

SOMAESTHETICS AS A DISCIPLINE BETWEEN PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: *Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics provides a disciplinary framework in which come together reflections on the body by the main philosophical traditions of the twentieth century; the paper investigates some relations with Plessner and philosophical anthropology, as well as the rediscovery of some of the themes of Baumgarten's aesthetics.*

"When Alexander Baumgarten coined the term 'aesthetics' to ground a formal philosophical discipline," writes Richard Shusterman at the very beginning of his essay "Somaesthetics: a Disciplinary Proposal," "his aims for that discipline went far beyond the focus of what now defines philosophical aesthetics."¹

The revisionary resumption of Baumgarten's proposal by Richard Shusterman has given rise to many new possibilities and opened new questions for historical studies and theoretical thinking in aesthetics. I limit myself in this paper to sketching a brief catalog of some of these issues. Among them I consider on one hand the use and the potential usefulness of the concept of "somaesthetics" for reconstructing our historical knowledge and interpretation of Enlightenment thought. On the other hand, from a more contemporary perspective, I will show how, in my opinion, Shusterman's proposal leads to a fruitful encounter between the naturalism that drives Deweyan pragmatism and prospects of contemporary philosophical anthropology.

After outlining the interrelationship between Baumgarten's notions of "natural aesthetics" and the systematic discipline of aesthetics and highlighting the

practical side of Baumgarten's systematic proposal, Shusterman criticizes its lack of any attention to the study, knowledge, care, and improvement of the body. He writes: "Of the many fields of knowledge therein embraced, from theology to ancient myth, there is no mention [in Baumgarten's work] of anything like physiology or physiognomy."² Shusterman clearly aims to remedy this lack in Baumgarten's project; and in this he seems to complete or fulfill some historical trends that can be reexamined from the perspective of somaesthetics.

First, one could propose that somaesthetics completes in some way the development that drives eighteenth-century aesthetic thought in the sense of Herder's criticism that Baumgarten's theory creates a philosophy based on the model of logic and therefore not a philosophy of the scholar or "learned" man. In other words, Baumgarten's conception of aesthetics as the "younger sister of logic" would recall or evoke the image of an "abstract" reason, devoid of historical and social connotations, devoid of connection with the production of knowledge in human "praxis."

So Herder proposed a distinctive aesthetics construed as a "physics of mind or spirit" (*Geisterphysik*), i.e., an aesthetics that would provide a point of intersection for the physiological grounding of our knowledge and for the recognition of the cognitive value of the senses. The efforts made by Herder, by the young Schiller's "vitalist" writings, by Ernst Platner and the largest part of the Enlightenment's anthropological theory sought to free our thinking from the division between physical anthropology and moral anthropology, offering instead, on the model of Greek sculpture, the image of a full, integral humanity, "*des ganzen Menschen*": an aesthetic, political, educational model all at the same time. This model cannot be configured without giving great care to studying the specificity of the different senses (as Herder emphasized) and the relationships between the human body and its environment, considered in its physical

¹ Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics: a Disciplinary Proposal," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 300; reprinted in Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2000), 262–83.

² *Ibid.*, 301.

components and emotional, aesthetic, and ethical implications—as found at least sketched in Schiller’s articulation of expressive movement (*Ausdrucksbewegung*) between voluntary and “sympatic” movement.³

Shusterman’s somaesthetics shares with the anthropology of the *Spätaufklärung* (late Enlightenment thought) this emphasis on the intimate union between “body” and “mind” as an activity of the living body: an activity ontologically rooted in the specific somatic relationship to the world but functionally articulated on a number of dynamic levels, a “fundamental ontological union” that becomes a “harmonic unity” among behavior, society, and the construction and reform of values.⁴

Given what we have said, we might consider the aesthesiological intention that animates the late Enlightenment’s *Geisterphysik* as a significant step in the genesis of a somaesthetics. However, this *Spätaufklärung* reversal of the logical character of Baumgarten’s aesthetic theory brought with it the loss of the “melioristic” component of his project. This is, in my opinion, where contemporary somaesthetics marks, through its adoption of melioristic Deweyan pragmatism, the most important trait of continuity with Baumgarten, re-opening in all its richness the original range of the *science of sensory cognition*, but also further enriching it through recognizing its somatic ground.

It should be noted that in Baumgarten’s view the definition of aesthetics is not fulfilled with the announcement or articulation of the proposed science of sensory cognition. If this announcement is the enunciation of the first paragraph of the first section of *Aesthetica*, later, in section 14, Baumgarten explicitly

adds: “The end of aesthetics is the perfection of sensible cognition as such, that is to say beauty.”⁵ Aesthetics aims at the perfection of its object, which is sensory cognition; and such a perfectly structured sensory cognition, according to Baumgarten’s careful research, is ultimately beauty, which achieves real cognitive value, giving to sensibility independent cognitive meaning and rules.

Leibniz’s metaphysics, which underlies and animates Baumgarten’s aesthetics, always conceives of perfection as a dynamical development, an increase of ontological, cognitive, and experiential value, given that, according to Leibniz, “perfection” is at the same time an increase of a thing’s essence and promise of happiness.

The melioristic project, which is integral to the Deweyan perspective of Shusterman’s analysis of sense experience, is further enriched, at least in terms of historical foreshadowing, by additional components of Baumgarten’s project that seem to be revived in somaesthetics’ view: especially the distinction between “*vividitas*” and “*vita cognitionis*.”

While a large part of Baumgarten’s theory is dedicated to a logical characterization of our sensory cognition and to showing how aesthetics highlights the “vividness,” that is to say, the “extensive clarity,” reached by the multitude of coordinated elements in our perception, Baumgarten also juxtaposes this property of vividness or clarity with what he calls the sensitive “life of knowledge,” which is perception’s ability to be translated into action. In this regard Baumgarten says that human intellectual knowledge needs the mediation of signs (language, mathematics, etc.) making such knowledge abstract and *notabiliter iners* (remarkably inactive), while sensory cognition and persuasion have significant incentives for the mind, a pragmatic capacity he calls “*foecunditas*”; in the same way he named “*prægnans*” as a significantly animated perception.

³ Friedrich Schiller, “Über Anmut und Würde,” *Neue Thalia* (Jena, 1793), 3:115-230.

⁴ See Richard Shusterman, “Soma and Psyche,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (2010): 206.

⁵ A. G. Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Halle, 1750), sec. 14.

"Fecund," "pregnant": notice how this metaphor of life attributes to sense perception and sensibility a physiological connotation and power, which makes up the body of argumentative discourse (in Aristotelian terms, *soma tes pisteos*): a principle of form equipped with physiologically driving activity ("principium aliud movens et agens", in the words of Daniel Coschwitz's *Organismus et Mechanismus*,⁶ one of the masterworks of vitalistic medicine in the eighteenth century). In full compliance with the reclamation of our sensibility as a principle of action of the animated body, Baumgarten's *Metaphysics* stressed that our knowledge always takes place in relation to the location of our body in this universe, "pro positu corporis mei in hoc universo"⁷: this interaction between ontological foundation and physiological explanation that opens toward semiotics and rhetoric is, in my opinion, closer than one might think to the genesis of modern somaesthetics.

Besides this historical perspective, I would also like to highlight from a theoretical perspective some of the descriptive powers of this sort of somaesthetic structure of analysis that links these different levels of the phenomenon, recognizing, on one hand, the autonomy of sense experience and its *constraint* within its ontological foundation and, on the other hand, the double opening of this constraint, considering possibilities and obligations of the living body.

Exploring the status of the living body in the universe by exploring sensory experience also beyond the context of modern philosophy of art: such might be the motto of modern somaesthetics.

This is exactly what leads us to examine somaesthetics in its second, more contemporary, set of roots, that is to say, its development of discussions of human nature between twentieth-century pragmatism and

philosophical anthropology, along an axis that finds in John Dewey and Helmuth Plessner its most representative figures. To explore this conjunction of philosophical approaches to embodiment, Richard Shusterman and Hans-Peter Krüger devoted a three-year Humboldt Transcoop research project culminating in a conference in Potsdam in 2009 and an edited collection of new texts published (as separate special issues, in English and in German, respectively) in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* and the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*. To suggest two of the major topics of this exploration, one might ask what is the relationship of the *soma* of somaesthetics with the *body/mind* issue on one hand, and with the couple *Körper/Leib*, on the other?

We must first remember the semantic richness of the word *soma*, whose meaning is not limited to the living body. Historically it extends, for example in Homer, to the opposite polarity of the corpse (*soma* opposed to *démas*),⁸ but also includes analogical transfers to the "body of discourse," from its discursive articulations (*soma* also means "element of a structural organization") to its value and function, which are always public and contextual, as seen in the above-mentioned characterization of Aristotelian rhetorical argumentation as *soma tes pisteos*, "body of persuasion."

In its search for a unitary basis for a philosophy of man, early twentieth-century German thought has polemically resumed the Cartesian distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, using the perspective of the "unity of behavior," that of a *Umweltbeziehung*, an organic relationship with the environment which is, in the words of Max Scheler, "indifferent to the psycho-physical point of view." Through the encounter with the other, Scheler argued, we perceive neither body nor soul, but a unified whole, which manifests itself in individual units, in a living body indifferent to the psychophysical partition.

⁶ Daniel Coschwitz, *Organismus et Mechanismus in homine vivo obvius et stabilitus* (Leipzig, 1725), 178.

⁷ A. G. Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (Halle, 1779), sec. 512.

⁸ On this subject see Valeria D'Agata's doctoral research now in progress at the University of Palermo, Italy.

We would, however, misunderstand the theoretical effort of philosophical anthropology if we forget the pragmatic component that animates it. Long before the systematic treatises of Max Scheler or Arnold Gehlen in this field, Viktor von Weizsäcker launched plans for a medical anthropology and psychosomatic medicine, important papers on anthropology and psychiatry were published by Binswanger and Straus, and Helmuth Plessner developed his dialogical reflections with Frederik Buytendijk on related themes. Here the relationship between health and disease, the function of “crisis” in questioning the unity of the human person, the meaning of expressive behavior were the main issues through which emerged an indifference to the division between the physical and the psychic. According to Plessner and Buytendijk, the sense of expressive movement arises in the reciprocity of the relationship with the environment, that is to say, in its indifference to the distinctions not only between the physical and the psychic and between subject and object but also, I would say, between activity and passivity.

In cohering with the environment, the body adjusts, monitors, and directs itself; it creates—precisely through its relationship with the environment—its own horizon of meaning and time. In this way, expressive movement becomes the final test—or even more the effective experimental field—for a philosophical anthropology. That is, it becomes the field of human behavior in which we see most clearly how the principle of psychophysical nondifference guides the creation, the production and transformation of meaning, whose experience is expressed in the configuration of ever new forms. These include forms of physical existence and forms of production and sharing of meaning (Hans-Peter Krüger describes this, in a somewhat different way: *Lebensformen und Lebenswissen*).

What I want to emphasize here is the close and constant correspondence between the structure of aesthetic experience and psychosomatic balance.

This factor suggests that anthropology has no interest in cultivating a static opposition between the morphological structure of the body and its lived experience, between *Körperlichkeit* and *Leiblichkeit*. You could even see that one of the most significant paths that lead from the vitalistic functionalism of Jakob von Uexküll to the anthropological thought of Weizsäcker and Plessner is located in the dynamic integration of these two components. Consider, for example, Weizsäcker’s attention to the change of functions that the physiological structure of the body can experience or Plessner’s very tight linkages between knowledge and action, between fundamental analysis of anthropological discourse and sociocultural construction of the person. Shusterman has observed that Plessner “avoids reification of the *Leib* as something inside the *Körper*. Neither an object nor a subject, the *Leib* is an aspect or form of behavior rather than a thing. It is the form of lived, experiential behavior that is differently lived and interpreted in the variety of cultures in which it is expressed.”⁹

For their part Plessner and Buytendijk, in their great essay of 1925 on mimicry, make use of the word “*Körperleib*,” pointing out how the somatic *unity/totality* is established through its balance with the environment: “*Körperleib und Umwelt aufeinander einspielen*.”¹⁰ The living or lived body is not such because it can be felt from within and mastered impulsively, but rather because of its balance, because of its mutual dependence with the environment. Plessner and Buytendijk even come to claim that the agreement between the body and its environment constitutes, as an expression of the sphere of living behavior, “the existential form and perceptual form of animal and human bodies [*Körperleiber*].”¹¹ With

⁹ Shusterman, “Soma and Psyche,” 210.

¹⁰ Helmuth Plessner and Frederik Buytendijk, *Die Deutung des mimischen Ausdrucks. Ein Beitrag zur Lehre vom Bewußtsein des anderen Ichs* (1925), in Helmuth Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 7:121.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

its indifference to the division between subject and object, between mind and body, this relational environmental accord ensures the relational unity of experience with the content of experience.

This is, I think, an extraordinary effort toward the notion of a *concrete form of reason*, that Plessner called an “aesthesiology of mind”: “Seeing, hearing, touching, every sensation, visualization, and perception, has the import of being fulfilled in an immediate presentation of the colors and shapes, the sounds, surface configurations, and solidity of the things themselves.”¹² This perceptual self-realization, one might add, comes through a (soma)aesthetic passage by which we are confronted with the solidity of things.

The same Plessner, in his 1936 essay “Sensibilité et raison,” wrote that “human nature is not divided into a historical region and a region that would not be such”—that would be somehow outside history and culture.¹³ He thinks this dualism is based on the body/mind opposition. Liberation from a commitment to ahistorical knowledge, consequently, is nothing more than overcoming this body/mind dualism. Hence Plessner recommends the project of an historical science of the living body, a knowledge that will be, in his opinion, the foundation of a new systematic philosophy: “If man is a historical being,” Plessner writes, “he is this ‘in flesh and blood,’ as well as an object of the history of culture as an object of physiology. The body is a historical category.”¹⁴ Living one's lived body, his own *Leiblichkeit* or his natural *Leibsein*, and reflecting and making reference to his being located in a body, in the sense of a *Körperhabens*, are always closely related, yet characterized by a continual tension. It is precisely in this sense that Plessner establishes, among the fundamental laws of

anthropology, that of a “mediated immediacy” that a human being is forced to find and deploy to balance “between the physical thing [*Körperding*] which he somehow happens to be and the body [*Leib*] which he inhabits and controls.”¹⁵

Plessner's emphasis on the primacy of action and unity of behavior and his corresponding critique of the philosophy of the subject are aimed at understanding and representing this duality, which involves the role of consciousness and every relation to living beings: “I go walking *with* my consciousness, my body [*Leib*] is its bearer, on whose momentary position the selective content and perspective of my consciousness depend; and I go walking *in* my consciousness, and my own body [*Leib*] with its changes of position appears as the content of its sphere. To wish to make a decision between these two orders would mean to misunderstand the necessity of their mutual interlacing.”¹⁶

And again: Man *is* not “just living body [*Leib*], nor does he just *have* a body [*Leib (Körper)*]. Every requirement of physical existence demands a reconciliation between being and having, outside and inside.”¹⁷

We can conclude this brief account of Plessner's somatic thought by agreeing with Shusterman that “the *Körper/Leib* distinction is clearly not a primordial, permanent ontological duality but, rather, a pragmatically functioning distinction in the practical behavior of persons.”¹⁸

This view of the relationship between *Körper* and *Leib*, elaborated in the light of German anthropology, brings us to the meeting with John Dewey, whose conception of the body provides us, I believe, with the most complete

¹² Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior*, trans. James Spencer Churchill and Marjorie Grene (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 41.

¹³ Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:136.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Plessner, *Laughing and Crying*, 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸ Shusterman, “Soma and Psyche,” 211.

picture of what might be called the "somatic style" as an expression of an act of living body.

Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience is arguably one of the main references for Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics, the theory which provides—along with the idea of a philosophy of lifestyle—the disciplinary framework from which somaesthetics was born. But experience, according to Dewey, always begins through an *impulsion* with which the living organism comes into contact with its environment. It is an impulsion that puts in motion the entire body and sets above all the body's rhythmic relationship to the environment and the line that marks the boundary between the body and its exterior. It is always a rhythmic pattern and a mobile border, a pattern of expression of needs and opportunities (or *constraints* understood in the positive sense of this term) that link the living being with its environment: "The need that is manifest in the urgent impulsions that demand completion through what the environment—and it alone—can supply," as Dewey says, "is a dynamic acknowledgement of this dependence of the self for wholeness upon its surroundings."¹⁹

I should emphasize the role a positive concept of "constraint" plays in Dewey's somatic thought. In the first, narrower sense of constraint as a barrier, such constraint provides the emotional component of impulsion, underlining the role of the impulsion in the manifestation of the self. It is not unimportant that this first, positive meaning of constraint is signaled by Dewey's pointing to the negative results of its absence: "Impulsion forever boosted on its forward way would run its course thoughtless, and dead to emotion. . . . Nor without resistance from surroundings would the self become aware of itself."²⁰

In its second positive sense constraint contributes actively to create the temporal shape specific to the organic impulsion. Resistance and environmental control, according to Dewey, "bring about the conversion of direct forward action into reflection; what is turned back upon [reflected] is the relation of hindering conditions to what the self possesses."²¹ The element of reflection that occurs, Dewey says, is by no means simply a *quantitative* increase; it leads, instead, to a "qualitative" leap which originates in the "transformation of energy into thoughtful action."²²

This is the function of constraint—both environmental and somatic: constraint gives birth and shape to a form of conduct that has no antecedent, a form of conduct whose characterization refers, in John Dewey's words, to the temporal pattern of acquired experience: "the junction of the new and old is not a mere composition of forces, but is a re-creation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the 'stored,' material is literally revived."²³

Perhaps one should remember that Darwin is Dewey's starting point for his theoretical understanding of the organized body: understanding the living organism means understanding its interaction with the environment, understanding it in the Darwinian sense of the term "mutual adaptation" that even allows us to speak of an organism and its environment.²⁴ It is not possible to speak of an organism out of its "co-evolutionary" relationship with the environment, nor to speak of a (biological) subject without starting from a continuous exchange of perspectives with the objects it encounters.

In conclusion, having discussed Dewey's vision of the important relationship between the organism's

¹⁹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr., New York: Perigee Books, 2005), 61.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 63.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, e.g., 45, 140.

impulsion experience and expression, I would like to compare it to Plessner's. Plessner gives high importance to the living body's autonomous expressive capacity, which makes the body and (selectively) its epidermal surface the meeting place of the active unity of the organism and its environment.

We can perhaps recognize a path leading from the expressive manifestation of the animal body, through the exchange function of the epidermis, to human gestures, language, and the development of artistic expression: "In animals, too, the body as expressive surface is no passive envelope and external layer into which excitations boil over from within, but a felt boundary over against the environment. . . . Animals live in this relation, and—to the extent that he exists on this level—so does man. But only he knows of it."²⁵ This knowledge is followed by the special tonality of style that is typical of our expressive life—both its clarity and its setting up of distance—that makes it capable of an autonomous articulation of expressive materials, including abstract linguistic signs, without, however, denying the "character of being 'organs of expression'" assigned by Plessner to the physical surface of the body and to the voice.²⁶

To close by returning to somaesthetics and its concern with life and expressive styles of the self in its diverse and changing environments, Shusterman recently posed, in terms of a "metaphysics of somaesthetics," the question of the relationship between the human *soma*, the self, and the person, given that there are "things we would attribute to the self or person that would not be attributed to her soma."²⁷ Here I see in somaesthetics—reviving Baumgarten's project—the function of describing and leading to a higher level of perfection our lifestyles, that is to say, these rhythmic models that reflect and reshape—on different levels and discursive or expressive planes of argumentation—the constraints and opportunities for relationships between living beings and their environments.

²⁵ Plessner, *Laughing and Crying*, 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁷ Shusterman, "Soma and Psyche," 219–220.