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## The Pragmatist Aesthetics of Richard Shusterman: A Conversation

*Richard Shusterman is Professor of Philosophy at Temple University, Philadelphia, and Directeur de Programme at the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris. His writings on art form part of the current renaissance in American pragmatism and renegotiate analytical and postmodern aesthetics towards a genuinely pragmatist philosophy of art. Shusterman's Pragmatist Aesthetics (1992) can be seen as neopragmatism's most significant contribution to art theory since Dewey's Art as Experience (1934).*

*Blending postmodern philosophy with the down-to-earth pragmatism typical of the Deweyan tradition, Shusterman combines Rorty's and Putnam's antifoundationalist epistemologies, Foucault's and Rorty's concepts of an aesthetics of existence, and Dewey's meliorist vision and experience-based philosophy of art and improved living. He seeks to mediate between high and popular art and thus juxtaposes interpretations of American rap lyrics or country musicals with readings of imagist poetry. With his concept of "somaesthetics" Shusterman probes the interaction of art, interpretation, and prediscursive levels of experience that most post-linguistic-turn art theories tend to ignore.*

*A major aspect of Shusterman's aesthetics is his emphasis on the element of pleasure in art reception and other human activities. He stresses that in order to enhance our experience, to shape our lives successfully into a "work of art," and to lead what he calls a "philosophical life," we need to work on our capacity to experience pleasure to a greater extent than most contemporary philosophies and aesthetics suggest. It is fitting, then, that Shusterman refers to himself as a hedonist and denounces the "perverse puritanism" of deconstructionists who refuse to read for "aesthetic richness" rather than epistemological and enlightenment aims (1992, 76). Similarly, he holds that Rorty's vision of aesthetic living is the "product of a puritan and capitalist America," since the body is mentioned only in connection with cruelty and not with "sensual bodily pleasures," and since the "breathless production" of new vocabularies Rorty demands is more a "theory of industrious making, than an aesthetics of full-bodied enjoying" (1992, 259). Shusterman's sense that there is a deep-rooted academic puritanism to be overcome becomes visible in his assertion that the academic resistance towards popular art stems from a "prolonged habit of inhibiting emotional excitement" and an "inhibition regarding the rapid surrender of self to strong emotions" (1999, 226); an incapability, therefore, to experience pleasure which is instilled in academics by their social and professional training. While this may be considered debatable, or at least as controversial as many of Shusterman's provocative theses, there can be no doubt that his highly original reworking of postmodernist and pragmatist aesthetics constitutes one of the most intriguing contemporary philosophies of art.*

*The following discussion focuses on the more controversial aspects of Shusterman's aesthetics – such as his critiques of deconstruction, contemporary moral theory and the linguistic turn – but also on his views on the uses of his pragmatist perspective for literary criticism. The discussion was conducted in written form and finalized during Shusterman's visit to the Graduiertenkolleg "Pragmatisierung/Entpragmatisierung" at Tübingen University in June 1999.*

## 1. The “Middle State” between Poststructuralism and Analytical Philosophy

G. L.:

*Mr. Shusterman, let us begin with the philosophical framework of your aesthetics. You have argued for a pragmatism which should take particular care to avoid two fallacies: first, the essentialism you see in analytical philosophy, whose epistemological viewpoint tends to regard objects of knowledge as “fixed, autonomous realities” (1992, 70); secondly, the radical contextualism you attribute to Derridean deconstruction and Rortyan neopragmatism, which you take to regard objects of knowledge “as but the flexible abstractions and constructed products of the activity of mind or of language’s play of differences” (ibid.). Your suggestion, then, is that pragmatism should locate itself in a “middle way between the rigidity of analytical philosophy and the confusing flux of poststructural theory.”<sup>1</sup>*

*It seems to me, however, that the more rigorous “poststructuralists” maintain epistemological viewpoints not essentially more skeptical than your own pragmatist version, and they have repeatedly insisted that charges of relativism are based on misreadings of their work. Particularly Jacques Derrida, the alleged archpriest of nihilism – and main addressee of your critique – has been very clear on this issue (at least in his later work): “Différance is not indeterminacy,” he insists, but “a determinate oscillation between possibilities [which] are themselves highly determined in strictly defined situations,” and he concludes that “from the point of view of semantics, but also of ethics and politics, ‘deconstruction’ should never lead either to relativism or to any sort of indeterminism” (148–49). Moreover, as to the problem of the stabilizing function of historical norms, the firmness and reliability of “our commonsense objects,” and the “adamant durability of some of our practices” (1992, 70) which you highlight, Derrida does not seem to differ fundamentally from your own viewpoint. He argues that “within interpretive contexts [...] that are relatively stable, sometimes apparently unshakeable,” there is always a “minimal consensus” and a “‘right track’ [une ‘bonne voie’]” which can serve as a temporal ground for interpretation (146).*

*In view of these apparent similarities between your and Derrida’s statements, critics defending deconstruction could feel pressed to argue that you – as part of a neopragmatist self-fashioning as a “new” philosophy which proclaims to replace the “obsolete” deconstruction – intentionally misread Derrida in order to be able to propose a pragmatist remedy for a Derridean relativism which you have constructed in the first place. In order to answer such a charge, could you refine the differences between the epistemological frameworks of your version of pragmatism and of the Derridean strands of deconstruction?*

R. S.:

Let me begin my answer by a cautionary remark about my general orientation toward the issue of novelty, since I suspect that with respect to this issue there is a certain “distortion effect” in the reception of my work which is understandable but very wrong and requires correction. I would rather be right than original, though I would of course enjoy being both. Pragmatism, you will remember, was introduced by William James as “a new word for some old ways of thinking,” and it is in that orientation that I see my own work. Its primary aim is not to grab attention by trying to be new, nor by trying to seem new by presenting rival theories as old. My work is aimed at solving theoretical problems that exist in philosophy and aesthetics, but also at calling attention to certain contemporary phenomena that have been largely neglected by academic philosophy, at least in the Anglo-American tradition in which I situate my own thought. So if I have

<sup>1</sup> My translation of Shusterman (1996, 17): “Pragmatismus als aussichtsreicher Mittelweg zwischen den Starrheiten der analytischen Philosophie einerseits und dem verwirrenden Fluxus poststrukturalistischer Theorie andererseits.”

chosen to deal with art forms like rap or with body practices that sometimes have questionable cultural legitimacy and virtually no philosophical recognition, it is not out of a lust to appear radically new or revolutionary. Nor is it out of a lust for media attention through the strategy of appearing transgressive or shockingly unique, of displaying radical chic. No, whether with regard to philosophy of art or philosophy of life, my books have always insisted that there are other aesthetic, cognitive, and ethical values besides radical originality, that innovation for its own sake is not the *summum bonum*, and that it is especially unprofitable to recommend as a formula for life.

In *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (1988), I tried to show that there are good pragmatic reasons for valuing tradition (reasons that Eliot shared with Dewey and Gadamer) and that there were dangers in Rorty's overemphasis on the new, on "new vocabularies," on "overcoming the tradition." I continue to respect and to develop this view in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992), *Vor der Interpretation* (1996), and *Practicing Philosophy* (1997), not only with respect to Rorty but with respect to Wittgenstein and Foucault (regarding originality in aesthetics) and with respect to Stanley Fish's one-sided demand for new interpretations. I don't think this should brand me as a conservative because I also believe that a healthy tradition cannot stand still; it requires some novelty, a balance of old and new. I know that particularly in literary and cultural studies today, there seems to be a pressure for novelty and difference, which sometimes degenerates into a "flavor of the month" mentality, but that is not the style of my philosophical investigations. Nor do I think that my German (or French) colleagues in philosophy see me that way.

With that background let me turn to your question about Derrida, whose work I admire (otherwise I would not have spent so much effort writing about it and even using it to help move analytic aesthetics toward pragmatism<sup>2</sup>). I agree that in certain moments Derrida sounds very much like a pragmatist and that he is not at all the foolish sort of relativist who thinks that any interpretation is as good as any other. You have indeed cited some of those moments. But what exasperates many Anglo-American philosophers who would otherwise be sympathetic to Derrida's views is that there are many other moments where Derrida, perhaps for the purposes of rhetorical drama to unsettle things, gives a very different impression, far more radically skeptical.

I don't want to get involved here in questions of rhetorical tone, emphasis, and style (which I think can be very important in philosophy), so let me highlight one important difference between Derrida's philosophy of language and my pragmatism by relying on the citations you yourself bring to insist on the similarity of our views. Derrida, you note, claims that deconstruction does not affirm "indeterminacy," but rather insists on "a determinate oscillation between possibilities [which] are themselves highly determined in strictly defined situations." This insistence and hankering for strictly defined determinacy is foreign to pragmatism, though very common to analytic philosophy. Analysis often insists that we can fix meanings or objects of reference univocally, while deconstruction counters that we cannot because of the inevitability of contextual oscillations through different situations, each with its precise determinacy. But both views assume such determinacy as the desired goal or standard or demand.

<sup>2</sup> As I do in "Deconstruction and Analysis: Confrontation and Convergence," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 26 (1986): 311-327; and "Croce on Interpretation: Deconstruction and Pragmatism," *New Literary History* 20 (1988): 199-216.

Pragmatism, in contrast, accepts not only the existence but the value of indeterminacy. Certain meanings and situations can be vague and undefined, and they can be happily left somewhat indeterminate so long as such indeterminacy allows us to continue our inquiry and our lives smoothly. For instance, if I say that I'll come by later this afternoon, my meaning is not that I'll come by exactly at 4 o'clock (for I haven't made my mind up yet); nor is it an oscillation between the precise determinacies of 16:00, 16:01, 16:02, 16:03 (and we could add the seconds for more determinacy). The meaning itself is indeterminate (and needs to be since my mind is not yet made up for a more determinate time).

Of course, if you need to leave at 16:30 and want me to be more precise about my arrival, I can say that I'll come around 4 pm. That, however, is still indeterminate about whether it will be slightly before or after 4 pm, but it is also not an oscillation of intention between the many precisely determined times that fall under the indeterminate meaning of around 4 pm. Of course, you can always ask me to be more precise if you have a good reason for it, but the point is that this higher degree of precision or determinacy is not necessary, unless for a specific purpose. For pragmatism, the need for determinacy depends on our purposes; and vagueness is often a virtue. It certainly has proved useful in peace agreements and other contracts, since the indeterminacy can allow for flexibility of interpretation, while if all the different precise interpretations were spelled out there would be no end to the debate and the agreement could not be signed.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The Pragmatic Justification of Literary Realism

G. L.:

*In your discussion of the deconstructionist critique of the concept of unity, you agree with De Man cum suis that the unity of a text is merely the effect of an interpreter's framing rather than an entity with a reality of its own, but you insist that "there remains pragmatic justification for postulating unity in the work as a strategy of reading [...]" (1992, 75). "If," your thesis goes, "our human need to perceive and experience satisfying unity in the disordered flux of experience is what motivates our interest in art, this need should not be rejected" (ibid.). If I understand you correctly, this seems to be a radically reader-oriented argument: what you see is what you want to see, and whether you see unity or incoherency depends on which gives you more pleasure, rather than on epistemological or ethical seriousness (as Jonathan Culler and Christopher Norris claim). It is a point which also seems to cohere with the pragmatist notion that truth is "what it is good to believe." I am intrigued by this argument, but I wonder why you seem to hesitate to apply a similar logic to questions of mimesis, the other main target of poststructuralist criticism. Could one not argue, do you think, that – if the feeling that one's reading experience is based on representational correspondence to the real produces pleasure – there remains a pragmatic justification for postulating realism as a strategy of reading?<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> There are, I think, also differences in metaphysics, that relate to this apparent difference between Derrida and the pragmatism I favor, which I outline in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) in the chapter on organic unity.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, an aesthetic defense of realism would cut through the often tedious realism/antirealism debates which seem to resurface whenever artists locate themselves within this opposition and which usually center around epistemological or ethical rather than aesthetic problems.

**R. S.:**

Yes, I think that could be an effective line of argument for realism as a strategy of reading, but I would recommend two slight, but I think important, modifications or cautions. First, when you describe my position on unity as “a radically reader-oriented argument: what you see is what you want to see,” I would insist that the “you” not be interpreted idiosyncratically or too individualistically. I think there are reasons why human beings generally seek (and profit from) unity or coherence in reading texts, particularly in texts that are read for the aesthetic experience they can afford; and, as I argue in “The End of Aesthetic Experience” (1997b), there seems to be a very general need or desire for such experience. This, of course, does not mean that there are never cases when we want a unity to be shaken-up or destroyed, or when we want to experience the dizziness of incoherence, but such desires are usually in the service of the quest for satisfactions in finding newer, better, more dynamic unities.

The second modification I would suggest to this argument for realism is more technically philosophical and concerns the very idea of truth as “representational correspondence to the real,” which pragmatism rejects as simply an abstract image of mirroring that has no real explanatory value. So I would prefer, in your argument for the pleasures of realist reading, to detach the idea of realism from the unhelpful theory of correspondence. Why not defend the reading strategy of realism simply in terms of reading for the pleasures of truth and insight? Why not just say that our reading is apt to be (and feel) more productive, engaged, and enjoyable when we presume that what we are reading can provide us (useful or important) knowledge of the world. Of course, this is not to say that we should believe that fairy tale creatures and fictional people are real, just because it might make our reading more fun. There is a difference between the needed “willing suspension of disbelief” and a positive belief in the reality of a described event or character. But fictional tales can give us truth even when their characters are unreal. That is another reason why my pragmatism would prefer to construe aesthetic realism without correspondence. In this context, I should mention that already thirty years ago in *Languages of Art*, Nelson Goodman, a philosopher with pragmatist affinities, tried to distinguish between artistic realism and correspondence by giving a more conventionalist account of such realism. Nor is Goodman’s model the only pragmatist strategy to avoid the standard correspondence model without giving up truth and realism.

### 3. The Aesthetics of Living

**G.L.:**

*A crucial part of your philosophical framework seems to be the blurring of the distinction between art and life. Your concept of “the art of living” draws from Foucault and Rorty and is based on the idea that the absence of a universal ethics grounded in human nature encourages us to choose an ethics which “strikes us as most attractive or most appealing” (1992, 243), and thus you suggest that the question of how we should live is a question of aesthetics rather than of ethics: by directing our lives along the lines of “aesthetic imperatives” we should aim at making ourselves “work[s] of art” (1997, 195). I am not sure, however, that I understand the conceptual cash value of replacing ethics by aesthetics. For instance, is the aesthetic unity we expect from an artwork the same as the unity we expect from a “good life?” And how does one deal with the relationality of aesthetic standards? While it is difficult enough to agree on ethical standards – even the UN definition of universal human rights has been challenged for its alleged eurocentrism (cf. Böhme, 23) –, views on aesthetics,*

at least in most of our contemporary societies, seem to get nowhere near a general consensus. This ultimate undecidability of aesthetic standards has led recent literary theory to give up the distinction between texts and artworks altogether. Is your concept of "the art of living" aiming at reversing that process? What, for instance, is an "aesthetic imperative?" If the "good life" equals art, is the "not-so-good life" to be seen as "kitsch," and, in order to tell the difference, is one to debate in terms of aesthetic terminology, such as "unity?" On the other hand, if your concept of the "art of living" does not give up the relationality of aesthetic standards, does that not have the dubious consequence of leading to a relativization of ethics? What, for instance, is one to reply, then, to radical rightwingers who argue that they find fascism beautiful and democracy rather plain? Is one going to try to prove, with the conceptual tools of literary criticism, for instance, that fascism does not fulfil aesthetic standards (that it lacks "unity"), or that a totalitarian society is less aesthetically refined than the philosopher state? In fact it seems to be rather difficult to criticize unethical behavior in aesthetic terms (i.e. referring to ethnic cleansing as ugly or lacking in unity rather than as immoral). Rorty, it seems to me, tries to tackle this problem by limiting the aestheticization of ethics to the realm of the private, and he would probably answer that everybody could be a fascist as long as they kept it to themselves (and out of the public sphere).<sup>5</sup> Since you eschew Rorty's private/public distinction and seem to suggest that the aestheticization of ethics should be a more global process, how could your concept of the "art of living" prevent that members of social communities, happily chipping away at their life as artwork, would step on each others' feet?

### R.S.:

There are a lot of interrelated interrogations wrapped up here in your question, and also, perhaps, a few misunderstandings of my work that need to be cleared up. So let me start with these points of clarification. First, as should be clear from my detailed reconstructive attention to pragmatist liberalism, my general ethical-political framework is too liberal to advocate the imposition of aesthetic imperatives on individuals as a coercive model to live their lives. Whatever force these imperatives have comes from their inspirational power, not from the fascist fiat of a supreme aesthete. (By the way, if we were going to criticize fascism in aesthetic terms, it would not be unity but variety that would be lacking.) In *Practicing Philosophy* (1997), I recognize that there are other models of philosophical life that have been successfully conceived and practiced, notably the therapeutic and the scientific models. And, of course, I recognize that one need not adopt the challenge of living a philosophical life at all. One of the advantages I try to show in the aesthetic model I favor is that it encourages variety and difference, even in the political sense, which is why I also offer in *Practicing Philosophy* aesthetic arguments for democracy that are related to this point.

Second, note how your question slides from my notion of blurring the art/life distinction to the more radical idea of "replacing ethics by aesthetics." When I speak of the aestheticization of ethics I am not suggesting that ethical values are no longer useful or necessary in many circumstances, and that everything in life should be judged as we judge works of art (so to return again to your worry about fascism, I don't think we need only to rely on purely aesthetic judgements in order to reject it). There is nothing wrong with having both aesthetic and ethical reasons for one's behavior, especially if they tend to blur and mix as I think they do. The either/or of ethics or aesthetics seems to me a false dichotomy, just like it did to the Greeks whose term *kalon-kai-agathon* – the

<sup>5</sup> Rorty argues that the citizens of an ideal society should be allowed to "be as privatistic, 'irrationalist,' and aestheticist as they please" as long as they cause "no harm to others" (1989, xiv).

beautiful and good, I often refer to. Of course, there can be cases where ethical values and aesthetic values conflict, but ethical values can also conflict with each other without an apparent option of reconciling them (take for instance the violent conflicts between pro-choicers and pro-lifers on the abortion issue, or between theologically driven ethical absolutists who kill themselves over whether the one god is protestant, catholic, muslim, or jewish).

In any case, most of my discussion of the aestheticization of ethics is not devoted to advancing the recommendation that ethics *should* be aestheticized. I am first of all trying to show that (largely because of loss of faith in a universal ethics that could be derived from an essential human nature) there is in fact a trend toward the aestheticization of ethics not only in our society but even among analytic philosophers who don't even explicitly claim to be moving in that direction (such as Richard Wollheim and Bernard Williams). As you yourself say in your question, we can't seem to agree universally on any substantive set of ethical standards, and there seems no logical way of compelling consensus through appeal to rationality or human nature in the way that philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, or Kant tried to do. Hence ethical judgment, particularly when it comes to hard cases or new problems or to fundamental choices about our life style, becomes more like aesthetic judgement: i.e. a reflexive judgement that requires a sense of harmony and creative imagination, a judgement where we expect and hope for agreement or confirmation or at least understanding, but where we can't guarantee agreement by unquestionable principles.

Within these reflexive judgements traditional ethical considerations have an important place, because of the continuity between ethical and aesthetic values in our lives. Things that horrify us ethically tend to disgust aesthetically, so that we could not enjoy the drama of human sacrifice or the tastiness of eating human flesh because of our ethical repugnance; and, in fact, part of the aesthetic criticism of literature and plastic art has always included issues of ethical values. Since our aesthetic tastes and our aesthetic criticism are in large part conditioned by our social upbringing and environment, hence by the ethical values therein expressed, the fears you voice that aestheticization will completely destroy our ethical values seem to me exaggerated, even if there can be cases where enchantment with certain aesthetic values (or, for that matter, certain ethical ones – like the life of the foetus) can temporarily lead us into unacceptable behavior. And conversely, the intensely experienced ugliness of certain ethical atrocities *can* be more effective than abstract moral principles in showing us the error of our ways. I think of how the residents of cultured Weimar were finally brought by the allies to see (and to retch with revulsion from) the performance of neighboring Buchenwald.

We should also note that the blurring of the aesthetic and the ethical extends into some of our most basic ethical judgements. Take, for instance, our notion of justice as fairness and the attempt to implement this ideal by achieving a fair equilibrium of goods for all members of our society. This implies the aesthetic idea of proportion and balance, a sense of what is fair that cannot be decided in purely mechanical, quantifiable terms, but instead requires a qualitative judgement of balance and imaginative perception. Such aesthetic judgements are involved even in what Rorty (after Rawls) regards as the purely procedural public sphere of justice. So even though some distinctions can be usefully made between private matters and public ones, aesthetic elements cannot be confined to the private sphere and are constantly exerting an effect on public life: just think about how aesthetics, through the media, pervades our political process and public opinion.

Rather than whining about this as a theoretical blunder, it makes more pragmatic sense to recognize that the aesthetic cannot be curtailed to the private, and thus we should exercise a far more vigilant critique of the aesthetic-ethical values that are expressed in the public sphere. My work on somaesthetics and the body-media issue has tried to engage this problem.

Finally, it is very important to recall that my theory of the aestheticization of ethics is not limited to the ideal of the artwork and is especially not confined to the ideal of the modernist or romantic artwork of genius. Insistence on other aesthetic values – beauty, harmony, unity, graceful ease and communicability – besides radical originality and dazzling uniqueness is an important part of what distinguishes my pluralist vision of the aesthetic life from the versions that Foucault and Rorty offer. And once aesthetic living no longer requires being shockingly different or new, then it becomes much easier to see how neighbors can live aesthetically together in considerable peace and harmony, relying on a relative convergence of values that underlies their variations of lifestyle. It also becomes clear how such a society can tolerate and even profit from the occasional genius who does bring a radically original and shockingly different lifestyle to concrete expression.

#### 4. Pragmatism and The Uses of Literature

G. L.:

*The meliorist attitude typical of pragmatist philosophy seems to lead to concepts of art which tend to impose extra-aesthetic functions on literature. Rorty's approach to literature in particular could be seen as ultimately rendering the literary text subservient to moral improvement: according to Rorty, literature consists of texts with "moral relevance," the critic revises the canon in order to "facilitate moral reflection" (1989, 82), and the novelist proves to be "socially useful" by "help[ing] us attend the springs of cruelty in ourselves" (1989, 95). In your Pragmatist Aesthetics you disagree with Rorty and insist that the aesthetic experience is an end in itself irreducible to external functions, yet you also argue that the experience of art has "effects" which "flow into and enhance our other pursuits" (1992, 53), that it is a prerequisite of an "improved living" (1997, 176), and that art can "serve worthy social goals" (1992, 177). In a commentary on Dewey, you emphasize that art has "instrumental worth. For anything to have human value, it must in some way serve the needs and enhance the life and development of the human organism in coping with her environing world" (1992, 9). Now, even critics who do not follow Kant's contention that art must be entirely disinterested may find that such meliorist expectation overly functionalizes and constrains the literary text, and that the charging of literature with moral functions may reintroduce the Shelleyan myth of the author as a "legislator of the world" (and hence may imply that literature departments be some sort of moral supreme courts which decide about the ethical pertinence of literary texts). Could you elaborate on your views about the function of literature (as against Rorty's), and consequently, the role of the literary critic?*

R. S.:

Let me begin by recalling the pluralism of my pragmatist approach. I do not think literature or criticism has one function but many: cognitive, emotive, communicative, social, political, ethical, etc. To some theorists, the arts have seemed disinterested and functionless partly because they actually can serve so many uses that they cannot be reduced to a special function. Already in my first book *The Object of Literary Criticism* (1984),



which was based on my Oxford doctoral dissertation in philosophy, I not only argued for the functional pluralism of literature and criticism, but showed how this also led to a logical pluralism in critical practice. And I went on to identify descriptive, prescriptive, and performative logics which could be demonstrated in the work of actual critics whom I cited and analyzed. In my subsequent books on T.S. Eliot and on pragmatism, I continued to develop this pluralist line, insisting moreover that the different functions of literature and criticism are for the most part compatible so that one is not automatically forced to deny one in pursuing another. In particular, I argue that the aims of understanding and of pleasure are very closely related and must not be seen as conflicting, that pragmatism can combine cognitivism and hedonism and even social merit. That combination is one of the reasons I wanted to study the genre of "knowledge rap" which explicitly sought to combine all three types of functions.

As for the question of my relation to Richard Rorty, whom I greatly admire and who helped me make the move from analytic philosophy to pragmatism, it is a topic that so many people ask me about in Germany and Eastern Europe (though not so much in France where he has been far less influential) that I am actually a bit tired of it. But I shall try, nonetheless, to give a substantive response, since it seems to interest others; and maybe if my answer is long enough, the question will stop being asked!

I should begin by stressing that our differences certainly extend far beyond the realm of literary criticism. So before taking up the aesthetic domain let me summarize our differences in the other two traditional areas into which you Germans like to divide the philosophical field: theoretical philosophy (epistemology and metaphysics) and practical philosophy (ethics and political theory). First, as you can see in *Vor der Interpretation* and in other writings, I reject Rorty's hermeneutic universalism that regards all understanding as interpretation. I argue for a pragmatic, functional difference between interpretation and unreflexive understanding that underlies it. A second, related, point is that I reject Rorty's textualism: the idea that the world we experience is thoroughly linguistic, that there is no meaningful experience that is not propositional, that our selves are but a collection of vocabularies and propositional attitudes. In contrast, I insist that in addition to the importance of language, there is a non-propositional somatic dimension of experience that is important for philosophy to recognize.

Moreover, Rorty rejects the very concept of experience as philosophically useless and dangerous, as misleading us into the myth of the given. But like the earlier pragmatists James and Dewey, I think the concept of experience is very important, so I have tried to defend it, paying particular care to rehabilitating the concept of aesthetic experience. Finally, to mark perhaps a fourth difference, Rorty, I think, exaggerates the pragmatist idea of contingency, giving it a sense of idiosyncratic arbitrariness or random accident rather than simply the sense of not being logically or ontologically necessary. By failing to distinguish between contingencies that are capricious or haphazard and those that are so deeply socially routinized and practically entrenched that they are indispensable ("contingent necessities" so to speak), Rorty is led to take an overly cavalier attitude toward social realities and the social sciences. Following Harold Bloom, he describes such sciences as "dismal" (1998, 127) and so he has also grown quite unsympathetic to the social analyses of Foucault.

The upshot of Rorty's views thus seems to suggest that if our world is contingent and linguistic, we can then reconstitute it (or at least console ourselves) by virtuoso linguistic reinterpretation, which is why he so much prefers Derrida and Bloom to Fou-

cault and social science, which is why he voices “the hope for a religion of literature” (1998, 136) to improve our world. But then, on the other hand, he makes a very sharp distinction between real politics and cultural politics that I argue against in *Practicing Philosophy* (1997). It is hard for me to see how there is not continuity between the two forms of politics, and it also baffles me that real politics does not require the methods and data of social science.

This brings me into the realm of practical philosophy and politics, where besides questioning Rorty’s rejection of cultural politics, I also question (like so many others) his rigid way of dividing the public from the private. It is not that one can never distinguish between public matters and private ones; but the distinction requires more contextual flexibility than Rorty allows and cannot simply be reduced to a distinction between agreed norms of neutral formal procedures versus private values relating to personal visions of the good life.

Moreover, I don’t think Rorty pays enough attention to how social structures and the public sphere inform what he advocates for our private visions of perfection. His own ethical ideal of the liberal ironist in constant search for new vocabularies is an obvious echo of the consumer’s quest for new commodities, and both are obviously framed by the master public framework of neo-liberal capitalism. Likewise, Rorty’s definition of autonomy as original, distinctly individualist self-creation seems a clear echo of neoliberalist self-seeking and selfishness. So ambitiously voluntaristic, demanding, and elitist, it makes one ask how many people could really live that way and why should we morally expect them to?

It should be obvious by now that I also take issue with Rorty’s glorification of neo-liberalism, his emphasis on negative liberty and the one-sided celebration of free-market capitalism. It is one of the great dangers of Rorty’s influence in Eastern Europe that American pragmatism, which Dewey inspired with socialist ideals, can now be construed as an apology for free-market opportunism and selfishly private values.

But let me finally get to literature and aesthetics. I reject Rorty’s Bloomian view of interpretation as “strong misreading.” When he asserts that the good critic “simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose” (1982, 151), I counter that such a policy is destructive of the very alterity that makes reading a dialogical hermeneutic project from which we can learn something new. This attitude also does not seem very helpful for (if indeed consistent with) Rorty’s recent advocacy of the “inspirational value of great literature” (1998). His strategy of bullying the text into fitting one’s purpose is, however, clearly connected to his demand that interpretations must be novel and that interpretation is (in Stanley Fish’s words) “the only game in town” (355). I argue instead for the possibility and value of readings that are not original interpretations but more ordinary, traditional understandings of texts which can serve as a background or base for the more novel interpretations. I don’t reject the value of novel interpretations or strong misreadings, only their exclusive claim to value in literary experience. I likewise reject Rorty’s one-sided identification of the aesthetic life with singular genius and originality – not because I have something against original genius but again only because this unwisely excludes other rewarding modes of aesthetic living that are less demanding and more accessible.

As you already noted, Rorty seems to me too narrowly concerned with poetics as the generation of new texts and vocabularies to enhance moral reflection, while failing to give enough attention to the aesthetics of pleasure and beauty. I think that the func-

tions of meliorism (cognitive, ethical, and social) and pleasure must be emphasized (and seen as related), just as I also think that works of popular culture are useful for both functions. This brings out another important difference in our aesthetic theories. While Rorty ignores the popular arts as essentially unworthy, I pay them considerable attention. Indeed it seems to me that popular art, since it is understood by more people, can be more effective in sensitizing our society to moral and political injustice so that popular art has a pragmatic advantage in making real improvements to the ethical quality of our world. Could we compare *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*? Finally, not only does my aesthetics include popular culture, but I work on music, visual art, and also somatic art which Rorty simply ignores, through his exclusive textualism.

But let me conclude this long response by returning to your initial question: Am I an aesthetic functionalist? Is any pragmatist aesthetics, by its very connection to the idea of practice, necessarily confined to functionalism? But here I want to ask "what is aesthetic functionalism?" If it means that works of art should be understood, appreciated, and used only for their ethical and social values in order to (as Rorty says) "help us become autonomous" or "become less cruel," then I am decidedly not a functionalist like Rorty for whom literature seems almost reduced to a branch of practical moral philosophy. Instead, my pragmatist approach (like Dewey's) stresses aesthetic experience more because of its immediately felt rewards of pleasure, intensified and meaningfully enriched awareness, and heightened vitality, than because of any specific practical purpose outside that experience for which it serves as a means.

In short, aesthetic experience for me is primarily a consummatory rather than an instrumental value. But this does not mean that the practical (including moral) functions of artworks are irrelevant to their value, even their aesthetic value. For a sense of the functional aims or import of the work (and of its already achieved practical effects) can form a significant part of its aesthetic experience, and can thus enrich it. Conversely, the power of its aesthetic experience can strengthen an artwork's practical efficacy. So that art's consummatory and functional values tend to be less contradictory than reciprocally reinforcing, and this means that affirming art's practical uses does not reduce one to a narrow functionalism.

On the other hand, if you define functionalism as the view that an artwork's value does not exist in itself in some pure platonic realm of absolute value but rather depends on its capacity to function in enriching human experience, then pragmatist aesthetics is functionalist, for it cannot conceive of aesthetic value outside of human experience.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> By the way, Monroe Beardsley, my predecessor at Temple, even proposed a functionalist art theory which made the production of aesthetic experience the defining function of art and the sole criterion of aesthetic value. My reasons for rejecting his theory are elaborated in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) and "The End of Aesthetic Experience" (1997b), but his theory suggests how aesthetic experience itself can be employed in a functionalist framework.

## 5. Somaesthetics and Pre-interpretive Experience

**G. L.:**

*Your concept of a "somaesthetics" revives the Deweyan notion of prediscursive experience and challenges central premises of the linguistic turn. You criticize contemporary aesthetics for reducing all levels of experience to the linguistic and for arguing falsely that "to perceive, read, understand, or behave at all intelligently is already, and must always be, to interpret" (1992, 115). Against this common antifoundationalist belief you hold that there is an important prediscursive and somatic dimension at work "beneath interpretation," which you call "non-interpretational experience, activity, and understanding" (1992, 117). At the same time you stress that your reconsideration of prediscursive experience does not necessarily mean a regression into the essentialism for which Dewey has been criticized, for you point out that prediscursive experience is not necessarily to be understood as objective. Yet if the pre-interpretive experience is just as perspectival as interpreted experience, what exactly is the heuristic use of pitting interpretive against prediscursive categories?*

*Moreover, what are the consequences of a somaesthetics for literary criticism and philosophy? As long as one is dealing with such obviously somatic artistic practices as, for instance, Techno dance, it seems to make sense that the critic's somatic perception is of importance. Yet your reference to having "tested" philosophical issues "on the dance floor" (1992, X), or your argument that philosophical projects should "be pursued not only through texts but also through somatic exploration or experiment" (1992, 176) may strike some of your readers as bordering on the esoteric. Could you define in which ways a somaesthetic approach to literature affects interpretation of literary artifacts (other than offering some questionable notion of "gut-feeling" about literary meaning and value)?*

**R. S.:**

I think you must be careful to heed a distinction in my work between the pre-interpretive and the non-discursive. When I hear a clear utterance (or read an easy text) in my mother tongue, I typically understand without interpreting it, though that understanding is obviously a discursive understanding, since it has to do with understanding language. There is also, however, a domain of somatic understanding which cannot be adequately reduced to language, though this non-discursive dimension of our life can be related to and improved with the help of discursive, self-reflexive measures. Concerning the heuristic value for literature of recognizing that there are non-interpretive understandings, it is primarily to validate ordinary modes of literary reading and understanding against the increasing, professionalist-motivated demands that the only acceptable way to read is to produce an original interpretation, a new strong misreading. In affirming ordinary reading and understanding, one validates the pleasures and knowledge they bring.

As for the field I call somaesthetics, I don't think its prime value has anything to do directly with literary criticism. I am not advocating a somaesthetic approach to literature in the way that A.E. Housman once suggested that we could judge good poetry by its giving us goose-bumps or taking our breath away. Perhaps somaesthetics could help literary criticism in a very minor, indirect way by giving readers greater bodily fitness so that they are less likely to lose attention through fatigue. But that hardly sounds like a stunning contribution. For philosophy, however, when it is conceived as an embodied life practice (in the way I advocate in *Practicing Philosophy*), somaesthetics seems essential. As I argue in a forthcoming paper that outlines the structure and aims of somaesthetics (to be published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*), this discipline, which may be provisionally defined 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, provides a crucial means to philosophy's classic goals of knowledge, self-knowledge, effective will for the exercise of virtue, and the quest for happiness.

## 6. Pragmatism and Neoconservative Literary Criticism

### G. L.:

Some of the recent pragmatist approaches to literature have tended towards neoconservatism. Rorty's enthusiastic agreement with Harold Bloom on the supposed decline in U.S. literature departments, for instance, is a baffling case in point. Though Rorty does not repeat Bloom's sweeping statements on literary value (or the alleged lack of it in most contemporary literature or culture), and though he defines literary taste more carefully than Bloom as a bundle of "idiosyncratic beliefs and desires" (1989, 142) (rather than an objective quality epitomized by Shakespearean drama), he basically reinscribes the popular/high literature dichotomy when he distinguishes between texts "which supply novel stimuli to action" and "those which simply offer relaxation" (1989, 143). This active/passive dualism brings Rorty's pragmatism dangerously close to the neoconservative description of popular fiction as cheap and sordid, as it has been expressed, for instance, by Martha Nussbaum, who defines Dick Francis' novels and "casual sex" with hired prostitutes as similar kinds of "numbing" activities.<sup>7</sup> It is a dichotomy which is also to be found in Dewey's writings, who warns of aesthetic experiences built on "meretricious stuff" (145) (*meretrix* being Latin for prostitute). As you have become known as a philosopher of rap, it should seem obvious that you would eschew such devaluations of popular art as merely "relaxing" (or mindless and sensuous) rather than inspiring. Yet your approaches to popular texts do not seem to have entirely dropped the dichotomies and hierarchies on which Bloom's or Nussbaum's neoconservative aesthetics are based. You argue that "the products of popular art are often aesthetically wretched and lamentably unappealing" and can have "noxious" social effects, "particularly when they are consumed in a passive, all-accepting way." As "the worst of American culture" you describe "meaningless sex, empty formalism, and contempt of intellect" (1992, 118), thus also connecting the sensuous with the trivial. Finally, you define the role of pragmatist criticism to help "improving" popular art towards "aesthetic merit" and "worthy social goals" (1992, 176-77). The question which suggests itself to me is how you can overcome the elitism of modernist or neoconservative aesthetics while retaining some of their evaluative oppositions (i.e. passive, meaningless vs. active, meaningful, etc.).

### R. S.:

You are certainly right to distinguish my aesthetic views from the cultural conservatism of Rorty, Bloom, and Martha Nussbaum. But I think you also have to distinguish between the inevitable hierarchies involved in evaluating things (e.g. this tomato is better than that one) and, on the other hand, rigid class- or genre-hierarchies that are based on essentialist distinctions (e.g. falsely affirming that tomatoes are not as good as apples because they are not really fruit, even if they are botanically recognized as such; or falsely affirming in aesthetics that popular artworks are always and necessarily worse than works of high art because they are not really art and lack the essential aesthetic values).

An important part of my work in aesthetics has been devoted to showing that the presumed essentialist distinctions between high art and popular do not rest on philo-

<sup>7</sup> (1990, 240). Though Nussbaum explains that there is a moral difference between reading popular fiction and hiring prostitutes, she ascribes both practices to people seeking "undemanding release."

sophically defensible principles, that high and popular works cannot be distinguished simply by a difference of aesthetic qualities. Popular art works can be aesthetically stimulating, rewarding, and complex, while works of high art can be dull, empty, and superficial. The differences between so-called high and popular art instead are socially and historically constituted, and this means that the status of an artwork or an entire genre can change with time. Greek tragedies that are now considered masterpieces of high culture were initially considered popular art, as was Shakespeare; and both were severely criticized by intellectuals of their respective times for being too vulgar in their appeal to the people. In the new millennium rock music and rap could well reach the status of classics, as the cinema certainly seems to have already achieved, though it was earlier lambasted (like the novel) as vulgar trash.

What then are the consequences of recognizing that there is no essential difference between the aesthetic qualities of popular art and high art? Not that there is no more use for aesthetic evaluation any more, because it cannot neatly divide all artworks into high good ones and low bad ones. That is a logical howler and an aesthetic catastrophe. On the contrary, dissolving the rigid line of aesthetic legitimacy and quality between high and low means that *more* evaluative effort is necessary, since we cannot simply rely on generic identification to evaluate things for us. I should also remind you that my defense of popular art is not an attack on high art per se (on which I also dwell and write with loving admiration); it is only an attack on its exclusive and exclusionary claims to aesthetic value.

As for the evaluative dualism of active/passive you find in Rorty and Nussbaum, I want to distance myself from them in two ways. First, I regard both active and passive moments as important in aesthetic experience, both in the artist's process of creation and in the audience's process of perception. In both processes, there are important moments of surrender as well as active striving and control. Just as there can be too much passivity, so there can also be a harmful, willful hyperactivism, which we often recognize in artworks and interpretations that seem forced and awkward in their striving to seem new. Moreover, passivity should not be identified with numbing. As any informed practitioner of somatic body therapies like Feldenkrais or bioenergetics surely knows, letting oneself go limp and passive is often the best way to feel things more acutely.

Finally, let me confess that I am continuously disappointed when intelligent people like Allan Bloom (cf. 1987) and Martha Nussbaum reach for the stale stereotypes that seek to discredit popular art through the negative sexual associations of masturbation and prostitutes. Should love of Henry James's novels make a woman not all that older than myself sound so much like a Victorian school marm? If so, we have an argument why rap should be added to courses in adult education. I don't know precisely the sort of evidence on which Nussbaum bases her claim, but I can assure you that I have not had enough experience of casual sex with prostitutes to find it numbing. On the other hand, I can testify to the numbing effects of continued acts of casual intercourse with one's sacralized partner in matrimony (fortunately, that marriage is over). The upshot is not that prostitutional sex is better than marital sex (though some radical thinkers have identified the two). The conclusion is rather that the value of consensual sex does not depend on the genre of high or low, marriage or prostitution, but rather on the specific aesthetic qualities and meanings of the particular performance. That is also the story for art, as I see it.

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