

Living Beauty, Rethinking Rap: Shusterman's Philosophy of Hip Hop Revisited

Max Ryynänen

Twenty-five years ago, during the winter of 1993–1994, I enrolled on Väinö Kirstinä's poetry course. Kirstinä (1936–2007) was post-Dadaist, but also a precise, minimalist writer, whose work I admired.

In Northern European literary modernism, which at that time still haunted us, rhymes were “banned”. I used rhymes in my poems, though—partly following my inspiring encounters with Latin American poets. I was the only one on the course who did.

In the feedback session Kirstinä went silently through my pile. I got the feeling he felt uneasy with my choice and that he did not really know what to say. In the end, the poet took his glasses off. He took a deep breath, and said: “I have heard that in America poets are out in the streets performing their work. They use rhymes again. This is called rap music.”

It was petrifyingly cold, that morning in snowy mid-Finland. Geographically and culturally we were light years away from the birthplace of rap, the block houses at Sedgwick Avenue (Bronx, N.Y.) where Kool Herc had looped breakbeats at his sister's birthday party 20 years earlier on August 13, 1973 (where I myself, some years ago, made a pilgrimage with my wife to see the original site and its graffiti). Rap must still, then, have really been “in the house”, as even elderly modernists knew about it.

When musicians, cultural journalists and public intellectuals were not nagging about rappers “just” speaking and not singing (Shusterman 1992c, 201), or claiming that rap was not “real music”, or that it was not “composed” but created “just” through an appropriation of other people's songs,¹ the poetry connection summed up rap's intellectual reception at the time.² Richard Shusterman claimed in 1992 that rap at the time was the “most maligned and persecuted form of popular music” (201), and I think this really was true, at least where I roamed at the time.

If rap and hip hop studies today have a strong focus on gender, identity, politics and religion,³ the early scholarly debates, on the other hand, often accentuated, if not the textual side, then the widely held idea that rap was a new form of music or a new form of “art” and/or culture.⁴

This “look, this is a new art form” type of debate happens, of course, from time to time. In my lifetime I recall that there have been some discussions about memes and techno music from this point of view (at least on a cafeteria level), but I believe rap to be the last popular art, which, in the footsteps of film, gained serious institutional and theoretical support for being art with a capital A.

Today that family of highbrow practices which has become the major framework for arts in the whole world through colonialization and diaspora, makes even Central European scholars feel uneasy due to its complicated gender, class and colonial history. At the time early rap theory began, it still seemed that belonging to this “family of practices” or even being accepted just as its satellite, was the best support one could get.

One could also say that today’s contemporary art field is so open to different methods and practices that one finds less of a need to ask for legitimacy for a whole practice or method of working in the arts. For example, Halil Altindere’s music videos featuring rap (produced as community art) have been at the front of central exhibition forums like the Berlin Biennale (2016) and MoMA. In addition, popular culture studies and the institutional support mechanisms for popular culture have become more legitimate in society, which decreases the need to legitimate practices as “art”.

Although contemporary culture in the 1980s and the 1990s was often framed with the help of the concept of postmodernism, in everyday life it seemed hard to take the step from the theoretically prevailing idea presented by Frederic Jameson in 1988 that schizophrenia and collage ruled, to finding examples of the embodiment of the idea that the disintegration of traditional modernist boundaries could offer emancipatory possibilities for radical cultural politics, this being the other side of the coin in Jameson’s work.

I recall many seminars from the late 1990s where scholars were asking if new cultural formations had already brought this forth, and to this day I do not understand why nobody asked why we had to wait for modernism to open its doors, as the world outside was full of art too.

This dynamic was of course postmodernism at its most typical. Securing the central, normative position of the white, Western, middle class and its highbrow aesthetic cultures (read: the old aesthetic hobbies of upper-class central Europeans), it rarely raised the thought that there is something else, something which could be valuable in its own terms. The messiahs had to come from within the system.

Here Shusterman’s approach to rap music made a healthy difference. He built his whole discourse on an aesthetically democratic theoretical base, focusing, through a rethinking of John Dewey’s aesthetics (1980, see also 1958), on aesthetic experience, so finding a practical way out from the highbrow academy. Maybe this was the reason for the “hit potential” of his work? In aesthetics and in theoretically minded cultural studies, the rap music texts by Shusterman have been central in constructing the whole discourse on not just rap, but also in some way for all philosophical discourse on popular culture.

Although experience has been in the center of aesthetic discourse since Aristotle's catharsis and Bharata Muni, Dewey was the first to make experience systematically the fundament of his aesthetic theory. Through this choice, Dewey drifted into a position of being the first philosopher to take seriously modern popular culture. Although "an experience" appeared in his 1934 *Art as Experience* (1980) in connection to e.g. cleaning, Dewey also lamented that many who consumed comics and jazz did not realize they were actually into art (1980: 5–6). He never, though, provided a concrete analysis of any popular art form or popular work of art where he could have shown the potential of pragmatist aesthetics, something he had developed standing on the shoulders of earlier experience-driven giants of pragmatism like Charles Saunders Pierce and the for Dewey even more important philosopher of religion, William James. He gave more concrete examples of mathematics and cleaning when he discussed the way we build experience, but popular culture only received a mention in his work.

Dewey's notion of experience and "an experience" showed the way to thinking about aesthetic encounters as holistic and experiential, and in the end as perhaps even crucial for human development. Dewey considered the fulfillment gained from aesthetic experience, e.g. through the process and end result of engaging with art, as one of the key motors in life, as we always strive to gain fulfillment, whether we'd hunt, cultivate land or play the flute. Dewey claimed that some highbrow arts had lost it from this point of view. In his museum critique, Dewey discussed places like the Louvre, where works of art had been taken from their lively original context and where they were then exhibited like experientially shallow trophies. Deprived of their original roles, for him many art works looked like shadows of their real nature and potentials.

Dewey's view differed from the original German conception of European aesthetics, which had stressed contemplation over engagement, as he actively propagated a more lively relationship to the arts. His theory of experience also followed a more bodily path. For Dewey, our everyday experience was fragmented. Memories, aesthetic skills, organic energies and all other human faculties are strayed out, but come together in the process of engaging with something aesthetically. Through a dialog with an aesthetic object we, according to Dewey, accumulate, 'dramatize' (this is Shusterman's conceptual 2001 addition to Deweyan theory), intensify and bring together our capacities and enter a flux, which in the end brings us a fulfillment (Dewey 1980: 132, 137).

From this point of view, and looking at it through traditions which do not base themselves on contemplation and intellectualizing tendencies as did Central European upper-class highbrow culture—European working class dance hall practices did not accentuate intellectualist contemplation any more than Tanzanian drumming or Japanese fireworks—Dewey's theory can be said to be about *most* art traditions, with nearly only the highbrow Central European art attitudes being left out.

As Dewey's philosophy also accentuated the body, it was quite natural that rap music evoked a need for rethinking Dewey, who for decades had been a key thinker for American art educators, as his democratically laden way of thinking about culture, for example jazz, made it easy to discuss the culture of all levels and sections of society. If Jacques Ranciere

(1991) has made us aware of our need to develop intellectual democracy (e.g. we should listen to the poor and the less privileged, not explain things to them), one can say that Dewey really was the first to think about aesthetic democracy.

For Dewey the fulfillment for which we all strived aesthetically (see also 1958: 8–12), did not come out of nowhere. It craved for a dynamic event, a dialog with an aesthetic object, where we as human beings engaged and warmed up our worlds (1980: 158–159). In this way, anything from sport to engaging with nature could be the productive dialogical encounter in our aesthetic life. Bringing this holistic view into rap theory was crucial for the role of pragmatist aesthetics, which in Shusterman's hands made a comeback.

Interestingly, though, reading the early 1990s “classic” *JOR Quarterly: The Journal of Rap Expression and Hip Hop Culture*, for which the ex-Black Panther George Ware served as editor-in-chief, and where not just Chuck D wrote, but Shusterman also published some of his first rap essays (1992a, 1992d, 1992e), one mostly finds analyses of lyrics if one looks for an art approach.

Looking at it in 2019, it is also interesting to consider why rap created so much fuss. For us it is perhaps now hard to remember how original it sounded in the beginning. In all cultures we certainly had musical pieces with spoken words, and in African-American culture one had to take just a small step musically and poetically from the “talkative” and “rappish” acts of James Brown, Pigmeat Markham, Amiri Baraka, Gil Scott-Heron and Isaac Hayes to reach the rap era.

The new technological invention of using record players and readymade music, although in the early phase often still in a quite non-melodic way, must have felt radical. In his text “L'esthétique postmoderne du rap” for *Parachute*, a French cultural journal, Shusterman took up the (de Andreade's) theme of “cannibalism” as an interesting explanatory framework for the use (“eating”) of readymade music with which we are all force-fed (1992b, 203). Why not “eat up” (appropriate) the tame sound of disco and commercial pop?

Shusterman (1989, 1991), together with, for example, David Toop (1984) focused on noticing the new way contemporary technologies and the appropriation of readymade material (a classical strategy of modernist art, Shusterman 1992c, 205) met the thread of poetical oral tradition which gave rap its specificity.

The long story of rapping had started with Nigerian Yoruba gallas with abusive female poems, and with the work of the griots, musicians working on oral poetry in Ivory Coast Africa). As a result of slavery, it had been taken to the US where it produced new poetics and language games like the dozens of the South of the US, the later dozens of Harlem N.Y. which were even more rhyme-based, and the “signifying songs” of New Orleans (Toop, 1984, 31–33; see also Mitchell-Kernan 1972). It took as much from the world of pop and soul as it took from the tradition of inversion in Afro-American communication (Holt 1972 and Labov 1972), and the classical dynamics of an Afro-American audience (Williams 1972).

The use of breakbeat loops, from today's perspective originally a quite dry rhyming on the beats, and the way early rap often did not base much of its musical agenda on melody, made many people talk about a new art form. One reason might have been the fact that it

was hard to see rap as music, and there was not yet any commonly known scene of noise music, which today is a fact in as much as that we all know rap music (which has also become more melodic) by heart. Rap was like the platypus, hard to categorize when academics “found it”.

Maybe that is why the notion of postmodern(ism) felt so natural? Tim Brennan (1994) wrote early about Shusterman’s idea that rap embodies the postmodernist spirit, by claiming that Shusterman was appropriating it, and bringing it into the context of white middle class America. Shusterman already had a readymade answer to Brennan in his text on ghetto music (1992a), where he analyzed the history of the concept back to Klezmer music, which had its roots in the ghettos, a system which the Venetians started in 1516, not just for Jews but also, for example, for glass makers. Klezmer is the “original ghetto music”. Even more importantly, as Shusterman noted, African-Americans were not strangers to the concept of postmodernism, and the intellectuals of black America made the connection too, not just Shusterman.

Shusterman also emphasized that theory could help rap. It is interesting how we now take for granted that somehow painting and classical European music have both a certain complexity and an intellectual level. We tend to forget that the highbrow arts have developed everywhere more than the lowbrow arts, together with theoretical debates and writing, and so we could think that it is of the utmost importance that when new artistic formations pop up, we discuss them theoretically too, if we want to support them gaining more complexity.

It is also interesting how popular culture institutionally does not traditionally bind together discussions, probably partly because there are fewer forums, archives and experts out there (this is changing, of course). The early rap debate was so very fragmented. In his much quoted article “The Aesthetics of Rap”, Mtume ya Salaam starts by saying:

After reading many articles supposedly concerning rap music – about the social aspects of rap music, the criminal elements in rap music, the lawsuits caused by rap music, sampling in rap music, gossip concerning rap musicians, how other musicians feel about rap music, etc. I realized that I had yet to read about the music itself. In other words, I had not read about the “aesthetics” of rap, about the qualifiers which made particular examples of rap music good music—not necessarily good rap music, but simply good music. (Salaam, 1995, 303)

But there were others out there, such as Shusterman, and to some extent Toop. This institutional problem is being increasingly solved as there are academic journals dedicated to popular culture studies, and the community of popular culture scholars is becoming stronger and more theoretical, but when early rap theory began, this was not really the case. Cultural studies had already broken their way out from highbrow thinking in the 1950s, but then as now, most of their perspective came from identity, class and gender questions, and not from artistry and aesthetics.

The new art form of rap thing was also explained through connections to the older highbrow formations at hand. Along with discussing rap’s specialty as a “new art form”, Gladney Marvin wrote in 1995 that rap already connected to the black arts movement,

and to some of the basic tendencies and problems of the Harlem Renaissance, such as seeking for autonomy and a balance between artistic freedom and commercialism (Marvin, 1995, 293).⁶ Marvin did not get a critique from him, but Herbert Grabes criticized Shusterman by saying that rap could also survive in the consumer society, and that it did not need support like some highbrow arts (2002, 146). Grabes's thinking is very twisted here. I think we also have painting and poetry which get no support from cities, societies and theorists: just look at marketplace painting and rhymes in adverts. We still know that support and legitimization makes it possible to find a wider array of possibilities inside any art form. Why keep anything narrow and just for markets alone? Interestingly, it looks like neither Marvin nor any other African-American philosophers and theorists who touched upon rap music, dug up older African American classics, like W.E.B. DuBois or Alain Locke for support to work on the philosophy of rap music. In his rap writings, Shusterman discussed Locke's openly somatic approach to the arts (1992c, 129), but the philosophy of W.E.B. DuBois touched upon could also be found interesting here. The most famous work of DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1989, orig. 1903), aspires to show a very simple thing: African-Americans also have a soul. This is shown through analogies between them and white people. One could say, that in some sense, as an aficionado of African-American music, Shusterman pedagogically also explained in the same way to the (white) highbrow intellectuals of the early 1990s that rap is an art form too—a work, which has since then been increasingly important in the field of postcolonial cultural studies. To straighten up things from an intercultural point of view we sometimes need to show similarities between traditions.

Even if “The Fine Art of Rap” initially made its way to mainstream academy through a literary journal (Shusterman 1991), its main impact was found as an addition to the book *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Shusterman 1992c), where it followed a fierce defense of popular culture. This probably affected its readings.

If popular culture enthusiasts had never really made a scholarly criticism of all the critical (and cynical) texts which were written against popular culture, Shusterman took up the job of clearing the way. It might appear a task that nobody needed to do as the old accusations against the popular were often quite absurd. Popular culture had, for example, been claimed neither to offer real satisfaction nor to last the test of time (Rosenberg & White 1957, 1969).

I think Shusterman's work here was important. There is a tradition in academic discussion of overcoming problems and false knowledge, but I think that Shusterman's project was even more about easing the heavy metaphysics around the subject matter. We often do not realize why and how we experience things to be as they are, and showing the assumptions of mass culture critics to be wrong might have been a worthwhile strategy for clearing some space for us to rethink popular culture. Without this beginning, it would have been absurd to discuss complicated ethical topics like the image of violence which has haunted rap music, and the way its technological poetics work on a violent recycling and appropriation of readymade material (Shusterman 2005). You have to start from somewhere, and the cash value of clearly overcoming a tradition might have been

crucial here. Where would our discussions on gender and racialization be if we had not already cleared up some basics? Rap's claims for artistic status were problematically overshadowed by fierce critique, censorship and commerciality at the time (1992c, 201).

Shusterman's text on rap music and violence (an issue with a negative effect on rap's 'brand') has an aesthetic spearhead:

The sculptor who chisels, the ballet dancer who leaps, the shrieking soprano playing the Queen of the Night in Mozart's *Magic Flute*, all exhibit physical violence, just as do hiphop artists, whether they are tagging graffiti, whirling and popping in breakdancing, frantically scratching vinyl as DJs, or busting rhymes and moves as MCs. Great art further works through violence not simply by representing it as in *Oedipus*, *King Lear*, *Crime and Punishment*, or *The Stranger*, but by effecting it in the flow of experience through the swift, enthralling power of aesthetic experience, which even when not pleasant is relished for its explosive intensity. So much of our routine experience of life is humdrum and boring that we relish art for sweeping us away by the power of its intense experiences." (Shusterman, 2005, 56–57)

Discussing the image of rap music as a violent echo from the street, Shusterman emphasized too that there was already anti-violence in rap early on (KRS, Guru), but that this had not caught the attention of the media as much as gangsta rap had. (Shusterman 2005, 59).

But the whole issue is also aesthetic. It could also be seen as an allegory for pragmatist aesthetics, which also need to break down patterns and metaphysics, in order to take us to the most basic nature of our lives. To penetrate reality, philosophy needs to be a bit violent too sometimes.

Shusterman wrote about Nelson Goodman's work as an analogy for the way rap music worked (2006)⁷, but even more, his own work, in the way he writes about rap music, celebrating the care and enjoyment of and for aesthetic experience, is a good analogy for rap music.

Most importantly, I think, Shusterman rethinks pragmatism by taking up the way rap reuses old culture to produce a new one. One could say that his defense of the art form was a proto-defense of all types of contemporary digital culture, where borrowing, cut-and-paste and appropriation has become a norm.

This appropriation was still a shock in early 1990s culture. It is not so today, where we all see every kind of cultural form being borrowed, recycled and reused in so many different ways that it is hard to react very much anymore when one sees it. In aesthetics and art theory, the first art which attracted a discourse on these matters was rap music. As Shusterman had emphasized in rap's relationship to Nelson Goodman's work, the pluralist and constructivist world view of the art was something which not just philosophy, but everyone into arts could learn from.

Dewey wrote about the holistic dialogue between culture and the rhythms of life (1958: 14, 81). As culture and technology take us to new phases, we need to rethink and learn all the time, and art is (this is a Benjaminian sidepath) one way of coping with new sensual challenges. Looking at early rap debates it is easy to understand how shocking it felt when

artists hijacked readymade tunes in everyday life (and not just in museums à la Duchamp's case).

There is so much one could write about in rap theory. Martti Honkanen (1995) claims in his philosophical treatise on roads and road art, that rap music is often created to resonate with the experience of driving, and I think one could say here that Shusterman's writings work in the same way. They are good company for rap music, company which can deepen and enrich the dialog with the aesthetic object. All art forms should, I think, have key thinkers focusing on their nature. It would make appreciation of them richer, deeper and more meaningful.

After the rap turn, Shusterman was criticized for doing something politically correct and was asked to take bigger challenges. He wrote about the country music of the ethnic white people of the US countryside (1999) with the same open mind he has always read non-Western theory, from Chinese and Japanese philosophy.

Was rap perhaps the open-minded beginning for all this, the first door to finding new issues which were not present in Western academia? For us, who are now increasingly living in a culture where everything is appropriated, recycled, cut and pasted, and repeated mechanically, the rap theory of Richard Shusterman forms a pioneering text on which we can lean. Rereading it in every phase of this development might become as handy and productive as the endless rereading of Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

The main potentials for today might still be the following: We haven't lived for a long time in our new technological everyday culture. Following technological developments most of us today cut-and-paste, edit, filter and recycle/appropriate culture with the help of computers, smart phones and other contemporary tools. Although rap music itself is now just one cultural formation working on this and although it has itself changed into being less radical, reading the theoretical debate on its early nature shows us how radical the change from the preceding cultural has been. The scandal of rap music was also an aesthetic scandal, the last one I have witnessed – one which made artists, critics and cultural theorists angry. It worked maybe as the spearhead for the whole era, helping later cultural formations where technology was used to appropriate readymade (and do-it-yourself) material, easier to accept.

As the European Union just today when I am finishing this (28.3.2019) voted for a new copyright law which cuts down the free play of memes and pulls a tighter string around people who work on appropriating media, I cannot but think that we might also be in the end of one era. Culture policies might be taking a step back regarding the aesthetic strategies discussed in this essay. The era which rap forcefully started, might be coming to its end.

Even without this dramatic turn Shusterman's rap theory catches something unique, which I here, in the end, would like to highlight. Although we find no exact description in Shusterman's texts on what it means to keep art 'live' or 'living' and how that affects experience, it is interesting, that through reinterpreting old records rappers showed an emancipated, creative way of approaching cultural history. Old soul records once in a

while might be in the need of a refreshing appropriation, so that their original, groovy potentials might shine through again. I think we are also starting to understand how important this is for other forms of culture too, from literature to maybe even philosophy. In some sense one could say that John Dewey, one of the most boring writers in philosophy, became appropriated in a hip hop style by Richard Shusterman. Although I love museums and archives, I'd love to take part in continuing to develop our relationship to 'recycling' and appropriating culture. Although I am not sure what this could entail in the future, I hope that this essay, an essay on the early work of one of my most important philosophical mentors who this year turns 70, could at least recollect what there is to learn from the point of view of rap theory. Rap itself seems to be more vital than ever. My own favorites today are, besides the political rap scenes everywhere where people face oppression, the energizing female/feminist rap scene of Chile and the new ways of rap becoming mixed with the spoken word techniques of the highbrow art scenes. This of course made the inquiry even more fulfilling.

(Philosophy-wise I dedicate my essay to Richard Shusterman, but rap-wise I dedicate this to Driemanskap, Kanyi Mavi, MV Bill, Reverie, Gavlyn, Princess Nokia, Sofa, Pastoripike, Vafe Jhous and Dania Neko, who recently made rap meaningful to me again.)

Aalto University, Finland

Notes

¹ Interestingly the lack of "traditional" and/or "original" (read: Central European highbrow) composition, vs. improvisation, was also a problem for some early European philosophical commentaries on jazz. See e.g. Henry Parland's critique of jazz in *Säginteannat* (1970, orig. 1929).

² Everywhere Richard Shusterman's early work on rap music was discussed at the time of its publication and in its early reception, the analysis of the lyrics of Stetsasonic's *Talkin' All That Jazz* (1988) in the eighth chapter of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) was at the forefront.

³ See e.g. Love (2013) and Rantakallio (2012).

⁴ The earliest work of this kind I have found is Esa Sironen's essay "Hip-hop don't stop": *Katujen uutta kulttuuria*" (1987, orig. 1984)—a rough translation into English could be "Hip Hop Don't Stop: New Street Culture"—which is a sociological take on hip hop, viewed through the trend movies of the time. There we find a broader analysis of the holistic combination of music, text and dance, which together with graffiti, according to Sironen, signifies a positive take on mass culture, street life and commercialism. Sironen, in his sociological aesthetic approach, even goes on claiming that the fast moves of hip hop dance resonate with the destiny of the singing of some urban birds. Some birds are singing shorter melodies because of their fast-paced

and noisy environment (Sironen mentions the great tit). Sironen thought that break dance embodied this. Mtume Salaam also worked on discussing rap's essential features as a new musical art, discussing, for example, concepts like "flow" (1995, 305).

⁵In his *Manifesto Antropófago* (1999) Brazilian writer Oswald de Andrade celebrated 1928 Brazil's history of 'cannibalizing' other cultures as its strength.

⁷Marcyliena 2005 does the same with rap battles, searching for analogies to philosophy.

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