

A Temple philosophy professor in rhythm with hip-hop culture

By Carlin Romano
INQUIRER BOOK CRITIC

Philosophers like syllogisms, so let's try one — a challenging four-partner:

When the beautiful people come to town, it's always nice to be one of them.

The beautiful people are coming to town.

Richard Shusterman is one of them.

Therefore, it must be awfully nice for Richard Shusterman to be one of them.

Why, then, isn't he smiling?

I told you these things don't work in real life!

Starting today around 6 p.m., hundreds of the beautiful people will be registering at the Philadelphia Hilton, then moving on to the University of the Arts for the 50th Anniversary Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, a group of university scholars — mainly philosophy professors — dedicated to the proposition that a thing of beauty can be analyzed forever.

Arthur Danto, Nelson Goodman, Stanley Cavell and other top American aestheticians — thinkers who study age-old questions of beauty, art, taste, style and related subjects

See **SHUSTERMAN** on G6



The Philadelphia Inquirer / SHARON J. WOHLMUTH

Richard Shusterman faults his colleagues for not taking rap music and popular culture seriously.

In analyzing rap, Ten

SHUSTERMAN from G1

— will read and comment on papers, mull their discipline, possibly undergo a few encounters with the Sublime and experience performance art by Carmelita Tropicana.

Joining them as a respected younger colleague and slightly naughty maverick will be Temple philosophy professor Richard Shusterman, known to readers of one North Philadelphia hip-hop magazine as "Rich Frosted."

High-culture vultures used to say that only Euclid, father of geometry, looked on Beauty bare. Well, Richard Shusterman is the first aesthetician to write on beauty for George Ware — publisher of JOR Quarterly, the Journal of Rap Expression and Hip-Hop Culture.

Talking about it in his Temple University office, then later in the 16th Street Cafe, the boyish-looking Shusterman, a casual 42-year-old in an open-necked shirt, sounds like a man caught between his profession and an obsession.

"I've given one talk on rap to this group, and duly scandalized them," he confides, characterizing the attitude toward rap of most senior aestheticians as "tolerant contempt."

Yet rap, he argues, is postmodern art, and "a lot cleverer than people think. The same people who say it's simple and stupid don't understand it, because a lot of it's in black English, which they can't understand."

Having analyzed the form's techniques — its chanting, sampling, oblique messages and non-standard diction — Shusterman finds its roots "deep in the black tradition," where one "couldn't send simple messages because the man, the master, the boss, would have picked up on it."

"But I don't want to come across as being against my profession," Shusterman adds, "and I don't want to be identified as just a rap philosopher."

He's safe on both counts. Editor of an important volume of essays enti-

tled *Analytic Aesthetics* (1989), and author already of three books — *The Object of Literary Criticism* (1984), *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (1988), and this year's *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Blackwell) — Shusterman stands established as more than just a rap philosopher. Far from being against his profession, he's a productive activist within it.

"The traditional idea of aesthetics," he says, "is to oppose it to the practical and the cognitive. But that's bad for art and bad for philosophy."

His new book, which contains chapters on rap and popular culture, seeks "to integrate art and the aesthetic into life." Shusterman performs the task partly by also writing about rap for a non-scholarly audience. His most recent article in JOP, "Ghetto Music," argues that rappers shouldn't romanticize the ghetto, or act exclusionary in regard to it, because that mimics and legitimizes the larger society's exclusionary attitude toward *them*.

"Philosophy should be practical and try to change things," says Shusterman. "I want to have some impact on a living culture."

For those who consider France a living culture, he already has. When French newspapers and magazines cast about this year for the American campus with the most interesting new thinker on the arts, they chose Temple. And Richard Shusterman.

"*Une esthetique du hip-hop*" ("A hip-hop aesthetic") proclaimed the prestigious French newspaper *Le Monde* in January, prominently reviewing his book *L'Art A L'Etat Vif*, a simultaneously published French version of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. Its unabashed examination of the "fine art of rap" delighted *Le Monde's* reviewer.

"The most original part of his work," wrote Christian Delacampagne, "rests incontestably in the analysis he puts forth of certain popular modern art forms, in particular

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Simple professor marches

rock and roll and hip-hop culture." Delacampagne praised him for giving a "brilliant and convincing formulation" to his views, and congratulated him for being a rare philosopher who "does not systematically consider youth culture with condescension."

Then came the magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* in March, headlining its own article: "An American Professor Takes Hip-Hop at Its Word." Writer Bernard Loupias praised Shusterman for treating the rap group Stetsasonic and rapper KRS-One with the same critical spirit he applied to a poem by T.S. Eliot, welcoming Shusterman's book as a "first bridge" between the worlds of philosophy and popular culture. Since then, other French publications have checked in. Shusterman, who spent part of last summer teaching and working in Paris, happily says his book's ideas have now become "part of the conceptual geography there."

The United States is another matter, of course — we've got ball games to cover — and Shusterman sees two obstacles to bringing his worlds together here: lack of media interest in philosophy, and philosophical dismissal of rap. The latter strikes him as myopic.

"The whole Romantic movement in English literature was based on the idea of bringing poetic language back to ordinary language," he notes. "So in Blake you even have the simple nursery rhyme rhythm. Simplicity doesn't have to be a horrible thing."

Sensible words from a man with a complicated life. Born in the Northeast, Shusterman grew up in the East Oak Lane/Olney area, attended Masterman, hung out as a kind of hippie

teenager in Rittenhouse Square, then graduated from Central High in 1966 at the age of 16.

Unwilling to go immediately to college, he took off from home and ended up in Israel. "I didn't really expect to stay there," he says, "but I sort of fell in love with the sun, the sea and the people." He stayed — excluding visits home and trips to Europe — for 20 years.

While in Israel, he was informally adopted by the family of Amiram Nir, the Israeli government operative who played a central role in the Iran-contra affair, then died mysteriously in 1988 in Mexico. "He was my best friend," Shusterman says. "He was my brother." In a 20-minute discussion, aesthetician Shusterman quickly becomes Shusterman the political analyst, offering his own view of who did what to whom.

Having earned both his B.A. and M.A. from Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Shusterman was inducted into the Israeli army during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Married by then, he served as an intelligence officer for three years, rising to first lieutenant, and participated in the broad planning of the 1976 Entebbe commando operation.

From 1976 to '79, he fulfilled his dream of going to Oxford, where he earned his doctorate in philosophy. After a brief stint as a gardener back in Israel, he received his first appointment in philosophy at Ben-Gurion University. He came to Temple as a visitor in 1985, was kept on and then offered tenure in 1988.

"One of the reasons I came here was that Temple's philosophy department really excelled in aesthetics," he says.

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to a different beat

"Monroe Beardsley had not died yet. The Journal [of Aesthetics and Art Criticism] was still here. And Joe Margolies was there, as he still is."

His marriage broke up in the late '80s, and his three children live with his ex-wife in Israel. Shusterman now shares a place in Manhattan with Japanese-American artist Erica Ando, and commutes to Temple, which suits him fine.

"Students have a very strong bot-

tom-line reality principle," he advises, noting its nice fit with pragmatism. "They don't have time to deal with pseudo-academic problems unless they really relate to their real-life problems."

And the examples he chooses don't hurt his popularity among students. "One brought his son," he recalls, "and told him afterwards, 'You see, I told you he'd talk about KRS-One and those guys. ...'"

Clarence Farmer, chairman of the museum's board of directors, said Stewart's decision caught him "a wee

ment directors will run day-to-day operations. "They'll look to me for leadership," he said.