

True to Life

René V. Arcilla

New York University

Suppose that you are designing a course on the great works of modernism, to be cross-listed as Ideological Texts in Twentieth-Century Western White Male Imperialism 101. As you struggle to match works with topics, mulling over the likes of Piet Mondrian's *Lozenge Composition with Red, Black, Blue, and Yellow* or Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, you become more troubled by their determinedly non-representational quality. They resist serving as illustrations of either metaphysical or historical concepts: the more you try to figure out how to ride them to a discussion of, say, "the human quest for meaning," or "emerging practices of libidinal spectacle," the harder they buck. You start to doubt whether modernist artworks can be truly taught at all. And then the question flips in your mind: what could there be for us to learn from their manifest opposition to teaching?

It is wonder at this that propels Darryl De Marzio's marvelous essay. De Marzio argues that a Cynical devotion to the truth is what the modernist artwork, unlike the object or agent of conventional pedagogy, has to teach us after all. After briefly reconstructing his reasoning, my response will probe his attachment to a notion of authenticity. If, in contrast, we follow modernism in ditching authenticity, we may discover still another understanding of how teachers may be true to life.

De Marzio opens by establishing Michel Foucault's support for a standard picture of modernist painting centered on Manet. Like many, Foucault interprets works like "The Fifer" as stressing, first, their material medium, and second, the artist's and viewer's estrangement from the world of representations. This understanding sets the stage for De Marzio to explicate why Foucault later likens the modernist artist to the ancient Cynic. On the one hand, this artist manifests her life directly and materially in her art-making; in this respect, Foucault echoes Harold Rosenberg's interest in the indexical practice of "action painting." Unlike the commodity that conceals its congealed labor, the modernist artwork flaunts every stroke of it. On the other hand, this practice is destined to marginalize the artist, to send her into exile along with Stephen Dedalus, Tonio Kröger, and other *poètes maudits*. Why is this? The reason is that by declaring, in effect, that she is what she does in a medium, whether those are actions on a canvas, actions in the street, or actions with another body, the artist denies that she is an idea or ideal that she must measure up to. Society, Foucault and De Marzio suggest, comprises a web of such normative representations of possible identities. When the artist materialistically affirms her body's actual impulses, she turns away from a life that aspires to begin to realize some such norm, some such *logos*, and turns candidly and shamelessly toward the life that is already being lived, impossibly unembarrassed by the "reason of material nature," of *bios*. This conversion in how one understands one's passion for truth is the central difference made by the Cynic's mode of being.

The modernist artist as Cynical misanthrope — how on earth could such a figure be a full-fledged teacher? Does not instruction involve a recognized relation to, and responsible concern for, others in one's society? Admittedly, De Marzio retreats a bit on this question: the prospect of Diogenes running home-economics class is not one he is eager to conjure up. He insists, nevertheless, that the Cynic expresses an ethical commitment to integrity that teachers ought to adopt and adapt to their more gregarious interests. After all, the way they demonstrate that they care for students is by presenting to the latter important truths. What truth could make more of an impression on youth than that of a life so confident in itself, in its responses to the world, it scorns respectable apology and prefers to go naked?

Let us face squarely this call to nobility; let us not cower behind protests of bourgeois modesty. To teach works that truthfully reveal living action, without evasion or exaggeration: is this not an attractive pedagogy? Evidently, I have to acknowledge, but I am less sure that it is modernist. Indeed, in its preoccupation with authenticity, Cynicism reveals itself to be rather Romantic at heart — a veritable Rick in *Casablanca*.

This becomes apparent when we examine more closely De Marzio's claim that the Cynical mode of being amounts to a pedagogical ethics. He explains that the truth to which the Cynic is devoted, and the teaching which she practices, does not refer to something that can be said but only to what can be shown. The Cynical modernist artist exhibits her life and its freedom from falsity by acting in a medium open to public scrutiny. As this practice of art-making develops reflectively and faithfully into a way of life, into a project of self-cultivation, it supports and is supported by an understanding of the good of truthfulness.

And why is it good to be truthful? Here is where I alas find a seed of contradiction. If the artist answers, "One ought to be truthful because ..." then she is no longer a Cynic — she once again is engaged in the project of living up to a verbal doctrine. The only consistent reply is to declare, in Wittgensteinian fashion, that being truthful is simply what she does. But does she really do that? What is to prevent her from being cynical about her Cynicism, that is, from *pretending* to exhibit her life truthfully? Would not public, shameless lying and deceiving also be simply things that one — truthfully — does?

This precarious and ambiguous notion of being true to what one does constitutes a version of authenticity. Charles Taylor has argued that authenticity *can* be the basis for an ethics, but only if it grows out of critical conversations with others about a common "horizon of significance" that take us beyond the Cynic's antipathy to convention and principle. Be that as it may, the Cynic's interest in authenticity, ethical or not, furthermore conflicts with artistic mediumism. De Marzio and I agree that at the core of the latter is the experience of strangerhood; like Arthur Rimbaud, the mediumist artist and her supporters realize that "I is an other." Put in more theoretical terms, the mediumist subject comes to understand that it is split and precisely cannot be itself, its representation. This is why, in *Mediumism*, I affirm with Jean-Paul Sartre a narrowly dialectical, ironic conception of authenticity that

equates it with acknowledged bad faith: I am authentic only when I am admitting that I cannot be who I say I am. The expressive, ideal link between one's actions, such as one's writing, and an authentic self is precisely what the material medium — the words, punctuation, and blank spaces — interrupts. In my view, then, the Cynic is working with a pre-modernist approach to art more fitting of John Keats than Kafka.

Let me circle back to my opening scenario where you are a teacher designing Great Works of Modernism 101. Your disquiet with the strange inauthenticity of the works aside, what truth might there nevertheless be in the paint that preexists Mondrian's painting? In one sense, almost none: before the artist has employed these elements of a medium to make meaning, they are merely there. They acquire use value only as they enter his imagination and hands. However, in another sense, these beings, considered in their meaningless contingency, may evoke the world's miraculous Being, what I call the Present. Indeed, we could understand a good part of mediumist art to be the presentation, through a canny play of forms in a particular work, of a direct experience of the Present. Unlike something in an anthropocentric, profane world that has use value, let alone a commodity that combines that use value with exchange value, the mediumist artwork — if we can suspend its commodification — has the power to transport us to a non-anthropocentric world of "present value," to coin a term. What is sacred here is not an idea, a god, which an idol may represent in human language. That such religious anthropomorphism is never far enough from the profane is why we perennially suspect it of idolatry. No, the non-representational work *materializes* the sacred. It presents the beauty of sheer paint on shaped canvas — of the sheer world that is prior to any meaning but amazingly there.

How do we know when we are experiencing that beauty? How do you or your student really know that Kafka, for instance, has revealed it? You cannot. Not only does Kafka's writing depart from many of our habitual associations between narrative verisimilitude and dramatic experience — dramatizing rather the labyrinth of language — but no learned discourses about the writer's ingenuity or historical context can authorize your judgment of the work's beauty. This aesthetic judgment rests on nothing but your faith in, not your knowledge of, what you have experienced first-hand.

Has a particular artwork disclosed, not its use value or exchange value, but its present value: this is the specific question that you might press on your students in a class on modernism. This is indeed not far from the Cynic's question of whether we have the courage to be true to the real life we lead. However, it asks us to focus less on our actions and more on the real life we have been given. Mediumist art challenges us to actively affirm our faith in the experience of its beauty. The work is truly beautiful only when we are true to it. I wonder if this way of being true to life may also suggest a model for our teaching.