

155. Review: Richard Shusterman, *Aesthetic Experience And Popular Arts. Somaesthetic Perspectives On Theory And Practice*, Edited by S. Marino, Trad. It. By T. Gallo And S. Marino, Mimesis, Milan-Udine 2023, PP. 203. (Filomena Trotta)

Richard Shusterman's text, edited by Stefano Marino, offers a cross- and multidisciplinary perspective starting with the theme of aesthetic experience, recognizing its indispensability within the philosophical (and other) debate. As clearly highlighted in the Introduction, the volume is composed of six chapters, corresponding to as many of Shusterman's essays, which cover a wide range of topics set within a rich and unified framework, typical of the disciplinary project of somaesthetics: from the heated debate on the apparent end of aesthetic experience to popular music, from the urban aesthetics of absence to photography as a process that exceeds representation by constituting itself as a performative act, and then also reaching the themes of fashion and gastronomy.

Starting from the recognition of the need to give new impetus to the experiential root of human existence, the U.S. philosopher takes up in the first chapter the evolution of the concept of aesthetics, which from Dewey to Danto, and then on to philosophers such as Beardsley and Goodman, reflects a shift from the centrality of the artistic object to the importance of cultural interpretations, theories and perspectives in defining art and aesthetics. In the first instance, Shusterman highlights the theoretical positions of Dewey and Danto, both of which are fundamental to the constitution of a contemporary aesthetics and philosophy of art: while, respectively, the emphasis in the former is on aesthetic experience as a fundamental part of human life, restoring the continuity of such experience with the normal processes of everyday life, in the latter the dependence of works of art on cultural institutions and interpretations is emphasized, thus shifting the focus to the conceptual dimension of art. As Shusterman himself points out, it seems that from Dewey onward there has been a shift from a concept of aesthetics understood in an evaluative, phenomenological and transformative sense to a purely descriptive and semantic notion, with the explicit goal of separating the artistic realm from other human realms (p. 36). This position has created not a few problems in the way the concept of aesthetic experience is understood: in Danto's eyes, in fact, its status can be legitimately questioned in its entirety, to the benefit of the concept of interpretation, considering the possible philosophical, historical and cultural keys that contribute to defining the meaning and scope of a work of art. In the Deweyan view, on the other hand, aesthetic experience is to be understood as the fluid integration of all the elements that make up ordinary experience, that is, immediate emotional fulfillment capable of strengthening perception itself through a mutual enrichment of art and life. The distinction that is highlighted between everyday experience and aesthetic experience is essentially qualitative, where the value of beautiful art lies in the spontaneously satisfying and phenomenologically constituted experience. In this sense, the meaning grasped as a result of interpretation is not incompatible with the immediate sensation of aesthetic experience: these two aspects are not mutually exclusive but, on the contrary, can coexist and contribute to the overall understanding and appreciation of a work of art. In considering such a debate, Shusterman's intent is to point out how to this day the aesthetic experience, thus "hermeneuticized" and deprived of an audience to nurture it, is increasingly directed toward the popular arts, which attempt, albeit not always successfully, to embrace the goals of pleasure, fulfillment and

meaningful richness. According also to the analysis provided by Walter Benjamin, in a highly fragmented and iridescent sociocultural context, within which sensationalism and hypermediation operate a profound rupture between experience and information in favor of the latter, it seems increasingly difficult to focus on the capacity to develop deep feelings, even to the point of speaking of our postmodern condition as afflicted by a sensory and emotional anesthesia, a true widespread echolalia. It is precisely because of this condition that, according to Shusterman, there is a need to restore a definition of aesthetic experience in light of a pragmatist philosophy apt to claim an embodied and situated approach.

In the second chapter, in fact, Shusterman goes into the merits of this need through the redevelopment of popular music, with a particular focus on the phenomenon of country music. Highlighted here is how contemporary philosophers have largely become disinterested with respect to the potential of popular music: in fact, progressive thinkers and intellectuals seem predominantly attracted to multicultural and sophisticated musical phenomena such as jazz, techno, reggae, and rap, to the detriment of more conservative genres tied to traditional identities, such as precisely country music. Although this genre is also characterized by the stereotype of its connection to racial prejudice, Shusterman intends to show how, from an intellectual point of view, it is capable of dealing with deep themes in relation to human experiential nature, such as love, loss, and struggle, constituting itself as a narrative form with high emotional and sentimental content, characterized by a typically American rustic authenticity. Picking up on William James and giving impetus to the narrative peculiarities of country musicals, such as the emblematic Pure Country, Shusterman believes that one of the factors that make this genre particularly in vogue is precisely its "pathetic" property, that is, its ability to bring about belief, and thus empathy, through genuine "emotional persuasion," giving the listener the impression of being in the presence of a stream of authentic life sensations (p. 74). The need to reconsider the potential of country music thus stems from the opportunity to understand it as an artistic expression aimed at promoting an integrated vision of the human being, where emotion and reason work together to explore the complexity of human choices and moral dilemmas, embracing deep and meaningful values.

Continuing on the path proposed by Shusterman, the third chapter focuses on the theme of absence in urban aesthetics, taking its starting point from an essentially personal experience of the American philosopher himself. Precisely by virtue of an analysis that starts from an exquisitely contextual experience, as is typical of the pragmatist approach, Shusterman recounts how the theme of the essay arose from his stay in Berlin, a city that reveals its charm through a fluid interplay of layers of "absences," real protuberances of history. Drawing on the theories of modern urban thinkers such as Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin and Lewis Mumford, the kaleidoscopic nature of the urban institution is examined, which, while, as Mumford points out, fosters openness to new spatialities by opening up powerful fusions, in Simmel's eyes, also risks annihilating our faculties of assimilation: as Shusterman himself observes, we are in the presence of a "fragmented shock of the Erlebnis" (p. 100). The chaotic metropolitan flow, in Simmel's eyes, can only be traversed by an enhancement of consciousness, at the expense of our emotional sphere: it is a necessity driven by the physical concentration of so many people with differentiated interests. Metropolitan life, according to this view, would not be possible without

the establishment of an iron, supra-individual order. In contrast, Mumford takes a particularly flexible approach, where social facts become the focus of urban definition. By displacing the identification of the subject in its possible relational networks, it is possible to create unprecedented plots of meaning, new spatialities, where what matters is not so much the pattern as the density and intelligibility of space, even in absence, which in this perspective becomes the bearer of clues. Dwelling becomes the human being's way of succeeding in permanence in the world through a ritualization between bodies and spaces. And what is at stake in ritual is precisely the assumption of a certain human condition. Redemption from this anguish is precisely the reshaping of the territory, where by anguish is meant the emotion of the possible and of freedom, that is, that "flaneuristic" losing oneself and distancing oneself which is often logically downgraded to an error, but which on the contrary can become a necessary element for a possible regeneration of meaning. It is precisely this continuous interplay of absence and presence that gives greater aesthetic power to life and, in this case, to the "urban jungle." Emptiness becomes an opening to unprecedented possibilities and the renegotiation of new resources and new ways of living, which can both challenge and enrich the city.

Continuing on the path proposed by Shusterman, the third chapter focuses on the theme of absence in urban aesthetics, taking its starting point from an essentially personal experience of the American philosopher himself. Precisely by virtue of an analysis that starts from an exquisitely contextual experience, as is typical of the pragmatist approach, Shusterman recounts how the theme of the essay arose from his stay in Berlin, a city that reveals its charm through a fluid interplay of layers of "absences," real protuberances of history. Drawing on the theories of modern urban thinkers such as Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin and Lewis Mumford, the kaleidoscopic nature of the urban institution is examined, which, while, as Mumford points out, fosters openness to new spatialities by opening up powerful fusions, in Simmel's eyes, also risks annihilating our faculties of assimilation: as Shusterman himself observes, we are in the presence of a "fragmented shock of the Erlebnis" (p. 100). The chaotic metropolitan flow, in Simmel's eyes, can only be traversed by an enhancement of consciousness, at the expense of our emotional sphere: it is a necessity driven by the physical concentration of so many people with differentiated interests. Metropolitan life, according to this view, would not be possible without the establishment of an iron, supra-individual order. In contrast, Mumford takes a particularly flexible approach, where social facts become the focus of urban definition. By displacing the identification of the subject in its possible relational networks, it is possible to create unprecedented plots of meaning, new spatialities, where what matters is not so much the pattern as the density and intelligibility of space, even in absence, which in this perspective becomes the bearer of clues. Dwelling becomes the human being's way of succeeding in permanence in the world through a ritualization between bodies and spaces. And what is at stake in ritual is precisely the assumption of a certain human condition. Redemption from this anguish is precisely the reshaping of the territory, where by anguish is meant the emotion of the possible and of freedom, that is, that "flaneuristic" losing oneself and distancing oneself which is often logically downgraded to an error, but which on the contrary can become a necessary element for a possible regeneration of meaning. It is precisely this continuous interplay of absence and presence that gives greater aesthetic power to life and, in this case, to the "urban jungle."

Emptiness becomes an opening to unprecedented possibilities and the renegotiation of new resources and new ways of living, which can both challenge and enrich the city.

Another theme addressed in the thematic journey offered by Shusterman is the wearability of fashion and the somaesthetics of style, the primary subject of the fifth chapter. Again, the explanatory project outlined in this chapter takes its start from an experience of the pragmatist philosopher himself. In fact, during his ten-year stay in New York, he recounts his own cohabitation with a Japanese-American designer, Erica Ando. In this setting, Shusterman rediscovers the role of the fit model, a crucial profession within the fashion industry. This professional figure is far removed from that of the fashion model engaged in fashion shows and on photographic sets: differently, the fit model's job is to lend himself or herself to the service of fashion designers to prove the fit of garments to be made by fashion companies, before starting industrial-scale production (p. 147). In this sense, fit models can be called with every reason true "keepers of valuable somaesthetic information" (p. 161). Certainly, the clothes we wear are not an actual part of our bodies; however, it would be wrong to claim that they are not shaped over time by our somatic habits and that, on the other hand, clothes themselves can shape our bodies, since these bring together a complex of postural dispositions that can be facilitated or, on the contrary, hindered, without most of the time having any real awareness of them. It is precisely by virtue of this that the entry of somaesthetics into the sphere of fashion can contribute to a more satisfying and conscious stylization of the self.

Concluding Shusterman's collection of essays, in the sixth chapter the U.S. philosopher focuses on the subject of the beautiful art of food and, more specifically, on the various processes surrounding the ingestion of food and drink. If the act of cooking can be described in Aristotelian terms as a *poiesis*, that is, the realization of an object by means of certain skills, eating, on the other hand, can be understood as a *praxis*, that is, the implementation of an action (p. 176). Although it is an everyday activity dictated by natural, experiential and learned cultural factors, which is therefore most often conducted mechanically and instinctively, the act of eating constitutes one of the most effective means of shaping oneself through a more refined capacity for choice, taste, order, discipline and will. The reflection regarding the beautiful art of food was developed, again, from a firsthand experience by Shusterman himself, following a year spent in Japan as a researcher at Hiroshima University. There he, with the intention of delving into the subject of somaesthetics in relation to the many psychosomatic practices offered by Japanese culture, realized through the advice and observations of Zen master Inoue Kido how important it is to attend to aspects such as posture, the movements one makes while eating, the tools we use to eat, the selection and sequence of foods, and the tactile and proprioceptive experiences of swallowing. The act of eating, experienced as a true "gustatory choreography," in a similar way to other experiences and activities that are conducted on a daily basis, can thus contribute decisively to an enrichment of the self and an improvement in one's sensory and perceptual potential. It is therefore an indispensable thematic approach to the project of somaesthetics that is concerned with care as well as life.

(Sept. 7, 2023)