

REVIEW

From Pragmatism to Fusion Philosophy

Shusterman's Pragmatism: Between Literature and Somaesthetics, edited by Dorota Koczanowicz and Wojciech Małecki. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012. 236 pp. ISBN 978-90-420-3486-0

Wojciech Małecki, *Embodying Pragmatism: Richard Shusterman's Philosophy and Literary Theory*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010. 204 pp. ISBN 978-3-631-61217-0

Richard Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 380 pp. ISBN 978-1-107-69850-5

There is only one global community of aesthetics which embraces all schools of philosophy. The main paradigm of the International Association of Aesthetics, which stands for consensus rather than quarrel between cultures of scholarship, could broadly speaking be called pragmatist. In this territory Richard Shusterman's impact is right now uncontested.

Shusterman, who started his career as an analytic aesthetician, became a scholar with cross-disciplinary (and international) impact when he converted to pragmatism. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (1992) offered a well-grounded but polemic interpretation of Deweyan aesthetics. It became famous because of its (then) scandalous analysis of rap music. The book was also a manifesto. Shusterman claimed that pragmatism could become a 'third way' in Western aesthetics, and that it could bridge the dichotomy of analytic vs. continental approaches. The revival of pragmatism, a wave which in America had seduced more analytic philosophers than phenomenologists and deconstructionists, had as well overlooked aesthetics. Though Dewey the aesthetician had his followers – Joseph Kupfer's *Experience as Art* (1983) is quite a forgotten treasure – Shusterman was the first one to successfully claim a role for pragmatism in contemporary aesthetics.

Especially Shusterman's work on somaesthetics has as well provoked, challenged and invited scholars from other disciplines to show interest in aesthetics. It is no wonder that books are now published on his life

work. In this review I will present critically two books on Shusterman. Dorota Koczanowicz's and Wojciech Mątecki's (eds.) *Shusterman's Pragmatism: Between Literature and Somaesthetics* (2012) includes articles written by thirteen authors. One of them is Shusterman himself, who has written a commentary on the book. Mątecki's 'solo', *Embodying Pragmatism: Richard Shusterman's Philosophy and Literary Theory* (2010), is the first monograph published in English on the work of Shusterman. I will also discuss Shusterman's new book *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (2012). This work quite recollects his thoughts on body, mind and culture.

Mątecki's monograph is an insightful work on Shusterman's aesthetics. It shows expertise in both philosophy of art and pragmatism. Mątecki also makes at least a couple of critical remarks about Shusterman's philosophy. But the same cannot be said about all the articles published in the book he has edited with Koczanowicz. In *Shusterman's Pragmatism* Shusterman's thinking serves mostly just as a horizon for reflecting other issues or as a tool for scholastic comparisons. In many cases the articles published would be more interesting if one would cut out Shusterman from them and so help the authors to concentrate on their main interest. Another possibility could have been to really focus on Shusterman's philosophy and call the book *Applying Shusterman*.

Shusterman's idea of emotion gets compared with T. S. Eliot's (Anna Budziak). His ideas on the erotic are analyzed in relation to what Dewey 'really' said (Don Morse). And for example Kacper Bartczak's "Neo-Pragmatist Models of Self-Development and the Poetic Subjectivity in John Ashbury's Poetry" is an interesting essay on Ashbury, but philosophically it is actually about Rorty, or at least too marginally about Shusterman's philosophy of life to really make a point on his work.

This would be a good book in the category 'essays in the honor of someone's (Shusterman's) birthday', but now a strong DNA is missing. Indeed, there is no radical or experimental attitude which would give the book a soul.

My interpretation of Shusterman's work differs quite from the interpretation many authors have on his philosophy. Dedicating a book to the work of one of the most radical philosophers of our time, a thinker who has taken risks and really crossed the tracks, would crave for more edge. Many articles work on digging for small problems. This is of course typical for academic publishing, but I hope that the work on Shusterman's philosophy wouldn't take too much of this direction, and I have a feeling that the authors could say more. Has the editing process polished off all the most radical ideas?

Some of the texts go deeper, of course. In “Somaesthetics and Democracy: Dewey and Contemporary Body Art”, Martin Jay hints, misleadingly, that Shusterman’s interest in lowbrow and his interest in the body would be two sides of the same coin. The topics are connected, but as Shusterman is not a system builder they collide more or less sporadically. Rather than starting to bridge these topics, Jay first fantasizes a strong connection between them in Shusterman’s corpus, then makes a polemic move to save holy art with the capital A. Jay says that rap music is often misogynic and homophobic, and so somaesthetics should rather be discussed in connection with highbrow art. Jay does not remind us about the institutional, bourgeois and capitalist logics of highbrow art, nor does he show any positive attention to the politically rewarding examples Shusterman has chosen for his discourse (Stetsasonic, Public Enemy). So, the black-and-white stance towards a whole genre of (originally black) music raises questions. Why is Jay so interested in comparing the Vienna actionists to MTV products – and not Public Enemy to the whitewashed and luxurious gallery life of 5th Avenue? Jay’s examples from Artaud to Duchamp can hardly be said to be radical or fresh, but maybe this all leads back to the classical paradox of aestheticians: many read about art only from history books.

Jay’s article is still a text which contains argumentation and a point on Shusterman’s work. And although I disagree with John Morse’s article “Erotic Pragmatism” – I think he is too much into exegesis of Dewey to be able to see how Dewey’s thinking can be developed – it is still a work which has depth both in pragmatism and the broader context of the problems presented. It is just that it doesn’t really matter what Dewey would have thought about his followers’ work.

Monika Bikiniec’s article “‘Body Trouble’? Somaesthetics and Feminism” shows good insight on how somaesthetics could contribute to the study of feminism and Simone de Beauvoir’s work. Bikiniec acknowledges that somaesthetics, like feminism, stands between theory and practice. The object is to change to world and to bridge theory and practice. And the whole body problem – should women forget it, or work on it? – is analyzed in a way which makes the reader hungry for more. The frame exists now. How about going deeper into it, and how about providing practical examples for pragmatist feminist aesthetics?

Shusterman himself comments, in the last article of the book, that he can see how many of the authors haven’t had access to all of his texts, and this might of course be one reason to the loose relationship some of them have to their object of research. I sincerely as well believe that the

book also reflects the way pragmatism is often seen to be more easily approachable than it is. As a straightforward philosophy written in a down-to-earth manner pragmatism invites scholars to take a break from the terror of cold analytic philosophy ('if we were robots, then...') and exegetic continental thinking ('Saint Derrida!'). But if one really wants to discuss pragmatist aesthetics, and not just become inspired by it, there is a lot to read, and a deep framework to study. For example Shusterman's philosophy of life has roots in the writings of e.g. William James and (the proto-pragmatist) Henry Thoreau.

Matecki's "Challenging the Taboo of the Autobiographical" takes, anyway, a witty stroll into Shusterman's philosophy. Matecki analyzes in detail Shusterman's work, and is able to write a good contextualizing overview of it. As there has lately been more and more interest towards personal writing and philosophy of life (Foucault, Cavell, Nehamas), and as Shusterman's work can be seen as a part this new wave of academic philosophy's urge to get back to 'real life', Matecki's essay is important. He makes a sharp division between texts which are intentionally and performatively autobiographical, and then texts which only contain fragments of this type, laying out, as well, all the important analogous projects from self-help books to essay writing.

There is something interesting about philosophy of life and subjective philosophizing when one thinks about Shusterman's work. Though he has sometimes worked from a consciously subjective position, too often many of his argumentations are seen as just stories or value statements. One example is his discourse on high and low. Though Shusterman discusses the non-rewarding nature of modern(ity's) distinctions, and goes on framing all culture through experience, fulfilment and engagement, readers of his work (also here, sometimes) interpret that he just dislikes hierarchies/elitism. This might of course be true, but this is not what philosophical work is about.

Though it is more the experience of working on pragmatist aesthetics or the interest to analyze it than the hard work to be able to produce it which dominates the work, *Shusterman's Pragmatism* has definitely been worth publishing – also from the point of view of pragmatist aesthetics or Shusterman scholarship. It tells us that aesthetics can become an interest for non-aestheticians. It shows pragmatism's contemporary relevance for non-pragmatists, e.g. analytic philosophers (Sami Pihlström) and literary scholars (Koczanowicz, Budziak). At the same time it has now been shown how inspiring it is when somebody takes aesthetics out of the box, and tests its limits in dialogue with for example bodily practices,

though the most radical moves of Shusterman's work – teaching theory of somaesthetics together with bodily exercises and collaborating with artists – haven't been seen as worthy for academic discussion.

The radical work finds, though, continuation in Shusterman's own book *Thinking through the Body*. While mainstream pragmatism in the English speaking world still works from an analytic point of view, expressing an aspiration to create a new fundament for analysis, aesthetics is more radical. Aestheticians, most visibly Shusterman, have gone applying and searching for new ways of doing and applying aesthetics, not just working to be acceptable in other schools of philosophy. This has resulted in a lot of new work which is not anymore about the impotent analysis of what could be done. The pragmatist dialogue with sport, film and environment has been active and engaging (Cavell, Berleant, Kupfer), and Shusterman has definitely commented too little on other pragmatist aestheticians. Still the most radical project of this breed is Shusterman's somaesthetics, were philosophy has been systematically taken into dialogue with the living body.

One of the chapters of Shusterman's new book performs textually somaesthetic exercises. "Somaesthetics in the Philosophy Classroom" shows what kind of practical work philosophizing with the body can be. It must be hard work to help philosophers understand the body as many of them do not study it with the same rigor as they study books. But this chapter, with its instructions on concentrating on first the left foot then on the right one, etc., brings out a good example of how language and body are connected, and how one can start working on them. A highbrow new age guidebook to the body? Yes, but in a positive way, I'd say. It will raise some cynical eyebrows, but who cares? This will maybe be less rewarding for mummified academic philosophers than for the use of aesthetics in other disciplines, without forgetting the readers who can benefit from it somatically – e.g. gain tools for bodily reflection.

One can as well ask what is the future brand of Shusterman's philosophy. He is discussing Confucius, Zen Buddhism and the Asian arts of sex, without forgetting the European radicals from Montaigne to Foucault, and doing all this without the attitude of a philosophical anthropologist. All schools of thinking are discussed as legitimate reflections on aesthetics, the body and culture. Shusterman is heading more and more towards a new way of philosophizing which, I think, could be called fusionist. I have borrowed the term from 1970s jazz (e.g. Mahavishu Orchestra), where it signified a way of mixing different traditions in a respectful but still lighthearted way. Fusion jazz was as well something which the

mainstream audience found easy to approach. This path might lead to less readings made by professional (and ideologically Western) philosophers, but for sure, new audiences will find aesthetics. I interpret the whole book to be a pedagogic enterprise. A reader who has a good knowledge of somatic practices or aesthetics has to sometimes stress a scholarly reading, sometimes find a way of reading which is typically needed for self-help guides. The book presents as well basics of Eastern philosophy for Western philosophers. (I believe teaching is less needed the other way around.)

Some of the texts in *Thinking Through the Body* provide new topics for somaesthetics. In a chapter on somatic style Shusterman goes into an analysis of individual bodily being/appearance in a way which provides fresh insight into the psychological ideas today presented on personality (and its somatic base). And for analytic somaesthetics it is important of course to make a broad reading of what has been said about the issue in different schools of thinking. A world history of the philosophy of the body is, for sure, something Shusterman is now working on. He shows how broad the discussion on the connection of body, mind and culture has been – globally.

After this book I believe the preliminary project of grounding somaesthetics has come to its end. We know already a lot about the way mind, body and culture affect each other, and as this has gained a good philosophical expression, even a philosophical history, it is time to move on. Questions on the somaesthetics of art, popular culture and the environment will, for sure, be discussed in the coming years. As the basic work is done, it is now easier to tackle these questions. Some fresh directions will for sure find their way in to the journal on somaesthetics which is going to be established in 2014.

Seen from the fusionist point of view it is as well time to analyze Shusterman's pragmatism in new ways. Małecki, in his Shustermanian *Embodying Pragmatism*, addresses pragmatism as 'hardly monolithic'. He says that some scholars acquire this label against their will, and some others desire to acquire it. But I would go further on, asking if pragmatism has contributed to the development of a fusionist aesthetics, provoked by thinkers like Shusterman and Wolfgang Iser. (It has been as well advocated by the International Association of Aesthetics.) How pragmatist is today's pragmatism, really? And could this (what I call the) 'fusionist' attitude become important for the whole field of philosophy? If it will, the impact of Shusterman cannot be overlooked.

Talking about schools, one can say that many of Shusterman's read-

ings of other philosophers and schools of thinking are somewhere between radical interpretations and misleading descriptions. For example Adorno becomes quite black-and-white and loses his dialectical method in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. Małecki shows a good critical spirit by analyzing Shusterman's work from this point of view on many different occasions.

Małecki's book is a good overview, but it shares a problem Shusterman has in his writings on pragmatism. Małecki only connects to Dewey and then the big names of mainstream philosophy, like Putnam and Rorty. Once again contemporary pragmatist aesthetics from Kupfer to Berleant is forgotten. Why do aestheticians so easily become overshadowed even by other aestheticians? The way Shusterman has become big even outside of aesthetics could be used for overcoming this, showing how much there is to find in pragmatist aesthetics, but it seems that most scholars on his work are not really interested in contemporary pragmatist aesthetics though one has to say Małecki writes a lot on e.g. Alexander and other Dewey specialists.

Another problem concerns Shusterman's work as an applied philosopher. Małecki asks if Shusterman's work betrays practice, but he does not analyze the most practical sides of the work, e.g. mixing bodily exercises with talks. Out from the class room, Małecki!

In the chapter on rap and high vs. low Małecki puts too much effort on compartmentalization, I think. I have always interpreted that Shusterman refers to rap music as postmodernist art just to show that if we take seriously celebrations and definitions on what art is, we should end up thinking that rap is art. Shusterman is against compartmentalizing readings. And as Deweyan thinking on the concept of art is more instrumental than the analytic or the continental ones, we do not need to include rap into the family of elite practices. Otherwise Małecki is clever on this issue. He presents Shusterman's attack against historical scholars showing prejudices about popular culture (e.g. van den Haag and Adorno) and claims that this kind of people have not for long had any dominance in actual philosophical debates. (This point has been made by e.g. Stefán Snaevarr as well, as Małecki rightly recognizes.)

Małecki presents well the somatic philosophy of Shusterman. His book is all and all good reading, though, only if one is interested in Richard Shusterman scholarship. It does not host any own points of view, or ideas which would be for any other use.

Most of the authors on Shusterman today are from Polish universities. Will we soon witness the birth of a distinctively Polish school of prag-

matist aesthetics? In e.g. Italy pragmatism has always been an important source of inspiration (in e.g. Vattimo's and Eco's work), partly because of the connection between Dewey and Croce, but Europeans have not yet stepped out to form an own way of doing it. *Shusterman's Pragmatism*, and even more *Embodying Pragmatism* show that this might not be the case in the future. All the Polish wing needs is a more courageous attitude. Looking forward to it! There is a lot of potential in the work which has been done.

In a sense the polyphony offered by Małecki's and Koczanowicz's book *Shusterman's Pragmatism* is also a better initiative on how to discuss Shusterman's philosophy. Diverse approaches make clear the broad variety of potentials and problems hidden in his work. Shusterman works a lot to bridge opposites, but his dominance in aesthetics craves for more criticism on his philosophy. I am sure that a seriously critical book on the topic will be published sooner or later. Its author(s) will find the work done by Małecki & Co. useful.

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