

SHUSTERMAN AND THE MAN IN GOLD

Richard Shusterman: *The Adventures of the Man in Gold. Paths between Art and Life. A Philosophical Tale/ Les aventures de l'homme en or. Passages entre l'art et la vie. Conte philosophique.*

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When Richard Shusterman burst on the academic scene some decades ago he quickly became the golden boy of aesthetics. Now in his late sixties he is hardly a boy anymore, but possibly a golden oldie. Nevertheless, he is still prone to boyish pranks as can be seen in parts of his new book, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold. Paths between Art and Life*. The text is both in English and French. It is a narrative of sorts, in-between fiction and philosophical reflection, a story of the Man in Gold, who incarnates in Shusterman's soma (body) and interacts with his "host" in various ways. It is also a photo-essay, which comprises both the narrative and the photographs of Shusterman, wearing a gold costume, playing (?) the role (?) of the Man in Gold. These photos were taken in various parts of the world, from Columbia and Paris to Denmark where the Man in Gold is shown interacting with such arch-typical Nordic objects as sculptures of Viking slabs. The photographer is a Frenchman, Yann Toma, who is listed as Shusterman's co-author.

In order to understand this book, we must be acquainted with Shusterman's aesthetics. After a short introduction to his aesthetic thought, I will return to the book about the golden man.

SOMAESTHETICS

He is famous for advocating pragmatist aesthetics, and somaesthetics (bodily oriented aesthetics) is perhaps its most important part. Pragmatist aesthetics emphasizes our active involvement with art. Art should be regarded as a part of the ever-changing stream of life and the art of living as the most important of all artforms.¹ A pragmatist emphasizes action and action is the domain of the body. So there is an open route from pragmatist aesthetics to somaesthetics. As I suggested, somaesthetics is the aesthetics of the body, not only in the sense of the body as pure material object but also the living sentient, purposive, perceptive intelligent body through which

one perceives the world. This theorizing is obviously inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He said that the unity of the body is like the unity of an artwork. At the same time, all bodily actions, perceptions and feelings are some kind of artworks.² Merleau-Ponty was in his turn inspired by Edmund Husserl. Husserl discriminated between the physiological body, which he called “Körper” and the living, sentient body, which he called “Leib”.³ But Shusterman maintains that soma comprises both Leib and Körper.⁴

Shusterman’s provisional definition of somaesthetics is as follows: “...the critical meliorative study of one’s experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning.”⁵

Somaesthetics aims at cultivating our sensual and sensory experience in general, not only our experience of artworks. Thus, Shusterman wants to revive the original use of the term aesthetics as “the study of sensations”. It almost goes without saying that the world of the senses is “corpo-reality”, that is the reality of the body. This reality is the realm of somaesthetics and the deeds of somaesthetics can range from dancing to rap music, doing workout, practising yoga or just taking a walk in a beautiful forest. Or that having sex; Shusterman has written a provocative article where he argues in favour of sexual acts having aesthetic qualities, being like virtual artworks.⁶ “I sing the body electric”, the bard Walt Whitman wrote in his *Leaves of Grass*, thus anticipating Shusterman’s celebration of corporeality.

Shusterman’s somaesthetics has three subdivisions: In the first place analytical somaesthetics, which studies the basic nature of our bodily perception and practices, as well as their role in our lives. Secondly, pragmatic somaesthetics, which focuses on particular somatic practices, including cosmetics and athletics. Of no less importance are such occidental somatic practices as the Feldenkrais method or oriental ones such as yoga. Generally, somaesthetics is influenced by oriental philosophy, including Daoism. Shusterman himself practices and teaches the Feldenkrais method, a method of bodily awareness; you might call it “somatic meditation”. Thirdly, practical somaesthetics is to be practiced by philosophers who should engage in concrete body work. Philosophy has hitherto only theorized the body, it should also change it, Shusterman could say. Art actually has its roots in our bodily structure, not least our innate tendency to find pleasure in things that are good for the survival of the species. Art’s beauty and pleasures have undoubtedly an evolutionary value by for instance creating meaningful images that help bind us together in organic communities. This is the

naturalistic side of art, which also has a cultural and historical side. The historical and natural sides of art can be reconciled if art is seen as a kind of dramatization. In the first place, artworks typically need frames and settings, for instance in the sense of paintings being put on display or symphonies being performed in certain kind of buildings. One might say that artworks are thus "staged", witness the expression "dramatization". This is the cultural side of dramatization. Secondly, artworks typically have dramatic qualities, which lead to the heightening of the senses of the audience. This is the naturalistic side of dramatization.⁷

Even though Shusterman does not use the expression "soma-ethics", such ethics are the implication of somaeesthetics. Let us clarify this with an example of my own making. The very somatic activity of bodybuilding certainly has some ethical sides. A body-builder can regard his body as a work of art. But we can ask the question whether he has a moral right to fill his body with steroids just in order to sculpt his body in beautiful fashion. The question is even more pressing from an ethical point of view if we consider the fact that steroids seem to make some people dangerously aggressive. No less ethical is the question whether it is right to use illegal steroids. Such questions have obvious political ramifications. Shusterman points out that corporeality has political import, the colour of people's skin or their biological sex has played an important political role. Racial and sexual prejudices are often subliminal bodily reaction against corporeal elements, for instance a subliminal reaction to the smell of people of other races or cultures. Due to their subliminal nature, combatting such prejudices cannot be done with arguments alone. Shusterman advises people to combat these prejudices by heightening their bodily consciousness and thus become aware of subliminal prejudices. Again we see the normative and active nature of Shusterman's thinking. Be that as it may, that which I call "pure somaesthetics", "soma-ethics", and "somatic politics" together form a trinity, they are three aspects of general somaesthetics.

Somaesthetics is not only the aesthetic of the body; it has implications for our commerce with artworks. Take architecture as an example. Several theorists of architecture, most famously Vitruvius, have pointed out that the body is the source of our ideas of symmetry and form. Shusterman adds that if architecture is the articulation of space for the purpose of enhancing our living, then the soma provides the basic tools for spatial articulation because it is the point of origin from which space can be seen and articulated in terms of left and right, up and down. Appreciation of architecture

is strongly linked to somatic experiences. Therefore, heightened somatic consciousness could improve our architectural experience and even improve architecture (again we see the pragmatist, normative side of Shusterman's thinking). Such a heightened somatic consciousness might help architects designing buildings that fit our somatic experiences better. Enjoying visual arts has also a somatic component. Without the body's power of locomotion we cannot appreciate a painting's depth and spatial qualities. Without experience of bodily touch we could not appreciate a painting's texture or tactile qualities. Without the experience of bodily movement, balance, mass, and resistance, we could not feel the dynamic tension, rhythms and suchlike in a painting's composition. Music is a very obvious case of a somatic art form. Not only do we need our bodies when we sing or play music, our sense of timing and rhythm are ultimately based on such somatic experiences as the beating of our hearts, the rhythms of breathing and regular muscular contraction. What about poetry? Is not enjoying poetry something spiritual, far removed from the concreteness of architecture? Shusterman's response is that the inner feelings that poems can activate can also have a somatic component, you feel the thrill of a beautiful poem in your spine, just like the somatic thrill of music. Even remembering poems often involves bodily movements. Our sense of poetic rhythm is, just like our sense of musical rhythm, ultimately based on somatic experiences such as the beat of our hearts and the rhythm of breathing.

Shusterman's somaesthetics certainly is interesting and thought-provoking. But it is not without flaws. One of them could be called 'the ontological deficiency of somaesthetics'. Shusterman has made his own version of the deweyan body-mind theory.⁸ He maintains that body and mind are not separated, but parts of a whole, and that whole is the soma. But he does not discuss alternative ontological theories such as immaterialism or its opposite, eliminative materialism. Paul and Patricia Churchland have famously defended eliminative materialism according to which we have no use for such concept as that of mind. Matter is all that matters.⁹ Less well-known is Alvin Plantinga's defense of immaterialism. He maintains that the mind is real and of non-material, subjective nature.¹⁰ Of course he might brush ontological issues aside by saying that his choice of the body-mind theory is a pragmatic one and that discussing ontological problems is futile. But then he should say so explicitly.

THE MAN IN GOLD AND THE PERFORMATIVE PROCESS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Shusterman's article «Photography as a Performative Process» is of paramount importance for the understanding of the book. There, he introduces his theory that understanding photography requires understanding "...the performative process of making a photograph of a human subject, and the sorts of artistic performances and aesthetic experiences that this process involves".¹¹ These experiences have a somatic aspect. This aspect includes the photographer's mis-en-scène of himself, the photographed subject's posing before the camera, and the critical communication between the photographer and the subject. The book *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* is, as it were, a poeticized description of this performative process. Furthermore, in the aforementioned article Shusterman describes Yann Toma's photographic technique.¹² Toma tries to capture that which he senses as the auratic energy of the subject's body by using lamps that swirl around the body photographed. The results of this can be seen in Toma's photographs of the Man in Gold. Shusterman gives a poeticized description of Toma's technique in the new book. You might say that this book is a poeticized and partly fictionalized version of somaaesthetics, like *The Nausea* was a fictionalized version of Sartre's existentialism. The text constantly shifts from the fictional to the real and back. "The real" being the account of how the photographs were made, "the fictional" the tale of the golden man. This constant "shifting" illustrates the book's main theme: the search for a path between life (that which is described) and art (the fictional part). Shusterman says that the Man in Gold intruded into the straight, prosaic account, with his poetic, even mystical view of this process, hailing from the Daoist mysteries of his being (p. 7). He adds that "The story's composition thus exemplifies one of its key themes: the instability and transformational potential of the self through the power of possession" (p. 8). By inhabiting and transforming Shusterman's soma, the Man in Gold made new avenues for aesthetic experience emerge. The emergence of the Man in Gold is told in the fashion of mythic tales: he does not know his father but imagines that his mother is the dancing goddess Wu Xiaoxing, who captured Shusterman's heart in her various incarnations. Some people even think he gave birth to himself by inseminating the dreams of the philosopher, most likely Shusterman. The midwife of course was none other than Yann Toma, who also transformed a middle-aged philosopher into a golden artwork (pp. 17-22). The Man in Gold is driven, like so many of us humans, by love and fear, not least the love of beauty

and fear of being misunderstood. He eschews discursive language and expresses himself "...in posture, gesture and acture,..." (p. 58). He is not only a lover of beauty but also of knowledge, wanting to learn through immediate sensuous experience (p. 60).

In an arduous photographic process in a beautiful garden, Shusterman loses sense of himself. Dancing around the garden, the Man of Gold becomes a fully independent being, possessing Shusterman's soma (pp. 30-32). And the philosopher starts dreaming that he is the Man of Gold, and when awake, wonders whether the Man in Gold dreams that he is Shusterman (p. 35).

Some of the descriptions of the adventures of Shusterman/the Man in Gold are quite humorous. They function as comic relief, enriching the text in the process. Variations in style are *ceteris paribus* a good-making feature, but of course it must not dissolve the unity of the text. In the case of this book, the comic, the poetic and the prosaic sides enhance each other.

However, the comic part has a tragic undercurrent. The Man of Gold sometimes gets into awkward situations, where he is being ridiculed, even threatened (pp. 49-50, pp. 68-70 and elsewhere). The tragic bit is the prejudices against those who look different, in this case Shusterman in a strange golden suit. His somatic stunt has some soma-ethical ramifications, because reactions to it shows how ubiquitous morally repugnant aversions against non-conformists can be. The Man in Gold reminds me of the typical Jewish name Goldman. So the animosity of the onlookers against the Man in Gold can be read metaphorically as the hatred of Jews, being accused of money-grabbing. Shusterman describes himself as a nomadic philosopher, perhaps he is a bit like the wandering Jew in the folk tales. And while wandering in his golden suit, he is being mocked, even attacked, like so many wandering Jews have been through the ages.

The book is written with the effortless elegance that characterizes Shusterman's writings. However, this book is clearly more poetic than most of his philosophical essays as can be seen in the following quotations: "But there was also nothing to excite the passions of the Man in Gold, no vessel to convey him to the harbor of his hope" (p. 55). Some pages later, he writes: "The Man in Gold shimmered and trembled; his skin smelled moist and salty as if he had emerged from the sea." (p. 78). Yet another poetic quotation stems from page 94: "Though a creature of light, he belonged to the night and felt more comfortable dancing in the dark".

Shusterman has a skillful way of using alliteration: "Desire counts more than darkness" (p. 91). However, sometimes there is

too much of good thing: “Remembering that treasured truth must be shrouded in obscurity, he ritually recited (as if in prayer) Laozi’s description of the immortal Dao...” (p. 111). Using alliteration twice in the same sentence as in this quotation is like using too much of a tasty spice. Another weakness is Shusterman’s tendency to overuse such words as “love” and “beauty”; using them a lot can lead to the devaluation of the concepts they signify: “...who loved those mortal beauties but grimly sacrificed their love...”; “...love’s nurturing power...”; “...dancing beauties...”, all quotes on the page 58. It is often better to show instances of love and beauty indirectly in the text than use the words, if it can be evaded. Or else, the text risks becoming somewhat sentimental. Despite these faults, Shusterman shows himself to be an excellent writer of poetic prose.

Lest I forget, Toma’s photos have a romantic, dreamlike quality, especially those, which show the Man of Gold with shiny objects in his hand or around him. The photographs and the text form a well-rounded whole.

Whether the Man of Gold really is Shusterman or whether Shusterman is a golden oldie does not matter. What matters is that Shusterman’s and Toma’s book is a gem to be treasured.

Stefán Snævarr

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| <p>1 Richard Shusterman, <i>Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art</i> (New York: Routledge, 1992).</p> <p>2 Shusterman critically discusses Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the body in Shusterman, <i>Body Consciousness, A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 49-76.</p> <p>3 For an overview see Elizabeth A. Behnke, “Edmund Husserl’s Phenomenology of Embodiment,” <i>Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>. http://www.iep.utm.edu/husspemb/ (Retrieved 22nd of May 2017).</p> <p>4 Shusterman, <i>Thinking through the Body</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 17.</p> <p>5 Shusterman, <i>Body Consciousness, A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics</i>, 19.</p> <p>6 Shusterman, <i>Thinking through the Body</i>, 262-287.</p> <p>7 Shusterman, ‘Art as Dramatization’, <i>The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism</i>, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Autumn 2001), 363-372.</p> <p>8 For instance Shusterman, <i>Body Consciousness, A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics</i>, 180-216.</p> <p>9 See for instance Paul Churchland, <i>Matter and Consciousness. A Contemporary Introduction to the Philosophy of the Mind (revised edition)</i> (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press/A Bradford Book, 1988).</p> <p>10 See for instance Plantinga, ‘Against Materialism’, <i>Faith & Philosophy</i> 23: 1 (January 2006), 3-32.</p> | <p>11 Shusterman, <i>Thinking through the Body</i>, 241.</p> <p>12 <i>Ibid.</i>, 254-261.</p> |
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