

Pragmatists on the Everyday Aesthetic Experience

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Although the first ‘pragmatist aesthetics’ was devised by John Dewey in his *Art as Experience* (1934), Richard Shusterman has been the only scholar to use the notion of “pragmatist aesthetics” in his *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992). In this paper, I show that Dewey already refuses the gap between the practices of the ‘artworld’ and that of everyday life. In *Art as Experience*, he criticizes the ‘museum conception’ of art to argue that some aesthetic experiences in our daily life have the same essential structure as the experience of art. While Rorty has revised Dewey’s basic premises, Shusterman has rather restated them. Since the end of the 1980s, he has started developing his own philosophical project, named ‘somaesthetics’. Shusterman’s somaesthetics does not simply incorporate many Deweyan views, but also develops them further. Accepting a Deweyan framework, Shusterman rejects the sharp dualism of the so-called “lower and higher levels of art”. What is more, he considers philosophy as an art of the living, embracing in somaesthetics the ancient Greek and Asian traditions. | Keywords: *Pragmatism, Dewey, Rorty, Shusterman, Aesthetics, Everyday Life*

1. Introduction. Pragmatism

Everyday life has already been significant for pragmatist philosophers from the very beginnings of their movement. Even banality, in the sense of commonplace, might be attractive within a pragmatist approach. My aim in this paper is to investigate the contribution that pragmatism – both in its traditional form and its current reinterpretation – can bring to the question of the aesthetic value of our everyday and ordinary life. With this aim, I will firstly outline the history of pragmatism from its nineteenth-century foundations and I will then focus on one of the most interesting perspectives in contemporary pragmatist aesthetics, namely Richard Shusterman’s ‘somaesthetics’.

As is renown, pragmatism is an original American philosophy, flatly opposed to European philosophy. Pragmatism has never been a canonized philosophical movement but amounts to a loose group of erudite scholars who lived according to similar values and principles. Traditional pragmatists were

radically oriented towards practice. For example, they interpreted life as problem-solving, and considered everything as a tool, including scientific and philosophical theories. Truth is for pragmatists what is good for the community, i.e., what is useful and has a function. This is why, among other theories of truth, as for instance the theory of correspondence and the theory of coherence, the pragmatist theory of truth has never researched the ultimate metaphysical or epistemological 'Truth'.

Pragmatists also adopt various forms of naturalism. With the exception of Rorty, most pragmatists support a form of radical empiricism. They are also anti-essentialists and pan-relationists. Meliorism can also be included within the common features of this philosophical movement.

It is possible to distinguish between an Old and a New Pragmatism or, to put it differently, between traditional and neo-pragmatism. Among the representatives of traditional pragmatism, the most important ones are Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the founder of pragmatism, who was an excellent logician and practiced a form of semantic pragmatism; William James (1842-1910) who was born into a wealthy Irish family in New York and was the older brother of Henry James, the prominent novelist, and of the diarist Alice James. James attended the best schools in Europe and New York, taught physiology, psychology, and philosophy at Harvard and created a form of 'practical pragmatism'. Finally, John Dewey (1859-1952) who authored many books and articles about many timely issues, and always took part in the life of his community as a teacher, social critic, or political activist.

After a break of forty years, in 1979, Richard Rorty (1931-2007) founded neo-pragmatism, by also causing an awakening of traditional pragmatism. Among neo-pragmatists, Rorty mentioned Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, Robert Brandom (1950), and Richard Shusterman (1949). Today, many people are still working in the framework of traditional and new pragmatism. These movements constitute an active dimension of contemporary philosophical life. We can speak of at least three different schools of pragmatism.

The neo-classic pragmatists (e.g., Larry Hickman, Susan Haack, John McDermott, John Ryder, Jacquelyn Kegley, Kenneth Stickers, James Campbell), who combine adherence to naturalism with the importance given to scientific methods. They see themselves as the truest intellectual heirs to Peirce, James, and Dewey.

The analytic pragmatists (e.g., Robert Brandom, Huw Price, Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, and the young Rorty also belonged here), who take the linguistic turn with deadly seriousness and see the future of philosophy in a combination of pragmatism with analytic philosophy.

The post-analytic pragmatists (e.g., the late Richard Rorty, Daniel Dennett, but Richard Shusterman also belongs to this group), who do not insist on the importance of an analytic approach, to which they prefer the analytic style, but take strongly into account the development of continental philosophy in the 20th century, such as phenomenology or philosophical hermeneutics. They preserve however some basic pragmatist principles.

In the next sections, I will review the main implications that Dewey's and Rorty's thought may have for aesthetics and the philosophy of art. I will then move on to analyze Shusterman's philosophical approach to show that his somaesthetics can be regarded as a turning point for the history of contemporary pragmatism in its dealings with everyday life.

2. John Dewey (1859-1952) and his philosophy of art

Dewey's pragmatism was influenced by Darwinism and the American Civil War (1861-1865). Dewey always describes the individual in human being - environment transactions. His views are also featured with radical empiricism, which is connected to tools, induction, and experiments, according to an approach that can be referred to as a 'science-centered' thinking. For decades after World War II, Dewey was more influential in the field of educational theory than in the area of pragmatism and Dewey was also a Socialdemocrat politically.

In several points in his work, Dewey discusses what he calls the 'museum conception' of art. Briefly, the idea is that, on the one hand, people remove works of art from their historical and cultural contexts; on the other hand, they pile up works of art in art galleries and museums, which become symbols of the public or private 'greatness'. The 'museum conception' of art, according to Dewey, is a historical product, and more specifically, a product of capitalism that Dewey condemned. Contrary to the representatives of 'Erlebniskunst' who wrote about the contradiction between art and practical reality (like Schiller in Gadamer's opinion (see Gadamer, 2006, p. 71)), Dewey thought that this contradiction between real life and art is unnecessary.

In his philosophy of art, Dewey interprets art as embedded into the practice of human life. Everyday life and its experience, what he calls "anesthetic experience", are according to Dewey mostly incomplete, random, fragmentary, and chaotic. For example, think of a typical morning when we are rushing to work, but we are already late, and it turns out our child has a fever, plus our mother-in-law calls us at the same moment, etc.

However, the aesthetic experience, what Dewey calls the "consummatory experience" or, simply "an experience" is unified, integrated, harmonious, and satisfactory - although it can have either a positive or negative value. Nevertheless, in Dewey's opinion, everyday life experience always contains the possibility of an aesthetic experience ("an experience"). A nicely laid table, a game of chess, a becomingly furnished flat, a beautiful building, sublimity of the mountains or the sea: all these objects can give rise to an aesthetic experience. As Dewey (1987, p. 42) puts it:

A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation.

It means that the unified, integrated and satisfactory everyday-life experiences are already aesthetic experiences, and they are also able to offer aesthetic consummation even in daily life. In Dewey's opinion, experience already contains a form of understanding, which makes it crucial for both artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation. To the same extent, art should not be thought in contradiction with everyday life.

3. Richard Rorty's (1931-2007) neo-pragmatism and his philosophy of art

In 1967, Rorty published *The Linguistic Turn*. In the introduction, he wrote on the meaning and significance of the linguistic turn in philosophy and replaced the notion of experience with that of language.¹ In 1979, Rorty published his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where he criticized analytic philosophy but didn't yet formulate his own ideas. This only happened in 1989, in a book entitled *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. After this philosophical turn, Rorty initiated a political turn: from being a Trotskyite, he became a liberal ironist thinker, although it must not be forgotten that the American "liberal" means "Socialdemocratic" in Europe. He described the *public-private split* and depicted the *liberal ironist type* of human being. As he writes: "Liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do," (Rorty, 1989, p. xv) and

I use 'ironist' to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. (Rorty, 1989, p. xv)

Rorty also gave rise to a utopia of liberal democracy and referred to the so-called "Strong Poet", who is the creator of new social vocabularies.

If we switch now on Richard Rorty's aesthetics, we can say that Rorty takes the linguistic turn in dead earnest, which is why, in his philosophy of art, he deals only with literature, where he addresses everything that promotes the realization of his own ideas of liberal democracy in the public sphere and of personal development, in the private one: Emerson, Whitman, Dickens, Orwell and Bloom, Kundera, Nabokov. One can consider as an example the Nabokov-chapter and the Orwell-chapter in the *Contingency* book. As a good pragmatist, Rorty also handles literature as a tool, just like he does with economy, science, philosophy, etc.: everything is for him a tool from a practical and moral point of view. Thus, after having its aesthetic value, that literature is 'right', that promotes his purposes in the public and the private dimensions of life. It means both the literature that shows the conflict between the rich and the poor and the literature that shows the richness of human life forms and socio-political possibilities.

Rorty did not address other branches of art. One main reason for this is the fact that, as we have already mentioned, he refused to attribute a central role to experience in his neo-pragmatism, since he considered experience as a sort of metaphysical residuum.

¹ Notice that we are much before the so-called "pictorial turn" (Mitchel, 1994).

4. Richard Shusterman (1949) and his somaesthetics

Born on December 3rd, 1949 in a middle-class Jewish American family in Philadelphia, Richard Shusterman moved to Israel at the age of 16, where he settled down and continued his studies. He specialized in English, literature, and philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he got his BA in English and philosophy and his MA in philosophy. During his studies, Shusterman became interested in analytic philosophy, to continue his research work in the field of analytic aesthetics in Oxford, where he defended his Ph.D. thesis work at St. John's College. This thesis resulted in Shusterman's first book, *The Object of Literary Criticism*, published in 1984. After 1984, Shusterman taught at different Israeli universities, until he got a tenure position at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. He was a guest professor for a year at Temple University in 1985, but in 1986 he moved back to the US, Philadelphia, where he became tenured professor in 1988 and then chair of the Philosophy Department between 1998-2004. Based on his personal experiences and his philosophical readings, Shusterman later questioned his initial adherence to analytic philosophy. Symptoms of this can be observed in his second book *T. S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*, from 1988. Starting from that date, Shusterman became a pragmatist and started to work out his own aesthetic project on the basis of John Dewey's "esthetics," namely, *somaesthetics*.

In the international context, Shusterman became famous after the publication of his book *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992), which has been translated into a dozen languages. In his subsequent works, Shusterman strengthened his philosophical position² and further developed the pragmatist tradition, which provoked both significant criticism and enthusiasm in professional circles. From 2004, Richard Shusterman became a philosophy professor at the Florida Atlantic University and the director of the *Center for Body, Mind, and Culture*, which helped him to spread the movement of somaesthetics on a global level.

Shusterman's general theoretical standpoint is a philosophical aestheticism that is saturated with democratic political intentions. This is manifested in his naturalistic somaesthetics, which is colored by pragmatist meliorism, namely, by the idea that society should be democratized as much as possible. As a matter of fact, Shusterman started his academic career with an analysis of interpretation. His general theory of interpretation is a "meta-theoretical interpretive pluralism," where practice is not determined by theory, but the challenges of practice are able to show new interpretive development directions. If, as Shusterman states, understanding and interpretation are parts of human way of life, then we live in a permanent self- and world-understanding and in a permanent self- and world-interpretation. Importantly, as much as it has our life and being as its objects, this self- and world-understanding become philosophy. This happens all the way down in Shusterman's somaesthetics, since the self is always embodied for Shusterman,

² See, for example, *Practicing Philosophy* (1997), *Performing Live* (2000), *Surface and Depth* (2002), *Body Consciousness* (2008), *Thinking through the Body. Essays in Somaesthetics* (2012), *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* (2016).

that is, the *soma* always has a prominent role in his philosophy. This is why, contrary to Rorty, Shusterman insists on the importance of experience and non-conceptual understanding.

Having summarized Shusterman's neo-pragmatist position, we can turn to our next question. Why has this naturalistic philosophy of art got the name of "Somaesthetics"? On the one hand, we can consider our body as 'the tool of tools.' On the other hand, only a living, vivid body can have a central place in philosophy. Interestingly, many languages, including Hungarian, do not distinguish clearly between the living, vivid body and the dead body. However, this difference is clear in the German language: the former is what the German call *der Leib*, the latter is what they refer to as *der Körper*. In this sense, while the *Leib* is the living, vivid body, the *Körper* means the dead body in the physical sense.

In the ancient Greek language, the expression *soma* meant the living, vivid body, an expression which Shusterman combined with the word 'aesthetics' to create the notion of 'somaesthetics'. At first, Shusterman consciously and intentionally called this naturalistic philosophy of art 'pragmatist aesthetics'. This is interesting, because Shusterman was actually the first philosopher who intentionally used the expression 'pragmatist aesthetics'. Dewey, indeed, never used it.

According to Shusterman, there are three different roots in somaesthetics.

The first one is constituted by John Dewey's philosophy. As Shusterman mentions in one of the interviews I conducted with him: "[...] by the end of the 1980s, he (Dewey) was my principal pragmatist inspiration." (Kremer, 2014, p. 8)

The second source is ancient Greek philosophy. As Shusterman (2014) writes:

from my study of the ancient (Greek) idea of practicing philosophy as an embodied way of life rather than simply a merely theoretical academic pursuit of reading and writing texts. We should always remember that Socrates established philosophy not by writing any books or articles (for he authored none) but by his exemplary way of living and dying in the search for the wisdom to guide the quest for the good life.

The third source is represented by ancient Asian ideas, which he considers essential:

The idea of philosophy as an embodied way of life is also prominent in ancient Asian thought; somaesthetics has been especially inspired by Asia's rich tradition of deploying somatic disciplines for philosophical and spiritual enlightenment along with better health and harmony." (Shusterman, 2014, p. 4)

As he claimed in the same interview:

Confucius for his emphasis on embodiment and pleasure and the importance of the arts for the ethical aim of self-cultivation in which the self and its cultivation are always seen as essentially socially constituted through one's relations with others rather than being narcissistically autonomous." (Kremer, 2014, p. 10)

Before defining Shusterman's theory of somaesthetics and examining its structure and intentions, it is important to notice that Shusterman mainly developed Dewey's naturalistic philosophy of art and brought together those historical and present thoughts and practices dealing with the *soma*. Shusterman's somaesthetics can indeed be seen as:

the critical meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning. In examining the forms of knowledge and disciplines of practice that structure such somatic care or can improve it, somaesthetics involves the critical study of society's somatic values and comportment, so as to redirect our body consciousness and practice away from the oppressively narrow and injurious stereotypes of somatic success that pervade our advertising culture and to focus instead on exploring more rewarding visions of somatic value and fulfillment and better methods for attaining them." (Shusterman, 2012, pp. 182–183).

It is clear that the *soma* is both intended in a *subjective* and in an *objective* position. The "creative self-fashioning" is thus both external and internal, where the latter term is connected to the psychosomatic phenomena of pleasure, excitement, stress, and depression. Shusterman's democratic meliorism wants to consciously influence society with his somaesthetics. At the same time, somaesthetics represents a permanent Self- and World-Understanding and a form of pragmatist meliorism. The somaesthetics enterprise can be divided in three sectors:

- a) an analytic somaesthetics, meant as a theory, which explains the nature of our bodily perceptions and practices and underlines their role in our knowledge and construction of the world;
- b) a pragmatic somaesthetics, meant as a method, which explores specific ways of somatic improvement and their comparative critique;
- c) a practical somaesthetics, meant as a practice, which disciplines bodywork aimed at somatic improvement.

It follows already from this classification of somaesthetics that Shusterman deals with our everyday life from an aesthetic point of view. Otherwise, he would not mention the methods of somatic improvement. What is more, his practical somaesthetics shows that Shusterman's focus is not only theory, but that he wants to improve our everyday life activities in a real practice.

5. Conclusion

That Shusterman accepts the existence of an aesthetic experience in everyday life is beyond question. This can be easily inferred from the definition of somaesthetics mentioned above as well as from his ideas concerning the genealogical roots of the discipline itself. It is also evident that he understands aesthetic experience as a very broad concept which is present even in daily routines.

Genealogically, somaesthetics has its roots in philosophy and more particularly in pragmatist aesthetics. Somaesthetics emerged from the following two ideas. 1. Because the body is crucial both to the creation of art and to its appreciation, a pragmatist approach (which also means a meliorist approach) to aesthetics should try to improve the body's perceptual and performative capacities so that it can improve our aesthetic experience. 2. Moreover, *because pragmatist aesthetics, as I conceive it, is also centrally concerned with the ethical art of living and because the body is the necessary medium through which we live, then it follows that a pragmatist, meliorist approach to living should work on cultivating our key tool or medium of living, namely our soma.* These two philosophical arguments, which originally inspired the idea of somaesthetics, continue to inspire it and to shape the approaches of non-philosophers who are working in this field. [...] *I believe that philosophical thinking is not confined to professional philosophers with Ph.D's in this subject.* This brings me to a further point about the somaesthetics-philosophy relationship. If we conceive *philosophy broadly as an ethical art of living that is guided by critical inquiry aimed to promote a more aesthetically satisfying form of life for both self and society,* then the various disciplines and forms of knowledge that contribute to this art of living (even if they are not distinctively or professionally philosophical) can be related to the broad philosophical project of the quest for wisdom in how to live better lives. Somaesthetic research in forms outside the normal disciplinary bounds of philosophy surely can contribute to this overarching philosophical project." (Kremer, 2014, pp. 10–11)

Looking at the genealogical roots of somaesthetics, it emerges clearly that for Shusterman everyday life activities are not inferior to artworks in providing us with an aesthetic experience. Shusterman interprets philosophy as "an ethical art of living": which means that he also handles his soma and life as an artwork. The aim, as he puts it, is "to promote a more aesthetically satisfying form of life for both self and society". My contention is that somaesthetics' contribution to this broad philosophical project can be absolutely crucial.

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