The return of the repressed

By John Preston

PHAGMATIST AESTHETICS: LIVING BEAUTY, RETHINKING ART
BY RICHARD M. SHUSTERMAN
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es of "accurate reflection and compartmental differentiation" are fulle and wrongheaded. So in place of the misplaced analytic idea of faithfully representing our concepts, the pragmatist rec- ommends taking an active role in the definition and conception of art, hoping to reshape our concepts to serve us better, and in particular to enhance our standing in the final court of appeal, aesthetics.

The analytic aesthetician, how- ever, might well argue that one thing which philosophers must aim at is an understanding of art. This surely involves an under- standing of our current aesthetic concepts and our actual concepts which we haven't (yet) got. Shusterman takes the radical course of denying that one task of aesthetic theory is to capture the truth of our current understand- ing of art, or to yield knowledge. But is this the right or better served by admitting these aims of truth and knowledge while recon- ceiving them in distinctively prag- matist terms, and forging anew the link with understanding.

The author has to say about interpretation should be of interest to many philosophers in areas outside aesthetics. Here he supplies a damning critique of existing pragmatist theories, before going on to argue that not all human activities involve inter- pretation. In his opposition to this "hermeneutic universalism" he follows Wittgenstein and departs from Rorty. In the book's best

chapter he skilfully takes apart the arguments for hermeneutic universalism, culminating in the realisation that our criteria for understanding and for having an interpretation differ. But this solidly Wittgensteinian critique makes one wonder whether he should ever have assimilated the later Wittgenstein to the analyti- cal paradigm in the first place.

In the book's second part, Shusterman seeks to apply his reconditioned pragmatist aesthetic to the vexed question of the status and value of popular art forms. He takes rap music as one representative of these forms, showing that at its best it can sat- isfy the central aesthetic criteria of complexity, philosophical con- tent, artistic self-consciousness, creativity and form. The question here is: couldn't the analytic aes- thetician make much the same case? Is there anything distinc- tively pragmatist about these cri- teria or this legitimation? Is there some deep reason why analytic aesthetics can't address today's live aesthetic issues and new artis- tic forms?

Shusterman's pragmatism was char- acterised by its opposition to all forms of formalism. Dewey and his followers challenge the oppositions between the aesthetic and the practical, between art and life, and between art and popular cul- ture. The resulting pragmatist aesthetic has an appealingly open, democratic and populist cast that is surely preferable to the dooey rhetoric of Adorno or the posturing of the deconstructiv- ist.

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