Affect, Asia, and Disability: Roots and Issues of Somaesthetics

CONVERSATIONS WITH RICHARD SHUSTERMAN

The following interview took place in Beijing on 3 July 2019 following Richard Shusterman's lecture to the Philosophy Department of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). The interviewer, Yanping Gao is an associate professor there. The notes were added in editing the interview.

Yanping Gao: One could say that humanities research in the past three decades has been experiencing an "affective turn." In your recent book, entitled *Act and Affect*, which I edited and translated into Chinese from your Fudan lectures of May 2017 and which currently is published only in Chinese, the theme of affect is also central. How do you assess the role of "affect" in your own theory, both with respect to somaesthetics and to pragmatism in general? Does your notion of "affect" relate to affect in Deleuze or to the theory of Spinoza that inspired Deleuze?

Richard Shusterman: One of the key themes of that book, *Act and Affect*, is to highlight that feeling is essential to action but also to thinking. Pragmatism is usually understood as a philosophy of action; the very term pragmatism derives from the Greek word for action. Critics of pragmatism often argue that it is too narrowly practical and focused on action, ignoring other important aspects of human existence. My book demonstrates how pragmatism can also be understood as a philosophy of feeling. It shows how the major pragmatist philosophers insist on the importance of feeling as the motor of action, as a crucial factor for structuring perception and thought, and as a key tool for ethical progress to a more caring and democratic society.

As for my understanding of affect, there are, indeed, some similarities between my philosophical views and those of Deleuze, but also some notable differences. There is an article I should mention that systematically compares my somaesthetics to Deleuze's philosophy of the body. It was published in a book on Deleuze and pragmatism, and it makes some useful points though it also involves some misinterpretations of my views but I will not go into correcting them here.[1] Before responding to your question about affect, I should note that Deleuze and I share two important philosophical orientations. One is a respect for the idea of experience in philosophy, including nonlinguistic experience. This differentiates us from a very large group of philosophers who reject the notion of experience for philosophical thinking and insist on dealing only with conceptual entities or what can be formulated in language. Both Deleuze and I are particularly interested in the revelatory power of extraordinary experiences, including powerful aesthetic experiences, but he seems to see these experiences (as do Bergson, Blanchot, and Foucault) as revealing a superior realm of reality and as ontologically superior to ordinary experience whereas I am reluctant to leap to that conclusion. I instead see the revelatory power of extraordinary

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experiences as revealing previously unrecognized aspects of the same world we encounter in ordinary experience rather than some higher metaphysical realm. Such special or limit experience provides a heightened view of the real rather than a view of a higher reality.

The second orientation Deleuze and I share can be described as a pragmatic stance. We both tend to understand what things are in terms of what they can do rather than in terms of a fixed material structure or essence. There is in this attitude a recognition of change rather than fixity and an appreciation of a melioristic dimension of philosophy. I think we share a faith or at least a hope that a better understanding can improve experience and one's manner of living and that philosophy can provide for better understanding by inventing new concepts rather than simply clarifying or defining old ones. The project of somaesthetics could be understood in this way, as a concept to improve our understanding and experience, most notably our somatic experience. Deleuze and I share the view that changing one's body practices can also produce new and better ways of understanding and living. Of course, Deleuze's recommended somatic transformation – becoming a body without organs (a very mysterious notion, totally remote from our physiological body, whose examples come from drug addiction, hypochondria, and other problematic somatic behavior) seems to be very different and more limited than the range of body practices that somaesthetics covers.[2]

The notions of change and meliorism find expression in the concept of affect, which both Deleuze and I regard as involving changes in the body. One's body is continuously affected by other bodies (human and nonhuman) it encounters and it reciprocally affect other bodies in the world. I am particularly concerned with those changes that influence our feelings and perceptions in ways that we either notice or could notice if we paid proper attention; not all modifications of the body reach the level of consciousness or promote thought or action. Deleuze takes his notion of affect from Spinoza's theory of emotion. Spinoza defines emotion as "the modifications of the body, whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished" and he notes "that the body can be affected [or modified] in many ways" that increase or diminish its power, but also in ways that do not influence the body's power in an appreciative way.[3] Spinoza thus has a bodily theory of emotion.

My concern with affect did not originally derive from reading Spinoza but from reading William James who was famous for his somatic theory of emotion (where emotion always involves some sort of motion or changes of the body) and from reading contemporary neuroscience that followed James in recognizing the somatic dimension of emotion and also thinking. Recently, I have reread Spinoza on the emotions and find that his views are extremely pertinent for somaesthetics. In fact, I believe his views on body-mind unity anticipate my idea of the soma. As you may recall, I define the soma as the sentient, living, purposive body, that is, an embodied subjectivity or body-mind. The soma includes both the body as a perceiving, conscious subjectivity and the body as a material thing in the world, both what Germans call the subjective, perceiving *Leib* and the material bodily object or *Körper*. The soma is a concept that expresses the essential ontological unity of what we call body and mind. Spinoza boldly asserts that same ontological unity. He writes "that mind and body are one and the same thing, conceived first under the attribute of thought, secondly, under the attribute of extension."[4] That one thing I regard as the soma. Moreover, in arguing that the soma is capable of perception and purposive action, I can find support in Spinoza's argument that no one has convincingly proved that our bodies are incapable of such things because no one has succeeded in fixing "the limits to

the powers of the body."[5] Furthermore, the somaesthetic idea that our powers of thought depend on the body's powers and therefore that we might improve our cognition through improving our somatic condition, similarly finds support in Spinoza's affirmation "that the mind is not at all times equally fit for thinking …but according as the body is more or less fitted for…this."[6] When I introduced somaesthetics as a new name for certain old ways of thinking, I was conscious that many of its key ideas had already been expressed in the long history of philosophy East and West, but I never mentioned Spinoza, and I'm glad I have the opportunity now to acknowledge him as an important precursor to somaesthetics' advocacy of the unity of the soma as body-mind and to the importance of somatic power for our mental powers.

YG: Your ideas of body consciousness and somaesthetics are defined as covering perception from all the bodily senses, but your work seems to focus particularly on proprioception. Why?

RS: Somaesthetics is indeed concerned with all the bodily senses. Moreover, I understand sensory perception as essentially transmodal. In other words, we perceive not through the different senses each separately providing their own distinct sensory input that the mind then combines; we instead perceive through our senses working together from the outset to deliver an integrated sensory perception. The perception of a particular sensory modality thus involves other senses. With taste and smell this transmodal nature is most obvious, but transmodality pertains throughout the realm of sensory perception.

There are two reasons why my writings in somaesthetics highlight proprioception. First, this sense modality has long been neglected. Since ancient times, we typically speak of the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, thus ignoring proprioception and its related sense of kinaesthesia or the sense of movement. Proprioceptive input, however, is essential for proper regulation of posture and movement and consequently for all the other sensory perceptions that depend on the proper control of our posture and movement (such as steadying the head and directing the eyes to stabilize and orient the gaze for seeing). The ignoring of proprioception contributes to neglect of the body because the proprioceptive sense is focused on the body itself. This, then, is the second reason somaesthetics should highlight proprioception. Proprioception is a distinctively somaesthetic sense because it is involved in perception of one's own body rather than the perception of external objects, whether through the distant senses of sight and hearing or the more proximate senses of smell, taste, and touch. With proprioception we sense the inner body itself as we feel from the inside our posture and balance in rest and in movement through sensory input about muscle, tendon, and joint position and tension. Proprioception (together with the sense of bodily heat and pain) belongs to what neuroscience distinguishes as the distinctively somaesthetic form of sensory perception, and the neuroscientists locate its cerebral processing in what they identify as the somaesthetic cortex.

YG: Somaesthetics has been very popular among Chinese academics. All of your works in this field but also your other major works have been translated into Chinese. Your writings have helped Chinese scholars to realize that Chinese culture has its own valuable traditions of embodiment that are worth exploring and reviving. How do you explain this popularity and what are the main inspirations you received from the Chinese tradition?

RS: My work has indeed been fortunate with respect to its Chinese reception. I am very happy that besides the publication of my texts and the extensive commentary on

them, there is now a Somaesthetics Center at Shanghai's East China Normal University as well as a Center for Life Aesthetics at Fudan University (also in Shanghai) in both of which I participate. I was initially surprised by the enthusiastic reception of my work in China, but now I believe I understand some of the reasons for it. Successful reception in a foreign country's intellectual field depends on the existence of positive and productive affinities between the work and influential elements in that foreign field or tradition. I can list five important affinities that I think made my work attractive to Chinese academics.

First, pragmatism has affinities with Marxism, which is the major, if not also the official, philosophy in communist China. Like Marxism, pragmatism is philosophy that emphasizes practice and transforming realities rather than just theorizing about them. Both these philosophies of practice direct themselves toward democratic meliorism. Second, pragmatism is a philosophy that emphasizes change; Marxism (with its Hegelian-inspired notion of dialectic) similarly is a philosophy of change, but so is classical Chinese philosophy which has its roots in the ancient *Yijing* or *Book of Changes*. A third affinity relates to respect for the body in philosophy. Classical Chinese philosophy recognizes the body's centrality in multiple ways, whether through the Confucian concern for its use in ritual and the arts or through the Daoist concern with disciplines of breathing and other body techniques. My work in somaesthetics (but also in pragmatist aesthetics) by highlighting the body and other material realities opposes the dominant Western idealist tradition and thus has an affinity also with Marxist materialist approaches. A fourth affinity is my concern for popular aesthetics, which converges not only with the Marxist emphasis on respecting and serving the people, but also with the appreciation of popular arts that we can find in classical Chinese thought. Pluralism constitutes a fifth affinity between my work and classical Chinese philosophy, and it is from classical Chinese philosophy that the Chinese influence on my thought has been the strongest.

I have learned a great deal from both Confucianist and Daoist texts, particularly with respect to the five themes I mentioned above, but also with respect to the basic idea of philosophy as a way of life, something that one practices in everyday living rather than in mere theorizing through academic writing and teaching. The ideal of a self-cultivation that is ethical, aesthetic, and somatic and that contributes to one's social environment beyond the self is an ideal central to my vision of pragmatist philosophy and somaesthetics. I tend to cite Confucian texts more often than Daoist texts in my philosophical writing because Confucian claims and quotations are easier to fit into a coherent chain of reasoning. But I feel the spirit of my work is as close or even closer to Daoist thought, and in my most recent book, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*, a philosophical tale rather than a standard philosophical treatise, Laozi is the only philosopher cited.[7]

Having noted the influence of Confucianist and Daoist texts, I should not neglect to mention the third important Chinese religious and philosophical tradition, that of Chan Buddhism. Here the influence on my thought has been only indirect and more practical than theoretical. It has been only indirect because the Buddhist influence on my philosophical vision came through my experience with Zen Buddhism in Japan, Zen having evolved from Chan Buddhism. The influence was more practical than theoretical because my study in the Zen dojo near Takahara focused on meditation techniques and their resultant experiences rather than theoretical philosophical questions. But I do not regard such practical influence as less important. I am a philosopher of experience. Most of my philosophical ideas come from experiences outside of the reading and writing of

texts. My Zen experiences were deeply transformative for my thinking about body consciousness, as was my professional practice as a body therapist in the Feldenkrais Method. Finally, to return to the influence of Chinese culture, I should note my appreciation for its literati tradition of poetry, calligraphy, and inkwash painting that beautifully exemplifies the classical Chinese ideal of aesthetic and ethical self-cultivation through artistic embodiment. I've written one essay on the inkwash painting tradition, a tradition that is still vibrant in contemporary Chinese art, but I should emphasize that the Chinese influence on my thinking originated from philosophy not from the arts.[8]

YG: You are a Feldenkrais practitioner and you also have written about the Alexander Technique (which Dewey also studied), and bioenergetics. These body practices form part of the somatic movement of so-called "new age" culture that was strongly influenced by Asian thinking and spirituality. You too have been influenced by Asian culture and spirituality, at least in terms of your experience with Zen. Is this convergence of your interest in the body and Asia merely a coincidence?

RS: I should preface my answer by putting things in historical perspective. Alexander Technique was invented and widely practiced long before the new age. Alexander's books began appearing already in 1910, and John Dewey became his pupil in 1916, but the new age did not begin until the 1970s. Many movements advocating attention to the body and techniques of somatic or psychosomatic improvement appeared in the West before new age culture. William James was an influential participant in the physical culture movement of the 1890s. My initial exploration of the somatic techniques and theories of Alexander, Feldenkrais, and Bioenergetics was not related to any interest in Asian culture. It was inspired by dancer friends who were, indeed, my first inspiration for the somatic turn in my thinking, including my transformation from a typical analytic philosopher focused on language to a pragmatist philosopher concerned also with nondiscursive or nonconceptual forms of understanding. The inspiration for this turn was decidedly experiential. The powerful, transformative, enlightening bodily experiences I had with these dancers convinced me of the need to take the body more seriously in my philosophical explorations and to appreciate forms of cognition and communication that are not discursive. I began studying Western body practices in the late 1980s and early 1990s long before I knew anything about Asian philosophy. I began my professional Feldenkrais training in 1998, but I did not began studying Asian philosophy until after the year 2000 when I was obliged to prepare prefaces for two books of mine that were being translated into Chinese. These books were *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and *Practicing Philosophy*, both of which were published in Chinese in the autumn of 2002. That academic year of 2002-2003 was also the period I spent in Japan and studied Zen with Master Inoue Kido. Of course, it is certainly true that my interest in classical Asian philosophy and its associated somatic techniques reinforced my conviction in the importance of the soma and my recognition of the spiritual dimensions of somatic cultivation and body consciousness. I should also admit that my closest dancer friend was thoroughly steeped in the new age spirit and was a passionate yoga practitioner and instructor. Perhaps some of her enthusiastic new age feeling rubbed off on me (at least enough to experiment with taijiquan and yoga), but my focus was primarily Western somatic methodology because it seemed more scientific and suitable to my analytic and pragmatist method of thinking at that time. To be honest, I was also suspicious and uncomfortable about what I perceived as the uncritical superficiality of new age thinking and its knowledge of Asian philosophical traditions. I did not know those traditions myself, but I did not

believe that my new age dancer friends really knew those philosophies in an adequate way. One of my reasons for spending a year in Japan and studying Zen in a remote Japanese *dojo* was to try to escape the limits of Western new age orientalism. I was not satisfied with "Upper West Side Buddhism" as Arthur Danto characterized the American reception of Zen inspired largely by D.Z. Suzuki and his seminars at Columbia University in New York. In one of our textual exchanges, I contrast my own Zen experience with the New York (apparently new age) version that Danto imbibed, a contrast Danto himself recognized.[9]

YG: Is there a somaesthetics for disabled people?

RS: That is a very useful question. One of the early worries concerning somaesthetics was that it was essentially designed to serve (and to favor) the beautiful, strong, healthy, and youthful members of society while disregarding or demeaning those with somatic difficulties. Even people who were very supportive of my work in aesthetics (such as Arthur Danto), initially expressed this concern of privileging the somatically superior and degrading the physically disabled. I can express my answer to this worry by insisting that somaesthetics is essentially designed for disabled people because all people are disabled in some way. What I mean by this perhaps puzzling statement is that we all have a certain degree of somatic malfunctioning at some point in time (whether it is because of an illness, an injury, excessive fatigue, a bad habit, or simply the increasing decrepitude of old age. As I explain in *Body Consciousness* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), somaesthetics does not agree with the way Maurice Merleau-Ponty and other thinkers sort people into, on the one hand, brain-damaged people or otherwise severely physically impaired individuals with resultant pathological somatic incapacities (like the patient Schneider Merleau-Ponty repeatedly discusses) and, on the other hand, the rest of us "normal" people whose bodily functioning Merleau-Ponty describes as miraculously flawless and spontaneous. Instead, I argue that we all suffer (at certain times, in various ways, and to different degrees) from various bodily malfunctions or disabilities (headaches, backaches, stiffness, lethargy, flawed motor habits, etc.). In *Thinking through the Body* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), I discuss a series of these malfunctions or disabilities that are connected with somatic habits or muscle memory.

The more disabled one is the more one needs the intelligence of somaesthetic thinking to overcome one's bodily disabilities and limits in order to perform the tasks that one needs or wishes to perform. When one is young, healthy, and uninjured one's mere strength is often enough to get the somatic job done. When someone, however, is somatically disabled in some way, somatic intelligence is needed to circumvent the disabling condition. It is therefore not surprising that both Alexander and Feldenkrais suffered from somatic disabilities and that precisely these disabilities inspired them to explore the body mechanics for developing methods to overcome those disabilities through alternative ways of using the body. There is a larger lesson here for our understanding of disability. What we label (and mourn) as disability can be enabling as well as disabling; it can teach us new ways of seeing and doing things. In the same way, although somaesthetics is concerned with improving our health and our pleasure, it also recognizes that there are valuable things to learn through illness and pain that pleasure and health cannot teach us so well. I have not yet given this dimension of somaesthetics as much attention as it deserves, but I make a start in a recent article on "Pleasure, Pain and the Somaesthetics of Illness."[10]

Notes

[1] W. Malecki and S. Schleussner, 'What Affects are you capable of': On Deleuze and Somaesthetics," in S. Bowden, S. Bignall and P. Patton (ed.), *Deleuze and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 2015), 216-234).

[2] Deleuze and Guattari derive their notion of the body without organs from Antonin Artaud who wrote in his play *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*:" When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom. "Somaesthetics locates our unfreedom not so much in our organs, without which we could not act, but instead in our automatic unthinking habits that are largely produced by the institutions whose subjugating power shapes our subjectivity and that require critical somaesthetic reflection in order to reveal and overcome them.

[3] Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics* (trans. R.H.M. Elwes) in *Spinoza's Works* (London: George Bell, 1884), vol. 2, 130.

[4] Ibid., 131.

[5] Ibid., 132.

[6] Ibid., 133.

[7] Richard Shusterman, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths Between Art and Life* (Paris: Hermann, 2016).

[8] Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and Self-Cultivation in Chinese Art," in E. Fischer-Lichte and B. Wihstutz (ed.), *Transformative Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2017), 83-109.

[9] Richard Shusterman, "Art as Religion: Transfigurations of Danto's Dao," in Mark Rollins (ed.), *Danto and his Critics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 249-266; for Danto's response, see 308-310. The exchange appears in French in my *Chemins de l'art* (Paris: Al Dante, 2014) to which Danto provides the book's "Afterword."

[10] Richard Shusterman, "Pleasure, Pain, and the Somaesthetics of Illness: A Question for Everyday Aesthetics," in O. Kuisma, S. Lehtinen and H. Mäcklin (ed.) *Paths from Philosophy of Art to Everyday Aesthetics* (Helsinki: Finnish Society of Aesthetics, 2019), 201-214.