

# Pragmatist Aesthetics, the New Literacy, and Popular Culture

*A Response to Stefán Snævarr*

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**ABSTRACT** The article is a critical response to Stefán Snævarr's "Pragmatism and Popular Culture: Shusterman, Popular Art, and the Challenge of Visuality." In its first part, I attempt to prove that several of Snævarr's claims about popular culture and new media, which form the basic premises of his diagnosis of the alleged intellectual decline of the West, are either dubious or wrong. Moreover, in the context of this diagnosis, Snævarr levels some serious accusations against Richard Shusterman's theory of popular culture, which, I believe, are ungrounded and do not do justice to the latter's approach. Henceforth, the remainder of the article is devoted to explaining in which aspects Snævarr's interpretation of Richard Shusterman's theory is misguided.

**KEYWORDS** Pragmatist aesthetics, Richard Shusterman, popular culture, Stefán Snævarr, new literacy, new media

## I

This article is a response to Stefán Snævarr's "Pragmatism and Popular Culture: Shusterman, Popular Art, and the Challenge of Visuality," and I would like to make it clear from the very beginning that I am convinced, and shall try to prove below, that many of the crucial points presented in his text are either dubious or wrong.<sup>1</sup> Now, I am also aware of the fact that in such situations there always emerges a question: why write, and then publish, a largely negative text of this kind? Can such an uncompromising criticism ever serve any useful purpose, after all?<sup>2</sup> In my opinion, it can, at least in this case, and this is mainly because of the following two reasons.

First of all, in his text, Snævarr paints a very bleak picture of today's popular culture and warns the reader that the latter, specifically its visual aspect, presents a serious *threat*, not only to so-called higher culture, but also to our civilization per se. Of course, we have heard many such warnings in the last decades (to be exact, more or less analogous ones have been tirelessly reiterated throughout the entire history of the West) and thus most of us should be immune to them.<sup>3</sup> Yet, Snævarr's article trumps many other texts of this kind in terms of gloominess, as he deploys a hyperbolically dramatic rhetoric in order to talk about: "the intellectual

*decline of the West*,”<sup>4</sup> “the onslaught of popular culture” and the resulting “death toll” which embraces more and more people (who, in Neil Postman’s formulation, are “amusing [themselves] to death”),<sup>5</sup> “the grey future” of the world inhabited by the “new barbarians,”<sup>6</sup> and “the culture of narcissism ... being replaced [today] by the culture of autism” and “social isolation.”<sup>7</sup> Given that all this might have a rather distressing effect on a large number of readers, I decided to address some of these predictions and lamentations. In the first part of the article, then, I am going to argue that many of Snævarr’s claims about popular culture, which form the basic premises of his warnings, are unfounded.

The second reason for my writing this polemical piece is that Snævarr, in the context of the aforementioned diagnoses and prognoses, levels serious accusations against Richard Shusterman’s aesthetic theory of popular culture (even though he at the same finds it “inspiring”).<sup>8</sup> These, I believe, are again ungrounded and do not do justice to Shusterman’s project. Henceforth, in the remainder of the paper, my aim shall be to demonstrate in which aspects Snævarr’s interpretation of Richard Shusterman’s aesthetics is misguided and to indicate that, despite the overall impression one might get from Snævarr’s article, Shusterman’s aesthetics is a useful tool for dealing with popular culture, especially as far as aesthetic education is concerned. That latter element actually allows me to say that my text is not entirely negative, but has a constructive side, too, something which, by the way, is quite appropriate in discussing pragmatist aesthetics, as should become clear from what follows. Finally, I will also try to indicate that had Snævarr read Shusterman more closely, he would have avoided not only the mistakes he made in his interpretation of the latter, which is quite obvious, but also those affecting his assessment of the present cultural situation in the West.

To begin with, Snævarr tries to defend his general claim “that popular culture, especially visual entertainment, could be a danger to education ... and civilization”<sup>9</sup> by arguing for the plausibility of three specific hypotheses: that popular culture poses a threat to (a) reading, (b) high culture and (c) communal living.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Snævarr uses a, b, and c to undermine Shusterman’s aesthetic of popular culture, as these contradict some of its basic premises.

(a) *Reading*: In defending the plausibility of the first hypothesis, Snævarr refers to surveys which indicate, e.g. that the readership of “imaginative literature in the United States” has significantly decreased, or that the same happened to the readership of books in France, or that even “in countries like Iceland with a strong tradition for reading, the

youth read less and less.” As if this was not enough, Snævarr rolls out heavy artillery in the form of studies which show that people in the West watch television on average 21 hours a week, or that youngsters spend as much as “twenty-five to thirty hours a week in front of the television or computer.”<sup>11</sup> This, and an implicit premise that the latter media do not have much to do with the written word, allow him to claim that “[t]hey [i.e. youngsters] simply do not have time to read.”<sup>12</sup>

My rejoinder to the above is rather simple and boils down to stressing that, according to various studies, the “Internet overtakes TV time,”<sup>13</sup> and that the World Wide Web is generally a textual environment. This latter claim is very easily proven, for instance, by the trivial fact that no matter which website one wants to visit, one usually has to *type* its address, and even if one does not have to do it (because one, e.g., follows a link), one must still be able to *read* the address or the description of the page. To continue with such banalities, even if the only thing one wants to use the Internet for is watching videos on YouTube, one still has to enter the name of a given video to find it (not to mention the fact that an important part of the entertainment provided by YouTube is posting and reading comments on particular clips). We should not forget, too, that one of the most popular phenomena in the Internet are the so-called blogs, i.e., electronic diaries accessible to the general public, and even though there exist also the so-called video blogs, the ordinary, i.e. written and read, blogs dominate.<sup>14</sup> And what about the fact that the content of thousands of newspapers, magazines, journals (including the one in which Snævarr’s criticism of Shusterman was published), and of thousands of books are to be found on the web, and are read in that form by millions? I also hope that Snævarr, and other people who are prone to associate the alleged decline of the printed word with the demise of literature, have heard that legions of authors publish their own poetry and *imaginative fiction* on the Internet, and still more people read it. It is also significant that the web, and electronic media in general, have *stimulated* the emergence of various *new* forms of literary writing, usually subsumed under the label of *electronic literature*.<sup>15</sup> In other words, one simply cannot ignore the fact that the Internet has its own literacy<sup>16</sup> which constitutes one of its core elements. The surveys Snævarr quotes do not take this phenomenon fully into account and unless they do, they cannot be treated seriously. In an article published in the online edition of *Forbes* in 2006, and tellingly entitled “How The Internet Saved The Literacy,” one can read that the results of various surveys that tried to show “a negative correlation between Internet use and reading” (including one of those

cited by Snævarr) are now thought to be “unduly alarmist, according to several experts in the field.” Interestingly it seems that the Internet is not only harmless to reading in general, but also when it comes to the seemingly endangered textual species, such as the book. After all, “the sale of books has continued to trend upward over the past several years ... [e.g.] in 2005, sales jumped 9.9%, to \$25 billion, according to the Association of American Publishers.”<sup>17</sup> In a more general way, it is also crucial to notice that according to the statistical estimates provided by UNESCO (which one can very easily find on the Internet, by the way),<sup>18</sup> in the last few decades, i.e. the age of television and computer, the illiteracy rate in the world has decreased, statistically, by almost 20%. In this light, I think that Snævarr’s talk of the “triumph” of visual culture,<sup>19</sup> which is supposedly threatening not only our capacity to read or write, but also our “abilities to engage in argumentation” in general should be put among fairytales, euphemistically speaking.<sup>20</sup>

(b) *Threat to high culture*: I would like to begin with a general remark that in his article, Snævarr does not provide any clear definition of high, and popular, culture (limiting himself to giving vague descriptions, or some examples, thereof), which I think is a serious methodological mistake that gets him into trouble in the course of his argument. After all, the high/popular distinction is not in itself unambiguous, as is evidenced by the existence of several, often mutually incompatible, understandings thereof.<sup>21</sup> Obviously, one might object that the question about the nature of this distinction is in a way analogous to St. Augustine’s *Quid est ergo tempus?* to which he famously responded: “If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks me, I do not know.”<sup>22</sup> In short, one might say that this is a theoretical question which does not apply to our usage of those terms in the practical life, where we can use them without any problems, just as we can deploy the word *time* being completely unaware of the theoretical intricacies and pitfalls of its meaning. And is Snævarr’s case not a practical one, after all? But such an analogy would be inadequate, and his not defining what he understands by these terms seriously affects the force of Snævarr’s argumentation.<sup>23</sup> For instance, what does it mean when Snævarr, in order to prove that high culture is in retreat, claims that it has become “more difficult to sell serious books”? What kind of criterion is that? As if to clarify the issue, Snævarr cites a complaint by one German publisher that 20 years ago one could sell 20,000 copies of a book “like the essays of George Steiner,” while now the sales are limited to, more or less, 9000.<sup>24</sup> But that does not explain what a serious book is: does it have to be erudite, interdisciplinary, or

sophisticated in style, as Steiner's works are? (By the way, we must not preclude the possibility that some die-hard analytic philosophers could say that books like Steiner's are not serious at all. And this is exactly because their authors take sloppy thinkers like Heidegger too seriously). I am also wondering what Snævarr would say about Harry Frankfurt's *On Bullshit*. Just to remind you, this small book, despite its seemingly insouciant title, is not bullshit itself, but a witty philosophical essay, and, most importantly, it has sold at least 175,000 copies in the US alone.<sup>25</sup> Would Snævarr dismiss it as an isolated example, or maybe would want to prove that this is not a *serious* book at all?

Similar doubts are raised by another feature Snævarr seems to be attributing to high culture, namely that it is "demanding." According to Snævarr, one of the alleged symptoms of the decline of that culture is the fact that sales of classical music have decreased, and that "we cannot rule out the possibility that the ever-present pop music is vaccinating the young against the more demanding classical music."<sup>26</sup> But what can one make of this claim? After all, the present musical culture in the West is not rigidly divided into the aficionados of Chopin, Schönberg, etc., on one side, and the ever growing horde of the rabid fans of Britney Spears or Madonna, on the other. Is classical music, then, the only reservoir of demanding music? And what about artists such as Antony and the Johnsons, Nick Cave, Björk, Interpol; what about post-rock bands like Mogwai, Godspeed You! Black Emperor [sic]; what about progressive rock, punk, alternative electronica and industrial (e.g. the German band Einstürzende Neubauten), and other genres which many young people are keen on? Are all of these undemanding products of pop music, too? Or maybe they belong to classical music? And if they are, in fact, demanding, can they be labeled as *high culture*? Where is their place within the dichotomy Snævarr sketches? I believe that the above examples sufficiently demonstrate that until Snævarr clarifies what he means by the high/low culture distinction, his respective claims are hard to be taken seriously.

(c) *Threat to communal living*: here, the gist of Snævarr's argument is to blame electronic media, such as TV, the Internet, and computer, for bringing about "the culture of autism," in which "civic activities" disappear and "social isolation" reigns supreme. Now, again, I hope that Snævarr realizes that when one sits in front of the computer "absorbed ... by Internet surfing," one is not necessarily "completely alone"<sup>27</sup> even if nobody else is physically present in the room. After all, one may well be exchanging emails, or talking via various Internet communicators, with other people, or playing multi-player computer games with any of

the millions of online gamers around the world. Such trivialities aside, we must bear in mind that among the most popular Internet phenomena are the so-called social networking websites, such as Facebook and MySpace.<sup>28</sup> Thanks to these, millions of people are not only able to communicate with each other, but also in a sense expand the potential range of their contacts farther than it was possible ever before (e.g. by joining international Internet communities devoted to various pursuits and goals, political ones among them), something which may compensate for the fact that other forms of social life may be disappearing.<sup>29</sup> Of course, one can always cling tightly to some conservative understanding of what the latter is, focusing exclusively on its old, petrified forms, and not realize, or not want to realize, that there may be any alternatives to them. Then, by definition, social networking websites and other enterprises the *netizens* engage in, would not count as *real* communal life; just as signing Internet petitions, Internet voting, or sending alarming emails to one's local politician, etc. would not be worthy of the dignifying label of "civic activity." I believe, however, that anyone who was to profess such a view would sooner or later be condemned to "social isolation" themselves. For instance, how could one ignore the fact that the competition between Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama in 2008 was to an important extent decided on the Internet?<sup>30</sup>

## II

Having challenged some of Snævarr's empirical claims, let me turn to his account of Shusterman's aesthetics. My critical arguments may be divided into two groups: charges of misinterpretation, and of omission.

As far as the question of misinterpretation is concerned, let us begin with the following quote from Snævarr's article:

To make matters worse, he [i.e. Shusterman] extrapolates in an unjustifiable manner from rock and rap to all forms of popular culture. He objectifies the concept of popular art; he argues that such disparate phenomena as rap music and TV soap operas share a common essence. He does not see that though rap music might liberate our bodies, watching TV soaps all day certainly does not. Actually, this implicit essentialism goes against the grain of his skepticism toward the objectification of concepts. So there are not only empirical but also logical deficiencies in Shusterman's argumentation.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear from the above, that Snævarr misconceives the main idea behind Shusterman's writings on popular art. In a nutshell, the latter's project aims primarily at providing aesthetic legitimation for popular art

against those critics who think that this kind of art *by its very nature* does not, and cannot, possess any aesthetic value whatsoever.<sup>32</sup> In order to refute this presumption Shusterman does not need to argue that popular art is intrinsically valuable, something which, being an anti-essentialist, he indeed explicitly rejects.<sup>33</sup> Instead, it would suffice, at least from a logical point of view, to provide counterexamples showing that there actually exist phenomena which the critics in question would be ready to categorize as *popular art*, but which at the same time represent aesthetic qualities that, according to those critics, such art cannot represent. And Shusterman does exactly that. For instance, *pace* authors who think that popular art can provide only spurious or “washed out” aesthetic pleasures, Shusterman argues that “the experience of rock music ... can be so intensely absorbing and powerful that it is likened to spiritual possession.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, he undermines the accusation of the alleged passivity of the reception of popular art by pointing to those of its forms which demand real physical effort from their public and are therefore capable of “liberating” our bodies.<sup>35</sup> These and other examples serve nothing more, and nothing less, than showing that popular art *can* have certain aesthetic qualities. That surely does not entail the essentialism Snævarr accuses Shusterman of, namely a belief that all forms of popular art *do* possess those qualities. Here we see very clearly that Snævarr either has not read Shusterman’s works thoroughly, or it is he, rather than the latter, who has problems with logical thinking.

Equally problematic are Snævarr’s claims that Shusterman is “blowing a fanfare for the common man ...”<sup>36</sup> or that Shusterman believes that “the entertainment industry speaks on behalf of the common man.”<sup>37</sup> First of all, Shusterman is not blowing any fanfare for anybody, since, being faithful to his melioristic approach (which Snævarr, by the way, does mention in the article), he is recognizing both virtues and vices of popular art in general, and of its specific genres, such as rap, in particular.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, anyone who has read the very texts Snævarr criticizes, knows quite well that Shusterman explicitly rejects the depiction of the audience of popular art as a homogenized aggregate, representing some average taste. As a consequence, instead of talking about “mass audience” of popular art he prefers to talk about its “multitudinous audiences,” each of which represents different tastes, levels of education, or economic backgrounds.<sup>39</sup> This approach surely makes any talk of “the common man” with regard to his views on popular culture simply absurd.

Let us take another example. Snævarr claims baldly that “... Shusterman is wrong about entertainment being something relaxing. By implication

there is no such thing as higher learning provided by entertainment's purported relaxing effect." And this is allegedly because "more often than not entertainment is a stimulant rather than a means for relaxation. (Do kids really relax while playing an exciting computer game and listening to loud rock and roll?)"<sup>40</sup> Yet these arguments miss the point of Shusterman's account of entertainment. In his article "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics" (to which Snævarr refers in his criticism), Shusterman sets out to defend the value of entertainment – which is denied by many thinkers, ranging from Plato to Hannah Arendt – by explaining its specific dialectic. In order to do so, Shusterman, among other things, provides an etymological analysis of various terms referring to the notion of entertainment in the English language (as well as in French and German), such as, e.g., "entertainment," "diversion," and "distraction." The former term need not bother us here, but the latter two, Shusterman argues, point to a very important function of entertainment; namely, diverting or distracting us from our main or "habitual" occupation. It is thanks to this function that we can "relax" our minds and bodies, which, quite naturally, become tired and strained when focused narrowly on one activity or object for too long.<sup>41</sup> Now, this general account implies that anything can be a form of entertainment, provided it serves this distracting function at a given moment and for a given person; which means also that no particular activity is, in and of itself, a form of entertainment, regardless of the context in which it appears. Now we can see why examples given by Snævarr (of children who spend so much time playing games or watching TV, to which they are "addicted," that they suffer from ADHD and other problems) do not refute, but rather confirm Shusterman's conception of entertainment.<sup>42</sup> This is because when a given entertaining occupation, such as playing computer games or watching TV, becomes one's habitual activity – something on which one concentrates through most of one's time – it by definition ceases to be entertainment as it loses its distracting, relaxing function. Importantly, in the case of computer games, this loss has nothing to do with their being exciting and stimulating, because excitement and stimulation do not necessarily preclude relaxation (as Snævarr apparently thinks they do). In order to understand that, let us once again refer to Shusterman's theory of the productive dialectic of entertainment. If, for instance, one's principal occupation is rather boring and bland, then one will quite likely be diverted, or entertained, and thus relaxed, by something exciting and stimulating. Besides, if one can relax by playing an exciting tennis match with a friend (which is one of Shusterman's own examples of an



entertaining activity, and which I think even Snævarr would not have doubts about), then why can one not relax by having wild fun at a rock concert or playing an engaging computer game?

Now, let me turn to omissions. First of all, it is a bit of an exaggeration to say that Shusterman “tends to ignore” the side of popular culture Snævarr is bothered with. Namely, the new electronic visual media and their possible negative impact on our lives; e.g., that they make us unfit or over-stimulated, or may turn us away from other valuable media, such as books. Of course, I admit that Shusterman does not talk explicitly about visual culture’s threat to reading and to verbal communication as such. Yet, in my opinion, one really cannot make that into an objection, since the threat is illusionary, as I have argued above.

Be that as it may, it is worth noting that in one of Shusterman’s works which Snævarr refers to, one can find an essay “Somaesthetics and the body/media issue,” which Snævarr strangely does not mention, even though he should, given the specific perspective of his criticism. There, Shusterman not only talks about “coach-potato media consumption” that is often contrasted with the active, healthy life of fitness aficionados,<sup>43</sup> but is also able to present that dichotomy in a far more subtle and useful way than the one implicit in Snævarr’s text. In that very same essay Shusterman discusses the tension between the “new media” (television, the Internet, computers) and the older ones, such as “the book,” and explicitly urges that there are good reasons (even if these are not the same reasons Snævarr gives) for us not to neglect at least some of the older ones in favor of the inventions of our electronic age.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, he explicitly talks there about “the time wasting nonsense of TV” and “the disruptive intrusion” of other contemporary media.<sup>45</sup> Does all that sound like “ignoring” the questions Snævarr is talking about, such as, e.g., the condition of books in today’s world, the negative influence of television, overstimulation, or lack of physical fitness? Let me also stress that Shusterman’s treatment of the latter two problems is not limited to just one essay. In fact, somaesthetics, a philosophical discipline he created at least ten years ago and has been developing ever since, quite often addresses the question of how “the newer electronic media” affect our bodily existence, often generating various somatic or psychosomatic ailments and malfunctionings.<sup>46</sup>

Now let me turn to Snævarr’s claim that Shusterman “does not quite grasp the fact that hedonism has prevailed. He apparently thinks that Puritanism is still a problem in the Western world like it was before the 1960s.”<sup>47</sup> There is no denying that Shusterman denounces critics of

popular culture such as Adorno and Allan Bloom as being too “ascetic,”<sup>48</sup> but he surely does not extrapolate this charge to Western culture *en bloc*. Suffice it to mention the following quotation from his *Performing Live*: “Hedonism may have always been with us, but it has become more outspoken in secular postmodernity.”<sup>49</sup> What is more, in one of his essays on Foucault, Shusterman provides an extended critique of a certain kind of hedonism which he thinks is predominant in our culture. Namely the hedonism which concentrates solely on seeking intense, extreme pleasures and, as a consequence, generates the problem of overstimulation.<sup>50</sup>

### III

Finally, I would like to explain why I believe Shusterman’s pragmatist aesthetics to be one of today’s most efficient theoretical approaches to the so-called popular culture even though it has its limitations and defects (albeit not the ones Snævarr is talking about), some of which I pointed out elsewhere.<sup>51</sup> To begin with, it is worth emphasizing that in Snævarr’s essay there is no single mention, let alone any detailed proposal, of any concrete, feasible solution to the problems he tackles, but only complaint and dark prophecies. Irrespective of whether he does differently in his other texts, that particular approach is something which characterizes the bulk of criticisms leveled at popular culture, and it is against exactly this background that the value Shusterman’s endeavor can be seen the most clearly.

One of the most important principles of pragmatism is that we must begin from where we are and always try to use the resources and tools available to us, here and now, in order to make things better. Now, it is definitely true that most of the students we encounter today (and will encounter in the future) are saturated by the so-called popular culture in its visual, audible, and all other possible guises, and thus they may have problems with understanding, let alone enjoying, many particular forms and canonical works of literature and other arts. Well, what can we do in such a situation? Should we try to ban popular culture or restrict their access to it? And how could we do *that*? Then maybe we should try to convince those youngsters that what they cherish most and what constitutes such an important part of their identity is essentially evil and must be rejected? Again, how could *that* be achieved? Interestingly, the roots of Shusterman’s theory are to be found in his own pedagogical experiences and in his attempts to face similar questions. As he has explained in interviews and a preface to one of his books, his *conversion* to pragmatist aesthetics took place in “1988, when [he] taught a ... [postgraduate] seminar” on aesthetics at Temple University. The students who attended

it had come mostly “from working class backgrounds” with their tastes having been shaped by television and pop music, while Shusterman at the time was a follower of Adornian aesthetics, and thus himself a critic of popular art. It was then when he realized, having seen the reaction of his students to his unshaken condemnation of their favorite forms of art, that such a condescending approach is not a solution. That in order to introduce students to the kinds of art they are unfamiliar with, one should not stress differences in an oppressive way, but rather show connections and be open to dialogue.<sup>52</sup> In this light, we should ask ourselves: Why not think about the ways in which popular culture, and its visual subset in particular, might enhance aesthetic education? Why not yoke its specific phenomena to the purpose of refining students’ aesthetic taste and hermeneutical skills? Why not use popular art forms to make the students think about the issues we think are important? Shusterman’s works make us realize this possibility and show how to do it (e.g. when he situates rap within the debate over the political function of art).<sup>53</sup> As far as his own pedagogical practice is concerned, Shusterman confesses that his classes have sometimes taken place in venues as unusual as dance and techno clubs, and he himself proves that the experiences one can get from attending the latter can indeed be a source of interesting aesthetic reflection. And he does so, for instance, by providing an insightful essay on the aesthetics of cities, which begins with an autobiographical narrative of his having attended a techno club in Berlin, where the idea of the essay was conceived. That place, quite obviously, was shaking with the sound of techno music (which Snævarr would surely condemn as intellectually undemanding), and was also full of “flashing lights” and videos “projected” on the walls (obvious examples of destructive visual culture). Yet its aesthetic dimension somehow allowed Shusterman to understand the peculiar aesthetics of absence that characterizes Berlin, and to propose a new interpretation of subtle and demanding thinkers such as Walter Benjamin.<sup>54</sup>

To continue with the question of the practical value of Shusterman’s approach, let me admit that it may well be the case that teachers of aesthetic education, e.g. dance teachers, are often confronted with children who suffer from overstimulation or are so obese that it makes it quite difficult to teach them not only dancing, but a lot of other things too. But does that mean that the case is lost completely? Surely not, and it is worth mentioning that Shusterman discusses how his somaesthetics may contribute to alleviating various bodily problems (not necessarily media-related) which can significantly hamper one’s education process,

and also how it may facilitate aesthetic education in particular by improving one's control and consciousness of the body (necessary for mastering the art of dance, e.g.) and the capacity for aesthetic experience.<sup>55</sup>

To return to the aforementioned account of the media proposed by Shusterman, its usefulness lies partly in that it reminds us that "every medium or technique – radio, television, video, film, books – has its advantages and limitations, encouraging certain perceptions, experiences, or constructions and hindering others."<sup>56</sup> Of course, one could say that this is obvious and no one really needs to be reminded of such trivialities, but Snævarr himself can be a very good counterexample here. He seems to be so concentrated on the positivity of the textual and the scourge of the visual, that he falls into a kind of graphocentrism, which is expressed, e.g., by the fact that he apparently cannot imagine any form of aesthetic education that could make good use of the students' excellent knowledge of electronic visual culture, or that could go without "writing essays" for that matter. Let me also note in passing that the rigid textual/visual distinction Snævarr seems to be attached to, is problematic indeed, as Shusterman himself proves eloquently in an article entitled "Deep Theory and Surface Blindness: On the Aesthetic Visibility of Print."<sup>57</sup>

It is also worth stressing that Shusterman's theory of the media, just as his philosophy and aesthetics in general, is thoroughly historicist, and thereby lets us understand that no form of art, no particular genre, and no medium, is bound to stay forever, and that the existence of none of them in particular is necessary for art as such, or high art and culture for that matter, to thrive (even if, at the same time, it might be advantageous if we could preserve all of them). Shusterman is thus properly flexible, where Snævarr seems to be overly rigid and conservative, which conservatism distorts his view of reality. For instance, why think that the decline of *classical music* is equivalent to the decline of *intellectually demanding* or *high* forms of music? What if classical music, with the particular set of instruments it prefers, particular mode of reception etc. simply outlived its artistic potential, and we should be ready to bid it farewell sooner or later? After all, we know from the history of music that some of its *high* forms have disappeared from existence, along with particular instruments and composing patterns, and yet nothing detrimental has happened to intellectually demanding music as such (which of course does not mean that these forms cannot regain their importance one day). If we are unwilling to take seriously the possibility that some other forms of music, and art in general, are undergoing analogous processes right now, we may unwittingly make aesthetic education into a

bulwark of artistic reactionism, which is certainly something better to be avoided.

The last of the positive aspects of Shusterman's aesthetics of popular art that I would like to talk about in this article is in a way related to Snævarr's ironic remark that

... he [i.e. Shusterman] seems to think that the high brows still rule. But the only place to find bona fide intellectual snobs these days is in the *Frasier* sitcom; nonvirtual high brows virtually disappeared in the 1960s, the decade during which hedonism triumphed. Interestingly enough, most of the high brows Shusterman criticizes wrote their books before the advent of the Beatles. So his criticism of the puritans and the high brows seems a bit dated.<sup>58</sup>

Have the highbrows really disappeared from the scene? And what about Harold Bloom who, just a few years ago, thundered from the height of his academic reputation of a famous Yale critic that the united forces of Stephen King and J.K. Rowling are "dumbing down American readers"?<sup>59</sup> Or what about the acclaimed novelist A. S. Byatt who said more or less the same, and more or less at the same time, about *Harry Potter* in an op-ed for *The New York Times*?<sup>60</sup> And the general criticisms of popular culture professed by the likes of Finkielkraut, Scruton, or Hoggart? These surely were *not* written in the 1960's.<sup>61</sup> The list could go on, but what interests me here are not such counterexamples, but rather what really lies behind the apparent retreat of highbrows and the triumph of popular culture. In order to clarify what I mean, let me refer to the following quotation from Didier Maleuvre's review of Shusterman's *Pragmatist aesthetics*, which contains a charge of anachronism that is analogous to the one formulated by Snævarr:

In his zeal to justify popular art against stuffed-shirt academia, Shusterman is guilty of setting up straw men: he has to dig out highbrow fogeys from half a century ago, or notorious curmudgeons like Adorno, to find voices still railing against popular art forms. Whereas a glance at contemporary academic publishing or college course catalogues would have informed him that the case of popular arts scarcely needs championing.<sup>62</sup>

On the first look, one could hardly disagree with Maleuvre. After all, does the epidemic of popular culture studies not mean that this culture has gained a respectable position in the realm of the academia, banishing the last survivors of highbrow criticism? And is it not the case that rappers like Jay-Z, singers like Shakira, authors like Stephen King and J.K. Rowling, and many other pop icons, are now allowed to compete

for the spiritual leadership in the classrooms on the same rules as John Milton and William Blake?<sup>63</sup> Moreover, one could find similar opinions even among Shusterman's fellow-pragmatists. For instance John J. Stuhr points out that now we can observe a peculiar way of pursuing the humanities, i.e., "the humanities as entertainment." And that

celebrity humanist scholars who now write learned essays about Madonna and feminist theory, Michael Jackson and the politics of desire, Cindy Crawford and late capitalist productions of style, Axl Rose and the politics of diminished expectations, and "NYPD Blues" and postmodern communication, are the vanguard of this movement.<sup>64</sup>

But all this is in fact the grist for Shusterman's mill, which becomes quite clear as soon as we take a closer look at the curriculum, as Maleuvre advises us to do, or at Stuhr's very own examples. Having done so we must conclude that, in the academic circles, popular art (which is the aspect of popular culture Shusterman primarily concentrates on) very often serves as mere pretext for sociopolitical debates taking place under the banner of cultural studies. This whole phenomenon, in fact, is situated on the opposite pole of what Shusterman argues for, i.e. analysis, study, and teaching of popular art, which, albeit not neglecting the sociopolitical aspects of particular works, puts sufficient emphasis on their artistic character and is supposed to contribute to the general improvement of the *aesthetic* quality of popular art.

To sum up, I hope to have demonstrated that both Snævarr's account of popular culture, as well as his interpretation of Shusterman's aesthetics can be questioned, and that there are several aspects of the latter's thought that may be of value for the contemporary aesthetic education. I would like to finish the article by referring to yet another question which bothers me in Snævarr's criticism, namely the rhetoric he employs in talking about Shusterman as an author. For instance, when characterizing Shusterman's overall project, Snævarr makes the following claim: "It is not by chance that he [i.e. Shusterman] defends popular culture; after all, he is one of the few aestheticians today who enjoys some popularity."<sup>65</sup> Now what can that supposedly mean? If this is an empirical claim to the effect that Shusterman defends popular culture somehow *because* he himself is popular then it is rather dubious, because Shusterman in fact conceived and presented his main idea of the defense of popular culture before he became popular. In fact, one might say that Shusterman became internationally famous partly *because* of his defense of popular culture, and now he is not so much defending it (although this

happens, too), but rather showing in which aspects it needs to be corrected, e.g., as far as visual representations of the body are concerned. Or maybe Snævarr is here trying to accuse Shusterman of a certain kind of cynicism (*he is doing all that only to defend the culture he is a part of*)? Then that would not only be dubious but rather ungenerous, too. I am equally troubled by Snævarr's awkwardly condescending remark, which concludes his article. Namely, that despite "not only empirical but also logical deficiencies in Shusterman's argumentation ... he is a very interesting philosopher, young enough to improve his analyses and cultural comments."<sup>66</sup> Given the tone of this latter remark I may be excused for expressing the hope, in conclusion, that Stefán Snævarr will be ready to improve his own analyses and cultural comments, too.<sup>67</sup>

### Notes

1. S. Snævarr, "Pragmatism and Popular Culture: Shusterman, Popular Art, and the Challenge of Visuality," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 41, no. 4 (2007): 1–11, further referred to as S (with page number).

2. For a useful criticism of overly critical attitudes very often adopted in academic discourse, see R. Shusterman, "Pragmatism and Criticism: A Response to Three Critics of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 16, no.1 (2002): 26–27.

3. See, Oliver Bennett, *Cultural Pessimism: Narratives of Decline in the Postmodern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

4. S, 4, emphasis added.

5. *Ibid.*, 5. See, Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin USA, 1986).

6. S, 9.

7. *Ibid.*, 8.

8. *Ibid.*, 9.

9. *Ibid.*, 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 5–9.

11. *Ibid.*, 5.

12. *Ibid.*

13. See, e.g., Erik Sass, "IBM Study: Internet Overtakes TV Time," *MediaPost Publications*, Aug 23 (2007), <http://www.mediapost.com/publications/index.cfm?fuseaction=Articles.san&s=66218&Nid=33541&p=405859> (accessed Oct 19, 2008).

As far as the UK is concerned, see Sarah Woods, "Internet use outstrips TV viewing for the first time," *Brand Republic*, Mar 08 (2006), <http://www.brandrepublic>.

com/News/545047/Internet-use-outstrips-TV-viewing-first-time/ (accessed Oct 19, 2008); Australia: Helen Leggatt, "Australian Internet use overtakes TV viewing," *BizReport: News and Insights for Online Marketers*, Mar 31 (2008), [http://www.bizreport.com/2008/03/australian\\_internet\\_use\\_overtakes\\_tv\\_viewing.html](http://www.bizreport.com/2008/03/australian_internet_use_overtakes_tv_viewing.html) (accessed Oct 19, 2008).

14. For a scholarly account of the phenomenon of blogs, see, e.g., *Uses of Blogs*, eds. A. Bruns and J. Jacobs (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

15. See, e.g., N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*, Second Edition (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001); Karin Tusting, "Ecologies of New Literacies: Implications for Education," in *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, 2nd Edition, Volume 9: *Ecology of Language*, eds. A. Creese, P. Martin and N. H. Hornberger (New York: Springer, 2008), 317–329.

16. See, e.g., Angela Thomas, *Youth Online: Identity and Literacy in the Digital Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); *New Literacies and the English Curriculum: Multimodal Perspectives*, ed. L. Unsworth (London: Continuum, 2008); *Doing literacy online: Teaching, Learning and Playing in an Electronic World*, eds. I. Snyder and C. Beavis (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2004); *Cyberlines 2.0: Languages and Cultures of the Internet*, eds. D. Gibbs and K.-L. Krause (Albert Park, Vic.: James Nicholas Publishers, 2006). I would like to thank Professor Anne Cranny-Francis (Macquarie University) for drawing my attention to the publications mentioned in this endnote.

17. M. Farrell, "How The Internet Saved The Literacy," *Forbes.com*, Jan 12 (2006), [http://www.forbes.com/2006/11/30/reading-literacy-internet-tech-media\\_cx\\_mf\\_bookso6\\_1201literacy.html?](http://www.forbes.com/2006/11/30/reading-literacy-internet-tech-media_cx_mf_bookso6_1201literacy.html?) (accessed Oct 18, 2008).

18. See the figures provided by UNESCO Institute for Statistics: <http://www.uis.unesco.org/en/stats/statistics/literacy2000.htm>.

19. S, 1.

20. *Ibid.*, 7. Of course, one cannot rule out that, in some unspecified future, the Internet will become nontextual. Yet so far it shows no symptoms of becoming such, and it is always better to confront real dangers than speculate on more or less nebulous ones.

21. Cf. John A. Fisher's informative article "High Art Versus Low Art," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, eds. B. Geut and D. McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2000), 409–422.

22. St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. A. Cook Outler (Courier Dover Publications, 2002), 224.

23. To forestall potential objections let me stress, that, just like Richard Shusterman, I myself do not fully acknowledge the term popular culture and think the



whole dichotomy high/popular culture is misguided and needs to be dissolved altogether. If I use that term in the present article, I do it for polemical and heuristic purposes, borrowing its denotation and meaning, provisionally, from self-declared critics of popular culture, such as Theodor W. Adorno.

24. S, 7.

25. Note that this data is from 2005. See G. Young, "The Bullshit Guy," *The Guardian* (Online Edition), May 12 (2005), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2005/may/12/internationaleducationnews.highereducation>. (accessed Oct 18, 2008).

26. S, 8.

27. Ibid.

28. See the results of the study cited in Erik Sass's article, op. cit.

29. In fact, some "surveys (online and off) have revealed that Internet users have higher levels of generalized trust and larger social networks than nonusers ... Results from survey analyses also suggest that Internet use serves to complement rather than substitute for print media and offline socialization" – Paul DiMaggio et al., "Social Implications of the Internet," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 316. See also *Building Virtual Communities: Learning and Change In Cyberspace*, eds. K. A. Renninger and W. Shumar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, "Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone: Virtual Community As Community," in *Networks in the Global Village*, ed. B. Wellman (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999), 331–67; Lewis Goodings, Abigail Locke, and Steven Brown, "Social Networking Technology: Place and Identity In Mediated Communities," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 17, no. 6 (2007): 463–476; Gerry Bloustien, "Wigging People Out: Youth Music Practice and Mediated Communities," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 17, no. 6 (2007): 446–462; Angela Thomas, "Children Online: Learning in a Virtual Community of Practice," *E-Learning* 2, no. 1 (2005): 27–38.

30. See Steve Schifferes, "Internet Key to Obama Victories," *BBC News*, June 12 (2008), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/7412045.stm> (accessed Oct 19, 2008).

31. S, 10.

32. See, R. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd Edition (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 176–7, further referred to as *PA*. Cf. See R. Shusterman, "Popular Art and Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, no. 13 (1995): 203–4, passim.

33. *PA*, 176.

34. Ibid., 178–9.

35. Ibid., 184, 214.

36. S, 3.

37. Ibid., 1.

38. See, e.g., his remark that popular culture often becomes "brutally crude in

sensibility" (*PA* 168), or his criticisms of some negative tendencies in rap music: e.g., R. Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 142–143.

39. *PA*, 190–1.

40. *S*, 6.

41. See R. Shusterman, "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43, no. 3 (2003): 289–307. Cf. R. Shusterman, "Art As Dramatization" in R. Shusterman, *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

42. *S*, 6.

43. R. Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000), 137. Further referred to as *PL* (with page number).

44. *PL*, 150.

45. *PL*, 145.

46. For Shusterman's discussions of somaesthetics, see, e.g., chapter 7 and 8 of *PL*; chapter 10 of *PA*; and "Thinking Through the Body, Educating for the Humanities: A Plea for Somaesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 40, no. 1 (2006): 1–21.

47. *S*, 9.

48. *PA*, 182.

49. *PL*, 163.

50. R. Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and Care of the Self: The Case of Foucault," *The Monist* 83, no. 4: 530–551.

51. See Wojciech Małecki, "Praktyczne aspekty estetyki Richarda Shustermana. Sztuka popularna i somatoestetyka" [Practical aspects of R. Shusterman's aesthetics: Popular art and somaesthetics], in *Wielka księga estetyki polskiej: Wizje i re-wizje*, ed. K. Wilkoszewska (Kraków: Universitas, 2007): 813–826.

52. See, *PA*, xvii, and R. Shusterman, "Zycie, sztuka i filozofia (interview)," trans. W. Małecki, *Odra*, no. 4, (2004): 48.

53. See chapter 7 of *PA*. Which is not to say that his account of rap is flawless. Cf. W. Małecki, op. cit.

54. See chap. 5 of *PL*.

55. See, e.g., R. Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and Education: Exploring the Terrain," in *Knowing Bodies, Moving Minds: Towards Embodied Teaching and Learning*, ed. L. Bresler (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004): 51–60; R. Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and Burke's Sublime," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45, no. 4 (2005): 340–341.

56. *PL*, 150, cf. 146.

57. Chap. 9 of *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.

58. *S*, 9.

59. See Harold Bloom, "Dumbing Down American Readers," *Boston Globe*, Sept 24 (2003), [http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing\\_down\\_american\\_readers/](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing_down_american_readers/) (accessed Oct 21, 2008).

60. A. S. Byatt, "Harry Potter and the Childish Adult," *The New York Times*, July 7 (2003), <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A02E4D8113AF934A35754CoA9659C8B63> (accessed Oct 21, 2008).

61. See Alain Finkielkraut, *The Undoing of Thought*, trans. Dennis O'Keefe (London: The Claridge Press, 1988); Richard Hoggart, *The Way We Live Now* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1995); Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1998).

62. D. Maleuvre, "Art and Criticism: Must Understanding be Interpretive?" *Substance* 30, no.3 (2001): 125.

63. Cf. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Basic Books, 2003).

64. J.J. Stuhr, *Genealogical Pragmatism: Philosophy, Experience, and Community* (New York: SUNY Press 1997), 19–20.

65. S, 1.

66. *Ibid.*, 10.

67. This article was written during my stay as a visiting research fellow at The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, The University of Edinburgh, in 2008. I am grateful to the Institute for providing me with an excellent research environment, and to Tibor Pinter and David Wall, my colleagues at the Institute, who read an earlier draft of the paper.