



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: david j. blacker / gustavo e. fischman / melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

May 1, 2013

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the
College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
the National Education Policy Center, and the
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

Follow *Education Review* on Facebook



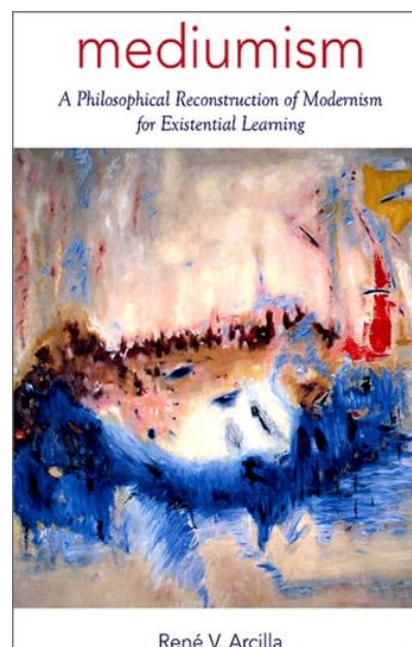
and on Twitter: #EducReview

Arcilla, René V. (2010). *Mediumism: A Philosophical Reconstruction of Modernism for Existential Learning*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Pp. vii + 119 ISBN 978-1-4384-2925-0

Reviewed by Olga Hubard
Teachers College, Columbia University

In *Mediumism*, René Arcilla makes a refreshing case for modern art as a critical component of contemporary education. His main thesis is that engagements with modern artworks can fuel existential education — the kind of education that compels us to ponder questions inherent to our existence in the world, and to our awareness of this existence. Is there truly no reason for our existence? Why keep on living? For whom do I exist? — such are the questions of existential learning. It makes sense, then, that Arcilla sees existential education as occurring along an entire lifespan and across realms



Citation: Hubard, Olga. (2013 May 1) Review of *Mediumism: A Philosophical Reconstruction of Modernism for Existential Learning* by René V. Arcilla. *Education Review*, 16. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1232.pdf>

of human experience, including schools, the media, museums, architecture, and so on.

The author acknowledges that his thesis is rooted in the way he has experienced modern artworks in real life. This book embodies his quest to substantiate his experience — one he trusts will resonate with others — through philosophical thought. Building on existing thinking in philosophy and art history, **Arcilla** constructs a fascinating, wandering theory that illuminates modern art in new and unexpected ways.

In what follows, I shall attempt to trace the central argument of this theory, and to chart a few of its building blocks so I may give a flavor of how the theory is constructed. I will do this in very broad strokes, cognizant that there is much in Arcilla's theory that will be left out — telling nuances ignored, significant turns missed, important components omitted. My hope is that this review will offer some sense of Arcilla's thinking and its relevance, while also compelling readers to add meat to the bones by reading *Mediumism*.

Arcilla's notion of modernism is in sync with that of Clement Greenberg, the influential art critic of the second part of the 20th century. Among other scholars, Arcilla and Greenberg regard as "modern" those works that emphasize their medium. For example, a painting is modernist when, instead of striving to create an illusion of things from the world, it turns our attention to the flatness of its surface, its shapes, its colors, the physical properties of the paint — that is, to the very elements that make painting *painting*. This stress on medium — or mediumism, as Arcilla calls it — is what holds modern art's potential for existential education. To expound on this idea, Arcilla introduces two key concepts: "strangerhood" and "presentmindedness."

The concept of strangerhood comes to life through a parallel between mediumist art and Sartre's thinking on consciousness and nothingness. Sartre suggests that when something enters our consciousness we become aware that our consciousness itself is not the thing that we are conscious of, but rather we are conscious of our separateness from it; we are aware that our consciousness



exists on its own, and that it is not any one particular thing; it *simply is*. Likewise, Sartre argues that our being cannot be equated with any of the roles we adopt in life — teacher, sister, citizen of a particular country, for example. Ultimately, we *just are*, and our existence transcends the various roles we may assume.

Mediumist art promotes this Sartrean awareness of existence, in Arcilla's view. Consider, for example, *The Fifer* by Edouard Manet. Faced with this painting, we may first acknowledge the young flautist represented on the canvas. Before long, however, we may notice the vagueness in Manet's rendition, and begin to focus on the patches of paint, the colors, the evidence of a brush sweeping across the canvas. We are reminded that this is, in fact, not a young flautist, but simply paint and color on a flat surface. Like with our consciousness, we realize that the artwork before us is not only of something — it also *just is*. And as works of modern art remind us of their nothingness, they turn our attention to our own; they point to the fact that we are not this, nor that; we just are. This just being, this being nothing in particular, makes us, in a sense, strangers to ourselves — and herein lies our inescapable strangerhood.

The disorienting experience of strangerhood, Arcilla argues, is our true condition as human beings. "To be human," he writes, "is to be a consciousness never coinciding with itself, roaming without a home" (p. 44). Acute awareness of the nature of existence is inherently ridden with the kinds of questions mentioned earlier: Is there truly no reason for our existence? How do our individual lives matter? In short, to be aware of the fact that we exist as strangers is to "live in question" (p. 105) — a way of life way of life that, according to Arcilla, is existential education. Why should we adopt this unsettling stance, so easily ridden with anxiety? In Arcilla's view, strangerhood is desirable because we are most authentically ourselves when we experience our existence as such, an existence that is not restricted to any specific state of affairs.

Arcilla proposes that mediumist artworks do more than making patent our strangerhood, however. As well, these works promote presentmindedness. To flesh out the notion of presentmindedness, Arcilla follows, and then veers

away from art historian Michael Fried's thinking on modern and minimalist art. Fried contended that our experiences with modern artworks have no duration,

not because one in fact experiences [such works] in no time at all, but because *at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest....* It is this continuous and entire *presentness*, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness*: as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it. (Fried, as cited in Arcilla, 2010, pp. 51 -52)

In Fried's view, the presentness of modern art is not to be confused with the presence of minimalist art. Works of minimalism — or literalist works, as Fried called them — are works that are literally what they are: Carl Andre's *Twenty-fifth Steel Cardinal* is a collection of square, steel plates that form a grid on the floor; Dan Flavin's *pink out of a corner* is a pink, fluorescent light inside its metal fixture, leaning vertically against a corner. Such works take our minds to other physical objects that surround us; they highlight the materials that precede the art. As this occurs, we are aware that the work is there, present, separate from us, like any other object — this, in contrast to modern artworks, which engulf us in their instantaneousness and presentness.

Arcilla concurs with Fried on the preeminence of materials in minimalist works but, as we have seen, he believes materials in themselves are salient in modern art as well. In fact, for Arcilla, minimalist art qualifies as mediumist (and, by extension, as modern). Arcilla also recognizes what Fried calls presence — the disconcerting awareness of a work's distance from us — and equates it with his notion of strangerhood.

All this said, Arcilla proposes a new idea, which finds echoes in Fried's presentness: He argues that the priority of matter in mediumist art is also responsible for promoting presentmindedness, the second ingredient of existential education. The materials of mediumist works —

their physicality--remind us of the things of the world that exist here and now, close to us; the things that are being offered for our acceptance, including our lives. In this way, mediumist works bring us to the Present and its offerings. As we marvel at the ongoing events of offering that are matter and life, an ethical orientation is promoted: We become grateful for what is given to us, and are compelled to give, too; we come to love the miracle of existence and commit to a way of life based on gratefulness and generosity.

In short, in Arcilla's theory, the preeminence of matter in modern art plays a double role, as it fuels both strangerhood and presentmindedness. The disorientation that strangerhood brings about is a necessary first step toward compelling us to accept and celebrate the Present of existence. The latter, in turn, makes us grateful and generous beings.

Having established how modern art promotes existential education, Arcilla articulates a vision for the future, where modernism is infused with new life and significance. In this vision, conversations about mediumist works abound. They occur in all sorts of spaces, fueling open discussion about who we are and what matters to us. Given the workings of mediumist art, the conversations its works promote are rooted in the commonality of our existence, but are also sensitive to our diverse and changing circumstances. The result is the development of a much-needed communal self-consciousness of what it means to exist.

Let me now, for a moment, return to the genesis of Arcilla's project: experience. As a reader mindful of this genesis, I cannot help but consider this theory in relation to my own experience with modern art. Even as I am compelled by Arcilla's astute, hopeful arguments, and even though I appreciate the solidity of the author's logic, I confess that I do not recognize in myself the experiences that he explains so convincingly. Why is this, I wonder? Why is it that when I feel the power of works of modern art — a type of art to which I happen to be partial — I am not necessarily reminded of the unsettling fact that I just am? Why is it that these works do not awaken in me gratefulness for the gift of my existence and that of the world? Why don't they trigger an ethical inclination? To

be clear, I do not doubt that the author's experiences, substantiated in such eye-opening ways, resonate with others. I just happen not to be one of these people.

Now, back to Arcilla's argument. Having established the promise of modernism for existential education, the author asks, "Why is modernist art in desuetude and the learning [it offers] practically unrecognized?" (p. 64). His response to this question hinges on Clement Greenberg's and T.J. Clark's contention that modernism arose as a reaction to capitalist mass culture in the first place. Arcilla proposes that the reason we cannot yet profit from the educative potential of mediumism lies precisely with the hegemony of mass media. An excess of fragmented information and never-ending spectacle distract us from the true condition of our existence — our strangerhood. Fantasies of escape surround us, breeding absentmindedness. In this way, mass media makes us into consumers, accomplishing its chief goal: to reproduce the capitalist order.

Ever an optimist, Arcilla claims that mediumist art — and the presentmindedness it promotes — can help resist this troubling status quo. He advocates for the creation of mediumist works that would inhabit the very realm of mass media, while also exposing its oppressive nature. His ultimate hope is that, in this era of media-induced ennui, thinking back to experimental, revolutionary aspiration of modernist art will wake us out of sleep. One can almost hear philosopher of education Maxine Greene speaking between the lines.

Ultimately, Arcilla offers a vision of mediumist art that is both aesthetic and political. To act politically, mediumist works must be interested in the aesthetic, and to reach an aesthetic place of presentmindedness, political action is needed.

In a last, beautifully written chapter, Arcilla delves into the realm of cinema to offer examples of mediumist works that promote existential education. His choice of film as a medium is not surprising, given the links that exist between film and mass media, and the author's interest in mass media as a potential site for mediumist art. Arcilla narrates each of these films, enveloping readers in the existential quests of the films' protagonists. As well, he explains how each film emphasizes medium. For example,

Rosetta is a film about a woman's efforts to survive. To animate the sense of effort, the filmmakers foreground the main character's corporeality: The way she moves and carries her body is conspicuous, and close-ups captured with an unstable camera further accentuate her effort-full physicality.

It is surprising that Arcilla's examples exceed the confines of his theory. In relation to each film, Arcilla highlights how the medium of film operates in tandem with the narrative; in *Rosetta*, for example, the use of medium augments, supports, and buttresses issues that are central to the narrative. In other words, representation and medium work together, inseparably, towards a common goal; the medium is put to use to embody and enhance particular representations. In Arcilla's theory, however, the stress on medium matters because it *separates* medium from what is represented in the work, making us aware of our strangerhood (as in the example of Manet's *Fifer*).

In spite of this discrepancy, Arcilla's examples are worthwhile, and deeply relevant to the impetus of his project. Moreover, in the concreteness of examples, his ideas resonate with my own art experiences at last. In all four cases, Arcilla shows how the thoughtful use of medium adds urgency to the existential questions the films raise. In doing so, he also highlights how the things represented in particular artworks matter. Perhaps there is room for both, then: medium that splits apart from specific representations, reminding us of our strangerhood; and medium that joins forces with representations, injecting urgency into existential questions. I wonder if the divergence between Arcilla's theory and his examples may not be an opening of sorts; a provocation for the author to theorize diverse ways in which the stress on medium might matter to existential education.

Mediumism is a challenging read; its intricate arguments demand close, careful attention. It is also invitational; the originality of the argument, as well as the author's searchful tone, feels like the start of an enduring conversation. Prompted to join, and spurred by Arcilla's reflection on his project's potential future, I would perhaps start with a few lingering questions of my own:

What might be some reasons (beyond the hegemony of mass media) to explain why some of us do not experience mediumist artworks as vehicles of strangerhood and presentmindedness? If so, what might it take for us to experience these works as Arcilla does? Might anything be lost if we aim specifically for this type of experience when faced with works of mediumism? On a slightly different note: Are all works that stress their medium (equally) suited for existential education? Might any works that do not stress their medium ever be suitable for promoting existential education? And on yet another, more playful, note, how might one communicate Arcilla's theory of mediumism for existential education in a mediumist way?

In short, *Mediumism* is a work of audacious inquisitiveness. As Arcilla weaves his ideas with those of philosophers and art critics, he invites us to reconsider the promise that art in general, and modernism in particular, hold for our collective flourishing. His unapologetic resistance to instrumentalism is uplifting, as is his spirited commitment to our shared humanity. Beyond all else, *Mediumism* is an optimistic call for us not to forget who we are, and to work together towards a freer, more genuine existence.

About the Reviewer

Olga Hubard (EdD, Teachers College, Columbia University; MA in Art Education, Teachers College, Columbia University; MFA in Fine Arts, School of Visual Art, New York; BA (licenciatura) in Art History, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City) is Associate Professor in Art Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she teaches courses in museum education, diversity issues, studio art, and art education research.



Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the
Education Review.

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the
College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
The National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>, and the
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University



Editors

David J. Blacker

blacker@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Follow *Education Review* on



Facebook and on Twitter:



#EducReview