



Shusterman, Richard, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths between Art and Life*. Photographs by Yann Toma

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Richard Shusterman's *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* is undoubtedly a bold and provocative work, which presents, embodies, and performs his vision of pragmatist philosophy of thinking through body via a creative narrative in words and images that unfolds a new genre of how "the word becomes flesh" (*The Gospel according to John*). The book is a philosophical as well as an artistic experiment in collaboration with Yann Toma, a French visual artist. It embodies Shusterman's idea of somaesthetics through a hybrid of words and visual images, along with what Shusterman calls a "new remix" of philosophy, autobiography, and narrative fiction. The book is bilingual, with Shusterman's text published both in the original English version and in French translation.

Although Shusterman intends to enunciate the personal aspect of aesthetic experience, he tries to avoid giving an explicit or *a priori* self-reference with regard to the Man in Gold to the reader, which can be seen in the author's constant shift from first-person narration to third-person narration. By so doing, the book presents the reader with a perspective that is twofold, namely, Shusterman's and the Man in Gold's. I must admit that it is by no means an easy book to review, especially when the discourse is operated at multilayered levels highlighted from two parallel dimensions: philosophical enquiry and performance art, wherein Shusterman is both a philosopher and a performance artist. Moreover, the book has interesting points of overlap with transformational notions in Daoism, which I address in the course of this review.

When thumbing through the book, what strikes the reader immediately may not be the words, or the narrative that lays out the key theme of the book, but the images throughout the pages: the dazzling "Man in Gold" featuring Shusterman as photographed by Toma. We cannot but help looking at a "60-year old philosopher's

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figure in a glitzy skin-tight body stocking that had been designed for lithe young dancers” (21). Yes, what we see here is Shusterman incarnating his somaesthetic theory in performance. Apart from eye-catching visual images, the storyline also offers the reader a detailed account of the event in which the artistic project the Man of Gold “was born.” The event took place in a medieval abbey named Royaumont near Paris in 2010—a perfect combination of a premodern setting with postmodern art. The images presented in the book, consisting of video stills and photographs taken, play a crucial role throughout the narrative: there are two Shusterman(s) encountered by the reader: one is Shusterman the narrator who witnesses and explains the Man in Gold; the other is the Man in Gold incarnated by Shusterman. In other words, Shusterman is both the Man in Gold and an observer/philosopher who examines the Man in Gold. Obviously, the book reflects a longstanding argument maintained by Shusterman that aesthetics is a life-improving cognitive discipline that extends far beyond questions of beauty and fine arts, and that involves both theory and practical exercise. In fact, most philosophical concepts and arguments presented in the book are implied through the mode of embodied thinking.

“Somaesthetics” is a term coined by Shusterman in 1996. He combined “soma,” an expression derived from the Greek word for body, with “aesthetics,” a word derived from the Greek *aisthesis*, meaning “sensory perception.” It is a philosophical discipline involving the use, appreciation, and knowledge of one’s own body, represented by Shusterman’s well-known works such as *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), *Performing Live* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), *Body Consciousness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and *Thinking through the Body* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Readers familiar with Shusterman’s previous works will not be surprised by his somatic approach to philosophy expressed in the Man in Gold. Shusterman hopes that as a body-centered and body-focused philosophy, somaesthetics serves two main purposes, namely, pragmatist aesthetics and philosophy as an embodied art of living. Therefore, in the Man in Gold, we see Shusterman using his own body to philosophize about aesthetic interpretation and experience despite an apparent avoidance of conceptualizing his experiment. The author intends to tell us that art reaches within, where one finds not only the interpretative power of the meaning of art but also, more importantly, the personal experience, going along with the concept of self or self-identity.

Therefore, we cannot help but ask this question: who is the Man in Gold in the fictional narrative? Shusterman suggests that he is both present and absent in the process of narration, and he is the subject who looks at the Man in Gold and an object examined by the subject simultaneously. When Shusterman is confined to the golden costume, he seems to assume a new identity which allows a personal transfiguration to become possible. Maybe this is what Shusterman calls “aesthetical experience and the power of possession.” Shusterman wants to empower the Man in Gold so the latter could be strong enough to “take the philosopher’s soma as his material medium for expression” (18). The Man in Gold was created in a medieval abbey in France, a place in Europe which reminds the reader of the monks who may have performed alchemies with the belief that they could gain transformative power over the elements of nature. Accordingly, “gold” in Shusterman’s story is metaphorical, which suggests a philosopher’s dream of achieving transformative power. As Shusterman puts it, one of the key ideas of the book is to show “the instability and transformational potential of the self

through the powers of possession” (8). Thus, Shusterman uses his own “silent” and “nomadic soma” as a material medium for the Man in Gold, who is full of life energy (19–20). The metamorphosis from Shusterman to the Man in Gold no longer remains a literary imagination but a real-life occurrence.

In the preface of the book, Shusterman offers a first-person perspective explaining the three main reasons that led him to engage in his adventures with performance art and his collaboration with Toma. He then he shifts to a third-person perspective, delineating “a mysterious birth” of the Man in Gold. This fictional and somehow mystical perspective of the birth story sounds like he is telling a Daoist folk tale: “The Man in Gold never knew his parents. He has no clue of who his father might be but does not mind this mystery, apparently regarding even the best of fathers as benignly irrelevant or blessedly absent” (17–18). Then Shusterman continues that the Man in Gold imagines his mother as a “tiny dancing goddess.” This ambiguity in the Man in Gold’s genealogy is very interesting. On the one hand, Shusterman wants to separate the identity of the narrator/philosopher from that of the Man in Gold; on the other hand, he gives the creator (the mother) special attention by presenting her with a Chinese name he created for her: WU Xiaoxing 舞小星, the tiny dancing goddess “who through a series of seductive human incarnations captured the heart and the mind of Richard Shusterman” (18). According to the Chinese characters, the mother’s name can also be translated as “the dancing little star.” It is quite interesting to see the idea of dancing and stars here. In Daoist religion, both dances (known as Yubu 禹步, paces and steps) and stars (known as Beidou Qixing 北斗七星, the seven stars from the Big Dipper) in early Daoist mythology are often connected to a transformative process and supernatural power. As a matter of fact, the mythical goddess’s divine resonance pervades the book’s final episode where the Man in Gold finally meets his “ideal archetype” of the female beauty whose “golden elixir of love” has “hammered into his finely gilded suit” and possessed his heart, transforming his mundane desires into “purity of passion” (64).

I am not sure that Shusterman intends to bring in Daoist mythology in his account of the Man in Gold, yet it is not difficult for us to notice other Daoist elements in the book. The experience-process perspective expressed in the book resembles a certain aspect of Daoist philosophy. At several occasions, Shusterman cites from Laozi’s 老子 *Daodejing* 道德經 directly to support his viewpoints, such as the saying “one who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know” (19), and “to know the male but keep the female” (54). The interplay between speaking and silence, and between the autobiographical account and philosophical discourse, is illustrated through the exchange of perspectives between the philosopher/Shusterman and the Man in Gold. In terms of speaking, Shusterman, like Daoists, very often adopts a kind of language that is more allegorical than conceptual, and it is particularly so when the story is told from the perspective of the Man in Gold. Shusterman tells us: “... the narrative presents ... the more poetic, even mystical views of these events from the Man in Gold’s own eccentric, other-worldly perspective, immersed in the mysteries of Daoism” (7). In Daoism, the concept of “mystery” is *xuan* 玄, literally meaning “dark” in Chinese and usually translated as “a profound mystery” that carries metaphysical, epistemological, and soteriological meanings. This notion of “darkness” is also reflected in some of the presentations of the Man in Gold when the dark image is lit by the photographer’s artistic manipulation of a lamp for a special illuminative effect. In the images produced by Toma, Shusterman’s “creative co-conspirator,” we also see the interaction between

the *yin* and the *yang*, and between darkness and light. On one occasion, Shusterman describes how Toma is delighted with the darkness in the space, for it empowers his lamp (the light) to do their photographic magic (94). As a matter of fact, the dark background with its obscurity (the *yin*) has enhanced the luminous images of the golden suit (the *yang*). In the images of the Man in Gold, therefore, we see the extensive use of the *yin-yang* (darkness-brightness) pair, a significant aspect of traditional Chinese aesthetics.

One further point can be made with regard to the alchemical practice suggested by the Man in Gold. It reminds me of not only the medieval monks in a smoky dungeon, trying to transform lead into gold, but also the Daoist alchemical practice and body-related perspectives in Daoism. The most important aspect of alchemical practice is called *neidan* 內丹 (internal alchemy), the purpose of which is to gain some sort of transformative or supranatural power. According to Daoism, the human body in the practice of the internal alchemy becomes a *ding* 鼎 or cauldron in which what is called “three treasures,” that is, essence (*jing* 精), life breath (*qi* 氣), and spirit or somatic/spiritual soul (*shen* 神) are cultivated. The whole idea of alchemical power is associated with the Daoist idea of “correlative cosmology” (a concept used by A. C. Graham) that emphasizes a correspondence between cosmos and body. This cosmos-body correspondence or the macrocosm-microcosm correlativity is a key concept in Daoist understandings of the cosmic order and the social order, as well as the well-being of the human being. From this line of thinking, Daoism also gives special attention to body and its connection to person. The body here, however, is not simply a form of corporeality (*xing* 形), a physical body (*ti* 體), for its emblematic functions are more significant than those performed by the body parts themselves or anatomic representations; instead it is a body with cinnabar fields and *qi*-energy which is linked to the mental, the spiritual, and the cosmic energies.

In a sense the Man in Gold resembles Daoist internal alchemy. When Shusterman is covered by his “magic skin” (i.e., his golden, energizing suit), he sometimes stands and sometimes lies in meditation-like postures. The Man in Gold says, “Beneath his fiery gold suit [the *yang*], he recognized the *yin* principle in his soul, inspired by the heavenly Wu Xiaoxing, and he longed to join her by the water” (55). The tiny dancing goddess appears again to indicate the feminine energy of the Man in Gold. This passage corresponds very well to the shooting scene that follows, when Shusterman speaks of the function of Toma’s lamps: “So while the Man in Gold reclined on the ribbed bilge floor, Yann [Toma]’s lamps over him, tracing his energetic aura with light, hoping these luminous lines would not only make manifest the Man in Gold’s purity of noble passion but shield him from negative energy or aggression. ... He slinked surreptitiously around the boat so as not to be discovered, holding himself close to its hull and sometimes pausing to caress, in reverence and entreaty, its lovely female limbs as he carefully crept toward the studio door” (100). It is here that Shusterman suggests, by employing a poetic language, that one of the transformative powers is to acknowledge the virtues of femininity, softness, and humility. For Shusterman, this transformation is an adventure in the sense that it is a completely new experience, both physically and mentally. To a certain extent, the Man in Gold reminds me of the aesthetic life of Zhuangzi 莊子, which points to a fluid and creative mind that transcends the rigidity of conventional mores and life patterns so that a person can respond to the world of flux more effectively and happily.

On the other hand, the *Man in Gold* can be understood in the light of Shusterman's pragmatic aesthetic theory in general. Shusterman has always been aware of the problem of defining art or aesthetic experience due to its ambiguity deriving from its divergent conceptions and theoretical uses. In his early works, Shusterman tries to bridge the gap between the analytics and continentals, and later he reconnects himself with the American pragmatic tradition, particularly with the aesthetics of John Dewey, supplemented by phenomenology and poststructuralism. The idea of incarnation via the *Man in Gold* is derived from the pragmatic philosophy of knowing through doing as well as the body conscious of phenomenology, or in Shusterman's words, thinking through body. The *Man in Gold* shows that Shusterman gives special prominence to the body in his philosophy, considering it a primary phenomenon of the art of living and experiencing. His body conscious enables him to describe the *Man in Gold* as an interlocutor between the author who tries to conceptualize and interpret as a philosopher and the author who attempts to attain a form of "pure experience" of living beauty. For Shusterman, life itself should be evaluated not only ethically but also aesthetically.

Meanwhile, the *Man in Gold* connects aesthetics to enjoyment, which bridges the gap between art and life. Shusterman expresses his dissatisfaction with certain tendencies in pragmatist philosophy. For example, he challenges Richard Rorty's model of a postmodern aesthetic experience focused on the intellectual heritage represented by literary or philosophical ironist and the "strong poet" (a term Rorty borrows from Harold Bloom), rather than advocating a more embodied pragmatist aesthetic aimed at living beauty, that is, the sensual bodily pleasures in daily life and the pursuit of somatic well-being. How does somaesthetics apply to contemporary art? According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension'" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 235). Shusterman's answer is that "the soma (with its sensory, motor, and affective resources) is the medium through which we both create and appreciate works of art, and that therefore improved somatic mastery could generate better aesthetic experience" (9). Yet this answer does not completely satisfy the artists who want "a more concrete and practical application" of his theory in contemporary artistic creation. *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* then gives Shusterman an opportunity to work on a project with practical application in which the author is the performer and interpreter at the same time. Yet in contrast to Rorty's model of high art, Shusterman puts his aesthetic experience in daily life. It should be noted also that the subtitle of the book is *Paths between Art and Life*. Shusterman intends to inspire and even provoke the reader to think about the relationship between art and life. The plural form of "paths" indicates the pluralistic nature of the art of life. Just as in Daoist philosophy, what really matters is not the Dao 道 (the Way), but *dao*(s) that open up all possibilities of life-experiencing and meaning-making.

In conclusion, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* is a book developed within Shusterman's long-standing endeavor in promoting somaesthetics. At the same time, it can also be interpreted as a new philosophico-artistic genre that tries to produce works using not merely abstract thought but also concrete application so as to fulfill the pragmatic unity of theory and practice, as well as a representational unity between a cataphatic philosopher and an apophatic *Man in Gold*. Some readers may find the book "bizarre" or find Shusterman's role-playing in photographic art overly introspective. The intertwining between the dream-like account of the *Man in Gold* and the rational

perspective of the author may sometimes confuse the reader in terms of the role of philosophical intervention in the book. Nevertheless, for those who love romantic adventures and an unconventional philosophical work, the book is truly a delightful read.

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