

Beauty from a Pragmatist and Somaesthetic Perspective

A Conversation with Richard Shusterman

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Richard Shusterman is an American pragmatist philosopher, currently Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar in the Humanities, Professor of Philosophy and English, and Director of the “Center for Body, Mind, and Culture” at Florida Atlantic University (FAU). Shusterman is mostly known for his contributions in the field of pragmatist aesthetics and the emerging field of somaesthetics. Among the main topics of his original development of a pragmatist philosophical perspective one can mention experience (and aesthetic experience, in particular), the definition of art, the question of interpretation, the philosophical defense of the value and significance of popular art (in comparison to the frequent devaluation of the latter by many philosophers and intellectuals), the revaluation of the idea of philosophy as an art of living, and finally the strong emphasis of the role of the body in most (or perhaps all) human practices, activities and experiences. This deep concern for embodiment led to his proposing the field of somaesthetics, and eventually to the existence of *The Journal of Somaesthetics*, of which he is one of the founding editors. Since pragmatist aesthetics is one of the leading trends in contemporary aesthetics, and since beauty is one of the guiding concepts of all research in aesthetics since its foundation with Baumgarten and Kant until today, we thought it would be interesting to ask Shusterman about the role that beauty played in his philosophical thought and in his vision of somaesthetics.

1.

Together with taste, genius, the sublime and a few other concepts, beauty (or: the beautiful) surely represents one of the main questions in the whole history of aesthetics. And, as such, it has surely played a role also in the development of pragmatist aesthetics, from Dewey’s groundbreaking 1934 work *Art as Experience* onwards. Now, the title of your most famous book, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992; 2000: translated into 14 languages), explicitly refers to the concept of beauty, inasmuch as the subtitle reads: *Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. So, what is the “living beauty” that pragmatist aesthetics deals with, or even that pragmatist aesthetics is fundamentally focused on?

Yes, the subtitle of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* includes the gerundive term “living beauty”, which I chose because of its semantic richness. This expression in English has at least two clear meanings. First, when “living” functions as an adjective, it suggests a beauty that is lively, vivid, or energetic (the sort of beauty that I wanted to defend in popular genres like rock music and hip hop). Secondly, when “living” functions as a verb, the expression “living beauty” refers to the

idea of living one's life as an aesthetic project, the idea of the art of living or of living a beautiful life or a life lived as a work of art. When I published the book in French and German in the early 1990s (before pragmatism and pragmatist aesthetics became widely known in Europe), the book's main title did not mention pragmatism at all but instead focused on the subtitle's idea of "living" beauty or living art. The French title (Minuit, 1992) was *L'art à l'état vif* and the German translation (Fischer, 1994) bore the title *Kunst Leben*. The idea of pragmatism appeared only in the subtitles of these translations because, as I already noted, pragmatist aesthetics was not really recognized in Europe at that time. John Dewey's aesthetics, for example, was not translated into French until 2005. But to return to the expression "living beauty", my aim has been to highlight the vivid, lived or experienced dimension of art and the idea of the art of living: of appreciating beauty in art and life and therefore contributing to the experienced beauty of art and life in one's practices of living. One can contribute to enhancing the experienced beauty of art even if one is not a practicing artist; for example, through practices of interpretation, of teaching, of theorizing in ways that open people's eyes to forms of beauty that they did not previously appreciate. Of course, anyone alive can work on contributing to the beauty of living through his or her own practices – ethical as well as aesthetic, and in my vision of pragmatist aesthetics there is considerable overlap between the ethical and the aesthetic.

I am a pluralist rather than an essentialist about beauty. I think there are a great variety of forms of beauty and I am not convinced that they can be fully and properly reduced to a single common essence. I recognize that some traditional definitions of beauty can be useful as convenient hints for understanding the concept: for example, unity in variety. But there are forms of unity in variety that are not beautiful and some examples of beauty may not clearly exhibit a unified variety of parts. In terms of this familiar definition, I would insist that what is important to my idea of living beauty is that the unity would be an energetic or dynamic unity that is felt in lived experience rather than being some static dead sort of unity. My work in performance with the Man in Gold, a project you know from reviewing my book on his adventures, exemplifies this sense of dynamic, energetic beauty. The Man in Gold is not beautiful according to the conventional standards of beauty we know from the world of advertising and top models, but he radiates energy and light that express an aura of dynamic beauty. Besides the definition of beauty as unity in variety, other accounts of beauty relate it to pleasure. I recognize a strong hedonic dimension in my aesthetics. Though some criticize pleasure as superficial, I insist that it is a crucial element in life and one that promotes improved knowledge and performance. We would lose our taste for living if we had no hope of pleasure; and pragmatist aesthetics affirms pleasure as an important value that is perfectly consistent with knowledge. Much of my work on aesthetic experience involves highlighting the nexus between pleasure and knowledge.

2.

One of the distinctive features of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, ever since its first edition in 1992, has always been its defense of popular art (and, in this context, especially popular music), with the claim that popular art actually "deserves serious aesthetic attention": according to *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, "popular art not only can satisfy the most important standards of our aesthetic tradition, but also has the power to enrich and refashion our traditional concept of the aesthetic"; popular art suggests "a radically revised aesthetic with a joyous return of the somatic dimension which philosophy has long repressed" (Shusterman 2000, pp. 173, 177, 184). In this context, I would like to ask you if, on the basis of your pragmatist background and perspective, you

conceive of any fundamental (or, say, essential) difference between the experience of beauty in the so-called high culture or highbrow art and the experience of beauty in popular culture and popular art.

With respect to this issue, it is helpful not to focus simply on the distinction you mention between highbrow art and popular art but to think more in terms of a distinction between highbrow and popular ways of appreciating art (whether that art is designated highbrow or popular). I think the same artwork (highbrow or popular) can be experienced or used in very different ways: some are very intellectual, refined, controlled, and comparatively unemotional; others are much simpler, unreflective, unrestrained, and more emotional and somatic. Popular art encourages this freer, more emotional, somatic reception. But it can also be appropriated in a very refined intellectual way. A popular genre like a superhero comic book, for example, can be enjoyed simply for its story and the sensory visual interest of its images, but it can also be analyzed intellectually for its form, its intertextual references, and its philosophical or social meanings. The same is true for rap music, which I have shown can convey sophisticated philosophical messages as well as exciting people to an unrestrained emotional reception that generates spontaneous and vigorous dancing. Beauty can be sensory and intellectual at the same time; and the best of popular and highbrow art exhibits both forms of beauty.

The distinction between popular art and high art, is not an essential one but a pragmatic, contextual, shifting distinction, because, as I've often noted in my discussions of the high/popular art distinction, the very same work of art can evolve from a popular work into a work of high culture. Classical Greek drama in ancient times was a form of popular art and entertainment where the audience behaved in ways resembling people at a rock concert, but these plays are now considered classics of high culture. The novels of Charles Dickens and Emily Bronte were initially regarded as popular art but now are high culture classics. Shakespeare was originally popular theatre and in nineteenth century American culture he was appreciated both in popular vaudeville form and as refined theatre. In a similar way, opera in nineteenth-century America could be enjoyed in a popular way (with the audience joining in with boisterous singing and commentary) or in a refined, highbrow way.

3.

Your original development of pragmatist aesthetics has finally resulted into the “coinage” of a new concept and a new discipline, namely somaesthetics – defined as “the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning” (Shusterman 2000, p. 267), and also as “a systematic framework” that has three fundamental branches: analytic, pragmatic and practical somaesthetics (Shusterman 2008, p. 19), and also “three dimensions”, depending on “whether their major orientation is toward external appearance or inner experience”: representational, experiential and performative somaesthetics” (Shusterman 2016, pp. 102-105). In your article *Thinking Through the Body, Educating for the Humanities: A Plea for Somaesthetics* you write: “somaesthetics, roughly defined, concerns the body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning. As an ameliorative discipline of both theory and practice, [...] it seeks to enhance the meaning, understanding, efficacy, and beauty of our movements and of the environments to which our movements contribute and from which they also draw their energies and significance” (Shusterman 2006, p. 2). So, what is the meaning of beauty from the point of view of a philosophical discipline, like somaesthetics, specifically centered on the

body, on embodiment, on the embodied nature of our world-experience and life-experience in general, and of our aesthetic experience in particular?

One of the key motives that generated the project of somaesthetics and perhaps the most urgent reason for proposing it was my conviction that bodily beauty should not be limited to the conventional stereotypes of beautiful bodies that we know from the advertising, fashion, and movie industries and that it should, moreover, not be limited to the body's surface and external form. Somaesthetics is centrally concerned with sensory perception and appreciation, and in this sense it continues the original direction and concerns of aesthetics. Most people who do not specialize in aesthetics and do not know its history are not aware that the field was not originally conceived as the theory of art and beauty. Rather, its founder Alexander Baumgarten introduced it in the mid-eighteenth century as a field devoted to the study and cultivation of our sensory perception so that through better sensory perception we could improve our knowledge, our performance, and our experience. (I am happy to mention here for Italian readers that the translator of Baumgarten's aesthetics into Italian, Salvatore Tedesco, also translated my book on *Body Consciousness (Conscienza del Corpo)* and wrote an excellent introduction to his translation. Baumgarten did not include cultivation of the body and of improved consciousness of our somatic feelings in his aesthetic project, but I realized that this is necessary for the comprehensive improvement of our perception, performance, and pleasure. Moreover, through my experiences in the arts (notably music and dance) and in the practice of various somatic arts and disciplines (yoga, taijiquan, zazen, Feldenkrais Method), I learned to appreciate the beauty of certain inner bodily feelings: of breathing, of energy flow, of harmony and balance, of felt vigor and power, of dynamic release, and so on. For many of us, these feelings too often go unnoticed or fail to occur. A major aim of somaesthetics is thus to help us feel better in two senses of "feeling better": first to experience more enjoyable feelings or, we could say, more frequent and powerful feelings of inner beauty; but secondly, to gain more precision, clarity, and awareness of our inner feelings, so that we can cultivate these feelings and our somatic behavior to enjoy more beauty with greater appreciation.

4.

In your book *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, you write: "pragmatism seeks to synthesize the beautiful and the good" (Shusterman 2008, p. 47). And one of the most important chapters of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* is devoted to the question concerning "postmodern ethics and the art of living", and hence the relationship between aesthetics and ethics (indeed, the chapter begins with a famous Wittgenstein quotation from the *Tractatus* of 1921: "ethics and aesthetics are one"). In your philosophical view, does beauty play any role also in ethics beside aesthetics?

Yes, it does because I see a significant overlap between ethics and aesthetics, which includes an overlap in ethical and aesthetic vocabularies. Adjectives like fine, fair, or fitting that we use in commending things aesthetically are obviously used in ethical contexts as well. In English we don't often speak of fine or noble ethical acts as being beautiful, but in several other languages "beautiful" is used to describe and commend ethical acts or to praise the character of the person who performs them. Besides the beauty of admirable ethical acts, there is the fact that beauty very often inspires people to ethical action. Beauty arouses love, and love is a powerful incentive to cultivate and exhibit virtue. The idea of beauty as essentially related to goodness and as inspiring

love is central to the Platonic tradition, including its flourishing in the Italian Renaissance, where God was the ultimate source and perfect exemplification of Beauty, Goodness, and Love.

In our postmodern (and some might add posthuman) times of extreme skepticism about a permanent human essence from which we can logically derive absolute, universal ethical rules, we are increasingly led to make our ethical decisions through the sort of reflective, nondeductive judgment that characterizes our aesthetic judgments of taste. The detailed arguments for that claim are in the chapter you mention, so I won't go into those details here.

5.

Finally, one of the latest developments of somaesthetics, and more precisely of its second subdiscipline (pragmatic somaesthetics), concerns scrutinizing the issue of Asian erotic arts (see Shusterman, "Asian Ars Erotica and the Question of Sexual Aesthetics", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 65/1, 2007; reprinted and enlarged in *Thinking through the Body*). Is there any difference, any specificity or particularity, in investigating from an aesthetic point of view the role of beauty in such a particular field as eroticism and sexuality, in comparison to more traditional fields or domains of aesthetic inquiry?

One distinctive feature about dealing with the aesthetics of erotic desire or the beauty of lovemaking is that the erotic has been essentially excluded from the dominant modern tradition of aesthetics because that tradition has been defined by disinterestedness in opposition to desire. Even before Kant formulated his views of aesthetic judgments as disinterested and of beauty as essentially different from anything related to pleasures of the appetite (whether of food or sex), the influential English philosopher Shaftesbury insisted on the radical gap between appreciating the beauty of the human body and the experience of sexual attraction to that body. As I explain, in my chapter on Edmund Burke's somaesthetics in *Thinking through the Body*, he was one of the very few modern aesthetic theorists to affirm beauty's sexual dimension. Nietzsche, to some extent, was another, and both thinkers were probably led to this conclusion because they recognized the body's crucial role in aesthetics. Both these thinkers I regard as forefathers of somaesthetics although in my writings I criticize some of the limits of their theories of the body.

But we should not forget that premodern thinkers also recognized the beauty-erotic connection. This connection lies at the heart of Plato's philosophy. Beauty is the object of Eros, and it is Eros that guides the philosophical quest to perceive the ideal Form of Beauty and, through this vision, to give birth to beautiful forms of action and knowledge. The first step in Plato's erotic quest for beauty is the desire for another person's body because of the beauty it possesses, and which (according to Plato) it possesses as a reflection of the ideal Form of Beauty. The philosophical quest involves gradually raising one's desiring love from the body of the beloved to ever more abstract and spiritual manifestations of beauty until it reaches the ideal Form of Beauty itself. But the first rung of Plato's ladder of love is sexual desire for a beautiful body, and we find this idea also in Renaissance neo-Platonism, where we also find an erotic desire for union with God. The various ways that erotic desire takes beauty as its object (whether human, abstract, or divine beauty) forms part of my current research along with my explorations of the somaesthetic experience of beauty in practices of lovemaking as taught in the erotic arts of various cultural traditions. I have been slow to publish such research for a variety of reasons, some of which you can easily imagine. Academic philosophy is a conservative and somewhat prudish field so philosophizing about the somaesthetics of lovemaking risks having

the whole field of somaesthetics dismissed as a low-minded and superficial provocation. As you know, I am willing to take such risks but I do so here with more care and prudence than with other topics more respected by philosophy, including the topic of fashion on which I was happy to write an article for your collection. Moreover, beyond the conservatism of academic philosophy (that also has its positive aspects in preserving certain valuable traditions) but more generally in current culture, the whole topic of eroticism has been tainted by the recent scandals and outraged backlash concerning the widespread sexual harassment and erotic exploitation of women. I deplore such predatory behavior not only as immoral but also as viciously ugly, so this is a good place to end our interview about beauty.