

**Simo Säätelä**  
*Between Intellectualism and »Somaesthetics«*

Contemporary philosophical aesthetics, as well as philosophy in general, is characterized by a loss of faith in various objectivist and foundationalist ideals. Having increasingly freed itself from its traditional aim to find foundations, essences, and necessities, philosophy has become *anti-foundationalist*, challenging the traditional conception that philosophy should provide immutable grounds for human knowledge and practices. Anti-foundationalism says that such grounds are neither available nor required (see Shusterman 1997b, 157). There are, however, different opinions as to what form such anti-foundationalism should take. My aim is to take a look at some ways to understand anti-foundationalism within aesthetics, and a focus for my presentation is given by the recent work of Richard Shusterman, who has, in a number of papers and books, discussed these issues as a part of his efforts to construe a neo-pragmatist aesthetics.

*Interpretation*

Perhaps the most influential version of anti-foundationalism is associated with something that could be called the »interpretive turn« in contemporary philosophy (see Hiley, Bohman & Shusterman 1991). Especially within recent Anglo-American philosophy this turn to interpretation and hermeneutics has been welcomed as an antidote to various forms of empiricism, and it is characteristic of different versions of »post-analytic« philosophy. This way of understanding the lessons of anti-foundationalism is to say that interpretation »goes all the way«; there are no »brute facts« or any immediate access to reality. Everything we understand is, the argument goes, in one way or another mediated through our interpretations or »cognitive schemes«. Consequently, the idea is that we do not only interpret things or texts that are somehow obscure or ambiguous, but that »interpretation begins at home« (to use Donald Davidson's phrase). This amounts to claiming that *all* intelligent behaviour, even our relation to our native tongue and thus to the world is based on interpretation.

Shusterman has characterised such a view as *hermeneutic universalism* and defines it as follows: it is the view that »simply to perceive, read, understand, or behave intelligently at all is already, and must always be, to interpret« (Shusterman 1991, 102).

This kind of universalism builds upon the idea of the hermeneutic circle in its most general sense: all understanding is interpretation, and every new interpretation always presupposes an already interpreted starting point. Thus we have no recourse to an »uninterpreted reality« outside the circle, and our horizon or perspective always already limits our understanding.<sup>1</sup> What we should insist on is the »universality of the hermeneutic problem«.

The central argument for »hermeneutic universalism« goes as follows:

1) all understanding is linguistic and

2) all linguistic understanding entails interpretation or »decoding« of signs (see Shusterman 1991, 115).

Interpretation, in short, is seen as some kind of explanation of how we can understand language (and thereby other people, art, etc.). The major problem with this kind of view is that the use of such an expansive notion of interpretation either

a) makes »interpretation« an empty catch-all word (by making it impossible to contrast understanding and interpretation), or

b) over-intellectualises our understanding of language as well as of art by modelling it on the interpretation of difficult texts with hidden meanings.

As Shusterman (1991, 113) points out, such hermeneutic universalism is a version of what John Dewey called »intellectualism«, and which he considered a major problem of Western philosophy. In his paper »Beneath Interpretation« (1991) Shusterman shows how some of the main arguments for such universalism can be confronted. He maintains that interpretation is characteristically linguistic, whereas understanding is often tacit: »while understanding is frequently a matter of [...] unproblematic handling of what we encounter, interpretation characteristically involves a problem situation« (Shusterman 1991, 126). Here Shusterman is partly drawing on Wittgenstein, who insists on the intrinsic problem-solving character of interpretation by contrasting it to immediate understanding.

---

<sup>1</sup> A major Continental background influence here is of course Nietzsche, whose perspectivism and idea of there being »no facts, only interpretations« is frequently cited in support of different forms of hermeneutic universalism (cf. Shusterman 1991, 103). On the analytic side, the influence of Quine's idea of radical translation is difficult to overestimate. This odd couple should make us realise that there are enormous differences among the philosophical views Shusterman subsumes under the title of hermeneutic universalism; there are, however, also interesting and surprising similarities between them.

What Shusterman (1991, 104) argues is that »interpretation is better served by letting it leave room for something else (beneath or before it)«. What then, is this »something« beneath or before interpretation? Shusterman suggests that it can be characterised as our somatic experience. But he also uses the term »reaction« to characterise a way of understanding that is not an interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

### *Experience*

Shusterman wants to counter the claims of hermeneutic universalism by developing a pragmatist anti-foundationalism: he wants to emphasize the role of spontaneous reactions and instinctive behaviour as indicative of understanding, and to contrast this with interpretation. So far I am in agreement with Shusterman: however, I think he gets into serious problems when he goes on to equate this idea of reaction and immediate understanding with that of an experience.

Shusterman wishes to make a case for »prereflective, nonlinguistic experience and understanding« (Shusterman 1991, 119). This kind of experience, Shusterman thinks, is best thematized in classical pragmatism, and especially in Dewey's philosophy. Shusterman starts his apology for Dewey in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992), and has continued this rehabilitation in his most recent publications, a paper called (ironically) »The End of Aesthetic Experience« (Shusterman 1997a) and his new book *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (Shusterman 1997b).

Dewey's philosophy, Shusterman (1997b, 171) thinks, expresses »pragmatism's traditional concern with the somatic and non-discursive«, and it is this tradition that he wants to rehabilitate. Continuing on the lines of Dewey, Shusterman insists that what is beneath or before interpretation is, in the last instance, our somatic existence, what Dewey calls »animal life below the human scale«, or the »live creature« that interacts with the world. This interaction, both Dewey and Shusterman think, is best characterised as »experience«.

In Dewey's spirit Shusterman claims that the involvement of the embodied subject with the world is at its clearest when art and the aesthetic are concerned. Thus it is precisely in terms of the aesthetic and the somatic that

---

<sup>2</sup> An interpretation, Shusterman (1991, 127) says, characteristically expresses itself in a linguistic form; »understanding, on the other hand, does not require linguistic articulation. A proper reaction ... may be enough to indicate that one has understood.«

the notion of experience should be articulated (Shusterman 1997b, 161). This is because »the aesthetic is central to the realm of experienced value« as Shusterman (1997b, 166) puts it.

This, Shusterman thinks, is something that especially analytic aesthetics has missed, since it has concentrated almost entirely on questions of semantics and demarcation (i.e., the meaning and »languages« of art and the definition of art). In most analytical aesthetics, Shusterman (1997a, 38) claims, »felt experience is virtually ignored and entirely subordinated to third-person semantic theories of artistic symbolization and its interpretation.«

Shusterman, instead, wants to argue for what he calls the »phenomenological« and »evaluative« dimensions of aesthetic experience and to connect them to an emphasis on the somatic, non-conceptual dimensions of non-interpretative understanding. Thus, it is the subjectively felt, »satisfyingly heightened, absorbing, meaningful and affective experience« (1997a, 38) that is important and that we should emphasize instead of the physical objects of that experience, Shusterman says. This, of course, echoes Dewey's *Art as Experience*.

I am mainly sympathetic with Shusterman's aims, but skeptical of his attempts to rehabilitate the notion of an »experience«. I think that by using this term he just takes over Dewey's philosophical problems. As we know, it is precisely Dewey's appeal to »experience« that has been considered problematic, even among philosophers sympathetic to his project. For instance Richard Rorty says that Dewey should have »dropped the term 'experience'« instead of making it the centre of his philosophy (Rorty 1994, 60; cited in Shusterman 1997b, 158). Rorty (correctly, I think) considers Dewey's appeal to experience a kind of foundationalism: Dewey claims for example that immediate experience is the »underlying quality« which is the regulative principle in all thinking (see Shusterman 1997b, 165). Shusterman acknowledges these traits of foundationalism in Dewey, but he thinks that he can show how to disentangle the idea of experience from foundationalism. Unfortunately I do not think he is successful in this attempt, and while I agree with Shusterman's criticism of hermeneutic universalism (as a species of intellectualism) I do also agree with Rorty and others who think that the notion of »experience« is hopelessly confused.

Especially in his newest book Shusterman goes too far in his urge to combat the intellectualism of traditional philosophy. Shusterman says that we should give up the resistance to »non-discursive soma« and thematize, in philosophy, this somatic dimension of our being-in-the-world. So far, I have no argument with him. I also think he might have a point when he says that

philosophy can and should become »transformational instead of foundational«, that is, a kind of »cultural criticism that aims to reconstruct our practices and institutions so as to improve the experienced quality of our lives« (Shusterman 1997b, 157). However, Shusterman then goes on to identify this »experienced quality« with somatic experience, which can be improved by different »bodily practices« (he mentions, for example, the Alexander technique, bodybuilding, aerobics, etc.). These bodily practices, he claims, aim at »a better harmony of lived experience«. Shusterman even wants to »integrate such bodily disciplines into the very practice of philosophy« making philosophy »a discipline of embodied life« as he puts it (ibid., 176). Thus he concludes that »improved experience, not originary truth, is the ultimate philosophical goal and criterion« (ibid., 157). Shusterman further thinks that such bodily, immediate experience is best articulated through the aesthetic. He has even figured out a name for this newly somatic, aesthetic philosophical practice: he calls it *somaesthetics*.

While I can appreciate Shusterman's missionary zeal and regard his writing as a kind of manifesto (which explains the rhetorical exaggeration) I do not think he is philosophically convincing. Ironically enough he is very persuasive when criticizing the vestiges of foundationalism in Dewey, but when it comes to developing an alternative he offers his »somaesthetics« more or less without argument. Indeed, as we shall presently see, when he attempts to philosophically elaborate the notion of »experience« he becomes deeply enmeshed in the kind of dualisms he attempts to free philosophy from, and is driven dangerously close to something that could be called »somatic foundationalism«. That is, he is not content with wanting to thematize the bodily dimension of our life, but wants to make it the prime focus both of philosophy and of life. However, here he makes a mistake: a criticism of intellectualism does not mean that we should have to embrace its diametric opposite and assert the primacy of the soma. Actually, Shusterman makes the same kind of mistake as the hermeneutic universalists, only the other way around.

Shusterman, by appealing to the aesthetic experience, tries to assert something that Richard Wollheim has called »the supremacy of life over art«. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this view, but as Wollheim notes, the problem with it is to »understand ... the idea in such a way as to fall neither into triviality or error« (Wollheim 1980, 99-100). However, I think that some of Shusterman's views are both trivial and erroneous; the main reason for this is the way he drives a wedge between the intellect and the soma, in a very classical dualist manner, in spite of his lip-service to the opposite.

Shusterman is right when saying that we should realise the importance of the non-discursive and somatic dimension of our interaction with the world, and that it is especially important when we are concerned with the philosophy of art and aesthetics. Nevertheless, I do not think we have to follow Shusterman's somatic turn and equate the uninterpreted with somatic experience. The reason for this is that there is a philosophically viable middle road between hermeneutic universalism and somatic foundationalism, between intellectualism and »somaesthetics«, and this is, perhaps not very surprisingly, to be found in the later philosophy of Wittgenstein.

Let me, in the time that remains, briefly outline some main points of such an alternative. Wittgenstein is, as we already mentioned, an ardent critic of the kind of intellectualism that is manifested as hermeneutic universalism. But I think he can also give an alternative to Dewey's and Shusterman's pragmatist philosophy of experience. In this context, this alternative can best be sketched out by elaborating the term »reaction«.

### *Reaction*

How then, is this alternative to be understood?

Let us first look at Wittgenstein's relation to the claims of hermeneutic universalism. It is clear that Wittgenstein is opposed to the idea that understanding always is, or requires, interpretation. Establishing a contrast between immediate understanding and interpretation is very important for Wittgenstein, since it is central for instance to what he says about the concept of »following a rule«; there certainly is such a thing as a way of acting that is grounded in interpretation, but not all rule-following can be understood in such a way – instead, there must be cases where we follow the rule unhesitatingly, without any interpretation (see, e.g., Wittgenstein 1958, § 201).

Wittgenstein thus opposes what could be called the mythology of interpretation: the view that linguistic understanding must always be a matter of decoding or interpreting. Wittgenstein's way of countering this mythology is to say that language cannot be based on thinking. Rather, it is grounded in our forms of life, in our instinctive behaviour and natural reactions – that is, our embodied existence as a certain kind of creature. He says that we do »naturally« understand certain rules just by being given examples, just as we naturally understand a pointing gesture; »and understanding here means reacting« (Wittgenstein 1969a, 141). No act of inner, laborious interpretation is involved.

What is even more interesting from our point of view is that Wittgenstein also makes a similar point in his lectures on aesthetics, where he says: »Perhaps the most important thing in connection with aesthetics is what may be called aesthetic reactions« (Wittgenstein 1966, 13). There would be much to say about the idea of aesthetic reactions (see further Säätelä 1995 & Säätelä 1998, ch. 3), but what I want to emphasize here is that Wittgenstein's use of this notion must be seen as a way pointing out that our primary relation to art and other aesthetic phenomena cannot be an interpretative one. However, this does not mean that Wittgenstein is ignoring the role of reason and thinking in the arts or in our lives.

Even though critical of hermeneutic universalism, Wittgenstein is to large extent in accord with the central insights of hermeneutic philosophy, for instance when insisting on the importance of a context or horizon for our understanding of, for instance, a sentence or sign. In fact, Wittgenstein also claims that art and artistic appreciation, in a very similar way as language, can only be made sense of by placing it in the cultural context to which it belongs and which shapes it.

However, Wittgenstein does not accept the idea of endless interpretation, implicit in the idea of the hermeneutic circle. Instead, the context prerequisite for understanding is given to us by ways of behaving and reacting, and ultimately by a form of life. This means that no object can be properly understood if we cannot in one way or another participate in the complicated set of activities or practices to which it belongs. In this sense practice, or ways of reacting and acting, give us the horizon within which an object becomes meaningful. This is what has been called Wittgenstein's »one-step hermeneutics«.<sup>3</sup> Instead of a circularity of interpretation, we have a circularity between understanding and doing, that is, participating in the relevant practices. Thus the »oscillations of hermeneutical theory are short-circuited« (Ackermann 1988, 18) when we reach a way of grasping that is not an interpretation, that is, when we have reached action or reaction. In the case of aesthetics and appreciation of art, this stopping point can be called an aesthetic reaction. When we, in a particular case, have reached aesthetic reactions, the question of interpretation does not arise any more.

When it comes to aesthetics and art this demand for participation means a demand that we submit ourselves to the object and react to what we perceive. This demand for an immediate reaction also means that the

---

<sup>3</sup> This term is introduced by Robert Ackermann, who maintains that »Wittgenstein's key to philosophical analysis was to discover a network of clear horizons of understanding that are implicit in our language« (Ackermann 1988, 9).

significance of art and other aesthetic phenomena cannot be appreciated from some externalised interpretative distance.

*Experience or Reaction?*

This kind of view (as Wittgenstein indeed himself points out in a different context) begins to sound like pragmatism<sup>4</sup>, and this way of putting the Wittgensteinian position shows that it indeed has many affinities with Shusterman's criticism of hermeneutic universalism. However, an important difference between this view and such a pragmatism is that Wittgenstein is very careful of not resorting to talk about »experience« in this context. And this is not merely a verbal quibble or a matter of choosing different words to describe the same phenomenon.

The main differences between Shusterman's and Dewey's appeal to experience and the Wittgensteinian appeal to reactions become clear if we look closer at the job these notions are supposed to do in their argument. As we mentioned before, Shusterman quite convincingly brings out some serious philosophical problems in Dewey's appeal to experience. However, when we look closer at Shusterman's own use of this term, we find that he in fact repeats Dewey's mistakes. This is clearly to be seen in a thought-experiment that Shusterman introduces in his paper »The End of Aesthetic Experience«. Here Shusterman wants us to imagine a science-fiction situation, where we are confronted with »two visually identical art viewers who offer identical interpretations of the very powerful paintings and poems before them«. One of these art viewers is a human being, while the other is a »cyborg«,<sup>5</sup> and the only difference between these two is that the »cyborg« lacks the human capacity to feel (Shusterman 1997a, 37). This means that »even if the cyborg's interpretative propositions were descriptively more accurate than the human being's, we would still say that the human's general response to art was superior and that the cyborg, since he feels absolutely nothing, does not really grasp what art is all about« (ibid., 38).

Now, Shusterman's science fiction story is rather feeble, but I think he is after an important point when emphasizing that works of art make de-

---

<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein 1969, § 422. He does, however, add the following remark: »here I am being thwarted by a kind of *Weltanschauung*«.

<sup>5</sup> Shusterman in fact messes up the science-fiction terminology here. What he wants to talk about is not a cyborg, which is a cybernetic organism (in this case a human whose normal biological capability is enhanced by cybernetic devices), but rather an android, a robot which can be thought of as a »visually indiscernible« replica of a human being.



mands our capacities for feeling, understanding and response and that we must submit to these demands in order to appreciate art. The problem is that his preoccupation with »experience« leads him astray. In Shusterman's fable the only difference between these »indiscernible« art viewers is the capacity to feel, but it is precisely this capacity that makes the human being's response to art »superior« to that of the »cyborg's«. However, this capacity is described only in terms of a qualitative difference of experience, which is further understood as some sort of introspectively available private occurrence.

Indeed, Shusterman's attempt to elaborate the idea of »aesthetic experience« by using this story shows that he inherits all the philosophical problems that Dewey struggled with: an experience, for Shusterman, is some kind of ineffable and private sensation that must be characterised in purely phenomenological terms (he talks about »feeling or savoring art's qualia « [ibid., 37]).

Shusterman's main problem is that

- 1) he thinks that the appreciation of a work or an object consists in the object's inducing or causing in us a certain experience,
- 2) and then conceives of this experience in abstraction from the work or object that gives rise to it.

The result is that the value of a work or object is conceived of as residing in its *effects*, and these effects are thought to have a nature independent of the object that causes them.<sup>6</sup> Thus Shusterman thinks that what is valuable about the aesthetic experience is precisely its immediate phenomenological and somatic characteristics, the »heightened awareness«, the »experience of qualia«, and so on.

But this way of representing artistic or aesthetic value is certainly mistaken. There is nothing wrong in saying that the only way of appreciating a work of art is to experience it with understanding, but this does *not* mean something like »experiencing the qualia« of the work. Instead, what is important is that we react to the object in a way that shows that we understand. In fact, Wittgenstein's criticism of the idea of »private« languages and objects can be directly applied to Shusterman's appeal to »aesthetic experience«. If Wittgenstein is correct, as I think he is, we should not expect phenomenological studies of experiences, which are grounded on the first-person case, to be helpful here; instead we must ask about the publicly observable criteria for the application of terms such as »experience«. Moreover, these criteria cannot be found by an introspective investigation of our own

---

<sup>6</sup> This means that Shusterman is repeating a mistake that is characteristic of classical expression theories of art (cf. Budd 1992, 445).

phenomenal experience; instead, we need a conceptual inquiry that issues in grammatical remarks. Wittgenstein's appeal to reactions must be understood as such a grammatical remark, also in the context of aesthetics.

A reaction is something that befalls us and has certain phenomenal and somatic qualities; and in this respect it could be described as an experience. However, when Wittgenstein talks about aesthetic reactions, he makes a very important additional point: he says that such reactions are not merely experiences or feelings, but that they are directed towards an object (i.e., they take on an intentional object). This means that the reaction, even if it is an immediate experience, cannot be considered in abstraction of its object. It is not merely a private sensation or experience of qualia, but manifested by what we are prepared to say or do about the object. Consequently, what makes a reaction an *aesthetic* reaction is its context and its directedness toward an object of a peculiar kind, not, as Shusterman suggests, the phenomenal characteristics of the experience itself.

If we concentrate on experiences, we risk ending up talking about the effects of objects on subjects. In contrast, the notion of aesthetic *reactions* makes it possible to take note both of the »phenomenological« and the »semantic« (or the »somatic« and »intellectual«) sides of our relation to works of art and other objects of aesthetic interest. Thus we could conclude by saying that Wittgenstein has both a therapeutic and an descriptive end in mind when reminding us of the importance of our reactions, since this notion (if rightly and fully elaborated) makes it possible to describe the important role of the aesthetic in our lives without relapsing either into the intellectualism of hermeneutic universalism or the foundationalism of somaesthetics.

### *Bibliography*

- Ackermann, Robert John, 1988. *Wittgenstein's City* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press).
- Budd, Malcolm, 1995. »Wittgenstein, Ludwig«, in Cooper, D. A. (ed.) *A Companion to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Dewey, John, 1934. *Art as Experience* (New York), repr. in J. A. Boydston (ed.) *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 10 (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987).
- Hiley, D. R., Bohman, J. & Shusterman R., 1991 (eds). *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

- Rorty, Richard, 1994. »Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin«, in D. Ross, ed., *Modernism and the Human Sciences* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Shusterman, Richard, 1991 »Beneath Interpretation«, in Hiley, Bohman & Shusterman 1991.
- 1992. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- 1997a. »The End of Aesthetic Experience«, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55:1.
- 1997b. *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York and London: Routledge).
- Säätelä, Simo, 1995. »Aesthetic Reactions«, in L.-O. Åhlberg & T. Zaine (eds) *Aesthetic Matters* (Uppsala: Cultural Studies, Uppsala University).
- 1998. *Aesthetics as Grammar: Wittgenstein and Post-Analytic Philosophy of Art* (Uppsala: Department of Aesthetics, Uppsala University).
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1954. *Philosophical Investigations*. 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell).
- 1966. *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett. (Oxford, Blackwell).
- 1969a. *The Blue and Brown Books*. 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell).
- 1969b. *On Certainty*. (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Wollheim, Richard, 1980. *Art and Its Objects*. 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).