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## Shusterman's somaesthetics as meta-aesthetics

### Abstract

*In this article I will explore three contributions that Shusterman's somaesthetics can make to meta-aesthetics: Shusterman's interpretation of the analytic-continental aesthetic debate; the redefinition of the aesthetic through the notion of experience, resulting in the aesthetics of popular art and somaesthetics, and finally, the opening of aesthetics to extra-philosophical practices, such as body exercises and performances.*

### Keywords

*Somaesthetics, Meta-aesthetics, Pragmatism*

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## *Introduction*

On the contemporary philosophical scene, a leading role is played by 'metaphilosophy,' understood as "the investigation of the nature of philosophy, with the central aim of arriving at a satisfactory explanation for the absence of uncontested philosophical claims and arguments" (Laserowitz 1970: 91). While the term has been part of the philosophical debate since the 1940s, it has recently developed into a discipline in its own right, finding support in both analytic and continental circles, often attempting to build bridges between the two traditions (for a general overview, see Overgaard, Gilbert, Burwood 2013). The same cannot be said of the term 'meta-aesthetics,' or 'metaesthetics,' which although documented as early as the 1970s, has not yet found much luck in philosophical jargon<sup>1</sup>. The definition of meta-aesthetics can be constructed similarly to that of meta-philosophy. Mary Carman Rose, for example, offers the following description in one of the earliest occurrences of the term:

Meta-aesthetics is philosophical inquiry about aesthetic inquiry. In part, its work derives from the fact that there are diverse aesthetic theories, each persuasive to some persons, and none persuasive to all. It compares, contrasts, and assesses the diverse methods of working out, assessing, and defending aesthetic theories. And it examines the multi-faceted relations between aesthetic theory and extra-aesthetic areas of inquiry – e.g., ontology, metaphysics, natural sciences, and the study of the human spirit. (Rose 1976: 3)

This definition distinguishes two levels, or two possibilities for meta-aesthetics. On the one hand, it can be the discussion of different aesthetic paradigms, their emergence, and their persistence. On the other hand, it can be the general discussion of the limits of the domain of aesthetics, and thus of its definition in relation to other fields of knowledge. The fact that the name 'meta-aesthetics' has not been particularly successful is especially surprising when one considers how precisely this second aspect – that of the constitution and definition of aesthetics – has been a point of contention that has accompanied aesthetics throughout its history. Indeed, the very birth of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline was the

<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Shusterman's construction of the term 'somaesthetics', in this paper I will use the hyphen and write 'meta-aesthetics' instead of 'metaesthetics'. Shusterman (among others: Shusterman 2014) offers reasons for his nominal construction. While I agree with his basic idea, I prefer to use the hyphen in order to be consistent with established uses of the term.

result of intense debate, and the very possibility that something like 'aesthetics' was and is possible is anything but a foregone conclusion (for this debate see Amoroso 2000 and Guyer 2009). In fact, if we take a broader historical perspective, we can see that the traditional definition of aesthetics as 'philosophy of the fine arts' emerges only as the culmination of a century-long bumpy ride ranging from Baumgarten's coining of the term in 1735 to the 1835 first edition of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Within what Amoroso (2014) calls "the golden century of aesthetics", the status of the discipline itself changes, morphing from author to author, or even from work to work, in a path in which aesthetics moves from being the science of sensibility (Baumgarten) to the study of pure a priori forms of intuition (Kant's first critique) to the study of *Zweckmäßigkeit* (Kant's third critique), through Schiller's aesthetic education and on to the philosophy of art of German Idealism, to mention only the most important steps. In this golden century, then, – and even more so in the two hundred years that followed – aesthetics underwent a constant process of definition, de-definition, and re-definition, perhaps demonstrating that its only 'essence' may be precisely that of remaining a "problem" (this is the thesis, for instance, put forward by Amoroso 1988).

To the contemporary observer, this ambiguity in the field of aesthetics does not necessarily feel like a defect. To borrow from the definition of metaphilosophy quoted above, the absence of uncontroversial aesthetic claims and arguments does not require any satisfactory explanation, but rather demonstrates the vitality of the discipline, capable of morphing time and again to address the most pressing problems that arise. For this reason, the revival and expansion of meta-aesthetics seems as much a natural development as a necessary endeavor for aesthetics today.

Given this historical and theoretical background and with this goal in mind, in this paper I will explore one possible contribution to meta-aesthetics, that of Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics. While I do not deny that other authors and currents can also effectively promote a revival of meta-aesthetics, I will argue that somaesthetics can make an important and original contribution. It can be considered on three levels, to which the next three sections of the paper will be devoted. The first two are those already mentioned in the quoted definition of meta-aesthetics: one discusses the emergence and persistence of certain aesthetic paradigms, and the other concerns the definition of the aesthetic. The third level, which justifies the choice to deal specifically with somaesthetics as opposed to other meta-aesthetic theories, will be traced in Shusterman's

proposal to expand the horizon of aesthetics beyond philosophical discourse to include bodily practices and exercises. I will argue that this is the most original (though perhaps not unique) contribution that somaesthetics can make to meta-aesthetics.

### *1. Shusterman and the tradition of aesthetics*

The first contribution that somaesthetics – or Shusterman's philosophy more generally – can make to meta-aesthetics is to discuss the history of aesthetics; to look for patterns to understand the emergence of certain interpretive paradigms, and to trace some basic features and trends that characterize the trajectory of modern and contemporary aesthetics. Obviously, it is not possible to deal in detail with Shusterman's discussion of all modern aesthetic theory. Thus, it will suffice to show the salient features of his confrontation with the most important aesthetic paradigms, in order to draw some guidelines that can serve as a contribution to meta-aesthetics. Fortunately, it is Shusterman himself who provides us with a list of the most important influences in the development of his pragmatist aesthetics and subsequent somaesthetics:

At that point, in 1988, I decided to write a book on pragmatist aesthetics, developing a comprehensive theory by engaging insights and arguments from the following five sources: Dewey's experiential aesthetics and reconstructionist vision of philosophy, neopragmatist theories of meaning, interpretation, and identity, Marxian challenges to art's autonomy and elitist tendencies along with Marxian defenses of these features (by T.W. Adorno and Pierre Bourdieu), constructive research into popular art (including my own efforts of aesthetic analysis of popular music and close readings of hiphop lyrics), and postmodernist visions of ethics as an art of living suggested in Michel Foucault and Rorty. (Shusterman 2014: 24)

Building on this historical remark, however, a further clarification is necessary. The aim of this paper is not to offer a comprehensive and neutral interpretation of Shusterman's philosophy, but to examine his aesthetics with a very specific purpose: to show what contributions it can make to meta-aesthetics. Thus, in this part of the argument, the goal is not a genealogical analysis of the influences of these currents and authors *on* Shusterman, but to show the meta-aesthetic significance of his interpretation *of* them. In the continuation of this first part, three of these five sources will be briefly analyzed (Dewey, neo-pragmatism, and Marxist aesthetics), while the last two (popular art and the connection between art

and life) will be the focus of the next part. In addition, in order to demonstrate the depth of the meta-aesthetic value of Shusterman's analysis of modern and contemporary aesthetics, these sources will be supplemented by other equally crucial perspectives with which Shusterman critically engages. These are the dominant paradigms of traditional German aesthetics (from Kant to Gadamer) and analytic aesthetics. It will be argued that only by showing the originality of pragmatist aesthetics with respect to these dominant paradigms, *and* by understanding the implications of Shusterman's interpretation of the five sources, is it possible to have a unified view of the significance of pragmatist aesthetics for the first level of meta-aesthetics.

We can start with Shusterman's confrontation with the two dominant perspectives. Shusterman's first steps in aesthetics – as was inevitable for an American scholar of those years – were taken in dialogue with analytic aesthetics; hence, the book he edited in 1989: *Analytic aesthetics* (Shusterman 1989). Dialogue, however, does not mean mere assimilation, and already in this text, and later, in the crucial *Pragmatist aesthetics* (Shusterman 2000b), this dialogue becomes an important but critical confrontation. Shusterman's critique of the analytic tradition is directed against its pursuit of precise and unambiguous definitions of art and aesthetic qualities, or of a '*fundamentum divisionis*' (Shusterman 2000b: 15) that would serve as a specific quality to identify an isolated and well-defined domain of the aesthetic. This quality would also serve to ensure the objectivity of taste and aesthetic judgment, effectively denying the influence of special interests (Shusterman 2000b: 17-8) and affirming its autonomy (Shusterman 2000b: 23). Against this view of the aesthetic, Shusterman proposes a holistic and continuist paradigm that links the artistic and aesthetic phenomena to the whole of human life, while at the same time rejecting any aprioristic-foundationalist approach, and recognizing the historicity, situationality, and practical utility of aesthetic practices (Shusterman 2000b: 5).

Shusterman's liberation from analytic aesthetics inevitably passes through a rapprochement with themes and authors in the continental tradition. Once again, however, rapprochement does not mean overlap, as Shusterman's confrontation with the author who founded modern aesthetics – Baumgarten – demonstrates (for a more comprehensive account of Shusterman's reading of Baumgarten, see Malecki 2010: 147-8). That Baumgarten is of considerable importance to Shusterman is evident from the fact that it is to him that Shusterman turns, first and foremost, to show

“how somaesthetics is grounded in aesthetic tradition” (Shusterman 2000b: 263). Baumgarten’s aesthetic project is particularly interesting to Shusterman because he recognizes aesthetics not as a theory of the fine arts, but primarily as a study of the sensory component of human cognition, with an explicitly ameliorative end toward “the perfection of sensory cognition as such, this implying beauty” (Shusterman 2000b: 264). While these points are also shared by Shusterman’s somaesthetics, and separate Baumgarten from the rest of the modern aesthetic tradition, what, for Shusterman, distances his own philosophy from Baumgarten’s is “the neglect of the body that Baumgarten disastrously introduced into aesthetics” (Shusterman 2000b: 267).

This neglect of the body continues and deepens in later German aesthetics, beginning with Kant. In Shusterman’s reading, it is Kant who is responsible for the division between ethics and aesthetics (see, for instance, Kant’s discussion of the various domains of pure reason in the *Introduction* to the *Critique of judgement* [Kant 1987: 9-18]). The aesthetic dimension loses any connotations of perfection (Kant 1987: 73-5) and becomes disinterested pleasure, paying for autonomy at the price of practical ineffectiveness. A further, more insidious consequence of the Kantian approach is a profound elitism, whereby a class privilege – that of being able to disinterestedly cultivate good taste without having to deal with the crudities of practical life – becomes the standard, attaining the status of human nature, and thus excluding from aesthetic enjoyment the vast majority of the population (Shusterman 2002: 91-107).

This tendency to subordinate the natural to the spiritual finds its culmination in the apogee of the modern aesthetic tradition: in Hegel. Indeed, it is Hegel who specifically defines the field of aesthetics as the “philosophy of the fine arts”<sup>2</sup>, thus subordinating artistic and spiritual beauty to natural beauty (Hegel 1975: 2). This also applies for the individual work of art and its appreciation, as Hegel claims explicitly that “the work of art, as a sensuous object, is not merely for sensuous apprehension; its standing is of such a kind that, though sensuous, it is essentially at the same time for spiritual apprehension” (Hegel 1975: 35). The inadequacy of the sensuous aspect to be a vessel for the highest contents of the spirit leads – as is well known – to Hegel’s famous thesis of the end of art, which Shusterman directly confronts. As we will see in the next section,

<sup>2</sup> “These lectures are devoted to aesthetics. Their topic is the spacious realm of the beautiful, more precisely, their province is art, or, rather, fine art” (Hegel 1975: 1).

Shusterman's interpretive key lies in relativizing Hegel's thesis to show that the past character of a certain modern way of understanding art actually opens the possibility for a new form of aesthetic experience (Shusterman 1997).

The last author to consider in order to understand Shusterman's confrontation with the modern continental aesthetic tradition is Gadamer<sup>3</sup>. Gadamer is already present in the earliest texts of Shusterman's philosophical career, and many themes are in continuity with the position that Shusterman will develop throughout his production; these include the question of the historicity of experience, the role of play, and the importance of tradition. At the same time, however, Shusterman criticizes what he calls Gadamer's "hermeneutic universalism" (Shusterman 2000b: 116), i.e., the idea that experience can (or should) be resolved entirely in the linguistic dimension of interpretation. In contrast, Shusterman defends the idea that there is a dimension "beneath interpretation" (Shusterman 2000b: 115). This consists of the broader field of understanding, which includes the practical, pre-linguistic, and bodily way of dealing with the world (for more on this topic, see Malecki 2010: 63-108; some criticism of Shusterman's reading can be found in Romagnoli 2023: 92-4).

Following the discussion of the two dominant perspectives of German continental aesthetics and analytic aesthetics, it is now necessary to identify the meta-aesthetic contribution of Shusterman's interpretation. We mentioned that the first sense of meta-aesthetics concerns the study of different aesthetic paradigms, their emergence, and their persistence. Shusterman's interpretation, then, which is never intended as a historical reconstruction but, true to the pragmatist tradition, always has an

<sup>3</sup> For a deeper and more comprehensive account of Shusterman's reading of Gadamer, see Romagnoli 2023 and Kremer 2018. In this review of the dominant paradigm of continental German aesthetics, two figures may seem to be missing: Nietzsche and Heidegger. For Shusterman, however, not only Nietzsche cannot be assimilated into the traditional aesthetic paradigm derived from Kant but is in fact a fierce opponent of it. If anything, Nietzsche, along with Foucault and Merleau-Ponty, belongs, albeit with due distinctions, to that set of authors who, for Shusterman, establish that connection between aesthetics, art, and life that we will discuss in the next section. For an account of Shusterman's reading of Nietzsche, see Marino 2022. For a detailed consideration of Nietzsche's possibilities for somaesthetics, see also Botha 2018. As for Heidegger, however, Shusterman is curiously silent. I would argue that there are some interesting possible intersections between Shusterman's and Heidegger's philosophies, beginning with a common desire to overcome dichotomies and building on a strikingly similar notion of experience – but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

interpretive and ameliorative purpose, contributes to this sense of meta-aesthetics by highlighting certain traits that emerge in the aesthetic tradition and persist in both the continental and the analytic perspectives. We can point to three main traits. The first, and for Shusterman the most important, is the gradual abandonment of the bodily and perceptual dimensions that characterized aesthetics at its inception in Baumgarten. This neglect of the body results in the continental tradition in Hegel's treatment of the work of art and Gadamer's hermeneutic universalism, while in the analytic tradition in the irrelevance of perception and the body in the critical interpretation of works of art. The second, directly related to the first, is the definition of the field of aesthetics as the study of works of art. This definition, as we will also see in the next section, depotentiates aesthetic experience and, according to Shusterman, carries with it, in both the analytic and continental traditions, an elitist bias that denies aesthetic and philosophical relevance to those forms of art and experience that do not conform to the taste of the ruling class – a taste that has been arbitrarily elevated to the status of human nature. The third and final characteristic that pervades both the traditional continental and analytic perspectives is that they increasingly move away from an ethical and ameliorative intent in favor of a scientific and disinterested study and fruition of the isolated work of art.

Against the shortcomings of both these dominant perspectives, Shusterman proposes his own pragmatist aesthetics, and later somaesthetics, as a “promising middle way and mediator between the analytic and continental traditions” (Shusterman 2000b: 4). This is where the five sources that Shusterman had indicated come into play. In fact, pragmatist aesthetics is the result of a creative reworking of these diverse influences, allowing Shusterman to break free from the two dominant paradigms and create a new possibility for aesthetics.

The first source to be discussed is neo-pragmatism, particularly Rorty's (on the relationship between Shusterman and Rorty see Shusterman 2022c). Rorty's importance to Shusterman cannot be underestimated: it was in fact “the exciting appeal of Rorty's texts in the 1980s [that] converted me from an Oxford-trained analytic philosopher to an advocate of the Deweyan-Jamesian pragmatism he championed” (Shusterman 2022c: 588). In Rorty, Shusterman finds first and foremost a philosophy of contingency, historicity, and a fascinating anti-metaphysical and anti-essentialist critique that frees him from the shackles of the two dominant perspectives. Thus, the meta-aesthetic significance of Shusterman's interpretation of



Rorty lies in highlighting how Rorty and Neopragmatism represent a first step beyond the definitory obsession of analytic aesthetics and beyond the metaphysical yoke of continental aesthetics, freeing the space for a plural, post-metaphysical, and non-representational aesthetics. The liberating role of Rorty's philosophy is only partial, however, and his philosophy retains some meta-aesthetic traits shared by the two dominant perspectives, such as the neglect of the body (famous is Rorty's [2001: 156] statement that "Discussion of the body leave [him] cold"), linguistic universalism, and the elitist distinction between public and private spheres.

Against this last point, Shusterman brings into play a second source, that of the aesthetics of critical theory (for more on this topic, see Shusterman's own retrospective: Shusterman 2022b). Critical theory, too, had a liberating significance for Shusterman, freeing him from the apolitical approach that pervaded analytic aesthetics and Rorty's neopragmatism, but also from the aesthetics of disinterestedness of the Kantian tradition. Once again, however, there are still aspects of Adorno's aesthetics in particular that anchor him to the tradition: among them is the problem of popular art, and of what Shusterman calls "critical theory's own residual, conservative elitism" (Shusterman 2022b: 203). This is the idea for which "art must studiously keep away from life and functionality, maintain its sacralized yet socially responsible autonomy and strict equation with high culture, so that it can be spared the pollution of a damaged world and thus maintain a purer critique of this repulsive reality" (Shusterman 2022b: 202)<sup>6</sup>.

It is precisely in opposition to this idea of Adorno's that Shusterman's conversion to pragmatist aesthetics takes place, and it is in relation to this problem that the last of the three sources to be discussed here comes into play: Dewey's aesthetics. The first meta-aesthetic significance of Shusterman's interpretation of Dewey lies in the idea that art and aesthetics must penetrate deeply into everyday life with an anti-elitist, reformative, ameliorative, and educational intent. As a consequence, and at the same time a catalyst of this general intention, is Dewey's idea of shifting the focus of aesthetics from the object to the "powerfully polysemous concept of experience" (Shusterman 2010: 30), thus expanding the field of aesthetics beyond the realm of great fine art. In Dewey, moreover,

<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that other authors and ideas in Critical Theory cannot play a more positive role in defining the emerging new aesthetic paradigm. Benjamin's focus on experience, his notion of the aura, and his studies on photography and the city, as well as Marcuse's central notion of Eros, are just a few examples.

Shusterman finds a champion of a naturalistic and somatic aesthetic, the idea of the functionality of art, and an ardently democratic vision. However, it would be simply wrong to say that Shusterman is simply repeating or reviving Dewey's aesthetics. Despite his "immense admiration" (Shusterman 2010: 27) for Dewey, Shusterman identifies several difficulties for the emergence of a truly new aesthetic paradigm: the first concerns the notion of immediate quality, which for Shusterman becomes too pervasive in Dewey at the expense of other ways of cohering our experiences (for a critique of Shusterman's view in favor of Dewey's idea of the pervasiveness of immediate experience, see the recent Henning 2022). The second concerns Dewey's "half-hearted approach to popular art" (Shusterman 2000b: IX), while the third concerns Dewey's ambition to redefine art based on experience, an attempt that, while "heroic", falls back on the quest for a definition typical of modern (and later analytic) aesthetics.

At the end of this inevitably somewhat schematic first part, we can summarize and draw the threads of the implications of Shusterman's aesthetics for the first sense of meta-aesthetics, that which concerns the emergence and persistence of historical aesthetic paradigms. The first contribution of pragmatist aesthetics to meta-aesthetics is to challenge the dichotomy between analytic aesthetics and continental aesthetics: as we have seen, not only do analytic aesthetics and continental aesthetics share some persistent traits (the limitation of aesthetics as a philosophy of art, the quest for a definition, etc.), but also some sources can be found within *both* traditions that allow for the deconstruction of the two dominant perspectives. It is in this sense that Shusterman's proposal of pragmatist aesthetics emerges as a possible third way, capable of drawing from both perspectives, creatively reworking them and bringing forth a new aesthetic paradigm.

The second contribution the identification of the features necessary to promote a new paradigm. These are 1) the adoption of a historical, post-metaphysical, and post-essentialist perspective; 2) the recovery of a practical, engaged, situated, and ameliorative intention in aesthetic experience; and 3) the centrality of the notion of experience. These are the starting points for Shusterman's new aesthetic paradigm. Since they challenge the very definition of aesthetics, the scope of these novelties, and their discussion, will now be addressed in a separate section that examines the contribution of pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics to the second level of the definition of meta-aesthetics, which has to do with the definition and boundaries of the discipline itself.

## 2. Shusterman and the boundaries of aesthetics

Beginning with the definition of meta-aesthetics, two possible levels of analysis have been outlined. The first was addressed in the previous section, which examined Shusterman's contribution to meta-aesthetics understood as the study of the emergence and evolution of aesthetic paradigms, tendencies, and shared features of a tradition. It is now time to discuss Shusterman's contribution to the second level of meta-aesthetics – which deals with the shifting limits and boundaries of aesthetics, with the definition of its object of study, and with its dialogue with other disciplines.

The key move that allows Shusterman to break with both the modern aesthetic tradition and analytic aesthetics is the shifting of the center of aesthetics. In the new definition of aesthetics proposed by Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics, the center is not the object (i.e., the great work of art) but rather the broader field of aesthetic experience (see the collection of essays edited by Shusterman and Adele Tomlin, entitled *Aesthetic experience*, especially the *Introduction*, and Shusterman's essay [Shusterman, Tomlin 2008]). This idea is explicitly opposed to what, as we have seen, both analytic and continental aesthetics had in common, and what we can call, with Dewey, the "museum conception of art" (Dewey 2008: 12). According to this view, aesthetics is conceived as the study of a precise and well-defined domain, isolated from the rest of human existence and concretized in the individual work of art (see Shusterman 2000b: 27-8). The work of art should therefore be studied objectively and disinterestedly and discussed separately from other areas of human life.

When Shusterman, in opposition to this conception, re-centers aesthetics around the notion of experience rather than the compartmentalized and isolated work of art, a profound change in the status and limits of aesthetics occurs. This section will therefore discuss the two main meta-aesthetic contributions that result from this redefinition of the aesthetic through the notion of experience, and which represent the most important innovations of Shusterman's work in contemporary aesthetics: the aesthetics of popular art, and somaesthetics<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> It is appropriate here to clarify an assumption that drives this entire essay and is made explicit here. In my reading of Shusterman's philosophical career, the phase of pragmatist aesthetics and the subsequent phase of somaesthetics cannot be sharply divided into two supposedly separate moments. Rather, there is a continuity in Shusterman's philosophical trajectory that leads him to a progressive deepening and radicalization of certain positions and instances, which, however, have moved him at least since his

Regarding the former, it is not wrong to think of Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics as a response to the Hegelian thesis of the end of art. As noted above, Shusterman's key innovation lies in the fact that he does not simply oppose Hegel's thesis – as so many have done – but he rather relativizes it. In other words, the point is not to speak of *the* end of art, but of the end of a specific way of understanding art and the aesthetic, typical of modernity, and centered around the so-called fine arts. To quote Shusterman: "The end of a particular and particularly constrictive [...] concept of art should not mean the end of art *tout court* and certainly not the end of aesthetic experience" (Shusterman 2000: 4). On the contrary, Shusterman argues, the end of this model of art actually opens up new opportunities "to renew art's energies and find new directions for progress beyond the traditional modern confines of compartmentalized fine art" (Shusterman 2000: 4). Thus, it happens that aesthetics, having exhausted its livelihood in the field of fine and high art, goes in search of new sources of sustenance in a sphere that remains intact, and finds it in popular art. In doing so, not only does aesthetics find new strength, but a loop effect occurs in which aesthetics transforms and changes its conceptual categories to fit the new object it now wants to study. In other words, there is a reinforcing mechanism at work between aesthetic experience and popular art, which leads to a double movement: on the one hand, aesthetics is de-defining itself – it is abandoning the idea of a defined sphere (that of great art) – and at the same time it is redefining and re-semanticizing itself around the notion of aesthetic experience, which not only allows one to talk about popular art, but also turns out to be the category that better accounts for this new object.

conversion from an analytic scholar to a promoter of pragmatist aesthetics. Continuity, of course, does not mean identity, and it is clear that there are reconsiderations, changes of attitude and perspective, but these do not warrant separate treatment. Rather, I believe that the extent of Shusterman's innovation, and especially his meta-aesthetic contribution, can only be understood by considering his entire career as a whole. A few examples, among others, can be cited in favor of a continuist reading of Shusterman's philosophy: 1) the chapter *Beneath interpretation* already moves against linguistic universalism in favor of a greater focus on the bodily dimension; 2) Shusterman himself decided to include the paper on the disciplinary proposal of somaesthetics in the second edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*; 3) in his most recent work, Shusterman has kept alive the interest in popular art and made explicit the contribution of the classical pragmatism of Dewey, but also of James and Peirce, to somaesthetics. More examples could be given, but for the sake of brevity these may suffice. For the merits of a continuist interpretation for a meta-aesthetic consideration of his work, I can only defer to the general argument of this paper.

This close connection between popular art and aesthetic experience lies in the fact that popular art, in Shusterman's words, "has not yet learned to eschew the experiential goals of pleasure, affect, and meaningful coherence" (Shusterman 2000: 32). In other words, popular art, because it has not yet been put through the conceptual grid of modern aesthetics, is able to show an alternative to it. Against the disinterested pleasure preached by modern aesthetics, popular art affirms the centrality of pleasure; against the autonomy of art demanded by tradition, popular art proposes a new union between art and life and between art and the whole of human experience. Against the idea of a separation between ethics and aesthetics, popular art affirms the thirst for meaning that aesthetics can actually satisfy. Finally, against the elitism typical of great art studied by modern philosophy, popular art offers the possibility of democratizing aesthetic experience. The implication of all this is that Shusterman's move not only seeks to extend the domain of aesthetics to include popular art, but that the latter is not content to stand on the periphery but becomes the new center around which to build a model of experience that, while not limited to it, finds an eminent manifestation precisely in popular art itself. In popular art and its aesthetic experience, a model of experience emerges that is creative, engaged, democratic, purposeful, and ameliorative; a model that can serve as a paradigm for a way of life (for a deeper discussion of Shusterman's interpretation of popular art, see Malecki 2010: 109-40).

Shusterman's second – and perhaps most famous – contribution to contemporary aesthetics is his introduction of the idea of 'somaesthetics'<sup>9</sup>. This is the definition Shusterman puts forward: "Somaesthetics can be provisionally defined as the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning. It is, therefore, also devoted to the

<sup>9</sup> The two contributions, popular art and somaesthetics, should not be seen as two separate theoretical issues, but rather as a unity, as two consequences of the paradigm shift in aesthetics from object to experience. Concretely, this means that Shusterman's analyses of popular artforms are always concerned with their somatic and sensual components, and that conversely, popular art has a greater pathic-somatic component compared to great art, a component that it does not spiritually sublimate, but rather promotes. On this topic, it is to mention, for example, the collection of essays edited by Shusterman on the intersection between body, art, and the streets, entitled *Bodies in the streets: the somaesthetics of city life* (Shusterman 2019).

knowledge, discourses, practices, and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it" (Shusterman 2000b: 267).

Against the modern and analytic tradition – which has limited the field of aesthetics to the great work of art (if not to its supersensible and spiritual aspect) – somaesthetics proposes a complete paradigm reversal. In it, not only does the sensitive aspect find a new dignity, but the body itself becomes the center and the protagonist: it is the center because the body becomes the object of an independent field of study; it is the protagonist because the perceptual-somatic dimension becomes the key to understanding new aesthetic phenomena<sup>10</sup>. This last point has already been seen in relation to popular art. However, the extent of this transformation becomes even more apparent when we look at other phenomena which, thanks to somaesthetics, now enter the picture. Indeed, if we redefine the domain of aesthetics as the field of what structures and enriches our experience – especially our somatic experience – the doors burst wide open. In a text on somaesthetics, then, one can rightfully find analyses of posture, fashion, eros, muscle memory, and the culinary arts – to name just a few examples<sup>11</sup>.

At the end of this section, if we return to the definition of meta-aesthetics from which we started, one last point has to be addressed: the relationship of aesthetics to other disciplines. Now that we have arrived at the definition of soma-aesthetics, we need to see how it relates to other fields of knowledge. Shusterman is very explicit in this regard:

Finally, somaesthetics, even in its more theoretical pursuits, goes beyond the typical disciplinary limits of philosophy. Although I initially conceived it as entirely nested within philosophy – most likely as a subdiscipline of aesthetics – I soon realized that it would be more fruitfully pursued as an interdisciplinary field, enlisting a variety of disciplines (such as history, sociology, cosmetics, anatomy,

<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on new phenomena in this paper serves to better show the contribution of somaesthetics to the redefinition of aesthetics. However, this does not detract from the fact that it is also possible to analyze more traditional aesthetic and artistic forms somaesthetically and arrive at original and interesting theoretical results. Shusterman, for example, devotes important somaesthetic essays to photography and architecture (Shusterman 2012: 219-61).

<sup>11</sup> To elaborate on just one example, Shusterman (2016) analyzes the culinary arts 'somaesthetically,' showing how there is as much somatic pleasure in the ingestion of good food as there is, for example, in the structured posture, gesture and use of tools involved in a Japanese tea ritual. For other perspectives on food and somaesthetics, see Koczanowicz 2022 and Korsmeyer 2008. To *Eros and Ars Erotica* is devoted Shusterman's second to last book (Shusterman 2021).

meditative and martial arts, physiology, nutrition, kinesiology, psychology, and neuroscience) that enrich our understanding of how we experience and use the body in appreciative perception, aesthetic performance, and creative self-fashioning, and for examining the methods of improving such experience and use. (Shusterman 2012: 142)

Even from this last point of view, then, there is no doubt that Shusterman's somaesthetics proves to be an example of meta-aesthetics due to its ability to enter into dialogue with other philosophical, humanistic, and scientific disciplines, as well as – and this is its most original contribution – with practices that have been scarcely studied in relation to aesthetics, such as the meditative and martial arts, nutrition, and kinesiology. The key to this dialog is once again the notion of experience, which involves the whole human being and thus requires an equally complex perspective that can hold these different instances together. The key move of pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics, that is, the recentering of aesthetics around the notion of experience, once again proves to be the decisive factor for the second meaning of meta-aesthetics.

### *3. Somaesthetics as meta-aesthetics*

As mentioned several times before, the traditional definition of meta-aesthetics identifies two levels of analysis: the study of aesthetic theories, and the study of the definition of aesthetics. I will now argue that there is a third possible level of meta-aesthetics, which somaesthetics promotes in a decisive and original way in the contemporary aesthetic landscape.

To advance this thesis, one can consider the theoretical framework that Shusterman provides for somaesthetics (for a more comprehensive account of the structure and the possibilities of somaesthetics, which is out of scope here, see Malecki 2000: 141-72; Koczanowicz, Malecki 2012: 163-226; Abrams 2022. For a discussion of some misunderstandings regarding somaesthetics, see also Bonnet 2023). Already in *Pragmatist aesthetics* Shusterman identifies three fields of somaesthetics. The first is 'analytic' somaesthetics, which "describes the basic nature of bodily perceptions and practices and their function in our knowledge and construction of reality" (Shusterman 2000: 271). This first field of somaesthetics is the more traditional one and can be linked to the first level of meta-aesthetics addressed in this paper. Indeed, both consist of a theoretical study of our theories of perception and other bodily functions. The issue becomes more

complex when we consider the second field of somaesthetics: 'pragmatic' somaesthetics. It has, in Shusterman's words, "a distinctly normative, prescriptive character – proposing specific methods of somatic improvement and engaging in their comparative critique" (Shusterman 2000: 272). In line with the typical ameliorative background of pragmatist philosophy, pragmatic somaesthetics is no longer so much concerned with analyzing different theories as it is with evaluating those paradigms and practices that can improve our somatic experience. This second field, too, can be traced back to the discussions of meta-aesthetics that have been made so far. This is not possible, however, for the third and last field: 'practical' somaesthetics, in which the meta-aesthetic originality of somaesthetics emerges more clearly. In fact, practical somaesthetics is no longer the *study* of those practices that can improve our experience, but the actual *performance* of those practices<sup>12</sup>. This means that practical somaesthetics goes beyond theory and philosophy; it is no longer concerned with either analysis or judgment, but with the bodily dimension in its practical act, and thus, in the gestures and movements, pleasures, and concrete behaviors that one must assume and perform. Shusterman offers a list of examples of disciplines that fall within the field of practical somaesthetics: "forms of dance and martial arts, yoga, massage, aerobics, bodybuilding, various erotic arts (including consensual sadomasochism), and such modern psychosomatic therapies as the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, Bioenergetics, Rolfing, etc." (Shusterman 2000b: 272).

The profound somaesthetic significance of including these practices is clear. Indeed, it implies that aesthetics is expanding to the point of transcending the boundaries of traditional philosophy to include new modes of experience. In this respect, somaesthetics offers a contribution that, while perhaps not unique, remains altogether original, innovative, and rare among philosophical and aesthetic disciplines. It is able to do so precisely because of the centrality of its two key concepts, "experience" and "body," which is here carried to its most extreme theoretical and meta-aesthetic consequences. Shusterman's critique of the two dominant aesthetic paradigms was aimed precisely at exposing the absence of this somatic-experiential dimension, which now comes to the fore. Similarly, the

<sup>12</sup> In this sense, somaesthetics can be compared to what Cometti calls 'aesthetics of doing,' opposed to the 'aesthetics of being' (Cometti 2008: 166-77). However, somaesthetics takes a step further. It is not only the study of works in the 'being-done,' nor is it only an 'aesthetics without ontology' (Cometti 2008: 174), but it is the actual practice of this doing, as opposed to the mere study of practices embodied in the work of art.



creative and meta-aesthetic element implicit in his use of the five sources was intended precisely to bring out a perspective that would allow for a plural, historical, engaged, and ameliorative study of this dimension. In retrospect, then, it can be said that Shusterman's philosophical career is not only continuous, but also consistent in leading to the redefinition of the aesthetic and the inclusion of a somatic-performative dimension within it.

We need to further explore the meta-aesthetic and metaphilosophical significance of this move. Indeed, if we consider philosophy according to its traditional definition as a discipline related to the *logos*, that is, to rational discourse, we see that somaesthetics, in its somatic-performative dimension, cannot be properly called 'philosophy', since it moves in a dimension that lies *beneath* the *logos* and over which the *logos* has at best only partial authority. This is the dominant view of philosophy in modern and Western culture, but it is not the only one. In fact, in his attempt to break away from modern aesthetics and incorporate these new practices into somaesthetics, Shusterman draws on alternative paradigms of philosophy, both temporal and spatial. On the one hand, he echoes the ancient notion of philosophy as a 'way of life'<sup>13</sup>, for which philosophy must be more than the detached study of data and theories and must instead become a guide to wise action. Such wise action, Shusterman argues, is inherently (though not exclusively) somatic. On the other hand, Shusterman draws on Eastern models of thought and practice that do not dwell on the metaphysical distinction between body and mind, and unlike Western philosophy have not abandoned the ameliorative and practical aspect in the experience of thinking (Shusterman 2012: 197-215)<sup>15</sup>. Ultimately, then, we can sum up the result of this third meaning of somaesthetics for meta-aesthetics (and for meta-philosophy) by saying that Shusterman

<sup>13</sup> "The somaesthetic project was equally inspired by the ancient idea of philosophy as a way of life, and my efforts to apply the pragmatist tradition to revive this idea in order to overcome the limits of philosophy's institutionalized confinement as a purely academic practice of teaching, reading, and writing texts" (Shusterman 2012: 140). Shusterman derives his idea of ancient philosophy as a 'way of life' from Hadot (Shusterman 2008: 16-17), but deepens the somatic dimension of what Hadot, in line with the tradition, calls instead "*spiritual exercises*" (Hadot 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Note the similarity to the sentence quoted above about popular art, which "has not yet learned to eschew the experiential goals of pleasure, affect, and meaningful coherence" (Shusterman 2000: 32). The similarity is not accidental: in both cases, the focus is on an integral experience, both bodily and spiritual, proposed as an alternative to the tradition (aesthetic or philosophical) dominant in the modern Western world.

completes his critique of the two dominant paradigms of aesthetics and his creative interpretation of the five sources by proposing a paradigm of “practicing philosophy” (Shusterman 1997) in which pragmatism and somaesthetics are seen as elements of a “philosophical life” dedicated to improving our experience of the world.

To conclude this final section, it may be useful to analyze some concrete examples of Shusterman's procedures in his pragmatic somaesthetics. Indeed, it would be hypocritical to preach about putting concrete somatic exercises into practice without performing them. Shusterman does not fall into this trap, as evidenced by the numerous workshops he has organized to demonstrate and invite somaesthetic practice, and by his position as a practitioner of the Feldenkrais method (Shusterman 2012: 43-4). However, the most interesting case of somaesthetic and meta-aesthetic practice is that of the “Man in Gold” (Shusterman, Toma 2017). The man in gold is a character that emerged from a collaboration between Shusterman and the French photographer Yann Toma (for a more detailed history of this encounter, see Shusterman 2012; Bukda 2022). Toma asked Shusterman to pose for his photographs, which were taken using the ‘radiant flux’ or ‘somaflux’ technique, the purpose of which is to “to capture and visually represent the invisible aura of the person posing for him, an aura he conceives and perceives as a temporally changing energetic force emanating from the person's body” (Shusterman 2012: 254). To this end, Toma creates a rather dark environment and has Shusterman wear a tight-fitting unitard in a garish gold color. Toma then releases the shutter and moves quickly and nimbly around Shusterman's body, tracing with a lamp the somatic and energetic aura he perceives<sup>16</sup>. The result is a bright subject against a dark background, surrounded by rays of light. This is how the Man in Gold was born: the alter ego that takes over Shusterman during his photographic and artistic performances with Toma. The relationship between Shusterman and his alter ego has been very complicated over the years, bringing Shusterman close to arrest several times (Shusterman 2012: 10-11). However, it also forced him to rethink his own aesthetic theory from the concrete practice of the artist, or better said, from the point of view of the one who actually enacts the performance. The book that

<sup>16</sup> The somatic component of this aesthetic performance is explicit. From the perspective of the photographed subject, it is evidenced by the transparency of the unitard and the somatic-energetic aura that must emerge. From the photographer's perspective, somatic skill is essential to perform the movements necessary to achieve the radiant flow (see Shusterman 2012: 259-60).

emerged from this collaboration is similarly contradictory; constantly shifting between the two personae – between first- and third-person points of view – and then alternating between Shusterman's perspective as the subject-object of the performance, and Toma's, as the creator and photographer.

Since we cannot go into the details of such a complex aesthetic operation, we will, once again, content ourselves here with assessing its meta-aesthetic significance. The *Man in Gold* is perhaps the most obvious case in which Shusterman's activity demonstrates the possibility of a third meta-aesthetic level. In fact, the *Man in Gold* not only implicitly discusses and critiques traditional aesthetic theories (e.g., those about photography, which are related to the first level of meta-aesthetics); not only is it not content with showing the dialogue between aesthetics and other disciplines (the second level of meta-aesthetics), but it also sweeps away any fixed boundary between art and life (hence the subtitle of the volume, *Paths between art and life*) and opens aesthetics to experiences outside of the traditional concept of philosophy (the third level of meta-aesthetics). The fact that an academic philosopher wears a garish unitard does not make him less of a philosopher; nor does the fact that the *Man in Gold* is a mute character make his contribution to aesthetic discussion and practice any less relevant. On the contrary, the *Man in Gold* is as much Shusterman's contribution to aesthetics as his philosophical writings, and to separate the two is to fail to grasp the ultimate significance of the revolution he has wrought in contemporary aesthetics.

#### 4. Conclusion

It should now be clear that Shusterman's somaesthetics is an important and original contribution to contemporary meta-aesthetics. It addresses both levels of analysis that are traditionally associated with meta-aesthetics and introduces an almost unique third level, related to somatic practice and performance. Through this new third level, the boundaries of aesthetics become more blurred; and aesthetics itself transforms into a 'boundary-crossing' discipline<sup>17</sup>. Aesthetics crosses the boundaries of philosophy, and so does somaesthetics itself:

<sup>17</sup> Shusterman refers to himself as a *Grenzgänger* or *passeur culturelle* (Shusterman 2012: 127-8). The same, I argue, can easily be said of his view of aesthetics.

There is an important sense in which somaesthetics is also more than a philosophy. Although I initially preferred to conceive it, in the 1990s, as within the field of philosophy, I recognized from the outset (with the pragmatist spirit of fallibilism and openness to change) that where it belongs depends on how it develops, and this depends on the community of somaesthetic researchers. [...] I soon happily realized (thanks to the way other disciplines began to apply it) that somaesthetics should be an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, practiced somewhat differently in different disciplinary and transdisciplinary contexts, and concerned with different aims and methods though sharing to some extent certain foci, concepts, and values. (Shusterman 2022c: 246-7)

The meta-aesthetic significance of Shusterman's somaesthetics, then, not only lies in quantitatively expanding the field of aesthetics, but, more essentially, in proposing a mobile and historical paradigm that eschews substantive and methodological definitions in favor of a contextual, pluralistic, and ameliorative model that is constantly adaptable to the ever-changing issues of the body, experience, and art. Through pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics, Shusterman affirms the motility and problematic nature of aesthetics, redeems it, and offers an original contribution to meta-aesthetics, in the hope that others will continue in his wake.

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