

# RICHARD SHUSTERMAN: LOOKING FORWARD LOOKING BACK – REFLECTING ON 30 YEARS OF PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS

T. J. Bonnet

While I was searching for PhD programs that might allow for studying American Pragmatist philosophy and aesthetics, but with a comparative edge that would encourage me to bring in potentially anything I wanted into the conversation, it was recommended to me that Richard Shusterman may be the best person to study with. That recommendation was profoundly correct. The impact of Richard Shusterman's aesthetic and philosophical writings has proven to be substantial and influential. His articulation of a distinctly pragmatist form of aesthetics with a focus on embodied subjectivity, alongside the emergence of the multidisciplinary project of somaesthetics, announced his work to be the next great innovation in pragmatist philosophy. Pragmatism is considered an original philosophy unique to the United States. It was first formulated by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) as a method to clarify statements by looking at their practical consequences. William James (1842-1910) broadened Peirce's analytical approach into a general philosophical attitude which looked to the 'cash value' of philosophy, demonstrating an overriding concern with practical action and the consequences and influences of our ideas. Finally, John Dewey (1859-1952) further expanded on the pragmatism of Peirce and James. Importantly, Dewey produced the first articulation of a pragmatist theory of aesthetics, *Art as Experience*, in 1934 (though he hesitated to call his theory 'pragmatist' for fear of misunderstanding). Shusterman will explain the influence of this work on his own thinking below, along with the personal input of another pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty (1931-2007).

This interview depicts how Shusterman came to formulate the ideas in his second book, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, and how it looks forward to his work in somaesthetics. Somaesthetics is an original field of research which Shusterman often defines as 'the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning. It is, therefore, also devoted to the knowledge, discourses, practices, and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it' (2000, p. 267). While somaesthetics proper is a somewhat ancillary topic in this interview, the discussion covers core ideas that constitute the fundamental approach of somaesthetics, including philosophy as a way of life, the continuity between art and living, pluralism, and meliorism.

This interview with Shusterman, it turns out, was timely, coinciding with the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design's conference celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*' (1992) initial publication. For the reader unfamiliar with Shusterman's aesthetics, this interview will serve as an introduction to these ideas and how they mesh with his more recent projects. For those familiar with Shusterman's work, this interview will, hopefully, allow for discovering clarifications, expansions, or anecdotes previously unknown.

*T.J. Bonnet: Previous interviewers have focused on your work in inaugurating the multi-disciplinary field of somaesthetics, the study of the lived body, or what you call the soma. But somaesthetics is predicated on the philosophical work you've done with pragmatist aesthetics, beginning with your book, Pragmatist Aesthetics (2000, originally published 1992), which celebrated its thirtieth anniversary this year with a four-day conference at the MOME, the arts and design university of Budapest. The subtitle for that book is Living Beauty, Rethinking Art. I understand this subtitle was originally*

*your main title for the book. What were you trying to express with that title, and how did you settle on Pragmatist Aesthetics as the main title?*

Richard Shusterman: You are right that my project of somaesthetics derived from my work in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. It seemed to me a necessary consequence of key ideas in that book, which argued that the soma or lived, sentient, purposive body (with its multiple and transmodal sensorimotor capacities) is essential to the experience both of making and appreciating art and other aesthetic objects. If

we want to improve these forms of aesthetic experience that depend on the soma, one way to do so is to improve our somatic knowledge and skills by improving our somatic awareness. Hence, somaesthetics as a field of study. However, there was also another, though somewhat related, philosophical topic of my research that made somaesthetics seem important to me. This was my research on philosophy as an art of living that I treated in *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (1997). Here again, the turn to somaesthetics seemed a natural consequence. Since one lives one's life through one's body, one can live it better (*ceteris paribus*) through better bodily skills and somatic awareness. This interest in philosophy as an aesthetic way of life (that I absorbed from philosophers as different as Kierkegaard, G.E. Moore, and Michel Foucault) was already present in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, which is why the original title was *Living Beauty, Rethinking Art: A Pragmatist Aesthetics*, thus signalling that beauty was something to be lived – not just observed in museums – and that art and aesthetics should be reconceived more broadly to include the

arts of living (fashion, culinary arts, *ars erotica* etc.).

My Blackwell editor, Stephan Chambers, however, suggested I reverse the titles. Through his shrewd marketing instincts and superior publishing knowledge, he convinced me that the main title I proposed, though attractively evocative, was far too vague to function successfully in the system of categories and cross-listings through which the book would be principally marketed, whereas the title 'Pragmatist Aesthetics' instead defined a recognizable yet intriguingly new philosophical genre derived from the established fields of pragmatism and aesthetics. Moreover, a generic title like 'Pragmatist Aesthetics' could build on the success of my recent Blackwell book *Analytic Aesthetics* (1989) by implying the existence of an exciting alternative that could challenge analytic philosophy of art and thus enrich aesthetics. I believe he was right, not only because of the title's efficiency for book catalogues of that time but also, presciently and now primarily for today's internet search engines (the likes of which did not exist in 1992). In any case, the book has done well with this title, but in some other languages, it also did well without it. The book appeared simultaneously in French

(published by Minuit) with the title *L'art à l'état vif: la pensée pragmatiste et l'esthétique Populaire* (2018), and in German it appeared as *Kunst Leben* (1994), but most of the book's 14 translations have 'Pragmatist Aesthetics' as the main title.

*T.J. B: The first thing you do in the book is distinguish pragmatist aesthetics (primarily represented by John Dewey) from analytic aesthetics. You came from a background in analytic aesthetics. In general, what convinced you to back the aesthetics of Dewey, and how do you broadly characterize his aesthetic philosophy?*

RS: What brought me to pragmatism, initially, was not Dewey but neopragmatist philosophy of language and interpretation in the writings of Richard Rorty and Joseph Margolis.<sup>1</sup> Interpretation was a key topic in my work in analytic aesthetics and literary theory, beginning with 'The Logic of Interpretation' (1978), which I published as a graduate student at Oxford. My interest in Dewey and his experience-focused theories came only in the late 1980s when, having moved to Philadelphia's Temple

University (situated in the midst of a North Philly ghetto), I became fascinated with hip-hop culture and the democratic potential of popular art, as well as becoming more appreciative of the liberational somatic pleasures of dance. I found analytic aesthetics at that time too elitist and detached from the political and the embodied. I liked the democratic, experiential, embodied dimensions of Dewey's aesthetics. I did not like his style of argument, which I felt lacked the tightness and focus of analytic philosophy, and I found his views lacking on issues of interpretation, compared to what I found in neo-pragmatism (Rorty, Margolis, Stanley Fish) and analytic philosophy.

*T.J. B: One central quality in Dewey that sticks out to me is what you call the 'continuity thesis.' Can you explain what that is?*

RS: The key idea of continuity for Dewey's (2008, p. 16) aesthetics is that we should appreciate not only the difference but also the continuity between the aesthetic experience of the arts and ordinary experiences of life, or as he puts it, 'the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes

<sup>1</sup> Shusterman recently published two papers reflecting on his engagements with Rorty and Margolis. See 'Pragmatist Philosophy for Our Times: Reviewing Rorty's Legacy' (2022) and 'Pragmatism and Interpretation: Radical, Relativistic, but not Unruly' (2022).

of living'. Aesthetic understanding must not forget that the roots of art and beauty lie in the 'basic vital functions,' 'the biological commonplaces' that man shares with 'bird and beast.' In buttressing this continuity of art and life, Dewey insists on the underlying continuity between a whole series of binary notions, whose long-assumed oppositional contrast has structured so much of aesthetics and philosophy more generally. In aesthetics: the fine arts versus the applied or practical arts, the high versus the popular arts, the spatial versus the temporal arts, the aesthetic in contrast both to the cognitive and to the practical, artists who create art versus the 'ordinary' people who appreciate art. With respect to philosophical binaries, more generally, Dewey argues for continuity between the alleged dichotomies of body and mind, material and ideal, thought and feeling, form and substance, culture and nature, self and world, subject and object, means and ends.

The idea of continuity is likewise important to other pragmatists. For example, Dewey's key concept of aesthetic experience, I have argued, draws heavily on William James' arguments for the unity of

consciousness and the presence of continuities in experiences that appear to be unconnected, such as the sudden roar of thunder breaking the continuity of silence. For C.S. Peirce, the acknowledged founder of pragmatism, continuity was a key ontological principle, which he called *synechism*.<sup>2</sup>

*T.J. B: And this connects to your critique of what you call the 'wrapper' model for a definition of art, correct?*

RS: It can, in a way, be connected. My aim was to critique the then-current analytic obsession with trying to define art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions that would precisely capture all but only objects that people consider art. That definitional goal was perfect coverage of art's extension but without clarifying why art is valued and how we can improve our understanding and experience of art. The point of my critically describing such attempts as 'wrapper definitions' was to suggest that, like food wraps, which simply present, contain, and conserve their object, these definitions do not really deepen our appreciation of art or improve art's practice. The meliorative, transformational aims

<sup>2</sup> Peirce explains this concept in his paper 'The Law of Mind' (1992). Also found in *CP* 6: 102-63.

of pragmatist aesthetics could not be satisfied with purely wrapper definitions.

*T.J. B: The concern with continuity makes it seem that pragmatist aesthetics is dedicated to unity instead of difference.*

RS: That would be drawing a wrong conclusion, false to my pragmatist pluralism. Dewey's one-sided dedication to extreme unity in aesthetic experience (namely, not only unity as coherence but unity of wholeness or completion) is one of the key places where I find his aesthetic theory flawed and his artistic sensibilities limited. He produced his masterpiece, *Art as Experience* (2008; originally published 1934), after the emergence of cubism, surrealism, and Dada, but pays no attention to them or their aesthetics of disunity, division, or shock. One reason I insisted on devoting a long chapter to rap music was to celebrate its aesthetics of sampling and fragmentation. For me, unity and difference are both important; indeed, they are conceptually related. Any meaningful aesthetic unity is a unity involving difference, a unification of different elements. Beauty itself has often been characterized as unity in variety. Unity and difference constitute an essen-

tial complementarity, something like night and day. Chapter 3 of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 'Organic Unity: Analysis and Deconstruction', focuses on this issue of unity and difference, relationality and individuality, by analysing the antithetical views of analytic philosophy and Hegelian-Nietzschean deconstruction before proposing a mediating pragmatist approach that recognizes both unity and difference, relations and individuals, as co-originary.

*T.J. B: I'd like us to turn to interpretation, another area in aesthetics you've devoted a lot of thought and writing to. What is your pragmatist position regarding the interpretation of artworks? What's the goal of the interpretation?*

RS: My pragmatist position on interpretation is pluralist, and I maintained a pragmatic pluralism regarding interpretation already as a young analytic philosopher, indeed as a graduate student. My very first essay on that topic, 'The Logic of Interpretation' (1978), which I mentioned earlier and which was nourished by my readings of Wittgenstein, Austin, and a host of literary critics (Samuel Johnson, Joseph Addison, Walter Pater, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis), argued that there was no single valid logic of

interpretation. Instead, there were a number of different language games of interpretation, having different logics, employing different forms of reasoning, involving different contexts and traditions, and pursuing different interpretive aims, not all of which were focused on truth or knowledge. Some practices instead privileged aesthetic enhancement or maximizing meaning, emotive force, or pleasure. I later rearticulated this position while responding to various critiques of my interpretive theory in a chapter of my book *Surface and Depth* (2002) that I titled 'Logics of Interpretation' in order to highlight its pluralist message. So, to answer your question about the goal of interpretation, my view is that if one looks closely at the history of interpretive practice in literary and art criticism, one sees more than one goal implicit in the conventional idea that the goal of interpretation is the meaning of the work. One can immediately ask whether this meaning is the author's intended meaning (and at what stage in or after her composition of the work) or is it the (possibly changing) meaning of the poem's words or perhaps the meaning the work has for the reader or the meaning endorsed by the consensus of an interpretive community. Moreover, I also caution against viewing an

artwork's meaning as a sort of object already existing somewhere, fixed and ready to be revealed. Instead, I would follow the Wittgenstein idea that meaning is simply the correlate of understanding the work; therefore, it is better to describe interpretation as making sense of the work so that it is properly understood rather than as revealing the work's 'true' meaning. I elaborate the details of this pragmatist theory of interpretation in chapter 4 of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, while chapter 5 of that book argues for the importance of understandings beneath the level of interpretation. Such understandings guide interpretive practice but also, more broadly, guide our everyday perception and conduct of life. Some of these understandings that exist beneath the level of explicit interpreting are nondiscursive understandings. I focus on the importance of these noninterpretive and nondiscursive experiences in a French-language book significantly titled *Sous l'interprétation* (1994). The existence and role of such understandings helped bring me to a greater appreciation of immediate, non-reflective somatic understandings that then led me to somaesthetics, which recognizes not only the crucial role of non-reflective somatic consciousness and

action but also the value of critical somatic reflection.

*T.J. B: What we have been talking about is getting us to perhaps the part of your work that has received the most criticism, which is your defence of popular art and specific forms of music like rap, rock'n'roll and country musicals. Why does popular art need to be defended?*

RS: To be frank and blunt, I don't think that today it needs a defence. But the situation was different in the late 1980s when I began working on the aesthetics of popular music, particularly hip-hop. Rap music was then associated with criminality, was not eligible for Grammy consideration, and was under various forms of surveillance and repression. In 1991, when I first published 'Form and Funk: The Aesthetic Challenge of Popular Art' and 'The Fine Art of Rap', I had to face the very influential and vehement arguments against the aesthetic validity of popular art or even against the very idea of a popular aesthetic; such arguments dominated academic discourse. The arguments articulated by Adorno and Horkheimer<sup>3</sup> from critical theory, and Pierre Bourdieu from social theory held sway in

progressive philosophical circles, while conservative elitist thinkers like Alan Bloom similarly denigrated popular art (particularly popular music).

I'm very happy that today's young scholars and students do not remember those times when popular art and everyday aesthetics were not welcome in academic seminars and scholarly publications. At that time, popular art needed a defence of its aesthetic potential, and it is important to recall here that my defence of popular art has always been a *melioristic* rather than an exonerating one. It recognizes popular art's flaws and abuses, but also its merits and potential. The meliorist position holds that popular art should be improved because it leaves much to be desired, but that it can be improved because it can and often does achieve real aesthetic merit and serve worthy social goals. Moreover, meliorism insists that if popular art is simply dismissed as unworthy of aesthetic nurturing, it will be more vulnerable to degeneracy and exploitation by the crudest market forces. This meliorism means that popular art deserves serious critical study to expose its flaws as well as its merits. Thanks

<sup>3</sup> For more on Shusterman's engagements with critical theory, see 'Pragmatist Aesthetics and Critical Theory: A Personal Perspective on a Continuing Dialogue' (2022).

to the progressive democratization of the academy, the battle for popular art's legitimacy has been won, and there is now considerable critical aesthetic attention devoted to popular art. *Pragmatist Aesthetics* was an early contributor to that winning battle, and that victory is one reason why, after *Performing Live* (2000), I've not written much about popular art. I still believe it needs critical attention, but there are many people doing that, so I've turned my attention to other aesthetic topics beyond the fine arts, such as somaesthetics, fashion, gastronomy, and ars erotica. There is an understandable tendency to associate these practices with the popular arts because they are obviously not part of the traditional pantheon of high art or fine art, even though some forms of these practices display aspects of elitist refinement that seem remote from the popular when that term is construed in terms of 'the common' or 'the ordinary.'<sup>4</sup> I have noted in my work the vagueness and ambiguity of the term 'popular', but there was no good way to avoid using it in debates about popular culture.

T.J. B: *I think it's safe to say you're*

*interested in pushing aesthetics into new and even controversial areas. In 2021, you published a well-researched book on the arts of sex called Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love. Do you see your defence of the aesthetic value of ars erotica to be continuous with your work with popular art?*

RS: My aim in philosophical writing, including aesthetics, is to be helpful and honest, not to be controversial or provocative. But some ways of trying to be helpful and honest can result in controversy. One way of being helpful is to explore topics that have been largely neglected, but that seem likely to reward more attention. One way to be honest is to write about what one existentially cares about. When I began exploring the aesthetics of rap music, it was a neglected topic that I also cared about. I was deeply absorbed in listening to the music and discussing it with other fans; I went to rap concerts and even had a column in a North Philly rap fanzine, where I bore the moniker of 'Rich Frosted.' When I began to work on somaesthetics, the body was a largely neglected topic in Anglo-American

<sup>4</sup> An Italian collection of Shusterman's essays, edited by Stefano Marino, bears the title *Esperienza estetica e arti popolari: Prospettive somaestetiche sulla teoria e la pratica* (2023).

philosophy. Analytic philosophy's linguistic turn resulted in a disregard for nondiscursive experience, while contemporary pragmatism's most influential philosopher, Richard Rorty, rejected the non-linguistic as totally irrelevant and detrimental to philosophy. So, the project of somaesthetics was designed to explore how attention to somatic experience can be useful for philosophy, and especially useful when one considers philosophy as more than a collection of texts but rather as an art of living. I should add that my turn from analytic to pragmatist aesthetics can also be explained as partly deriving from the same aim of being helpful by treating a relatively neglected topic or orientation. In the 1980s, analytic aesthetics was blessed with a host of distinguished senior philosophers: Danto and Goodman, Beardsley and Dickie, Scruton, Urmson, and Margolis. In addition, there was a cohort of very talented younger figures, such as Walton, Carroll, and Levinson, slightly older than I was. The aesthetics of pragmatism, on the other hand, was largely neglected. Dewey's aesthetics (which he adamantly refused to consider pragmatist) had been eclipsed as old-fashioned, and so pragmatism needed a contemporary aesthetic

theory that was not afraid to call itself pragmatist aesthetics.

To return to the book referenced in your question, my philosophical exploration of *ars erotica* similarly sought to be helpful by exploring a subject whose aesthetic dimensions philosophy has traditionally ignored. Roger Scruton's instructive book on *Sexual Desire* (1987) might seem a rare contemporary exception, but it focuses more on the moral dimension of sex and deploys analytic methodology, whereas my *ars erotica* is genealogical in its approach and pragmatist in orientation. When I began thinking philosophically about *ars erotica* (because it was an obvious topic for somaesthetic inquiry), I was surprised and disappointed that the pragmatist tradition completely neglected it. This was especially disappointing because pragmatism, with its Darwinian background, melioristic thrust, and concern for the practical problems of men and women, has every reason to treat the topic of sex in a substantive and detailed way. After writing *Ars Erotica*, I explained the reasons for pragmatism's neglect of this topic in an article on 'Pragmatism and Sex: An Unfulfilled Connection' (2021).

To answer, finally, your question. In one way, my work on the aes-

thetics of *ars erotica* is continuous with my defence of the aesthetic value of popular art: in both cases, there is an attempt to explore and thus redeem the aesthetic value of practices whose aesthetic dimension has been denied or dismissed. However, in another way, the treatment of *ars erotica* in my book is discontinuous with popular culture because the texts I study in that book belong essentially to upper-class culture. These texts, stretching from ancient Greece to the Renaissance, were written by and for the elite of those patriarchal cultures, which essentially meant they were written by upper-class, cultured men and for the pleasure and power of other such privileged men. Sexism and misogyny are rampant in these texts (implicitly when not explicitly). This meant that much of the book's labour involves exploring what aspects of (and to what extent) those aesthetic erotic theories and practices are nonetheless ethically acceptable and perhaps even

potentially ennobling so that the power of desiring love (i.e. *eros*) could perhaps serve us today as a positive engine for ethical and aesthetic fulfilment through pleasurable, meaningful interpersonal and social harmony. A study of the influential past errors and oppressive misdirections in the history of the aesthetics of erotic love might also be helpful in navigating the uncertain, turbulent waters of sexual relations in contemporary culture with its promising openness to pluralism and transformation in gender identity.<sup>5</sup>

*T.J. B: Through this interview, we have been able to touch on a handful of key ideas in Pragmatist Aesthetics, its continuities with Shusterman's earlier work in analytic philosophy, and what would become his subsequent projects. Shusterman's always lucid and detailed answers to my questions are productive. I deliberately feigned the false idea that his pragmatist aesthetics insists one-sidedly on unity in order to elicit his firm*

<sup>5</sup> Shusterman's *Ars Erotica* was the focus of two substantial print symposia. The first was in *Foucault Studies*, 31 (December 2021) and the second in the philosophical journal *Eidos*. (Volume 5: No. 4/2021). The full collection of these two sets of papers, including Shusterman's responses, can be accessed, respectively, at <https://rauli.cbs.dk/index.php/foucault-studies/issue/view/845> and <https://eidos.uw.edu.pl/issue-4-2021/>. In a recent paper, Shusterman uses the poetry and prose of Rilke to explore the aesthetics of sex and transgender identity. See 'Self-Transformation as Trans-formation: Rilke on Gender in the Art of Living' (2023).

response that '[u]nity and difference constitute an essential complementarity, something like night and day.' That false conclusion and the charge of hedonism have been recurring misconceptions in the scholarly literature about his pragmatist aesthetics generally.<sup>6</sup> In addition, questions I assumed would get modest and direct responses were expanded on by Shusterman in ways unexpected, yet perfectly fitting. My indifferent use of the word 'controversial' in my last question led to a few remarks on how Shusterman does his philosophical writing, namely 'to be helpful and honest, not to be

controversial or provocative.' But, as he says, sometimes, despite one's intentions, crossing boundaries strikes others as provocation.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, however, Shusterman's way is not that of the provocateur or contrarian. Instead, it is 'nomadic', as a French interviewer titled him (Droit 2007). Even in this brief interview, that nomadic quality can be found in how we've, indeed, looked backward and forward from Pragmatist Aesthetics.

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<sup>6</sup> See the 'Introduction to the Second Edition' in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. I address these and other related misunderstandings in my article, 'Addressing Common Misunderstandings of Somaesthetics' (2023).

<sup>7</sup> Shusterman's latest book, *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* (2022), contains more information on philosophy and writing.

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