

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS

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It. *Estetica pragmatista*, Fr. *Esthétique pragmatiste*, Germ. *Pragmatistische Ästhetik*, Span. *Estética pragmatista*. The term can refer to three things: 1) the theories of art and/or aesthetic experience of the authors belonging to so-called classical pragmatism (especially Peirce, James, Dewey); 2) the philosophy of Richard Shusterman, who first coined this expression and popularized pragmatist aesthetics across the world; 3) more generally, a “pragmatist” approach to topics and problems in contemporary aesthetic debates.

In general, the unifying feature of these three meanings, and thus the core of the pragmatist approach to art and aesthetics, can be identified in the interweaving of 1) continuity, e.g., between art and life, the aesthetic and the practical, high art and popular art, body and mind, nature and culture, etc.; 2) naturalism, meaning either the continuity between artistic experimentalism and scientific experimentation, or the integration of the results of the natural and human sciences into aesthetic inquiry; 3) holism, meaning an attitude that favors an integral (rather than a compartmentalized or analytical) approach to art and aesthetic experience; 4) pluralism, both in aesthetic values and in the possibilities of aesthetic expression; 5) meliorism, meaning that aesthetic theories and practices can enhance sensory perception, somatic proprioception, creative self-fashioning, and that art can promote social integration and social change.

### AESTHETICS IN CLASSICAL PRAGMATISM

None of the traditional authors of classical Pragmatism ever use the expression “pragmatist aesthetics” as such. Nevertheless, both Peirce, James, and especially Dewey made important contributions to the history of aesthetics and to the later development of what we are now used to call pragmatist aesthetics.

Peirce famously and repeatedly called himself “lamentably ignorant” (CP, 2.120) of aesthetics and art. Nevertheless, aesthetics has its place in Peirce’s systematic architecture, appropriately redefined as a normative science along with logic and ethics. For Peirce, “aesthetics is the science of ideals, or of that which is objectively admirable without any ulterior reason” (CP, 1.191). Its task is therefore to identify an

ideal and an ultimate goal for action. Apart from this redefinition, Peirce's most important contributions to the later history of aesthetics are to be found in his semiotic theory and in the category of firstness as an immediately felt quality.

James, too, never wrote a work specifically focused on aesthetics, but especially in his *Principles of Psychology* one can recognize a strong emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of experience (James 1983). Like Peirce, James sees the qualitative dimension as the unifying feature in the stream of consciousness of experience, and links it to the notion of "fringe". James then emphasizes the aesthetic dimension involved in decisions about competing patterns of action and even philosophies and worldviews, claiming that they reflect preferences of taste and style. Two other "aesthetic" themes in James that will also play an important role in Dewey's thinking are 1) the focus on the role of sensibility and perception, 2) the continuity both between somatic dimensions and more complex experiences, and also between the aesthetic, practical, and cognitive dimensions of existence.

Dewey's treatise *Art as Experience* can rightly be considered the most important aesthetic work of classical pragmatism. Dewey's aim is to criticize the "museum conception of art" (AE, 12), which is guilty of regarding art as the "beauty parlor of civilization" (AE, 346). Against any isolationist and compartmentalizing aesthetic theory, Dewey seeks to restore the continuity between art and its experiential and somatic roots. To do this, art is defined by Dewey as "a quality of doing and what is done" (AE, 218), as a moment in which experience reaches its consummation and is charged with meaning. Art, then, both in the moment of its creation and in the moment of its fruition, becomes a possibility for communicating shared emotions, qualities, and meanings, and is in continuity with other forms of inquiry. It also has a social significance, representing the expression of a community, but also the possibility of critiquing and transforming inherited values, enabling personal growth and social change.

#### SHUSTERMAN AND THE "BAPTISM" OF PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS

Although the first record of a "pragmatic view of aesthetics" dates back to a 1908 essay by Kate Gordon (Gordon 1908), and although other authors have sometimes spoken of a "pragmatic aesthetics" (Kaplan 1948; Pepper 1968; Aiken 1962; Musik 1983; Seigfried 1990; Bernstein 1992; Alexander 1992) or have kept alive the presence of some "pragmatist" themes in aesthetics (especially Berleant, Rorty, and Margolis), the real 'baptism' of pragmatist aesthetics and its popularization can be attributed to Richard Shusterman and his 1992 book *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Shusterman 1992). Here Shusterman proposes pragmatist aesthetics as a third way between analytic aesthetics and continental aesthetics. In doing so, Shusterman names five sources for pragmatist aesthetics: the experiential aesthetics of Dewey, neo-pragmatism, the engaged view of art of Marx and especially of Adorno and Bourdieu, constructive research in popular art, and the postmodern views of Foucault and Rorty on the art of living (Shusterman 2014).

Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics seeks to challenge the traditional understanding of aesthetics by emphasizing the practical and experiential aspects of art and beauty. It eschews any definitional approach

in favor of a continuity between aesthetic theory and practice, and between art and life. This continuity does not lead to an empty aestheticism, but results in a holism capable of going beneath linguistic interpretation and becoming deeply attentive to the experiential, somatic, and cultural context in which art emerges and which it is meant to enrich.

For Shusterman, popular art and somaesthetics are both examples of this aesthetic perspective and the basis for its development. For pragmatist aesthetics, there is no a priori division between high art and popular art, but rather a historical and flexible one. Denying the aesthetic legitimacy of popular art leads to an elitism that betrays the ameliorative intent of pragmatism and implies denying popular art's ability to relate to people's lives and experiences. On the contrary, engaging with it theoretically and practically leads to a democratization of aesthetic experience and to the possibility of a plural and contextual aesthetic education. To further substantiate this view, Shusterman's works explore popular arts ranging from hip-hop music to the genre of country musicals, from photography to fashion, and more.

For Shusterman, a pragmatist approach to aesthetics leads directly to a reevaluation of the bodily and somatic dimensions of aesthetic experience, and thus to the emergence of a new discipline: somaesthetics. Shusterman defines it as "the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning. It is, therefore, also devoted to the knowledge, discourses, practices, and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it" (Shusterman 1992, 267). It has three dimensions: 1) analytical somaesthetics studies the role and function of perception and proprioception in the construction of reality; 2) pragmatic somaesthetics has a prescriptive character, proposing methods of somatic refinement; and 3) practical somaesthetics consists of the actual practice of exercises and practices for somatic self-perfection.

## THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Following Shusterman's work, the pragmatist approach to aesthetics has become one of the most widespread trends in contemporary aesthetic debates. Here, only a general account of the most recent developments in pragmatist aesthetics will be given, naming authors, approaches, and currents that refer more or less explicitly to authors of the pragmatist tradition or to the mentioned core features of pragmatist aesthetics.

The first concerns developments in Shusterman's own philosophy. In fact, after the publication of his seminal book, Shusterman has continued to explore a pragmatist and somaesthetic approach, first becoming interested in performativity as a key concept for the popular arts and as a remedy against the end of art (Shusterman 2000), then further developing the foundations of somaesthetics (Shusterman 2008), and finally bringing a somaesthetic approach to the study of the *ars erotica* (Shusterman 2021). In his wake, other authors have developed the somaesthetic approach by applying it to classical and new art media and to various experiences of human life.

One of the fields in which a pragmatist approach has always remained of interest is that of anthropological aesthetics, especially through the work of Margolis and Cometti. Margolis develops the innovations he

introduced into analytic aesthetics until they converge with pragmatism in the idea of works of art as “physically embodied and culturally emergent entities” (Margolis 1974). Cometti’s aesthetics also focuses on the anthropological aspect of the emergence of artistic practices, traits, and codes from a broad web of social and cultural transactions of the contingent creature with the world (Cometti 2012).

Another area in which the pragmatist approach dates back to the 1990s is environmental aesthetics, as shown by Berleant’s *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Berleant 1992). For Berleant, there is no place in the environment for a dichotomy between subject and object; rather, the environment shapes us as much as we shape it. Aesthetics thus becomes a model for reflecting on and improving the mutual transaction between humans and nature. Alexander, too, has developed a pragmatist eco-aesthetic based on the notion of *eros* and the idea of a continuity between aesthetics and ethics (Alexander 2013).

One of the most important recent developments in the pragmatist approach to aesthetics is certainly everyday aesthetics. Both Saito (Saito 2007) and Leddy (2012) take their cue from Dewey to expand the field of aesthetics beyond the realm of so-called high fine art, thus overcoming the dichotomy between the extraordinary and the ordinary in aesthetic experience. The result is a sort of aesthetic legitimization of ordinary activities and an attentive and engaged approach to their experience.

Other currents should be discussed (such as social aesthetics, for example, in the works of Westbrook and Honnacker), and other authors should be mentioned (Gallagher, Johnson, Noë, etc.). However, due to the reasonable limits of an encyclopaedic entry, it is only possible to offer here a brief explanation of some important developments. For a brief but accurate account of the contemporary legacy of pragmatist aesthetics, see Dreon (2021).

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