

GADAMER'S AND SHUSTERMAN'S AESTHETICS

Alexander Kremer

University of Szeged, Hungary

1. Introduction

If we look at Gadamer and Shusterman from the point of view of the history of Western philosophy, it is beyond question that they both belong to the relativist traditions of post-Nietzschean European and post-Darwinian American philosophy. Nonetheless, there are far more common features than differences, and the common features result in overlappings between Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and Shusterman's neopragmatism. Such common features are first of all their antifoundationalism, panrelationism, and antiessentialism.

Yet the aesthetics of these two philosophers are seemingly very different. Gadamer (1900–2002) tries to integrate aesthetics into a hermeneutic philosophy of art, while Shusterman (b. 1949) builds his somaesthetics on the somatic naturalism of Dewey's aesthetics. The hermeneutic and somatic are seemingly two absolutely different approaches. There is, however, a point where they meet each other, and this is *experience*. They both accept the importance of experience regarding art and artworks.

Analyzing this common point, I will show, on the one hand, that there are far more similarities between Gadamer's philosophy of art and Shusterman's somaesthetics than we might have thought. On the other hand, I will demonstrate that Gadamer is not a hermeneutic universalist in Shusterman's sense, but his standpoint is closer to Heidegger's, whom Shusterman calls a "revered progenitor".¹

¹ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics. Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), p. 129. Hereafter: *PA*

2. Similarities of Gadamer's Philosophy of Art and Shusterman's Somaesthetics

*Truth and Method – Fundamental Characteristics of a Philosophical Hermeneutics*² is Gadamer's main work published in 1960, which gradually made him and philosophical hermeneutics well known in the international arena. Its main aim was to renew philosophy, which Gadamer accomplished by making us aware of its hermeneutic presuppositions and of the philosophical presuppositions of hermeneutics. Regarding the details, we can say that Gadamer has legitimized the humanist tradition, while opposing it with the dominance of the natural scientific method, and in this way he has created his philosophical hermeneutics. In the first part of the three main parts of *TM* ("I. The question of truth as it emerges in the experience of art") Gadamer demonstrates the hermeneutic approach to *art*, and in the second part ("II. The extension of the question of truth to understanding in the human sciences") he applies it to *history* and *philosophy*, while the third part ("III. The ontological shift of hermeneutics guided by language") emphasizes the special significance of *language* in our relationship to the world. The train of thought in *TM* permanently widens the territory of hermeneutic procedure from the experience of artworks to the universal aspect of hermeneutics. However, we have to distinguish the Gadamerian meaning of the "universal aspect of hermeneutics" from the meaning of Shusterman's expression, "hermeneutic universalism".

The first part of *TM* contains two chapters: "1. Transcending the aesthetic dimension" and "2. The ontology of the work of art and its hermeneutic significance". In the first chapter Gadamer writes a kind of general introduction to the legitimization of the humanities contrary to the dominance of natural sciences, and it also contains his criticism of traditional subjectivistic aesthetics. The second chapter is the explication of the essence of his own philosophy of art.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London-New York: Continuum, 2006). Hereafter: *TM*.

Applying Heidegger's existential-phenomenological ontology, Gadamer's main aim is to show, while working out his philosophy of art, that "aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics" (*TM*, p. 157). Behind this idea we can find the recognition that the general connections of understanding and interpretation have to function in the particular field of art as well as in the particular case of the appreciation of an artwork. *An appreciation of an artwork is only a special occurrence of the general hermeneutic connections.*

By denouncing the subjectivistic trend in aesthetics that began with Kant, Gadamer contrasts the very special, primarily *experiential meaning* of artworks with the exclusiveness of their formal criteria. This means that understanding and interpretation of an artwork's special meaning have a distinctive (but not exclusive!) significance for Gadamer. At the very beginning of the real understanding of an artwork there is always, according to Gadamer, some kind of experience. It follows from this that it is beyond question for Gadamer that experience already includes understanding in itself:

We have seen that it is not aesthetic consciousness but the experience (*Erfahrung*) of art and thus the question of the mode of being of the work of art that must be the object of our examination. But this was precisely the experience of the work of art that I maintained in opposition to the levelling process of aesthetic consciousness: namely that *the work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it. The "subject" of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself.* (*TM*, p. 103. – my emphasis)

It stands to reason for Gadamer! Why? The reason is that he has based his philosophy of art, which transcends the aesthetic dimension, on the young Heidegger's existential-phenomenological ontology. What does it mean in detail? It means that Gadamer has taken and applied Heidegger's very thoroughgoing analysis of experience. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976),

as it is well known, achieved the ontological turn in Western philosophy, created philosophical hermeneutics, and wanted to answer the question of Being throughout his whole life. He combined his ontological approach with his transformed version of Husserlian phenomenology and his philosophical hermeneutics. The early Heidegger (1919–1929) wanted to fulfill his project in *Being and Time*,³ that is, to create a fundamental ontology through an existential analysis of *Dasein*, but his fundamental ontology remained a torso. However, he did complete the existential analysis.⁴ Heidegger, who had criticized and rejected the *conscious intentionality* of Husserl's phenomenology, replaced it with *experiential intentionality* in his existential phenomenology. According to the young Heidegger we can have, in the most basic approach, exclusively phenomena about the world, which are essentially experiences, that is, lived, non-discursive "meanings and significances". I have to emphasize here that the meaning of experience is threefold in Heidegger. It includes the being who experiences, as well as the object and the process of experiencing.

Gadamer has taken this Heideggerian analysis of experience, and just like Dewey did in *Art as Experience*, Gadamer has embedded aesthetic experience into the whole of the human life. If we read in Gadamer that "aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics" (*TM*, p. 157.), then it is essentially the same striving that we can find in Dewey's work. As Dewey speaks about the priority of "The Live Creature" and wants to grasp the aesthetic experience as embedded in this creature's life, so does Gadamer, because his philosophical hermeneutics is a description of how we gather experiences, understand and interpret the world.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. by Joan Stambaugh (SUNY Press, 1996). Hereafter: *BT*.

⁴ After "the Turn" (*die Kehre*, 1929–1935), the late Heidegger (1935–1976) evaluated his early work, *BT* as a subject centered philosophy, and absolutely neglected the existential analysis. The late Heidegger focused directly on Being, on the history of Being and Ereignis.

Aesthetic experience may be grasped only as a part of human life. What is more, they both understand the work of art not as an independent objective entity, but first of all as a special, experiential meaning, which comes to life in the process of experience, and this experience is in the first real moment an immediate and non-discursive experience that always includes understanding.

Shusterman's somaesthetics is built in this respect on Dewey's aesthetics, and the similarities are also self-evident between Gadamer's and Shusterman's views. It is beyond question at the same time that Shusterman, who also builds his aesthetics on the dominance of experience, focuses in his somaesthetics, contrary to Gadamer, on aesthetic experience in a wider sense. Shusterman has obviously emphasized the differences between his and Dewey's views as well, for example that he does not accept Dewey's "experiential definition of art and essentialist theory of aesthetic experience" (PA, p. ix).⁵ Furthermore, Shusterman questions "his half-hearted approach to popular art," and contests "his excessive reliance on immediate experience as the foundation for all thought and the criterion for justifying aesthetic value" (PA, p. ix). However, all these differences do not affect or alter the essential similarity between Gadamer's and Shusterman's views regarding the central position of experience and the artwork's relational mode of being.

3. Gadamer is not a Hermeneutic Universalist

Let us return, however, from aesthetic experience to experience in general, and let us demonstrate that Gadamer is not a hermeneutic universalist. In the third part of *TM*, we can actually find a sentence from

⁵ See for example, when Shusterman says that "Unfortunately, Dewey does not confine himself to transformational provocation, but also proposes aesthetic experience as a theoretical definition of art". ("The End of Aesthetic Experience," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55 (1997), p. 33.)

Gadamer that says that "all understanding is interpretation" (*TM*, p. 390), but my interpretation differs from Shusterman's. According to Shusterman this Gadamerian expression, which is taken out of context, shows that Gadamer claims the absolute identity of understanding and interpretation. He calls this view is "hermeneutic universalism":

Considerations of this sort have led Gadamer and other hermeneutic universalists to the radical claim that "all understanding is interpretation." (PA, p. 130)

However, considering two important contexts will result in a different interpretation. One of the contexts is naturally the context of the quoted expression ("all understanding is interpretation"), the other one is Gadamer's philosophical development. If we read thoroughly the mentioned paragraph of *TM*, then it becomes recognizable that Gadamer understands his expression ("all understanding is interpretation") from the point of view of German romanticism and, primarily, from that of the young Heidegger. The very important beginning of the paragraph, which was highlighted by Gadamer himself, goes this way:

Since the romantic period we can no longer hold the view that, *in the absence of immediate understanding*, interpretive ideas are drawn, as needed, out of a linguistic storeroom where they are lying ready. *Rather, language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting.* (*TM*, p. 390. – The first emphasis added, the second emphasis in the original.)

By "German romanticism" we have to understand among others Schleiermacher, one of whose hermeneutic theses is quoted by Gadamer: "Everything presupposed in hermeneutics is but language" (*TM*, p. 383). However, it is beyond question that the young Heidegger's influence is much more important for Gadamer's intellectual development. In this case it is obvious that the last sentence of our Gadamer quotation ("*Understanding occurs in interpreting*") stands in absolute harmony with Heidegger's description in *Being*

and Time. "The project of understanding has its own possibility of development. We shall call the development of understanding *interpretation*" (BT, p. 139), claims Heidegger, and the next sentences of the 32nd section in BT ("Understanding and Interpretation") offer on a tray the right interpretation of the focused Gadamerian sentence:

We shall call the development of understanding *interpretation*. In interpretation understanding appropriates what it has understood in an understanding way. *In interpretation understanding does not become something different, but rather itself*. Interpretation is existentially based in understanding, and not the other way around. *Interpretation is not the acknowledgment of what has been understood, but rather the development of possibilities projected in understanding*. (BT, p. 139 – my emphases)

It follows from this that Gadamer does not think that all understanding is always and definitely interpretation, but he thinks that the development of understanding happens in the best way in interpretation if we explicate understanding at all! Not only for Heidegger, but also for Gadamer there exists a non-discursive, experiential understanding, and he also knows that not every understanding needs and is followed by interpretation. (Pay attention to Gadamer's words in our quotation: "in the absence of immediate understanding"!.) However, a real experience is always a new one, that is a negative experience (and it is never an experience that only repeats an earlier experience), and its most suitable development is interpretation, linguistic at all times. (It is *the most suitable development* in the sense that it is *the most human one*, because other beings on Earth do not have the ability of and possibility for discursive, linguistic interpretation!) It means that the Gadamerian expression, "all understanding is interpretation", does *not* identify understanding and interpretation. *Rather*, Gadamer's statement means only *that if we need and want to explicate the details of an understanding*, which is non-discursive, experiential understanding in many cases and related to the actual relative whole of our

practice, then the most suitable, the most human way is interpretation, at all times discursive. *This is actually Heidegger's standpoint, and as long as Heidegger is not a hermeneutic universalist in Shusterman's opinion, Gadamer cannot be evaluated in this way either*. However, it is obvious from his *Pragmatist Aesthetics* that in Shusterman's opinion Heidegger and Wittgenstein were only "two revered progenitors of hermeneutic universalism who I think wisely resisted that doctrine". (PA, p. 129) That is why I am persuaded that Gadamer also belongs to the revered progenitors with his standpoint, and not to the hermeneutic universalists understood in the extreme Shustermanian sense. Proof is offered by Gadamer himself, because he claims in one of his interviews as follows:

– H-G. Gadamer: Das ist Hermeneutik, zu wissen, wieviel immer Ungesagtes bleibt, wenn man etwas sagt. Nach dieser Richtung geht sehr vieles, was durch den Wissenschaftsbegriff der Neuzeit fast ganz unserer Aufmerksamkeit entgeht. So habe ich es geradezu als das Wesen des hermeneutischen Verhaltens bezeichnet, daß man nie das letzte Wort behalten soll.

– J. Grondin: Wenn ich recht verstehe, heben Sie damit auf die Grenzen der Sprache ab, während man in *Wahrheit und Methode* den entgegengesetzten Eindruck bekommt, daß das Universum der Sprache grenzenlos sei.

– H-G. Gadamer: Aber nein, das habe ich nie gemeint und auch nicht gesagt, daß alles Sprache ist. Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache. Darin steckt eine Begrenzung. Was also nicht verstanden werden kann, kann eine unendliche Aufgabe sein, das Wort zu finden, das der Sache wenigstens näher kommt.⁶

⁶ "Dialogischer Rückblick auf das Gesammelte Werk und dessen Wirkungsgeschichte", in: *Gadamer Lesebuch*, ed. by Jean Grondin. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), p. 286.

– H-G. Gadamer: In hermeneutics the thing is to know that much more always remains unsaid when one says something. From this aspect there are lots of things at issue that avoid our attention almost entirely, due to the concept of science in modernity. That is why I have described as the essence of hermeneutical attitude that one shall not insist on having the last word.

– J. Grondin: If I understand it correctly, you are emphasizing the limits of language this way, whereas one gets the opposite impression, that the universe of language is boundless, when reading *Truth and Method*.

– H-G. Gadamer: Not at all, I have never thought and

also never said that everything is language. Being that can be understood is language. Therein lies a limitation. Therefore what cannot even be understood can be an infinite task, looking for the proper word in order to bring the thing at least closer.