Marxist Art History *

Several years ago while I was still an undergraduate student here, I made the very wise purchase of Professor Kleinbauer's Research Guide to the History of Western Art. Sometime later, I became curious to know why I thought about art the way that I did. Why did I approach it from a particular point of view, searching for rather specific data, and not something else? It was not sufficient for me to say that it was Professor Kleinbauer's or Professor Van Buskirk's fault. I began going through his book in hopes of discovering why and how I turned out this way. I spotted Marxism during a cursory sweep through the table of contents. Being of a somewhat conservative and highly libertarian frame of mind, I thought, "Well, that is one thing that, to be sure, I am not." Well, guess what. Very much of how I approach the history of art—while not Marxist in itself—owes a very great deal to Marxism's focus on the social and cultural background of artistic creation.

Marxist art historians range from the very doctrinaire Francis Klingender to the very open-minded Meyer Schapiro. Their adherence to and divergence from Marx's original theory varies widely. But they all seem to have something in common, and that is the notion that their theory is a universal law. Universal laws are very hard to come by, and great caution should be used in testing this theory. Antal, for example, was widely criticized for his neglect of documentary sources. Such evidence is critical for coming to a full understanding and appreciation of an artwork. That Marxist art historians seem to fall down in this area is a very telling problem with this approach. Marxist theory was utilized more frequently with regard to other cultural studies, such as literary criticism.

Now let's move on to Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Walter Benjamin was a German literary critic. He was born in Berlin on July 15, 1892. His family was a cultivated and assimilated Jewish family, and he was fascinated with messianic and redemptive religious themes. The Jewish kabbala remained a potent element in all of

his subsequent thought. I'll spare you the details about his education in his youth and skip right to the chase. He studied philosophy at the universities of Freiburg, Munich, Berlin, and Bern. He received his doctorate degree from the University of Bern with his dissertation, The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism. He was not offered a teaching post on the completion of his degree; three years later, his *Habilitationschrift*, Origins of the German *Trauerspiel*, met with no further success. He then began his vagabond career as a freelance writer and occasional raconteur of radio shows. In 1933, Benjamin went into exile in Paris. The following year he visited Bertold Brecht in his exile in Denmark; over the next year he wrote the article we have read. He remained in Paris until 1940, when the Germans invaded and occupied France. Through the intercession of Max Horkheimer he obtained an affidavit and visa to come to the United States—all he had to do was get to Lisbon. He fled Paris in June and made his way to Lourdes. In the Pyrenees, he was denied passage by a border guard, but continued cross-country. He got as far as Port Bou, where he was notified that the Gestapo were on their way to pick him up. Having reached the end of his flight, he committed suicide by taking an overdose of morphine on September 27, 1940. It is interesting to note that at his death, he left behind an unfinished manuscript on hashish, of which he was a consumer.

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is Benjamin's most famous work. This is a topic which should be of great interest to us, since we deal with reproductions of art works on a daily basis, whether in our own studies or for teaching students. He begins with a discussion of how art has been reproduced through the ages. I'd like to point out that while Benjamin mentions founding and stamping in the ancient Greek period, we know that the Romans had pointing machines which would allow exact replicas to be made of statuary. Before the modern period, the act of reproduction was an art in itself; woodcuts, engravings, and etchings all required a

great deal of artistic skill, and press runs were limited due to the deterioration of the impressing material with repeated use. The coming of lithography allowed many more prints to be made, which in turn allowed art works to reach a much wider market. Photography quickly superceded lithography as a means for art to reach a wide audience. Benjamin brings up a very important difference that is occasionally forgotten by the student of art: a reproduction differs greatly from the original work of art, in that it lacks the physical reality of the original, both in terms of the physical changes it has endured over time and its provenance.

For Benjamin, the authenticity of the work of art is paramount, and the presence of the original is the prerequisite for this concept of authenticity. Authenticity is the essence of something which is transmissible from its beginning. Technical reproduction strips the artwork of this authenticity. Aspects of the original that are not available to the naked eye are brought out by reproductions in film or photography, and such reproduction allows the artwork to exist in an environment which was unattainable for the original. His excellent example is that of playing choral music recorded in an outdoor setting in one's drawing room, but one could also picture Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* hanging over one's toilet. So one is left with an "aura" of the original when dealing with a reproduction. This aura is the unique phenomena of the distance between the viewer and the artwork, however close the reproduction may be. But the so-called masses wish to have these works brought closer to them, both spatially and humanly, and reproduction fills this need. They come to accept the reproduction as the original. This leads to changes through time of our sense perception of the artwork, and this can be comprehended as a decay of its aura. Opportunities for the work's exhibition increase exponentially, so that the nature of the work is transformed from its original definition. Reproduction emancipates the work of art from its earliest function, that of ritual service. For Benjamin, its ritual function is then replaced by a political function.

Benjamin focuses a great deal on the medium of film. He states that the performance of a stage actor is presented directly to the audience, while a screen actor's performance is presented by a camera to the audience. This separation between the actor and the viewing public has several results. The scene is effected by shooting from numerous camera angles and the use of close-ups, moving shots, etc. The actor's performance is effected by these set-ups as well, but more importantly the actor has lost personal contact with the audience. He can no longer adjust his action or speaking to the audience's reactions, just as the audience no longer identifies with the actor, but now identifies themselves with the movie camera. Benjamin feels that in film, the actors have no aura to show their audience, because the actors' presence is necessary for the aura. The film industry responds to this "shriveling" of the aura by building up the personality of the actor outside the studio—the cult of the movie star. This cult does not fill the space formerly occupied by the aura, but replaces it with the "spell of personality"—what Benjamin describes as the phony spell of a commodity. The increasingly widespread media of film and the press in the early part of this century turned everyday people into actors, and readers into writers. Just as with acting, the distinction between the author and his readers is changing its basic character; literary license becomes common property.

Mechanical reproduction has similar repercussions for the viewer of the visual arts. Reproduction changes the audience's reaction to the art. Benjamin repeats the timeworn lament that the masses seek distraction while true art demands intellectual participation of the viewer—pure concentration. A single person concentrating on a work of art is absorbed by it. By contrast, a large group of viewers absorbs the work of art; it becomes part of their cultural furniture. The cultural value of film recedes into the background by putting the public into the position of the critic, while at the same time the viewer/critic does not need to concentrate on what he is seeing.

Benjamin finishes his article with a bang. Fascism attempts to give the distracted masses an opportunity to express themselves, but it preserves the holding of property. The result of this is that aesthetics are introduced into political life. For Benjamin, such an introduction results in only one thing: war. He feels that war alone can set a goal for mass movements while retaining the property system. He quotes part of Marinetti's futurist manifesto on the Ethiopian colonial war as a prediction of the combination of an accelerating production force and technological advances with the retention of the property system. Fascism's introduction of aesthetics into politics allows the distracted mass to be entertained by its own self-destruction. Communism's response is to politicize art. Benjamin views the reproduction of art works and their wide distribution to the masses as a beneficial thing, because it democratizes art—in turn, helping to free the people.

The next article up for discussion is Meyer Schapiro's "Nature of Abstract Art." Schapiro himself is an amazing specimen, as art historians go. He was born in Lithuania on September 23, 1904, the descendant of Talmudic scholars. His family emigrated to the United States when he was three. During his processing at the immigration facility on Ellis Island, his original name—spelled "Meir"—was changed to the "Meyer" with which we're all familiar. He was encouraged by his parents to let his curiosity run free, and he applied his agile mind to reading, drawing, photography, working with electrical gadgets, and sports. In 1920, at the age of 16, he entered Columbia College as a holder of both a Pulitzer scholarship and a Regents scholarship. His studies emphasized Latin, modern languages, mathematics, ancient and modern literature, anthropology, philosophy, and art history. Before he turned 20, he earned his bachelor's degree with honors in art history and philosophy. He remained at Columbia for his graduate work in art history, and he completed his dissertation, "The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac," in 1929. His teaching career began in 1928,even before the completion of his dissertation, when he was appointed lecturer in art history.

He taught mainly at Columbia, until his retirement in 1973, but also taught at New York University, the New School for Social Research in New York, and briefly at Harvard and Oxford Universities. He was known as a mentor to generations and a galvanic lecturer, and his range as an art historian was universal because he believed in the universality of art. He sketched, painted, and sculpted all of his life. He had not only an encyclopedic memory, but a photographic one as well; he could remember art works that he had seen only once, decades before! His main areas of interest were somewhat unusual—mediaeval and modern—and he was a great champion of contemporary art. As a lecturer, he was a phenomenon. Listen to this brief quote from Professor Marshall Berman of CUNY:

> I fell in love with Meyer Schapiro the first time I saw him. As I write this, more than 30 years later, I am just about the age now—middle 50s—that he was then. I think it's important to reconstruct the feel of it—the shock, the rush—to give him the homage he deserves. My friends at Columbia were saying, You have to see this guy, he's a living legend. I was cynical about living legends, but at last I went, and (was) jammed against the wall in an overheated, overcrowded room. Inside five minutes I was knocked out. He talked about Gauguin and Van Gogh—and Zola and Shakespeare and Augustine and Engels and William James and Tolstoy and Picasso and Non-Euclidean geometry; as he spoke, he projected an amazing flood of images, modern and medieval, paintings and newspaper photographs and blueprints and cartoons, representational and abstract, high and low, works thousands of years old and works that he said weren't finished yet. He made dazzling jumpcuts into the past, into radically different cultures, into visions of the future. His talk reached a dramatic climax a couple of minutes before the bell, and finished exactly when it rang. But it sounded like he could go on forever. I sighed: did he have to stop? The friend who had brought me and some of the people around us said they were "regulars;" they had been going to his lectures for years, and they still felt the pull, the flood, the intensity, the desire. DON'T STOP! It was like sex, or music, or a few other peak experiences: he had shown us the richness of being. And every one of us seemed to feel he had done it for ourself alone. "So what did he say?" my girlfriend asked that night. I felt I could spend my whole life trying to explain, and never reach the end.

For such a dazzling scholar, he did not publish very much during his career. With the exceptions of two books on Van Gogh and Cézanne in the 1950's, most of his publications were collections of his

papers which were published after he retired in four volumes by Braziller. He finally died on March 3, 1996, at the ripe old age of 91.

His article, "Nature of Abstract Art," is a critique of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s book *Cubism and Abstract Art*. His aim is to highlight and fill out something that he felt Barr's book lacked: to draw connections between abstract art and the conditions in which it was created. He begins by describing the birth of abstract art conceptually—starting from a visual world where abstract forms could not be readily accepted because they had not been seen before. Abstract art allowed forms and colors to have their autonomy and concrete aesthetic expression. The new art form changed artists' attitudes toward past art as well, allowing them to appreciate the forms of formerly unintelligible art, such as that of children. Artists' horizons were also expanded to include non-western works of art. The art of the whole world was put on an unhistorical and universal plane displaying the creative energies of all humankind. This new vision revolutionized general art theory by destroying the classic ideas of artistic imitation. But as abstract art aged, its adherents reverted to the use of natural forms. Abstract art, however, is here to stay; it has had a great impact on all artistic theory, and concepts of absolutes and pure art are to be found in all artistic schools of thought.

Schapiro criticizes Barr's blind acceptance of abstract art's theories at face value, as well as his notion that the history and nature of the society where it arose is irrelevant. Barr's unhistorical view of abstract art causes him to fall back on the cyclical theory of art championed by many German art historians—that each new art theory is a reaction against its predecessor, and hence there is a generational perpetual alternating motion of styles. An immanent purpose is then brought in to explain similarities between the style concepts of different generations. When a style no longer serves the needs of the artists, it is replaced by a different style. Schapiro believes that stylistic

change which stems from this sort of antithetic sense occurs only under impelling historical conditions. He does not agree with the idea that subsequent painters will paint differently from their forerunners, just to be different. Great historical styles in art and literature correspond with momentous changes in the history of society.

He begins by using Impressionism as an example. The detractors of Impressionism had different complaints about it. For the classicists, Impressionism was unclear and destroyed linear form; for the symbolists, it was too banal and photographic. The artistic styles which followed Impressionism tried to correct these wrongs, as the artists saw them. But as Schapiro points out, the reaction against Impressionism did not occur after its most original possibilities had been realized. Groundbreaking strides in Impressionism were being made well into the twentieth century. He examines what was happening in France in the 1880's. Some artists did not find Impressionism as a workable style for them; Schapiro mentions Gauguin and Van Gogh. He examines their reaction to Impressionism by looking at their personal backgrounds; these were middle-class young men, trying to earn a living through their art. Society had changed since the birth of Impressionism in the 1860's; by 1885 only artists had freedom and integrity, but often they had nothing else. Impressionism drew people who were discontent with their boring middle-class jobs and life, which had been made worse by the appearance of monopoly capitalism. But the Impressionistic style did not suffice for these new artists; they wanted more than dispassionate atmospheric pictures. So the Post-Impressionists injected their art with expression and the exotic.

Schapiro's next example comes from early Impressionism. The choices of subject matter and aesthetic devices of these artists—promenades in the city, boating trips, travel—demonstrate their concept of art as individual enjoyment, which they held to be the highest field of freedom for the enlightened bourgeois detached from the official beliefs of his class. Such bourgeois sociability

changed over time, becoming more urban and commercial in its focus. Artists such as Gauguin and Van Gogh, who could not afford to participate in this cosmopolitan circle, found themselves in isolation in an anonymous indifferent mass. This was the reason that such artists desired more order and morality in their art. They did not know the social and economic source of their disadvantaged position, so they sought a replacement religion or societal model through their art. Such a project can be seen in Van Gogh's idea for an artists' commune, which Schapiro postulates was an attempt to reconstitute the human sociability that capitalism had destroyed. The main point of these examples is that the reaction to a style of art is not inherent in the nature of art, but came from the responses that the artists made to their own cultural situation.

Schapiro then goes on to debate Barr's notions that representation is a passive mirroring of the world, while abstract art is pure aesthetic activity. Schapiro lays the blame for this misconception on a mistaken idea of what representation is. Nothing can be completely realistically reproduced, hence realist artists cannot be said to be slaves to the physical world; by the same token, there is no such art which is entirely unconditioned by experience. Both realism and abstraction involve the artistic freedom of the creator, who chooses either to depict precisely what he sees or to evolve new abstract forms from the world around him.

Barr believes that the exclusion of the natural world in abstract art, while losing personal and social values, renders aesthetic values in a pure form. Schapiro disagrees, proposing that such forms are not "pure" but are filled with the artist's mode of seeing and emotional attitudes. In finding ways to express their emotional and intellectual outlook, artists choose either to retain the conditioning object from the real world, or construct unassociated forms that will produce a similar emotion or thought in the viewer. Abstract artists make judgments on the external world when they eliminate or distort natural forms. When the artist feels that an aspect of experience is alien to art

and the higher realities of form, he discards them and replaces them with forms of his own. Abstraction expands the catalog of forms available for the artist's use exponentially; he is free to choose from all traditions and sources.

Schapiro then addresses some of the artist's statements in Barr's book. While Barr tries to focus on the formal elements of Malevich's *White on White*, Schapiro demonstrates the similarity of this work with Malevich's earlier Cubist painting of *Woman with Water Pails.* The interest in balance and unarticulated forms in the latter painting had their precursors in the Cubist figural work. The same applies to Picasso's *Circus Acrobats* and his later Cubist works; the artist links his subjective experience of the world to his non-abstract and abstract works. Similar ideas were in Kandinsky's mind; he brought his interests in theosophy and synesthesia to his figural works before 1912, and his totally abstract works which followed. In discussing the Italian Futurists, Schapiro points out that the mechanical forms favored by these artists are not a reflection of existing technology. After all, mechanical machines had been around for more than a century, but the Futurists were newcomers to the art scene. The artists in the recently industrialized countries of Europe and Asia all produced differing representations of the place that machines had in life. Schapiro states that the development of mechanical abstract forms stems from the values assigned to man and machine within the ideologies of a particular society. Thus, he posits that "man as machine" is economic rather than biological in its emphasis. For the Italian Futurists, their artistic style was influenced by the contemporary socio-economic situation in Italy—struggling to expand production to compete with the other European nations. The existence of a strong visual tradition in Italy highlighted the conflict which the modernizing of the country created. Progress in the socio-economic sphere was translated into movement and mobility for the artists. Technology took its place in art, both as a rationalization of industry in post-World War I Europe and as a reformist belief that technology

would solve all of the world's social and economic ills. The failure of technology to effect a peaceful transition to socialism led to the mechanical abstract style's decline, in favor of biomorphic abstraction and Surrealism.

So now we have taken a long, hard look at how Marxist art history changed the focus of historians from formalist studies of art works to a history of society and culture. The main problem which has irritated me since the beginning with this approach, in the theories we have seen, is the repeated emphasis on social factors in the creation of art. Cultural factors do play a role in artistic creation—even a very great role, I will admit—but I feel that it is necessary to retain the role of the artist's personal vision. An artist will paint or sculpt differently on different days, with no particular societal reason. The significance of the artist's own personal inclinations and peculiarities must never be forgotten.

*** NOTE:**

This is a lecture presented to Professor W. Eugene Kleinbauer's Fine Arts A500 Historiography of Western Art class on October 28, 1999 for the discussion of the Marxist art history topic.

The quote from Prof. Marshall Berman appears on this web site:
http://www.wilpaterson.edu/wpcpages/icip/newpol/issue20/berman20.htm

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," appears in Hannah Arendt's edition of his works, Illuminations (New York: Schocken, 1969).

Meyer Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art," appears in Modern Art: 19th & 20th Centuries (New York: George Braziller, 1978).