

# “Pragmatism, Critical Theory, Pop Culture, and Fashion: Interview with Stefano Marino”

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**Stefano Marino is a prominent figure in the middle generation of Italian aestheticians and head of the BA program in “Fashion Cultures and Practices” at the University of Bologna (Campus of Rimini). A philosopher who is also active as a rock drummer, he has authored and edited volumes on the philosophy of Adorno, Gadamer, Heidegger, Kant, Nietzsche, Radiohead, Frank Zappa, Pearl Jam, fashion and popular culture, while translating into Italian works of Adorno and Gadamer. The apropos of this conversation was an international conference devoted to Richard Shusterman’s aesthetics, a session for discussing the validity and relevance of a pragmatist approach to the problems of aesthetics in our time.**

**VERES:** This conversation is taking place while preparations are going on for an international conference of aesthetics at Moholy-Nagy University of Art & Design. More closely, this four-day conference is to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a highly influential book on aesthetics, which made its author, Richard Shusterman, world-renowned in many fields of the humanities and the arts, not only within the narrower circles of philosophers and aestheticians. What’s more, in 2002 a second, expanded edition has been brought, precisely ten years after the first publication of the *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, and this second edition proved to be as influential as the first was, delineating a new interdisciplinary field of study, somaesthetics, which greatly developed ever since. In 2012 a significant international symposium and an art show were held in Paris to celebrate the anniversary of the book that was clearly seen by many thinkers and artists as having an irreversible effect on approaches dealing with issues of aesthetic phenomena, aesthetic literacy, and politics of aesthetics. The conference to be held at MOME between 25–28 May 2022 (<https://pae30.mome.hu/>) can be seen as an iteration of the above pattern in terms of issuing state-of-the-art pragmatist aesthetic views every 10 years. Naturally, the event features Richard Shusterman as a guest of honour, besides prominent keynotes like Barbara Formis from Paris Sorbonne (organizer of the 2012 conference), Tanehisa Otabe from the University of Tokyo (one of Shusterman’s many dialogue partners from Asia), and Kristina Höök (professor of media technology and interaction design at KTH Stockholm, a leading figure in somaesthetics-oriented design). At this point, I would

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like to ask my first question: when and how did you encounter Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, and how did it affect your aesthetic thinking?

**MARINO:** First of all, I would like to thank you for your interest in my work and for this opportunity to talk about the influence of Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics* on some of my philosophical activities in the last few years: it is a great pleasure and honour for me to participate to this international conference on pragmatist aesthetics at MOME and to be interviewed in this context. As for your question, let me start a little further back, mentioning Giovanni Matteucci, a leading voice in Italian discourse, a colleague of mine and my supervisor during my postdoctoral years at the University of Bologna with whom I had and still have a strong scientific collaboration: in 2016–2017 we co-edited a book on the aesthetics of fashion and a special issue of *Discipline Filosofiche* on Adorno's dialectics, in 2018 we translated Adorno's essays on jazz from German into Italian, and we have recently worked at a new publication on Fink's phenomenological approach to fashion. Well, I first encountered Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics* precisely during my postdoctoral years, so about seven or eight years ago, both because of the great reputation that the book had at an international level and because of the fact that Matteucci had supervised and edited the Italian translation of the book, published by Aesthetica, a publishing house connected to the Italian Society of Aesthetics (SIE). At the time I had already completed my PhD on Gadamer's hermeneutics, I had published some works on Adorno's dialectics, I had encountered Rorty's neopragmatism, and I had also started working on the aesthetics of popular culture, especially focusing on fashion and popular music (also due to my previous studies on musicology at the University of Bologna and to my attempts, a young drummer in a rock band, to have a musical career!). On the basis of this background, mostly based on hermeneutics and Frankfurt critical theory, my first encounter with Shusterman's philosophy especially affected my aesthetic thinking because of his well-structured and convincing defense of popular culture (interestingly exemplified, in two fundamental chapters of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, precisely through examples taken from popular music), and also because I could find in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* a coherent and well-grounded development of neo-pragmatism in the field of aesthetics, in a way that I had not found in Rorty's more linguistically-oriented version of neo-pragmatism.

**VERES:** For my part, when I first read Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics* as a newbie doctoral student, I felt challenged to navigate between his elegant and multifactorial analyses in the history of aesthetic thinking on the one hand, and his post-analytical attitude on the other, that has put an alternative to universal hermeneutics. Later on, I realized he offered at least three substantial directions to develop further both the Anglo-Saxon analytic aesthetics and the continental ones that have suffered for some time by the apocalyptic tone emitted from the Hegelian statement about the "end of art", and they seemed stuck in writing postscript to aesthetic phenomena, at least it seemed like this for me in my Hungarian perspective. The three directions I refer to are: (1) a social one, related to the need to democratize aesthetics; (2) a cognitive-epistemological, related to the non-discursive nature of aesthetic experience; and (3) a perceptual one, related to the necessary bodily requirements of having any aesthetic experience. These set up three vectors for the development of thinking about the arts and aesthetic phenomena. But maybe you see it differently and discovered other vectors in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*.

**MARINO:** I totally agree with you on the fact that those elements and vectors are strongly present in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, and they actually represent some of the most interesting aspects of Shusterman's book. At the same time, probably due to my partially different background (that, as I said, included and still includes the strong influence of Adorno, to whose dialectical thinking I have dedicated my last books: *Le verità del non-vero*, 2019; *Verità e non-verità del popolare*, 2021; *The "Aging" of Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 2021), the vectors that I have discovered in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and that have mainly influenced my own thinking about the arts and aesthetic phenomena are partially different.

First of all, I would mention the abovementioned question concerning the aesthetics of popular culture, in general, and popular music, in particular. In 2014 I published the book *La filosofia di Frank Zappa*, in which I "heterodoxically" used some concepts derived from Adorno's seminal writings on the philosophy and sociology of music to try to show that, while a certain part of contemporary popular music surely falls into the category of standardized/pseudo-individualized commodities, as Adorno had already argued in the 1940s, an important part of contemporary popular music is vice-versa able

to stay “in the marketplace but not governed by the values of the marketplace” (as once claimed by a famous aphorism by Robert Fripp): hence, a kind of popular music that, although often starting from a standardized musical material, is nevertheless able to create non-standardized and original compositions. This has been masterfully shown, among others, by a figure like Frank Zappa and more recently, for example, by a rock band like Radiohead which is the object of my book from 2021 *La filosofia dei Radiohead* (written with my pupil Eleonora Guzzi). Although I was quite satisfied with my book on Zappa, and although it actually received some positive reviews in Italian journals and websites, at the time I felt that I still lacked an equally strong and powerful philosophical background as Adorno’s that I could try to originally combine with Adorno’s influential but sometimes all too critical approach to popular culture. This was precisely what I found in Shusterman’s essays on “form and funk”, rap music, and also country musicals, and from a certain point of view, this had a liberating effect on me, allowing me to overcome what I felt as some limits in my first writings in the aesthetics of pop-rock music and also allowing me to gradually develop my own aesthetic thinking in this field. Participating in a somaesthetics conference at the University of Szeged in the summer of 2017 with a paper on rock music that received encouraging feedback from the audience (including Shusterman himself, and then also Alexander Kremer, Attila Horányi, and Anne Tarvainen) was surely an important step in this process. My subsequent writings in this field — such as, for example, my essays included in the co-edited volumes *Adorno and Popular Music* (2019), *Pearl Jam and Philosophy* (2021), and *Popular Culture and Social Criticism* (2021: special issue of *The Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture*, with Valentina Antoniol and Samir Gandesha) — surely reflect this process and my attempt to find a sort of combination and balance between the powerful conceptual tools provided by Adorno’s critical theory and those offered by Shusterman’s pragmatism.

**VERES:** You mentioned that other aspects of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* have also become important for you.

**MARINO:** Yes, the second vector of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* that I would cite as highly influential for me is represented by the connection between aesthetics and ethics. In fact, one of the basic and most fascinating features of a book like *Pragmatist Aesthetics* is precisely represented for me by its capacity to overcome certain boundaries and connect in a convincing (and not at all merely eclectic) way the stimulating insights that one can derive from different philosophical approaches, with reference to both the Western tradition and non-Western traditions. This is especially testified, in my view, by Shusterman’s recent somaesthetic work, including his edited collection *Bodies in the Streets* (2019) and his systematic monograph on the somaesthetics of sexuality, *Ars Erotica* (2021). Besides this, another example of this capacity to overcome well-established and sometimes too rigid boundaries and barriers is represented for me by Shusterman’s tendency, in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and other writings, not to limit himself to “simply” working in aesthetics (although understanding the latter in a broader and more inclusive way than a mere philosophy of fine arts) but to open himself to the manifold connections between aesthetics, ethics, and politics. This is the case, for example, of the chapter of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* on postmodern ethics and the aesthetics of existence, which I personally consider one of the most stimulating parts of the book and that I have used several times for my own lecture courses at the University of Bologna.

Finally, the third vector of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* that I would cite as very important for me is represented by somaesthetics, Shusterman’s original development of pragmatism in the direction of a philosophy of the living body, added in the final chapter of the second edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. As happened with Shusterman’s defense of popular culture, also his complex and interdisciplinary approach to our body experience in all its breadth, complexity, and manifold dimensions has had a relevant and, in a sense, liberating effect on my own thinking. For example, in an article that appeared in *The Journal of Somaesthetics* (2019) I tried to reflect from a somaesthetic perspective on the experience of musical improvisation that, both as a philosopher and as a musician, I had always been very interested in. The basic and original recommendation of somaesthetics to philosophize on the body both in theory and practice (which surely differentiates somaesthetics from other, purely theoretical philosophical approaches to the body) led me to try to use in my article, as potential sources of inspiration, not only my ideas derived from articles and books but also my personal experiences of improvisation as a drummer.

More recently, what I have described as the liberating effect of somaesthetics on my own thinking led

me to write a long article entitled *Sexuality and/as Art, Power, and Reconciliation*, which appeared in December 2021 as Introduction to a symposium on Shusterman's book *Ars Erotica* in the journal *Foucault Studies*. In this article, I not only felt free to use different sources (philosophy, music, film, etc.) to try to modestly offer my point of view on such a fundamental dimension of human life as sexuality, but I also felt free to combine, in the last section of my article, the stimulating insights of Shusterman, Marcuse, and Adorno with my personal experience, namely with what I think, but especially how I feel, about sexuality (because, of course, in this case, it is probably more a matter of feeling than a matter of pure thinking). At the end of my article, for example, I wrote that

“a sexual intercourse is comparable to a *dialectical* relation of simultaneous ‘entering in’ and ‘being-received in’ or ‘being-welcomed in’, in which all the partners involved in the intercourse take part in an exciting intersubjective *dialogue* and quite often exchange their roles in a spontaneous and pleasurable way. [...] The joy of lovemaking, with the somehow ‘blind’ character of the somatic pleasure that it brings, is nonetheless capable to ‘open our eyes’ (also at a philosophical level) more than many concepts and argumentations can do. [...] A joyful sexuality can surely offer a glimpse of freedom and reconciliation even in an unfree and unreconciled world, perhaps pointing in the direction of a gradual transformation of the existing reality and of the human relations starting from our most intimate, delicate, beautiful, communicative and, for this reason, also powerful and sometimes life-changing experiences of unity, fusion, mutual permeation and interpenetration (or, so to speak, of merging together) with other human beings. [...] A free, consensual, spontaneous and joyous sexual intercourse includes both the apparent superficiality of the physical contact between two or more bodies and the mental/emotional profoundness of an authentic ‘fusion of horizons’ between two or more human beings.”

Now, I had always thought and especially felt in this way about human sexuality, but only recently have I found the right words and right concepts to try to present and explain these thoughts also in a philosophically adequate form, and I think that a great part in this process (that, again, also has a component of liberation and emancipation from certain rigid and “unemotional” standards of academic work) was played by my encounter with somaesthetics and its latest developments that, as I said, also include the experience of lovemaking. In my opinion, because of its pluralist and democratic attitude (that you correctly mentioned at the beginning of our conversation), Shusterman's pragmatist philosophy and somaesthetics can offer important tools of inquiry and stimulating insights, among other things, also on sexuality, with great attention to, and great respect for the dimension of gender, and with a great openness to recent debates in feminism and LGBTQ+ cultural sensibilities.

**VERES:** It seems to me, that your answer points in the direction that the philosophy presented in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* has exerted its most stimulating power not primarily through its definition of aesthetic problems (“rethinking art” – as the subtitle puts it), but rather in terms of transgressive philosophical behaviour, the way of approaching its subjects and how they are experienced, and the acts of naming these experiences. In the preface to the second edition of his book, Shusterman himself declared that the ten years that passed since the first edition resulted, naturally, in many revisions and changes in his thinking, nonetheless, he did not feel obliged to implement all such corrections in the text. In turn, to add the final chapter on somaesthetics that announced a whole spectrum of further research was definitely a must. Clearly, rather than doctrinal clarity and conceptual finality, although his analytic philosophical toolkit encourages such ambitions, for him maintaining the vitality and flexibility of research has always been more to the fore. And this leads toward the final topic I would touch upon in this brief conversation. The subtitle of our conference is *Looking Forward After 30 Years*. This underlines a decisive future-oriented approach, anticipation even, which can connect the somaesthetic project perhaps even to Adorno, but certainly does to the legacy of Walt Whitman whose lines are famously quoted and boldly complemented in the Peter Weir movie, *Dead Poets Society*, produced just in the same period when the first edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* was written: “What will *your* verse be?” — asks Professor Keating, played by Robin Williams. Paraphrasing this legacy in the context of research, the question arises: What do you think about the future of aesthetic thinking? Does this future emerge primarily in terms of themes, perhaps in terms of attitudes, or in terms of a new vocabulary?

**MARINO:** Well, let me say that this third question is not only intellectually interesting and exciting but, for someone like me, also emotionally stimulating and to some extent also moving. In fact, by mentioning both Walt Whitman's collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*, and Peter Weir's film *Dead Poets Society*, you have mentioned two of the greatest sources of inspiration in my life on many levels. Besides my philosophical articles and books, in the last years, I have also published two collections of poems, entitled *Frammenti di agonia umananimale* (2015) and *Fratture multiple alle ossa e al cuore* (2019), and I was honoured when the international journal of poetry *Gradiva* accepted for publication in 2021 four recent poems of mine. Although I obviously don't consider myself a poet in a strong, emphatic, or ambitious meaning of this word, I must admit that writing poems have always been important for me: namely, it has always represented a way to express some feelings and also some ideas that otherwise I could not have expressed, and in certain "times of trouble" writing poems (and publishing them, when I was sufficiently satisfied with their aesthetic level) had also an invaluable therapeutic and cathartic significance for me. Now, together with Giuseppe Ungaretti and Paul Celan (and in quite striking contrast to them, considering how different their poetic styles are!), Walt Whitman is probably my favourite and most inspiring poet, and one of my projects in the future is to write an article (or perhaps a short book, who knows?) on the somaesthetics of Whitman. Namely, an article or a short book on the fundamental role that, in my modest opinion, the question of the body plays in many parts of *Leaves of Grass* and on the originality of some of the views and ideas expressed by Whitman about the power of human corporeality and its meaning for human life at all levels. So, this is perhaps my first answer (strictly focused on Whitman) to your Whitmanian question: "What will your verse be?"

More in general, I would say that the relationship between philosophy and poetry has always been a fundamental and extremely significant one — although, as you know, quite often also a problematic and critical one, from Plato to Heidegger and arriving at nowadays (depending on the different thinkers or poets, their different views and traditions, etc.). I think that this relationship will remain a very important topic also for the future of aesthetic thinking, and I obviously think that also other "traditional" topics, like the relation of philosophy to painting or music or other arts will remain of great importance for the future of aesthetic thinking. In other words, the kind of "dialectics" that I see between the old and the new, between traditional topics and recent ones, is not a "dialectics" that requires abandoning the tradition to only favour the experimentation of new paths, but rather one that constantly searches for a well-balanced and inclusive position: a position that may be capable to fruitfully combine what traditional topics and approaches can still teach us with what recent, up-to-date and sometimes experimental fields or questions can offer us. After all, something that I learned from Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, and that I strongly agree with, is the idea that we should "not abolish the institution of art but transform it", that we should "open and enlarge [...] art's museums" rather than (metaphorically) close them, in order to promote, for example, "a greater openness to the ways high art can further a progressive ethical and socio-political agenda" (in a spirit that is common to both pragmatism and critical theory) and at the same time a greater openness to the idea that popular art has "the power to enrich and refashion our traditional concept of the aesthetic". From this point of view, a certain traditional logic of the "either / or" (or sometimes even of the "neither / nor"!) should be replaced today by a more inclusive and pragmatic perspective of the "both / and".

**VERES:** As I understand it, your answer to my question also exemplifies the above disjunctive logic of "both/and", since you refer to a combination of themes, attitudes, and vocabularies.

**MARINO:** Exactly. In addition to this, concluding my reply to your question about what I see as potentially emerging in the future of aesthetic thinking in terms of themes, attitudes and/or new vocabularies, I would say that the aesthetics of fashion represents for me a very fertile field today. Fashion has been underestimated for a long time as a potential object of serious research, but in the last decades, things have partially changed (thanks to the essays on fashion by such philosophers as Lars Svendsen, Nickolas Pappas, Elena Esposito, Gwen Grewal, Giovanni Matteucci, Richard Shusterman, and many others) and nowadays it seems to me that philosophical approaches to fashion are considered as some of the most original ones in the vast and variegated field of Fashion Studies. Drawing on the insights offered by these authors, and trying to further develop and, so to speak, radicalize the discourse of the aesthetics of fashion, in some recent contributions I have argued that the unprecedented power and relevance

acquired by pop culture and fashion in our time seem to point in the direction of a post-metaphysical (and not simply postmodern) attitude towards the reality and towards life — that which, as you can understand, has many implications and consequences that I would like to explore one day in a research monograph on this topic. For me, this is a promising direction, among many other possible ones, for the future of aesthetic thinking.

But I also have other ambitions: as a critical theorist, strongly influenced by Adorno and Marcuse, I am very interested in the relation between the aesthetic dimension and the potential for ethical and socio-political change, and I consider also this question a very relevant one for the future of aesthetic thinking. In this context, thanks to the collaboration with my colleague and friend Federica Muzzarelli (a scholar of photography and feminism, and a member, like me, of the international research centre “Culture, Fashion, Communication” at the University of Bologna) and also thanks to the stimulating suggestions that I could receive from some of my students who are very engaged in feminist struggles (Ginestra Bacchio, Anna Preti, Ines Zampaglione), especially the relation between aesthetics and feminist questions has recently captured my attention, so to speak, and two of my next projects are a volume on *Popular Culture and Feminism* co-edited with my Polish colleagues Dominika Czakon and Natalia Anna Michna, and a volume entitled *Perspectives on Nancy Fraser’s Thought: Philosophy, Feminism, Capitalism*, co-edited with my Italian colleagues Valentina Antoniol and Olimpia Malatesta.

**VERES:** Dear Stefano, thank you for the discussion and I wish you inspiring meetings at the conference in Budapest.