Book Review

Meliorate Meliorism: A Review of *Somaesthetics and the Philosophy of Culture: Projects in Japan* (ed. Higuchi, S.)

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Somaesthetics and the Philosophy of Culture: Projects in Japan serves as a guidebook on Japanese somaesthetics. It was edited by Satoshi Higuchi—a leading theorist and researcher of aesthetics in Japan—who introduced somaesthetics into the country. In this book, Higuchi describes the history of somaesthetics in Japan, its development (when and the circumstances under which it began and how it developed), and its current state. The book presents an overall picture of "Japanese somaesthetics."

Two questions will arise. Is it possible to grasp the overall picture of Japanese somaesthetics? If so, is it necessary? Although not explicit, Higuchi's answer to both of these questions is yes. With regard to the first question, we should first examine whether somaesthetics can be found in Japan. Of course, somaesthetics was not originally present there. As is well known, somaesthetics was introduced at the end of the 20th century by Richard Shusterman, who wrote in the foreword of his book that he "first arrived at the idea of somaesthetics in 1996" (p. vii). Higuchi arranged for him to come to Japan in 2002. He subsequently served as visiting professor at Hiroshima University for two years and introduced the concept of somaesthetics there. Somaesthetics did not exist in Japan prior to Shusterman's arrival, and it has not spread much since then. However, people have always been curious about the potentiality of the human body, akin to somaesthetic researchers in this century.

This book illustrates how Japan was a suitable, though not optimal, place for somaesthetics to take root. First, people in Japan have always emphasized "praxis" over "theoria." In other words, they have valued doing over just seeing and thinking. For instance, traditional Japanese art, which includes paintings and music, is not merely viewed or heard, but is drawn and played. Art is not a special activity performed only talented artists, but an everyday one. In addition, Japan has a long tradition of emphasizing "acquisition" (*taitoku* in Japanese)—a deep understanding obtained through bodily practice and actions, as opposed to a shallow understanding of the theory. The importance of bodily understanding is taught not only in Zen monasteries, but also in common people's houses.

Unfortunately, modern Japanese "physical education" in schools does not properly inherit this tradition. In the latter half of the 20th century, there were some books related to body theory, but they were influenced by the Western philosophical tradition that tends to disregard the body.

However, trust in bodily knowledge is sound in itself. In fact, significant philosophical research on the capability of the body has been conducted. Books by Hidemi Ishida, Yoichi Yamada, and Akeo Okada are examples of such research.

Why did this happen in Japan? It is likely that Japanese people felt a sense of discomfort with the modern concept of "art" imported into Japan in the late 19th century. *Bugei* (martial arts and sports) were traditionally considered a form of art in Japan, but they came to be excluded because they did not fit the Western concept of "fine art." Since then, in a sense, people have regularly questioned what art truly is and whether sports can be considered art. This may have led to the maturation of the concepts of beauty, art, and sports.

Third, how to handle one's body has always been a central topic in Japanese school education. In Japan, serious incidents have long occurred at school that have been related to the human body. Higuchi provides two examples: "*tsumekomi kyoiku*" (rote learning; literally means "knowledge-stuffing education") and corporal punishment. We should feel ashamed that such problems have frequently occurred in Japanese schools. However, it can also be argued that such circumstances presented the opportunity to think about the body, which facilitated the maturation of the discussion about the somatic existence of human beings.

Regardless, is it useful to examine Japanese somaesthetics? In recent years, the reformation of aesthetics has gained momentum worldwide, and aesthetic research appears to be entering a new stage. Shusterman argued that Western philosophy needs to be renewed and that Japan and its ideological traditions offer hints for thinking about the future of philosophy. Higuchi has also been working on renovating modern aesthetics, but his perspective is not necessarily the same as that of Shusterman. Looking back on their efforts to examine the problems encountered and how they overcame them will help us gain insight into future of aesthetics and philosophy.

In fact, this book addresses topics that have rarely been touched upon in previous studies on somaesthetics. The topics include the relationship between physical and theoretical knowledge, the involvement of language in improving bodily capabilities, and the role of language in acquiring knowledge and trying to grasp meaning through the body. These issues are examined from a new perspective in this book, which refers to and introduces recent studies in Japan (e.g., the study by Masaki Suwa). Referring to such research is expected to deepen discussions on somaesthetics.

Some may argue that most of the content in this book merely consists of Higuchi's personal history. It does, in a sense. It would not be out of line to say that his career almost overlaps with the history of Japanese somaesthetics itself. However, this does not mean that Higuchi is the only person to practice somaesthetics in Japan. Researchers from various fields have made efforts that resonate with his inquiries (note that the subtitle of the book contains the pluralized term "projects"). Additionally, the number of younger researchers in the field are growing. The second half of this book consists of articles by his young colleagues, which illustrates that Japanese somaesthetics is being passed down to the next generation. Japan can thus certainly play a part in the future of somaesthetics.

Before closing, I would like to express a possibly superfluous concern. There is no doubt that somaesthetics will help us to conceive "a better body." It is no mistake to call it meliorism, as even Shusterman defines somaesthetics as "the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body" (p.xiii). However, what does it mean to make better use of one's body? Is there anyone who can do it in the truest sense? If there is, who is it?

Higuchi focuses on the somaesthetic experience of the sports performer in Chapter 2. He possibly uses the word "sports performer" and not "athlete" because the latter tends to imply someone who is proficient in physical exercise. In other words, the latter term implies a professional sportsperson. This can be seen as a reflection of his anti-elitism. This is also reflected in Chapter 3, where Wolfgang Welsh's attempt to expand the object of aesthetics from traditional fine art to topics in daily life is introduced. On the other hand, Higuchi also appears to be interested in the use of the expert's body. In his previous work, he analyzed the body theory of Yoshinori Kono—a renowned researcher and practitioner of *ko-bujutsu*, a traditional Japanese martial art (Higuchi 2017, 2019). It is also well known that Shusterman is an enthusiastic practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method and is a certified instructor who undertakes workshops and demonstrations that include practical exercises. We are thus prompted to think that paying attention to our body requires a proficient skill or a method that would be found outside our daily life. I recall that when I introduced the idea of somaesthetics to a student at my college, he said he was interested in the somatic experience of athletes. He wanted to study Ichiro's body use (Ichiro—a major league player—is mentioned several times in this book, albeit in different contexts). This example may be too mundane, but it would be reasonable to admit that there is a danger that meliorism can bring back the elitism that Higuchi and Shusterman were trying to avoid (Satoshi Masuda (2000)—a Japanese musicologist—once criticized somaesthetics' elitist tendency by stating that Shusterman's meliorism failed to capture the true value of rap music. This criticism may appear a bit too harsh, yet I do not think it is completely off the mark).

Asa Ito, a Japanese aesthetician, published a series of studies concerning the body use of the disabled. She stated that "while we tend to think that the world we see is everything, there should be a world that you can grasp with your ears, hands, and so on" (Ito 2015: p. 5). According to her, "the blind are the specialists who can sense 'another face of the world'," because "they perceive the direction of the floor mats with the feel of the soles of their feet, and they know whether or not the curtain is open by the echo of the sound" (Ito 2015: p. 6). Of course, here she uses the term "specialists" in a figurative sense.

Some researchers (including myself) have started to study the behavior of amateurs in Japanese traditional arts (e.g., Pellecchia 2017). Although amateurs do not have extraordinary talent or special skills, they know themselves and their bodies well. They always pay attention to their physical condition, because their relative incompetence encourages them to think about how to live with their own bodies and how to cope with their (im)possibilities.

Paying attention to groups such as amateurs and the disabled, who thus far may not necessarily have been the subject of philosophical research, will broaden the horizons of somesthetic research. "Projects in Japan" is still now going on.

References

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