

# Somaesthetics and Banality: A Reply to Kremer

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This short paper is an attempt to intersect my reading of Alexander Kremer's key ideas in his article *Pragmatists on the Everyday Aesthetic Experience* (2020) with my previous thoughts on banality as an aesthetic quality experienced by the modern subject in her everyday life. My contribution tries to interconnect key theoretical and artistic conceptions of banality (as discussed for example by Charles Baudelaire, Hannah Arendt, Marie Darrieussecq, Edward Keinholtz) with Shusterman's somaesthetics and subsequently to reveal another possibility of rethinking the relationship between aesthetics and ethics.

| Keywords: *Pragmatism, Somaesthetics, Banality, Everydayness, Insensitivity, Visual Art*

## 1 Introduction

Learning is never over because not only there is room for further refinements and extensions of the acquired skill, but also because we so often lapse into bad habits of performance or face new conditions of the self (through injury, fatigue, growth, aging, and so on) and new environments in which we need to correct, relearn, and adjust our habits of spontaneous performance. (Shusterman, 2009, p. 138)

It is my honour to present here my comments on Professor Alexander Kremer's paper *Pragmatists on the Everyday Aesthetic Experience* (2020). Kremer is a leading figure in the field of contemporary European pragmatism studies. Based at the Philosophy department of the University of Szeged, in his research Kremer is mainly concerned with neo-pragmatist aesthetics and ethics with special focus on Richard Rorty's and Richard Shusterman's philosophical concepts (see Kremer, 2016). Kremer is also Editor-in-chief of the journal *Pragmatism Today: The Central-European Pragmatism Forum*, which has been published since 2010.

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Professor Kremer's argumentation in this paper can be divided into two parts. The first one is a historical survey and comparative explanation of the different branches of American pragmatism from Dewey and James, to Rorty and Shusterman. As we can see, Kremer outlines Dewey's approach to art theory, everyday experience and specifically, the social role of art education (Dewey 1934). The second part – which articulates the key aim of the paper – is an explanation of Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics as a continuation of Dewey's thoughts on 'experience' and art. The brief insight into Rorty's neopragmatism consists of the linguistic turn in his approach and his concept of the "liberal ironist" (Rorty 1989). In the explanation of Rorty's theory of art, the author stresses his pragmatist approach and understanding of literature in terms of "social utilitarianism".

Much room in Kremer's paper is devoted to Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics. Kremer interestingly visualises Shusterman's key notes on somaesthetics with photographs from Gunther von Hagens' famous exhibition *Bodyworlds* (2010). This pictorial supplement, highlighting muscles, bones and 'corporal tectonics', reminds us of Shusterman's pursuit of "body awareness". As he effectively explains in comparison with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologist approach:

If Merleau-Ponty aims to recapture a primordial unreflective perception that is universal and 'unchanging' and that is needed as the essential ground for explaining all other perception and performance, my pragmatist approach is more sensitive to differences in somatic subjectivity and instead aims to explore and enhance our behaviour by rendering more (though not most or all) of it more explicitly conscious and reflective so that our perception and performance can be improved. (Shusterman 2009, p. 139)

Shusterman's path from the analytical tradition (during his Israeli studies) to American pragmatism is well-known but interesting to remember. In comparison with Richard Rorty, Shusterman has built his concept of somaesthetics on Dewey's aesthetics in *Art as Experience* (1934) and has created the concept of his aesthetics of pragmatism<sup>1</sup>. Subsequently, he stimulated the establishment of the international movement of somaesthetics. In addition, as Kremer points out in his paper, Shusterman's general theoretical standpoint is a form of philosophical aestheticism which is saturated with democratic political intentions and coloured by pragmatic meliorism. In Shusterman's theory of interpretation, the core is self-interpretation, which means interpretation and understanding into the embodied 'self', the so called 'soma'. "This is why, contrary to Rorty, Shusterman insists on the importance of experience and non-conceptual understanding." (Kremer, 2020, p. 71)<sup>2</sup> Shusterman's concept of 'soma' is the vivid, living body, which occupies a central position in aesthetics.

<sup>1</sup> In recent Slovak writings on the work of Shusterman's somaesthetics, Lukáš Makky (2018, pp. 169-171) has provided a useful analysis of Shusterman's ideas in reference to John Dewey's, Jan Mukařovský's, Alexander Baumgarten's, and Michel Foucault's approaches towards aesthetic experience.

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Kremer (2020) underlines the absence of a distinction between the notion of "body" and "corpse" in Hungarian. In Slovak as well, the word "telo" is used to indicate both the living and the dead body.

In order to better understand somaesthetics, Kremer's paper offers a system of three pillars as its theoretical base: Dewey's pragmatist art theory (arguing for a so-called museum concept of art); ancient Greek practice of philosophy as an embodied way of life; finally, ancient Asian (Daoism and Confucianism) tradition of deploying somatic disciplines for philosophical and spiritual enlightenment along with better health and harmony.

Apart from understanding the "soma" as a "locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation" [...], somaesthetics involves the critical study of society's somatic values and comportment" (Shusterman, 2012, pp. 182–183 quoted in Kremer, 2020, p. 72). In a recent presentation, referring to Shusterman's *Thinking through the Body* (2012, p. 182-183), Kremer describes somaesthetics as follows:

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 fulfilment and better methods for attaining them. (Kremer 2020)

With respect to the last argument, I would like to extend somaesthetics to the problem of the mindless, unreflected perception of self, as well as to the unreflected psycho-somatic transformations of the self caused by dull everydayness or by the everyday experience of banality.

## 2 Discussion

While my concern in reference to the topic of this symposium (*Banality, Aesthetics and Everyday Life*) is the aesthetics of the banal aspects of everydayness, in the remainder of this paper I would like to examine possible connections among concepts of banal, everydayness and somaesthetics. There are "side effects" of modernity: industrial boredom, repetitive everyday acts and one's experience of dullness, banality and mindlessness. I consider "the banal"<sup>3</sup> as an important part of a 'modern life experience' discourse. During the 19th and 20th century, its meaning has been shifted, and recent usage of the notion contains morally defected, or even evil connotations.

In my earlier text on banality as an aesthetic quality experienced in everyday life and in many strategies in contemporary visual art (Migašová 2016, pp. 33-45), I argue that there are crucial theoretical concepts of banality, which definitively influenced our understanding of the word. Increasing number of theoretical reflections on banality is proof of the intensified significance of the phenomenon. Apart from Baudelaire's reflection of banality as a constituent of the word 'chic' and 'eclecticism' in reaction to *Le Salon De 1846*, I find the most important explanation of banality in Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in*

<sup>3</sup> The origins of the word date back to mid-18th century. The term, originally related to the feudal service, indicated something 'compulsory'. The root of the word comes from the French *ban*: 'a proclamation or call to arms', ultimately of Germanic origins (see: [www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com](http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com) 2020).

*Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963, p. 357). She brilliantly points out that it simply was not diabolical evil what permeated the soul of the main 'holocaust administrator', Adolf Eichmann: rather, it was the "banality of evil", distance and alienation, anesthetization caused by non-reflective everyday acting, machinery of bureaucracy, perfect and dehumanized paperwork, which, in the end resulted in the biggest catastrophe of the 20th century. "The Moloch", "the beast" was born in the realm of very modern human inventions.

As an art theoretician, let me bring into this discussion two examples from the realm of art, which represent, in my opinion, artistic manifestations of bodily and psychical deformations caused by human experiences with banality, apathy (as a form of insensitivity) and mindlessness. The first one is an example from the realm of literature – *Les Truismes (Pig Tales)*, a novel by Marie Darrieussecq (1996). The main heroine of the novel slowly, almost unnoticeably turns into a pig. *Pig Tales* reveals deformative metamorphosis of the human / female body<sup>4</sup> as a consequence of unreflected everyday acts and mindless compromises even with violent aggressors. Contrary to Franz Kafka's comparable *Metamorphosis*<sup>5</sup>, Marie Darrieussecq tells us a story of slow and long, but definite transformation, or better said – disintegration of the body.

My second artistic reference is Edward Kienholz's famous installation *Beanery* (1965)<sup>6</sup>, which facilitates intense experience of banal existence. It represents the interior of the average 1960's American bar, featuring smells and sounds of the bar and various types of customers, all of whom have clocks on the faces with the time set at 10:10 pm. The entire work symbolizes the killing of time: "Kienholz has noted that time is suspended in the installation to underscore the escapism of the bar's clientele; as he stated, 'a bar is a sad place, a place full of strangers who are killing time, postponing the idea that they're going to die.'" (*Edward Kienholz Artist Overview and Analysis*, 2015) To my understanding, the artwork is a perfect exemplification of *ennui* – the experience of brutal boredom with underlying melancholy.

I consider banality as an expressive quality of communication, which is constituted of repetition, emptied figures of communication<sup>7</sup> and consequently, alienation of the communicants. I assume the alienation is a modus of one's relation not only to the others, but mainly to the self. Both artworks aesthetically communicate bodily deformation, disintegration and ugliness as an aesthetic ramification of the long, slow process of experiencing

<sup>4</sup> See the figure: Cover of *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation* (Source: The New Press, <https://thenewpress.com/books/pig-tales>. (Accessed: 6 December 2020).

<sup>5</sup> See the figure: Mendelsund, P. (1995) Cover of *The Metamorphosis: And Other Stories*. The Schocken Kafka Library. Available at: <http://commonreads.com/book/?isbn=9780805210576> (Accessed: 6 December 2020).

<sup>6</sup> See the figure: Kienholz, E. (1965) *Beanery* (assemblage / environment / installation). Available at: <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/collection/1019-edward-kienholz-the-beanery> (Accessed: 6 December 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Either verbal or pictorial. For some pioneer reflections on this problem, see: Leon Bloy's *Exegese des Lieux Communs* (1902).

banality. They can be understood as artistic proof of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, or let me say, ability of making choices.

To conclude, these notes on banal lead me to the issue of mindlessness from Shusterman's point of view. As he puts it

[...] the pervasive value of unreflected habits in our perception and action do not entail that these habits are fully adequate and do not need correction through a process involving critically reflective awareness of what those habits are. [...] Unnoticed bad habits exercise a horrible power over action, thought and will. (Shusterman 2009, p. 135)

Moreover, as he points out, we need to reconstruct our habitual modes, as well as pay careful attention to the self. Careful attending to self, I think, logically must be, at the same time, careful attending of what one perceives. Let me quote again:

Bringing unreflective habits into more explicit consciousness is useful not only for correcting bad habits but also for providing opportunities for unlearning problematic patterns of behavior and for stimulating new thinking that more generally increases the mind's flexibility and creativity, even in terms of enhancing the plasticity and efficiency of the brain's neural networks. (Shusterman 2009, p. 135)

Let me close this brief discussion with a suggestion and an invitation. In light of the aforementioned thoughts, I believe that an examination of the aesthetics of banal, with its existentialistic background, can represent a much relevant topic for somaesthetics. On the one hand, as I have tried to show, the principles of alienation and insensitivity may find fertile conceptual ground in current discussions in somaesthetics. On the other hand, they can also lead somaesthetics to better account for the complex relationships between everyday experiences, sensibility and the transformations undergone by the living body or 'soma', which in turn can be beneficial to foster cooperation between somaesthetics and everyday aesthetics.

The temporal dimension of everydayness; the form of repetition and multiplication; the notions of urban living, mechanization and institutional distance: all these phenomena may create a new, stimulating research framework for the aesthetics of pragmatism.

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