The return of the repressed

BY JOHN PRESTON

PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS: LIVING BEAUTY, RETHINKING ART
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JUST AS William James offered pragmatism as a middle way between the "tough-minded" empiricist and the "tender-minded" rationalist, Richard Shusterman's aim is to show that an updated version of John Dewey's pragmatist aesthetic is a tenable middle way between the exacting sterilities of "analytic" aesthetics and the lively but pretentious work of recent Continental theorists. Dewey's *Art as Experience*, however, was swiftly forgotten under the hegemony of analytic philosophy. Are we now ready for the return of the repressed?

Shusterman's sketch of analytic philosophy and analytic aesthetics emphasises an alleged commitment to foundationalist distinctions and ahistorical essences. Pragmatist aesthetics, by contrast, he characterises in terms of its holism, historicism and organicism, and its naturalistic emphasis on the human body. It emphasises that thought, language, and their objects are changeably, contextually, and socially-historically constituted. While the analytic aesthetician is content to map out the concepts we use in describing and evaluating art, the pragmatist is not concerned, for example, with whose definition of art is the most accurate. For her the analyst's purposes of "accurate reflection and compartmental differentiation" are futile and wrongheaded. So in place of the misplaced analytic ideal of faithfully representing our concepts, the pragmatist recommends 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, aesthetic experience.

The analytic aesthetician, however, might well argue that one thing which philosophers must aim at is an *understanding* of art. This surely involves an understanding 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 understanding of art, or to yield knowledge. But his case might be better served by admitting these aims of truth and knowledge while reconceiving them in distinctively pragmatist terms, and forging anew the link with understanding.

What 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 interpretation. 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 analytical 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 satisfy the central aesthetic criteria of complexity, philosophical content, artistic self-consciousness, creativity and form. The question here is: couldn't the analytic aesthetician make much the same case? Is there anything distinctively pragmatist about these criteria or this legitimation? Is there some deep reason why analytic aesthetics can't address today's live aesthetic issues and new artistic forms?

Dewey's pragmatism was characterised by its opposition to all forms of dualism. Dewey and his followers challenge the oppositions between the aesthetic and the practical, between art and life, and between art and popular culture. The resulting pragmatist aesthetic has an appealingly open, democratic and populist cast that is surely preferable to the doomy rhetoric of Adorno or the posturings of the deconstructionists.

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