

INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Autumn 2019 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857559926, DOI 10.7413/18258630069

SOMAESTHETICS

By Richard Shusterman

(First published November 30, 2019)

It. *Somaestetica*; Fr. *Soma-esthétique*; Germ. *Somästhetik*; Span. *Somaestética*. Somaesthetics is an interdisciplinary research project devoted to the critical study and meliorative cultivation of the experience and use of the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-stylization. An ameliorative discipline of both theory and practice, somaesthetics seeks to enrich not only our discursive knowledge of the body but also our lived somatic experience and performance; it aims to improve the meaning, understanding, efficacy, and beauty of our movements and of the environments to which our actions contribute and from which they also derive their energies and significance. Somaesthetics is therefore concerned with a wide diversity of knowledge, forms, discourses, social practices and institutions, cultural traditions and values, and bodily disciplines that structure (or could improve) such somatic understanding and cultivation, and it is therefore an interdisciplinary project, in which theory and practice are closely connected and reciprocally nourish each other. It is not limited to one theoretical field, academic or professional vocabulary, cultural ideology, or particular set of bodily disciplines. Rather it aims to provide an overarching theoretical structure and a set of basic and versatile conceptual tools to enable a more fruitful interaction and integration of the very diverse forms of somatic knowledge currently being practiced and pursued. The impressive abundance of multiple discourses about the body in contemporary theory typically lacks two important features. First, a structuring framework that could integrate their very different discourses into a more productively coherent or interrelated field. The second feature lacking in most academic discourse on embodiment is a clear pragmatic orientation — something that the individual can clearly employ or apply to his or her life in terms of disciplines of improved somatic practice. Somaesthetics addresses both these deficiencies.

GENEALOGY AND EMERGENCE

Somaesthetics emerged in the mid-1990s from two principal themes of research: pragmatist aesthetics and philosophy as an embodied art of living. If pragmatist aesthetics rejects the traditional aesthetic attitude of distanced, disinterested contemplation by advocating an aesthetics of active, creative engagement, then it also should recognize that all action (artistic, practical, or political) requires the body, our tool of tools. Building on the pragmatist insistence on the body's central role in artistic creation and appreciation, somaesthetics highlights and explores the soma — the living, sentient, purposive body — as the indispensable medium for all perception. If experiences of art and beauty are distinctive for the powerfully gratifying ways they absorb our attention, unify our consciousness, and engage our emotions, then increasing our powers of awareness, focus, and feeling through better mastery of their somatic source could render more of our experience similarly rewarding in such ways. Not only art's creation and appreciation would be enhanced through this heightening of consciousness, but also the attractive shaping of our lives as an art of living could be enriched by greater perceptual awareness of aesthetic meanings, feelings, and potentials in our everyday conduct of life.

This ancient pragmatic idea of philosophy as a way of life or art of living is a second root of the somaesthetic project, with its integration of theory and practice. Rather than the phenomenological quest to reveal an alleged primordial, foundational, and universal embodied consciousness that is "unchanging, given once and for all," and "known by all men" in all cultures and times (Merleau-Ponty), somaesthetics recognizes that somatic consciousness is always shaped by culture and thus admits of different forms with different cultures (or with different subject positions within the same culture). Second, somaesthetics is interested not merely in describing our culturally shaped forms of somatic consciousness and modes of somatic practice but also in improving them. Third, to effect such improvements, it also includes practical exercises of somatic training rather than mere philosophical discourse. Building on pragmatic insights and ancient philosophical traditions from both the East and the West, somaesthetics advocates somatic training as a worthy dimension of philosophical cultivation and expression. The project uses the term "soma" to designate the lived, sentient, purposive body in order to avoid problematic associations of "body" and "flesh" (an alternative term for body that Merleau-Ponty uses but whose ordinary meaning refers only to the fleshly parts of the body and is strongly associated with Christian notions of sin). The term "soma" designates the lived, sentient, purposive body rather than merely the physical body. The "aesthetic" in somaesthetics also originates in Greek, deriving from the word for sensory perception (*aisthesis*) that Baumgarten used to coin the modern philosophical discipline of aesthetics. So somaesthetics implies a project of appreciating and cultivating the body not only as an object that externally displays beauty, sublimity, grace, and other aesthetic qualities, but also as a subjectivity that perceives these qualities and that experiences attendant aesthetic pleasures somatically. It treats both *Leib* and *Körper*.

STRUCTURE

Somaesthetics consists of three related branches. *Analytic somaesthetics* is an essentially descriptive and theoretical enterprise devoted to explaining the nature of our bodily perceptions and practices and their function in our knowledge and construction of the world. In contrast to analytic somaesthetics, whose logic is essentially descriptive, *pragmatic somaesthetics* has a distinctly normative character because it involves proposing specific methods of somatic improvement or engaging in their comparison, explanation, and critique. Since the viability of any proposed method depends on certain facts about the body (whether ontological, physiological, or social), this pragmatic dimension presupposes the analytic dimension. It, however, transcends analysis not only by evaluating the facts analysis describes but also by proposing methods to improve certain facts by remaking the body and the environing social habits and frameworks that shape it. Aims of improvement concern representational, experiential, and performative aspects of the soma. There are thus three major dimensions to somaesthetic analysis and improvement. Representational somaesthetics (such as cosmetics) is concerned more with the body's surface forms, while experiential disciplines (such as yoga) aim more at making us feel better in both senses of that ambiguous phrase: to make the quality of our somatic experience more satisfying and also to make it more acutely perceptive. The distinction between representational and experiential somaesthetics is one of dominant tendency rather than a rigid dichotomy. Most somatic practices have both representational and experiential dimensions (and rewards), because there is a basic complementarity of representation and experience, outer and inner. Performative somaesthetics concerns disciplines that focus on performative power or success, such as athletics, sports, or martial arts. But to the extent that these disciplines aim either at the external exhibition of performance or at one's inner feeling of power and skill, they might be associated with or assimilated into the representational or experiential categories. The different disciplines of pragmatic somaesthetics should be distinguished from their actual somatic practice, which is the branch of *practical somaesthetics* that involves actually practicing those disciplines.

APPLICATIONS

Somaesthetic theory has been applied to issues of ethics, politics, health and gender studies, exercise science and human-computer interaction design. For details consult the bibliography.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- P. Dhillon, *At home: somaesthetics and re-education in architecture from a global perspective*, "Contemporary Pragmatism", 12 (2015): 116-134.
- S. Gallagher, *Somaesthetics and the care of the body*, "Metaphilosophy", 42/3 (2011): 305-313.
- D. A. Granger, *Somaesthetics and racism: toward an embodied pedagogy of difference*, "The Journal of Aesthetic Education", 44/3 (2010): 69-81.

- S. Higuchi, *Somaesthetics in Japan as practicing pragmatist aesthetics*, in W. Malecki (ed.), *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics*. Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2014: 203-215.
- K. Höök, *Somaesthetic design*, "Interactions", 22/4 (2015): 26-33.
- *Designing with the body: somaesthetic interaction design*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2018.
- M. Jay, *Somaesthetics and democracy: Dewey and contemporary body art*, "Journal of Aesthetic Education", 36/4 (2002): 55-68.
- M. Jolles, *Between embodied subjects and objects: narrative somaesthetics*, "Hypatia", 27/2 (2012): 301-318.
- F. E. Maus, *Somaesthetics of music*, "Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education", 9/1 (2010): 9-25.
- M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, London, Routledge, 1962 (orig. ed. 1945).
- *The Visible and the invisible*, Evanston (IL), Northwestern University Press, 1968 (orig. ed. 1964).
- E. Mullis, *Performative somaesthetics: principles and scope*, "Journal of Aesthetic Education", 40/4 (2006): 104-117.
- G. Patella, *Una nuova disciplina. La "somaestetica" di Richard Shusterman*, "Paradigmi", 1 (2016): 179-192.
- J. Protevi, *Three developments of themes in Shusterman's somaesthetics*, "Pragmatism Today", 3/2 (2012): 21-28.
- R. Shusterman, *Somaesthetics: a disciplinary proposal*, "Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 57 (1999): 299-313.
- *Performing live*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 2008.
- *Body consciousness: a philosophy of mindfulness and somaesthetics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- *Thinking through the body: essays in somaesthetics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- *Somaesthetics and politics: incorporating pragmatist aesthetics for social action*, in L. Koczanowicz, K. Liszka (eds.), *Beauty, responsibility and power*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2014: 5-29.
- (ed.) *Aesthetic experience and somaesthetics*, Leiden, Brill, 2018.
- (ed.) *Bodies in the streets. The somaesthetics of city life*, Leiden, Brill, 2019.
- M. Surbaugh, *"Somaesthetics", education, and disability*, "Philosophy of Education", (2009): 417-424.
- S. Tedesco, *Somaesthetics as a discipline between pragmatist Philosophy and philosophical anthropology*, "Pragmatism Today", 3/2 (2012): 6-12.
- A. Terry-Fritsch, *Performing the renaissance body and mind: somaesthetic style and devotional practice at the Sacro Monte di Varallo*, "Open Arts Journal", 4 (2015): 11-132.
- B. Turner, *Somaesthetics and the critique of Cartesian dualism*, "Body & Society", 14/3 (2008): 129-133.

C. Voparil, J. Giordano, *Pragmatism and the somatic turn: Shusterman's somaesthetics and beyond*, "Metaphilosophy", 46/1 (2015): 141-161.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

R. Shusterman, *Somaesthetics*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Autumn 2019 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2019/autumn/Somaesthetics.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630069.

Please note that this URL is fixed, since it belongs to *ILAE's* archived edition. This allows readers to quote a stable document for academic purposes.

This entry also belongs to the second volume of *ILAE's* printed edition. Each issue of this edition collects *ILAE's* Spring and the Autumn online editions per year. The proper reference of the printed edition is:

R. Shusterman, *Somaesthetics*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 2, Milano, Mimesis, 2019.