



Wojciech Malecki

*Embodying Pragmatism. Richard Shusterman's Philosophy and Literary Theory*, Peter Lang, New York et al., 2010.

Though hints of increasing interest can be discerned here and there within contemporary aesthetic theory, as a whole, pragmatist aesthetics is still very much situated at the outskirts of philosophical aesthetics. Richard Shusterman is basically the only figure who has tried to develop a more systematic aesthetic theory based on pragmatist ideas, and while his work has been addressed and its value acknowledged in various parts of contemporary theory, its impact on what could be called the hard-core of philosophical aesthetics has remained rather small, and the amount of trembling Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (first edition 1992) caused in analytic aesthetics pales desperately in comparison with the shockwaves the publication of Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* initially caused in general philosophy some thirty years back.

Apart from Shusterman's books, current work on pragmatist aesthetics has mostly appeared as individual articles and texts, which focus on some particular subfield of aesthetics, such as popular culture, environment and the body, without attempting to build a general pragmatist outlook on aesthetic questions. Thus, any book-length study focusing on pragmatist aesthetics is bound to raise anticipation in anyone interested in this field. Wojciech Malecki's book *Embodying Pragmatism. Richard Shusterman's Philosophy and Literary Theory*, however, meets these anticipations only in part. Its main value lies in its providing an accessible and well-informed introduction to the main threads of Shusterman's aesthetic theory and to the discussion revolving around it, but the positive ideas Malecki himself presents in the book on the basis of the critical remarks he makes on Shusterman's theory are sadly so underdeveloped that the book does not evolve into an original contribution to pragmatist aesthetics in its own right. Malecki considers Shusterman one of "the most interesting voices" (12) in contemporary pragmatism and he is in general agreement with, for example, "Shusterman's plea for the rehabilitation of aesthetic experience in philosophy and art" (62) and the pluralistic attitude characterizing Shusterman's interpretation theory (101). However, the criticism of Shusterman's views Malecki presents is scattered around different parts of the book, usually collected in the conclusions of each individual chapter. This makes it hard to build a detailed picture of Malecki's own position and the direction he thinks pragmatist aesthetics should take and how that differs from the path Shusterman suggests.

Malecki's book falls into four chapters each of which is devoted to one particular part of Shusterman's aesthetics. Chapter one discusses Shusterman's pragmatist conception of experience and aesthetic experience in particular, chapter two considers Shusterman's views on the interpretation of literature, while the two last chapters are devoted respectively to Shusterman's defence of popular culture, something which, as Malecki correctly observes, has won Shusterman "wide international recognition and popularity" (20), and to somaesthetics, a field of aesthetics Shusterman has recently put a lot of effort on developing.

Malecki begins with a careful examination of Shusterman's position within contemporary pragmatism. For him, a key factor of Shusterman's pragmatism that separates it from

the views of some other important representatives of neopragmatism is in the attitude it takes towards language. In the introduction to the book, Malecki presents a mapping of contemporary pragmatism and contrasts Shusterman's pragmatism with a form, which, in his words, emphasizes the essential "linguistic dimension of human existence" (15). Malecki singles out Rorty as the main representative of this line of thought and the investigation of Shusterman's views he presents in the early parts of the book are characterized by an attempt to distance Shusterman's work from Rorty's. The most important difference Malecki sees in them is in the way they approach the corporeal side of human life and the kinds of immediate and unconceptualized experiences it involves. According to Malecki, Rorty is highly sceptical towards their philosophical relevance, an attitude which, in Malecki's view, is reflected in Rorty's criticism of Dewey's conception of experience. In this, he follows Shusterman's interpretation of Rorty. Shusterman's main goal is, in turn, precisely to raise the bodily "rootedness" of our existence into the centre of philosophical reflection and to show not only the philosophical importance of nondiscursive forms of experience, but to provide a detailed analysis of their impact on human life. This is the distinctive feature of Shusterman's pragmatism which the title of Malecki's book, *Embodying Pragmatism*, is intended to capture, and the contrast the title tries to establish between Shusterman's and Rorty's forms of neopragmatism serves as a kind of guiding spirit of the book.

In chapter one, Malecki further elaborates the importance of experience for Shusterman's theory by discussing Shusterman's account of aesthetic experience that he draws from John Dewey, as well as the position it has in Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics. Malecki is right in pointing out that some of the important threads of Shusterman's aesthetic theory such as his criticism of analytic aesthetics and the defence of popular culture he presents build heavily upon Dewey's notion. While devoting a lot of attention on tracking the influence of Dewey, Malecki is equally keen on pointing out those aspects of Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience Shusterman does not fully buy into. This part of Shusterman's reception of Dewey is less often emphasized, and Malecki's careful examination of the points over which Shusterman's view of aesthetic experience depart from Dewey's account is one good example of how his book manages to give a previously more detailed picture of Shusterman's theory.

However, despite this merit, a central problem of the first parts of Malecki's book is that he does not always take an appropriate critical stance towards the figures and conceptions Shusterman engages with. A good example of this deficiency is Malecki's investigation of Shusterman's relationship to Rorty's neopragmatism. Malecki evidently has wide knowledge of Rorty's work and, in his investigation, he takes into account the short, but rather spiteful response Rorty has made to Shusterman's criticism<sup>1</sup> (30-31), something which I have not seen Shusterman to have done himself properly. Despite of this, Malecki overlooks certain parts of Rorty's work which are arguably relevant to an assessment of Shusterman's reading of Rorty. By criticising Rorty for what Malecki calls "textualizing human subjects" (15) and by contrasting, in his defence of nondiscursive forms of experience, his own approach with Rorty's neopragmatism, Shusterman seems to associate Rorty's views with a metaphysical doctrine known as "linguistic idealism", that is, a view which sees reality as essentially language constructed. This kind of understanding of Rorty's neopragmatism, however, has in recent commentary literature been seen to provide a highly misguided

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty "Response to Richard Shusterman", in M. Festenstein and S. Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, Clarendon Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 153-157.

view of the philosophical undercurrents of Rorty's neopragmatism<sup>2</sup>. This is a body of literature that Malecki does not take into consideration in his investigation of Shusterman's work, which is a shame, for I believe it provides new insight on the aptness of Shusterman's criticism of Rorty.

The significance of these alternative understandings of the philosophical underpinnings of Rorty's neopragmatism is that they reveal the connections Rorty's work bear to the tradition of naturalistic philosophy, an aspect of the background of Rorty's views, which has been basically totally overlooked in the reception of Rorty's work within aesthetics and philosophy of literature, including Malecki's book. Central for this naturalism is to insist that there are no relationships of representation between mind and world, but that the relationship between the two is purely causal by nature. This alternate picture of mind's relationship to the surrounding world forms the core of Rorty's criticism of empiricist epistemology, which calls into question the idea that the kinds of elements of experience upon which empiricists try to establish knowledge cannot, ultimately, serve the role they presume. Instead, in Rorty's view, the justification of beliefs is a social affair, and, thus, essentially bound to language. In this respect, Rorty's neopragmatism, indeed, seems to involve a discrediting of experience in favour of language.

However, taking the naturalistic aspects of Rorty's work into account provides new insight on the position of language in his views, for, as I see it, an essential part of Rorty's naturalism is that, in his hands, it turns into a purely negative thesis in the sense that it rejects certain traditional ways of thinking about reality and knowledge, like empiricism, without offering positive metaphysical theses in their place. This is to say that given the disbelief towards metaphysical views accompanying Rorty's naturalism, it is arguable that he would have troubles of even making sense of the theses Shusterman and Malecki attribute to him, such as "all experience is linguistic", and what it would mean to make a distinction between experiences which are linguistic and those which are not permeated by language. This is what I think Rorty is, in fact, aiming at in his short response to Shusterman's criticism referred to above.

Malecki does shortly raise similar cautionary factors in his investigation of Shusterman's criticism of Rorty (35). He, nevertheless, ultimately sides with Shusterman, finding Shusterman's criticism of Rorty's alleged textualism and the conception of experience with which Shusterman challenges that approach "seminal" (36). However, I think the strength of this conclusion is somewhat undermined by Malecki's slightly one-sided account of Rorty's work. Malecki's failing to come into terms with the naturalistic underpinnings of Rorty's neopragmatism weakens his investigation of Shusterman's pragmatism, for by calling the textualist reading of Rorty's work Malecki inherits from Shusterman into question, it makes harder to see where the difference central for Malecki's book between Shusterman's "embodied pragmatism", which is supposed to overthrow the dominance of language-centred forms of neopragmatism, and Rorty's pragmatism ultimately lies.

There is also another important background factor of Rorty's work that Malecki does not consider, which I would like to take up shortly here due to its apparent relevance for the critical line Malecki takes towards Rorty in the book. This is the effect that Donald Davidson's view of metaphor had on Rorty's philosophy of literature. Observing Davidson's influence on Rorty's thinking on literature actually shows instant problems in readings which consider Rorty a strong textualist. This is because the decisive feature which separates

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Robert Brandom "Vocabularies and Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism", in R. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, pp. 156-183 and James TarJames Tartaglia *Rorty and the Mirror Nature*, Routledge, London and New York, 2007, p. 126.

Davidson's approach to metaphor from other influential accounts is that it does not seek to explain the work of metaphor by assuming metaphorical expressions possess, in addition to their literal meaning, a kind of second or ideal level of meaning. Instead, Davidson unpacks the mystery of metaphors by concentrating on the effects metaphorical uses of language cause. This is, in other words, to say that in the Davidsonian scheme, the work of metaphor is not primarily explained in linguistic terms. This is also shown by Rorty's understanding of Davidson's approach, for he compares the effects metaphors are described as having on conversations in the Davidsonian model with the effects such phenomena as slapping on one's interlocutor's face or kissing him have in similar situations<sup>3</sup>. Rorty, in fact, explicitly calls the phenomena the effect of which bear a likeness to the effects of metaphors "non-linguistic"<sup>4</sup>.

Davidson's view of metaphor and the naturalism characterizing Rorty's neopragmatism are not isolated parts of Rorty's work, but, in his philosophy of literature, he combines them into an intriguing explanation of art's significance. The ultimate value of Davidson's theory for Rorty precisely lies in its providing an apt framework for explaining the value of literature, art and other like phenomena in the context of naturalistic philosophy. Davidson's view of metaphor, in other words, shows that "a proper acknowledgement of the cultural role of imaginative literature (and, more generally, of art, myth, and religion – all the 'higher' things) is [not] incompatible with a naturalistic philosophy"<sup>5</sup>. This is a side of Rorty's thinking on aesthetics and philosophy of literature which Malecki overlooks completely and, at least in my eyes, this inattentiveness weakens the general value of his book.

The second chapter of Malecki's book is a highly thorough examination of Shusterman's work in the philosophy of literature and interpretation. As Malecki correctly notes, Shusterman's principal contribution to these areas are from the earlier phases of his career, dating back to the times when his work was still very much in the spirit of analytic aesthetics.

Shusterman's philosophy of interpretation can be divided into three interrelated parts. 1) His rejection of a conception known as "hermeneutic universalism". 2) A pluralist view of the logic of interpretation. 3) A critical engagement with other pragmatist views of interpretation (Knapp & Michaels, Fish, and Rorty). Malecki again presents detailed and informative accounts of all these parts of Shusterman's conception and of the views against which Shusterman develops his position. Malecki's presentation is at its best in his investigation of Shusterman's engagement with other forms of pragmatist philosophy of interpretation. As Malecki correctly points out, despite the evident differences between the figures Shusterman considers, his criticism of their views is united by an attempt to show that they all contain features which are ultimately rather alien to the spirit of pragmatism. First, Knapp and Michael's approach in which textual meaning is seen determined by the author's intentions squares rather badly with the interpretative pluralism pragmatism endorses. Second, while Shusterman is in general agreement with the emphasis on the communal side of interpretation involved in Fish's literary theory, he, nevertheless, considers the one-sided identification of genuine literary criticism with academic criticism apparent in Fish's view as an unfounded and unneeded consent to professionalism, something Malecki names "a perversion of professionalism", which Shusterman considers a rather unsuited match to the kind of pluralism he sees lying at the heart of pragmatism. Rorty's view of the liberal iro-

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers I*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 167.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

nist is plagued by similar drawbacks. For the liberal ironist, literary works are important sources of innovative redescrptions which allow her to self-enlarge and enrich herself and even to create a self that is entirely unique. The main problem with Rorty's view of literature building on the notion of the liberal ironist is that, to put in Malecki's words, it "implies a denigration of everyday, unprofessional readings and those who engage in them" (95), a conclusion that, again, is hard to reconcile with some ideas Shusterman, and Malecki following him, find central to pragmatism.

The value of Malecki's investigation concerning this side of Shusterman's work lies especially in the good use he makes of his vast knowledge of literary theory, which allows him to reveal some compelling problems in Shusterman's critical reading of hermeneutic universalism, as well as in Shusterman's understanding of pragmatist philosophy of interpretation.

The most serious trouble of Malecki's presentation again, however, lies in his account of Rorty's views. Though having many original things to say, Malecki is in general too faithful to Shusterman's approach to Rorty's philosophy of literature and he overlooks some important aspects of Rorty's work that are significant for the assessment of its relevance in the context of philosophy of literature. Malecki arguably subscribes to the common view of Rorty's liberal ironist as some form of "private aestheticism" in which the needs and feelings of a community are replaced by the individual subject's quest for self-perfection and self-enlargement and in which precisely those aspects of life which serve to separate an individual from her surrounding community are seen as the source of life's aesthetic significance. The interpretation of Rorty's work Shusterman offers has no doubt played an important part in the formation of this picture in people's minds, and Malecki does virtually nothing to overthrow it.

There is an apparent social side in Rorty's work on literature and aesthetics which both Shusterman and Malecki do not give proper attention to. This is revealed by observing the role Rorty ascribes to metaphors and narrative literature in the enhancement of the value, which he sees as central to liberalist societies, namely the feeling of solidarity. It seems that the role metaphors have in building solidarity is in the end two-fold. On the one hand, by making people attend to some unnoticed likenesses between different people in some particular context, an individual metaphor can prove profitable with regard to the enhancement of solidarity in some specific context. However, the role of metaphors can be understood in a more wide-ranging sense as well, for engagements with metaphors seem to require capacities similar to those Rorty finds central to solidarity, that is, such capacities as alertness to contextual detail. What these capacities seem to have in common is that they are all somehow related to the notion of imagination. Like metaphors imagination, too, tries to show the world in a new light and to reveal novel aspects in one's environment. In fact, in some of his later works, Rorty explicitly addresses these themes through the notion of imagination and he ascribes to that faculty the same kind of cultural role that he in his earlier works, most importantly in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, assigned to metaphors<sup>6</sup>.

Malecki devotes no attention to the communal role Rorty assigns to these aesthetic phenomena and how his thinking on them developed in the course of his career. This is a significant drawback, for, as in the case of naturalism and metaphors, this oversight undermines the credibility of Malecki's evaluation of Shusterman's criticism of Rorty, as well as the positive contribution Malecki tries to make to pragmatist philosophy of literature and interpretation. For once Rorty's philosophy of literature is addressed through the significant

<sup>6</sup> See especially Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, chapter five.

cultural position he sketches for metaphors and imagination, its implications look very different than in the account taking the received understanding of Rorty's model of the liberal ironist as a basis. In fact, I do not believe that Rorty's philosophy of literature is ultimately at tandem with what Malecki sees as pragmatist aesthetics' fundamental idea of the function of art and that he thinks Rorty is unable to embrace, namely "uniting the society" (95).

In the third chapter, Malecki presents Shusterman's defence of popular culture which is famously centred on an attempt to show the aesthetic value of rap music. As Malecki correctly points out, the main goal of Shusterman's defence is to show, against Adorno and other like figures, that there is no intrinsic property that would render all forms of popular culture necessarily unworthy of more deep and sustained aesthetic reflection. That is, wider popularity does not necessarily go hand in hand with aesthetic shallowness.

This, again, is among the better parts of Malecki's book and he develops a well-organized critical line. Malecki is clearly well-informed in rap music and uses his good knowledge of the genre to call the enthusiasm Shusterman's earlier work exhibits towards rap into question. He, for example, cites some more recent developments in rap music to show that it has partly lost the critical edge which initially inspired Shusterman to single it out as a highly promising form of popular art.

In the final, fourth chapter of the book we finally arrive at the main focus point of Shusterman's work of recent years, somaesthetics, which investigates the different aspects of our bodily existence. Malecki goes carefully through the different variants of somaesthetics Shusterman singles out. Somaesthetics is divided into three categories, 1) analytic somaesthetics examining the nature of our bodily perceptions, 2) pragmatic somaesthetics, which focuses on the bodily practices of different cultures and assesses their value for "the quality of our embodied lives", and 3) practical somaesthetics trying to push philosophers to participate in different bodily practices, which Shusterman believes might afford them new insight into their research on human embodiment. (144.) Malecki also gives a highly informative account of Shusterman's critical engagement with other influential views of human's bodily existence, such as those of Foucault and Beauvoir.

Now, I have no quandary with the themes relevant to somaesthetics as such and, I further believe that an aesthetic approach to the body of the kind Shusterman develops may indeed contribute to critical analyses focusing on narrow and superficial conceptions of body's aesthetics. (The chapter actually begins with a rather grotesque story about breast implant surgeries and their advertising [142].) Where my doubts concerning somaesthetics lie is that I have troubles seeing why it should be considered a philosophical discipline. Shusterman seems to go so far as to claim that better bodily awareness will result in better philosophizing, that is, that the body itself can be a tool of philosophizing (166). Actually, when writing this my leg hurts quite a lot (which I hope is just a result of too excessive jogging in a cool Finnish autumn night and not a sign of embolus) that distracts me a bit and I am sure that once the pain has passed, I will be able to concentrate on my work better, and perhaps even to do better philosophy (whatever that means). But it is quite a long way from claiming that a passing of pain from one's leg allows one to focus on one's work better to claiming that an improved body's functioning improves once philosophizing in some more general sense. In this respect the scepticism Malecki reserves for the goals of practical somaesthetics with regard to improved philosophizing at the end of the chapter is, I believe, highly sensible (167-172). Somaesthetics is a young developing discipline with ambitious interdisciplinary goals and a growing literature has begun to develop around it. It remains to be seen, whether Shusterman can cash out the high prospects he assigns to it.

Malecki's book ends with a short comparison of Rorty's and Shusterman's views on cultural politics, which, however, remains rather disconnected from the previous chapters of the book. What I really miss in Malecki's book is the developing of some original idea that would raise the work from a mere exegetical study of Shusterman's pragmatism into a more substantial contribution to the tradition of pragmatist aesthetics. To be sure, in the course of his book, Malecki does present a substantial amount of critical comments towards Shusterman's views. However, as already said, the critical comments Malecki presents do not evolve into the kind of thoroughness and detail of argumentation that would allow them to establish some new areas of research for contemporary pragmatist aesthetics. When reading these critical remarks one gets the impression of a constantly bursting volcano which is too fired up to concentrate on developing the ideas bursting out into more consistent and forceful streams of lava. If there is some unifying critical line in Malecki's book, which binds together the almost overpowering amount of different and, to my mind, hasty and underdeveloped critical remarks he presents to Shusterman at the end of each chapter, I am afraid it eluded me.

Malecki's book is recommended reading to anybody wanting a concise and informative introduction to Shusterman's aesthetic theory and to its intellectual background and goals. To the development of pragmatist aesthetics it, however, offers very little.

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