a priori* and necessary qualities of any painting whatsoever. But the material property of the picture-object — that is, the surface of the canvas itself — does not contain background or depth. So, by “removing” background from the painting, Manet is essentially omitting a masking device, which he inherits from the tradition of representational painting, along with the expectation that the viewing subject has for the painting. But this removal, for Foucault, is more than simply a negation. Rather, it is a form of creation and play — that is, a *playing with* the material properties of the painting — rather than merely a neglect of the traditional expectations for representation.

As with Manet’s play of space, the use of lighting in “The Fifer” is also a form of creation through negation of traditional features of representational art. Foucault says:

Ordinarily, in traditional painting ... the light source is situated somewhere. There is either from the very inside of the canvas, or from outside, a luminous source which is directly represented or simply indicated by rays of light ... and outside of the real light which strikes the canvas, the picture always represents, in addition, a certain light source which sweeps the canvas and provokes upon the figures there all the falling shadows which form the modeling, the relief, the hollows, etc. (*MOP*, 58)

However, in “The Fifer” there is no light from within the depicted scene. In other words, lighting is not represented at all. Instead, lighting comes from outside the painting precisely because the material properties of the canvas itself do not render light. What we have, Foucault says, is a lighting that is “the real lighting of the canvas if the canvas in its materiality was to be exposed to an open window” (*MOP*, 59).

So how does this play of the materiality of the canvas dislocate the viewing subject? For one, there is no ideological device at work to situate the viewer within a place of stability. Representational art, from the Renaissance on, used depth and lighting to effectively hide the material existence and limitations of the canvas itself, “to mask and negate the fact that the painting was still inscribed inside a square or a rectangle of straight lines cut at right angles” (*MOP*, 29). In the case of “The Fifer,” however, the viewer is positioned in front of the image only insofar as she stands in front of the canvas itself. The viewer does not stand in the foreground of a represented scene, but only in the foreground of the *recto* of the canvas. In this way, the painting refers to nothing but itself and imitates nothing but itself. The painting does not, as it does in the case of representational painting, refer to a normative space for the viewer to inhabit. Instead, through its mode of self-reference, the painting provokes the viewing subject to question her own location and presence in relation, not only to the painting, but to a much larger order of meaning.

Here the painting functions pedagogically by inciting the viewer to question her own status as a viewing subject. This understanding is in concert with Arcilla’s argument that modern art functions pedagogically by igniting the quest for existential

learning. For Arcilla, modern art teaches us what it is like to exist authentically because through the emphasis on its medium, the work negates those ideological devices that position the viewing subject within a predetermined order of meaning, thus foreclosing the possibility of pursuing an understanding of one's own location for oneself. Arcilla calls this experience of authentic existence "strangerhood," or the experience of our essential questionableness. This condition of *being-in-question* is the condition of *human being*, and, as such, it is the ontological condition of all existential learning. Thus, modern art teaches us by disclosing us to ourselves so that we can begin to take responsibility for our questionable existence.⁷

Whereas Arcilla sees the pedagogical function of modern art as disclosing the self to the self in order to bring about existential learning, I suggest in the next section that the self-disclosing aspect of modern art finds embodiment in the mode of being of the Cynic. In both cases, modern art teaches to the extent that it reflects authentic existence. Specifically, in the case of Cynicism, we see that authentic existence consists in positioning oneself in a relation of exteriority to the world. That is to say, authentic existence amounts to a lived practice of critique.

MODERN ART AS THE VEHICLE OF THE CYNIC MODE OF BEING

The historical significance of Manet's work returns in a different guise thirteen years later for Foucault, in his final lectures at the Collège de France. For Foucault, the ancient concept of *parrhēsia* references a specific manifestation of the relationship between the subject and truth. In other words, Foucault poses the question of the mode of being one might take up in order to speak the truth. In the ancient Cynics, Foucault discovers a way of life in which truth was conveyed in both word and deed, and projected in the very body and material existence of the Cynic philosopher.⁸ The Cynic rejects prevailing ideological principles, relocating the foundation of truth from its source in *logos* to that of *bios* and existence itself. The Cynic does this by rejecting custom and living in accord with the "reason" of material nature, cultivating instead a disciplined shamelessness and indifference toward social norms. Far from retreating from the public in order to live authentically, the Cynic practices an active and relentless critique of all customs and values in the public space, and is thus willing to sacrifice himself in the face of political threat in order to speak truth for the benefit of others.

And it is in the final lectures that Foucault, in an un-Foucauldian manner, describes ancient Cynicism beyond its historical specificity and declares it instead a transhistorical ethical category, a recurring form of subjectivity that emerges in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries primarily in the life of the artist. Modern art becomes the modern-day vehicle for the Cynic mode of being, according to Foucault, in two major ways. First, through the idea that the artist does not live exactly like others in that the life of the artist is itself a manifestation of the truth of art itself. It is from this historical moment that the modern notion of the artistic life as being incommensurable with other forms of life — insofar as the artist's life is itself a mode of the true and authentic life — begins to take hold. Furthermore, the idea arises that the truth of the work of art is derived from the very form of existence of the artist. Foucault says that "if the artistic life does in fact have the form of the

true life, then this in turn guarantees that every work which takes root in and starts from this life truly does belong to the dynasty and domain of art" (CT, 187). The life of the artist becomes the very condition of the work of art — it authenticates the work and gives testimony to its meaning and truth as art.

How is it that this event in the history of art carries with it the mode of being of the Cynic? For Foucault, ancient Cynicism and modern art are coupled in that both convert their form of existence into "an essential condition of truth-telling ... the reductive practice which will make space for truth-telling" (CT, 172). The modern artist conveys the truth of their art, not solely through the artwork itself, but through the reduction of the work of art to the visible expression of their way of life: through the actions, body, dress, and speech of the artist. Similarly, the ancient Cynic conveys the truth of his philosophical discourse, not by establishing a correspondence of discourse to rational principles, but through the manifestation of life itself — practicing, Foucault says, "the scandal of the truth in and through one's life" (CT, 174). It is important here to distinguish between the life guided by one's discourse and the discourse guided by one's life. For the Cynic, the connection between word and deed, theory and practice, follows a principle of inverting the dominant form of this relationship found in the history of philosophical thought. Peter Sloterdijk, in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, formulates this principle of inversion as follows: "[If] philosophers are called on to live what they say, their task in a critical sense is much more: to say what they live."⁹

The second way in which modern art becomes the vehicle for the Cynic mode of being is found in the idea that modern art reflects a specific relation to reality — what Foucault calls the "Anti-Platonism" of modern art. Foucault says that with the incursion of modern art, "the relationship to reality must no longer be one of ornamentation and imitation, but one of laying bare, exposure, stripping, excavation, and violent reduction to its basics" (CT, 188). We saw this "reduction of existence to its basics" clearly in the preceding section with Manet's reduction of the work of art to the medium of its production.

But what this reduction stands for, in the sense of a pedagogical function, is the establishment of a relationship to the world as one of exteriority — of standing beyond the margins of society and culture — striking a "polemical relationship of reduction, refusal, and aggression" to social norms, values, and, in the case of art, aesthetic canons (CT, 188). I refer to this as a pedagogical function insofar as exteriority elicits an active calling into question of truth. But what makes the Cynic distinct from, say, the Skeptic in this sense of calling truth into question? The Cynic, beyond merely calling truth into question, raises the further question of the form of existence necessary for this questioning of truth to take shape. This is not simply a matter of calling others to live authentically by living what one speaks, but by speaking what one lives. In other words, Cynicism raises the question of the ethics of truth, and insofar as we hold truth-telling to be a pedagogical activity, Cynicism also raises the question of the ethics of teaching — that is, the form of existence necessary for teaching to take shape. Therefore, the issue of the Cynic's doctrine — the truth of what one says — becomes secondary to the issue of the Cynic's way of

life. As Foucault puts it within the context of his historical analysis: “The history of the doctrine matters little, what is important is to establish a history of arts of existence.... Cynicism constantly reminds us that very little truth is indispensable for whoever wishes to live truly and that very little life is needed when one truly holds to the truth” (CT, 190).

Such an ethics of truth, to borrow from Arcilla, takes the form of an ethical-aesthetic-*mediumism*. It entails the embodiment of a truth or doctrine by transforming oneself into its medium. The suggestion here is that the Cynic philosopher, like the modern artist, practices an art of living in which the work of art becomes the self-itself.¹⁰ That is to say, the self in the Cynic mode of being refers only to itself in the same manner that the modern work of art refers only to its own medium and material properties. The pedagogical significance of the modern art–Cynic couplet, as I have described it here, resides in its relation to reality as a radical rejection and sustained challenging of the truth of the world through its manifestation of the truth of authentic existence. In this guise, critique takes the form of various lived experiments that displace the most widely accepted principles of reason, knowledge, and theory from the foundation of *logos* to that of *bios*. In the concluding section that follows, I consider how the practice of teaching might represent such a lived experiment — an experiment in which the practice of teaching itself emphasizes the medium of the teacher.

CONCLUSION: CYNICISM AS AN ETHICS OF TEACHING

What might it mean to suggest that teaching reflects a lived experiment in which the practice itself emphasizes the medium of the teacher? In this concluding section I respond to this question by highlighting a singular ethical dimension of teaching: integrity. I refer to this dimension as ethical insofar as it underscores the manner in which the self relates to itself through the practice,¹¹ as well as orients the self toward the task of self-cultivation within the practice.¹² The upshot of highlighting this dimension will be to root an ethics of teaching in the traditions of both modern art and Cynicism.

The common notion of integrity refers to a state of completeness or wholeness. A person with integrity is an integrated self, a self in which the various aspects of the self — needs, commitments, and ideas, for example — form a unified whole.¹³ To strive for personal integrity in this sense also entails working to resist those forces bent on corrupting the self. However, personal integrity is more than just a matter of willpower, of remaining vigilant in order to avoid hypocrisy. As we have seen with the mode of being of the Cynic, personal integrity entails a mode of self-relationship in which the subject works to divest itself of all “ornamentation and imitation” — a mode of existence in which to say what one lives, not to live what one says — and which serves as the principle of the true life.

In the context of teaching, integrity means placing at the fore of one’s discourse one’s lived experience.¹⁴ Again, this would mean to teach and to speak *from* one’s life, not to live one’s life in accord with what one teaches and speaks. Such an experience of teaching is often witnessed when teachers refer to their own lives to offer an example that brings a lesson home. Or, when a teacher’s actions, as the

saying goes, speak louder than their words and have the effect of reaching students in a way that the curriculum could not. We also see traces of the Cynic mode of being in philosophical reflections on teaching, such as when Maxine Greene suggests that “[a] teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own.”¹⁵ In this case, it is the teacher who manifests a certain mode of being that, as Chris Higgins says, “is the catalyst in the educative process.”¹⁶ Such teachers authenticate their teaching by virtue of their existence.

But the Cynic mode of being also entails locating oneself in a position of exteriority in relation to the world. From the standpoint of integrity, this would mean resisting those forces of convention that seek to undermine self-integration through a sustained practice of critique. The teacher in contemporary life is expected to yield to a whole host of conventional expectations of what teaching and learning mean. In one respect, the Cynic mode of being, at least in its historical realization, entails the outright rejection and refusal of such conventions, so as to integrate such critique into the fabric of one’s existence. However, we may suggest at this point that a more modest version of the Cynic mode of being is called for. Rather than living out the rejection and refusal of convention, the teacher might achieve integrity when such expectations are brought into question through a sustained critique and a satirical orientation to convention.¹⁷ It may be that the conventional expectations for our students consist in learning a standardized set of knowledge and skills, but to openly question the wisdom of such standardization and to live as if one seeks knowledge and skills beyond the standardized set does not necessitate refusing to abide by what is expected. Rather, it means locating oneself always at the exterior of what is expected in order to affect one’s own sense of what it means to teach and learn.

In this essay I have offered a Foucauldian contribution to the conversation on aesthetic education and, specifically, the modernist turn in that conversation recently introduced by Arcilla. I suggest that the characteristic emphasis on the medium in the modern work of art signals a distinctive pedagogical function. I have described that pedagogical function as an ethics of teaching rooted in the Cynic mode of being. To assay this claim, I discussed how the practice of teaching oriented in the Cynic mode of being cultivates the integrity of the teacher by locating the teacher at the exterior of conventional expectations of teaching and learning. It is in this way — through its manifest Cynicism — that modern art educates.

1. René Arcilla, *Mediumism: A Philosophical Reconstruction of Modernism for Existential Learning* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010).

2. This is not to suggest that very few scholars have explored the role of modernist art in what we might call, “art education.” Rather, Arcilla’s argument is unique in that it demonstrates just how modernist art serves as the foundation for a pedagogical culture.

3. Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* ed. F. Frascina and C. Harrison (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 5–10.

4. Michel Foucault, *Manet and the Object of Painting*, trans. Matthew Barr (London: Tate Publishing, 2009). This work will be cited as *MOP* in the text for all subsequent references.

5. Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011). This work will be cited as *CT* in the text for all subsequent references.
6. Although it serves as the only reference to the painting of Manet in his text, Arcilla discusses “The Fifer” in a somewhat similar fashion to Foucault. See, Arcilla, *Mediumism*, 39–40.
7. Arcilla, *Mediumism*, 15–16.
8. For authoritative discussions of Foucault’s reading of ancient Cynicism in his last lectures, see, Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 169–192; and Edward F. McGushin, *Foucault’s Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 148–172.
9. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 101–102.
10. This is a common theme throughout the later Foucault, perhaps best captured in an interview where he says, “What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art?,” Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 350.
11. *Ibid.*, 352. Foucault refers to “ethics” generally as the *rapport à soi*, or mode of self-relationship.
12. Recently, educational philosophers have referred to “ethics” in the context of teaching in order to highlight the ways in which the practice cultivates and develops the self. See Chris Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); and David T. Hansen, *The Teacher and the World: A Study of Cosmopolitanism as Education* (London: Routledge, 2011), 33–36.
13. For a classic defense of this view, see Gabrielle Taylor, “Integrity,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. 55 (1981): 143–159. For a thorough and critical response to Taylor’s essay, see Raimond Gaita, “Integrity,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. 55 (1981): 161–176.
14. For discussions on the importance of integrity in teaching, see Michael S. Katz, “Teaching with Integrity,” *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald David Glass (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 1–11; and P.J. Nelsen, “A Deweyan Approach to Integrity in an Age of Instrumental Rationality,” in *Philosophy of Education 2010*, ed. Gert Biesta (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011), 58–66.
15. Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 14.
16. Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching*, 5.
17. Sloterdijk describes this satirical element in ancient Cynicism as a form of “cheekiness.” See Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 101–133.