

Book Review

The Clamorous Silence of the Body: A Review Essay on Shusterman's *Somaesthetics - From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art*

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In 2022, Brill published the book *Shusterman's Somaesthetics - From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art*, edited by Jerold J. Abrams. The book contains chapters by eleven internationally well-known Shusterman researchers, and it is divided into two main parts, while a third part includes an essay where Shusterman's responds to the preceding chapters' analyses of his work, followed by an interview with him by Yanping Gao that covers, among other things, the Chinese reception of somaesthetics. The philosopher, who was born in the USA, studied in Jerusalem, received his doctorate in Oxford, and currently teaches at Florida Atlantic University, has traveled the whole world in recent years to introduce the theory that defines both his philosophical thinking and his everyday life. Somaesthetics now has substantive academic support around the world. Universities, research institutes, art academies, and other art groups and organizations are connected with new projects relating to Shusterman's theories, as they have developed since the publication of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* in 1992.

It is worth reading Yanping Gao's interview with Shusterman, which was conducted online in 2020, right in the middle of the Covid epidemic. Shusterman pointed out that the resulting situation gave a completely new aspect of relevance to somaesthetics. The obligation to wear a mask and keep spatial distance forced people to transform social relationships, previously formed habits, and communication that were routine in everyday life. On top of all that, in order for people to protect their loved ones, they needed increased awareness to recognize the symptoms of the disease. The question and answer that started the conversation highlights how much the epidemic we experienced together turned our lives upside down and what deep traces it left, even if we do not consciously analyze it every day. The interview also discusses in detail some of the philosophical contexts, inspirations, and influences on Shusterman's work that provide important background information in the various chapters. For example, the relationship between his views on affect and embodiment and those of Spinoza, Deleuze, and William James, and the evolution of his thought from literary theory to more embodied arts.

The first major part of the volume is entitled *Pragmatism and Somaesthetics*. Its authors of its six chapters thoroughly explore the inspirations and influences behind the development of

somaesthetics, sometimes emphasizing the features that raise the most questions in Shusterman's readers, and other times focusing on the topics that point to the positive, integrative, and interdisciplinary characteristics of somaesthetics. The theoretical part of somaesthetics cannot be understood without examining the tradition of pragmatism, so the philosophy of Dewey and Rorty forms a basis of comparison in some of these chapters. Shusterman is a versatile thinker who, after a serious training in analytical philosophy, turned to the philosophical problems of pragmatism and contemporary art. Richard Rorty's personal example had the greatest influence on Shusterman's turn to pragmatism, while his focus on the aesthetics of contemporary aesthetics was inspired by the writings of Arthur C. Danto. Pierre Bourdieu drew Shusterman's attention to the socio-political aspects of aesthetics and invited Shusterman to Paris (when Shusterman was still identified as an analytical philosopher), thus opening Europe's intellectual doors to the nomadic philosopher. At the end of the volume, Shusterman explains why the European terrain is so important to him: the first somaesthetical workshops were connected there and the Man in Gold (who is central to six of the book's chapters) was also born there. Certain books of Shusterman that are published in Europe do not even exist in English.

After a while, the framework of contemporary analytical aesthetics proved to be too narrow for Shusterman, including Danto's because for Danto the distinction between art and reality is absolute. Shusterman himself perceived that the chapter on hip hop in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* no longer moved within the framework of analytical philosophizing. He saw more and more clearly that art and reality, as well as philosophy and the personality of the individual creating the philosophical theory, cannot be fully separated. Shusterman believes that the personal voice, questions of personal identity, and the biographical dimension should not be excluded from philosophy. His philosophy is thus also a personal wayfinding, involving critical introspection as part of one's way of life; the life task that binds the whole person, body and soul. The roots of this idea clearly go back to antiquity, when philosophy was treated as a way of life. Shusterman's goal is to overcome the institutionalized confinement of philosophy. The essence of Shusterman's theory is that for self-improvement, cultivation, and mental well-being, it is essential to deal with the soma and taking the person's physical dimension into account. He sees that in order to bring together the whole of human existence and keep it in harmony, it is necessary to work in an interdisciplinary field, and he tried to do so by developing somaesthetics. Hence somaesthetics' disciplinary relationships go beyond the humanities and extend to the biological, cognitive and health sciences, which can be valuable allies of the humanities.

This book accurately reflects the diversity that can be seen in the researches of philosophers inspired by Shusterman. By crossing the boundaries of philosophy rooted in traditional European thinking, Shusterman attracts criticisms of abandoning real philosophy though his aim is to enrich it. The adoption of a multi-dimensional approach that includes thinking through the body contrasts with the dominant European tradition that insists exclusively on the spirit. This embodied direction, which is natural for Asian philosophy, seems to find support also in the United States because of the pragmatist tradition. John Dewey is one of Shusterman's main intellectual "supports."

In the introduction of Jerold J. Abrams and in Stefán Snævarr's chapter "Shusterman's Pragmatist Philosophy," we see the intellectual heritage that greatly influenced the development of Shusterman's theory. Snævarr presents Shusterman's well-known definitions of the soma in detail, and although he notes that "Shusterman does not situate his thinking concerning the soma within any grand metaphysical or ontological theory" he finally concludes that "Shusterman's theory about the soma is an attempt at inventing a new way of speaking about the body and the

mind [...] far removed from metaphysical speculation.” (25) Shusterman often receives sharp criticism from phenomenologists at conferences, because he does not follow the traditional *Körper* and *Leib* distinction. By way of comparison, Snævarr brings up the phenomenological soma concepts of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. However, the traditions of pragmatist aesthetics (Rorty, Dewey, etc.) approach the aesthetic self from a different direction. I think Shusterman’s understanding is much closer to Foucault’s aesthetics of existence than to Merleau-Ponty’s somatic philosophy, whose conceptual system and aims differ from a pragmatist approach.

According to Alexander Kremer’s “From Pragmatism to Somaesthetics,” Shusterman’s works not only changed the approach to aesthetics, but also gave philosophy a wider interpretation. Like Snævarr, Kremer frames Shusterman’s theory by clarifying what characterizes pragmatist philosophy and who are the representatives of neopragmatism. According to one possible grouping, we can distinguish three main groups within contemporary pragmatism, writes Kremer, the “neoclassical pragmatists (e.g., Larry Hickman, Susan Haack, John McDermott, John Ryder, Jacquelin Kegley, Kenneth Stickers, and James Campbell),” who are characterized by combining naturalism and scientific methods and consider themselves the truest followers of classical American pragmatism, the analytic pragmatists (e.g. Robert Brandom, Huw Price, Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, and the early Rorty) who see the future of philosophy in a combination of pragmatist and analytic philosophy, and the postanalytic pragmatists (e.g. the later Rorty, Daniel Dennett and Richard Shusterman) who are seriously monitoring the development of 20th century continental philosophy. Although most people think of Dewey, Rorty and Shusterman when they mention pragmatist aesthetics, Kremer points out that Dewey never used the notion of pragmatist aesthetics. Regardless, Dewey’s critique of the museum conception of art can also be interpreted as an antecedent of somatic aesthetics. In 1934, in his theory explained in *Art as Experience*, Dewey already stated that real life and art do not necessarily have to be separated, we just do it out of an academic, institutional habit, because for centuries, people have placed different works of art in museums from their own cultural context.

According to Kremer’s conclusion, Shusterman’s “general theoretical standpoint” is also “philosophical aestheticism,” the necessary prerequisite of which is continuous self- and world understanding, and thus experience is its central concept. Kremer asks the question in the third part of his study: “Why can we say that Shusterman’s somaesthetics is a philosophy?” Although some of us have already come to this conclusion based on the first part of his paper (taking into account the importance of the body and understanding - which of course is primarily realized through experience and thinking through the body), Kremer summarizes his argument in five points. However, the arguments do not primarily prove why somaesthetics is a philosophy, but rather what are the most defining points of Shusterman’s theory, which, in addition to explaining the close connection to pragmatism, highlight innovations, new approaches, and at the same time anticipate Shusterman’s openness to Asian philosophies, which fit perfectly with his philosophy that emphasizes the soma. I think that the fact first mentioned by Kremer, according to which “Shusterman’s approach is not a substance-oriented but a process- and practice-oriented approach,” is important from this point of view. This could also be an answer to Snævarr’s questions, who misses the ontological foundation in Shusterman’s theory. Kremer accepts as a principle that “Shusterman is not interested in the substance of the world, but instead he views the world as a conglomerate of ever-changing processes and relations.” (53) This allows Shusterman a natural connection to life practices based on Buddhism. But the concept of philosophy as a way of life dominates the entirety of Western ancient philosophy. This is

precisely what Michel Foucault pointed out in *The History of Sexuality*, so it can be considered Shusterman's merit that he brought back and strengthened those elements of the philosophical tradition that represent the importance and naturalness of aesthetic existence. Shusterman himself states this in the article "What Pragmatism Means to Me" quoted by Kremer, according to which "Pragmatism provides support for the idea that philosophy should engage not only with concepts, but also in practice. This has encouraged my efforts to revive the ancient idea of philosophy as an embodied way of life." (53-54)

The book's third chapter is by Polish professor Leszek Koczanowicz, author of several books on politics and pragmatism. Pragmatists are mainly committed to philosophical investigations on politics because people have to create a democratic milieu first and after that we can speak about the possibilities of freedom and responsibility. Without the foundations of a well-functioning democracy the questions of private and public affairs would be useless. Koczanowicz in his paper focus on the relations of power and the body, on how certain movements can embody the idea of emancipation and resistance against the oppression of the state, the establishment or any other oppressive system. One of the main questions is why the autocratic systems are afraid of spiritual messages in relation to well-being and ameliorative practices. According to Koczanowicz it is really important to examine these questions from the point of view of contemporary social sciences and humanities, because it is a huge problem that "an adequate concept of the body is lacking, which would combine its social character with the appreciation of its emancipatory potential" (63-64). To address the question of how politics deals with everyday life, Koczanowicz analyzes Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* in the light of Bourdieu and Boltanski's works. In Koczanowicz's argument, the concept of everyday life is important because it is the only way to understand the concept of emancipation, which in this context is not only "a certain general movement toward a greater freedom and/or equality, but also a set of everyday life activities that enable people to obtain more autonomy in their actual social relations" (66). Introducing somaesthetics into the political field can reveal "how the body could be both a vehicle of emancipation and a site of resistance against the oppressive regime." Building on the theory of somaesthetics, Koczanowicz proposes the concept of somapower as a political alternative to Foucault's biopower. Somapower "vitality affirms that while the body is shaped by social relations of power, it can also shape these relations" (71).

Max Rynnänen's "Living Beauty, Rethinking Rap: Revisiting Shusterman's Philosophy of Hip Hop" returns to Shusterman's most famous book, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, which marked the greatest breakthrough in 20th-century aesthetics for the concept of popular art. Rynnänen knows the history of rap well, and while presenting it, he immediately theorizes the possible place of rap in art theory. Analyzing Shusterman's early writings on rap, Rynnänen argues that "if rap music expressed postmodernism, then postmodernism (as a philosophy) would also help to illuminate various dimensions of rap music, as aesthetically challenging, intellectually penetrating, and socially critical." (81) Since rap is the defining musical trend of the 20th and 21st century, it is necessary for art theory to be able to theorize and examine the social conditions that shape the development of different artistic trends. It is important to work in an interdisciplinary field, because the broad background context of a work of art is essential for understanding the work. Shusterman, reflecting on Rynnänen's chapter at the end of the volume, notes the relationship between somaesthetics and rap: "As pragmatist aesthetics and the philosophical art of living were the two prime themes that led me to somaesthetics and that were central to my study of rap, it is not surprising that some early interpreters of my somaesthetic project (including the always insightful Martin Jay) took rap as its paradigm. Even if my study of Western somatic

therapies and Asian somatic disciplines were equally inspirational and perhaps ultimately more formative for my studies of body consciousness, rap was surely decisive for my appreciation of the political import and transgressive joy of somaesthetic experience.” (249)

In his article “Somaesthetics and Pathic Aesthetics,” Tonino Griffero sends his own philosophical perspective, “pathic-atmospherological aesthetics” into battle for the critical examination of somaesthetics. While somaesthetics finds its roots in pragmatism, pathic aesthetics finds its roots in phenomenology. According to Griffero “Pathic aesthetic experience is an in-between space experienced by the felt – or lived body (*Leib*), and one not reducible to any physiological or anatomical dimension of experience.” For me, the in-between space symbolizes transversality, which has its antecedents in European philosophy (e.g. Deleuze) as well as in Asian thought, e.g. in the aesthetic interpretations related to Japanese *butoh*, which I have discussed at several somaesthetic conferences. The experience of transversality is possible for both the artist and the receiver, and the experience of a special state of mind experienced as a result of the work clearly has physiological consequences. Of course, aesthetic experience cannot be reduced to purely physiological effects, but it has some of them. The ameliorative care of the self-practice of somaesthetics is sharply opposed by Griffero’s theory of “wise passiveness,” which does not consider it necessary to develop somatic skills. Separation of passivity and activity at this level does not stand the test of philosophical debate, since we have known since Aristotle that thinking is also activity, but to quote Shusterman’s apt conclusion: “Living is an activity that essentially involves breathing and other somatic actions, even what we call passive perceiving involve action. Simply to see our surroundings, we must open and focus our eyes. In order to taste, even as passively as possible and even if someone is kind enough to feed us like a baby, we need to open our mouths.” (251)

It was a smart decision on the part of the editors to place Dorota Koczanowicz’s “Eating as an Activity: Somaesthetics and Food Studies” after Griffero’s study. The author, who has been publishing in the field of “food studies” for a long time, has truly advanced somaesthetic theory in its connection with food. Koczanowicz points out that in Shusterman’s article “Somaesthetics and the Fine Art of Eating” (published in 2016) extended somaesthetics to the art of food and eating. It has been known since ancient times that well-chosen food can have a healing effect, the “disciplinary history of food studies” is quite short (106). According to Koczanowicz, “the first book to ask explicitly whether food is art was Elisabeth Telfer’s 1996 *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food*” that applied familiar philosophical notions to new fields of inquiry (113). If the main question of somaesthetics is “How to make life better?,” then it is really essential to examine nutrition as an activity that most influences our health and well-being. The “act of eating” is of course not the same as the art of eating, this is also evident for Shusterman, who writes in his reflection that “gastronomical meliorism is also an issue of cultural politics: to raise the status of our eating experience to the legitimacy and quality of aesthetic experience, so that the mere *act* of eating becomes an *art* of eating imbued with cultural meaning, and affording shared social pleasures.” (252)

The second part of *Shusterman’s Somaesthetics* is a tribute to the Man in Gold and at the same time a critical examination of its diverse meanings. The six chapters examining *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* and Shusterman’s reflections on this second part at the end of the book provide a fantastically detailed and comprehensive picture of Shusterman’s Man in Gold project that he conducts with the Parisian artist Yann Toma. The description of the technical details of the work is dwarfed by the exploration of the deep human feelings that characterize the birth and adventures of the Man in Gold, “the philosopher without words.” Shusterman formulates

the key question of the identity of the Man in Gold. "On one interpretation, the Man in Gold is the transubstantiation of the philosopher Richard Shusterman, enjoying a different ontological identity than the philosopher. But what is that ontological status? Is the Man in Gold an artwork and would this constitute an ontological elevation that makes him superior to the philosopher? Or, instead, is the Man in Gold, as the imaginative creation of two people (Shusterman and Yann Toma), only a fictional entity with no real substantive identity, only a borrowed existence in the performances of Shusterman and the photographs, films, and texts relating to those performances. I cannot resolve these questions here; perhaps they are ultimately unresolvable and or not worth resolving." The six chapters on the Man in Gold focus less on ontology and identity but more usefully on issues of transformation, otherness, the transfigurational media of photography and film, prejudice, and projection, the power of love and the pain and trauma of its loss.

Part of book's strength is that the authors of the studies have known Shusterman personally for many years, they can see his entire *œuvre* and, accordingly, are able to interpret certain details in depth. Abrams (after Shusterman) analyzes the Man in Gold as a strange hybrid of philosophy and photography, and then parallels it with Chris Johnson, "from Philip K. Dick's science fiction novella, *The Golden Man*" (138). The second part of Abrams' study is an examination of the possible relationship systems of the two figures, who can be connected to each other through photography. Yvonne Bezrucka ("Shusterman as Philosopher and the Man in Gold") examines the provocative stimulus that the appearance of the Man in Gold evokes in people, and thus immediately analyzes the confusing difficulties of accepting otherness somaesthetically. Yang Lu's study ("On Shusterman's Somaesthetic Practice: The Case of the Man in Gold") merges beautifully with Yanping Gao's interview, providing a valuable interpretation of the Chinese reception of *The Man in Gold*.

Diane Richard-Allerdyce's Lacanian investigation ("An Exquisitely Beautiful Longing: A Lacanian Reading of *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*") gives a new perspective to the atypical beauty of Shusterman's creature. Richard-Allerdyce's analyzes the contradictions of Shusterman's creature along the lines of the most important Lacanian concepts (the Real, The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Mirror Stage). The use of Lacan's concepts is particularly relevant in this context. Based on Lacan's famous mirror stage theory, it is a misunderstanding of identification if we think that with the "I" the subject discovers its own reality. Actually, it is identification with an image. The mirror stage, during which an imaginary self-image is born, determines all our lives. Infants discover their own reflection in a mirror between the age of six and eighteen months. This image is of crucial significance in the developing of self-awareness. The birth of an ideal-I is transmitted by the imago (mirror image); however, in this way the basis of our self-consciousness will always be an image with which we will never completely identical. Therefore, Lacan thinks that the misjudging of ourselves is decisive instead of getting to know ourselves. It is only an identification with a desired thing.

Shusterman rightly describes Else Marie Bukdahl's chapter ("The Golden Turn in Shusterman's Somaesthetics: The Magical Figure of the Man in Gold," written with testimony of the artist Benthe Norheim) as "special because its authors actually witnessed the Man in Gold and sheltered him with sympathy and love" (256). Bukdahl's study, enriched with color photos, really guides the reader through the phases of the birth of the Man in Gold. It presents the exhibitions, artistic programs and meetings that owe their birth exclusively to the Man in Gold. We can get to know the artists who were most emotionally connected to this project. Bukdahl chose the perfect motto for the chapter from Paul Klee: "Art does not reproduce the visible; it

makes visible” (177). The sentence that Deleuze analyzed a lot is also strong in this context, because the Man in Gold project brought to the surface countless things (emotions, memories, positive and negative relationships) that would have remained hidden forever without it, not only to his readers but primarily to the philosopher Shusterman.

Taken as a whole, this collection of essays on Shusterman’s somaesthetics is like a journey in which rational planning progresses while evoking emotional memories. It brings the reader much closer to somaesthetics and its multiple possibilities of interpretation and application. The entire book, not least through the golden image of the philosopher without words, demonstrates that soundless screams cannot go unnoticed and the clamorous silence of the body can be a reality.