CHAPTER ONE

Modernism: A Pedagogical Culture?

How might the fields of education and culture better support each other? This book is going to seek some initial answers to that question, both utopian and practical. Of course, as soon as you mention culture these days, many reach for the more skeptical query, whose? Culture*s*, we are reproved, belong to disparate groups with interests in excluding, dominating, or protecting themselves from others; these interests necessarily shape and find expression in any cultural work. As a first step toward opening education to this tense diversity, then, we should be upfront about the specific cultures, and interests, we each represent. I ought to declare the one or ones with which I identify and how they stand in relation to others.

So let me start there. As I see it, my culture emerged out of experiences in the early 1970s while attending college at the University of Chicago. The sixties counterculture appeared to be changing everything, and I was eagerly trying to catch up. More than Dionysianism, this culture represented for me a refusal to settle for the functional compromises associated with "adulthood," and a commitment to the experimental life. Still, I remained retrograde enough to attend classes and the ones that affected me the most, ironically, were those devoted to the Establishment's classic texts, "the best that has been thought and said." I found the whole idea of a Great Conversation about what it means to be human inspiring; it revealed something universal and eternal about my most fundamental quandaries and reassured me that in my loneliest moments I was in the company of seers.

A traditional high culture and an avant-garde populist one: yes, I did worry about being torn apart by my attractions to both of these, and my betrayal of each. But that worry also excited my imagination of what these cultures could have to say constructively to each other; it made me feel like I had my hands on some crucial koan. Probably one reason I took seriously even these cultures' most hyperbolic ideals is that I wanted their combined contradictions to come into acute focus. I suspected that if I could in a manner reconcile them, or at least bring them into sustained dialogue, I would find there my authentic self.

The Great Books and the Grateful Dead? I must be joking if I am claiming these as my culture today. Unless I am some kind of reactionary, surely I have unlearned the naïve pretensions and ideological collusions of such works by now and have outgrown the communities that once revered them—communities that themselves have largely passed away. Would I deny that most of what currently hypes itself as countercultural is merely, as Thomas Frank would put it, fashions in commodified dissent?[1] Or that Western high culture is based on the Imperial Monologue? Has my learning been somehow stuck in time, my culture mere nostalgia for daydreams of the tuition-paid moratorium?

Furthermore, I can imagine an incredulous reader thinking that what I call culture here hardly seems adequate to the term. A person's culture is rooted in the groups to which one voluntarily or involuntarily belongs. It would be more accurate to speak of one's culture or cultures being hybrid. In either case, a particular culture becomes especially meaningful for one when membership in the corresponding group makes a pronounced difference in one's life. One will tend to value one's ethnic culture more in societies where ethnicity matters in how one is treated. Now even in the ivory tower, surely, my race, gender, sexuality, and class—likening me to some and distinguishing me, often conflictingly, from others—shaped the course of my life more than the music I surrounded myself with or the books I read. Did not my socialization into groups in the above categories, my informal, mainly unconscious learning of what it means to be Asian American, masculine, heterosexual, and petty bourgeois in Chicago at this time, have more of an impact than any idealistic identifications? Is not this uneven, manifold, materialist positioning in society my true culture?

These are no less serious objections for being obvious. Perhaps, though, their reasoning adds up less to the conclusive untenability of my cultural understanding than to a need to elaborate it further. Let me see if I can translate them into two sets of constructive questions.

Granted that both the sixties counterculture and the Arnoldian culture of old-time liberal education are as such, for the most part and for good reasons, moribund. Are there nevertheless key remnants of these that could, and should, be preserved, even developed, in the present? Is there some culture that might bring these two sets of remnants together for some important purpose?

Granted that the cultures that mean the most to us are rooted in those social groupings that most affect our actual material and practical lives. Could an above culture of remnants be so rooted?

Before I take a crack at these, let me seize the opportunity to gloss that most slippery of terms, "culture." My remarks are hardly intended to be definitive—how could they be, given the long, contested history of the term?—but they are meant simply to suggest one way of figuratively understanding the term that may be useful.[2] Think of culture as the central nervous system of a community.

Individually, our biological nervous systems enable us to become aware of how the world affects us, to derive from that awareness intelligent decisions about how to respond to the world, and to take reflective responsibility for our identities over time. Culture, I am suggesting, facilitates these same functions for a community. It registers the community's experiences—not all of them, obviously, but those that attract popular concern and conversation. It derives from that register general, model judgments about how to live. And it summons an audience to recognize the experiences and models of conduct that its members have in common and to take responsibility for the welfare of this community. It is in this sense that a work of culture in conversation with other such works may be likened to a nerve transmitting a message that must be integrated into a whole network of such messages, forming self-consciousness. Culture, as such a self-consciousness, would be focused on what Raymond Williams calls its "basic element": the "effort at total qualitative assessment."[3]

Is there, then, a communal nervous system that usefully brings together components of high culture and the counterculture? Yes—modernism. Of course, how this may be is far from evident. It is not clear that modernism, understood initially as a movement in the arts, is even a coherent whole, let alone a full-fledged culture. Moreover, if it were, how it would combine high-cultural and countercultural elements requires explanation, since modernism of course postdates the ancient sources of Western high culture and predates the twentieth century, not to mention the sixties. Finally, and perhaps most problematically, even if modernism could be understood in the way I am proposing, there remains the inconvenient fact that it, like the other two cultures, is widely considered to be over. We are all postmodern now, no less than post-canon-worshippers and post-'68-ers, and while particular works from these pasts may shed light on our present, the idea that they could form as a whole our living culture seems, again, like nostalgic escapism.

What is modernism? Does it—did it—even exist? I imagine that many of us who try to get a handle on the subject must struggle with the same doubts that Franco Moretti did.

> Initially, to be honest, my project was entirely different. I was thinking about modernism—a theme on which I had already written on more than one occasion, and which I had been studying for years. During that time, however, Perry Anderson had been trying to convince me that so heterogeneous a category (Mayakovsky and George, Kafka and Proust, perhaps even Lawrence and Tzara) could be of little use: it was too contradictory, or too vague, to have real explanatory value. For a long while I thought Anderson was mistaken. Then I came to the conclusion that he was half right (and modernism should precisely be described as a field of contradictions). Finally, at a certain point, I decided it was I who was mistaken. Weary of trying to square the circle, I resolved to abandon modernism and broke off my original project.[4]

No doubt the category, like many others, can be grist for some skeptic's deconstruction, showing how its components are ultimately arbitrary, contradictory, and incoherent.[5] But then deconstruction being the double-edged sword that it is, one could use it equally to demonstrate that arguments debunking the idea of modernism tend to rely on modernist assumptions and devices. For what it is worth, I propose to build on the work that so many precursors have invested in giving this idea meaning. This is scarcely because I think I am better informed than Moretti or Anderson—far from it. I concur that there is nothing natural or inevitable about the idea. Yet I am looking in it, ultimately, for a different kind of "explanatory value." I am less interested in calibrating the comprehensive, historical order of the arts than in showing how an open-ended set of their works may be enrolled in the service of a specific project in the present. From here on out, while of course inviting criticism, I shall be striving less to establish categorical facts than to articulate the promise of particular speculative possibilities. For me, modernism is a concept whose significance is entirely pragmatic.

To be sure, the artists, critics, historians, and philosophers who have concerned themselves with this concept have hardly been unanimous. Most, especially at this late date, have distanced it from loose notions of modernism as art that is strikingly novel, fresh, or advanced, or as a taste for these qualities. Some have associated it with a distinct style or language characteristic of a historical period that reveals beauty and meaning (or ugliness and meaninglessness). Features commonly associated with this style include not only self-reflexivity, dissonance, and inconclusiveness but also functionality, geometric perspicuousness, and so on.[6] Some, examining such various and conflicting stylistic features, have traced them to an overarching aesthetic philosophy, an "-ism" coincidentally or communicatively shared with significant variations, of how artworks should be made and appreciated with a sense of their timeliness. And then some have tried to explain how this aesthetic philosophy was shaped in turn, and held in place, by forces rooted in particular historical situations of modernity. These represent some of the most general ways of interpreting modernism. Within and between them, there remain refractory disagreements.

The idea of modernism that I am drawn to inherit is perhaps the most commonplace one: that based on the stress on medium. The medium of an art consists of a set of regular materials, instruments, techniques, and forms. The artist employs these to produce recognizable works of that art; in this sense, the medium constitutes the means of artistic production. Normally, such artworks, with their interacting elements, stimulate experiences of beauty, pathos, or meaning in audience members. Artworks often do this by representing parts of the world or life in some special yet intelligible fashion. The same medium that enables an artwork to be produced also enables it to signify something. Conversely, the medium sets certain conditions for the artwork's production and signification. The process of signification highlights another

dimension of the medium: it constitutes a communicative interface between the artist and the audience. The medium places these two in a social relation.

Equipped with this rough notion of the artistic medium, we may wonder why it is that certain artworks—call them modernist—are evidently bent on stressing their mediums, on celebrating and threatening them. The two writers who have broken the most ground in responding to this question, defining modernism as such a response, are Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg. The former, most notably in *Aesthetic Theory*, explains how the stress represents an attempt to mournfully acknowledge, and check, the threat posed to genuine artistic aspiration by commodification.[7] Although I very much want to keep Adorno's concerns and insights in view, I would like to proceed from Greenberg's account. Adorno's critique of the current crisis of the arts expands to cover a larger crisis of reason in toto; this critical theory leads him to toil without prevarication and with painstaking patience in the contradiction of having constantly to undercut the very grounds of his own critique. Writing today on the other side of deconstructionism, so to speak, and having become disenchanted with the extremely scholastic fruits of such metalinguistic, paratactic, recursively ambiguous tours de force, I prefer to be more cautiously modest and to accept that the grounds of my criticism will only be incompletely apparent, let alone rational. I am ready to rely on, and be corrected by, that most human, all too human of instructors: experience. Hence my turn to the hardheaded New Yorker. Greenberg, James Elkins reports, "in the United States and in England, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Scandinavia, and France . . . tends to be considered the most important [art] critic of the second half of the twentieth century."[8] Fredric Jameson affirms that he is the "major theoretical figure of the late modern age and indeed that theoretician who more than any other can be credited as having invented the ideology of modernism full blown and out of whole cloth."[9] His theory is conceptually plainer than Adorno's, yet backed by close reading and criticism of numerous specific works; the data supporting it, as it were, is clearer. And Thomas Crow and Thierry de Duve, among others, have persuasively detailed a number of intriguing parallels between these two thinkers.[10]

Just as Adorno developed his concept of modernism in dialogue with works of primarily music and literature, so Greenberg's thinking is rooted in a career of judging works of the visual arts. By engaging at length with Greenberg and his critics, then, I will be initially rooting my understanding of modernism in approaches to sculpture and painting. Most of the examples I consider in passing in the next few chapters will come from these arts. My ultimate aim, however, is to explore how his theory of modernism can be extended and reinforced to comprise a culture of all the arts. Accordingly, when later in the book I try to support this revised theory with an examination of several concrete examples, I shall look to cinema.

Greenberg characterizes as modernist any artwork that is engaged in a project of Kantian self-criticism with respect to the question, what elements of its medium are necessary to works of this particular art? His classic formulation of this idea is in the late essay "Modernist Painting," although, as we shall see in a moment, some of his earliest essays are arguably even more crucial for getting the idea off the ground.[11] I shall be examining and developing this interest in illuminating the artistic medium at length over the course of this book; Greenberg's own elaborations may be found throughout much of his writing, particularly in *Art and Culture* and "After Abstract Expressionism."[12] As many know, Greenbergian modernism eventually bred a fierce backlash sharpened by antipathy to its author's notoriously peremptory manner as well as by the gold rush to all things postmodern. Currently, much of the art world treats him as a figure of ritual scorn. However, there has been some recent, sensitive criticism of his thinking by J. M. Bernstein, Crow, Arthur Danto, de Duve, and Jameson and an in-depth study by Caroline Jones.[13] As we will see, the critical responses of T. J. Clark and Michael Fried, arguably the two most influential critics and historians of modernist painting after Greenberg, have proved especially helpful for my purposes. What I would like to explore is how, in the stress on medium, there might actually be more at stake than the experience of beauty. I wonder if we might not be able to derive from this "mediumism," as I shall call it, a basic sense of who we are and what is the good for us. Such a philosophy would be at the heart of modernism as a culture.

This returns me to my claim about modernism's cultural components. What would substantiate it is a historical account of why and how modernism inherited important elements of high culture and anticipated—even influenced—those of the counterculture. Clark, particularly in his magisterial commentary on Greenberg, offers us such a history. "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art" develops a critical interpretation of the cultural understanding that guided Greenberg's practice as a critic, focusing on his early, formative essays.[14] Greenberg situates the tradition of avant-garde art, which he and many others would later call modernism, in a crisis in bourgeois culture, one in which "all the verities of religion, authority, tradition, and style—all the ideological cement of society, in other words—are either disputed or doubted or believed in for convenience's sake and not held to entail anything much."[15] Although Greenberg does not delve into the reasons for this crisis, Clark draws out his implicit historical understanding of them from these essays' pointed Marxism.

Focusing on the key work "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Clark observes that "it seems to be an unstated assumption . . . that there once was a time, before the avant-garde, when the bourgeoisie, like any normal ruling class, possessed a culture and an art which were directly and recognizably its own."[16] Writers and artists like Daniel Defoe, Stendhal, Théodore Géricault and others Clark lists, helped record the experiences with which this class largely identified. However, "from the later nineteenth century on, the distinctiveness and coherence of that

bourgeois identity began to fade."[17] Its culture slid into the crisis that eventually produced modernism. What precipitated this were pressures from the classes the bourgeoisie strove to rule. As Clark explains,

> "Fade" is too weak and passive a word, I think. I should say that the bourgeoisie was obliged to dismantle its focused identity, as part of the price it paid for maintaining social control. As part of its struggle for power over other classes, subordinate and voiceless in the social order but not placated, it was forced to dissolve its claim to culture—and in particular forced to revoke the claim, which is palpable in Géricault or Stendhal, say, to take up and preserve the absolutes of aristocracy, the values of the class it displaced. "It's Athene whom we want," Greenberg blurts out in a footnote once, "formal culture with its infinity of aspects, its luxuriance, its large comprehension." . . . Add to those qualities intransigence, intensity and risk in the life of the emotions, fierce regard for honour and desire for accurate self-consciousness, disdain for the commonplace, rage for order, insistence that the world cohere; these are, are they not, the qualities we tend to associate with art itself, at its highest moments in the Western tradition. But they are specifically feudal ruling-class superlatives: they are the ones the bourgeoisie believed they had inherited and the ones they chose to abandon because they became, in the class struggles after 1870, a cultural liability.[18]

In order to present less of a target to working-class discontent, particularly after having so conspicuously affirmed with this class a democratic rhetoric that helped overthrow the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie found it advantageous in the late nineteenth century to downplay and camouflage its class identity. This meant giving up any claim to a distinctive culture or communal self-consciousness, let alone one that trumpeted inherited "ruling-class superlatives." Aristocratic high culture was let go. In its place, the bourgeoisie manufactured a new "popular" culture, one that purports to belong to all of us classless individuals. Such a culture functions to flatter, excite, and distract so that we can stand another Monday morning—quietly overlooking the fact that not everybody needs such mollification. Indeed, for some of the latter, it constitutes a lucrative market; as a result, commercial considerations tend to supplant aesthetic ones in its works, "hence what Greenberg calls kitsch. . . . It is an art and a culture of instant assimilation, of abject reconciliation to the everyday, of avoidance of difficulty, pretense to indifference, equality before the image of capital."[19]

This crisis, where an unabashedly challenging, genuinely communal culture is being replaced by a pandering, pseudouniversal, mass one, is what gives birth to modernism. Modernism is a movement that dissents from this development. It tries to hold on to "bourgeois art in the absence of a bourgeoisie or, more accurately, . . . aristocratic art in the age when the bourgeoisie abandons its claims to aristocracy. And how will art keep aristocracy alive? By keeping itself alive, as the remaining vessel of the aristocratic account of experience and its

modes; by preserving its own means, its media; by proclaiming those means and media as its values, as meaning in themselves."[20]

A couple of things are happening here. First, a fraction of the bourgeoisie is reacting against most of that class's support for the emerging culture of kitsch by asserting the contrary values of traditional, aristocratic culture. To do this, the modernists have to avoid reproducing the academic look of traditional culture, since kitsch culture, especially at its inception, is largely about the cheap simulation of such forms to trade on their prestige. Instead, modernism strives to put old wine in new bottles, traditional aesthetic virtues in futuristic, less exploitable forms.[21] A similar insight constitutes the cornerstone of Adorno's theory: in order to be honest, artists in this historical period of crisis have to bear witness, in their forms, to the pressure to reduce aesthetic value to exchange value. The other thing going on, though, is that this bourgeois coterie understands itself to be claiming and projecting not class values, but purely artistic ones, separate from those that guide and matter to everyday life. These artistic qualities are considered the "repository, as it were, of affect and intelligence that once inhered in a complex form of life but do so no longer; they are the concrete form of intensity and self-consciousness, the only one left, and therefore the form to be preserved at all costs and somehow kept apart from the surrounding desolation."[22] Modernism attempts to save these qualities in works that disengage from the representation of their milieu, in formally self-reflexive sanctuaries of abstraction.

How it pursues this project of formal resistance and shelter leads us back, as Clark indicates in the penultimate quote above, to the famous stress on medium; I shall commence my investigation of that in the third chapter. For our present purposes, this history of Clark's that I have sketched here illuminates how modernism emerges aspiring both to inherit and affirm traditional high culture and to protest against contemporary kitsch culture. It is in this sense that I call it a marriage of high-cultural and countercultural elements. Clark brilliantly dubs this union "Eliotic Trotskyism."[23] Indeed, as an example of how easily a modernist can shift between one or another of these emphases, consider the step in the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard's career, which seemed a baffling jump at the time, from the Maoist *Vent d'est* (1969) to his *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (1979) and the even more elegiac cinema after that, with the interjacent *Tout va bien* (1972) containing almost equal amounts of insurrectionary derision and rueful soulfulness. For those of us who still believe that there is a way these two kinds of elements can fit together into a coherent and compelling communal consciousness, modernism would appear to be the supporting tradition.

Yet this history also casts light on what has become increasingly dubious about this faith. Modernism is the culture of a class that no longer wishes to claim its identity; it is bourgeois culture disowned by its progeny. In response, it tries to stand for purely aesthetic values, but as Clark convincingly argues, who is finally going to be interested in works too abstract to even refer to our

practical lives? Small wonder that the modernist protest seemed finally pointless, if not exasperatingly cultish—a defense of values that cannot really matter anyway. While some critics, like Danto, have linked its demise to the cramped dogmatism of its aesthetics, particularly its "metanarratival" tendency to exclude other approaches to art-making with its demand for progress, Clark, modulating at the end of his essay from interpretation to criticism, finds modernism falling fatally into social irrelevance between two stools.[24] On the one hand, the bourgeoisie has no use for modernism's aristocratic values because they dissent too much from its *faux* populism. On the other, the working classes who are in a position conceivably to overthrow that culture have no use for dissent in the name of such values. Without an audience to which it could really make a difference, modernism became an embalmed curiosity only for posterity.

Or did it? Terminally, and without possibility of revival? Unlike postmodernists eager to kill the Father and move on, with gleeful irony, to the new and improved, Clark pronounces the death of this culture with some sorrow and with apprehension about the rut its passing has left us in. This comes through especially in his later writings.[25] But I wonder if he has not written off too quickly modernism's once and future audience. He characterizes this audience as a shrinking fraction of the bourgeoisie, alienated both from the mainstream of its class and from the working classes. Although this may well have been true throughout most of modernism's history, I am not sure it must be so today.

My reason for optimism is that I believe modernist culture *can* make a practical difference to us, as individuals and as members of a community defined by that difference. This is the central theme of this book. The difference is one rooted in the antikitsch, anticommercial stance that Clark identifies in modernism's origins and treatment of its medium. True, it is not an anticapitalism that proceeds from a working-class identity and so, as he notes in a later book, this political stance is bound to sound to some wishful and flimsy.[26] From such an unlikely premise, then, let me jump directly to the implausible punch line, in order to measure roughly the burden of argument I intend to take up.

My hunch is that modernism can be a culture that establishes and affirms the distinction between consuming and learning, between identifying oneself as a consumer, part of a market, and identifying oneself with other learners in an ongoing, conversational adventure. Indeed, it would proceed from the realization that the prevailing culture of consumerism gravely endangers learning. In the tensions between these two groups and cultures—which are related to, if not identical with, those between the central capitalistic classes—modernism would find its politics.

By "consumption," I am thinking of what exactly? Conventionally, we lump together under the term those activities in modern societies that are contrasted with production. This dichotomy is linked to that between leisure and labor, as well as that between receptivity and expressivity. This chain of binaries, however, tends to naturalize consumption to the degree that consumption

is made to look as necessary to us as leisure and receptivity. However, just as socialists have argued that labor and expressivity could be made to resemble more of an art than a mechanical production, I would like to suggest there is a practice of receptivity that does not involve consumption or the restless casting around for punctual, disjointed, fleeting pleasures and that can be placed at the center of our leisure: learning. Modernism has the power, I believe, to convert consumers into learners, their defining opposites, who progressively deepen the satisfaction they receive from life.

At last I bring education back into the foreground of this picture. But what kind of education am I talking about here: artistic and literary, aesthetic learning? That seems so narrow, effete a taste, hardly a force that could constitute a counterweight to the ubiquitous and implacable drumbeat urging us to buy. Besides, such an education is itself big business, as are all the others on offer. If I hope to play out this argument, I need to explain why there is an education that is not a mere option for those of us who can afford it, but a necessity for all. I need to explain why it cannot be commodified or cultivated by anything we consume and how it can be supported by an alternative culture of modernism. As a placeholder for such an explanation, let me give this education the rather exotic name "existential learning." One thing that stimulates and nurtures existential learning, I shall be arguing, is modernist pedagogy. The culture of modernism serves as a nervous system for the community of existential learners, helping them to develop and to defend themselves from the society and culture of consumerism.

Modernism for existential learners: even this preliminary announcement of my theme indicates that I am separating modernism somewhat from its tight association with modernization. If we follow all the way through on the logic of the stress on medium, I shall argue, we will discover that the mode of experience brought to our attention by this emphasis is ultimately not only that of modern people. It is that of learning beings. For this reason, my philosophical reconstruction of why modernism can still make a difference to us concludes by renaming this pedagogical culture more explicitly, "mediumism." (And if the proclamation of yet another "-ism" amuses as a piece of modernist camp, all the better. Humorlessness is fatal to seriousness.)

Why should modernism, its historical legacy and its current viability, matter to educators? How might appreciation of this educational value affect the way we support mediumism today? Responding to these central questions is how I propose to explore the relation between culture and education in this study. Some will doubtless be disconcerted that there has been little mention of the diversity of, and conflicts between, the racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual cutlures that have preoccupied us for the past few decades. They will probably wonder how an education that is not explicitly multicultural could claim to be responsibly cultural at all. I plan to address these concerns at the appropriate moment in my argument; I shall explain my reservations about cultures of

identity. In the meantime, I would ask the reader at least to entertain a different way of fitting together culture and education, one that I am confident would help heal, rather than exacerbate, our cultural conflicts. We are all familiar with the broad idea of a multicultural education for the tolerance and appreciation of different cultures. Consider now a specific yet capacious mediumist culture for the support and protection of our universally necessary, existential learning.

I realize too that my willingness to talk without batting an eye about saving elements of aristocratic culture will mark me in the eyes of some as an irredeemable elitist. Have I forgotten, or worse, the fact that "there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism?"[27] To the contrary, I want to preserve the charged distinction between civilization and barbarism in as scrupulous and detailed a form as possible. It may be that virtually all works of culture are morally myopic or contradictory in the way that Edward Said, for example, has contended that *Mansfield Park* is.[28] If that were the case, however, would we not have all the more motivation to discern and affirm the aesthetic and moral values in such works, so that we can condemn *on the basis of that affirmation* their disappointing lapses and betrayals? My worry about the Red Guards' treatment of politically incorrect authors, clapping both their virtues and their vices into the stocks, is not that it is too severe but that it may end up accustoming us to the notion that aspirations to elevation are always merely apologies for debasement. Why then bother apologizing? Far from ushering in the Republic of Virtue, this version of the Terror puts us on the road to a coarse and complacent cynicism.

Finally, I should note explicitly what I would think is obvious by now: I do not restrict education to schooling. Many participants in the recent debates on cultural education view the stakes as coming down to how, and which, culture is taught in the classroom. Although I share that concern, to be sure, I want to keep it connected to one that is perhaps more utopian and certainly less attended to, namely, how the realm of public culture beyond the schools—that of the media, museums, architecture, and so on—can be reclaimed for education. How we might live in a school from which we never graduate.

This chapter has introduced the possibility of viewing modernism as a viable, pedagogical culture; the rest of the book can be adumbrated as follows. In the next chapter, I try to characterize more fully the existential learning proper to modernism. I start from Michael Oakeshott's idea of liberal learning, which, following the traditional practice of liberal education, is rooted in our nature as free beings. After elucidating some of the principal characteristics of this learning, I explain how Jean-Paul Sartre, who shares Oakeshott's appreciation of our deep freedom, points to a serious dilemma: how could liberal learning avoid immuring us in bad faith? In response, I try to revise this learning in the light of the emphasis that Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein place on existence. Existential learning would encourage us not only to meet practical problems with intelligent solutions but also to find in these problems regular opportunities for coming back

to, and coherently advancing from, the experience of questionable existence—an experience that is at the core of our authentic being.

Chapter 3 considers in more detail what it would mean to return to this experience. How might modernism help bring us back to it? I address this by resuming the discussion of Clark's response to Greenberg, focusing on the latter's stress on the medium of modernist works. Clark discerns in this stress a central act of negation. I try to seal the connection between this negation and the experience of existence by exploring an analogy between Clark's medium constituted by, and registering, negation, and Sartre's account of consciousness constituted by, and registering, nothingness. The medium and consciousness are what enable us to become aware of whatever exists. Yet as hosts of a negativity distinct from such beings, they also estrange us from the world. By drawing attention to the medium of a work of artistic representation and, by extension, to the medium of our awareness itself, to our consciousness, modernist works remind us of the alien and questionable, nameless dimension of ourselves. Beneath all we have assumed, including our own identities, there is our deeper strangerhood.

This compelling experience of negativity would appear to trap us in a dead end. How can we go on; how can we advance constructively from an experience that dispossesses us of everything familiar? I respond to this in chapter 4 by turning to an alternate understanding of the modernist medium. Fried takes issue with Clark's emphasis on negation; he characterizes the medium rather as a site affirming "presentness." I examine and critically revise Fried's argument, developing out of it a moral orientation. The medium, it appears to me, has the potential to disclose the Present as the good for us, a good that shows us how we conscious beings should live. It teaches us how to accept, rather than assume, our existence. Existential learning thus completes itself in the move from an acknowledgment of our true condition as strangers, to this ethical presentmindedness. And what can facilitate this learning are modernist works that stress their mediums in ways that combine, and reconcile, both Clark's and Fried's emphases.

The previous chapters aim to develop a theory of the mediumist artwork as a pedagogical work for existential learning. If we stopped here, however, the theory would appear unduly idealist in that it evinces little appreciation of its concrete, social context. If existential learning is so natural, then why do so few actually interest themselves in it? Why is *post*modernism today's watchword? Rather than seeing this as disproof of the theory's factual claims, I hear in it a call to work out its politics. Suppose mediumism were being marginalized by a quasiculture occupying the main stage of our society. As evidence for this hypothesis, can we discern how the same features that would be centrally constitutive of this hegemonic culture would be also necessarily opposed to mediumism? Chapter 5 will examine how the forms of immediacy favored by our mass media propagate a kind of absentmindedness that not only dispels social discontent but blocks existential learning. To the extent that mediumism forms

an idealistic culture of existential learning, then, it constitutes a counterculture as well. Anticonsumerism is its politics.

With these fundamentals of a theory of mediumist works and culture in mind, I shall turn in the sixth chapter to some concrete examples. I want to start to test the theory against specific works, especially those outside its original domain of the visual arts. To that end, I examine four contemporary films: Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Café Lumière*, *Rosetta* by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, and Theo Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze*. These raise questions about our existential condition and the limitations of commercialism by drawing attention to the cinematic medium. They constitute guiding examples of mediumism.

By way of summary, my seventh, concluding chapter will plot the main theses of this reconstruction of modernism onto a triangular diagram that Christopher Higgins has formulated to specify the elements of any one, coherent concept of education for the purpose of critical comparison with others. While some people will likely continue to disagree that the cultural education constituted by these theses ought to take precedence over other learning projects, others, I hope, will find its capacity to stand comparison with such projects inviting. They may come to recognize themselves as mediumist educators. I point to some promising directions for the work of such educators. The chapter closes by returning to the book's epigraph, a passage from Rainer Maria Rilke that once upon a time led me to modernism. It seems fitting to finish by rejoining the scope of what remains to be elaborated in this theory to the hope that gave the theory birth.