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## ON MEYER SCHAPIRO



*by Miles Mathis*

I have noticed that every time anyone interviews Jacob Collins, the first thing they ask about is Meyer Schapiro, his great uncle. Jacob accepts that fact graciously, as is his style, but it burns me up. I suspect that under a calm exterior it irks Jacob, too, but I know he will never admit it publicly. So I will do it for both of us.

I wish just once Jacob would say something like, “Don't you get it? *I* am the artist. Meyer was never an artist. He didn't know the first thing about art. I have forgotten more about art than Meyer ever knew. Meyer knew a lot of facts about art *history*, but like all art critics he was a moron when it came to understanding art. Knowing names and dates and knowing art are not the same thing. He was good at talking and writing, but he didn't really care about art. He cared about seeing his name in the paper and getting hired by the universities and lecturing to auditoriums filled with other people who knew and cared nothing for art.”

Since if Jacob had any interesting stories to tell about Meyer, he would tell them, I assume he doesn't have any. The form of his responses to these reporters who ask him about Meyer leads me to believe that Meyer was an egotistical old blowhard who never took any interest in Jacob's talent. Would that really surprise any of us? Not me. I have met and read a lot of contemporary art critics, and I have never seen or heard of one that wasn't a pompous gasbag. If art critics were of any use then art wouldn't be where it is now. Historically, the rise of the art critic and the fall of art have been strictly concurrent.

Here is the quote leading the Meyer Schapiro page at Columbia University:

Art has its own conditions which distinguish it from other activities. It operates with its own special materials and according to general psychological laws.

Like most 20<sup>th</sup> century art criticism, that is empty verbiage. It has zero content. If a 12-year-old asked you what art was, and you said that, the child would answer, “Doh!” Not because the child couldn't understand it, but because even a child can see that is just blather. It is stating the obvious and trying to make it look like it has great meaning.

The two sentences could apply to anything. If they said something about art, then we should be able to change the first word and the sentences wouldn't be applicable. Let's try it:

Pissing in the wind has its own conditions which distinguish it from other activities. It operates with its own special materials and according to general psychological laws.

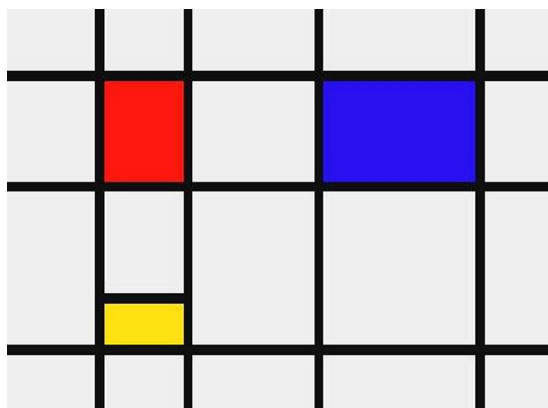
Nope, still true, which means the sentences have no specific content.

That a writer would write such things and that a major university would choose to lead with them on a eulogy page is a sign of the intellectual collapse of an entire culture. Our culture is one that makes people famous for nothing, then continues to boldly broadcast their nothings into space after they are dead.

When we hear about art critics lecturing to artists in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of these art critics was Meyer Schapiro. I have already commented in other papers on the illogic of non-artists lecturing and leading artists. Any real artist from the past would have seen it immediately and been disgusted, but it passes in the current milieu without comment. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was a matter of course that artists would be led by the nose by people who had never created anything and never even tried to create anything. Writers would lead the way. It didn't matter that Whistler had popped a blood vessel every year for thirty years, trying to warn the future of this. It didn't matter that Van Gogh had warned of it. It didn't matter that Nietzsche had warned of it with a brilliance never matched before or since. It didn't matter that the idea was absurd on the face of it, since it would be like sports writers telling LeBron James how to play basketball or like piano salesmen telling Van Cliburn how to play. It happened anyway, and almost no-one after Whistler made a peep. Artists didn't make a peep because by the time of Picasso, the writers had the artists under their thumbs. Any artist who made a peep was simply ignored from there on out. He didn't make the papers and therefore didn't become famous, so you haven't heard of him.

This is why artists still aren't taking on the critics and academics. One, because they are pussies. Two, because they have families they need to feed. Three, because the field of art has been taken over by posers and gasbags, and posers and gasbags will always outnumber real artists a thousand to one. The posers can't allow the real artists any press or TV time, because then people will want to listen to them. If people figure out that real art is still available, the posers will be doomed.

Schapiro may or may not have had interesting things to say about Giotto or the Joshua Roll. I don't know or really care, because I don't need art historians to tell me what to think about old paintings or mosaics. I can come to my own conclusions from just a list of the facts and a look at the works. But concerning contemporary art, Schapiro was lost. I assume he liked Alice Neel, for instance, since he posed for her (above). But that portrait is simply awful. I consider any claim to liking it to be an admission of a serious artistic disability. You are free to like it, but I am equally free to think you have no eye for art. I will continue to think it no matter how famous you are. He also liked Mondrian, and titled one of his famous books *Mondrian: On the Humanity of Abstract Painting*.



Oh, the Humanity! If you find that interesting as an artifact or as a sample of expression, you really need to stick to crossword puzzles and shampoo commercials. That is your level of art and art criticism.

Some will think I am being snide, but that *has* been the level of art criticism over the past century. Because most people can't comprehend art and are more comfortable with ads and common objects, art has been redefined to fit their disabilities. The critic [Arthur Danto](#) and his lotto tickets is the prime example of that, but all critics have devolved in the same general way, talking either about soup cans or white canvases or cans of excrement or a few ruled lines. The level of art has been lowered far beneath crossword puzzles and shampoo commercials, *on purpose*. And it has been done by writers. The artists were only accomplices.

Despite his knowledge of the Romanesque, Schapiro was never a force against this Modern dissolution. He never acted the classicist, fighting Modernism tooth and claw. He was too interested in being liked to do that. By hopping on the Marxist bandwagon (and later off) and interpreting both old and new art as signs of class struggle and whatnot, Schapiro brought art down to the level of politics. Once there, it was ripe for even greater falls. Once art became mainly a thing to be interpreted by writers, it lost any solidity it once had.

Here's a comment about art with some content: art is now a tool of non-artists. It is a whore to be used and abused by anyone with a pen or a pencil (or a checkbook). Schapiro probably related a few useful facts to a few people over his lifetime, but as a writer and critic in the 20<sup>th</sup> century his primary legacy is as an abuser of art. That is what writers and critics did. It is what they were expected to do. They took part in a century-long and culture-wide rapine of art, and they did it with gusto and for their own temporary glory.

From [theartstory.org](http://theartstory.org):

In 1950, Schapiro and fellow critic Clement Greenberg were contacted by Samuel Kootz to help organize an exhibition at the Kootz Gallery, called Talent 1950, which showcased the work of younger artists like Elaine de Kooning, Franz Kline, Sue Mitchell, Esteban Vicente and Manny Farber. Many of these artists had attended lectures given by Schapiro at the New School and at the famed Artist's Club, which was a regular gathering place for artists and writers in Greenwich Village, much in the tradition of the Cedar Tavern.

In 1954, along with the literary and social critic Irving Howe and other New York intellectuals, Schapiro helped launch the magazine *Dissent*, a quarterly newsmagazine of politics and culture, which still exists today. The founding editors opposed Soviet totalitarianism and McCarthyism, and throughout the Cold War, they challenged the Marxist notion that culture in all its

forms should be at the service of politics.

Reminds me of the Woody Allen joke: “Did you hear that they merged *Dissent* and *Commentary*? They are going to call it *Dysentery*.” Again, I ask why art critics should be organizing exhibitions? Shouldn't they be commenting on them, not organizing them? Many people now recognize that Greenberg had an overbearing and negative influence on art history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but because Schapiro wasn't quite as obnoxious, his negative influence is usually missed. We can see it in these two paragraphs. What sort of artists go to be lectured by art critics? The sort that know that is a good way to get noticed. In other words, phonies. Fake artists. *Artistes manques*. People who don't give a shit about art except for its perceived ability to supply them with an income with very little work. From the same blurb we learn, “Many of the era's best artists were not themselves well-versed in the history of their trade, so Schapiro proved to be a valuable asset and friend to many.”

Let's pull that apart. If these were real artists, they should have been able to study art and art history with their own eyes. They should have cared enough to read a few books. Did they really need Schapiro to read and think for them? They didn't go to Schapiro for knowledge of art or art history, since none of them ever showed any knowledge like that before or after the lectures. They went to Schapiro for an entrée into the market. That was always their concern, as is clear from listening to old interviews. If that is not clear, just ask yourself what sort of information “about the history of their trade” Schapiro could give them. Could he show them how to mix paints or build a canvas that would last? Could he show them how to use models in a complex composition? Could he show them which paintbrushes to use for certain effects or show them how colored shadows increased the richness of a harmony? Could he show them how to set up a studio and how to work with models? No, because he didn't know anything about that. You will say they could get that stuff in their studio classes, but they weren't getting it then and they aren't getting it now. Instead, if they are getting anything in their studio classes, it is a variant lecture on politics and theory. The Schapiros invaded the studio classes as well, and in most cases the studio classes don't exist at all anymore ([see here](#)).

Which leads us to the sentence about Marxism above. That is simply an inversion of the truth. To start with, art criticism was heavily influenced by Marxism from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even before the first war. Early on, the critics—and Greenberg and Schapiro are both prime examples—were vocal Marxists. And even when some of them cooled on Marxism after the atrocities of Stalin, they kept the lazy dialectic and squishy logic of Marxist writing, which led directly to the sort of sentence I quoted above, where “art operates according to...general psychological laws.” I am not pro-Capitalist, but I have never had any use for the sort of writing that dominated “intellectual” circles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, since it is a purposeful dodging of all clarity. This dodging of clarity came in a straight line from Hegel, through Marx, and it still dominates academic writing. It is evident in the artstory quotes as well, since the claim that *Dissent* magazine had any interest in challenging art as politics is both foggy and false. All art critics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Schapiro and the others at *Dissent*, did everything they could to subordinate art to culture, and especially politics. The only time they weren't subordinating art to politics is when they were subordinating it to art theory, and the difference isn't very great.

From [Cynthia Persinger](#), we get the admission,

In “The Social Bases of Art,” Schapiro urged contemporary artists to recognize that both the form and content of their work derived from their social conditions.

And,

Schapiro's aim in "The Social Bases of Art" was to convince contemporary artists of the intimate link between art and the social conditions of its production. [p.74]

Not really challenging the idea that art is politics, is it? You will say that was in the 1930's, and *Dissent* magazine was in the 50's, but less had changed in Schapiro's criticism than we are told. Yes, Schapiro was no longer overtly Marxist, since it wasn't cool to be a Marxist in the 1950's. But he was still saying the same sort of things about social relevance, forcing art to bow to culture if not to politics, which again is not a great difference.

Actually, it was never culture or politics the critics wished artists to bow to, it was themselves, the social critics. Talking about culture and politics and history and psychology and all the rest was always just a way to outsmart the stupid artists and to steal their field from them. Which is precisely what happened. Art was not about any artifacts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was about talking. It was extended academic dialogue between people who cared nothing for art and everything about their own airy dialogue.

Just look at the title of Cynthia Persinger's book on Schapiro: *Meyer Schapiro and the Crisis of Meaning in Art History*. The crisis of meaning? A created crisis if there ever was one. *Oh, Art, what does it mean?* Could such a crisis have been manufactured in any other century? I don't think so, because no other century was as hysterical, confused, lost and noisy as the 20<sup>th</sup>. In the past century there has been a crisis of meaning in every possible action, from marriage to sex to child-rearing to art to science to politics to napping. *Napping: what does it mean? Are you a power napper or a snoozer? Take this 100-question personal examination to find out.* Why? Because created crises help to sell things, whether it is a new power-nap pillow or the latest art. The century-long crisis was a brilliant sales ploy by geniuses of marketing. Via this crisis they have been able to totally redefine art as that thing that they can do quickly and easily and that thing that you must pay more and more for. They have stolen art from real artists and refashioned it as a academic exercise, a cocktail party topic, and an obscenely priced piece of (actual) garbage. On the wings of this manufactured crisis, the talentless have driven the real artists from the museums and installed themselves there.

One of the ugliest moments in Schapiro's resume is his part in the protests against Thomas Hart Benton. Although a vocal leftist, Benton had proclaimed himself an enemy of Modernism, and the New York insiders didn't like that, of course. He also argued for the right of the artist to determine his own affairs and for the right of artists to determine their own field. They hated that even more. He also wrote well, and Sinclair Lewis said of Benton, "Here's a rare thing, a painter who can write." They hated that even more. So they did what they would do now: they attacked him as a racist (although he wasn't). He painted things as they were historically, with no bow to political correctness. In other words, he wasn't willing to censor history for political reasons. If a black man looked a certain way, he painted him that way. But he was no racist. Because Benton's murals eschewed politics for realism, Schapiro accused him of standing in the way of class struggle. This was in the '30's, and Schapiro was defining art like the other Marxists around him, as either for or against *the program*. The fact that Benton was always (and famously) on the side of the working class and small farmer and underdog meant nothing to Schapiro and the other Marxist critics, who were more interested in literature and correctness than in actively supporting any real underclass.

At any rate, things got so bad in 1932, when Benton installed his murals in New York, that students at the Art Students League, led by abstract painter Stuart Davis, circulated a petition calling for the destruction of the murals. They had been wound up for weeks by a series of articles by Schapiro and

Paul Rosenfeld. We assume that had the petition gained enough support, Davis and the others may have rioted and destroyed the artworks themselves. This is a measure of how progressive these people really were. Crossing over into fascism has never been a danger only for the right. The left in America has always been more than happy to assume control, demand that you agree with them, and punish you if you don't.†

Schapiro's part in this can be seen in his insistence that “revolutionary content emerges from class struggle and not from the reproduction of American life.”\* That was an attack on Benton's avowed Regionalism. But Schapiro apparently missed the irony of an art critic requiring all artists to be revolutionaries. Who was Schapiro to be telling Benton what to paint or or to be telling people what to look at? Or for that matter how to be revolutionaries? As I said, Benton was a progressive in his own way. He was never a puppet for the ruling class. You might as well call Steinbeck a puppet of the ruling class. Steinbeck “reproduced American life” in *The Grapes of Wrath*, creating revolutionary content at the same time. But because Benton wasn't willing to prostrate himself before these self-appointed priests and rabbis of art in New York City, he was vilified, slandered, and apparently feared for his personal safety.

Not only did Schapiro accuse Benton of being a racist, he accused him of having a position regarding art that was “dangerously close to the Nazis.” Why? Because Benton and the art critic Craven had attributed the downfall of American art to foreign, cosmopolitan interests. In hindsight, we can see that Benton and Craven were right. I have shown in many places that these cosmopolitans were simply masters of marketing, creating a long-term scheme by which they could steal art from real artists, installing themselves in their places. They did this through the manufacturing of crises and a never-ending publishing and media blitz. The real artist couldn't get a word in edgewise, and no one cared if he did, since he didn't use the up-to-date neologisms. And of course this idea for the takeover of art came from Europe. Our big-city phonies just borrowed the idea from their big-city phonies.

So you see that Schapiro turned the truth on its head. It was not Benton and Craven who were acting the fascists, it was Panofsky and Schapiro and Greenberg and the leftists. The Regionalists would have been content to share art. That is what Regionalism means after all. It was an original pluralism, back when pluralism meant something. If the New York Marxists wanted a revolutionary art, they were welcome to it. That is until they required that everyone else paint as the exact same sort of revolutionaries as well. That is when Benton drew the line and even went on the counterattack. He pointed out that art had been coopted and was being forced into a new narrow pen to suit the revolutionaries and the critics. But he wouldn't be told what to do. That was his real crime, and the critics wouldn't stand for his independence. The critics preached revolution but demanded obedience.

We see the same thing now. Nothing much has changed since the 1930's, and art is still squashed under the thumbs of the writers, administrators, and gallery owners. Yes, the revolutionary spirit has dissipated, and the revolution is now just an empty act. But it was always an empty act. It was a loud empty act back then and now it is a self-consciously empty act, but it is the same basic act. The pretense of progressivism to cover up the destruction and theft of art history.

And they use the same tactics against me that they used against Benton 80 years ago. Invert the truth. Because I defend myself and defend traditional art, I am a fascist or an aristocrat or a closet-Nazi or something. This while they are controlling art with an iron fist. They have all the museums and institutions and magazines and I have nothing, but I am fascist. They control everything and I control nothing, but I am the fascist. They have the big cities like New York so completely controlled that a Thomas Hart Benton couldn't even make it through the toll booth on the edge of town. He would be

stopped and told to turn around, with a police escort.

Some will say, “Aren't you always asking for a noisy fight? They certainly had that back then, by golly!” Yes, they did, and even the manufactured hysteria of that time would be preferable to the controlled silence we now have. But I have no nostalgia for that time, as you might imagine. My nostalgia is for the cafe fights they had before, say, 1870. I have no interest in these manufactured political disagreements between armchair psychologists and petty academics of various stripes. I have nothing to say to such people, except “I can see through you.” I would enjoy arguing about art with someone who disagreed with me, but who knew how to paint and how to think. That doesn't apply to any of these people. Kobe Bryant and Michael Jordan might enjoy arguing about basketball with each other, but they wouldn't spend five minutes arguing with some academic who didn't know how to dribble and had never been to an NBA game. These art critics are like basketball “experts” who learned about basketball from reading books and looking at old still pictures of games from the 1920's. I have seen them in front of real paintings and they just look lost without their notes. They don't know what to think about art without a cue from literature. They need Marx and Panofsky to tell them what a painting means, and whether they are free to like it or not.

It is also unfortunate that the Jewish intellectuals who used to pretend to be progressive don't even pretend anymore. It looks to me like intellectuals of all backgrounds have finally capitulated to the imperialist machine. The Jewish mob has been incorporated into the government monster along with the Irish mob, the Italian mob, the neocon mob, and the neoliberal mob. There is no old style liberalism or conservatism, there is only neo, and all the neos are chomping at the bit to bomb Iran, suspend both Congress and the Constitution, install a dictator, and allow the military to patrol the streets. The entire east coast and half the rest of the country now works either directly or indirectly for the CIA, and they are just building prisons for the rest of us. Fairly soon the Meyer Schapiros of the world will be permanently enshrined, all new ideas will be banished, and people like me will be jailed or lynched for thinking we have a right to some independence of thought. All truth telling like this will be a thing of the past.

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I could end there, but I want to add a few words about *Dissent* magazine. From its beginnings, *Dissent* was sold as a tonic to the “bleak conformism” of US political life, and it is still sold that way today. All propaganda, since the magazine has toed the Statist line from the beginning. It was anti-Communist in 1954, which is not exactly going out on a limb or adding anything to the dialogue. We are also told that *Dissent* was anti-McCarthy in 1954. As if that is taking a stand. Unfortunately, we now know that the FBI and CIA were anti-McCarthy by 1954. In fact, that is *exactly* the time the tide turned against McCarthy, since the Army-McCarthy hearings were that year, 1954. Coincidence?

We learned in the Senate Church Committee hearings in 1975 that army intelligence and the CIA had infiltrated the press at all levels *since the early 1950's*. So a prominent “intellectual” magazine is founded in New York City in 1954, and it just happens to lead with anti-Communism and anti-McCarthy. At Wikipedia, we are told that the politics of *Dissent* “generally led to a pragmatic approach to politics.” Wow, more trailblazing! Who ever thought of pragmatism in politics? But really, what could be more conformist and stale than pragmatism in politics? What could be more CIA/FBI/military than pragmatism in politics?

In the 1960's, the skepticism of *Dissent* “toward third-world revolutions and national liberation theories

...separated it from both mainstream liberalism and the growing neoconservative movement.” That's interesting. I don't see how that separated it from neoconservatives, except that neoconservatives weren't just skeptical they were outright hostile. But how did that separate *Dissent* from the CIA, which was actively undermining third world revolutions and national liberation theories in the 1960's? The CIA is only interested in revolutions that overthrow elected representatives and replace them with puppet dictators (think Pinochet). But *Dissent* would probably be alright with that. Today *Dissent* is led by “hawkish liberals” like Paul Berman. What is a hawkish liberal? A guy who wants to bomb Syria in the name of gay pride? C'mon! We all know that a hawkish liberal is just fake liberal installed by the CIA to blow smoke and promote war. That is why we now get this:

Recently, its writers were divided over the U.S. invasion of [Iraq](#). [Michael Walzer](#) opposed the invasion while criticizing the rhetoric of the anti-war movement and Mitchell Cohen supported intervention while remaining critical of the Bush administration. [Wiki]

If you can't see through that, you need to check your prescription. What that means is, “Michael Walzer was paid to pretend he opposed the invasion *so that* he could criticize the anti-war movement, and Mitchell Cohen supported the intervention while pretending he didn't want to snuggle with Bush and have his lovechild.” Cohen was probably “critical” of Bush like this: “Bush is getting caught killing too many innocents. We need to keep the press out of there so that we can pillage the country while still looking like the good guys!” Madeleine Albright actually put it pretty much that way on the CFR website. The government is in control of both sides of every story now, so that they can wheedle you from both angles. If they allow you to read an avowed Marxist like Marshall Berman at *Dissent*, it is only to create the appearance of choice or breadth where there is none. The new Marxist like Berman has been detoothed, and he is only a subtle variant of the “democratic socialist”\*\* the writers at *Dissent* have always claimed to be. We see that by looking at a blurb from his most famous book, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*:

To be modern is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one's own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows. [p. 345]

Berman is supposed to be taking on *Postmodernism* there, which he claims is more sure of itself. But that is just a strawman. Postmodernism never defended or encouraged self-assurance or calmness or clarity. It simply profited from ambiguity and contradiction in more obscene and transparent ways. What Berman is really doing is continuing the romanticizing of personal and cultural disintegration. What Goethe invented as a cultural and artistic novelty with *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* in 1774, Modernism bastardized and enshrined in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a way to corrupt and thereby control the youth. Those perpetual adolescents who are kept in a maelstrom of anguish and self-doubt cannot question or penetrate the lies around them, and they can survive only with the help of the state. They will believe whatever continues the lie of their own romance with their own fervid anguish. If everything that is solid melts into air, there is no reason to question the thieves as they steal your bank account, poison your children, taint your food, and rewrite history to suit themselves. There is no reason to revolt. There is no reason to do anything, except to “make the maelstrom's rhythms one's own.” Did you get that? Do you understand it? Have you been hypnotized? The maelstrom is culture, and you are not to resist it. You are not to create your own personal rhythm. You are to “make the maelstrom's rhythms your own”! You really have to read these “progressive” writers closely, to see what they are up to. Berman is good. That paragraph is poetic, and I admit it. But it is not



progressive. It is insidious. It is the subtle spell of the master, lulling you to sleep while he compresses your cage still further.

†I say this as someone with much more sympathy with the left than the right, as my regular readers know.

\*John Reed Club, 67-68.

\*\*In truth, the neo-socialist isn't a democratic socialist; he or she is a national socialist: pro-war, anti-democracy, anti-Constitution, and most of all, anti-truth. All the current magazines should have this above their mastheads, as a permanent colophon: *anything but the truth!*