

Marxism concepts of art | an analysis



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The nineteenth century was significant in Europe because it spawned or brought to the forefront revolutionary new forms of culture and theology. Among these movements were feminism, Marxism, the romantic period of music, and the impressionist period of art. Marxism has been critically acclaimed for its adherence to the popular utopian traditions of past ages and its determination to exterminate the inequities of the feudal class system. Marxism was a nineteenth century behemoth, its shadow influencing not only social and political thought but also provoking minds around the world. Critics of ideology's influence on art harangue the latter as a restrictive form of interpretation, one whose hold over art's beholder evokes themes that override those intended by the artist. However, art created in the impressionist period was created on the basis of the artist's perception, and if no one can recall exactly what the artist intended, then using ideologies of the time remains a logical basis of interpretation. Marxism promotes the involvement of all aspects of society in its ideology. However, when used as an exclusive method of art, Marxism can be quickly dismissed as stringent and a useless art method.

In his *Theory and Philosophy of Art*, Meyer Schapiro contends that ideology constricts the freedom of artistic expression. Schapiro insists that philosophers using ideologies in artistic interpretation forgo the artist's rendering and draw their own conclusions, therein ignoring the prevailing themes and purposes behind the artist's creation. Through intense speculation of an object, the philosopher has [deceived] himself in assertions which are not sustained by the picture itself but rather in his own social outlook (Schapiro 1994, p. 134). For example, Japanese aesthetics value the

imperfect, almost deifying the worn and blemished. A rusty spade in a tool shed would be perceived by classical Japanese aesthetics as beautiful because of its natural state. The traditional Japanese artist would have painted the shed to exemplify its imperfections and the subtleties of its presentation.

A Marxist contention might be that the artist presented the spade as a token of the working class, a tribute to the agrarian utopia sought after by many of the period. By making these assumptions, the individual perceiving the Japanese spade would be detracting from the painting's meaning; though agrarian utopia is a beautiful image, it is ultimately deviant from the artist's purpose and casts the painting in a whole new light. Using a school of thought such as Marxism endeavors people to [imagine] everything and [project] it into the painting, causing them to experience both too little and too much in [their] contact with the work (Schapiro 1994, p. 138). Schapiro and his contemporaries are concerned with the nature of the work, not the beholder's perception. Art's grandeur is in its presentation, which if misinterpreted bypasses the artist's intentions, altering the state of art. Recurrent themes might be based on philosophy, but the concept of [the] metaphysical power of art remains a theoretical idea (Schapiro 1994, p. 139). It is irrelevant that there may exist a hidden message within the subject perceived. What is of consequence is rather what the object portrayed means to the artist. Projection and personal interpretation negates the fundamental aspect of the artist's presence in the work, and metaphysical integration in interpretational method stints the potential of art's full meaning (Schapiro 1994, p 139).

Marxism specifically denigrates the self in favor of the whole, therein detracting from art as a representation of the artist himself or herself. As a means of interpretation, Marxism is useless as the art becomes solely focused around the objective nature of the subject. Painters such as van Gogh and Monet did not popularize the impressionist movement because their objects were more true to reality than others of the age; they popularized the movement because their interpretations were revolutionary and unlike that of their contemporaries. In effect, all art becomes a piece from a self-portrait; the subject is turned to the spectator as a part of the artist, not an instrument of political ideology (Schapiro 1994, p. 140).

Schapiro describes shoes as a recurrent theme in van Gogh's paintings to solidify his argument. The focus of several paintings, van Gogh's worn shoes are a portion of the self, a revealing theme (Schapiro 1994, p. 140). They do not signify the work ethic of a communist, nor does the weathered nature of the shoe imply the subject had anything to do with attaining an agrarian utopia. For van Gogh, the shoes were a memorable piece of his own life, a sacred relic (Schapiro 1994, p. 141). Paintings of the shoes were brilliant because of what they meant to van Gogh. The virtuosity of van Gogh's style and presentation make him unique; shoes by themselves mean nothing without the artist's rendering. What makes a painter unique is his or her ability to present him or herself, manifesting personality into unconventional objects in such a way that an audience can connect and relate to the emotion evoked. The object presented means nothing without the artist's intimation. A shoe, for example, is merely a protective covering in the real world. It does not exist to testify to the greatness of Marxism and its

superiority over other ideologies. In art, objects do not exist to signify metaphysical forms or ideas, but to serve the artist's meanings.

The efficacy with which an object portrays the artist is what makes it extraordinary. Theology is useless as an interpretive method of art history because of its constrictive nature on the purpose of art; Marxism is particularly inhibiting because of its emphasis on the nature of being and the individual's position in society. If a painter were to create a work solely to advertise Marxist doctrine, the artistic creation itself would be impeded. Practical aims, rules methods, [and] fixed notions of style hamper virtuosity and the artistic process (Schapiro 1994, p. 202). Schapiro continues, stating, the creation of art has rested on the activity of self-directed [people] who regard their work as a free expression of their natures (Schapiro 1994, p. 204). Ideologies are not naturally occurring in society as a whole; they are indoctrinated and therefore are alien concepts. Marxism is not a natural conclusion, but rather one that had to be indoctrinated into the bourgeois, who in turn had to give up their advantageous statuses in order to better society. Because Marxism is forced by nature, it cannot be a viable art method in Schapiro's system of interpretation.

Though Schapiro's passion for the personal and physiognomic on behalf of the artist is commendable, it too easily dismisses the possibility that social ideology played a part in the artist's choice of subjects (Schapiro 1994, p. 139). Marxism changed the way men and women viewed society, and hence altered individual perception. Empiricism, or the theory that all knowledge is based on experience, is a testament to artistic presentation. Theoretically speaking, van Gogh may have painted his shoes because he was an avowed

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Marxist and chose to present a commonplace object in a Marxist light. Those testifying otherwise can prove their points only by having known the artist themselves, or by proving through communications relayed by the artist suggesting the contrary. Marxism, like other ideologies, is not an impossible basis of inspiration. For example, the twentieth-century composer Dmitri Shostakovich chose to proclaim his disdain with Soviet Russia through music. Political ideologies such as Marxism are revolutionary because they alter perception and opinion. As an inspirational method, Marxism is very useful. Ideologies and social movements lend form and base to art; whether they positively or negatively affect an artist, ideologies are an inspirational basis for many works. Marxism does not necessarily diminish art as a form of self-portrait in inspirational form. It molds and manipulates the course of the art. Though it changes the direction of interpretation (possibly detracting from the artist's meaning), it is feasible as part of the subject if determined to be a prevailing theme of the work in question. Schapiro describes the philosopher Martin Heidegger and his interpretation of a painting as an [illustration of] the nature of art as a disclosure of truth (Schapiro 1994, p. 135). Contrary to Schapiro's contentions of art's theoretical metaphysical implications, Heidegger purports art is metaphysical in nature. The artist is therefore presenting the object from a different vantage. The nature of art is metaphysical in its individuality, so ideology is not to be dismissed as a viable method of art history. Marxism in particular has the capacity to be an effective method of art solely because of its paradigm shift in the concept of individuality. Marxism, like other ideologies, is an irrevocable aspect of

society, especially in nineteenth century art. Society is part of what makes an artist individual; it is the lifeblood of creativity and influence.

Movements such as impressionism are themselves fashioned by society and altered interpretations. Schapiro's stance is that society is constraining and the ideologies of which it is comprised imperil [artistic] liberty (Schapiro 1994, p. 201). Marxism is only constraining, however, when applied to capitalist societies. It is impossible for a human being to be completely unbiased and unaffected by ideologies as every human being has some affiliation with a school of thought. Marxism has the ability to inspire just as much as it has the ability to constrict and limit artistic freedom. Though Heidegger may ignore what those shoes meant to van Gogh himself, he may have also suggested a new side of van Gogh, one that is revealed in a new light just as van Gogh presented shoes in a new light (Schapiro 1994, p. 147). Marxism further may serve as a basis of ideas and concepts. Schapiro himself admits, a disciplined classic style needs a source of ideas, a continuously renewed energy of conception otherwise [art] is a sterile routine (Schapiro 1994, p. 201). Ideology, by nature, is a set of conglomerated beliefs and observations. Why, then, does Schapiro assume it to such an inefficacy as a method of art history? Schapiro's conclusions border on myopic as he fails to consider the possibility that ideologies can also serve as inspirations, as a possible source of ideas rather than the only source. All ideologies become constrictive if used exclusively. More constrictive on the artistic process is the elimination of ideology as a viable method; by consciously restraining interpretive vehicles, art is stunted and the liberty Schapiro so treasures becomes finite.

As far as impressionism is concerned, Marxism is as effective as any other method of art history. The word impression refers to the objective, what the mind itself perceives. The very nature of impression is derived from the illusory rather than reality. Speculation, when observed within moderate means, is the purpose behind an object. Using an ideology such as Marxism does not impede interpretation so long as it is not used exclusively. Schapiro describes Heidegger's speculative method as detracting and self-serving, purporting that he conjectures that his reader could imagine himself wearing [van Gogh's] old leather shoes (Schapiro 1994, p. 149). The speculative approach to impressionism is its very basis. Had van Gogh intended to portray the shoes as part of his history, perhaps he would have painted himself wearing them. That he chose to focus on still life and not a self-portrait insinuates the possibility that van Gogh wanted to portray the shoes as open to outside interpretation as well.

Marxist interpretations would not be indicative of useless method in the aforementioned perception so long as the interpretations outside the obvious are secondary in nature. To further his argument against ideologies such as Marxism as viable methods of art history, Schapiro addresses the opinions of French philosopher Denis Diderot. He describes Diderot's preoccupation with freedom, considered in its inner and outer circumstances (Schapiro 1994, p. 201). If utilizing Marxism is a transgression on freedom, then it is a safe assumption to make that no artist will ever be free. All forms of thought are constrictions so long as they are regarded as limiting the abstract. Artistic production is reliant on the power of suggestion. The power to create is reliant on the power to envision, and the power to envision is subsequently

dependent on the power of suggestion. Schapiro, however, takes Diderot's stance that the artist's inner freedom is the impulsive, unaccountable flow of the pencil and brush, of images and ideas; verve, enthusiasm, spontaneity, and naturalness are its outward signs and without that flow, there is no authentic art (Schapiro 1994, p. 201). Marxism, therefore, would erstwhile be an obstacle in the artistic process. However, impulses are drawn from ideas, and spontaneity requires inspiration, both of which may be derived from ideologies. Schapiro supports this contention, writing that the conditions most favorable to the flow in art are not only a matter of temperament but are also social (Schapiro 1994, p. 201).

Art history reveals that social ideologies such as Marxism are not only viable methods, they are also intrinsic in the creation of art. Diderot anticipated a dilemma of artists: they wish to be free creators, unconfined by any goal external to art but also wish to participate in the most advanced consciousness of their society and to influence it by their work (Schapiro 1994, p. 207). If ever there was an ideology that encapsulated total social involvement, it was Marxism. So if artists participate in the most advanced consciousness of their society, how can they be truly free by Schapiro's standards? Is it because they have made a conscious decision? Their choices, however, are influenced by their desire to be a part of something larger. In effect, they are limited by their desires, which are concrete aims and goals. Marxism's all-encompassing doctrines are a reflection of scientific method, designed with multiple factors and social tenets in mind.

Stephen Eisenman presents Marxism as a useful method of art in his *Nineteenth Century Art*, presenting evidence that certain critics consider the <https://assignbuster.com/marxism-concepts-of-art-an-analysis/>

scholarly (scientific) method and subject matter [of art] perfectly merged (Eisenman 1994, p. 9). Marxism is based on a single concept: total egalitarianism. To serve that end, Marxism lists several factors and instructions. Art is similar, centered on a singular subject or theme. Different details delineate and instigate thought on the aforementioned subject, drawing further parallels between art and ideology. Eisenman furthers his contentions opposite that of Schapiro by stating outright how empiricism has dominated studies of nineteenth century art but has rarely been explicitly acknowledged as a methodology, whether inspirational or interpretive in nature (Eisenman 1994, p. 10). In defining true expression, many scholars reject the purist tyranny of abstract and absolutist systems such as those defined previously by Schapiro, insisting that art historians should be as flexible, various, and comprehensive as possible in their approaches, and be willing to consider anything from the history technology to the abiding mysteries of genius and psychology as potentially illuminating their ever more vast subject (Eisenman 1994, p. 10). Therefore, Eisenman counters critics who lambast ideologies as limiting, stating that by closing interpretive doors on art methods, one further inhibits the freedom of expression.

Separating artists from society alienates the artist from humanity, therein isolating the artist as potentially self-deprecating. Diderot's dilemma of the artist seeking to be creatively free and yet still a driving force of society is a paradoxical query answered by Eisenman's assertions in favor of Marxism. Eisenman supports the statement that art history itself, especially art history of the nineteenth century, has been significantly transformed by the prevailing attitudes of radical scholars; Marxist philosophy has played a

signal role in overturning the formerly prevailing confidence that art history could be told as a straightforward, descriptive narrative independent of the interests, politics, gender, or ideology of artists, audiences, and critics (Eisenman 1994, p. 10).

The aspects listed by Eisenman encapsulate what drives artists to create. Marx postulates that while humans by their nature as humans have senses and perceptions, these are rude and unformed in the absence of their specific development and cultivation, which only occurs historically (Eisenman 1994, p. 11). In the Marxist school of thought, Diderot's emphasis on creative freedom still remains paramount to artistic creation. However, Marx stipulates that the abstract is only given form by prevailing attitudes of the day. Eisenman supports Marxism as a method of art, writing, all the senses are differently developed according to the nature of the particular society in which the person lives: a capitalist society in which the sense of having dominates is clearly different in its sensual or perceptual capacities from a feudal or Communist society which does not subscribe to the concept of private property (Eisenman 1994, p. 11).

Ultimately, art methods are only viable given the freedom of interpretation they allow. Marxism is viable because it promotes inspiration on part of the artist, as well as affording an observing art beholder a unique avenue of interpretation. The only caveat to employing ideology as a method of art is its constrictive nature. When applied exclusively, any single art method exudes glaring inefficacy in the face of constricted artistic freedom.

However, the singling of any art method as a useless art method lends itself to the practice of restriction, defeating the requisite observation of creative

freedom, whether the artist or the one perceiving art practices that freedom. Marxism, in turn, is just as useful an art method as any other ideology, so long as it is utilized as one possible perception among many. Marx argued, the cultivation of senses whether in the form of art, music, or literature in its turn plays a significant role in the historical unfolding of a society, and it is an untenable fact that history plays a part in shaping art, whether in the form of ideology or any other aspect of humanity (Eisenman 1994, p. 11).