

## Urban Aesthetics and Soma-Politics: On *Bodies in the Streets: The Somaesthetics of City Life*

Book Review

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*Bodies in the Streets: The Somaesthetics of City Life*, published in August 2019, is the second book in the series edited by Richard Shusterman “Studies in Somaesthetics. Embodied Perspectives in Philosophy, the Arts and the Human Sciences,” published by Brill Publishers. The first volume, entitled *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics* (2018),<sup>1</sup> represented a very interesting, although quite “classical,” contribution in somaesthetics. By this I mean it is a “classical” contribution to a “non-classical” and somehow “unconventional” (in a positive sense of these terms, of course) branch of contemporary aesthetics *par excellence* such as somaesthetics, about which Shusterman had written in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992<sup>1</sup>; 2000<sup>2</sup>) that it is “best situated within an expanded discipline of aesthetics” capable of giving “more systematic attention to the body’s crucial roles in aesthetic perception and experience, including the aesthetic dimensions of body therapies, sports, martial arts, cosmetics, etc., that remain marginalized in academic aesthetic theory” (p. 283). Therefore, “to incorporate somaesthetics’ practical dimension, the field of aesthetics must also expand its notion of disciplinary attention to actual, hands-on training in specific body practices that aim at somaesthetic improvement,” and while “[i]nclusion of such body work may make aesthetics more difficult to teach or practice in the standard university classroom, ... it certainly [can] make the field more exciting and absorbing, as it comes to engage more of our embodied selves” (p. 283). With its 12 chapters articulated in 3 parts dedicated to “Embodiment in Philosophy and Aesthetic Experience,” “Somaesthetic Approaches to the Fine Arts” and “Somaesthetics in the Photographic Arts and the Art of Living,” *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics* connected back to the question of aesthetic experience that has always played an important role in Shusterman’s thought – at least since *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and his seminal paper “The End of Aesthetic Experience” (1997). In that first volume, Shusterman expanded aesthetic experience in the direction of somaesthetic investigations of various aesthetic questions and topics, with connections to thinkers from the present and the past.

Now, in comparison to the very interesting but, as I said, somewhat more “classical” first book in the series “Studies in Somaesthetics,” *Bodies in the Streets: The Somaesthetics of City Life*, represents a more original and stimulating work, offering a significant contribution in imposing

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<sup>1</sup> See my review of this volume on the online journal of aesthetics *Studi di estetica* (<http://mimesisedizioni.it/journals/index.php/studi-di-estetica/article/view/635>).

somaesthetics as one of the most open and pluralist fields in contemporary philosophy. The book advances Shusterman's philosophical investigation of various phenomena with a "critical study and meliorative cultivation of the body as the site not only of experienced subjectivity and sensory appreciation (aesthesis) that guides our action and performance but also of our creative self-fashioning through the ways we use, groom, and adorn our physical bodies to express our values and stylize ourselves" (p. 15) – following Shusterman's definition of somaesthetics.

A simple look at the book's table of contents clearly shows this. In the long and complex introduction, Shusterman explains clearly and in detail the origin, general meaning, and structure of the book. This structure is articulated in four parts: "The Soma, the City, and the Weather," "Festival, Revolution, and Death," "Performances of Resistance, Gender, and Crime," and "Bodies in the Streets of Literature and Art". The simple titles of the book's four parts, and then the titles of the contributions gathered in each part, show how the general aim and, as it were, the very spirit of somaesthetics – as a philosophical discipline attentive to *both* theory and practice – is open, interdisciplinary and pluralist. At the same time, somaesthetics avoids the potential risk of falling into a variety of relativism thanks to its strong and coherent pragmatist background and thanks to its very clear and specific focus on the body, understood in its complexity and its irreducibility to simplistic patterns of explanation (be it philosophical, scientific, theological, etc.).

As Shusterman (2012) explained, his "aesthetic research... began to look beyond the analytic aesthetics paradigm (valuable as it is) to incorporate ideas from pragmatism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, post-structuralism, and East-Asian thought:" "striving for some kind of new philosophical synthesis, a new remix (in rap terminology)," he would soon realize that "aesthetics can be more usefully pluralistic" than it has usually been. (pp. 105, 112). This plurality applied to both a *plurality* of complementary approaches and a *plurality* of objects of inquiry, neither excluding "the most elevated fine arts" nor devaluating "the most commonday everyday aesthetic practices and popular artistic forms" (p. 112). *Bodies in the Streets* bears clear traces of all this. It is a valid successor to Shusterman's previous books as author, his collections as editor, and the research in somaesthetics developed in recent times in the specifically dedicated journal, *The Journal of Somaesthetics*. At the same time, the book also extends and expands in a fascinating way the sense and scope of somaesthetic research, not limiting itself to inquiries into aesthetic subjects (no matter how broad, articulated, and complex is the concept of "aesthetic" assumed and used). Rather, it broadens the horizon of somaesthetics to cover a variety of phenomena and subjects that range from the study of urban development and life, to ethics and politics, to the philosophical investigation of art, literature, and culture inter- and multi-cultural perspectives.

The inter- and multi-cultural perspective is especially the case in the three interesting contributions included in the fourth part of *Bodies in the Streets*: "Terra Incognita: The Somaesthetics of Thomas De Quincey's Psychogeography," "The Empty Spaces You Run Into: The City as Character and Background in William S. Burroughs's *Junky, Queer, and Naked Lunch*," and "The Somaesthetic Sublime: Varanasi in Modern and Contemporary Indian Art," authored by Evy Varsamopoulou, Robert W. Jones II, and Pradeep A. Dhillon, respectively. The study of urban development and life is especially at the core of the three significant contributions in the first part of the book: "Bodies in the Streets: The Soma, the City, and the Art of Living," "The Weather-Worlds of Urban Bodies," and "White on Black: Snow in the City, Skiing in Copenhagen," authored by Richard Shusterman, Mădălina Diaconu, and Henrik Reeh, respectively.

These six contributions are all of great interest, in general, and quite often original in the way in which they interpret from a somaesthetic perspective very different phenomena. Diaconu

considers the relationship between “human settlements [and] physical atmosphere,” “urban ‘sensescapes’... the practices through which, intentionally or not, urban spaces are experienced, appropriated, modified and produced,” and the many ways in which “atmospheric factors influence in a positive or negative way and in various degrees our human well-being, behavior and performance” (pp. 38–39). Reeh reflects on the experience of “urban snow [in Copenhagen] and skiing as a somaesthetic environment” (p. 62). Yet Varsamopoulou studies “the ways in which the body, dreaming, drifting and opium transform the cityscape in Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*” in light of “the recent reformulation, or redirection of aesthetics toward an awareness of the body and its cultivation in everyday life by *somaesthetics* [that] has opened new and wider lenses through which to read De Quincey’s autobiographical narratives” (pp. 249, 252). Jones attempts to combine “the theories of Alfred Korzybski, Wilhelm Reich, W. Grey Halter and Vladimir Gavreau” with “the theory of somaesthetics” to interpret “[William S.] Burroughs’s intellectual and artistic interests, including a wide-ranging philosophy of the body, mind, language and control” and the depiction of life in the “mid-twentieth-century cities... portrayed in his novels” (p. 271). Finally, Dhillon examines the relationship between “Burke’s conception of the sublime,” “the Kantian treatment of the concept,” the “turn to the somatic” that we find in Shusterman’s work on this topic, and “the use of examples of the body in the city drawn from Indian modern and contemporary art” aimed at demonstrating that, “without a turn to somaesthetics, we could not reasonably extend the notion of the sublime to the social and political dimensions that postmodern thinkers like Lyotard have sought to do,” i.e., “without the turn to somaesthetics, the sublime would be of little use in understanding the role of art in moral and civic education” (p. 312).

Shusterman’s long and rich essay “Bodies in the Streets: The Soma, the City, and the Art of Living” plays a decisive role in the book because of its capacity to explain in general, and then investigate in detail, several fundamental aspects of the body/city/art-of-living relationship that also make it possible for the reader to understand the many connections present in the other essays. Other essays in parts one and four seem at times to suffer from a certain heterogeneity and variegation that may disorient the reader and lead him/her to ask whether the relation to the basic somaesthetic framework of investigation is fully consistent or a little too vague. To be precise, this is not necessarily a problem or a deficiency in the book, because variety, openness, inter- or multi-disciplinarity, and pluralism correspond to essential and distinctive features of pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics as such. So, a problem may arise only if the heterogeneity crosses a certain line, so to speak, and causes the sensation of a loss of philosophical unity and consistency. This feeling, if it arises, clearly also depends on the reader’s experience, expectations, and interpretations.

This possible problem of heterogeneity that might arise in some of the essays, surely does not apply to the chapter “Bodies in the Streets: The Soma, the City, and the Art of Living” and the essays in parts two and three that powerfully link somaesthetics with politics. Starting from a few “etymological connotations” of the English, German, and French terms for bodies, sidewalks, and streets, Shusterman introduces the idea of “city streets [as] a theatre for dramatic action, a stage with multiple scenes for spectacles of performance in the art of living, an art necessarily performed with the soma (the sentient purposive body) and most typically performed in scenes involving other somatic selves or bodies in the streets” (p. 14). On this basis, Shusterman then develops some important observations on the complexity of the human experience of the body and, in relation to the complexity of the soma “as both subject and object in the world,” also on the complexity of the human nature as such: as Shusterman writes, “[o]ur experience and

behavior are far less genetically hardwired than in other animals. The soma reveals that human nature is always more than merely natural but instead deeply shaped by culture” (p. 15). In doing this, Shusterman relies on some phenomenological-anthropological insights into the dual nature of our body experience as both *Körperhaben* and *Leibsein*, thus connecting in a fascinating way American pragmatism with 20<sup>th</sup>-century German philosophical traditions.

Shusterman offers a general presentation of the somaesthetic conception of the body as expressing “our ambivalent condition between power and frailty, dignity and brutishness, knowledge and ignorance” (p. 16) and as “a single, systematic unity that however contains a multiplicity of very different elements (including diverse organs) that have their own needs, ailments, and subsystems that frequently trouble the functioning unity of the somatic self as a whole” (p. 17). Then he shows how this complexity “is also shared by the city, whose dynamic unity contains a diversity of neighborhoods, organizations, populations, activities, and interests that are often in tension and threaten to destabilize the city’s unity” (p. 17). In the remaining sections of the paper, Shusterman goes into more detail about the body/city/art-of-living relationship through an elaboration in various steps of “the analogy of soma and city” (p. 17).

Drawing on reflections on the body, the city, and also the State (“the body politic”) from such thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Poe, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Engels, Simmel, and Benjamin, and using them in a creative but not unfaithful way to create “a useful background for exploring the somaesthetics of city life” in its many features, Shusterman introduces the reader to various “key characteristic[s] of the city that ha[ve] an analogy with the soma” (p. 22). Those range from the dialectic of size and growth (p. 18) to the ambivalences of both the soma and the city as “site[s] of desire” (p. 20), to the condition of being defined by limits yet capable of extending beyond them (p. 22), to the fact of being sites of both freedom and constraints and dependencies (p. 22), to the dialectic of commonality and individuality (p. 23). Finally, turning in a more explicit way to the somatic experience of the city in our times, Shusterman offers some intriguing philosophical observations on the relationship between the crowd and the individual (pp. 24–29), on current phenomena of “intoxication and alienation from the city streets” (pp. 29–31), and on the significance of “drama, art of living and somaesthetic self-fashioning” in our globalized and aestheticized contemporary experience of the city through our bodies (pp. 31–35). Shusterman especially focuses on the way in which this may also lead us to rethink our ideas on the relationship between aesthetics and politics today. As he explains indeed in a pragmatist and meliorist spirit,

*[t]he large presence of foreigners circulating in the city streets provides the metropolis with more possibilities for varied somaesthetic experience and an enriched aesthetic education in cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity. Unfortunately, some citizens regard the introduction of such diversity as unwelcomely transforming the city’s (or nation’s) prior aesthetic “feel” and thus calling for solutions to this discomfort that are politically problematic. Ghettos are a traditional response to this fear, as are expulsions and xenophobic violence. ... Cities, as Musil remarked, have their distinctive aesthetic identities or particular qualitative “feels” that lovers of those cities cherish and do not want to see changed in any way. On the other hand, change and diversity are an essential part of the dynamism of development and innovation that defines city life and distinguishes it from the familiar steadiness and slow pace of village or country life. Like the body, the city needs to balance change with constancy, harmonize stability with movement and growth, in a manner that is not*

*rigidly mechanical or prescribed by strict conformity to predetermined rules but instead sensitively flexible and adaptive. ... How do the streets themselves contribute to this somaesthetic social drama where individuals develop and manifest their work of self-stylization in interactive engagement with others? One might specify three modes: as physical space, as structured social space, and as narrative space. ... Benjamin's notion of "the streets [as] the dwelling place of the collective" in which the city's many classes, cultures, and ethnicities move and mix suggests the promise of a dynamic, hybrid social group that can be politically potent but attractively open and comparatively free. Its constitution can be flexibly voluntary, since the same streets can be used to walk away, not just to come together. A collective or crowd in the street need not deny free individual expression but can, as we argued earlier, even stimulate and nurture it. But despite such liberty, a collective can nonetheless manifest its commitment and its power by occupying the streets with its throng of communicating, dynamic, and sentient somas. Such crowds are more lively and energizing than the mere virtual presence of texts and images shared through digital networks. Bodies in the streets still matter, aesthetically and politically (pp. 30–31, 33, 35).*

The relationship between aesthetics and politics, which is at the core of the second and third parts of the book, is investigated in *Bodies in the Streets* from a somaesthetic perspective. This represents, in my view, one of the most intriguing, stimulating, and original characteristic of the book. In particular, I consider the connection of somaesthetics and feminism that emerges, powerfully and convincingly, in these parts as one of the most promising aspects of this new direction of somaesthetic research, also given the recent rise of a new wave of radical feminism, testified for example by Arruzza et al. (2019).<sup>2</sup> Shusterman (2003) had already touched on the connection of pragmatist aesthetics and feminism. However, this new context might make it possible to intersect the somaesthetic examination of the body "in the street" (and hence the network of social relationships that play such an important role in determining, among other things, our body consciousness both at the individual and collective levels) with critical developments in contemporary feminism against the growing objectification, reification, and even commodification of human bodies (and most noticeably of women's bodies) and how they are controlled.

The second part of the book, entitled "Festival, Revolution, and Death" includes the following contributions: "Body Politics: Revolt and City Celebration," "Bodies in the Streets of Eastern Europe: Rhetorical Space and the Somaesthetics of Revolution," and "From Dancing to Dying in the Streets: Somaesthetics of the Cuban Revolution in *Memories of Underdevelopment and Juan of the Dead*," authored by Matthew Crippen, Noemi Marin, and Marilyn G. Miller, respectively. The third part, entitled "Performances of Resistance, Gender, and Crime," has four chapters: "Street' is Feminine in Italian: Feminine Bodies and Street Spaces," "Bodies in Alliance and New Sites of Resistance: Performing the Political in Neoliberal Public Spaces," "East End Prostitution and the Fear of Contagion: On Body Consciousness of the Ripper Case," and "Toward a Somaesthetic Conception of Culture in Iran: Somaesthetic Performance as Cultural Praxis in Tehran," authored by Ilaria Serra, Federica Castelli, Chung-jen Chen, and Alireza

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2 On this ground-breaking contribution to the definition of a new form of radical feminism both in theory and practice, and also its connections to, for example, Angela Davis's intersectional approach to feminism and social criticism, see the interviews with Cinzia Arruzza and Nancy Fraser available at <http://mimesis-scenari.it/2018/05/31/donne-razza-e-classe-intervista-a-cinzia-aruzza> and <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/10/nancy-fraser-feminism-anti-capitalist-99-percent-majority>.

Fakhrkonandeh, respectively.

It is impossible to do justice, in the limited space of a review essay, to the richness and depth of the ideas in these seven papers both from a strictly theoretical point of view and a trans- and multi-cultural perspective. The authors offer stimulating somaesthetic observations, originally intersecting aesthetics, politics, and feminism, with a focus on such different historical contexts and cultural events – as emphasized in the introduction by Shusterman– as “the politically directed Mandalay Water Festival that wildly floods the city streets and drenches those who use them [and] the streets surrounding Cairo’s Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring Protests of 2011” in Crippen’s chapter (p. 4), the “spontaneous bodies-in-the-streets revolt [in Romania] that sparked the revolution of 1989 and its execution of the communist despot Nicolae Ceasescu” in Marin’s chapter (p. 4), “Cuban films that... reveal the tensions between... Castro’s revolutionary government’s... demands on the bodies of citizens (who are called to a self-sacrificing commitment to the government’s aims) and, in sharp contrast, the somaesthetic needs and desires of those bodies in the city of Havana” in Miller’s chapter (p. 5), and then “woman’s subjugation on the streets, focusing on Italy” in Serra’s and Castelli’s chapters (pp. 5–6), the “viciousness of violence women suffer on the streets through an examination of the notorious case of Jack the Ripper” in Chen’s chapter (p. 6), and finally “the complex history and multiple levels of body-shaping and city-shaping ideologies in contemporary Iran” in Fakhrkonandeh’s chapter (p. 7).

It is important to emphasize the significance of such complex, brilliant, thought-provoking, and original contributions. It is also important to stress the role that such an opening of somaesthetic research toward a new connection of aesthetics and politics, with a focus on such relevant phenomena, may play for future developments of somaesthetic investigations. In recent decades, Italian society and mentality have undoubtedly made great progress with regard to women’s rights. Nevertheless, there persist sexist stereotypes and serious problems concerning the condition of women. (There has, in recent times, been widespread use of the term “femminicidio” [“femicide”] in newscasts, newspapers and TV shows to call people’s attention to the emergency situation of too many Italian women suffering from gendered violence and being killed by males). So, as a reader I was particularly impressed by Serra’s and Castelli’s chapters.

The former starts from the etymological observation that, although “[t]he word ‘street’ – *la strada* – is a noun of feminine gender in the Italian language,” “Italian public spaces are historically places of misogyny” (p. 153). She then explains that her aim is to address “a watershed moment in Italian history that opened a discussion on the somaesthetics of the street: the 1970 wave of feminist struggles,” emphatically defined by Serra as “a time in which Italian women took possession of Italian streets as they intensely reflected on their bodily experience of such spaces. ... In those years,” as Serra further explains, “the street developed into a stage and even an instrument of the struggle, a walkable space that offered visibility but one that also became a matter of discussion involving bodies, actions, and sensations. The specific intersection of ‘soma-esthetics’ discussed in this article is one where *soma* is the feminine body and *aesthesis* is women’s sensorial perception of the city” (p. 153). Serra’s contribution thus is to provide “a specific Italian declension to Richard Shusterman’s proposition for a socially minded, pragmatic somaesthetics, capable of turning self-awareness into social action. ... Feminism was a turning point in women’s history that included a redesigning of the experience of city life for women,” and it also involved “a deep realization of the ‘somaesthetic dissonance or disharmony’ perceived by [women’s] bodies in the street that became a fierce refusal of their beleaguered state, a political

resistance to oppression” (pp. 153–154).

Next, Castelli focuses on “the link between politics and urban space from a situated, embodied, gendered, intersectional, and feminist approach” (p. 177). She aims to offer a reflection “on bodies through a focus on embodied practices of performing in public space” and to explain, through a specific reference to the feminist movement, that “taking bodies into account means entering a political dimension that says something about our existence – as human beings – in the world” (p. 177). Bodies, as Castelli correctly points out,

*are not just something about which discussions can be held and knowledge can be produced, but they are means of political creation. ... On one hand, the feminist intersectional approach allows me to take into account differences among embodied subjectivities in all their possible forms, and leads me toward an analysis of the processes of construction of identities and different modulations of the relationship between the individual and the collective. On the other hand, my embodied experience with feminist collectives and protests provides me with important interpretative tools* (pp. 177–178).

I found this way of connecting the study of embodied subjectivities and feminist activism through the use of one’s own body in the street to protest against persisting patriarchal structures, mentality, and values (or better, disvalues) to be quite original. Not only is it an intriguing reinterpretation and further development of somaesthetics’ basic aim to be a discipline of both theory and practice (which here means political participation and praxis), but it is also a very promising path for new somaesthetic research in connection with, for example, Angela Davis’ intersectional approach to feminism, Judith Butler’s performative conception of assembly, and Nancy Fraser’s anti-capitalist feminism “for the 99%” (see Marino et al., 2019). Continuing to develop somaesthetics in the direction of connecting aesthetics and politics, i.e., exploring the role that an embodied aesthetic can play in political debates and struggles (with a particular focus on feminism, with its undeniable significance today and the specificities of the questions concerning women’s bodies in society), might lead to original, stimulating, and even surprising new acquisitions of somaesthetic knowledge. It would mean expanding our body consciousness in the broadest meaning of this term, thus encompassing both the individual and the social, the private and the public, and the theoretical and the practical.

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