

Le Monde, Friday, Nov. 30, 2007.

Book Review Section, pages 1 & 12.

Two articles: one a general profile with comments on the new book, *Body Consciousness*; the other strictly a review of the book

Translation:

p. 1: Headline: "The holistic philosophy of Professor Shusterman: for this American expert on aesthetic questions, the body is a site of full-fledged thought"

p.12. First article: Headline: **Richard Shusterman**  
The side-effects of a holistic philosophy

Today gyms are no longer frequented by philosophers as they were in the time of Socrates. And few philosophers have taken seriously the role of dance and physical training in their teaching. To see Richard Shusterman, a philosophy professor at Florida Atlantic University (USA) offer a demonstration of the Feldenkrais Method (a body discipline of which he is a professional practitioner), one can't help but recognize the attention he gives to what the tradition of Western philosophy has long considered as the graveyard of the soul and that he prefers to conceive as the "soma": that is a living, feeling body.

Visibly in better shape and more supple than most men of 58, his own body is the first indicator of this attention, an attention that is then further directed to bodies of others, as when one comes to consult him on questions far from metaphysics: as when an octogenarian with such frightful pain in his knees that made it difficult to stand up from sitting came to see Shusterman for help, as the author recounts in his new book: *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. "The body is not only unreflective spontaneity. There is also somatic reflection," he explains to clarify his interest, uncommon in his profession, for practices like zen meditation in which he was trained in Japan. But was not John Dewey, one of the founders of American pragmatism, himself schooled in the [somatic] theories of F.M. Alexander? In the 1930s, this former actor went so far as to see in certain bodily postures ("head forward and erect," for example) a condition of humanity's moral evolution.

Shusterman's is of those holistic philosophies, which are like the holistic medicines that one judges by their effects and active principles. This first of his books (among a dozen others translated into several languages) to be dedicated principally to the theme of embodiment, Shusterman's latest book can be situated at the heart of his original path of thinking and living, inspired in large part by the Hebrew maxim that advises us to "respect and suspect" when it comes to our sensory habits.

Shusterman has long been troubled by the mere pursuit of truth, as he once confessed in an autobiographical essay. "My study of philosophy began with a passion, or rather with a vengeance, spurred by a disappointment with the world." Beginning with America, whose image as a democratic pluralist society free from religious and racial prejudice could not survive what he experienced as a young Jew from Philadelphia. He left America in 1966 at the age of 16, in conflict with his family, during the war in Vietnam. Israel at that time appeared to him a paradise of progressivism for forging a new identity. "One didn't yet speak of occupied territories," he remembers, *I believed in*

*the egalitarianism of that society, in its freedom and posture of defense.*” His three years of his military service there, as an intelligence officer from 1973 to 1976, marked by Yom Kippur War and Operation Entebbe, posed again, in a crucial way, the question of truth: the vital stakes of thinking that must be done under extreme physical conditions determined his commitment to an embodied philosophy and decisively provoked in him “*a certain critical distance regarding the paltry stakes of academic success as a professional philosopher.*”

Choosing nonetheless to shed his uniform to take a doctorate at Oxford , Shusterman wrote a thesis on the logic of literary criticism. His reading of Wittgenstein and Austin, who insisted on the practical dimension of language, prepared his path toward the philosophy of *pragmatism*. This tradition of thought defines itself as a method for clarifying concepts in terms of their concrete effects; accordingly, experience is the test of our ideas, and the meaning of a concept is nothing else than the totality of results of this test. Pragmatism is also a sort of humanism which rather seeks not absolute truths but rather that which is good for human beings.

Over the years, Shusterman has become an unavoidable figure in issues of aesthetics,” after finally leaving Israel to teach for a while at Temple University, in his native Philadelphia. He has never stopped crossing borders, not only philosophically but also geographically, ethnically, culturally. “*I am more influenced by life experiences than by philosophical texts,*” he confesses. Between different nationalities, families, languages, and modes of thought, Shusterman’s pragmatist philosophy, like William James’s a century earlier, succeeds in connecting diversities of experiences while maintaining their differences in a dynamic and fertile tension. “*I regard the meaning of an event, an artwork, a life as examples of reconstructed unities that embrace plurality and change,*” explains the author of *Practicing Philosophy* (Routledge, 1997).

For him what is at stake in art is not the revelation of beauty for mere contemplation. Just as with truth, beauty is something to be studied, internalized, and lived. He thus develops the sort of view proposed by John Dewey for whom art is the place of an aesthetic experience, that is, a perceptual experience whose intensity should constitute a model for our daily experience. Thus, aesthetics can be brought into ordinary life; thus art, life, and philosophy can form a field of common experience. And in contrast to analytic theories that put “*art in a box,*” we have a theory that would make art surge out of the box to regain its practical and democratic import, outside the galleries.

So besides referring to T.S. Eliot, Shusterman has been equally fond of citing the rap group Public Enemy (with its media critique of “don’t believe the hype”). A philosopher of rap, who reveals in its culture some of the attitudes of ancient sages, Shusterman first became well known in Europe through his interest in popular arts that were thought unworthy of academic attention. His first book translated into French, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, published by Minuit in 1991 in the series edited by Pierre Bourdieu. “*He sought a bridge toward American analytic aesthetics,* Shusterman remembers. *And I found in Bourdieu what neither Wittgenstein nor Austin had really examined: the real social conditions of ‘linguistic situations.’*” But the exchange between the two men also included another dimension, since Shusterman belonged to the militant Israeli left that opposed the politics of his adoptive country.

“*I myself am an imported product,*” he notes, amused at the complexity of Franco-American intellectual exchanges; he who later edited a collection entitled *Bourdieu: A*

*Critical Reader* (Blackwell, 1999). Although he reads and comments widely on twentieth-century French thinkers, Shusterman does not like to talk about “*French theory*” [in English in the original French]. “*We should distinguish between the theories of French thinkers and their reception in the USA, which is often done by people who don’t really know French and who confuse everything. I don’t have great respect for the mediocre theoreticians of so-called ‘American continental philosophy’ and I’m quite concerned by the way that English dominates the entire field of philosophy in the world,*” he confides.

Distinctively, just like his first book published in Paris, Shusterman’s new book appears in French even before its original English version. Between analytic and continental philosophy, his pragmatism, once again, creates links without dissolving differences, and his thought gives body, recalling from his own somatic theory that the body is a medium.

But doesn’t advocating attention to the body lead us to an individualistic hedonism unable to treat social problems. “*Body consciousness does not solve everything,*” concedes Shusterman, *but it is crucially important in numerous dimensions of ethical and political issues. One sees this in Simone de Beauvoir or with Frantz Fanon on the topic of the bodies of the oppressed. And also in the struggle against visceral hatreds devoid of any rational foundation that are directed at groups of people because they are considered to be foreign bodies. In this case, a consciousness of the impurity of every human body can help improve interethnic relations.*” This optimistic meliorism of Shusterman does not preclude the negative sense of torment that, by his own confession, oriented him toward philosophy. Through this sense of negation, an active critical principle remains continuously at work even when the body seems calm and confident. As a side-effect.

p. 12. 2<sup>nd</sup> article. **Headline Body Intelligence**

“*To find intensely enchanting experiences in ordinary life,*” mobilizing “*the exalting feeling of cosmic unity*”; no, Richard Shusterman’s latest book is not a New-Age manual of personal well-being, delivered from Florida’s paradise of cosmetic surgery. It is indeed a real book of philosophy that is simply defending the virtues of “*reflective bodily experience.*” Inspired by the rejection of body-mind dualism deriving from John Dewey and cross-bred with Asian thought, the author develops his theory of “*somaesthetics.*” He presents it as the critical study of “*our use of the lived body (or soma),*” considered as a site of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (asthesis)” and of “*creative self-fashioning.*”

According to Shusterman, there exists a reflective level of bodily consciousness neglected by certain great philosophers of the body: thus the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty restores “*the flesh*” to the world but leaves it, without power, in the “*silent consciousness*” of “*primordial experience*”; similarly, Simone de Beauvoir’s theories of gender and old age fail to recognize the body as place for the transcendent activity of consciousness; while William James, despite his physiological approach, did not accord a role to somatic introspection in practical life.

The key, for Shusterman, consists in articulating [somaesthetics] levels: “*analytic*” (the body’s role in perception and knowledge); *pragmatic* (the methods for

improving these perceptions); and *practical* (the actual practice of these methods). An example of this movement from the analytic to the practical: using the theme of “*bodily feelings*” in Wittgenstein to sustain the struggle against racism by trying to control certain “physical” causes for rejecting those who are Other. Besides these political applications, it is the cultivation of pleasures that motivates Shusterman. In that matter, breathing and walking can be as effective as the practices of sex and drugs that Foucault advocated. Shusterman criticizes the latter’s equation of sensory intensity with intensification of pleasure, which dominates also our consumerist culture. Against a society that glorifies certain models of good looks, against the conformism of advertised images and the ideology of (physical and technical) outputs, Shusterman seeks to liberate the notion of self-use from its dominant competitive context that is both self-destructive and negates the other.