

Review

Richard Shusterman, *Esperienza estetica e arti popolari. Prospettive somaestetiche su teoria e pratica*

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Richard Shusterman's is a name familiar to anyone even tangentially concerned with philosophical aesthetics; his disciplinary proposal, somaesthetics, has been among the relevant positions in philosophical debate for some decades now. The main fortune of this orientation can perhaps be traced in its ability to recompose within an original theoretical horizon, the aesthetic in its multiplicity: forms, levels and manifestations that have somewhat undergone fragmentation. The somaesthetic paradigm, in fact, presents itself as a kind of theoretical platform that aims to reallocate within a common theoretical space, all occurrences of the aesthetic. "Aesthetic Experience and Popular Arts. Somaesthetic Perspectives on Theory and Practice," recently published in the "Experiences of the Aesthetic" series of the publisher Mimesis, aims to offer the Italian public an agile reading volume designed precisely to introduce the reader to the theoretical path developed by Shusterman and to some of the fields of application of somaesthetics. The essays, selected by the translators/curators together with Shusterman himself, are presented for the first time in a collection available only in Italian and are representative of a good portion of Shusterman's theoretical path. The titles of the essays in order are: *The End of Aesthetic Experience, Affectivity and Authenticity in Country Musicals, The Urban Aesthetics of Absence, Photography as a Performative Process, Fashion Vestibility: the Somaesthetics of Style, Somaesthetics and the Fine Art of Eating*. They attest to the breadth of issues, traditionally aesthetic and extra-aesthetic, with which somaesthetics has grappled. The present volume reflects this multiplicity of interests: alongside essays of a more philosophical-historical tenor such as *The End of Aesthetic Experience* - in which Shusterman examines a kind of history of the decline of the concept of aesthetic experience in the analytic philosophical landscape and in parallel a reappraisal of aesthetic experience in Continental philosophy and pragmatism. One finds in fact represented some of the various cores of reflection with which Shusterman has grappled such as the defense of popular music, as in the essay *Affectivity and Authenticity in Country Musicals*, the theme of the art of living, declined in this case as the art of eating in connection with Zen discipline practices in *The Somaesthetics and the Art of Eating*, and as a reflection on the practices of stylization of the self that pass through fashion in *Dressing Fashion: The somaesthetics of style*. To the essay *Photography as a Performative Process*,

Shusterman entrusts his reflections on the active dimension of photographic practice; the latter, in fact, is present throughout its realization by taking into consideration the load of expressive somatic laboratory work also carried out by the posing model, in addition to the direction and subsequent selection of the photos by the photographer. As is often the case when dealing with somaesthetics, such reflections emerge from Shusterman's firsthand involvement with the practice in question; in fact, in closing the essay, the author traces his own experience with the French photographer Yann Toma for whom he posed and with whom he collaborated on a series of costumed performances, from which a kind of alter ego of Shusterman himself was born, namely a figure known as *The Man in Gold*. Finally, the essay *The Urban Aesthetics of Absence* takes its starting point from a stay by Shusterman in Berlin where he found himself reflecting on the city as a concept that playfully encompasses a multiplicity of possible philosophical insights. In the present case of the essay, it is the return trip from an evening of electronic music in the eastern part of Berlin that elicits a reflection that winds along the concept of absence; the phantasmagorical presence of the wall that, though no longer there, still defines the city architecturally, but also the absence, at the time of the essay's writing, of a Holocaust memorial: "Even more exciting for me was the discovery of an even greater and hidden absence: on my usual jogging route I was passing right by the site of the old Wilmersdorf Synagogue (on Prinzregentenstrasse). Destroyed not by enemy bombs, but more by Berlin barbarians during Crystal Night, the Synagogue was never rebuilt and its site not only remained hidden, but was also renumbered by an ugly 1950s apartment building. These experiences convince me that Berlin's memory of the Holocaust is more effectively supplied by the controversial absence of an official memorial to its victims than by any concrete monument that might eventually be proposed to fill this gap" (p. 95). Thus, somaesthetics is a discipline that aims at declining the aesthetic in all its aspects, even in those that are more "practical" and physical in the true sense of the word; as stated in the introduction, "Beginning with such a return to aisthesis, Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics thus moves with rigor and discipline, but at the same time with curiosity and imagination, toward an exploration of different fields of the aesthetic that may be of great interest to a pragmatist philosophy" (p. 9). It is precisely on the tracing back of the meaning of aesthetics to its perceptive-sensitive root that hinges the field view that Shusterman offers on the various forms of the aesthetic and on which part of his reflection on the historical and exclusive character of the concept of Art also stands. As can be read in the preface written by Shusterman: "Recognizing the fact that art has a history should also imply

recognition of the fact that its main forms extend backward, to pre-modern eras, and that art is currently open to the advent of postmodern historical transformations. The recent flowering of alternative aesthetic forms outside the (often sacralized) modernist sphere of fine arts offers a good argument for the thesis of the persistent presence of an artistic impulse that goes beyond the boundaries of the ideology, typical of modernity, aimed at compartmentalization. Since the strength of these aesthetic alternatives seems to have increased concurrently with the extinguishment of the modernist art paradigm, one can reasonably imagine that the end of the artistic monopoly of modernity may open up vibrant new possibilities for different art forms" (p. 23).

As can be easily understood from the very title of the volume, a common thread connecting the different reflections proposed in the various essays is precisely that of questioning the distinctions between high and low, between legit and true art and its popular counterpart. On this point, it should also be said that, as has been pointed out by some critical voices, the term popular does not find as its immediate cast the Italian "popolare," restricted to Gramscian and demological conceptions; it is also necessary to contextualize its use also with respect to the different traditions of reflection that may precisely assign different meanings to the concept. The reader looking for a systematic theory expressed by consequential points will probably be disappointed in reading the volume, since that is not the goal. In fact, the value of the publication is to be found in the variety and, so to speak, in the "push" and invitation to further reflection toward and within the new forms of the aesthetic. As the author himself writes at the close of the preface, "This book, of course, represents only a small example of my pragmatist and somaesthetic approach to folk art and the art of living, but I hope that it will nonetheless be useful for readers in Italy. Sometimes less is more, even in philosophy books" (p. 23). Having to draw a balance on the volume we believe that it is undoubtedly a publication deserving of attention especially by scholars dealing with contemporary aesthetic phenomena, but also a good tool to essay the general tenor of somaesthetics as a discipline; for those, on the other hand, who would like to be interested in the general theoretical framework of somaesthetics there remain, in our opinion, necessary steps the previous volumes by Shusterman to which, for the Italian audience, must be added "Aesthetic Experience and Popular Arts. Somaesthetic Perspectives on Theory and Practice."

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