

RICHARD SHUSTERMAN IN BUDAPEST

— AN INTERVIEW

Prepared by Alexander Kremer

Looking at the countries you have visited during the last decade, it is clear that you have lectured much more in Central Europe than other Western philosophers. Why do you prefer Central Europe, especially Poland better than other American philosophers?

You make an interesting observation, but I don't compare my lecture tours with other Western philosophers, and I expect that some of them have visited Central Europe as much as I. In fact, this is my very first academic visit to Hungary, and I've only been a couple of times in Prague and Bratislava. I've been a Visiting Professor in Vienna twice, once at the Academy of Fine Art and once at the Architecture Department of the Technical University. But I don't know whether Vienna counts as Central Europe. You are right, however, that I've been particularly active in Poland. There are two kinds of reasons for this: general and personal. Taking the general reason first, Poland has a very strong interest in pragmatism and neopragmatism. Richard Rorty's contact with some Polish philosophers helped establish that interest, and there is now a Dewey Center in Krakow.

In my personal case, I have published 4 books in Polish translation (one of them a collection of essays translated by a brilliant young Polish theorist Wojciech Malecki), so I often come to Poland to follow my books and engage in dialogue with readers. I see my books as tools of communication so I am interested in learning from the reactions of readers of the books. The publication of a new book of mine in Hungarian is one reason why I am coming to Budapest in June. I have been lucky that my books and articles in Polish (some of which are in cultural magazines aimed at non-experts) have been translated by some very smart people who understand not only my mind but also my heart, the spirit that motivates my

philosophical writing. Without good translators, my books would be useless for reaching a wide audience in foreign countries. I've been lucky in most countries with excellent translators.

But there may also be other personal reasons why my work has been well received in Poland. When I left my home in America at the age of 16 and arrived in Israel, I was adopted by an Israeli family of Polish origin that had emigrated from Warsaw after the Second World War. The parents still spoke Polish at home and their cuisine and many other aspects of their daily cultural life remained Polish. So Polish culture became familiar and comfortable for me, and when I mentioned this in some of the interviews I gave in Poland, I think that this fact created considerable good will towards me. I should also mention that my father was born in the Western Ukraine that was very close to Poland and that my mother's family came from Vilnius. So if one takes a longer perspective on ethnic identity, I might be seen as neither essentially American nor Israeli (the two countries where I have citizenship) but rather as having deeper Central European roots.

This brings me to another hypothesis about the positive reception of my work in Poland. A hypothesis involving mixed emotions. Because I am obviously a well-travelled, international Jewish intellectual and thus can be seen in the typical mold of the secular, rootless cosmopolitan Jew that became one of the standard targets of twentieth-century anti-Semitism, I think that Polish intellectuals who perhaps feel guilty about the long history of Polish anti-Semitism may have been kind toward my work as a sort of compensation for that history and the elements of anti-Semitism that remain in non-intellectual Polish circles. The ambivalence is that behind the very positive reception of my work by progressive intellectuals there could be a background that is very unsympathetic to all that I represent and embody. I have a strong faith in the value of my ideas but I know that the reception of ideas depends on the prevailing ideologies and mechanisms that structure the

social and cultural field. This is especially true for the importation of foreign authors.

You have started your philosophical career as an analytic philosopher, since you have defended your PhD thesis (The Object of Literary Criticism) in Oxford and published articles, books of analytic vein. Nevertheless, you have changed your mind and since the second half of the 1980s you have been a neopragmatist philosopher. At the same time you have started your own aesthetic project, which is based on John Dewey's aesthetics. What are the main differences between Dewey's naturalist aesthetics and your somaesthetics, which was presented first in a detailed version in your book, Pragmatist Aesthetics (1992, Hungarian translation 2003)?

Yes, I started my career as an analytic philosopher, and that style of argumentation is still an important part of my repertoire, even if my ideas and topics of research have gone far from the analytic mainstream. I was very unimpressed by Dewey when I first read him as a graduate student, partly because of his writing style and his looser manner of reasoning. But by the end of the 1980s he was my principal pragmatist inspiration. My philosophical debts to him are much greater than my differences from him. I could sum up the major differences between his pragmatist aesthetics and mine in four or five points, but before listing them I should note that Dewey never presented his aesthetics as "pragmatist aesthetics" and he actually explicitly refused the idea of a pragmatist aesthetics. I ignored his rejection of the term and instead made it the title of my approach.

Beyond this terminological difference, I critique Dewey's one-sided emphasis on unity as the essential and necessary value in aesthetic experience. I think there can be aesthetic value in experiences of fragmentation and rupture. That is one reason I made rap music a key example for my aesthetic study. Dewey's artistic taste

was very conservative. He showed no appreciation of cubism and other avant-garde artistic trends when he wrote his book *Art as Experience* in the 1930s. Second, in defining art as experience, Dewey courts a sort of naturalistic essentialism by not sufficiently recognizing the social institutions that shape and enable those aesthetic experiences. Art is a societal affair and not just an experiential one. One cannot justify an artwork's value by merely saying it gives a good experience. One needs to use the socially shaped instruments of art critical language even if this is done informally in casual conversations about artworks. Third, I emphasize pleasure more than Dewey does. Fourth, I try to establish my aesthetic theories by engaging in extended interpretations of particular artworks (whether it is rap and country music or the poetry of T.S. Eliot), while Dewey does not do this form of practical criticism. Dewey wrote a couple of sentences in support of the idea of popular art, but he never provided any detailed arguments for it or any detailed analyses of particular works of popular art to demonstrate their value. Finally, in recent years I have also started to engage in artistic practice (as an occasional performance artist) as a way of fulfilling the pragmatist aesthetics' idea of engaging practically in the realm of art. With respect to somaesthetics, this practical dimension is especially central. I teach practical workshops in somaesthetics as a way of communicating the full range and meaning of this field. Dewey's aesthetic teaching remains in the realm of theory and discourse, my somaesthetic teaching involves also moving bodies and not just arranging words. Nonetheless, Dewey's appreciation of Alexander Technique (in which he took lessons for many years) was a real encouragement for my decision to become a professional body therapist in the Feldenkrais Method so that my understanding and teaching of somaesthetics could be more complete.

It is clear from Pragmatist Aesthetics that you refuse the distinction between high art and popular art (and even mass culture). What is your opinion about Adorno's criticism of „cultural industry“? What would be Adorno's mistake in this criticism?

What I refuse is that there is an ontological or absolute distinction of kind between high art and popular art. Of course, in everyday contexts we can often distinguish between works that are revered as high art classics and works that are designed for the entertainment of popular audiences. But there is no clear, fixed line of demarcation or difference of essence. What were originally enjoyed as popular entertainments (Greek tragedy, Shakespearean drama, the novels of Charles Dickens) have later come to be regarded as high art. I was a fan of Adorno before I embraced Dewey's more democratic perspectives on aesthetics, and I still admire the power of Adorno's thought. Like Dewey he insists on the important and transformative dimension of aesthetic experience as the key to art's crucial cultural value. Adorno makes many good points in his critique of the culture industry. Where he went wrong is in universalizing his critique to all works of popular art. The fact that much popular is merely commercial and superficial does not mean that no popular artworks have aesthetic value. His position is an extreme negativism, but I do not hold a naïve positive position that celebrates all popular art. My position is meliorism: popular art is neither perfectly good nor essentially bad. Rather the meliorist position is that popular art should be improved because it has the potential to be good (and is sometimes rich in value) but it also often suffers from aesthetic faults and therefore requires improvement.

I think Adorno makes a couple of other missteps because of his understandable rage against the vulgarity and rapaciousness of the popular entertainment industry along with the advertising industry that serves and profits from it. He seems to think that all the pleasures of entertainment are false pleasures and that the more one

enjoys art the less one understands it. He argues that entertainment's pleasures are false because they are transitory. But all pleasures are transitory to some extent, and the ephemerality of pleasures does not make them unreal. He further claims that pleasure distracts us from the serious aesthetic pursuit of critically understanding artworks, but I believe there is no essential tension between enjoyment and understanding and that our enjoyment can even stimulate us to seek a deeper and more critical understanding of what we enjoy. By the way, I think Adorno and Horkheimer make an analogous mistake in their rejection of somaesthetic cultivation. They simplistically identify the whole idea of cultivating the soma with the racist, brutal, violent body ideology of Nazi KoerperKultur and the mercenary aims of corporate advertising that promote images of bodily perfection that hardly anyone can attain. Rightfully horrified by these ideologies, Adorno and Horkheimer fail to see that somaesthetic cultivation includes the Leib as well as the Koerper and that even working on the Koerper can be beneficial for worthy ethical aims and satisfactions.

Every philosopher is affected by different thinkers oeuvre during her or his intellectual development. Who were those thinkers whose influence played an important role in your development? Who was the most important if you would like to highlight one of them?

If I confine myself to thinkers I've had the fortune to know personally, I would say three great twentieth-century thinkers made my career possible. Richard Rorty, through his inspiring example, converted me from analytic philosophy to pragmatism and helped me see the special value of Dewey's work. Arthur Danto, again by his exemplary practice, showed me that aesthetics need not confine itself to traditional theorizing about past works of art but that it can be actively engaged in the most current and progressive of artistic practices while also extending into the practical criticism of contemporary artworks. I believe that his example

unconsciously helped encourage me to seriously treat the very contemporary and controversial genre of rap. If someone of his generation and stature could treat Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat, why couldn't someone of my generation examine the artistry of Grandmaster Flash and Public Enemy. Pierre Bourdieu was crucial to my philosophical work because he showed me how deeply the creation and experience of art and the mechanisms of the artworld are shaped or structured by social institutions and political ideologies that go beyond that artworld. He also was the person who introduced me to French academic life. He invited me to Paris because of his appreciation of my work on Wittgenstein, and indeed Wittgenstein was the dominant influence of my analytic stage, as Dewey and William James largely guide my later pragmatist phase.

Three other philosophers are worth mentioning for their importance in shaping my thought: Montaigne for his celebration of experience, his meditative efforts of self-knowledge, his open-minded tolerance, and his candid confessions of his own weaknesses; Foucault for his genealogical critique, his adventurous explorations in somaesthetics, and his concern with philosophy as an art of living (an idea prefigured in Montaigne and the ancient Greeks), and finally Confucius for his emphasis on embodiment and pleasure and the importance of the arts for the ethical aim of self-cultivation in which the self and its cultivation are always seen as essentially socially constituted through one's relations with others rather than being narcissistically autonomous.

Your own philosophical project, somaesthetics has already become an international philosophical movement. Due to its interdisciplinary character it does not only belong to aesthetics. How do you see the relationship between somaesthetics and aesthetics or/and philosophy now?

When the idea of somaesthetics first came to me, I thought it would be a subdiscipline of philosophical

aesthetics, but, as you say, my thinking was wrong. Somaesthetics has become an interdisciplinary field, because the body – as our tool of tools and the central site of our experience -- is crucially related to the many disciplines that concern human flourishing: not only the arts, but politics, education, historical and social sciences as well as health sciences and even technology. In fact, much of my recent work in practical somaesthetics has been with experts in human-computer interaction design, scientists who are researching strategies for designing technological devices that are more somaesthetically friendly than our current technology, designing devices that can help an individual monitor his body or perform somatically in more helpful ways. I don't help them to design because I have no expertise in that area; instead I provide them with a 2-3-day practical workshop in body consciousness that can improve their somaesthetic awareness through which they hope to achieve somatically superior designs. Because of its interdisciplinary character and the increasing international interest it is achieving, somaesthetics will have its own journal, which will be based in Aalborg, Denmark and will start publication later this year. There is already an active somaesthetics Google group that anyone, in principle, can join.

But I should return to your question about the relationship of somaesthetics to philosophy. Genealogically, somaesthetics has its roots in philosophy and more particularly in pragmatist aesthetics. Somaesthetics emerged from the following two ideas: Because the body is crucial both to the creation of art and to its appreciation, a pragmatist approach (which also means a meliorist approach) to aesthetics should try to improve the body's perceptual and performative capacities so that it can improve our aesthetic experience. Moreover, because pragmatist aesthetics, as I conceive it, is also centrally concerned with the ethical art of living and because the body is the necessary medium through which we live, then it follows that a pragmatist, meliorist approach to living should

work on cultivating our key tool or medium of living, namely our soma. These two philosophical arguments, which originally inspired the idea of somaesthetics, continue to inspire it and to shape the approaches of non-philosophers who are working in this field. I believe that philosophical thinking is not confined to professional philosophers with Ph.D.'s in this subject. This brings me to a further point about the somaesthetics-philosophy relationship. If we conceive philosophy broadly as an ethical art of living that is guided by critical inquiry aimed to promote a more aesthetically satisfying form of life for both self and society, then the various disciplines and forms of knowledge that contribute to this art of living (even if they are not distinctively or professionally philosophical) can be related to the broad philosophical project of the quest for wisdom in how to live better lives. Somaesthetic research in forms outside the normal disciplinary bounds of philosophy surely can contribute to this overarching philosophical project.

Between June 2-5th you will be here in Budapest as the keynote speaker of the conference, „Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics” (<http://www.mft-hps.hu/hirek.html>) organized by the Hungarian Philosophical Association, where scholars from 14 countries will give interesting lectures pertaining to the topic. Beside the conference, a new book was published in Hungarian titled Somaesthetics and the Art of Living (JatePress, 2014) mostly from your latest texts. What do you hope from this conference, from your first visit in Hungary?

I should first express my deep thanks for the organization of this conference, which I believe is the first international somaesthetics conference of such large scope in Central Europe. My first hope is that all the scholars coming to Budapest (sometimes from very distant places) arrive here and return home safely. International travel is not easy on the soma, but the sort of full-bodied, real-time communicative exchange that a conference or face-to-face meeting provides is truly precious, so I myself endure a great deal of somatic fatigue in my travels connected with somaesthetic and philosophical research. Those travels are motivated by the hope of learning new things from very smart people. I have confidence in this hope because so much of my education has been pursued in foreign lands and through dialogical encounters with many different kinds of people who were generous to share their views with me. I truly look forward to this conference and also to the instructive dialogues with Hungarian intellectuals that can develop through the publication of this new book translated by Prof. Alex Kremer. Hungarian culture, I believe, has an admirable tradition in the practices of somaesthetics. During my younger days in Israel, I learned of Hungary's great traditions in sports and spa culture, and I could directly enjoy the delicacies of Hungarian cuisine in some excellent restaurants established in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem established by native Hungarians. I'm sure the cuisine is even better in Budapest, and I hope I'll have time to enjoy that too, along with some sport.