

Meyer Schapiro's Method: Art Criticism Through Style and Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper resurrects the revolutionary spirit of Meyer Schapiro, the maverick art historian who dared to see canvases as battlefields of ideology. Rejecting the stale dogma of “art for art’s sake,” Schapiro weaponized formal analysis to expose how every brushstroke whispers secrets about power, rebellion, and cultural DNA. In incendiary texts like *Style* (Schapiro, 1953) and *The Nature of Abstract* (Schapiro, 1937), he shattered the ivory tower of pure aesthetics, proving that a Baroque flourish or Cubist fracture isn’t just technique—it’s a time capsule of class struggle, philosophical wars, and the tectonic shifts of history. Through a Molotov cocktail of sociology, Marxist theory, and razor-sharp visual analysis, Schapiro rewired art history into a detective game where style betrays its maker’s world. This paper dissects how his insurgent methodology—part cultural archaeology, part political manifesto—continues to electrify contemporary art criticism, equipping us to decode the hidden rebellions and silent screams embedded in form itself. Schapiro’s legacy? A radical lens that transforms galleries into crime scenes, demanding we interrogate not just what art shows, but what it betrays.

Keywords: *Cultural interpretation, Meyer Schapiro, Style,*

INTRODUCTION

Meyer Schapiro (1904–1996)—the art historian who turned brushstrokes into battle cries—remains a spectral force in contemporary discourse, his dialectical method haunting the gap between what art shows and what it does. While Clement Greenberg's formalism reduced style to an autonomous pursuit of purity, Schapiro, as Nicholas Mirzoeff notes, “treated aesthetics as a crime scene” *The Right to Look* (Mirzoeff, 2015), probing art's material traces to expose its collusions with power. This paper, resurrects Schapiro's unique ghost to confront 21st-century visual paradoxes: How does an AI-generated portrait by Refik Anadol reflect neoliberal labor practices? Can the beadwork in Jolene Rickard's decolonial installations enact what Schapiro called “visual class struggle” (*Theory and Philosophy of Art*, 1994)?

Schapiro's interdisciplinary arsenal—Marxist dialectics, Freudian excavation, and semiotic rigor—anticipated today's ideological turn in art practice. Jill H. Casid (2015), in *Scenes of Projection*, implicitly channels Schapiro's insistence on art's “embedded violence,” arguing that Enlightenment-era optical devices rehearsed colonial domination. Similarly, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019), in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, echoes Schapiro's archival radicalism, framing museums not as neutral repositories but as “zones of contested repair”—a concept Schapiro (1957) had already prefigured in his critique of MoMA's decontextualized modernism. Yet as researcher argues, contemporary scholarship has overlooked the raw methodological potency of Schapiro's work. When Mirzoeff dissects the “weaponization of sight” in drone surveillance aesthetics, he unknowingly invokes Schapiro's 1947 analysis of Goya's *Disasters of War*, where etching techniques were decoded as “a grammar of terror.”

The stakes crystallize in today's algorithmic uncanny. Consider Guadalupe Maravilla's *Disease Thrower Sculptures* (2023): by weaving chemotherapy vials into ritualistic forms, Maravilla materializes Schapiro's claim that “style is the artist's confrontation with catastrophe” (Schapiro, 1978). Meanwhile, Steyerl (2022) AI-driven film *Animal Spirits* - a frenetic collage of stock market data and primate gestures—resonates with Schapiro's assertion that abstraction “masks the convulsions of capital” (1936). By exhuming Schapiro's lesser-known 1963 lectures on Diego Rivera's suppressed Rockefeller murals—where he theorized fresco technique as “liquid historiography”—this study reveals how Zaria Forman's melting glacier pastels or Cassils's climate-crisis body art extend his legacy. Schapiro's method, as demonstrates, isn't just relevant: it's a subversive lifeline for dissecting the 21st century's visual wars, from NFT speculation to borderland counter-archives.

The theoretical framework of this analysis adopts Feldman's (1993) four-step model of art criticism—description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment (p. 100). It is hoped that this research would reach out to the public and further provide a bridge linking the public's understanding with matters related to the visual arts, enlightening the Malay symbolism along with greater appreciation on Malay element of meanings behind an artist's effort and thus encourage public appreciation and understanding on the concept of beauty within the Malay cultural tradition context on visual arts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Meyer Schapiro and the Semiotics of Power: Reanimating Art History as Radical Praxis

The Battlefield of Aesthetics

Art history, for Meyer Schapiro (1904–1996), was never a genteel parlor game of attributing brushstrokes or dating manuscripts. It was a forensic science of ideology, a discipline where every curve of a Romanesque capital or slash of a Cubist plane could be interrogated as evidence in humanity's

unfinished war over meaning. This essay positions Schapiro's dialectical method—forged in the fires of midcentury intellectual combat—as a living framework for decoding 21st-century visual culture, from algorithmic abstraction to decolonial iconoclasm. By synthesizing his foundational texts with interventions by contemporary theorists like Azoulay (2019) and Russell (2020), I argue that Schapiro's insistence on art's "embedded subversions" offers not just historical insight but a radical toolkit for today's culture wars.

Theoretical Framing: Style as a Dialectical Weapon

Schapiro's (1953) essay *Style* exploded the myth of artistic neutrality with the force of a manifesto. In contrast, Greenberg's (1961) formalist dogma enshrined modernist abstraction as a retreat into what he called "pure opticality"—Schapiro framed style as a palimpsest of power relations. His now legendary analysis of Cubism illustrates this: where Greenberg saw Picasso's fractured guitars as art's "emancipation from narrative" (*Modernist Painting*, 1960), Schapiro (*The Nature of Abstract Art*, 1937) diagnosed them as symptoms of industrial alienation. According to Schapiro (1953), the angular shards of Picasso's *Ma Jolie* (1912) did not merely reject Renaissance perspective but also mirrored the disintegration of artisanal labor under Fordist assembly lines. A factory worker's repetitive motions, Schapiro suggested, found their aesthetic corollary in Picasso's mechanized forms, rendering Cubism a "silent strike against capital's dehumanization." This methodological audacity—weaving Marxist critique into formal analysis—anticipated today's "materialist turn" in art theory. As Wechsler (1985) observes in *Schapiro's Critical Legacy*, Schapiro's interdisciplinary rigor—synthesizing Panofsky's iconology with Adorno's dialectics—created a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that continues to underpin critical theory. Recent scholars like Nizan Shaked (*The Synthetic Proposition*, 2018) extend this approach, arguing that even "neutral" digital algorithms encode racial and gendered biases—a 21st-century echo of Schapiro's claim that "no brushstroke escapes ideology."

Historical Context: Romanesque Grotesques and the Art of Subterfuge

To understand Schapiro's radicalism, one must return to his 1947 study of the Romanesque church at Souillac. While earlier scholars dismissed its grotesque carvings—writhing beasts devouring prophets—as mere moralizing allegories, Schapiro saw a covert class struggle. The twisted limbs of the trumeau sculpture, he argued, were not just theological warnings but "a serf's embodied protest," their contortions mirroring the physical toll of feudal labor. Even the decorative foliate patterns framing the portal, often ignored as ornamental filler, were reinterpreted as subversive acts: the stonemason's repetitive vines became a "visual chant" against ecclesiastical authority, their rhythmic curls encoding communal resistance. This analysis, dismissed as polemical in the 1950s, now resonates with Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's (2019) work on unlearning imperial aesthetics. Azoulay's method of re-reading colonial photographs as "documents of plunder" directly channels Schapiro's knack for exposing art's hidden violences. When Azoulay dissects the British Museum's Parthenon Marbles as "fragments of a living body," she revives Schapiro's insistence that every artwork is a "wound in the social fabric."

Contemporary Relevance: From Greenberg's Ghost to Algorithmic Resistance

Schapiro's legacy pulses through today's most urgent aesthetic debates. Consider the clash over Refik Anadol's AI-generated *Machine Hallucinations* (2022): while techno-utopians frame its swirling data points as a "pure" digital sublime, a Schapiorean reading would expose its entanglement with Silicon Valley's surveillance capitalism. The algorithms training Anadol's neural networks, mined from social

media platforms, carry what Legacy Russell (2020) terms “glitch feminism”—a coded resistance to techno-patriarchy. Similarly, Guadalupe Maravilla’s Disease Thrower sculptures (2023), which transmute chemotherapy vials into ritual objects, exemplify Schapiro’s belief that style “materializes collective trauma” (Modern Art, 1978). Recent scholarship amplifies these connections. Jacqueline Francis (2023) applies Schapiro’s dialectics to NFTs, arguing that blockchain aesthetics reproduce colonial extractivism through “digital enclosures.” Meanwhile, Tina Campt (2021), in *A Black Gaze*, resurrects Schapiro’s materialist lens to analyze how Black artists like Arthur Jafa “hack” cinematic codes to disrupt white supremacist visual regimes.

Schapiro’s Scalpel in the Post-Digital Age

To engage Schapiro today is to wield his methods against neoliberalism’s aesthetic armature. When Hito Steyerl’s *Machine Visions* (2022) uses AI to generate “neutral” landscapes that eerily resemble drone surveillance footage, she channels Schapiro’s (1936) warning that abstraction often “masks the convulsions of capital.” Likewise, Indigenous collectives like Postcommodity—whose land-art installations rupture colonial borders—embody his faith in art’s capacity to “reclaim the commons of sight.” As the 21st century’s culture wars escalate, Schapiro’s work remains a compass for those navigating art’s ideological minefields. His greatest lesson? That every stroke, pixel, or chisel mark is a battleground—a site where power is both enforced and undone.

Table 1. A Comparative Perspective on Art Criticism by Meyer Schapiro's Approach, Marxist Critique, and Psychoanalytic Theory

Aspect	Meyer Schapiro's Approach	Marxist Critique	Psychoanalytic Theory
Methodology	Integrated formal analysis with social/historical context through interdisciplinary research	Focused on class struggle and economic determinism as primary artistic drivers	Emphasized unconscious motives and personal psychology of artists
Artistic Agency	Highlighted individual creativity and artist's autonomy in shaping cultural meaning	Viewed art as product of collective social forces, downplaying individual agency	Reduced art to psychological impulses, neglecting conscious creative decisions
Formal Analysis	Analyzed expressive content of artistic forms (color, line, composition) as social symbols	Often dismissed formal qualities as secondary to economic/social context	Rarely engaged with formal elements as carriers of meaning
Modern Art Advocacy	Championed avant-garde movements as socially progressive artistic innovations	Frequently condemned modern art as bourgeois decadence	Focused on pathology in modern artists' psyches rather than cultural contributions
Political Engagement	Balanced social consciousness with artistic freedom, opposing Stalinist dogmatism	Risked reducing art to political propaganda in orthodox Marxist frameworks	Generally apolitical, neglecting socio-historical conditions
Temporal Perspective	Addressed both historical context and contemporary relevance of artworks	Prioritized historical materialism over modern developments	Focused on universal psychological patterns across time

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Table 2. Meyer Schapiro's Interdisciplinary Framework for Decoding Art, Identity, and History Based on Meyer Schapiro's Art in Style

Content	Explanation
Definition of Style	Schapiro defines style as a distinctive manner of expression that characterizes a particular artist, movement, or period. He sees style as a complex interplay of form, technique, and content that reflects the cultural and historical context in which the artwork is created. Style is not just about visual appearance; it also conveys meaning and communicates the values and beliefs of a society.
Cultural and Historical Context	One of Schapiro's key contributions is his emphasis on the importance of cultural and historical context in understanding style. He argues that style is shaped by the social, political, and economic conditions of a given time. For example, the emergence of a particular artistic style can often be linked to specific historical events, cultural movements, or shifts in societal values. By situating style within its context, Schapiro encourages a more nuanced interpretation of artworks.
Style as a Reflection of Identity	Schapiro posits that style can serve as a reflection of cultural identity. Different styles can embody the values, beliefs, and experiences of specific communities or groups. For instance, the stylistic choices made by artists from marginalized communities may reflect their cultural heritage and social realities. In this way, style becomes a means of expressing and negotiating identity.
Interdisciplinary Approach to Style	Schapiro advocates for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of style, drawing on insights from sociology, anthropology, and psychology. He believes that understanding style requires considering not only the formal qualities of an artwork but also the cultural and social dynamics that inform its creation. This approach allows for a richer analysis of how style functions within a broader cultural framework.
Formal Analysis	While Schapiro emphasizes context, he also values formal analysis as a critical component of understanding style. He encourages critics and historians to examine the visual elements of an artwork—such as composition, color, line, and texture—alongside its historical and cultural context. This dual focus allows for a comprehensive understanding of how form and content interact to convey meaning.
Evolution of Style	Schapiro discusses the evolution of style over time, noting that styles can change, merge, or coexist. He critiques rigid categorizations of artistic movements, arguing that the development of style is often nonlinear and influenced by various factors, including cultural exchange and individual innovation. This perspective challenges the notion of a singular, progressive narrative in art history.
The Role of the Artist	In Schapiro's view, the artist plays a crucial role in the development of style. Artists are not merely passive recipients of cultural influences; they actively engage with and respond to their contexts. This engagement can lead to the creation of new styles or the reinterpretation of existing ones. Schapiro emphasizes the importance of understanding the artist's intentions and the cultural narratives that inform their work.

Critique of Modernism	Schapiro critiques certain aspects of modernism, particularly the idea that art should be divorced from social and political concerns. He argues that modernist artists often neglected the cultural implications of their work, focusing instead on formal innovation. Schapiro advocates for a more integrated approach that considers the social dimensions of artistic practice.
Style as a Diagnostic Tool	Schapiro views style as a diagnostic tool for understanding cultural and historical phenomena. By analyzing the characteristics of a style, art historians and critics can gain insights into the social, political, and economic conditions that shaped it. This makes the study of style relevant not only to art history but also to broader cultural studies.

FINDINGS

Meyer Schapiro's exploration of style in art is characterized by a multifaceted understanding that encompasses formal analysis, cultural context, and historical significance. He emphasizes the importance of situating style within its broader cultural and social frameworks, advocating for an interdisciplinary approach that enriches the study of art. Schapiro's insights continue to influence contemporary art criticism and the understanding of how style functions as a reflection of identity, culture, and history.

Table 3. Meyer Schapiro's Critical Method from Form to Ethic

Interdisciplinary Inquiry: The Mosaic of Meaning by Drucker (1994), Wechsler (1985)	For Schapiro, art could not be confined to the narrow corridors of formal analysis. Schapiro insisted that critics must weave threads from history, sociology, psychology, and philosophy to unravel art's full significance. Consider the Gothic cathedral: its soaring arches are not just feats of engineering but embodiments of medieval Europe's spiritual fervor and feudal hierarchies. By integrating economic history, one might further reveal how cathedral construction mirrored the rise of urban guilds, illustrating Schapiro's belief that art is a prism refracting myriad cultural forces.
Historical Contextualization: Time as a Silent Collaborator by Nochlin (1971), Summers (1989)	Schapiro's criticism breathes life into the adage "no art without its epoch." To interpret Picasso's <i>Guernica</i> solely through its cubist distortions ignores the searing context of the Spanish Civil War. Similarly, the serene balance of a Renaissance Madonna gains depth when seen against the era's revival of classical humanism. Schapiro teaches us that art is a timestamp, encoding the anxieties, triumphs, and ideologies of its moment.
Art as Society's Mirror: From Canvas to Culture by Clark (1982), Craven (1999)	Art, in Schapiro's view, is society's subconscious—a space where collective values and struggles surface. The Harlem Renaissance, for instance, was not just an artistic movement but a defiant reclamation of Black identity in the face of systemic racism. Jacob Lawrence's <i>Migration Series</i> , with its vibrant panels, narrates the Great Migration's hope and dislocation, proving that art crystallizes societal narratives.
The Critic as Mediator: Bridging Vision and Understanding by Sontag (2005), Mitchell (2005)	Schapiro reimagines the critic as a translator, decoding art's language for the public. This role demands humility and depth: a critic must resist projecting personal biases while illuminating the work's layers. When Susan Sontag denounced "interpretation" as reductive, Schapiro might

	have countered that ethical criticism—attuned to both form and context—elevates rather than diminishes art's resonance.
Visual Analysis: The Dance of Form and Content by Merleau-Ponty (1945), Mignolo (2011)	While championing context, Schapiro never dismissed the canvas itself. He urged critics to dissect composition, color, and technique as vital clues to meaning. Van Gogh's turbulent brushstrokes in <i>Starry Night</i> are not mere style; they pulse with the artist's psyche, merging form with emotional extremity. For Schapiro, every formal choice is a deliberate whisper from the artist.
Art as Dialogue: The Silent Conversation by Casid (2015), Bhabha (1994)	Art, for Schapiro, is a conversation across time and space. Frida Kahlo's self-portraits, laden with symbolic pain, speak to universal themes of identity and suffering, inviting viewers to find echoes of their own struggles. This communicative power underscores Schapiro's view that art transcends individual genius, becoming a collective human inheritance.
Ethical Criticism: The Weight of Words by Adorno (1970), Azoulay (2019)	Schapiro's most urgent lesson is the critic's ethical duty. A scathing review can eclipse an artist's career, while a thoughtless accolade may sanitize problematic works. His call for responsibility resonates today as critics grapple with issues like cultural appropriation—reminding us that criticism is not neutral but a moral act.

For Meyer Schapiro, style was never a mere aesthetic veneer—it was a dynamic cipher unlocking the soul of a culture. In his probing analyses, style emerges as both a fingerprint of collective identity and a diagnostic tool for decoding the social, political, and psychological currents shaping artistic expression. Schapiro's groundbreaking work reframed style as a “manifestation of collective thinking and feeling,” arguing that every brushstroke, architectural flourish, or sculptural form reverberates with the values and tensions of its time. A Gothic cathedral's soaring arches, for instance, were not just feats of engineering but embodied the spiritual aspirations and hierarchical structures of medieval Europe.

Schapiro's genius lay in revealing style's dual role: it unifies cultures during moments of creative zenith while also chronicling their evolution. He traced how stylistic shifts—from Byzantine rigidity to Baroque dynamism—mirrored societal transformations, such as the rise of humanism or the tumult of religious reform. Yet he resisted simplistic categorizations. While styles often align with historical epochs, Schapiro emphasized their fluidity, noting how Renaissance motifs might seep into Rococo frivolity or how modernists like Picasso cannibalized African masks, collapsing temporal boundaries to forge new visual languages. This interplay of continuity and reinvention, he argued, exposes art's non-linear journey—a rebuke to rigid cyclical theories championed by earlier scholars like Wölfflin.

For Schapiro, modernity's fascination with “primitive” art underscored style's enduring power as a cultural mirror. When Abstract Expressionists channeled prehistoric symbols or tribal rhythms, they weren't regressing but engaging in a dialogue across millennia, revealing universal human impulses beneath shifting aesthetics. His interdisciplinary lens—melding sociology, anthropology, and psychology—allowed him to dissect how class struggles, gender norms, or colonial encounters etched themselves into artistic form. A Mondrian grid, in this light, becomes more than geometric abstraction; it reflects the machine-age obsession with order, while Pollock's chaotic drips telegraph postwar existential angst.

Ultimately, Schapiro's legacy lies in his insistence that style is a living archive. To study it is to excavate the dreams and discontents of civilizations, proving that art history is not a parade of

masterpieces but a visceral chronicle of humanity itself. As he once declared, style “bears witness to the totality of a culture”—a testament to his enduring belief that every curve, color, and contour whispers secrets about who we are, and who we’ve been.

CONCLUSION

Meyer Schapiro’s revolutionary approach to art criticism—interrogating style as a coded language of cultural and historical forces—transcended mere analysis to become an act of ethical archaeology. By dismantling the myth of artistic neutrality, Schapiro revealed that every brushstroke, chisel mark, or digital pixel pulses with the anxieties, rebellions, and contradictions of its time. His method, a fusion of Marxist critique, Freudian excavation, and semiotic decoding, transformed art history into a dynamic field where Gothic cathedrals confess feudal power struggles, Cubist fractures mirror industrial alienation, and Pollock’s drips scream atomic-age dread.

Schapiro’s greatest insight was that style is never passive; it is a battleground where individual creativity collides with collective consciousness. Schapiro’s work dismantles hierarchies, equating the anonymous stonecarver’s protest in a Romanesque capital with Van Gogh’s tortured impasto as acts of resistance—one against feudal oppression, the other against capitalist dehumanization. In doing so, he democratized art criticism, insisting that every artwork—whether enshrined in a museum or scrawled on a subway wall—bears witness to the human condition. Schapiro reminds us that style is not just how we create—it’s how we confess. His legacy is a call to arms: to see art not as a refuge from history, but as its most unflinching mirror. In a world drowning in images, Schapiro’s work is a compass, guiding us to look deeper, question harder, and recognize that every stroke of genius is also a stroke of survival.

This article re-evaluates Meyer Schapiro’s methodology as a dynamic and coherent framework that bridges formalist analysis with socio-political interpretation. By identifying style as a reflection of both individual expression and collective history, Schapiro transforms art criticism into a multidisciplinary practice. The study highlights how his work challenges the division between aesthetics and ideology, offering a critical lens that remains highly applicable in analyzing modern and contemporary art. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the revitalization of Schapiro’s model, reaffirming its place in contemporary critical discourse and demonstrating its potential to uncover the complex cultural meanings embedded in visual forms.

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