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Shusterman's Thinking Through the Body and Everyday Aesthetics

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“Shusterman’s *Thinking Through the Body* and Everyday Aesthetics”

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Abstract

How does Richard Shusterman’s *Thinking Through the Body* apply to the issues of everyday aesthetics? As it turns out, many chapters contribute significantly to everyday aesthetics, in particular the work on architecture, self-styling, the body as background, lovemaking, and the process of making a photographic portrait. Shusterman’s concentration on the art of living has special importance to everyday aesthetics. Current debates within the field of everyday aesthetics also raise problems for somaesthetics. I also question the limits of somaesthetics and Shusterman’s rejection of defamiliarization in making the ordinary extraordinary.

Keywords: Somaesthetics, Richard Shusterman, *Thinking Through the Body*, Thomas Leddy, everyday aesthetics

1. Introduction

Thinking Through the Body is a major contribution to the burgeoning field of everyday aesthetics.¹ Somaesthetics, a discipline founded by Richard Shusterman, has much to be said for it, not only as a contribution to aesthetic theory but also as an important new interdisciplinary effort. In it, Shusterman continues to expand the range of somaesthetics into a number of new and interesting territories, including the aesthetics of architecture, art photography, and lovemaking. Since architecture, for example, is commonly considered one of the fine arts, somaesthetics, insofar as it has important things to say about it, can be seen as having important relevance to the nexus of aesthetics and the philosophy of art. This is also true for art photography. Drawing on Eastern traditions, especially from India, even lovemaking can be treated as a fine art.

The role of somaesthetics within philosophical aesthetics generally will be one of my main concerns here. However, I am particularly interested in its relation to everyday aesthetics, a subdiscipline that I have been much involved with in recent years.² In the past I have seen somaesthetics as a branch of everyday aesthetics (47). Yet, as such, it could be only seen as covering a small disciplinary space. I now think it is much more than that. Shusterman himself has expanded its scope, seeing it no longer as a sub-

¹ Richard Shusterman, *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Page references to this book will just be in parentheses.

² *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012). An excellent introduction to this topic is Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

discipline of aesthetics but as interdisciplinary, taking in disciplines that “enrich our understanding of how we experience and use the body in appreciative perception, aesthetic performance, and creative self-fashioning, and for examining the methods of improving such experience and use.” (141) As such, it ranges far beyond everyday aesthetics and even beyond philosophical aesthetics...perhaps beyond philosophy itself. Still, it is useful to ask what role somaesthetics can play in the emerging field of everyday aesthetics, and that is my purpose here.

2. Lived Space

There are a number of ways in which somaesthetics may contribute to everyday aesthetics. Although architecture is an art form, it is one that is devoted to providing an aesthetically satisfying context for everyday life activities. It is not surprising then that the first appearance of the phrase “the aesthetics of everyday life” that I know of was in Roger Scruton’s book on the aesthetics of architecture.³ Scruton saw architecture coming under the aesthetics of everyday life and thus as associated with various minor arts such as table arrangement. Discussion of the role of the body in architectural space, then, relates to everyday aesthetics. Shusterman in his chapter, “Somaesthetics and Architecture: A Critical Option.” stresses that the *soma* (his word for the body/mind, coined to avoid dualism) is the point from which space “can be experienced and articulated” (224).⁴ He also observes the various symbolic connections between architecture and the body -- think Vitruvius (223). In addition, bodily gesture plays an important role in architectural expression. This leads to consideration of proprioception

³ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

⁴ Jenefer Robinson has recently taken a similar somatic approach to architecture in her “On Being Moved by Architecture,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70(4) (2012): 337-253. Another similarly body-centered approach to architecture can be found in Arnold Berleant, “Judging Architecture,” in his *Aesthetics Beyond the Arts: New and Recent Essays* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 3-15.

as the sense modality most involved with orientation of the body to space (225). All of this is, of course, true not only for architecture but for every other aesthetic experience including the aesthetics of everyday life.

3. The Body as Background

Another area in which Shusterman's innovations may be relevant to everyday aesthetics is his development and expansion of the notion of background in "Chapter 2: The Body as Background." This is not surprising since he has long been inspired in this by the aesthetics of John Dewey, who is clearly the grandfather of everyday aesthetics as well as the leading founding figure of pragmatist aesthetics.⁵ Any aesthetic experiences we have, whether in art, nature, or in everyday life will involve the body as essential background. Shusterman's own contribution to the theory of background is the notion that we need to sometimes foreground the body to improve understanding of how it functions in the background. This, in turn, allows reconstruction of poor habits, for example in flute-playing or golf (17). This somatic self-knowledge, and the increasingly effective performances it produces, can lead to heightened experiences with intense aesthetic qualities. So the notion of background not only provides a basis for understanding how aesthetic experience is possible but how it can be improved as we pursue the art of living. Shusterman associates the art of living particularly with everyday aesthetics (for example, in Chapter 13) as also with philosophy itself (i.e. philosophy as the art of living.) This is one area in which somaesthetics seems to have gone beyond its origins in the discipline of aesthetics.

⁵ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987). My own take on Dewey's aesthetics can be found in "John Dewey," *Aesthetics: The Key Thinkers* ed. Alessandro Giovannelli (New York: Continuum, 2012) and "Dewey's Aesthetics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011 at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey-aesthetics/>

Shusterman's first explicit mention of aesthetics in relation to the body as background comes when he discusses Wittgenstein, whom he praises for affirming the body's importance as background for mental life "including the refinements of culture and aesthetics," mastery of which can be achieved through motor training (48). Music is an important example. Still explicating Wittgenstein, he observes that "music's inexpressible depth of meaning and its grand mysterious power derive from the body's silent role as creative ground and intensifying background" (50). He then turns to John Searle's analysis of what he calls "Background." If Searle is right that Background, as he puts it, "enables perceptual interpretation to take place" and "structures consciousness" (quoted by Shusterman, 51) then this must also be true of aesthetic experience as well, including the everyday variety.⁶ The Background, for Searle, consists in neurophysiological structures that cause intentional phenomena. These structures could also be seen as the causal basis for aesthetic experience. Shusterman rightly questions Searle's limiting of the Background to neurophysiological causes, brain structures, and the individual subject. He then introduces Pierre Bourdieu's sociological notion of "*habitus*" (which he recognizes as the basis of taste) as expanding the notion of the Background by way of social inscription in the body.⁷

Dewey, as Shusterman observes, comes closer to an aesthetic analysis of experiential background through his notion of a background quality of experience that is felt.⁸ However, he thinks that Dewey's theory that unified experience (including aesthetic experience) has a "pervasive quality" is weak and needs supplementation by the

⁶ John Searle, *Rationality in Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁸ Dewey's view on background is deep. See my discussion in "Dewey's Aesthetics," 2.9 "The Common Substance of the Arts."

theory of background habit, which brings in the body. As he puts it, for Dewey, “aesthetic experience is where such unifying background qualities seem particularly important and distinctively felt” (61). So far, so good. However, when he turns to Dewey’s advocacy of Alexander Technique, the aesthetic seems to disappear. Alexander Technique (as also Feldenkrais Method, of which Shusterman is a practitioner) heightens consciousness of the body and thereby allows us to correct bad habits. This can, of course, be useful in the practice of an art, for example playing the violin. So, insofar as such techniques may be used in improving the skills necessary for art they are *related* to aesthetics. But are the experiences involved best described in terms of aesthetics? Do these practices help us to focus on aesthetic qualities, for example, if their goal is changing habits to eliminate pain, as Shusterman suggests? What about this relates to aesthetic experience and specifically to aesthetic pleasure? Granted, the pain we experience in having to listen to a bad concert is “aesthetic” in the sense of being a *negative* aesthetic experience, but the main focus of aesthetics is on obtaining pleasure not on elimination of pain. Even sublime experience, which is clearly aesthetic while at the same time associated with terror and hence psychic pain must, according to Edmund Burke, be accompanied by delight.⁹

There is no problem with Alexander technique and Feldenkrais method as ways to change bad habits. However, if taken as paradigmatic for somaesthetics they would raise concerns about somaesthetics’ relevance to aesthetics generally to the extent that aesthetic experience recedes into the background. Shusterman does find inspiration in Montaigne’s belief that our sensuous pleasures are magnified as we lend greater attention

⁹ Edmund Burke. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Part 1, Section IV. Burke there makes a terminological distinction between delight and pleasure.

to them (86). Still, the creation of positive affect through such processes as meditation (another important touchstone for his somaesthetics (85)) should not, I believe, be equated with the creation of aesthetic experience. Whatever generalized happiness or joy may result from meditative practices does not equate with pleasure or delight taken in certain specific objects, events, images or properties. Nor is it clear that what Shusterman calls “somaesthetic pathologies of everyday life” (106) are aesthetic, even negatively so. True, curing such pathologies can be conducive to making life better and can even help enhance aesthetic experience, but that is not enough to make the process itself aesthetic. This would be like saying that getting a hearing aid is aesthetic since it enhances aural experience. However, these concerns are somewhat allayed by Shusterman’s thinking about photography as performative process, and about the art of lovemaking, to which I now turn.

4. Human Interactions During the Creative Process

The most important part of *Thinking Through the Body* for everyday aesthetics is “Part III: The Arts and the Art of Living.” There, Shusterman makes the important point that something interesting aesthetically, and important to photography as an art form, goes on between the photographer as portraitist and the sitter. The aesthetics of art (especially in the analytic tradition) tends to focus on the end product of artistic processes, for instance the aesthetic features of photographs.¹⁰ Yet it is a paradox of contemporary aesthetics that, despite this, emphasis has been increasingly placed on the context of production in appreciation and understanding. Doesn’t this imply that something important about art can be found in what happens in the artist’s or, in this case,

¹⁰ See my, “A Pragmatist Theory of Artistic Creativity,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 28 (1994): 169-180.

the photographer's studio? Are the processes involved in the taking of a photographic portrait part of the aesthetics of art or part of the aesthetics of everyday life? In a way, they are both. They are part of the aesthetics of art since they go into our understanding and evaluation of the resultant artwork. They are part of the aesthetics of everyday life also, and for two reasons. First, studio life is a major part of the everyday life of the working photographer. (Here I disagree with Kevin Melchionne who insists that everyday aesthetics would exclude daily life of the professional.)¹¹ As Russell Pryba has noted, a theory of everyday aesthetics that only focuses on those experiences that most humans do every day would be pretty banal.¹² Second, these processes are part of the aesthetics of everyday life if we take everyday life to include aspects of non-art aesthetics that are not quite ordinary, not strictly speaking everyday, but which relate strongly to, or are grounded on, everyday experience. Many theorists of everyday aesthetics, including Melchionne, think that it should be limited literally, or almost literally, to things that happen every day.¹³ It is not an everyday experience to have one's portrait made in a photographer's studio. So, this view of everyday aesthetics would exclude this activity. It becomes an orphan, neither part of art aesthetics nor part of everyday aesthetics. This is a mistake, for what one does in the studio when presenting oneself for admiring visual attention *is* something that happens every day, as is also engaging with others in joint projects and in conversation. The activities in the portrait studio are *built on* what happens every day. Melchionne's focus on the common downplays the important

¹¹ Kevin Melchionne, "The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics" *Contemporary Aesthetics* 11 (2013). <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=663>

¹² Editors note.

¹³ "The Definition" *ibid.* A similar view is taken by Ossi Naukkarinen in "What is 'Everyday' in Everyday Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 11 (2013) <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=675>

relations between the common and the unusual, i.e. between everyday conversation and the more unusual communication between portrait photographer and subject that Shusterman describes. As Shusterman observes, studio photography relates to the everyday aesthetics of self-styling and interpersonal communication.¹⁴ It does so by building on those things to create unique and art-like experiences in the happening of the creative process itself.

The process of making a photograph of a human subject is neither a work of art, nor something that we normally aesthetically evaluate. Nonetheless, as Shusterman notes, it does include both artistic, or at least art-like, performances and experiences that are aesthetic. In *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, I similarly observed the importance of looking at activity in the artist's studio as showing the close ties between art aesthetics and everyday aesthetics.¹⁵ There I criticized the neglect of this dimension of aesthetics in the analytic tradition. Shusterman, inspired by Deweyan pragmatist aesthetics, overcomes this prejudice.

However, in his actual discussion of what goes on in the studio, as with his discussion of the body as background, Shusterman focuses on skills rather than (or, at least, more than) experiences: for example, on the skills of the photographer in handling the camera and in making the subject feel comfortable, as well as on the skills achieved by the photographic subject in overcoming awkwardness and avoiding inauthentic self-presentation. Control of one's facial expressions and bodily postures plays a role in this.

¹⁴ For a pragmatist account of the aesthetics of interpersonal communication see Scott Stroud, *John Dewey and the Artful Life: Pragmatism, Aesthetics, and Morality* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), pp. 177-192.

¹⁵ 2012a, pp. 121-122. A recent defense of a Deweyan view of aesthetics of everyday life similar to my own in the stress it places on the concept of imagination (as found in my work with its stress on aura and metaphor) is Kalle Puolakka, "Dewey and Everyday Aesthetics - A New Look," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 23 (2014) <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=699>

With this emphasis on skill, aesthetic experience is downplayed. Of course, the exercise of a skill can be an important part of an overall aesthetic experience. For example, the skillful playing of music probably cannot be separated phenomenologically by the flute player from the aesthetic experience of that music during the playing. Moreover, Shusterman does speak of the event as a form of aesthetic experience (245). So, experience does not disappear entirely.

Shusterman's analysis also has the advantage of breaking away from Walter Benjamin's overly photograph-centered way of seeing the art of photography.¹⁶ Benjamin had stressed that in the age of mechanical reproduction the ritual value of a work of art is replaced by exhibition value. This goes along with what he referred to as the elimination of aura. By refocusing us on the ritual of the photographic process (i.e. the ritual-like way in which the photographer and the subject interact), Shusterman turns us back to the aesthetics of the everyday and away from over-emphasizing the ways in which we are distanced in aesthetic appreciation of photographs as items for exhibition.

The application of Shusterman's account of what happens in the photographer's studio to everyday aesthetics may not be immediately evident. However, many of the things he describes as happening in the photographic studio also happen in the informal context of a holiday family portrait or in a posed picture for Facebook (248).¹⁷ For example, we are often concerned about the threat of being permanently represented on the internet in a way we do not want.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969).

¹⁷ See my - "Everyday Aesthetics and Photography," *Aisthesis. Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico*, 7(1) (2014): 45-62. <<http://fupress.net/index.php/aisthesis/article/view/14610>>.

Towards the end of the chapter, Shusterman speaks of his own experience of being photographed by the artist Yann Toma, and of how this provided the chance to liberate “his sense of self to assume new expressive forms and attitudes transfiguring [himself] from an ordinary person to an artistically stylized subject” (258). He describes how he expresses himself in an artlike way through his posing as a subject for photographs taken by the artist. He is no longer ordinary, but yet he is also not art. However there is something artistic going on here. The term “transfiguration” reminds us of Arthur Danto’s idea that mere objects are transfigured when they are taken into the world of art. Maybe is a kind of transfiguration happens here that does not take one all of the way into the realm of art. The dictionary defines “transfiguration” as involving any exalting, glorifying, or spiritual change. So, the change could be one that, although profound, aesthetic, and maybe even spiritual, does not turn one into a work of art. Of course. Shusterman’s *performance* as a photographic subject can itself be part of a work of art even though he himself is not. But being turned into an “artistically stylized subject” is not being turned into a work of art.

Now, whether this transformation comes under everyday aesthetics is controversial. Melchionne would exclude it, and I would not. Perhaps, like the Zen satori experience Shusterman discusses in his chapter on somaesthetic awakening, it is a kind of ideal in the art of living, and is related to everyday aesthetics in this way.

5. Ars Erotica and Everyday Erotics

As we have seen, an important aspect of Shusterman’s project is to promote the idea that there is an art of living. Of course one could promote such an art, as Oscar

Wilde did, and not have any particular interest in somaesthetics.¹⁸ Unlike Wilde, somaesthetics makes specific recommendations about the art of living in relation to the cultivation of one's body.

Everyday aesthetics can also contribute to the art of living. Just as there is a meliorative dimension to somaesthetics, so too there is for everyday aesthetics. The art of living may include, as an important component, enhancing the aesthetic aspect of one's life. If one intends to enhance the aesthetic aspect of one's life this can be done not only through paying attention to the arts and nature but also by paying attention to other aspects of life, for example everyday life, and also non-everyday moments in life that are neither experiences of art nor of nature, for instance celebrations, festivals and vacation activities.

When Shusterman turns to the question of sexual aesthetics he makes an important advance in everyday aesthetics as well as in the art of living, this given the almost universal neglect or denigration of this topic in the West. He finds his inspiration mainly in writings from China and India. One *could* think of his project as merely setting up a special category of fine or popular art, i.e. treating lovemaking as an art-form much like painting. If the only concern here is with such an art-form then this would just be a new dimension of art aesthetics. A parallel can be found in the Japanese tea ceremony. Tea drinking is an ordinary everyday activity. However, the Japanese tea ceremony is highly ritualized and may be seen as an art, even as a fine art.¹⁹ Similarly, although lovemaking is an everyday activity, certain sexual practices could be seen as highly

¹⁸ Mrs. Cheveley in Oscar Wilde's "An Ideal Husband" refers to the art of living as "the only really Fine Art we have Produced in modern times" in *The Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Boston: John Luce and Co., 1905), p. 64.

¹⁹ See Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*.

ritualized and art-like. This would be the case, for example, for lovemaking in the *Kama Sutra* tradition.

However, Shusterman also opens up the possibility of seeing lovemaking *in general* aesthetically. That is, even lovemaking that does not rise to the level of fine art may have important aesthetic properties. Moreover, on the prescriptive level, we might recommend greater attention to lovemaking as an aesthetic practice or as having aesthetic dimensions, to enhance life or as part of the art of living.

As Shusterman rightly observes, aestheticians, particularly in the West, have traditionally tried to distinguish between what they have considered disinterested aesthetic perception and paradigmatically “interested” sexual experience. This is the ultimate example of denial of the body. Shaftesbury, for example, saw sexually attractive bodies as not inspiring studious contemplation of the sort characteristic of aesthetic experience. Kant associated the sexual with “the agreeable” and not with disinterested delight in beauty. Even Nietzsche failed to recognize the aesthetic dimension of erotic play. Shusterman, by contrast, writes of “experiences of lovemaking that are rich in beauty, intensity, pleasure, and meaning, that display harmonies of structure and developing form, and that deeply engage both thought and feeling, stimulating body, mind, and soul” (264). Of course this is not your literal everyday experience, and would fit better what I would call “the aesthetics of life,” a larger territory than the aesthetics of everyday life. The kind of erotic experience Shusterman describes here could be described as the high point or ideal of lovemaking.

Shusterman observes that one can appreciate erotic experience for its own sake: it has intrinsic value. This allows him to say that lovemaking can exhibit desiring

enjoyment which is also disinterested. He further argues that lovemaking is not only “subjectively savored for its phenomenological quality” but is also “intentionally directed at an object” i.e. another person who structures the experience (265). He also finds coherence, completion and consummation (all criteria for what Dewey calls “an experience”) as possible for lovemaking.

As I have observed, Shusterman has stressed lovemaking as an art, particularly as described in Eastern traditions. At the very least, it can be argued that some erotic acts even in the contemporary West can be art-like and highly aesthetic. The only thing I would add is that even relatively low-level erotic experience, for example a nice back rub from one’s lover, can be aesthetic. Such experiences can be savored, and can have coherence, completion and consummation. Thus, there can be an ordinary or everyday dimension to erotic somaesthetics. In sum, a caress or kiss that has many layers of meaning and that refers to all of the senses can go far beyond mere pleasure to have the aura of the aesthetic.²⁰

6. Possible Excessiveness in the Definition(s) of Somaesthetics

But how far does somaesthetics extend? This issue has not, as far as I know, been sufficiently addressed. Shusterman does discuss it briefly when he says that logic and income tax do not pertain to somaesthetics although “somaesthetics can reinterpret or extend its borders” to take these things in if it can be shown that some aspect of them relates to its central concerns (142). However, this does not handle its relation to the rest of aesthetics. Now, it could be argued that somaesthetics covers *all* of aesthetics, since, after all, the body is the center of all aesthetic experience. So one might see

²⁰ One wonderful description of such (the first kiss of a teenager) is in David Mitchell’s novel *Black Swan Green* (New York: Random House, 2007), pp. 274-5.

somaesthetics as just an approach to aesthetics as a whole from the perspective of the body. Could we, then, *exclude* the aesthetics of any particular art form from somaesthetics? I think not. Take painting for example. The practice of painting involves hands, eyes, brains: all parts of the body. Painting style can be understood in terms of the body. Cultural institutions, such as the artworld, can be seen as the actions of collective body-minds. Couldn't it be argued, then, that painting should be considered part of somaesthetics? Moreover, given that, as William James argued, all experience has layers of meaning (57), there is no reason why *any* aspect of experience should be excluded from somaesthetics.²¹ No claims along these lines have been made by Shusterman or others, but there is nothing in principle to exclude this.

However, some might see an expansion of somaesthetics to include all of aesthetics as posing a problem. What appears to be an interesting field that includes such things as the aesthetics of martial arts, meditation, hair-styling, and massage (including analytic, pragmatic and practical dimensions of each (41-43)) becomes, by its very self-definition, something much too big. The issue could even be extended. The body is the center of human experience insofar as it is the source not only of sensation but also of reasoning and imagination. If we see somaesthetics as a matter of looking at experience from the standpoint of the body then this would cover *all* of experience. Can somaesthetics be distinguished from phenomenology or even from philosophy?

For Shusterman, "Somaesthetics, roughly defined, concerns the body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning" (25). So it deals both with that aspect of aesthetics concerned with sensory appreciation and that aspect

²¹ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 246.

which has to do with the arts. Creative self-fashioning is strongly associated with what has been traditionally called the minor arts, i.e. home decoration, fashion, and cosmetics. Also included in the minor arts could be such practices as body-building and tattooing. It is arguable, at least, that there is a sub-discipline of aesthetics concerned with the body as itself the object of sensory–aesthetic appreciation. Yet is the body as the thing that appreciates aesthetically (and not just the object of appreciation) also part of somaesthetics? Shusterman has insisted that it is. The problem is that, if the body is the self then this would equate somaesthetics with all of aesthetics. To be sure, Russell Pryba is right that this could be seen as “exactly the sort of pragmatist reconstruction of aesthetics that recognizes that the body is central to all art and aesthetic experience (as both subject and sometimes object) that is required to correct the entrenched dualisms that are still operative in much of philosophy and aesthetic theory.”²² That is all to the good, but fundamental issues are still at stake.

The definition of aesthetics is itself a matter of debate. Shusterman models his idea of aesthetics on Baumgarten’s original introduction of the term, and develops his own approach by way of certain departures from that base. Baumgarten saw aesthetics as a science dealing with what he called “lower cognitive faculties” (129). Shusterman observes that Baumgarten thought of aesthetics as going beyond the traditional disciplines of rhetoric and poetics, and also beyond the usual collection of aesthetic qualities of beauty, the sublime and taste to, as he puts it, “engage a much wider domain of qualities and judgment relating to our pleasurable and meaningful experience of art and nature” (129). He notes, however, that Baumgarten neglected somatic cultivation. Later, he gives another characterization of Baumgarten’s conception of aesthetics as both

²² Editorial comment.

theoretical and practical, and as aimed at “the perfection of sensory cognition,” as in the experience or creation of beauty (148).

Baumgarten’s definition is not, however, authoritative. Word meaning changes over time. Contemporary dictionaries tend to define aesthetics in terms of such concepts as beauty, art, pleasing appearance, and what is pleasurable to the senses. Whereas the earliest sense of “aesthetic” is associated with its Greek root “aesthesis” (sense perception) and not necessarily with *pleasurable* sense perception or appreciation, most early aestheticians (including Baumgarten himself!) *and* contemporary dictionaries stress pleasure and appreciation as well. Aesthetics, as we understand it today, is not just sense perception, or what is related to the “lower cognitive faculties,” but sense perception plus pleasure and appreciation: that is, pleasurable sense perception that is appreciative, with unpleasant sense perception coming in under ugliness and other negative concepts. Aesthetic properties such as beauty, sublime and picturesque also play a determining role in our understanding of the nature of aesthetics. Any other understanding of aesthetics would be revisionary of the contemporary understanding of the concept. Of course this is not grounds for rejecting such a revision. But neither is a story about how Baumgarten devised the term grounds for rejecting the current meaning.

If creative self-fashioning means creatively doing things to one’s own body, for example in muscle-building, dieting, tattooing, or learning how to breath in the Zen way, then it might be considered a part of aesthetics *if* (or to the extent that) it involves producing aesthetic experiences that are pleasurable or appreciative in a way that enhances or brings out aesthetic properties. The main goals of these various arts and practices may not, however, be aesthetic experience. Zen breathing has as its goal satori,

enlightenment. Doesn't that go well beyond aesthetic experience? Of course, the *products* of these arts and practices can be objects of sensory-aesthetic appreciation and come under aesthetics in that way. One might, for example, appreciate the body shaped by muscle-building or by dieting. We might appreciate tattoos as abstract forms or as meaningful memorials. One might even appreciate the look of a body controlled by someone practiced in Zen methods of breathing, although such a body is not usually presented for external appreciation. I recently attended a performance of *Tempest* in which actors dressed to look like Zen monks sat on the stage before and often during the play.²³ They were simply sitting, breathing, and once in a long while, adjusting their postures when uncomfortable. This was fascinating to watch and added to the overall spectacle of the performance.

Bear in mind that the body-based practices I have mentioned, taken together, are not the same as creative self-fashioning in general. After all, as I suggested earlier, one can engage in creative self-fashioning through practicing how to write, and although writing is ultimately bodily (what is not?) it is not specifically body-focused. Nor is its product something that happens to the body as such. Similarly we may ask whether one is engaged in somaesthetics when one engages in improving one's taste in wine or appreciation of painting. In response to an earlier criticism of mine Shusterman rightly argued for the importance of muscular shaping in the experience of paintings, including the muscles of the eye in focusing vision and scanning.²⁴ True, and there is important

²³ Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland, Oregon, February 14 - November 2, 2014, Angus Bowmer Theatre, directed by Tony Taccone.

²⁴ Thomas Leddy, "Shusterman's Pragmatist Aesthetics," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 16 (2002): 10-15. Richard Shusterman, "Pragmatism and Criticism: A Response to Three Critics of Pragmatist Aesthetics," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 16 (2002): 26-38.

neurological shaping that goes on as well. But this is not normally part of the experience of refined perception.

As I have also suggested, somaesthetics has come to be defined in terms that are much broader than, or even quite distinct from, aesthetics. When we see that, for Shusterman, “somaesthetics...involves a wide range of knowledge forms and disciplines that structure ...somatic care or can improve it” (27) it seems we have gotten beyond aesthetics in the sense of aesthetic pleasure and appreciation to something more like care of the body. For example, somaesthetics could include personal hygiene and physical therapy under this umbrella and, although both of these can involve pleasure and pain, it is not clear that these aspire to aesthetic appreciation.

There is considerable debate in everyday aesthetics over whether certain pleasures are just agreeable, and certain pains just disagreeable, while not actually being aesthetic. An important problem for somaesthetics can be found in issues raised against the views of Sherri Irwin on everyday aesthetics.²⁵ Irwin, herself strongly influenced by Shusterman, argues that aesthetic experience can be found even in such ordinary things as feeling air currents on your skin. This is similar to Shusterman’s idea that somaesthetics is very much a matter of paying attention, and self-improvement based on that. But the question is whether everyday aesthetics (especially in the controversial form proposed by Irwin) and somaesthetics are sufficiently like mainstream aesthetics to even be called “aesthetics.” Has aesthetics been rendered “trivial,” by extending it to such things as

²⁵ Sherri Irwin, “The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 29-44. Christopher Dowling, “The Aesthetics of Daily Life,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2010): 225-242. A nice overview of these debates can be found in Dan Eugen Ratiu, “Remapping the Realm of Aesthetics: On Recent Controversies about the Aesthetic and Aesthetic Experience in Everyday Life,” *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, 56 no. 1 (2013): 3-26. Jane Forsey is critical of what she calls my extraordinarist position in her “The Promise, the Challenge, of Everyday Aesthetics,” *Aisthesis. Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico*, 7(1) (2014): 5-21. Available at: <http://www.fupress.net/index.php/aisthesis/article/view/14608>.

scratching an itch or taking a warm bath, as has been argued by Christopher Dowling? Is it enough for something to have a qualitative feeling to be aesthetic? I will not go into this debate here, but its results will have an impact on whether many of the things covered by somaesthetics are also covered by aesthetics.²⁶

Perhaps there is ambiguity in the term “care” when used in “care for the body.” Care can mean attentive aesthetic interest but also simply attending to something with concern for its proper functioning. If somaesthetics is a matter of care in the sense of assuring that the body-part functions properly then it is more a matter of medicine than aesthetics. Sometimes, however, Shusterman understands somaesthetics in terms of cultivation of “skills of enhanced awareness.” This definition, quite different from the one given above, comes closer to aesthetics. Many aestheticians, including David Hume with his notion of delicacy of taste, have seen aesthetic experience and taste in terms of enhanced awareness. Sancho’s cousins have an enhanced awareness of wine, for example. Still, as mentioned earlier, although one can have enhanced awareness of noises using a hearing aid, this does not make the enhancement, or the resulting experience, necessarily aesthetic or better in terms of aesthetics. Something else is needed.²⁷

7. Downplaying the Spectator

I wish to discuss another somewhat subtle problem for somaesthetics. Although Shusterman places a lot of emphasis on the aesthetics of personal self-styling (Chapter 14, “Somatic Style”), he does not say much about the point of the view of the aesthetic

²⁶ I sided with Irvin on this in *The Extraordinary*, pp. 203-207.

²⁷ I attempt to say what that is in *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary* under the concept of “aura.”

perceiver or viewer. The way in which he focuses on the maker of style over the observer can be seen, for example, in his definition of style: “Style (including somatic style) is a disposition or a habit to perform or appear in a certain manner or set of ways” (324). I am sure, however, he would agree that an important aspect of everyday aesthetics is our aesthetic experience of other people and, in particular, their personal styles.²⁸ Shusterman does speak of “representational somaesthetics” which is “concerned more with the body’s surface forms” than “experiential somaesthetics” (44). There are various aspects of personal style including one’s style of writing. But probably the most important is what Shusterman calls somatic style: that is, one’s presentation of oneself as an embodied being. Of course all aspects of our personal styles ultimately refer back to our bodies. Even our writing styles are associated with embodied living: for example, an informal writing style might reflect a relatively informal lifestyle. However, an emphasis on the body focuses us on the ways in which both personal and cultural style is present when we see someone physically before us. All of this is fine, and Shusterman has made an important contribution to everyday aesthetics by discussing somatic style. Yet he stresses the experience of self-styling mainly from within. We should not underrate the importance of somatic style from the perspective of the spectator. One advantage of paying attention to the spectator is that we can talk about inter-subjective standards of taste. In this (or to that extent), everyday aesthetics would be seen as sharing something with art aesthetics, thus making aesthetics as a whole a more unified study.

²⁸ For an example of aesthetics of style from the outside see Carol Steinberg Gould, “Iki and Glamour as Aesthetic Properties of Persons: Reflections in a Cross-Cultural Mirror,” in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics: Philosophy, Culture, Literature, and the Visual Arts* ed. Minh Nguyen. Forthcoming.

Shusterman does not ignore this issue entirely. For example, he correctly distinguishes between the honorific notion of style, in which we consider that someone “has style,” and the descriptive sense, in which everyone has his or her own style. He also notes that “style” can also be seen as an embellishment, as something added. Here, as he observes, “style can obscure or distort one’s thoughts” and can be seen as “artificial dressing” (321). He also has a theory of personal style criticism that focuses on the range between the natural and the artificial, and which can be applied to appreciating the styles of others. He joins Thoreau in praising a style that is not pretentious but “simple, clear, practical, and sincere” (320). It is hard to disagree with any of this. However, whereas Shusterman sees somatic style mainly in terms of “bodily comportment and gesture,” I would equally emphasize style as manifested in clothing and body decoration. The net can be cast even wider to include personal product choices and ways of doing things. “Personal style,” as opposed to just bodily style, includes the car one drives, the way one decorates one’s house, the kind of garden one has, the birthday cards one chooses, one’s sense of humor, how one manages other people, and, as mentioned above, the way one writes.

Again, Shusterman attends to this issue to some extent. He says, for example, that clothing certainly seems to belong to somatic style (although note the hesitancy in “seems”) (321). However, he tends to see clothing as not quite part of somatic style. “Somatic style” seems to exclude (or at least, makes peripheral) that which is not literally part of the body, and hence personal style as manifested in the clothes one wears or the type of computer one buys. Yet when we observe people in public and appreciate their personal styles we do not normally see them without clothes or other possessions. Attire

is an important part of how they present themselves. Are clothes and computer choice so different from hair styling or the look of teeth to fall in a different category?

In short, Shusterman to some extent ignores (or at least downplays) the appreciator of style, focusing more on the process of self-styling. This seems odd since the person who tries to improve his or her personal style is doing so for others, as much as, or more than for him or herself. What is missing from Shusterman's analysis of style is the *flâneur*: the connoisseur of personal style who observes the passing scene and appreciates what he or she sees.

8. Two Conceptions of Everyday Aesthetics

Shusterman also makes, in this book, a very direct contribution to contemporary debates in everyday aesthetics. He observes two very different conceptions of everyday aesthetics, writing that, "Although both are concerned with appreciating ordinary objects or commonplace events, the first notion stresses the ordinariness of these everyday things, while the latter instead emphasizes how such things can be perceived through a distinctively focused aesthetic appreciation that transfigures them into a more richly meaningful experience" (303).²⁹ The second involves "focused or heightened experience ...appreciated as such" (303). I would argue that both approaches are valuable: we need to recognize the ordinariness of everyday things, but we also need to be more aware of the possibilities for richly meaningful experience. Shusterman finds limitations to the first approach since it might lead us, for instance, to try to appreciate "dull weather with

²⁹ Shusterman may have had in mind Arto Haapala as defender of the first position. See his, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place," in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, ed. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005): 39-55. Melchionne, Forsey, and to a lesser extent, Saito, also stress the ordinariness of the ordinary.

an ordinary, dull appreciation of its dullness, rather than a sudden spectacular vision...of its dullness." Dullness can become doubly dull with emphasis on the ordinariness of the ordinary, or it can become dullness enhanced (no longer really dull, actually.) Like me (36), Shusterman takes inspiration from Emerson's speaking of "the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking" in simple things.³⁰

I join Shusterman in finding the second kind of everyday aesthetics more promising insofar as, here, aesthetics is "aimed at enriching our lives by providing richer and more rewarding aesthetic experience" (304). He recognizes that this may seem paradoxical since "heightened perception renders the ordinary somehow extraordinary in experience," but he sees a worse paradox in the first approach in that if we experience the ordinary in the most ordinary way we risk "not really perceiving anything aesthetically at all" (304). I agree that the risk is there but not so serious since in focusing on the ordinariness of the ordinary it too becomes enhanced and hence somewhat less ordinary.

Given his insistence on the primacy of the extraordinary, however, it is somewhat surprising that he contrasts his own conception of everyday aesthetics with the notion in art of defamiliarization or "making strange," an idea often used by artists of certain schools, for example formalists (304).³¹ Viktor Shklovsky saw this as a way to complicate form. The difficulty involved in this complication would, Shklovsky thought, compel us to prolong our perception. Shusterman, however, thinks that difficulty alienates art from life, confining art to the elite. There seems here to be two ways to look

³⁰ *The Extraordinary*. See also my chapter 8: "Everyday Aesthetics and the Sublime." Poulakka, cites Shusterman favorably on this point creating an alliance between his view, mine and Dewey's concept of "an experience." He quotes Shusterman's "Back to the Future: Aesthetics Today," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (2012): 104-124, also found at <http://ojs.statsbiblioteket.dk/index.php/nja/article/viewFile/7500/6349>.

³¹ This would put him in agreement with Haapala, who considers the "strange" as being outside the bounds of everyday aesthetics.

at the idea (and ideal) of attentiveness. The classic view is that when one pays attention closely one sees a thing for what it really is: the essence of that thing emerges. Another way to look at it is that paying attention and slowing down allows for the work of the imagination such that a metaphor (what Morris Weitz called an honorific definition³²) can emerge that gives the object perceived new life, making the ordinary extraordinary. (There are non-verbal, non-definitional metaphors as well.) Something can thereby take on an aura of going beyond itself.³³ Defamiliarization takes us beyond just paying attention. It is a kind of paying attention that allows the unconscious to come into play in such a way as to bring in the “background” (see my earlier discussion of this) and focus it symbolically. The paying attention here is focused not on the object as autonomous but on the object as possibly identified with the self, as symbolic of oneself, or one’s culture, or both, as a whole. One could say that “making strange” is just another word for what happens when a striking metaphor emerges, one that gives new life. (Danto saw this metaphorical capacity in art but not, unfortunately, in everyday life.) I do not deny that there are problems with elitism in the contemporary art world, but at the same time, if one puts the work in, one can sometimes use contemporary art experiences to enhance everyday life experience through the process of “making strange.” This would only undemocratically confine art to “privileged elite,” as Shusterman puts it, if the average person is deliberately excluded. But, in truth, our cultural world is full of in-groups, from motorcycle clubs to Chelsea gallery-goers. To criticize the Chelsea gallery-goers for not making their material accessible to the motorcyclists seems as strange as reversing the

³² Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 15 (1956): 27-35.

³³ I describe this process in *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, Chapter 4: “Aesthetic Experience as Experience of Objects with Aura.”

situation. So, although I am sympathetic to the "awakened-consciousness version of everyday aesthetics" Shusterman favors, I do not see it as an alternative to "high art's alienating difficulty and isolating elitism" but rather as another path to intensity of awareness. The two paths, one focusing on making strange and difficult, and the other on making simple and easy, are really just aspects of the same thing. Moreover, it is perfectly appropriate to say that Zen experience is extremely difficult and complicated, even though the end product may have the quality of simplicity. When Shusterman attacks high art for its "alienating difficulty and isolating elitism" one wonders why these terms do not apply to the very Zen monastic experiences he describes.

9. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to explore ways in which Richard Shusterman's *Thinking Through the Body* can have bearing on the field of everyday aesthetics. Shusterman, of course, has already been an important influence on, and contributor to, this field through his many books and articles, to address the entire corpus of which would have been beyond the scope of this chapter. It would seem, on first sight that the chapter titled "Somaesthetic awakening and the art of living" would have the most relevance. However, most of the chapters of the book have something to contribute. Somaesthetics itself can be seen as extending the limits of aesthetics beyond the arts (although it certainly has relevance to the arts) to include various practices and skills related to the soma (body/mind). It extends to the aesthetics of everyday life and also to the aesthetics of life, if we assume "everyday life" excludes rare highly intense experiences as well as professional life and celebrations. Both Shusterman's analysis of the art of lovemaking and his exploration of what goes on in the photographer's studio

have applications to everyday aesthetics as well as to life aesthetics, although this is not always made explicit. For example, lovemaking is not only aesthetic at the level of the ideal erotic interchange but also in daily caresses and everyday sexuality. Similarly, something like the interaction between photographer and subject in the studio can be found in amateur photography, and such interactions are ultimately based on modes of daily interpersonal interaction that themselves have an aesthetic dimension. Although one can envy Shusterman's satori-like experiences as a student of Zen Buddhism, this kind of appreciation of the extraordinary in the ordinary is also accessible in less disciplined contexts, although not usually at the same level of intensity.

We also discovered the need to be careful in simply accepting somaesthetics as a subdiscipline of aesthetics. Although it began as a branch of aesthetics it has gone on to cover behaviors that sometimes seem to have little bearing on aesthetic concepts, pleasures, experiences, properties or judgments. These explorations are, of course, valid, but should not be confused with aesthetic exploration. This is not so much a criticism of somaesthetics as a cautionary note for those who wish to use it in the development of everyday aesthetics. That said, however, the contributions of somaesthetics to everyday aesthetics are enormous.

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