

# Taking the body seriously

an interview with Richard Shusterman

by Anna Wójcik

Richard Shusterman – American-Israeli philosopher. He graduated from Hebrew University of Jerusalem and defended doctoral dissertation at St John's College, University of Oxford. He currently holds position of Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy at Florida Atlantic University. He was associated with Temple University and Collège International de Philosophie in Paris as well as with New School for Social Research and École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Starting as an analytical philosopher, Shusterman later contributed to pragmatist aesthetics and developed an original interdisciplinary field of somaesthetics.

**You were described as a “nomadic philosopher”. This description seems appropriate considering the geographical and cultural span of places where you have studied, practiced and taught philosophy. It is also accurate when one thinks of the shifts between your philosophical fields of interest. Starting with analytical philosophy you arrived at interdisciplinary body studies. What propels a philosopher to such a substantial change of azimuth?**

In my case the change was gradual. It was obviously provoked by books. Nevertheless, reading lists are usually inspired by professional and private encounters. I received a solid background in analytical philosophy in Jerusalem and at Oxford. I owe taking pragmatism seriously to Richard Rorty or, more precisely, to his interpretation of John Dewey, which in turn encouraged me to read William James. I turned from a regular analytic philosopher to someone who still uses analytic methods, but is more on the pragmatist side. Pragmatism is a philosophy that makes the basic human goal and basic human function not knowledge, but action. Once you see that the action is at the core of human existence, then you have to ask what is the core of action and the body is essential for any kind of action that we do. After encounters with Pierre Bourdieu and Arthur Danto I realized that it is also the case of aesthetics – our judgments on works of art and beauty are strongly connected with the experience of appreciation, which is always bodily. This convinced me to focus on a body in a theoretical way.

However, a private impulse was equally important. The change of research interests was mirrored by more holistic conversion, which came with living with dancers. During one of my seminars I met a group of dancers and started a romantic connection with a dancer. We lived together for two years, which gave me an opportunity to discover a milieu of dancers and change my attitude. For me it's very clear that my philosophy comes from my experience from life and not only from books. I think mostly from life - in books I find the arguments and vocabulary to verbalize the experience I have in life. Of course reading is also important part

of my experience, but I arrived at the topics that excited me through things I have lived and I felt. That is why the experience of being with people who take the body seriously, who take art experience seriously, who take feeling seriously was crucial. Again, feeling and emotions are very bodily.

**There is a tendency in some fields of philosophy to say the emotions are disruptive and distractive of thought and rationalism.**

I am convinced that emotions are very important for thinking – being interested in a subject is decisive, without it you cannot concentrate on a thought until you reach its conclusion. There is a vindication: feeling is very important for thought as well as for action. Thought most often inhibits action, whereas people act from their feelings. It does not mean that feeling cannot be criticized and controlled. But feeling can guide you – just like thinking can regulate your action.

**How does the encounter with dance professionals influence theoretician's attitude?  
What lies behind "taking body seriously"?**

Dancers learn experimentally to enjoy and see the wisdom of the body. However, I saw that they often had problems upon translating this personal experience to concepts. They were hopeless in expressing themselves in a language which was considered acceptable by people from academic community, including myself. At the beginning I also supposed that maybe they were stupid and talked nonsense, but over time I realized an acuteness of their diagnosis; they really did understand. Something similar can happen to people who had accident or operation – they experience their body differently. It helped me decide that here is this intelligence of dancers, that is disrespected and neglected, because it does not fit academic discourse. And there is a job for me to try to translate their intelligence into a language that philosophers and intellectuals can understand. Not simply for the good of the dancers, but for the good of the philosophers. I realized that living with dancers was healing for me and improved my quality of life and also my philosophical perception. Like with music - if you are tone deaf, it does not help if you can understand the music intellectually.

**Apart from being theoretically interested in body practices, you also work as a professional therapist.**

The dancers, partly because they had injuries, partly because they were curious and liked to experiment, tried different practices. It is through them I got acquainted with the body practitioners. However, the decision to get on a professional level with Feldenkrais method was caused by my experience in philosophy. Anyone can read philosophy or take few philosophy courses, but that doesn't mean they understand it. To really understand philosophy, to get a complete picture – you arrive only by a very systematic study. It is similar with body studies. After completing professional training I opened my own practice in order to keep up my skill and satisfy my curiosity. Besides, I find keeping my practice very satisfying. I see my primary job as writing and teaching people. Moreover, I travel a lot and this prevents me from taking too many clients. What is more, I do not even accept credit cards which is almost inconceivable in the US.

## **You have “conquered” a new field for philosophy.**

Philosophy is bound to engage more with the world. If not, it will surely become a highly specialized, marginal discipline, attractive to smaller and smaller groups of people. One way of improving philosophy is broadening it. Psychology has started when William James improved philosophy by expanding it into the experimental domain. Similarly, I see somaesthetics as an interdisciplinary field grounded in philosophy, but open to other disciplines?

## **Do you think universities themselves are opening up?**

Definitely. In 2010 my book was published in Poland and there was a promotional event at Jagiellonian University in Cracow. Suddenly professor Krystyna Wilkoszewska, the editor of Polish edition, asked to remove tables and chairs from the seminar room and a dance performance begun. The soloist wrote a thesis on somaesthetics. I remember I was emotionally moved. This wouldn't have happened before my work in pragmatism aesthetics and somaesthetics that a dance performance could happen in a seminar room. Besides, new methods of teaching are introduced. Along with lectures I started to propose workshops myself.

The change is possible. I learnt and grew in Israel and Europe and didn't plan to come back to the United States, but when it happened, I had to redefine my identity and open up to all things American and to youth culture. In the beginning of the 90. I started to write about rap music. At that time not so many philosophers were interested in popular culture and now my students publish book on the Simpsons and philosophy. In America there are two extremes: writing is either hyper-academic or completely popular. Popular weekly magazines are quite superficial, while academic journals are just very, very dry. Sometimes I feel like a stranger in American society. I feel comfortable on the “European”, middle level of writing. In Europe there are cultural journals, where for instance visual is important and the content is understood by general intellectuals, not just genuine philosophers. Even though I wrote a lot about popular culture, I never considered myself as a popular writer – my education in analytical philosophy prevents me from being too personal or writing on the level of slogans.

## **In conclusion, remaining role of philosopher would be keeping the standards of thinking and giving some kind of credibility to new fields of research.**

As a philosopher I have to keep academic credibility. In my books I have to maintain a perfectly respectful philosophical arguments and language. Reputation I earned, good publishers, mentors such as Rorty, Danto and Bourdieu, who accepted my work in pragmatism aesthetics – all this allows me to walk on a tightrope between establishment and progress and do what interests me and people I meet.

A very important aspect of pragmatism has always spoken to me: pragmatism is millieuism. It's not only to describe the world, it's to improve it. In my opinion philosophy shouldn't only interpret the world, it should improve it. Many people in Europe see this approach as being

very naïve and American – they prefer to describe world in objectified, cynical way, whereas I am convinced that you can at least change your experience. It is possible to improve philosophy by making it more interesting and more rich in what it covers and therefore open people to new aspects of their existence.