

# Popular art, Somaesthetics and philosophy

(An Interview with  
Richard Shusterman)

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*Jozef Kovalcik & Max Rynnänen (JK & MR)*  
1. Your work on popular culture has produced many new initiatives both for aesthetics and popular culture studies, and at least in the continental context you first became famous through your texts on rap music. Aesthetic experience had never before been discussed in relation to popular culture. And by analyzing Eliot vs. Stetson you showed how flexibly the criteria for highbrow poetry can be applied outside of high culture. Although your work on popular culture is mentioned in all of the studies on your philosophy, we have not seen many attempts to develop this approach. There would be many gaps to fill. Would you consider returning to the topic, and if so, what would you concentrate on?

*Richard Shusterman (RS)*

I should begin by interrogating and clarifying the premise of your question. Much depends on what you mean by developing my approach. As you noted, before my pragmatist, meliorist defense of the aesthetic value and potential of popular art, such art was not considered worthy of careful aesthetic analysis and interpretation by philosophers of art. Stanley Cavell's work on television and cinema was the only notable exception. But since *Pragmatist Aesthetics* was published in 1992, there has been a wealth of studies devoted to examining the philosophical meaning and aesthetic qualities of genres and even particular works of popular art. We even find a couple of successful book series on philosophy and popular culture, and I should mention that some of my doctoral students at Temple were among the first editors and contributors of those books. Aesthetics is now very comfortable with popular culture; it is no longer a taboo or provocative topic, but one that is increasingly studied. Moreover, this increased attention by intellectuals has improved the understanding and enjoyment of such art, at least for the many intellectuals who like not only to experience popular art but to reflect on and discuss its meanings and aesthetic qualities. That was the kind of development I was hoping for in my efforts to provide a philosophical aesthetic legitimization of popular art. Because I feel it has been adequately fulfilled, and because a host of philosophers began to work in this area,

I thought it was better for me to turn my attention to other areas that needed work and that interested me.

I think your question implies another kind of development: the development of a systematic theory of popular art, a theory, that provides a precise definition of what popular art is, that defines what its special principles and values are, how its different genres and styles should be classified, and how popular art essentially differs from other kinds of art. My attempt to legitimize the aesthetic value and potential of popular art did not seek to answer all those questions. I had a pragmatic theoretical aim of challenging the philosophical prejudice against popular art by refuting the standard arguments against it and countering with arguments that legitimated its aesthetic value. Developing a definitive systematic theory was not part of my agenda: partly because legitimation seemed a more urgent task and partly because the field of popular art is so diverse and vague that a systematic theory hardly seemed manageable. I think the scholars (in philosophy, aesthetics, and cultural studies) who best understood and applied my work, realized my intentions and did not try to read my arguments as providing a comprehensive systematic theory nor try to construct a systematic theory from them. I am not in principle against system building, but I am more interested in removing prejudices or blind spots and transforming attitudes that block our insight and blight our enjoyment.

If I would return in a serious way to the philosophical analysis of popular art, then I'd probably want to spend more time on teasing out the very different meanings of popular and how those different meanings function in debates about popular art. Of course, the term "popular" is obviously based on the notion of "the people." But "the people" is also a very ambiguous notion that is used in different ways. The popular art audience is in fact a construction of very different target audiences. You refer (by mentioning Steinsasonic) to my work on hip-hop culture, but there are other distinctive popular art cultures whose aesthetics are radically different from the hip-hop aesthetic, as are their audiences. In my book *Performing Live* (2000) I devoted a long chapter to one of those forms of popular culture — that of American country music. Because

country music has a very different vibe and politics than hip hop (and consequently is much less attractive to progressive intellectuals), this aspect of my work on popular culture has not received the attention that my research on hip hop has received. I should note that I did return to the issue of popular art in a series of articles between 2003 and 2007 that focused on reconstructing the high art/popular art debate in terms of the broader issue of entertainment versus serious culture. The first of those articles was called "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics" published in *The British Journal of Aesthetics* (2003).

*JK & MR*

2. One problem is still the same as when you wrote *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992): social sciences dictate, maybe even increasingly, what to discuss about popular culture. Adorno, Benjamin and Greenberg once had an impact on how popular culture was discussed in social sciences and other disciplines. Why doesn't aesthetics have the same impact today?

*RS*

I think the problem you are referring to is more general than aesthetic theory's loss of influence in the treatment of popular culture. I see this problem as one symptom of a general trend concerning philosophy's loss of hegemony in the cultural field. Philosophers have less cultural impact than they did fifty years ago, and part of the reason for that, I think, is that the balance of power in the global intellectual field has shifted toward America where traditionally philosophers have had less cultural influence. Europe has had a long history of great philosophers; it is proud of its philosophers and celebrates them, for example by naming streets and universities after them. But America (though it has, in pragmatism, a wonderful philosophical tradition) does not celebrate its philosophers, unless they also are political figures like Jefferson and Franklin. One indication of the decline of Europe's intellectual hegemony through the rise of American cultural power is the apparent disappearance of the great master thinkers of the late twentieth century (Sartre, Foucault, Bourdieu, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, Deleuze, Adorno, etc.) without any comparable

thinkers of that caliber and influence replacing them today. Moreover, in the dominant Anglo-American conception of philosophy, aesthetics is a marginal rather than a privileged or dominant philosophical discipline. This gives aesthetics even less cultural influence in the intellectual field. Clement Greenberg, who was not a real philosopher but an art critic and theorist, had much less impact than Adorno and Benjamin on the issues of popular culture, not because he lacked philosophical credentials but because his views and arguments on popular art — or what he called kitsch — lacked the complexity, power, and imagination that Adorno's and Benjamin's theories provide.

There is also another hypothesis worth considering to explain the phenomenon you note. Theorists usually are most influential by problematizing or exploring important new issues. The issue of popular culture — its challenge to the hegemony of high culture and its connection with the dual trends of democratization and commercialization — was much fresher and urgent in the time of Adorno, Benjamin, and Greenberg than it is in our time. In our time, popular art had clearly won substantial recognition in the general cultural field even before it received the kind of academic, intellectual legitimization that my research in the early 1990s tried to provide.

*JK & MR*

In your writings about somaesthetics you mentioned a wide range of popular culture practices from fitness franchises to our bodily self-image which echoes visual popular culture. As Westerners, we can hardly imagine a body without the impact of popular culture. Do people working with body-consciousness, self-help and bodily therapy actually need the philosophy of popular culture to thoroughly understand what the body of a Westerner really is? This would not be very far from what you are actually doing by building a bridge between philosophy and practice in somaesthetics. In other words, should the aesthetics of popular culture and somaesthetics be more connected as disciplines?

RS

Somaesthetics is a much larger project than the aesthetics of popular culture, though of course there are many connections. This is because many somatic practices or pursuits that somaesthetics contains within its purview of research are practices that clearly belong to popular culture. Consider, for example, our popular modes of exercise and sports, but also the popular forms of fashion and grooming (including such practices as tattooing), but also our popular ways of eating. Such popular somatic practices clearly have their distinctive aesthetic features and pleasures that would be relevant for analysis through an aesthetics of popular culture. But there is much more to somaesthetics than aesthetics in the traditional senses of beauty, artistic meaning, expression, and style. For somaesthetics, the meaning of the aesthetic goes back to the original Greek meaning of "*aesthesis*" — sensory perception in the broad sense. Somaesthetics deals with the body's role in sensory perception and in improving and applying such perception for thought and action to serve cognitive, ethical, practical, social, and political purposes — not just aesthetic ones. Because somaesthetics is such a huge research project, it demands most of my time. Fortunately, there are many scholars of a younger generation, scholars like you for example, who will further develop the aesthetics of popular culture. I'm happy to provide my encouragement, and this interview can be seen as an expression of my continuing solidarity with this work.