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Review Article

Somaesthetics and the Critique of Cartesian Dualism

BRYAN S. TURNER

Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics

by Richard Shusterman

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Reviewed by Bryan S. Turner, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

Richard Shusterman is a professor of philosophy at Florida Atlantic University but he is also well known to social scientists, and especially to those working in the field of the sociology of the body, for his pioneering work on pragmatism, aesthetics and performance in such works as *Surface and Depth* (2002), *Performing Live* (2000) and *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992). He also edited the Blackwell critical reader on Pierre Bourdieu (Shusterman, 1999), and his early work represented a blend of pragmatist philosophy and the sociology of Bourdieu.

One aspect of Shusterman's aesthetics has been to take the movement of the human body – foot tapping, hand clapping, swaying and so forth – as an important aspect of the appreciation of any

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performance – from hip hop to Bach. In particular, to study ballet for example as performance rather than simply as cultural representation, sociologists of the body need to pay close attention to the performing body. In *Performing Live* (2000), drawing on the work of Bourdieu and developing pragmatist aesthetics, Shusterman argued that an aesthetic understanding of popular musical performances such as rap cannot neglect the embodied features of artistic activity. In *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) and *Surface and Depth* (2002), Shusterman made important contributions to aesthetic theory by examining the relationship between the pragmatist legacy of John Dewey and Bourdieu's cultural sociology. In his emphasis on the body in relation to aesthetics, Shusterman has successfully made the point that Bourdieu's cultural analysis is exclusively concerned with the audible (musical taste) and the visual (conventional works of art). Performance was not successfully addressed by Bourdieu, despite the centrality of the notion of practice to Bourdieu's sociology as a whole. Shusterman argued that Bourdieu's sociology of the aesthetic was implicitly parallel to Theodor Adorno's critique of popular culture. Visual culture – such as a Baroque painting – or literary culture – such as a Shakespearean sonnet – has more cultural capital than a dance. For example, Shusterman has been interested in the themes of rap music as a critique of society, and he has not regarded rap as merely an expression of inauthentic popular culture. But understanding rap requires more than just an analysis of the words that express it, since in rap, as in other forms of popular music, the body comes centrally into play. Having analysed Bourdieu's treatment of the everyday habitus as compatible with but superior to the social philosophy of language and rule following of Austin and Wittgenstein, Shusterman claimed in his work on pragmatist aesthetics that Bourdieu failed to provide an adequate sociology of the embodied experience of movement, particularly aesthetic experience. Bourdieu's implicit reluctance to treat experience (of movement) seriously is associated with the fact that appreciation of rap or tango falls outside the cultural privilege accorded to intellectual self-consciousness and reflection (of works of art). Reliance on such intellectual introspection will not help us penetrate to 'the deeper, unconscious, socially structured strata of the self that help shape individual consciousness' (Shusterman, 2002: 224). Despite Bourdieu's own protests to the contrary, Shusterman claimed that Bourdieu failed to deal with lived experience, especially an ephemeral experience of a dance gesture: 'No sympathetic attention is given to the phenomenological dimension of lived experience, its power of meaningful, qualitative immediacy, and its potential for the transformation of attitudes and habits' (2002: 221). Shusterman's previous work can be taken as a powerful criticism of the legacy of Kant's rationalist aesthetic theory, in which the appreciation of art must be undertaken from a disinterested standpoint, and against this legacy Shusterman provided a new 'somaesthetics' which, as I have indicated, was also a powerful criticism of Bourdieu who, ironically, failed to employ his own notions of habitus and practice to understand bodily performances.

This new work elaborates and extends his existing interests in pragmatic aesthetics through an examination of bodily consciousness. The principal thinkers considered in this book are Michel Foucault (Chapter 1), Merleau-Ponty (Chapter 2), Simone de Beauvoir (Chapter 3), Ludwig Wittgenstein (Chapter 4), William James (Chapter 5) and finally John Dewey (Chapter 6). Shusterman's topic is not, however, simply a list of philosophers. He has a practical aim which is to allow us to better enjoy our embodiment and thereby to enhance our self-knowledge and our capacity for self-transformation. His thesis is that the greater the degree of information and sensory stimulation provided by new technologies, the greater our dependence on our own somatic consciousness, because 'we need our own body sensitivity to monitor the performance of those devices whose functioning and fit are always fallible' (p. 13).

We could plausibly argue that the central questions of Western philosophy have been articulated around the mind-body dichotomy which Shusterman describes in terms of the Platonic-Christian-Cartesian mind-body dualism, in which spirit or mind or consciousness is always separated from and privileged over body. Shusterman wants in part to celebrate the Asian understanding of the necessary connections between spirit and body and in part to tease out the critique of dualism from the works of these six authors. The other aim of this study is to reassert the Socratic and Aristotelian view that

the care of the body is necessary for the life of philosophy and that, properly understood, virtue requires the discipline of the body. Outside the Western tradition, for example in the Confucian legacy, Mencius argued that taking responsibility for the body was a necessary step in the development of the mind. On the basis of these assumptions, Shusterman provides a far-reaching analysis of his six key thinkers. In developing this exegesis, he is concerned to understand not only 'analytic somaesthetics', that is the descriptive and theoretical task of explaining the nature of bodily perceptions and practices, but also 'pragmatic somaesthetics', that is the normative and prescriptive task of somatic improvement.

That Michel Foucault has been central to recent writing about the body can be taken for granted, but Shusterman opens up many new interpretations of the legacy of Foucault. His interpretation of Foucault is highly critical of Foucault's advocacy of drugs and S/M, not because we need to be squeamish about Foucault's sexual orientations but because they were unnecessarily narrow and unhelpful as the basis of a pragmatic somaesthetics. Foucault advocated the creation of a general economy of pleasure by displacing the 'genital-centrism' of Western sexual practices by a de-sexualization of pleasure. S/M is praised because it explores a new art of sexual practice. Shusterman argues that Foucault's proposals about the intensification of the sexual act contradict his ideas about a new economy of de-sexualized pleasure, because the focus on the sexual act narrows the range of pleasures. Furthermore, the icons of S/M bondage (chains, ropes, whips, handcuffs and so on) indicate a captivity to the sexual act and the result is that Foucault privileged a masculine form of sexual violence that was blind to alternative orientations.

The sociology of the body has also drawn extensively from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) and yet Shusterman notes some neglected features in most interpretations of his work. In particular, Merleau-Ponty typically described the body as 'the silent *cogito*', 'the unspoken *cogito*' and 'a tacit *cogito*'. Against this background of silence, every gesture of the body involves a 'tacit language'. Why has philosophy, according to Merleau-Ponty, denied or ignored the body? One answer is its very vulnerability – its capacity for being wounded. Because we suffer daily from discomfort, pain and fatigue, the body's imperfect senses distort the truth just as its desires distract the mind. Hence philosophy has often portrayed the body as a prison from which the mind seeks to escape. Merleau-Ponty's answer was to argue that the body is the framework from which we have perception, action and language. The limitation of the body is precisely the angle of perception on the world. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology sought to restore the primordial perception and our experience of the world below the level of reflection. This non-discursive level of intentionality is the 'silent consciousness' of our subjectivity. He recommended the recovery of the spontaneity of this level of perception and finally he argued that these conditions of human existence are 'unchanging and given once and for all' to all human beings. Shusterman draws attention to Merleau-Ponty's notion that the lived body has two layers – the spontaneous body of the present moment and the 'habit-body' of sedimentation. As we will see, this idea of unreflective habit in our action, speech and thought becomes a central feature of Shusterman's account of the body and its consciousness.

Simone de Beauvoir is probably best known for her work on *The Second Sex* (1989) and as a consequence her work on *The Coming of Age* (1972) is often neglected. In her critique of dominant views on sexual difference, she famously argued that the biological facts could not explain the hierarchy of the sexes, and that both men and women experienced the shame of the flesh in its pure inactive, unjustified presence. Human nature is malleable, being shaped by history and circumstance. Social change cannot, however, be achieved through individual responses to our somatic condition, but only by collective social and political action. Somatic self-awareness, for Beauvoir, can do nothing to improve the social subordination of men and women. Her treatment of old age follows a similar logic. Ageing is not primarily a biological process but a social one in which, in a society that gives a special value to youth and youthfulness, ageing is brought about by the prejudicial gaze of the Other. What then is old age? She gives no clear answer except to say that it is because our vision is no longer refreshed by new projects. Old age is characterized by a lack of curiosity. Shusterman to some extent finds this emphasis on the representation of the body and the absence of the lived body in her analysis of old

age problematic and he argues that today we are more likely to put an emphasis on pragmatic somatics, namely regular exercise and good diet. Body-scanning meditation and the Feldenkrais Method may be more optimistic responses to physical decline rather than concentrating exclusively on the social dimensions of ageing.

Ludwig Wittgenstein might appear as an unusual selection for a book on the body, since Wittgenstein strenuously denied the relevance of the bodily feelings in explaining the key concepts of philosophy such as will, action and emotion. He was a prominent critic of sensationalism and psychologism with regard to mental concepts. Nevertheless Wittgenstein, like Merleau-Ponty, recognized that the body has a crucial role in conscious somaesthetics; it is the silent, uncanny and mysterious background for all that can be expressed in language and art. The body, for Wittgenstein, is the inexpressible background of all that can be expressed. All music, for example, derives its ultimate force from this uncanny inexpressible corporeal reality.

The final chapters are devoted to two major figures in pragmatism, namely William James and John Dewey. While James is typically enlisted in any sociological account of emotions, pragmatism in general, and Dewey in particular, are rarely invoked in the contemporary literature on the body, and yet Shusterman shows how their work on body and habit is central to our current concerns for understanding embodiment. Shusterman cleverly extracts the importance of habit when thinking about the body from the pragmatist tradition. While considerable interest has been shown by sociologists to the idea of habitus in the work of Bourdieu, Shusterman shows how James made habit – both mental and bodily – central to his view of human life. James claimed that habit in living beings arises from the very plasticity of their organic life. From this physiological observation, James drew the lesson that we should make every effort to develop good habits. This training of embodied action requires asceticism if we are to push our nervous systems in the right direction, and finally the social structure itself depends on these unconscious habits of action. Although James's presuppositions are promising foundations for transcending the body–mind dualism, Shusterman notes that James ultimately contradicted himself by insisting that will is a purely mental phenomenon. Despite this problem, James offered much sound advice on pragmatic somaesthetics by suggesting numerous ways of improving our own examination of our bodily feelings. But these bodily-related means are seen to be individual methods of psychological introspection rather than a means for improving our performance in the public domain. Given the reformist agenda of pragmatism, this passive or private view of somaesthetics was somewhat surprising.

Dewey in many ways was even more definite in his rejection of dualism and he emphatically celebrated the body as a wonderful phenomenon in the universe. Dewey came to this view partly through the influence of James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890), where James had defended the idea that there is a definite correlation between mental and bodily states, but Dewey criticized James for conceiving of body and mind as different kinds of phenomena, no matter how closely correlated they were. Dewey by contrast recognized the cognitive dimension of emotion and integrated cognitive and physiological reactions into a larger and more coherent pattern of behavioural response. Body and mind were no longer distinct things, but a fundamental unit, and action was seen to be always both mental and embodied. In this manner, Dewey developed a view of purposive behaviour underpinning the cognitive and bodily dimensions of emotion. In his treatment of action, Dewey relied heavily on F.M. Alexander's insights into the force of bodily habits in all forms of action. Habits are neither purely mental nor autonomous since they always incorporate elements of the environment.

This issue about the nature of habit then forms the basis for the conclusion of Shusterman's account of these various attempts to overcome body and mind dualism. Alexander was an Australian actor whose career was cut short by the fact that he kept losing his voice. In trying to cure this problem, he discovered that, as a matter of habit, he held his head in the wrong position and that attempts to remedy this problem were aggravated by the habitual way in which he held his head too far back. From this insight he developed a method of improving his self-awareness and sense appreciation thereby liberating people from being unconscious victims of inappropriate habits. This analysis of

habit therefore becomes the bridge by which we can better understand action outside of a dualistic framework. *Body Consciousness*, like Shusterman's other works on aesthetics, is an important contribution to the development of a more adequate theory of mind-body as a unity. It is valuable in building a foundation for the development of a more sophisticated and philosophically adequate sociology of the body.

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