

Consciousness, Literature and the Arts

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Shusterman, Richard, *Surface & Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2002. 273 pages, ISBN 0-8014-8683-1, Paperback -price unknown.

Reviewed by

John Danvers

From the opening pages it is clear that this is a wide-ranging, yet closely argued book, contributing stimulating ideas and analyses of the many debates and issues with which it engages. Shusterman's aim is very ambitious: to bring into productive interaction two tendencies in aesthetics that are usually seen as divergent, or even mutually exclusive. These are: on the one hand, "the drive toward depth analysis and emphasis on the nonperceptual in art"; and on the other, "aesthetic experience, surface, and spontaneous pleasure". An argument is put forward for "greater recognition of the rich dialectical connections between surface analysis and depth analysis in aesthetics". And the argument is very persuasive. In typical Deweyian pragmatist style Shusterman aims, by removing artificial boundaries, to pull together ideas and approaches that provide a multi-perspectival engagement with the processes and products of art.

The argument is developed through a lucid and incisive interrogation of analytic aesthetics, deconstruction and pragmatism, with interesting commentaries on "the social and cultural foundations of aesthetics" exemplified in the writings of Hume, Kant, Wittgenstein, T.S. Eliot and others. The different approaches of late 20th Century cultural theorists (Danto, Rorty, Margolis and Bourdieu) are critically described as affording a means of bridging the apparent gap between surface and depth analysis.

Shusterman regrets the lack of space for more "examples of concrete aesthetic analysis". In fact there are hardly any, and this is one of the few disappointments of the book. It weakens one of the main strands of the argument by neglecting the aesthetic (surface) specificity of the artwork in favour of the theoretical exegesis that privileges commonalities, generalities, context and

hermeneutics. 'Depth' to some extent overshadows 'surface'.

Morris Weitz's influential critique of essentialism (in *The Role of Theory*, 1956) "implores us to 'look and see' the vast array of differences among artworks rather than presume a common essence to search for as a definition of art". However Shusterman points out that the openness of early analytic aestheticians to perceptual 'empirical' evidence and specificity, to the materiality and surfaces of artworks, gradually disappeared after the mid-60's.

Arthur Danto "helped initiate this turn from aesthetic perceptual properties by stressing art's imperceptible contextual features as the essential factor for an artwork". To be considered as art, artworks require what Danto describes as, "something the eye cannot descry - an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld." This opened the door to Dickie's institutional theory of art, and to a growing preoccupation amongst later analytic aestheticians with the cultural foundations of art, and to a concomitant distrust or doubt regarding the very notion of 'aesthetic experience'.

Despite the anti-essentialism of much early analytic aesthetics, a later exponent like Danto exemplifies a return to essentialism, and to the essentialist tradition of Croce, Collingwood, Bell and Fry. Danto acknowledges himself to be an "essentialist in philosophy", believing that all artworks "must exemplify one identical essence" but "do not have to resemble each other". As with all essentialist theories the difficulty comes in how to define the 'essence' - and no satisfactory definition has emerged (nor, in my view, is it likely to).

Shusterman argues that there are a number of different logics of, and reasons for, interpretation, and that no particular one can be considered supreme or more true than any of the others. Three logics are considered in detail: Descriptivism, Prescriptivism and Performatism. The various interpretive 'games' play around the artwork in different ways providing a variety of cues, modes of access and reception, and other kinds of insight, analysis and commentary. Each approach may have its own form of consistency and etiquette (as all games must) and its own particular value, strengths and weaknesses, but none can offer a total picture of the artwork. These interpretive processes co-exist with "authorial intentionalism" in a plurality of narratives circulating through and around the artwork.

There is an interesting and unusual discussion of the similarities (and some differences) between the aesthetics of Croce and Derrida. This focuses on a shared belief in reality as being “a temporary and dynamically developing linguistic construct”. “For Croce and Derrida, language not only constitutes the world, but is an irrepressibly creative force which is continually transforming itself”. However Croce believed that “interpretive truth could be achieved through the recovery or reproduction of original meaning”, while Derrida argues that there can be “no correct understanding or valid interpretation” of a given text - indeed that all texts are “unreadable”.

Shusterman analyses Croce’s idea of “true interpretation” from a ‘radical pragmatist’ perspective and argues that Croce probably wouldn’t have disagreed with the notion that an artist’s or author’s intuition/expression can only be imaginatively reconstructed by each interpreter within a historically framed interpretive community. The process of interpretation is part of the reconstruction of objects, events, intentions and meanings that each historian imagines and narrates as they make *a* history within *their* history - and we are *all* historians.

As in his earlier book, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, Shusterman emphasises the pragmatist belief in “fallibilism and the possibility of interpretive revision”, which provides a “promising option between rigidly analytic and recklessly deconstructive accounts of interpretation”. Viewed from this ‘middle’ position meaning is always something relational, never an absolute or an object.

Chapter Four comprises an interesting discussion of Wittgenstein’s views on “critical reasoning” and on the “radical indeterminacy of aesthetic concepts” - both exemplifying the critique of essentialism that characterised so much of his thinking. Wittgenstein’s position on reasoning is also articulated by Stuart Hampshire: “the critic’s role is only to ‘direct attention... if one has been brought to see what there is to be seen in the object, the purpose of discussion is achieved”. On the other hand Shusterman argues that Wittgenstein’s support for a plurality of critical methods and aims suggests that we should be sceptical of any attempts to consider one method as being ‘correct’ or more ‘true’ than others.

Other matters covered by Shusterman include: a lucid examination of the ways in which aesthetic judgment and standards of taste are grounded in social conditioning and class distinction (in the writings of Hume and Kant); an analysis of convention, in which the apparent

distinctions between convention and nature are shown to be much less clearcut than philosophers like Hilary Putnam and David Lewis maintain; and a lively discussion of pragmatist aesthetics in Alain Locke and John Dewey, in which the following statement by Locke is a key theme: “I project my personal history into its inevitable rationalization as cultural pluralism and value relativism.”

In a review of this brevity I can only point to other chapter headings as evidence of Shusterman’s scope and ambition: *Eliot and Adorno on the Critique of Culture*; *Deep Theory and Surface Blindness*; *Art in a Box* (about Arthur Danto); *Cultural Analysis and the Limits of Philosophy* (about Bourdieu); *Art as Dramatization* (a brief foray into the art/life debate - art leading “us back to experience life more fully through the infectious intensity of aesthetic experience and its release from affective inhibitions”). The last sentence of the book makes reference to the “art of living” and it would be good to see Shusterman further develop his ideas around this theme, perhaps picking up Dewey’s art-as-experience thesis and providing a more sustained exploration of the idea of art as dramatization.

‘Surface and Depth’ is an excellent text, combining lucidity and keen analytical thinking with an ability to challenge preconceptions, to make surprising connections and to open up new avenues of enquiry. I would encourage anyone interested in aesthetics, arts criticism, cultural theory and philosophy to read this book and to enter into a richly rewarding engagement with a stimulating and lively mind.

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