

SHUSTERMAN AND GADAMER ON AESTHETICS. SITUATEDNESS, HISTORICITY AND PLAY

Elena Romagnoli
University of Pisa
elenaromagnoli91@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This paper carries on the dialogue between Shusterman and Gadamer on the topic of aesthetics. The aim is twofold. On the one hand, it shows the little-known influence of Gadamer's philosophy on the development of Shusterman's thought up to the elaboration of his mature proposal in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. In particular, this essay focuses on the two concepts of situatedness and historicity that Shusterman inherits from Gadamer and that constitute a peculiar feature of pragmatist aesthetics, which actually distinguishes it from analytic aesthetics. On the other hand, on the basis of the commonalities between hermeneutics and pragmatist aesthetics, this essay illustrates, through the concept of play, the possibility of rethinking Gadamer's aesthetics along a pragmatist line. In particular, the participatory and anti-subjectivist character of play as an emblem of the work of art allows us to rethink the relationship between the author and the audience. This shows the anti-elitist potentials of Gadamer's aesthetics, which can be developed in connection with contemporary artistic phenomena, such as the popular arts.

Keywords: Shusterman, Gadamer, situatedness, historicity, play

1. Introduction

Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics, later developed as somaesthetics, certainly represents one of the most promising proposals in the current aesthetic debate. Shusterman's thought is informed by a variety of sources and references (from the more classical authors, such as Dewey, to critical philosophy, popular arts and Chinese thought)¹. A relevant and partially overlooked influence on Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics is Gadamer's hermeneutics. Except for Kremer 2013 and Kremer 2018, it is barely known that Shusterman was strongly

influenced by Gadamer's thought in the transition from analytic philosophy to the elaboration of pragmatist aesthetics, and that the engagement with Dewey is actually subsequent to that with Gadamer²: Shusterman approaches Gadamer's hermeneutics through Rorty, while working out a different reading of it³.

Along this line of research, I propose to highlight the possibility of a dialogue between Shusterman and Gadamer on the role of art in the contemporary world. My intention is twofold. On the one hand, I aim to highlight hermeneutics as a source of Shusterman's thought, which is little-known but fundamental in the development of his more mature philosophical proposal. On the other hand, on the basis of the commonalities between hermeneutics and pragmatist aesthetics, I propose to reassess Gadamer's aesthetics along an anti-elitist line, focusing in particular on the concept of play.

Indeed, just as Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics was fruitfully influenced by Gadamerian hermeneutics in the 80s, nowadays hermeneutics can use pragmatist aesthetics to overcome a state of (at least partial) marginalization in respect to other currents⁴. The dialogue with pragmatist aesthetics may enable us to tone down some problematic and more conservative elements of hermeneutics and highlight a possible rethinking of it as a philosophy that is capable of accounting for contemporary forms of art, such as, for example, free jazz, as recently shown by Nielsen 2016 and Nielsen 2022, 124 ff.

² Kremer clearly highlighted this point: "Rorty's pragmatist approach to meaning and interpretation, not Dewey's aesthetics were the initial focus of Shusterman's work in pragmatism, and as Rorty's pragmatic historicist interpretative theory invoked the hermeneutics of Gadamer, Shusterman also devoted considerable study to Gadamer's work before plunging deeply into Dewey" (Kremer 2018, 50).

³ I would like to thank Richard Shusterman for being available for a discussion on this topic during the conference *The Promise of Pragmatist Aesthetics: Looking Forward After 30 Years*, 25-28/05/2022, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest.

⁴ After great circulation and success in the '80s and '90s, the interest in hermeneutics partly declined and was replaced by other philosophical currents, like structuralism and the French Theory. The resurgence of Gadamer's thought, in particular Gadamer's aesthetics, is a process that took place in the last decades, as testified by George – Van der Heiden 2021 and Nielsen 2022.

¹ See, among others, Shusterman 2008, Shusterman 2019, Shusterman 2021 and Shusterman 2022. See also Dreon 2012, Shusterman 2018, Abrams 2022, and Marino 2022.

In particular, the first part of my paper (§2) will highlight how Shusterman, as an attentive reader of Gadamer, focuses on the concepts of situatedness (§2.1) and historicity (§2.2). As brought to the fore by his late '80s writings, Shusterman learns from Gadamer that all human experience is necessarily space-time situated and that this is not a limitation but a productive possibility from which all knowledge is possible. This aspect is then reformulated in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* in the awareness of the radical historicity of art and in the critique of de-historicising conceptions that disregard the historical context in their quest for a mere definition of art. It is precisely these two hermeneutic concepts that pragmatist aesthetics takes on, constituting a fundamental characteristic of Shusterman's mature philosophical proposal that distinguishes it from the main developments of analytic aesthetics.

On the grounds of Gadamer's influence on Shusterman and leveraging on the commonalities between hermeneutics and pragmatist aesthetics, the second part (§3) of my paper will show how, by means of the concept of play as an emblem of the work of art (§3.1), we can rethink aesthetic experience in a participatory and anti-elitist way (§3.2). As Shusterman rightly identified, play has a fundamental role in Gadamer in explaining the essence of art as an anti-subjectivist and participatory process. This brings about a rethinking of the relationship between the author and the public, where the latter actively participates in the shaping of the aesthetic experience: this is a key point that Pragmatist and Gadamerian aesthetics share. By leveraging this aspect, Gadamer's aesthetics can be opened up to an anti-elitist conception of the artistic phenomena, as opposed to the separation between "high" arts and "popular" arts: an issue that featured in embryo in Gadamer's hermeneutics and that we could promisingly develop in the wake of pragmatism.

2. From Analytic to Pragmatist Aesthetics: the Gadamerian Heritage

2.1 Situating Experiences

In the context of the 1988 book *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*, dedicated to reconsidering not only Eliot's poetry but his theoretical production too, Shusterman deals extensively with Gadamer's philosophy. This is far from obvious for a philosopher who had developed his thought in the context of American analytic philosophy: this book marks a sort of transition towards the development of a critique of analytic philosophy – made explicit in Shusterman 1989⁵ – and the elaboration of Shusterman's own pragmatist perspective that would culminate in the first edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* in 1992. In the book on Eliot, quite disregarded compared to Shusterman's later works, Gadamer's centrality is explicitly stated, while Dewey's name appears only twice (see Shusterman 1988, 207, 210). Shusterman's intention is to show how Eliot can be considered close to pragmatist thought, while recovering certain hermeneutical notions. Without delving into the details of Shusterman's reading of Eliot, I will focus on some issues developed in that book to highlight how influential Gadamer's philosophy was on the formation of pragmatist aesthetics.

In the introduction to the book, Shusterman openly states: "My examination of Eliot's critical theory will not be confined to the Anglo-American perspective. It will endeavour to show how Eliot's later theory anticipates and converges with certain currents in contemporary continental philosophy, most strikingly with the hermeneutic philosophy of Gadamer on the topics of interpretation and tradition" (see Shusterman 1988, 3). As clarified by Shusterman himself, this aspect is far from obvious, in an '88 book written by a philosopher with an analytic background⁶: "This seemingly unnatural coupling of analytic

⁵ In the same year Shusterman also wrote a contribution to the famous Gadamer-Derrida Debate: see Shusterman 1989a.

⁶ It can be said, as affirmed by D'Angelo 2012, that Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics builds a bridge between analytic and continental philosophy. Shusterman himself defined pragmatism "as a more promising middle way and mediator between the

philosophy with hermeneutics through the medium of Eliot is not an attempt at eclectic comprehensiveness. It reflects a significant movement in recent analytic philosophy toward historicist, holistic and non-realist points of view which converge with those urged by contemporary hermeneuticians in the continental tradition" (Shusterman 1988, 3).

In the development of the book on Eliot, it is especially from chapter 4 that a close examination of Gadamer's conception transpires. Among the fundamental themes of hermeneutics that Shusterman recalls, namely tradition, language and interpretation⁷, a main place is sharply given to the condition of human finitude, which is the ground for the idea of "situatedness". I believe this is a crucial point in the development of Shusterman's thought, leading up to his proposal in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. Situatedness is indeed rightly regarded by Shusterman as one of the "fundamental and inalienable features which condition understanding" (Shusterman 1988, 110). Shusterman defines situatedness by stating that human beings are "essentially and irremediably located in (some part of) the spatio-temporal world and that [their] perception or point of view is consequently structured or conditioned by and contingent upon their particular situation" (*Ibid.*). On recalling its Heideggerian origin, Shusterman points out that Gadamer makes the situatedness of all human experience and understanding "the cornerstone of his philosophy" (Shusterman 2012, 110)⁸. The fact that all understanding is always histori-

cally situated does not imply, however, as Shusterman rightly reminds us, that all understanding is totally determined, restricting the way we interpret a text or a phenomenon: being situated actually paves the way to a range of possibilities and perspectives that can be developed within a given vision⁹.

Understanding and experiencing is thus always located in a given temporal and spatial context: a context that is, however, mutable and consciously grasped by the individual. Shusterman connects this crucial point to art and artistic experience, a topic that will be central to *Pragmatist Aesthetics*: "Art can never be created or appreciated in an historical vacuum" (Shusterman 1988, 111). Situatedness thus has a *productive* character, a fundamental acquisition that distances Shusterman from those analytic and cognitivist readings that saw it as a limit to knowledge and that brings pragmatism closer to hermeneutics. In this respect, Shusterman states that the "insistence on the situatedness of critical understanding should not be construed as merely the trivial negative reminder of *human fallibility and cognitive limitation*" (*Ibid.* Emphasis added). In this sense, Shusterman sees in situatedness a "*positive pragmatist point*" (*Ibid.* Emphasis added), namely the role of situatedness is "to promote the welfare of a being whose needs in this world are overwhelmingly situational and pragmatic" (Shusterman 1988, 111). This would lead Gadamer (and Eliot) "to elevate the status of contextual thinking and practical wisdom over scientific method with its rigid universalizable character" (Shusterman 1988, 112). The distancing from the demands of analytic philosophy already emerges in this statement, which questions the dependence on science and the attempt at the "objectivism" that he attributes to some strands of analytic aesthetics.

analytic and continental tradition" (Shusterman 2012, 4).

⁷ Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the English edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* – later expunged from the French, German and Italian editions as more technical chapters and less suitable for a wider audience – deal with the question of interpretation. In that context, Shusterman distances himself from the Gadamerian conception by pointing to the need to distinguish between understanding and interpretation, and instead attributing to Gadamer a reading that treats the two moments as indistinct. On this complex issue I cannot dwell here. See however in this regard Stroud 2002, 151-160.

⁸ "Consciousness of being affected by history [*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*] is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation [*Situation*]. [...] We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished. This is also true of the hermeneutic situation—i.e., the

situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the tradition that we are trying to understand" (Gadamer 2013, 312).

⁹ "Historical situatedness determines, as it were, a limiting framework with certain possibilities of logical-linguistic space for understanding to work in, but it does not determine precisely which of these possibilities must be actualized or chosen" (Shusterman 1988, 11).

Human finitude, closely linked to the concept of situatedness, is thus understood as the horizon of every possible openness to the knowledge of the other. For this reason, Gadamer's famous "rehabilitation of prejudice" (Gadamer 2013, 278 ff.) is not considered by Shusterman a limitation of knowledge but the essential initial direction from which all experience must necessarily start. However, this delimitation should not be understood in a static sense: on the contrary, the human situation is dynamic, constantly changing. This is closely linked to the hermeneutic conception whereby a work of art develops as its different readings and interpretations evolve. Shusterman responds to the criticism that this conception deals with a form of conservatism by emphasizing that it is "more normative and pragmatic than epistemological" (Shusterman 1988, 117). That is, the recovery of tradition implies the pre-understanding of the context in which each individual is necessarily situated. For this reason, rather than tradition, Shusterman refers to the concept of transmission and its mutability and non-exhaustibility: "Eliot and Gadamer recognize that this transmission is never total and that what is transmitted may anyway prove inapplicable because of the mutability of our world" (Shusterman 1988, 112).

Far from being the expression of a conservative or reactionary attitude (as has often been argued)¹⁰, the emphasis on tradition is closely linked to situatedness: since we are always situated in a given condition, we can relate to the past through an integration with it, by dialoguing with what has been preserved of it. As Gadamer stresses, tradition must be intended as "transmission [Überlieferung]", as the movement in which "past and present are constantly mediated" (Gadamer 2012, 302). It is precisely the sharing of the tradition of the past, which of course does not imply an uncritical acceptance of all that has been, that forms the basis on which we orient ourselves, resulting in the creation of a "consensual

community" (see Shusterman 1988, 170-173) that highlights the social role of philosophy¹¹.

The criticism made by Gadamer to historicism – i.e., that "temporal distance" cannot be overcome, thus acquiring the original author's point of view¹² – is adopted by pragmatism as a critique of the cognitivist positions, what Shusterman defines as "objectivism" (Shusterman 1988, 41-76), basically expressed as the "implausible view that a work of art be understood as independent of human perception" (Shusterman 1988, 11). According to this reading, cognitivist theories try to disregard the historical situation by abstraction. It should be noted that the topic of the situatedness of experience is fundamental to Dewey's conception (not only aesthetic)¹³. However, it is noteworthy that it is Gadamer's reading that guides Shusterman towards this position: the "Gadamer-Eliot" (Shusterman 1988, 117) conception is a theoretical anticipation of the perspective developed in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*.

2.2 The Historicity of Art

Pragmatist Aesthetics can be considered the inaugural book of the new direction of Shusterman's thought as well as of a discipline in the aesthetic field. This book weaves a constant dialogue with Dewey's philosophy, as

¹¹ This is among other things one of the points on which Shusterman distances himself from Rorty and his rejection of the concept of tradition in furtherance of the "linguistic turn" of his thought: "Rorty himself seems misled by the erroneous assumption that we can only choose between the uselessly superannuated language of the past and the radically new language of the future, evidently inspired by Derrida's apocalyptic vision of a new writing born through deconstruction's dismantling of logocentrism" (Shusterman 1988, 212). On Derrida's influence on Rorty's thought, see Rorty 1982. Nonetheless, Shusterman credits Rorty (and Margolis) with helping to highlight the limitations of the objectivist view (see Shusterman 1988, 53-57).

¹² "Hence temporal distance is not something that must be overcome. This was, rather, the naive assumption of historicism, namely that we must transpose ourselves into the spirit of the age, think with its ideas and its thoughts, not with our own, and thus advance toward historical objectivity" (Gadamer 2012, 308).

¹³ Indeed, the concept of situatedness is central not only to aesthetics, but to the whole of Dewey's reflection (particularly the pedagogic texts): see Hildebrand 2018, 287-300.

¹⁰ See, for example, Caputo 1987.

well as dealing with authors and texts from extremely varied perspectives (Adorno, Bourdieu, the analytic tradition, Eliot, the popular arts). I certainly do not aim to assert that Gadamer is a unique and privileged source for Shusterman. However, on the basis of what has emerged from the book on Eliot, we can show how the Gadamerian influence on the radical historicity of every human experience has remained so relevant in the subsequent developments of Shusterman's thought, although not explicitly stated.

This emerges precisely in the first chapter of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, which defined the boundaries of pragmatist aesthetics as a discipline, especially in the version provided by Dewey's philosophy (who never employed the term "pragmatist aesthetics"), and its recovery after its partial replacement with analytic philosophy (see Shusterman 2012, 3-6). According to Shusterman, this was countered by the fact that "the analytic hegemony in Anglo-American aesthetics is being severely challenged by continentally-inspired theory based on hermeneutic, post-structuralist, and Marxian philosophies" (Shusterman 2012, 4). These are influences that Shusterman also identifies in pragmatism and which are grounded in the opposition to "foundationalist distinctions and *ahistorical* positive essences, emphasizing instead the mutability, contextuality, and social-historical praxical constitution of thought and its objects" (*Ibid.* Emphasis added). Without going into too much detail here, I am interested in showing how the concept of situatedness formulated in the book on Eliot is applied to the foundation of pragmatist aesthetics, which takes an explicitly intermediate position between analytic and continental approaches: "Placed between analytic and continental aesthetics, [...] pragmatism is very well placed to help us redirect and reinvigorate contemporary philosophy of art" (Shusterman 2012, 4).

One of the main criticisms against analytic aesthetics is certainly that of being the bearer of a de-historicising view and of seeking only the definition of art (see Shus-

terman 2012, 21)¹⁴: this is Shusterman's fundamental debt to Gadamer's hermeneutics. Of course, one of the merits of the Gadamerian philosophy is recalling the radical historicity of every comprehension, without relapsing into mere historicism. This is resumed by Gadamer in the well-known principle of "*Wirkungsgeschichte*", namely, "if we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always already affected by history [*bereits den Wirkungen der Wirkungsgeschichte*]" (Gadamer 2013, 311). According to Shusterman, indeed, a relevant aspect that distinguishes Dewey (and thus pragmatist aesthetics) from analytic theories lies in "the historical and socio-cultural thickness" of his theory, namely in his insistence that "art and the aesthetic cannot be understood without full appreciation of their socio-historical dimensions" (Shusterman 2012, 21)¹⁵. This is seen as an alternative to the decontextualising and isolationist tendency that Shusterman criticizes in analytical aesthetics, which attempted to compartmentalize art by avoiding historical context, contributing to the isolation of art from other forms of life.

As I mentioned, in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, Dewey's philosophy plays a predominant role, as he refers to it as "an aesthetics of continuity" – a definition that, as we shall see, Shusterman also employs for Gadamer. Dewey's aesthetics, as expressed in *Art as Experience*, is rooted in the interaction between the living creature and its environment (see Dewey 2008, 18ff.), recalling an integral definition of experience (Dewey 2008, 42 ff.). Indeed, pragmatist aesthetics contrasts "the typical approach which looked for a single, special property or experience to define art or aesthetics, 'a single *fundamentum divi-*

¹⁴ See G. Dickie 1969, 253-256 and Dickie 1984. See also Davies, 2015, 375–384. From a different perspective, see Danto, 1981. Actually, Shusterman credited Danto together with Dickie and Wollheim with the attempt to take history into some consideration, albeit more sporadically and limitedly than Dewey.

¹⁵ Dewey is in fact aware of the historical fracture that occurred after the Greek world and the consequent isolation of art in the contemporary world, as is particularly obvious in the first part of the first chapter of *Art as Experience* (see Dewey 2008, 9-18).

sionis” (Shusterman 2012, 15). Thus, against these isolationist tendencies, Shusterman draws attention to the holism that characterizes Dewey’s position, who thought it was a mistake “to try to define the aesthetic by isolating ‘one strand in the total experience’ of an object [...], when that so-called aesthetic strand is only ‘what it is because of the entire pattern to which it contributes and in which it is absorbed’” (Shusterman 2012, 15).

Shusterman rightly grasps the novelty of Dewey’s approach in his critique of isolationism (with its social implications) as the separation and isolation of the aesthetic, recalling the Deweyan intent to restore continuity between art and other forms of life (see Dewey 2008, 9). It can be shown how this aspect recalls (more or less consciously in Shusterman) the process of “aesthetic differentiation” criticised by Gadamer¹⁶. In fact, according to Shusterman, “in contrast to Dewey’s holism, analytic aesthetics has for the most part concentrated on projects of *distinction*, devoting enormous effort to clearly distinguishing the aesthetic from the non-aesthetic” (Shusterman 2012, 17. *Emphasis added*). This conception and the reference to the term differentiation certainly go in the same direction as the Gadamerian critique of the tendency of which he had accused 19th- and 20th-century aesthetics’ (see Gadamer 2013, 39-90). In fact, for Gadamer, modern aesthetics tended to separate art from other human experiences: a process initiated by Kant and emblematically developed in Dilthey’s philosophy. Artistic experience thus turned out to be a moment of suspension of and separation from reality. To this tendency, Gadamer opposed the rehabilitation of art in connection to truth: with the famous expression of art as “*increase in being [Zuwachs an Sein]*” (Gadamer 2013, 141) he aims to consider art an enhancement of everyday experience.

The centrality of art, as opposed to its decontextualisation, is linked to the critique of isolationism: disen-

gaging works from their historical context leads to the musealisation of art and thus to the separation of the artistic sphere from other human activities. This is a point in common between Dewey and Gadamer, as Dreon 2018 pointed out. Later on, Shusterman, also on the basis of the confrontation with Gadamer’s philosophy, emphasised the historical grounding of art as a prerogative of pragmatist aesthetics, stressing its anti-elitist scope and its openness to the popular arts, including, as is well known, “the beautiful art of rap” (Shusterman 2000, 201 ff). This is a direction that hermeneutics itself, based on the common critique of isolationism, can take.

To sum up, the ineradicable situatedness and the historicity of art are two fundamental aspects of pragmatism, and it seems relevant that Shusterman first acquired them from the Gadamerian reflection and then explicated them in Dewey’s thought as a prerogative of pragmatist aesthetics. Based on these commonalities between pragmatist aesthetics and hermeneutics, the latter can reconsider the dialogue with pragmatism in a fruitful way: in this regard, the concept of play has a central role.

3. Play as a Pragmatist Clue: from Shusterman to Gadamer

3.1 The Social Seriousness of Play

In his book on Eliot, Shusterman already identified play as a paradigm to explain the essence of art. This aspect differentiates Shusterman from Dewey, who had instead criticized the readings that identify art and play, showing the risk of a disconnection of art from reality (see Dewey 2008, 218 ff.). Instead, Shusterman recalls, through Gadamer (and Eliot), the seriousness that characterises play: “In playing games *seriously* we do not typically mistake them for the serious matters of real life, but we temporarily pretend, as it were that they are. [...]. We temporarily take on new identities as players and as adversaries in play, and in doing so *we may learn new things* about

¹⁶ “By disregarding everything in which a work is rooted (its original context of life, and the religious or secular function that gave it significance), it becomes visible as the ‘pure work of art’” (Gadamer 2013, 77).

each other and about our own selves" (Shusterman 1988, 139). On a similar note, Gadamer had already shown how, just like art, play has a transformative character for those who take part in it: "Play itself contains its own, even sacred, seriousness. [...] Seriousness is not merely something that calls us away from play; rather, seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play" (Gadamer 2013, 108).

Play has thus a transformative value, and, moreover, as Shusterman perfectly stresses, it implies the involvement and participation of the players: in fact, "but though the structure or rules of a game govern the player who submits to them, the game could not properly exist without its players and only achieves its 'full being' when it is played" (Shusterman 1988, 140). This is a conception that perfectly echoes the Gadamerian anti-subjectivistic reading of the play, right down to the statement that "players and their play constitute an essential part of a game" (Shusterman 1988, 141). On this basis, according to Shusterman, we can see a link between the play "conceived in this way" (*Ibid.*) and the work of art. In fact, even the work of art is actively structured by the different readings given of it. Against the neutralisation of the point of view from which a work is read or admired, Shusterman in fact emphasises: "Literature's effect is a function not only of the power of the work or author but *greatly depends on the reader*, on the breadth, depth, and experience-proven firmness of his previous structure of belief, not to mention his capacity for imaginative understanding" (Shusterman 1988, 146. Emphasis added).

Shusterman's recovery of play also emerges in a little-known text of 1988 (the same year of the book on Eliot), that consists in a review of the English edition of Gadamer's collection *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. In this short but dense review, Shusterman focuses on the essay *The Relevance of the Beautiful. Art as Play, Symbol, and Festival*, showing how Gadamer attempts to address the question of the changing role of art in the modern world. Shusterman here describes Ga-

damer as "always a proponent of unity and continuity" (Shusterman 1988a, 751) – using similar words for Dewey, as I mentioned before – who seeks a possible answer to the role of art in the concepts of play, symbol and festival. Shusterman identifies in play the anthropological component of Gadamer's philosophy and the possibility of rethinking the relationship between the work of art and the public; the symbol stands for the impossibility of an assimilation and reduction of the work of art to mere conceptuality; the festival instead shows the collective and communitarian dimension of the work of art (see Shusterman 1988a, 752). According to Shusterman, here Gadamer would show how art is not only an oppressive instrument employed by the ruling classes and elites: in Gadamer's reading, festival in particular is a collective moment, open to all, just as art can be addressed to every viewer, including the popular entertainment of the masses (see Shusterman 1988a, 752).

As Shusterman rightly observed, the concept of play allows for the overcoming of the distinction between the author and the audience in the sense of art as a participatory and active event which the public contributes to: an aspect that already underpinned Dewey's thinking¹⁷ and was taken up by Shusterman himself. In *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, the conception of art as a participatory experience welding the hiatus between art and life is explicitly connected with the questioning of a dualism that (since Aristotle) would consider art on the model of creation, that lead to "the fetishization of art's objects with little regard for their actual use in appreciative experience" (Shusterman 2012, 54). For Shusterman, the rethinking

¹⁷ In Dewey, the critique of philosophical dualism had already taken the form of a critique of the distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic, i.e., between the passive aspect of enjoyment and taste, and the active, creative aspect. This is a central theme in Chapter IX of *Experience and Nature*, eventually taken up in *Art as Experience*, where Dewey points out that "we have no word in the English language that unambiguously includes what is signified by the two words 'artistic' and 'aesthetic.' Since 'artistic' refers primarily to the act of production and 'aesthetic' to that of perception and enjoyment, the absence of a term designating the two processes taken together is unfortunate" (Dewey 2008, 53).

of art as experience (underlying Shusterman's reading of Dewey)¹⁸, which therefore takes its processual and dynamic dimensions into account, is actually a reminder that "artistic creation is itself a powerful creation which shapes the artist as well as the work" (*Ibid.*). This also implies a revision of the separation between the audience and the artist, "between the active maker or author and the contemplative receiver or reader" (*Ibid.*).

The conception of art as experience thus provides a way out of such dualism, since it "links artist and audience in the same twofold process" (Shusterman 2012, 55). Shusterman explicitly affirms that "art, in its creation and appreciation, is both directed making and open receiving, controlled construction and captivated absorption" (*Ibid.*). Pragmatist aesthetics has particularly emphasised the social outcomes of redefining the relationship between the audience and the author from a democratic, horizontal and anti-elitist perspective. By leveraging the concept of play and its processual character, we can open hermeneutics, along the lines of pragmatism, up to an anti-elitist rethinking of art.

3.2 Anti-elitist Potentials of Hermeneutical Aesthetics

According to Shusterman, indeed the most important topic in Dewey's aesthetics is the "privileging of *dynamic aesthetic experience* over the fixed material object which our conventional thinking identifies [...] as the work of art" (Shusterman 2012, 25. *Emphasis added*). Moreover, he continues, "the essence and value of art are not in the mere artefacts we typically regard as art, but in the dynamic and developing experiential activity through which they are created and perceived" (*Ibid.*). Gadamer shares with pragmatism the fact that he privileges art as "experience" conceived as *Erfahrung*, and not as *Erlebnis*, i.e. as a process and not as a mere object of artistic contemplation, separated from what is not aesthetic¹⁹:

"The work of art is *not an object* that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an *experience [Erfahrung]* that changes the person who experiences it" (Gadamer 2013, 107. *Emphasis added*). It is this aspect of art as interaction that both Shusterman (as well as Dewey) and Gadamer place at the heart of their conceptions (see Kremer 2018 and Romagnoli 2022).

The Gadamerian concept of "play [*Spiel*]" is an emblem of the work of art, where the subject is not the player but the process of play itself (Gadamer 2012, 107)²⁰. Since all playing is a being-played (Gadamer 2012, 11), play is understood as "self-presentation [*Selbst-Darstellung*]"²¹ (Gadamer 2013, 112). The concept of play can thus be explained as participation, overcoming the subject-object dichotomy. Gadamer stresses that the participants play an active role in shaping the experience: the same goes for the role of the spectator in the constitution of the artistic experience. In *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer explicitly supports the applicability of this account to contemporary works of art that require the active participation of the public: "I think this point is enormously significant for the contemporary discussion of modern art. What ultimately concerns us here is the question of the work. One of the basic impulses of modern art has been the desire to break down the distance separating the audience, the 'consumers,' and the public from the work of art" (Gadamer, 1998, 24).

Gadamer's conception of art as play is thus closely linked to the rethinking of reception or fruition as a form of creation and participation in the work of art. In his es-

supposed to be the work proper— what it ignores are the extra-aesthetic elements that cling to it, such as purpose, function, the significance of its content" (Gadamer 2013, 78).

²⁰ The concept of play is a fundamental topic in the field of Gadamerian studies: see in particular Vilhauer 2010.

²¹ As Kremer 2018, 52, rightly points out, a conception akin to that of play is developed in Shusterman's essays *Art as Dramatization*, where "dramatization" is doubly defined as to "put something on stage," to take some event or story and put it in the frame of a theatrical performance or the form of a play or scenario" and as "to treat something as, or make it seem, more exciting or important" (Shusterman 2001a, 367-368).

¹⁸ See Shusterman 2001.

¹⁹ "Aesthetic experience [*Erlebnis*] is directed towards what is

say *The End of Art? From Hegel's Doctrine of the Pastness of Art to the Anti-art of Today* (1985), Gadamer states that it is necessary to “pull the rug from underneath the false alternatives of production and reception, of the aesthetics of production and the aesthetics of reception” (Gadamer 2022, 72). Moreover, in line with pragmatism, Gadamer continues: “On the side of the artist we have the anticipation of the effect which the work will have, whether as fulfilling an expectation, trumping an expectation or producing a contrast to an expectation. On the other side, the work of art is always encountered in such a way that the spectator always ascribes something like an intention or an idea to it or to the artist, who is its creator” (*Ibid.*). The work only emerges from a wholeness, which is not, however, the result of something static or planned, but “it is like a genuine dialogue, in which the unforeseeable makes its appearance and orients the course of the conversation” (Gadamer 2022, 73).

Prompted by this common point, an additional step made by Shusterman consists in showing that the strict separation between the creator and the beholder has consequences on the *social* role of art. In fact, equating art to the production of definite objects, independent of the artist who made them, neglects those forms of artistic experience in which one can hardly speak of a definite, independent work, such as dance improvisation²². The re-assessment of the relationship between the creator and the spectator leads to dismissing the separation between fine arts and popular arts, showing a democratic understanding of art. This also relates to an attempt at social meliorism, since the isolationism of art “provides an excuse for the powers and institutions that structure our everyday life to be brutally indifferent to natural human needs for the pleasure of beauty and imaginative freedom” (Shusterman 2012, 19-20). In the wake of Dewey, Shusterman specifies how the isolation of art results in a worsening of the living conditions of the “masses”, ex-

cluded from the cultural-artistic elite: “Not only does the elitist equation of art with high art alienate and intimidate many people from seeking satisfaction in the fine arts; it denies them recognition of the artistic legitimacy and potential of the so-called ‘low’ arts or entertainment they do enjoy – ‘the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip’” (Shusterman 2012, 19).

I claim that these elements could be potentially highlighted in particular in the essays following *Truth and Method*, such as *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, where Gadamer distances himself even more from a classical conception of aesthetics that was only related to the fine arts. Based on the participatory character of play and the democratic character of the festival, as “meant for everyone” (Gadamer 1998, 39), Gadamer seems to prefigure an overcoming of the distinction between the high arts and the popular arts: “The *Threepenny Opera*, or the record of modern songs so popular with the young people of today are equally legitimate. They too have a capacity to establish communication in a way that reaches people of every class and educational background” (Gadamer 1998, 50-51).

From this point of view, Gadamer seems to be close to the pragmatist conception: although aware that the use of art as means of mass production can involve “the contagious and intoxicated enthusiasm” (*ibid.*), Gadamer states, however, that, if these means are used correctly, they are not to be rejected outright: even the arts for the masses can produce an enriching experience: “It is a profound mistake to think that our art is simply that of the ruling class. [...] This is also to forget the mass media and the widespread influence that they have on the whole society. We should recognize that all these things can be used in a rational way” (Gadamer 1998, 51).

It is thus possible to affirm that Gadamer’s philosophy features an aesthetic paradigm, which is open to less classical forms of art and even to technological phenom-

²² On the topic of improvisation and its relevance for the essence of art, see Bertinetto 2022.

ena²³, as opposed to a view of hermeneutics as a conservative philosophy. The reassessment of the role of the public in the creation of the work of art conceived of as a collective process implies a focus on the social configuration of art and its role in the community. This also implies questioning the separation between “fine arts” and “popular” arts, something that is *in nuce* in Gadamer’s later essays.

On this basis, just as pragmatist aesthetics has learned the situatedness and historicity of every experience from hermeneutics, developing this perspective in a social direction, hermeneutics can be reassessed in a pragmatist way, developing tools that are already present, but somewhat implicit, in Gadamerian thought. I propose that hermeneutics should be further and promisingly developed from an anti-elitist perspective, stressing the active participation of the audience in the construction of the artistic experience: this would lead hermeneutical aesthetic to embrace and expand into the realm of popular arts and “everyday aesthetic” phenomena.

Bibliography

- Abrams Jarold J. (2022), *Shusterman’s Somaesthetics. From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art*, Boston: Brill.
- Bertinetto Alessandro (2022), *Aesthetics of Improvisation*. Transl. by R.T. Valgenti, Munich: Fink Verlag.
- Caputo John D. (1987), *Radical Hermeneutics. Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- D’Angelo Paolo (2012), *Pragmatist Aesthetics by Richard Shusterman. A Bridge Between the Analytics and Continentals*, in “European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy”, 4, 1, 242-246.
- Danto Arthur (1981), *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- Davies Stephen (2015), *Defining Art and Artworlds*, in “Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, 73, 4, 375–384.
- Dewey John (2008), *Art as Experience*, in *The Later Works*, vol. 10, ed. by J. A. Boydston, Carbondale and

- Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dickie George (1969), *Defining Art*, in “American Philosophical Quarterly”, 6, 3, 253-256
- Dickie George (1984), *The Art Circle*, New York: Haven.
- Dreon Roberta (2012), *Pragmatist Aesthetics, Twenty Years Later. Understanding Interpretation, Interpreting Understanding*, in “European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy”, 4, 1.
- Dreon Roberta (2018), *La “distinción de lo estético” en clave pragmatista. Dewey, Gadamer y la antropología de la cultura*, in L. Arenas, R. del Castillo, Á. M. Faerna (ed. by), *John Dewey: una estética de este mundo*, Zaragoza: Prensas De La Universidad De Zaragoza, 213-233.
- Gadamer Hans-Georg (1998), *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gadamer Hans-Georg (2013), *Truth and Method*, Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London: Bloomsbury.
- Gadamer Hans-Georg (2022), *Ethics, Aesthetics and the Historical Dimension of Language. The Selected Writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Vol. 2. Ed. and transl. by P. Vandavelde and A. Iyer. London: Bloomsbury.
- George Theodore, Gert-Jan Van der Heiden (ed. by) (2021), *The Gadamerian Mind*, London: Routledge.
- Hildebrand David L. (2018), *Experience is Not The Whole Story: The Integral Role of the Situation in Dewey’s Democracy and Education*, in “Journal of Philosophy of Education” 52, 2, 287-300.
- Kremer Alexander (2013), *Gadamer’s and Shusterman’s Aesthetics*, in “Pragmatism Today,” 4, 1.
- Kremer Alexander (2018), *Art as Experience: Gadamer and Pragmatist Aesthetics*, in R. Shusterman (ed. by), *Aesthetics Experience and Somaesthetics*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 43-55.
- Marino Stefano (2022), *Popular Music, Feminism and the “Power of the Body” in the Performance: Some Remarks on Adorno, Shusterman and Pearl Jam*, in “Popular Inquiry”, 11, 2, 48-69.
- Nielsen Cynthia R. (2016), *Gadamer on the Event of Art, the Other and a Gesture Toward a Gadamerian Approach to Free Jazz*, in “Journal of Applied Hermeneutics”, March 15.
- Nielsen Cynthia R. (2022), *Gadamer’s Hermeneutical Aesthetics. Art as a Performative, Dynamic, Communal Event*, New York-London: Routledge.
- Romagnoli Elena (2022), *From a Remote Pedestal to Everyday Life. The Social Role of Art in Gadamer and Dewey*, in “European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy”, XIV-1.
- Romagnoli Elena (2023), *Oltre l’opera d’arte. L’estetica performativa di Gadamer tra idealismo e pragmatismo*, Pisa: ETS.
- Rorty Richard (1982), *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shusterman, Richard (1988), *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Shusterman Richard (1988a), *Review of “The Relevance of*

²³ This conception has recently been developed as a “performative” reading in Gadamer’s aesthetics, as in Nielsen 2022 and Romagnoli 2023.

- the Beautiful and Other Essays*", in "History of European Ideas", 9, 6, 751-752.
- Shusterman Richard (1989), *Analytic Aesthetics*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Shusterman Richard (1989a), *The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter: A Pragmatist Perspective*, in D.P. Michelfelder and R.E. Palmer (eds.), *Dialogue and Deconstruction. The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, New York: SUNY Press, 215-221.
- Shusterman Richard (2001), *Pragmatism: Dewey*, in B. Gaut and D. McIver Lopes (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, London and New York: Routledge, 97-206.
- Shusterman Richard (2001a), *Art as Dramatization*, in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 59, 4, 363-372.
- Shusterman Richard (2008), *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shusterman Richard (2012), *Pragmatist Aesthetics. Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.
- Shusterman Richard (ed. by) (2018), *Aesthetics Experience and Somaesthetics*, Leiden-Boston: Brill.
- Shusterman (ed.) (2019), *Bodies in the Streets: The Somaesthetics of City Life*, Leiden: Brill.
- Shusterman Richard (2021), *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shusterman Richard (2022), *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*, New York: Routledge.
- Stroud, Scott R. (2002), *Understanding and Interpretation. Defending Gadamer in Light of Shusterman's "Beneath Interpretation"*, in "Auslegung", 22, 151-160.
- Vilhauer Monica (2010), *Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other*, New York: Lexington Books.