

America's greatest empiricist

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Review of:

Meyer Schapiro's Critical Debates: Art Through a Modern American Mind by C. Oliver O'Donnell, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2019, 272pp, 36 b. & w. illus. ISBN 9780271084640 \$ 99.95

C. Oliver O'Donnell's *Meyer Schapiro's Critical Debates* is a welcome addition to the library of twentieth century theoretical art historians. There have been a number of excellent studies of Schapiro's thought and politics but until the dissertation of Cindy Persinger, no attempt to bring them together.¹ O'Donnell's study does this with a deep dive into a number of archives, above all Schapiro's own voluminous one at Columbia University, and provides a largely convincing account of America's 'greatest' art historian.

O'Donnell well explains Schapiro's enigma. He was everywhere, he knew everyone, and he read everything. But he had a strangely bifurcated career, alternating between traditional studies of medieval art (though, later addressing interested philosophical questions) and the works on modern art and the infamous 'Marxist' elements that have been gone over endlessly. O'Donnell wants to reduce this paradox by restoring Schapiro to 'much larger, overlapping domains of intellectual and visual culture' (12).

The whole book is staged in terms of some significant intellectual encounter between Schapiro and another scholar, so each one deals significantly with a personality that figured into his scholarly career at any time (e.g., Ananda Coomaraswamy, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, Max Raphael). This strategy turns evolving elaborations of contrasting viewpoints between thinkers into formal 'debates' rather reifying them. This is to say that Schapiro tends to be understood as theoretician, or responding to theoretical questions, and his beautiful, synthetic criticism is less elaborated. O'Donnell is aware of this bias, noting that 'perhaps...[the book] is not as comprehensive as some might hope; not all of Schapiro's writings are discussed, and some are given far less weight than a different book about Schapiro might give them' (39).

This book is exhaustively researched and brings to light many of Schapiro's unpublished manuscripts in his archive at Columbia University. Nevertheless, with the use of teaching and manuscript notes, I confess that sometimes I had a difficult time navigating between Schapiro's published thought, his notes, contemporaries' reactions, and O'Donnell's own opinion. Schapiro indeed tangled with the best, but

¹ Cindy Persinger, *The Politics of Style: Meyer Schapiro and the Crisis of Meaning in Art History*, PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2007. Thanks to Roger Rothman for reading a draft of this review and offering helpful improvements.

the result is that we have to discern through inference what Schapiro himself believed. As I will discuss at the close of this review, the presentation of the life encourages seeing little if no unity in the scholar's production.

Summaries of chapters

The first chapter – '1929/Formalism and Perception' – begins with Schapiro's precocious dissertation on Moissac.² Rather than immediately situate Schapiro the immigrant amidst working class Brooklyn and the formation of his much vaunted Marxism, we instead delve into the apparently formalist elements of the thesis. Here, O'Donnell stages a confrontation with Emanuel Löwy and Roger Fry as Schapiro's 'first substantive intellectual debate' (15). Löwy had provided a kind of phenomenology of archaic forms in Greek art and Schapiro had accepted this, while criticizing the archaeologist's nineteenth century belief that such forms are perfected toward naturalism. O'Donnell thoughtfully compares Löwy's characteristics of Greek art to Schapiro's reverse account of the rise of Impressionism in his 1948 lecture, 'The Value of Modern Art'. It is strange, however, that O'Donnell ascribes Schapiro's attention to Löwy as an enthusiasm for formalism rather than an artistic youth's appreciation for the positive aesthetic values of archaic styles.

Schapiro had an early enthusiasm for Roger Fry's work, explained by an interest in 'larger perceptible wholes' (22). This raises the question of whether Fry had anything to do with Gestalt psychology. It is worth pointing out that the problem of the 'gestalt' (if not '*ganzheit*') was discussion all throughout the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth.³ Schapiro was a lifelong artist. Rather than 'whole' denoting a school of psychology, isn't it possible that the 'whole' is simply the mutually accommodating field that the artist seeks to organize? Once again, an artist's sensibility would seem to be important here.

O'Donnell turns to Schapiro's actual acquaintance with a Gestalt psychologist, Max Wertheimer, who had been dismissed from his post at the University of Frankfurt and emigrated to New York in 1933. O'Donnell records one of Schapiro's stories that Wertheimer reacted adversely to being shown the trumeau of Souillac, which he eventually understood when it was inserted into its stylistic tradition. Wertheimer had an eye for naïve pictorial features and had coined the *Dingfront* for art that, similar to Löwy, focused on preserving the salient front of an

² Meyer Schapiro, 'The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac', Diss., Columbia U, 1929; Meyer Schapiro, 'The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac, Part I', *Art Bulletin* 13.3 (1931): 249-351, 464-531.

³ This 'Gestalt problem' is discussed in Mitchell Ash, *Gestalt psychology in German culture, 1890–1967: Holism and the quest for objectivity*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, ch. 6.

object.⁴ It seems harsh, then, that O'Donnell argues that the Gestalt fixation on 'manageable and comprehensible wholes' led them to difficulties (25). After all, hadn't Wertheimer re-organized his stylistic percept in line with the Gestalt shift?

John Dewey makes his first appearance as a figure who had similar holistic interests as the Gestaltists – but preferable because his perspective was subjective and 'malleable' (27). Then we jump forward to encounters with Gombrich because thematically they relate to these stylistic themes. Gombrich's famous schema have some origin in Löwy's work as well and both saw a progressive movement toward naturalism. O'Donnell shows how in unpublished correspondence and teaching notes Schapiro indicated the shortcomings of Gombrich's schema in art history. He argued that the schema could not explain itself and, also, criticized its asepticism in not addressing questions of value.

In '1936/Reviewing *Kunstwissenschaft*' we move to the mid-1930s and Schapiro's well-known review of the second volume of the Vienna group and their journal *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*. O'Donnell rightly calls this review 'Janus-like' (35) in its qualified interest in the work of the Viennese, particularly Hans Sedlmayr and Otto Pächt. O'Donnell arrives at the Viennese through Schapiro's review of Jurgis Baltrušaitis' book that had been invited by the Viennese art historians for another journal that they dominated, *Kritische Berichte*.⁵ For O'Donnell, this review rehearses the problems Schapiro that would have with the Viennese, and indeed later in the century in the 'Two Cultures' debates, which is the balancing of law-like generalizations and description. Baltrušaitis proposed a law of the determining power of the frame, which Schapiro shot down in a manner that will become common (in his discussions of Freud, Heidegger, and others).

Embracing formal determination is interpreted as a forcing of French vitalism into both Baltrušaitis' work, and that of his mentor, Henri Focillon. The frame for Baltrušaitis has an active role in determining the composition (42), which to O'Donnell sounds like animism. For O'Donnell too, the 're-creation' of the work of art by Pächt (38), or the surpassing of the study of 'art corpses' (43) by Sedlmayr can only invoke in a vitalist way *Lebensphilosophie*. Yet the Viennese's formalism was not 'gestalt-like' (37), it was orthodox Berlin gestalt psychology.⁶ And one need not

⁴ Mentioned in Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954, 118.

⁵ See Schapiro's review, 'Über den Schematismus in der Romanischen Kunst', *Kritische Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur* 1 (1932-33), 1-21 [reprinted in English as 'On Geometrical Schematism in Romanesque Art', in *Selected Papers*, 1:265-84]; of Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *La stylistique ornementale dans la sculpture romane*, Paris: Leroux, 1931.

⁶ I have argued this point in a series of papers: 'Materializing *Strukturforschung*', in Dan Adler and Mitchell Frank (eds.), *German Art History and Scientific Thought*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012, 141-160; 'La "second" école de Vienne et les sciences sociales', *Austriaca: Cahiers universitaires d'information sur l'Autriche*, in Céline Trautmann-Waller, ed. (2012); Shortened English version, 'The "Second" Vienna School as Social Science', *Journal of Art*

invoke Dilthey on *Verstehen* and *Erklären* when the more apposite pair of terms is the *Leib* and *Körper*, well known to Sedlmayr and Pächt through their reading of Max Scheler, Edmund Husserl and the Gestaltists. The lived, experienced body (*Leib*) cannot be identified with the biological unit (*Körper*) that supports it and the same is true of the work of art and its physical support.

Turning to the review, O'Donnell refreshingly does not fixate on the apparent irrationality of the Vienna group, turning instead to possible comparison to Schapiro, which revolve around the science vs. humanities duality. But O'Donnell focuses on Sedlmayr's notorious 'Macchia' essay on Brueghel, in which the art historian tied 'color patches' to estrangement (*Entfremdung*).⁷ He connects this symptomology to Dilthey's *Verstehen* but it is more important to connect it to Otto Pächt's 'Gestaltungsprinzipien' of the year before.⁸ Sedlmayr does not cite it, but Pächt had nominated the arrangement of flat forms on the frontal plane and included Brueghel in this 'Netherlandish' tendency.⁹ Indeed, Pächt's and not Sedlmayr's pre-1933 theory agree with O'Donnell's characterization of Novotny as 'inductive, comparative, and generalizing' (51).¹⁰

When O'Donnell therefore insists on the affinity of Sedlmayr and Schapiro based on the *ethical* lesson to be drawn from the work I am not completely convinced. Schapiro's interpretation of the *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1560s, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels) as expressing moral doubts about market speculation appeals to the history of sixteenth century Netherlands. Sedlmayr's observation is instead *Weltanschauung*, something true of Bruegel whether he knew it or not. Here, a connection to Pächt would have been more

Historiography 7 (2012): 1-17; 'Otto Pächt and 'National' Constants in Late Gothic Painting', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 65 (2018): 135-153.

⁷ Hans Sedlmayr, 'Die "Macchia" Bruegels', *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* 8 (1932): 137-59; trans. in Christopher Wood (ed.) *The Vienna School Reader*, New York: Zone Books, 2000, 322-376.

⁸ Otto Pächt, 'Gestaltungsprinzipien der westlichen Malerei des 15. Jahrhunderts', *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* 2 (1933), 75-100.

⁹ Although Sedlmayr knew Novotny and his earlier work, his book was only ready in 1936 and does not seem to have influenced Sedlmayr in 1933; see Agnes Blaha, *Der Wiener Kunsthistoriker Fritz Novotny und die wissenschaftliche Rezeption Paul Cézannes*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Vienna, 2009.

¹⁰ As I have argued, the 1934 article by Sedlmayr marks a decisive break in his methodology 'Obscene History: The Two Sedlmayrs', *Studia Austriaca* 24 [2016]: 79-93). While other scholars have been content to conflate the different aspects of his career, it is necessary to recognize the cosmopolitan, scientific, Gestalt-derived content of his theory up this essay, a change from which seems to have been partly occasioned by a desire to succeed Schlosser in the chair at Vienna.

convincing, and indeed Pächt's gestalt humanism apropos the Two Cultures debate.¹¹

The chapter '1941/Science and the Dialectic' fully addresses Schapiro's political commitments and their immediate changes. O'Donnell traces Schapiro's politics from his parents' affiliations in Lithuania to working-class Brownsville, Brooklyn. Schapiro's published pseudonymous essays following an orthodox communist party line but his associations with official organs of Communism cooled, with a 'postwar tempering' with the Courbet essay of 1941 – 'Courbet and Popular Imagery' – the 'climactic pivot' (58).¹² O'Donnell asks us not to scrutinize the differences between two important essays of 1936 and 1937, respectively, 'The Social Bases of Art' and 'The Nature of Abstract Art', so as 'not to lose the forest for trees' (63). Yet, as he notes, they do share a different stance to the concept of freedom.

Here, we begin a confrontation with the Marxist art writer, Max Raphael, who split with Schapiro after he sent the former a copy of the Dewey commission about the Trotsky trial (78). For O'Donnell, Raphael is 'totalizing' (66), relying on 'dialectical reasoning' (67). Schapiro is opposed to Raphael through an embrace of empirical history, and a natural science attitude. The contrast is brought out in their respective reception of Picasso's *Guernica*, negative by the orthodox Raphael and more ambivalent for Schapiro, a 'a mere record of index of an individual's struggle to balance his everyday practice against some quite serious and intractable political questions' (77).

O'Donnell nicely documents the post-war challenges of recovering Marxist thinkers. McCarthyism hit particularly close to home for Schapiro as he was brought to testify in 1949 before a grand jury. Schapiro refused to join the Committee for Cultural Freedom, which seemed red-baiting to him, and helped found the new journal *Dissent* in 1953, signalling his more democratic values. O'Donnell places Schapiro's new championing of the values of freedom promoted by the avant-garde in this light.

In pinpointing Schapiro's views of Marxism, O'Donnell's presentation is rich but still leaves some uncertainty. There are issues of the genre of writing – party or popular or scholarly – and then the reaction to the show trials and other events in Soviet Russia and American responses, including McCarthyism. Still, there would then seem to be three questions to be kept separate; what is Schapiro's Marxist politics (who is the vanguard and what is their role? Which nation will lead a revolution?), his theory of society and historical development (does the base and superstructure, in general, account for the dynamics of society?), and what texts

¹¹ For Schapiro's and Pächt's correspondence, see Cindy Persinger, 'Reconsidering Meyer Schapiro and the New Vienna School', *Journal of Art Historiography* 3 (December 2010).

¹² Meyer Schapiro, 'Courbet and Popular Imagery', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 3 (1941): 164-191.

were available at which times?¹³ I suspect that Schapiro was sympathetic to a broadly materialist explanation of society and history as an empirical question. Further, it may be that the production of autonomous specialized studies – because of their scope or self-limitations – did not directly trigger problems or require mention of political economy.

In '1947/The "Aesthetic Attitude". Coomaraswamy's Metaphysics, and the Westernness of Art's History' we pass to Schapiro's engagement with Ananda Coomaraswamy, curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and increasingly sage of traditional artistic values and the occasion – via his Festschrift – for Schapiro's famous essay, 'On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art'.¹⁴ The two had corresponded on iconographic questions but O'Donnell builds some clarifications and distinctions into a 'debate'. O'Donnell acknowledges the socialist influence on Coomaraswamy, and the fact that his promotion of the medieval artisan expressing timeless qualities of his society is consonant with Schapiro's 'romantic anticapitalist tendencies' (88). But the discussion of 'naturalism' – for Coomaraswamy a negative development and index of the decline of religious values and for Schapiro a mark of a modern viewpoint that allows scholarly attention to such values – is made to be a sticking point.

A debate in *Art Bulletin* over the interpretation of a relief in Persepolis – *Darius Fighting a Monster* – is made to be quite significant. In a replay of what is essentially the debate over the Laocöon, Schapiro plays Lessing to Coomaraswamy's Winckelmann.¹⁵ For Schapiro, the expressionless face is not a reflection of cultural values but a demand of the medium. For Coomaraswamy, even with formal restrictions to art, this limitation is in a way an expression of cultural values.

Turning to the essay for Coomaraswamy's Festschrift, Schapiro had affirmed the existence of aesthetic values within the Romanesque period – 'spontaneity, individual fantasy, delight in color and movement, and the expression of feeling that anticipate modern art' (92). For O'Donnell the acceptance of aesthetics is an acceptance of science over 'metaphysics'. Yet upon arriving to New York in 1940 and quickly meeting Schapiro, Rudolf Arnheim devoured Coomaraswamy's works and visited the curator in Boston. We can imagine the fast friends discussing Coomaraswamy's works and I believe they would both have been excited by them and the utopian, modernist idea of re-achieving balance for the artists in society.

This chapter concludes with a consideration of a posthumous essay, 'The Fine Arts and the Unity of Mankind', which seems to reveal a framework for his

¹³ In his excellent study of Dewey, the philosopher Peter Manicas notes that for Dewey 'Marxism' meant mostly the writing of the 'Second International': *Rescuing Dewey: Essays in Pragmatic Naturalism*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008.

¹⁴ Meyer Schapiro, 'On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art', in *Art and Thought: Essays in Honour of A. K. Coomaraswamy*, London: Luzac and Co., 1947, 130–50.

¹⁵ Ananda Coomaraswamy and Meyer Schapiro, 'Letters to the Editor.' *Art Bulletin* 23 (1941): 173.

dealings with figures like Coomaraswamy. Schapiro embraces an empirical standpoint for history and rejects 'metaphysical presuppositions and a priori frameworks' (94) and affirms the more immediate availability of visual cultures to historical understanding. But O'Donnell is concerned that this modern universalizing framework will be misconstrued by contemporary readers. He therefore produces two examples, the paintings of Robert Motherwell and the photography of Alfred Stieglitz, as examples of variety that respects difference and evades 'domineering power relations' (100).

The chapter, '1956/Pragmatic Psychoanalysis and the Confirmation of *Woman I*' details Schapiro's interactions with Freud and his ideas, in particular Schapiro's famous essay on Freud's interpretation of Leonardo da Vinci.¹⁶ O'Donnell charts Schapiro's engagement with Freud from the early study of Silos, to an engagement with Paul Schilder in the 1940s, to the Van Gogh and Cézanne volumes of 1950 and 1952, the rather critical Leonardo essay, and finally the apparently pro-Freudian 'Apples of Cézanne' of 1968.¹⁷

Throughout, O'Donnell inflects Freud with Dewey, to 'mediate psychoanalysis by way of Deweyan ideas' (109). Schapiro's rather damning criticism of Freud's account of Leonardo is regarded as an intervention like that on Marxism: 'a more thoroughgoing empirical investigation of its foundation' (113). O'Donnell sees Schapiro's theory of still life in his 'Apples of Cézanne' as a pragmatist reworking of Freud. Lastly, the author considers the anecdote of Schapiro's visit to De Kooning's studio in 1952, while the artist was working on the famous *Woman I* painting and supposes that Schapiro's support of figuration (contrary to Greenberg's abstraction) led to De Kooning's steadfast belief in the correctness of his strategy.

As with Marx, O'Donnell seems to strive to retain contact with the radical figure of Freud, in spite of Schapiro's own negation. If as in Van Gogh's case, 'the world around us is an object of strong desire or need, as a potential means of fulfillment of the striving human being' (108) isn't this just the psychology of motivation?¹⁸ And if in a hugely limned way apples represent displaced desire for Cézanne, isn't this a radical shrinkage of Freudian ambition beyond recognition? Schapiro had objected to the sublimation of libidinal desires in art, but this is not decisive for O'Donnell. Yet once you take away sublimation, you no longer have psychoanalysis. Once the individual is 'more perpetually emergent and optimistically oriented toward the future' then it's no longer Freudian. It's not clear how the 'Apples' essay is a 'positive psychoanalytic interpretation' (114).

¹⁶ Meyer Schapiro, 'Leonardo and Freud: An Art-Historical Study', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17 (1956): 147-178.

¹⁷ Meyer Schapiro, 'From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos', *Art Bulletin* 21.4 (1939); 'The Apples of Cezanne', *Art News Annual* (The Avant-Garde) 34 (1968): 34-53.

¹⁸ Meyer Schapiro, *Vincent Van Gogh* (New York, H. N. Abrams, 1950), 32.

Schapiro's summation of Bernard Berenson's career in 'Mr. Berenson's Values' appears in the chapter, '1961/Debating Berenson with Berlin'. Schapiro met Berenson as a young student and they had more than a little in common, though of different generations. Both were Jewish, born in Lithuania, and had been exposed to Pragmatism (Berenson with James at Harvard and Schapiro with Dewey at Columbia). Schapiro had already responded to Berenson's late works marking the decline of civilization.¹⁹ O'Donnell uses an argument of a common friend to Berenson and Schapiro – Isaiah Berlin – who famously articulated the theory of negative and positive liberty as a conceit.²⁰ Berlin's two kinds of liberty map fairly well, at least as a heuristic, to the two men. Negative liberty is associated with classical liberalism (Berenson) while positive liberty links to classical social engineering (Schapiro).

After contrasting Schapiro to the elder scholar as an assimilationist (if not self-effacing) Jew, profiting from his attribution work, retreating from his working-class background, O'Donnell further contrasts his reliance on photography to Schapiro's intense use of in-person study. But O'Donnell then softens this opposition to acknowledge that Berenson shared an 'active model of visual perception' (140) and that insofar as connoisseurship might be a kind of consensus building it could be allied to democracy.

In '1968, Heidegger and Goldstein' O'Donnell covers the genesis and response to Schapiro's critique of Heidegger in the 'Origin of the Work of Art'.²¹ As is well known, the philosopher invoked a generic Van Gogh painting to explain his idea of art as unconcealment by means of a peasant's boots. Equally well known, Schapiro wrote directly to Heidegger asking provocatively which painting he had meant, calling into question whether the Dutch artist had even represented a peasant's boots, when they appeared to belong to Van Gogh himself. It is worth pointing out that Kurt Badt, Arnheim's brother-in-law, had rehearsed this critique already in a book of 1961 that was probably known to Schapiro.²²

Obscured by Jacques Derrida's later, irreverent, dismissal of Schapiro, O'Donnell returns to Schapiro's friendship with the neurologist Kurt Goldstein, the Festschrift of whom Schapiro's article appeared, and their relationships to 'existentialist' thought. O'Donnell recounts the meeting between the two men and interestingly notes the affinity between Schapiro's account of Van Gogh's attitude to the world and Goldstein's symptomatology of the 'concrete' attitude of the brain

¹⁹ Meyer Schapiro, 'The Last Aesthete.' Review of *Aesthetics and History in the Visual Arts and Sketch for a Self-Portrait*, *Commentary* 8 (1949): 614–16.

²⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, London, Oxford University Press, 1969.

²¹ Meyer Schapiro. 'The Still Life as a Personal Object - A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh', in Marianne Simmel, ed., *The Reach of Mind: Essays in Memory of Kurt Goldstein*, New York: 1968, 203-9.

²² Kurt Badt, *Modell und Maler von Jan Vermeer: Probleme der Interpretation, Eine Streitschrift gegen Hans Sedlmayr*, Cologne: du Mont, 1961.

injured patient.²³ Here, it would have been helpful to connect Goldstein to Wertheimer (and Arnheim) and to place the former in a general (but not uncritical) relation to Gestalt theory.

O'Donnell turns to a comparison of both thinkers' relation to existentialism, which seems incomplete without noting the derivation of Heidegger's thought from phenomenology (as also Gestalt theory). The two are linked, somewhat vaguely, to a common threading between 'the Scylla of intuitive discussions of existence on the one hand and the Charybdis of purely positivist, empirical approaches on the other' (149). Turning to Heidegger's essay, O'Donnell confirms that Schapiro does not really address Heidegger's point of the 'equipmental being of equipment', that is the revelation of shoes of equipment via Van Gogh's painting, missing 'a fundamental part of Heidegger's argument' (153). But O'Donnell goes on to frame Schapiro's essay as merely questioning Heidegger's description of this work. O'Donnell goes on to use Schapiro's teaching notes to argue that the substance of Schapiro's problem with Heidegger lay in the latter's reduction of art to description given Schapiro's criticisms of the propositional nature of art. This argument simply does not work as Heidegger's very practice is based on the shortcomings of language.²⁴ Indeed, the argument would only work if Heidegger's brief treatment of art was the basis of an aesthetics, which he never supplied.

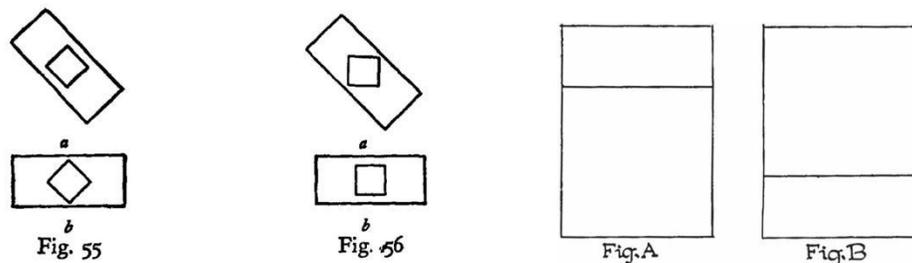


Fig. 1 (left), 'Ground as Framework'. from Kurt Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, 185; (right), Meyer Schapiro, 'An Appraisal of Anthropology Today'. 61.

We end the book with Schapiro the semiotician ('1973/Words and Pictures'). In 1966 Schapiro had written a study of the role of the pictorial field in creating meaning; in 1973, he published a lecture called *Words and Pictures*.²⁵ O'Donnell reviews Schapiro's possible exposure to strands of semiotics, particularly echoes of

²³ Meyer Schapiro, 'On a Painting of Van Gogh', *View 7* (1946): 9-14; reprinted in *Modern Art, 19th & 20th Centuries: Selected Papers*, New York: George Braziller, 1978, 87-99; Kurt Goldstein and Martin Scheerer, 'Abstract and Concrete Behavior', *Psychological Monographs* 53 (1941), whole no. 239.

²⁴ For a discussion, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 269-275.

²⁵ Meyer Schapiro, 'On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Sign', *Semiotica* 1 (1969): 223-42; *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text*, Hague/Paris: Mouton, 1973.

Peirce through his Columbia training, but he also believes that artists were influential too. O'Donnell uses Schapiro's comments during the symposium, *An Appraisal of Anthropology Today*, to indicate first inklings of his views. Levi-Strauss had introduced his idea of kinship as a series of language-like oppositions; what was important was not the family form but its difference from another form. Schapiro's intervention, his famous 'Style' essay, occasioned Levi-Strauss' comments.²⁶ For O'Donnell the diagrams that Schapiro uses to explain the problem with mathematical relationships – their non-commutability – suggest the influence of contemporary art. However, Schapiro himself mentions 'anisotropy' and similar diagrams appear in Kurt Koffka's *The Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (fig. 1) – where orientation changes the meaning of a 'square' to a 'diamond', or Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception* (of the next year, 1954). Schapiro mentions the mathematician George Birkhoff, and that signals that the diagram reflects discussions of information theory and perception that were Arnheim's current interests.²⁷

These diagrams are used again in 'Field and Vehicle in Image-Sign', and there the use of 'perceptual field' is consistent with Gestalt psychology. Such reservations lead one to question the very 'semiotic' nature of these works. *Words and Pictures* hardly even broaches the question of pictorial signification (in contrast, Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* based somewhat literally on Karl Bühler's linguistics is much more semiotic).²⁸ *Words and Pictures*, in contrast, is largely perceptually based, with talk of an 'archaic object-oriented attitude', a 'certain stage in the development of pictorial art' and a 'naïve reductive style'.²⁹ There is no question these works influenced semiotics but it is questionable the extent to which they themselves constituted 'semiotics'.

Critical review

Throughout *Meyer Schapiro's Critical Debates* we are enriched with the contrasts of Schapiro and any number of thinkers, through his published and unpublished works. In this section, I will summarize some of my observations on the consequences of this structuring principle and other presuppositions of the book. To begin, the themed discussion is useful for trimming art historical debates to a manageable scale. Each chapter could easily be used with profit in a methods

²⁶ Meyer Schapiro, 'Style', in A. L. Kroeber (ed.), *Anthropology Today*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953, 287-312.

²⁷ See Rudolf Arnheim, 'Gestalt Psychology and Artistic Form', in L. L. Whyte (ed.), *Aspects of Form*, London: Lund Humphries, 1951, 196-208.

²⁸ Richard Woodfield, 'Ernst Gombrich: Iconology and the "Linguistics of the Image"', *Journal of Art Historiography*, Number 5 (December 2011).

²⁹ Meyer Schapiro, 'Script in Pictures: Semiotics of Visual Language', in Meyer Schapiro, *Words, Script, and Pictures: Semiotics of Visual Language*, New York: Braziller, 1996, 115-99.

course, or topic related to the individual chapter. Nevertheless, there is a somewhat artificial elevation of the matched dyadic showdown between Schapiro and another thinker. Obviously, that Schapiro happened to publish an article on Freud in 1957 is probably relatively unrelated to events in that decade. In addition, relying on unpublished materials, some of which Schapiro hesitated to publish, makes us pause as to their representativeness of his thought.

The book has 'debate' in its very title. But we should pause at what constituted these very differences, disagreements and polemics. Schapiro's suggestion that Wertheimer's Gestalt factor of 'good continuation' could be reduced to 'similarity' do not seem to rise to 'criticisms' (26). Schapiro's comments at a symposium become a 'critique' of Claude Levi-Strauss (165). However, Schapiro sometimes signals different intentions. The Freud essay is specifically called 'an art-historical study'. The short Heidegger essay is called 'a note', and so on.

Because of the constant pairing of Schapiro and other thinkers, the structure of the writing often becomes a series of matched observations, affirming an affinity or contrast between the two. The discussion of Schapiro and Kurt Goldstein as sympathetic to 'existentialism' leads to an observation of Goldstein's commitment to truth as an ethical goal. We then unnecessarily pass to a forced observation on Schapiro: 'Though Schapiro was not as explicit as Goldstein his belief in the necessity of a moral foundation for science, he did hint at a similar reading' (p. 151).

More generally, I often wished the author had affirmed more vigorously his own interpretation because otherwise it is too hard to locate Schapiro between a number of relative statements. For example, in the discussion of Coomaraswamy, we hear that 'the universalizing undercurrent of Schapiro's critique...has not aged particularly well' but then we hear that Coomaraswamy's viewpoint 'would likely [not] fall on sympathetic ears today' (91). The target is tacit and relative but not made explicit. Later in that chapter O'Donnell asks,

Without a general category like 'form' or something like it, how can art history speak across borders at all? The Cold War ideological divides across which Schapiro and Motherwell both hoped to speak, naturally, were different from those between the 'West' and 'non-West' that are often evoked in postcolonial conversations today. But how should we-or can we-differentiate with precision the 'West' from which Schapiro and Motherwell spoke? (98).

I agree. But we are made to coordinate theories according to relative values without a clear-cut idea of what form and modernity exactly mean to Schapiro or O'Donnell.

It is interesting that Arnheim traversed many of the same paths as Schapiro. Arnheim was in contact with Max Raphael, Coomaraswamy, Gombrich, and others in the 1940s. Moreover, he adhered to the Gestalt psychology that was the training of numerous figures Schapiro appreciated (Wertheimer, Goldstein, Sedlmayr, Otto Pächt – not discussed). In addition, he was discussing the content of many of

Schapiro's papers. In 1957, for example, both Arnheim and Schapiro were in Houston where the latter delivered his 'The Value of Modern Art' while Arnheim had just published 'Accident and the Necessity of Modern Art'. In a similar way, reading 'constants' we have to think of Pächt's project (46).³⁰

For this reason, reading the book, I sometimes thought it might be more economical to take more seriously the Gestalt position. For example, the problem of scientific description and values had been the subject of Wolfgang Köhler's William James Lectures at Harvard.³¹ The phenomenal description of reality that Gestaltists insisted upon included within it value-like elements. It should also be remembered that the influence of Arnheim can be underestimated because the correspondence between the two is not that great. However, they saw each other often from 1941 till 1968, when Arnheim left New York for Harvard, leaving no trace of communication.

Introducing a Gestalt emphasis could change the valence of Pragmatism, the leitmotiv throughout the book. O'Donnell uses John Dewey as a tempering agent in various discussions, to smooth out a lack of fit between thinkers. But he is the first to explain how Dewey was not accepted wholesale by Schapiro. Since American philosophers cast about for a home-grown response to French post-structuralism, there has been a hopeful investment in the thought of Peirce, James and especially Dewey for a respectable, progressive account of the world that avoids 'positivism' and 'scientism'. He, like Gadamer, provides a respectable proponent of relativism without flying off the rails. But Dewey is a flawed figure – in 1942 Maurice Mandelbaum (whom Schapiro knew) noted the performative contradictions of Dewey's theory, at once committed to the utility and pragmatics of arguments, next to their truth.³² Both Gestalt and Dewey agreed on the importance of meaningful objects in the world, but only Dewey was an instrumentalist, which challenges some of the value of his thinking for historiography. The point is that Schapiro knew this.

Where then are we left with Schapiro? O'Donnell documents where, at every turn, Schapiro rejects an excessively generalizing or abstracting tendency. Coomaraswamy is too 'metaphysical'. Freud is too a-historical, Heidegger is too discursive. In the famous 'Style' article of 1953, Schapiro meticulously explained all of the grand systems of art history yet stepped back from the precipice of adapting

³⁰ See my article, 'Otto Pächt and 'National' Constants in Late Gothic Painting', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 65 (2018): 135-153.

³¹ Wolfgang Köhler, *The Place of Value in a World of Facts*, New York: Liveright, 1938.

³² See Maurice Mandelbaum, 'Causal Analysis in History', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 3 (1942): 30-50; and Alan Spitzer, *Historical Truth and Lies about the Past: Reflections on Dewey, Dreyfus, de Man, and Reagan*, Chapel Hill, NC, and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. Still relevant as a philosophical criticism of Dewey is Arthur Lovejoy, 'Pragmatism vs. the Pragmatist', in *The Thirteen Pragmatisms and Other Essays*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, [1920] 1963, 133-190.

them. O'Donnell explains at varying times an affinity to E. H. Gombrich and both did share a Cold War retreat from the speculative *qua* totalitarian.³³

Early in the book, O'Donnell quotes but dismisses Henri Zerner's characterization of Schapiro as 'the most famous art historian who never wrote a book'.³⁴ Zerner had noted that the books on Cezanne and Van Gogh were 'essentially long essays with notes to the plates', while the monograph on the Parma Ildefonsus manuscript from Cluny in 1964, was a 'short monograph'.³⁵ Clearly, even in his style of argument Schapiro preferred narrow arguments to grand systems.

W. J. T. Mitchell upset many people when he criticized Schapiro for his failure of nerve to 'engage with theory and philosophy'.³⁶ But the accumulated number of empiricist rejections of big theory – Coomaraswamy, Freud, Riegl and most problematically Marx – does affirm Schapiro's true values. He was less a theoretical art historian than a theory-acquainted art historian, who had no trepidation about engaging any thought system but tended to reject them all. It is certainly true that Schapiro was steeped in theory, but his theory – tacit or not – was to block systems. If the complexity of the world resists a politics, indeed, if fear causes us to reject a positive politics, then we have a form of liberalism, not socialism.³⁷

The fact that Schapiro was allergic to all abstraction – including stylistic constants investigated by Otto Pächt – has important consequences, for to reject style is also to reject class and to reject *all* forms of Marxism. The necessity to see Marxism as requiring some modicum of abstraction is suggested by Arnold Hauser:

Neither school of thought [idealism or positivism] does justice to the real character of structures such as capitalism, the enlightenment, the Renaissance, visuality in painting, or the form of classical tragedy, for neither takes full account of their insubstantiality, on the one hand, and, on the other, of their special sort of significance and degree of independence.³⁸

³³ On the Cold war, see 'Crying Hegel in Art History', *Journal of Critical Realism* 15 (2016): 107-121, and 'Otto Pächt, "Hegelian" Exile in Cold-War England', *Konsthistorisk tidskrift* (2019): 113-133.

³⁴ Henri Zerner, 'Master of Arts' (review of Meyer Schapiro, *Words and Pictures*), *New York Review of Books*, November 14, 1974.

³⁵ Meyer Schapiro, *The Parma Ildefonsus. A Romanesque Illuminated Manuscript from Cluny and Related Works*, Monographs on Archaeology and Fine Arts, New York, 1964.

³⁶ W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Schapiro's Legacy', *Art in America* 83 (1995): 29–31.

³⁷ Judith Shklar, 'The Liberalism of Fear', in N. Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

³⁸ Arnold Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History*, London, 1959, 210.

This is really the situation: capitalism, class, and social structure are metaphysical. Schapiro was not comfortable to move beyond physicalism and empiricism. He could not, technically speaking, accept non-substantial ontological entities.³⁹

Likewise, Schapiro never deferred to the transversal expertise of an extra-historical discipline, and this is another key to his empiricism. The secrets of Capitalism or the Unconscious are subject to intense thinking and do not require special apprenticeship. This feature of Schapiro's empiricism is exaggerated in O'Donnell's antagonistic method. In a kind of 'horizontalism', all thinkers are arrayed on a scale of various commitments – historical/universal, metaphysical/empirical.⁴⁰ But this kind of horizontalism is exactly what is wrong with Schapiro's approach. By treating everyone – psychologists (Freud), philosophers (Coomaraswamy, Heidegger) and political thinkers (Marx) as essentially the same he has already committed an empiricist sin.⁴¹

To be sure, a Coomaraswamy or a Freud and a Schapiro meet in the interpretation of an iconography or a historical fact, but at some point we have to leave a discourse. Not reflecting on Schapiro at all, but an analytic tendency to limit what is meaningful to what is easily made into a proposition, Arnheim wrote in his notebook:

One fails to do justice to Heidegger by accusing his language of taking refuge in poetry. Poetry has a precision of its own, on which Heidegger has the right to rely when he is dealing with issues for which our intellect has, as yet, no concepts. One only has to make sure that he does not pretend to use the one while he is using the other.⁴²

In light of this quote, perhaps what is interesting about Schapiro is that he did not have the charity to accept the positive nugget in the system or to wait long enough to begin the reconstitution of the thinker. There is something deeply resonant in Schapiro's thinking today in an academy that respects no boundaries or specialized knowledge. But the empiricist limitation still stands. Schapiro was a brilliant writer.

³⁹ If we insist on calling Schapiro a Marxist, then perhaps he could be allied to 'analytic Marxism', based on methodological individualism; e.g. G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

⁴⁰ I am using the term for its political resonance, as ontologically monistic knowledge is like liberalism.

⁴¹ This tendency is very common among departments of English and Art History. An example is the statement by James Ackerman, the great architectural historian, when he said of Rudolf Arnheim that 'Because I have emphasized in my work the social and cultural determination of our responses to art, our views were incompatible' [*Rudolf Arnheim: Revealing Vision*, ed. Kent Kleinman and Leslie VanDuzer, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, 54]. But isn't that to be expected? Can a psychology of historical contingency exist? Can a history of universals?

⁴² Arnheim, *Parables of Sunlight*, 54.

His interpretations are flecked with a million observations and give important responses to all the great thought systems, but they themselves are not a system.

After making these apparently critical remarks, I simultaneously regret that Schapiro has been put under this glaring theoretical light. The focusing on theoretical matters, widely scattered though it is, and impressive in the figures it connects with, is not what Schapiro should be known for. He was an art historian and rather than do a disservice to him through his partial engagements with the heavy hitters of the twentieth century, perhaps we need to linger through the soft touch of one of his discussions of a medieval manuscript or painting by Van Gogh.

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