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The Field of Rap: An American Professor Takes Hip Hop At Its Word

Richard Shusterman, professor of philosophy, provides an inspiring study of rap and affirms the necessity for a serious criticism of the popular arts.

A youthfully fortyish Richard Shusterman teaches philosophy at Temple University in Philadelphia. He publishes simultaneously in France and in the United States Pragmatist Aesthetics (which has as its subtitle Living Beauty, Rethinking Art), a work which offers a deep and cleansing reflexion on "the popular forms of expression which dominate our world, the mass media arts which have long been misunderstood and mistreated by conservative aesthetic theory." And to make his case more difficult, Richard Shusterman focuses more specifically on rap, a genre of music which is far from enjoying a great reputation in academic circles.

Richard Shusterman takes an equally minority position with respect to his philosophical options, since he employs John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, whose aesthetics has been totally eclipsed by another major current of American thought, analytic philosophy. Pragmatism, which did not get its name by chance, approaches cultural objects without a priori normative preconceptions. Shusterman, for example, treats with the same critical attention and singularly democratic spirit a poem of T.S. Eliot and a rap by the group Stetsasonic: "Though this bringing together of high modernism and hip hop within a single book might be seen as symptomatic of postmodern eclecticism, I would rather see it as emblematic of a cultural ideal where so-called high and low art (and their audiences) together find expression and acceptance without oppressive hierarchies, where there is difference without domination or shame."

But why rap? "First", Shusterman replies with a naughty smile, "because I've always loved black music. I initially took to rap by dancing to it. Then I began to listen carefully to the lyrics, which are sometimes very sharp. As a philosopher, I immediately admired its challenge to the traditional philosophical compartmentalization between knowledge, politics, and art. In this Kantian and Weberian tripartition, art is always left out on a pedestal, as something very beautiful but without a solid link with the rest of experience and without power. However, for pragmatism, art is a means to reenchant real life."

Shusterman's analysis of Stetsasonic's "Talkin' All That Jazz" is fascinating. Many readers would find the song's lyrics rather poor. Shusterman uncovers all their richness, while reminding us first of all that its transcription-translation as mere printed text cannot help but impoverish it, since it does not exist independently from the music, oral phrasing, and delivery which support it. Rap is a "body language". More specifically, Shusterman methodically analyses all the song's

important linguistic, social, and artistic features. Verbal virtuousity, intentional semantic ambiguities, social challenges, musical innovation, sampling-recycling, and the claims of its links to jazz and its status as art. "This last point is very important. A rapper like KRS-1 defines himself simultaneously as poet, teacher, scientist, philosopher, indeed as metaphysician! This challenges many of our assumptions and it's essential in giving rap a political and educational force." The popular arts, Shusterman reminds us, are accused of all the evils: regression, miserable emptiness, control by the market, opium of the people, dégredation of the level of general culture, etc. To these arguments, Shusterman answers with a pragmatism ready for any test: "Intellectuals frequently seek excuses for not taking the popular arts seriously. As most of these works are empty, dull, and superficial, it is very to reject the popular arts en bloc. Intellectuals are traitors to culture when they abandon these arts to the pressures of mere economic success. Now more than ever, these arts - rap, TV - need serious criticism; without it, they will remain oppressed by the dictates of business. They are accused of being commercial, but aren't the so-called high arts as well, where success gets measured by museum purchase and by price? Consider this anecdote: I was given the rights to use Stetsasonic's song free of charge; while I had to pay two times - in the United States and in Great Britain -- for T.S. Eliot's poem! No commentary needed here."

For Shusterman, it is urgent that intellectuals elaborate a criticism for the popular arts, because, he says, "we risk a deeper and deeper split between intellectual life and actual cultural life. This aesthetic work is indispensable, for without it both philosophy and popular culture will suffer." His book is a first bridge built between these two worlds. One hopes that there will be others as stimulating.