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Pragmatist Aesthetics and Critical Theory: A Personal Perspective on a Continuing Dialogue[1]

I

Critical theory was a key factor in my path from analytic philosophy to pragmatist aesthetics, and it remains an important orientation in my thinking. It is significant both for its views that I embrace and for the views that have inspired my theorizing by inciting my opposition. To understand the role of critical theory in my development of pragmatist aesthetics in all these ways, I need to describe some personal history. As I've often confessed, most of my philosophical ideas have come from life experiences other than reading books. I do not regard my texts as jewels in terms of their quality (I wish they were much better). But I do regard their production as in one way resembling the formation of natural pearls. My philosophical writings are essentially secretions from my life experience as stimulated by irritants in my life. Although I strive to make my texts reasonable, they have their origins in feelings that somehow disturb or irritate and that my thinking and writing then struggle to control, soothe, and cover with an attractive surface, in the same way that the nacre or mother of pearl attractively enwraps the irritant in the pearl-producing mollusk.

What first drew me to critical theory and made me dissatisfied with analytic aesthetics was the way it helped me soothingly wrap a deeply painful rupture in my life. I felt a comforting empathy in the beauty of the darkly critical mood and sense of alienation as expressed in the early Frankfurt school, particularly in Adorno. I could identify strongly not only with him and his *Reflections from Damaged Life* (the subtitle

[1] I prepared the original version of this essay as a keynote lecture for an online conference entitled "Pragmatist Aesthetics in Dialogue" that was organized by the University of Pisa in December 2021. That particular context will explain the paper's special references to Italian readers and to the Italian version of my book *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. I therefore find it most fitting to publish the written version of my talk in an Italian journal and am happy to publish it here in *Scenari*. I wish to thank Nicola Ramazzotto and Elena Romagnoli for their invitation and warm welcome to the conference.

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of his poignant *Minima Moralia*) but also with the plaintful thought of his Frankfurt School cohort. Like them I was a secular Jew, feeling the lonely alienation of exile and painfully critical of the commercial American culture that had become my new home. Most people identify me as an American philosopher, and so I am in certain ways, but not in others. Though born in the USA, I fled that country in my teens and did not plan to make my career there. My university studies I did in Jerusalem and Oxford; I served three years as an officer in the Israeli army and married a native Israeli with whom I had three children born in Israel. I was already tenured in Israel when I accepted a post as Associate Professor at Temple University in Philadelphia. One key reason for taking that job was personal hardship. Recently divorced with three children, I was broke and confused, and I needed a good American salary to provide adequately for my ex-wife and children and still have some money left over to care for myself.

It was a very unhappy time for me; and it was especially difficult for me, as a veteran of the Israeli communist youth movement and leftist activism, to get used to Reaganite America with what I perceived as its ideology of capitalist greed and selfishness (masked, of course, as individualist freedom). I felt both harassed and insulted by America's blatantly commercial, consumerist culture, so I resonated strongly with Adorno's critique of the culture industry and the social injustice inscribed in apparently benign neoliberal political regimes. My unhappy mood found confirmation and comfort in the critique that Frankfurt School theorists (and Pierre Bourdieu, whom I see as representative of critical theory beyond the Frankfurt school) directed at the cultural illusions that conceal systematic injustice in capitalist society. Together this emotional irritant and the corresponding critique made me dissatisfied with the complacent, complicitous attitude of analytic philosophy, which simply analyzed the dominant cultural discourse without questioning the injustice of what made that culture possible and what or whom that culture and discourse excluded.

When I was living in Israel, working hard for tenure, raising a family, and active in real progressive politics in a tightknit society that I considered home, I was too busy and too happy to be disturbed by the apolitical nature of analytic aesthetics. However, once I felt isolated from my family and society, and plunged into the alienating new American context, my unhappy mood made me more critical of analytic aesthetics' complicity with the cultural status quo. Most philosophers in Europe don't recall my early analytic work; even fewer are familiar with my book on T.S. Eliot and my other work in literary and critical theory that preceded my first book on pragmatism and that bridged between my analytic and pragmatist aesthetics. Italian readers of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, unless they go

back to the original English preface, will not realize that I never studied pragmatism until I came to the United States in the mid-1980s, and that, as late as 1988, Adorno was my favorite philosopher of art, whom I much preferred to Dewey. I confessed this in the English preface to *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. Here is what I wrote.

> Pragmatism emerged for me as a philosophical horizon only when I returned to America in 1985 to take up an appointment at Temple University. Indeed, it was, among other things, an intellectual tool which helped me reassimilate a culture which had initially formed me but which now seemed puzzlingly yet stimulatingly new. My ultimate "conversion" to pragmatist aesthetics and the idea of this book did not take shape, however, until the Spring of 1988, when I taught an aesthetics seminar to a very mixed and lively audience of graduate students in philosophy and dance. My debt to them is greater than I can here record. I had originally intended to use Dewey primarily as a foil to what I then regarded as the far superior aesthetic theory of Adorno (which I still greatly admire). But by the end of the semester, having scrutinized the different arguments in class and tested some issues on the dance floor, I could not help but trade Adorno's austere, gloomy, and haughtily elitist Marxism for Dewey's more earthy, upbeat, and democratic pragmatism.[2]

I will explain this conversion soon, but first let me give some evidence of the Adorno-Horkheimer influence from my book on *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*, published in 1988 and strongly defending modernist high art, despite its connection with systematic social injustice and oppression.[3] I argued that

> art's inviting vision of alien social worlds, ways of life, and discursive structures can help us realize that our own socially entrenched practices are neither necessary nor ideal, thereby opening the way for change. The eager rejection of all art as a lie unfaithful to the materialist evils of social reality betrays a dangerous tendency to assume that such reality is the ultimate criterion of truth and not itself the product of ideological illusion; it is to keep complicitous faith with that reality in refusing to consider art's alternative visions as worthy or serious. This, as Adorno remarks, is throwing out the baby with the bath-water; 'in face of the lie of the commodity world, even the lie that denounces it becomes a corrective truth' (TSE 154).[4]

[2] Richard Shusterman, "Preface," *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), x.
[3] Richard Shusterman, *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (London: Duckworth; New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), hereafter TSE.
[4] Ibid, 144. The Adorno quote is from *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, (London: Verso, 1978), 44

And after quoting this remark of Adorno, my Eliot book continued:

> In this contest for social privilege, it would be wrong to see high art as an unequivocal weapon of the most ruthlessly dominating class. This class or class fraction is comprised not of elite artists and their intellectual audience, but rather of big business, banking, industry, and advertising. Nor is elitist art its major instrument of domination. Instead it exploits, under the guise of democratic populism, the arts of popular culture (not to be confused with traditional folk art) and the manipulative art of advertising to produce a lucrative mass-culture industry. Apart from its own profit-taking, this industry promotes that docile conformism and worship of the superficially new which keeps the dominated consumer in a confused frenzy of changing fashion and thereby sets him up for ever more punishing rounds of profit-making.
>
> In contrast, high art (along with education) represents perhaps the only serious rival to material capital as a source of social status and legitimation. The art of high culture, the appreciation of things that are not 'box-office', represents an alternative value still deeply entrenched and emotively potent in our tradition, perhaps partly as a repository for displaced religious feeling set free by the so-called death of God. This cultural capital, as Bourdieu calls it, which is powerful enough to command at least the lip-service respect of both the common man and industrialist, constitutes the artist's and intellectual's prime weapon against the total hegemony of the dollar. And it is the dollar, not the poem or painting, which sustains and motivates the repressive conservative establishment deplored by so many of us (TSE 154-155).

This critique of popular culture and its deceptive democratic populism that serves an oppressive capitalist agenda certainly seems worlds apart from my texts defending popular art, celebrating rock and rap, and critiquing the oppressive social hegemony of high art, texts that came only a few years later, beginning in 1991 with my paper "Form and Funk."[5] What happened to change my approach to the high art/popular culture issue? Many colleagues were astonished by this radical transformation, although some recognized that my pragmatist critique of elitism was motivated by the same progressive democratic agenda that motivated my Adornian remarks against the culture industry. Readers of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* in Italian will not have the necessary clues to this transformation. They do not have the book's original English preface that states how my conversion to pragmatist aesthetics and the idea of my book on it did not take shape until my seminar with the dancers

[5] Richard Shusterman, "Form and Funk: The Aesthetic Challenge of Popular Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 33 (1991): 203-213.

in 1988. Readers of the book in Italian will also not see that the book's original version was dedicated to "three dancing graces," one of whom (I can now confess, thirty years later) was the dancing muse who radically transformed my philosophical thinking, largely by transfiguring my affective and somaesthetic life.

She was a young dancer, studying for a doctorate in dance education at Temple University, who took, along with five of her dancer classmates, my doctoral seminar in aesthetics. Small and slender but full of lithe, graceful energy and imagination, she came from a working-class background and was sensitive about her humble roots. She was an enthusiastic student, keen to learn, and as I passionately conveyed my preferred teaching of Adorno, I saw how she grew troubled. So I asked her why. Her response was something like this. "You and Adorno claim to be trying, with your theories, to elevate and liberate the common people, but what you are really doing is humiliating and insulting them by insulting the culture that shapes their lives and gives it meaning. The house I grew up in had a television in every room and they were mostly on all the time. Does that mean that I am in idiot who believes whatever is broadcasted? Does that mean that my cultural knowledge is worthless and that I have no culture worthy of the name? Is that liberating? Do you and Adorno really know the culture you are attacking and the way that culture shapes our lives? How deeply have you experienced this culture and the people who enjoy it and whom you claim to liberate? As for your analytic philosophy that's like my giving you a beautiful bouquet of flowers and instead of appreciating its beauty you pull off each petal of every flower, one by one, and are proud of how you analyzed a complex beauty into its parts."

In contrast to analytic aesthetics and Adorno's complex dialectics that she experienced as arrogant elitism, she loved the flowing positivity of Dewey – who seemed democratic not only in ultimate sociopolitical aims but also in his aesthetic and cultural attitudes, even in his philosophical style. Because this dancer projected her own aura of positive, encouraging, healing affect that I found irresistible in my unhappy state, she became my enchanting muse, and she helped me to see that Deweyan pragmatism provided me with a better framework for progressive reform in philosophy, in society, and for my own empowerment as a progressive thinker, trying to make a difference in the philosophical culture of America and perhaps in the world beyond. This dancer (who also taught yoga, aerobics, and massage) became the muse who led me into the field of somatic practices that eventually inspired my work in somaesthetics.

Because Adorno was such an important figure in my turn to pragmatist aesthetics but was also a key target of critique in my defense of rock and

rap music in my book *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, I felt I needed, for the book's German translation, to explain my admiration for Adorno but also my preference for pragmatism. This is what I wrote for its German preface.

> The glaring differences between my pragmatism and Adorno's aesthetic theory will catch the eye, but they should not blind readers to overlook the deep affinities that exist between pragmatist aesthetics and the Frankfurt School. Adorno, who pays high praise to "the unique and truly free John Dewey," shares the pragmatist emphasis on the dynamic, experiential dimension of art rather than its fetishization as a material object, the emphasis on the social essence of art and thus on the guilty reflection of social injustice, the valuable cognitive and communicative dimension of art, and the socio-political ideal that art expresses through its form of dynamic non-coercive unity. Adorno, however, rejects the strong pragmatist recognition of the functionality of art and the related goal of tying art and life more closely together in favor of their mutual improvement. He cautiously insists that 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. Pragmatism is more hopeful, more adventurous (or perhaps naively foolhardy): it emphasizes that, despite the risks of misappropriation by an immensely unaesthetic world, art should emerge from its sacralized fragmentation and enter the realm of the everyday, where it could function more effectively as a model and impetus for constructive reform than if it were an imported ornament or a devoutly invented alternative reality. More in the spirit of Walter Benjamin than Adorno, the pragmatist is willing to trade the autocratic aura of transcendental authority that surrounds high art for a more down-to-earth and democratic glow of an improved life and an enriched community of understanding. In short, for the pragmatist, our concept of art must undergo a democratic reform so that it becomes integral to the reform of the society whose dominant institutions, hierarchical distinctions, and class divisions have shaped this traditionally elitist concept – and which, to some extent, have been reciprocally reinforced by it.[6]

Moreover, as the German version of my book, which like the French one was a few chapters shorter than the English version, because its commercial publishers (Minuit and Fischer) demanded this, I explained this reduction in terms of the issue of popularization and the culture industry. I wrote:

> Interestingly, the abridged version of the book can be seen as reflecting its central thesis: the justification of popular culture. It could be condemned

[6] Richard Shusterman, *Kunst Leben: Die Aesthetik des Pragmatismus* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994), 14-15.

– along with its contents – for pernicious popularization. Is there not a disturbing analogy between the need to streamline one's books so that they reach the interest of a larger readership and the common charge that popular art must lower its standards to the lowest common denominator in order to secure the income of a large audience? Under the pressure of postmodernism (and irresponsible academics), has publishing philosophical texts degenerated into an offshoot or analogue of the nefarious, profit-seeking culture industry?

It would be naive not to see the influence of economic pressures on the scope of my book. Its European publishers understandably had an interest in publishing a shorter, more accessible book-because of the different economic factors (e.g., number of students, universities, and institutional libraries) that structure the European and American markets for academic publishing, respectively. However, even at the risk of making an editorial virtue out of an economic necessity, I hereby state for the record that my goal in making the cut was not to make more profit (which is not high in these literary genres anyway), but rather to reach more readers who can enjoy and learn from this book.

This democratic explanation has, of course, very limited power. For in the spirit of pragmatism, the book should be judged in the same way that we judge works of art: not so much by its motives as by its results. One of the main theses of the book is that popular art can achieve its popularity without thereby slipping into aesthetic worthlessness and vulgarity. The present abridged version of the book can thus itself be regarded as an argument that philosophical culture can also be popularized without at the same time becoming vulgarized and losing all rigor and enlightenment. I hope that this argument will succeed. But even if it does not, it will at least have been useful as an experiment in contextualizing and popularizing intellectual goods.[7]

II

That concludes the personal part of my paper, describing how critical theory, through its broader sociopolitical critique of culture, led me away from the apolitical approach of analytic aesthetics and eventually took me beyond critical theory's own residual, conservative elitism and brought me to progressive pragmatism. Now I consider more closely some key themes of critical theory that helped me develop (through absorption and critique) my own pragmatist views.

1. The first is the theme of aesthetic experience. Although this concept was central to Dewey and also to Monroe Beardsley, a leader in analytic aesthetics (and a professor at Temple University, whom I was hired to replace when he died in 1985), the idea of aesthetic experience had been severely criticized and essentially abandoned by analytic philosophy.

[7] Ibid., 11-12.

Moreover, the leading pragmatists like Richard Rorty opposed the whole notion of experience as a dangerous regression into obscure subjectivity and foundationalism, and so did Pierre Bourdieu.[8] The critical theory of Adorno and Walter Benjamin provided me with support in maintaining the abiding value of experience as a philosophical concept. They did so by subjecting it to critical analysis that helped me see its complexity. In my paper "The End of Aesthetic Experience" I outline some of that complexity in terms of four central features whose interplay shapes yet confuses twentieth-century accounts of this concept.[9] First, aesthetic experience is essentially valuable or enjoyable; second, it is something vividly felt and subjectively savored, affectively absorbing us and focusing our attention on its immediate presence and thus standing out from the ordinary flow of routine experience. Third, it is meaningful experience, not mere sensation. Fourth, it is a distinctive experience closely identified with the distinction of fine art and representing art's essential function or defining aim.

These features of aesthetic experience do not seem, prima facie, collectively inconsistent. Yet they generated theoretical tensions that discredited the concept in analytic philosophy. Adorno and Benjamin show that rejecting the claims of its immediacy, pleasure, or art-defining function does not mean rejecting the value of aesthetic experience. Although Adorno rejects its claim to immediately felt pleasure as the ideological contamination of bourgeois hedonism, he claims the concept of aesthetic experience is crucial for the philosophy of art. Unlike facile pleasure of the subject, "real aesthetic experience," for Adorno, "requires self-abnegation" and submission to "the objective constitution of the artwork itself."[10] This can transform the subject, thereby suggesting new avenues of emancipation and a renewed *promesse de bonheur* more potent than simple pleasure.

Here we see the transformational, passional aspect of aesthetic experience; it is something undergone or suffered. Though the experiencing subject is dynamic, not inert, she is far from a fully controlling agent and so remains captive and blind to the ideological features structuring the

[8] For discussion of Rorty's critique of the concept of experience and my defense of it, see Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (London: Routledge, 1997), ch.6. For discussion and critique of Bourdieu's rejection of aesthetic experience, see Richard Shusterman, "Bourdieu and Pragmatist Aesthetics: Between Practice and Experience," *New Literary History* 46:3 (2015), 435-457.

[9] Richard Shusterman, "The End of Aesthetic Experience," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997), 29-41; reprinted in *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

[10] Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 474,476; hereafter AT.

artwork she follows. Hence a proper, emancipatory understanding of art requires going beyond immediate experience, beyond immanent *Verstehen*, to external critique ("secondary reflection") of the work's ideological meaning and the socio-historical conditions which shaped it. "Experience is essential," Adorno dialectically concludes, "but so is thought, for no work in its immediate facticity portrays its meaning adequately or can be understood in itself" (AT 479). In the same dialectical manner, while affirming aesthetic experience's marked differentiation from "ungodly reality," he recognizes that such apparent autonomy is itself only the product of social forces which ultimately condition the nature of aesthetic experience by constraining both the structure of artworks and our mode of responding to them (AT 320-322, 478-479). Since changes in the sociohistorical and technological world affect our very sensibilities and capacity for experience, aesthetic experience cannot be a fixed natural kind.

This is a central theme in Walter Benjamin's critique of the immediacy of *Erlebnis* privileged by phenomenology. Through the fragmentation and shocks of modern life, the mechanical repetition of assembly-line labor, and the haphazardly juxtaposed information and raw sensationalism of the mass media, our immediate experience of things no longer forms a meaningful, coherent whole but is rather a welter of fragmentary, unintegrated sensations – something simply lived through (*erlebt*) rather than meaningfully experienced. Benjamin instead advocated a notion of experience (as *Erfahrung*) that requires the mediated, temporally cumulative accretion of coherent, transmittable wisdom, though he worried whether it could still be achieved in modern society. Narrative, for him, became an important factor in creating *Erfahrung*'s coherence and unity over time.[11]

Modernization and technology, Benjamin likewise argued, have eroded aesthetic experience's identification with the distinctive, transcendent autonomy of art. Such experience once had what Benjamin called *aura*, a cultic quality resulting from the artwork's uniqueness and distance from the ordinary world. However, with the advent of mechanical modes of reproduction like photography, art's distinctive aura has been lost, and aesthetic experience comes to pervade the everyday world of popular culture and even politics. Aesthetic experience, therefore, can no longer be used to define and delimit the realm of high art. Unlike Adorno, Benjamin saw this loss of aura and differentiation as potentially emancipatory

[11] My account of Benjamin here is based on his essays "The Storyteller," "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," all of which are found in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969).

(although he condemned its deadly results in the aesthetics of fascist politics). In any case, Benjamin's critique does not deny the continuing importance of aesthetic experience, only its romantic conceptualization as pure immediacy of meaning and its isolation from the rest of life through its confinement art.

Another aspect of Adorno's views on aesthetic experience I found encouraging as I developed, in the last decade, a new dimension of my treatment of this concept. After my work in performance art with the Man in Gold, in which I underwent very powerful, immersive, invasive aesthetic experiences, I began to explore the intuitions of our culture's first theory of aesthetic experience: experience as uplifting possession from some mysterious, overpowering force, originally attributed to the divine muses.[12] I was glad to see that Adorno recognized something like this. He describes the initial stage of a powerful aesthetic experience that so strongly seizes the subject who thus feels a "shock" or "tremor" (*Betroffenheit* or *Erschütterung*) and "gives himself over to the work" as if possessed. Such aesthetic experience "signals the breaking through of [the artwork's] objectivity into subjective consciousness" that challenges rather than simply gratifies the personal ego. By "being shaken up [through the invasion of this outside objectivity] the ego becomes aware of its limits and finitude" (AT 346-347) These include our inevitable limits of understanding the artwork, which remains a puzzle even to its own creator, thus testifying to "the enigmatic quality that is constitutive of art." Works that "lack enigma…indeed fall short of art." (AT 178). The enrichment and edification that art's discomforting, enigmatic experience can eventually bring to us distinguishes true art from the tepid products of the culture industry that try to gratify rather than challenge the ego's sense of self-possession and control in order "to leave everything as it is" (AT 348). However, to achieve a fuller understanding of art and its edifying capacities, Adorno argues that one must go beyond the initial stage of giving oneself over to the work and being "under art's spell" and move to a stage of critical "reflection" (AT 177-178).

The pragmatist John Dewey, who makes aesthetic experience the defining core of his philosophy of art, likewise adopts a two-stage theory of artistic understanding and applies this theory both to artist and audience. The first stage involves the artist undergoing a surprisingly involuntary experience of possession that stimulates her artistic creation; and a similar seizure (resulting in "surrender" or "yielding of the self") occurs

[12] For my work with the Man in Gold and the theme of possession, see Richard Shusterman, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* (Paris: Hermann, 2016); "Aesthetic Experience and the Powers of Possession," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 53:4 (2019), 1-23.

in the spectator's aesthetic experience.[13] Dewey writes "that artist and perceiver alike begin with what may be called a total seizure, an inclusive qualitative whole not yet articulated, not distinguished into members" or parts (AE 195). This prepossessing qualitative whole, though vague and undefined, "persists as the substratum" of aesthetic experience that serves to unify and organize the experience and make it distinctive. "The total overwhelming impression comes first, perhaps in seizure by a sudden glory of the landscape, or by the effect upon us of entrance into a cathedral when dim light, incense, stained glass and majestic proportions fuse in one indistinguishable whole." This "rapt seizure" as Dewey calls it (somewhat redundantly as "rapt" etymologically means seized) is "a direct and unreasoned impression" that is not in the person's control. "Sometimes it comes and sometimes it does not, even in the presence of the same object. It cannot be forced" but instead it exerts its force on us. From this "original seizure" the artist or perceiver can then proceed to a stage of "critical discrimination" to explore the different elements and meaning of the object, scene, event, or force that possessed us with that initial total seizure (AE 145-146).

This respect for the aesthetic object as having a power independent of the subject who experiences its power is important to me, especially because it distinguishes my pragmatist theory of interpretation from that of Rorty, who follows Harold Bloom's notion of strong misreading. When Rorty asserts that the good critic "simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose,"[14] I counter that such a policy is destructive of the sense of otherness that makes reading a dialogical hermeneutic project from which we can learn something new. How, one wonders, can Rorty combines his domineering attitude toward texts with his fervent advocacy of the 'inspirational value of great works of literature?"[15] Here is a good place to recall how my pragmatist aesthetics argues like Adorno for a two-stage process of interpretation: first, an immersion in the world of the work so one can understand it (*Verstehen*) and then criticism of the work's ideological presumptions from a critical standpoint outside that world.[16]

[13] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 59; hereafter AE

[14] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 151.

[15] Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 125.

[16] I elaborate this theory in "Eliot and Adorno on the Critique of Culture," in my *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 139-158, particularly 155-157,

2. If the German distinction of experience between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* helped nourish my pragmatist analysis and defense of aesthetic experience, a similar linguistic distinction helped motivate my study of somaesthetics. That is the German distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*, which we do not have in English or French. (I believe the lack of *Leib* in French led Merleau-Ponty to speak of "*le corps propre*," which is often translated into English as "the lived body," although *Körper* can also be living and will always be living when *Leib* is present). These German words for body – *Körper* and *Leib*, with their accordingly different cognate grammatical derivatives (*körperlich*/*leiblich*, *Körperlichkeit*/*Leiblichkeit*) – are typically sharply opposed in philosophical discourse on embodiment; not only in German but in their adaptation into French and other languages by Merleau-Ponty and others. Very roughly speaking for the moment, *Körper* denotes the physical body as object while *Leib* typically signifies the lived, feeling body or the body as intentionality or subjectivity.

When I began to develop somaesthetics in the second half of the 1990s I was not yet aware of the *Leib*/*Körpe*r distinction. This is because I began to learn German rather late in my career, only in 1995 when I began a year as a Fulbright Professor in Berlin. By that time, I had already published some work in German about embodiment that engaged the work of Adorno and Horkheimer (though I had not yet coined the term somaesthetics). However, I had read German philosophy only through English texts where the *Leib*/*Körpe*r distinction was invisible, so I was unaware of the distinction. Let me give you an example of the misunderstandings that can result in translations unable to mark that distinction. I remember first encountering this translation problem when (in a German translation of one of my English texts) I first saw the German original of a passage from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ("Interesse am Körper") that deployed both *Körper* and *Leib* in a single sentence: "*Der Körper is nicht wieder zurückzuverwandeln in den Leib*." If the first published English translation I used rendered this misleadingly as: "The body cannot be remade into a noble object," an allegedly improved new translation seems no less misleading: "The body cannot be turned back into the envelope of the soul." Neither "noble object" nor "envelope of the soul" seems close to the meaning of the single word *Leib*," but to simply repeat the word "body" to designate "Leib" would hardly be a better solution, as it would render the sentence into contradictory nonsense.[17]

[17] See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1988), 248; and the respective English translations by John Cummings (London: Continuum, 1986), 234; and by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 194.

As somaesthetics began to be introduced into the German philosophical field,[18] many German colleagues asked me why I did not use the term *Leib* instead of soma because I identified the soma as the living, sentient, purposive body. I insisted, however, that soma was the concept I needed. The choice of the word "soma" was not a trivial matter of linguistic style. It signaled matters of conceptual import. I felt that the *Leib/Körper* distinction remained too dualistic (subject/object; mind/matter). Moreover, *Leib* does not relate to the anatomical and physiological dimensions of embodiment that belong to my conception of the field of somaesthetics; nor does *Leib* adequately relate to the distinctively bodily [*körperlich*] aesthetics of physical beauty, food, fashion, cosmetics, and sex that I wanted to consider under somaesthetics. My concept of soma ontologically comprises both *Leib* and *Körper*, though it allows one to distinguish between their different discourses. In this, the concept of soma harkens back to the ontology of Spinoza which saw mind and the living body as ontologically one thing but considered under different perspectives.

My appreciation of the *Körper* as a physical body that is appreciated and cultivated for its beauty and performative powers was understandably something that Adorno, an exile from Nazism's regime of somaesthetic racism, could not properly appreciate. The notion of *Körper Kultur* was central to the Nazi ideology of racism and eugenics. Because of this, the stigma on the *Körper* in German intellectual circles is abidingly strong, so much so that when I wanted, as a Fulbright Professor in 1996, to offer a course on body culture at Berlin's Freie Universität, the course was initially disallowed because its title "*Körper Kultur*" was regarded as something like hate speech because of its Nazi connotations. I had to retitle the course with the English title "Body Culture" before the course was allowed to go into the list of courses for the semester. The new German phenomenology of embodiment, inspired by Herman Schmitz and best known through Gernot Böhme, is distinctively a *Leib Philosophie* with little regard for the *Körper*. This *Leib/Körper* problem was another reason why I preferred "soma" to "body," apart from the body's negative connotations as contrasted with mind and as connected with the corpse.

III

Most scholars of pragmatist aesthetics are very familiar with my somaesthetics and with my critique of Adorno on popular music, so let

[18] It is interesting that the very first time I used that concept was in one of my books in German, *Vor der Interpretation* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1996). The book was a slightly revised translation of *Sous l'interprétation* (Paris: L'éclat, 1994).

me turn to two other arts (photography and architecture) where Walter Benjamin has served me both an inspiration and a polemical target. In my work on photography as performative process, I noted how Benjamin's influential views contributed to theory's focusing on the photograph as the sole site for photography's aesthetic experience, thus ignoring the aesthetics of photography's performative process.[19] Benjamin argued that photography's epoch-making transformation of art through mechanical reproduction involved changing art's essential nature from cult value to exhibition value. If art originally emerged from "magic" and religious ritual "with ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult" whose transcendent quality imbued artworks with an elevated sense of "aura" and "unique existence," then photography (as "the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction") "emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" and "the unique value of the 'authentic' work" that has its role in ritual or cultic use; for "to ask for the [one] 'authentic' print makes no sense."[20]

Art's essential nature, Benjamin argues, was therefore transformed from emphasizing "cult value" (where the work could serve effectively even when hidden from view but recognized as being kept in its hallowed place) to instead emphasizing "the exhibition value of a work," because the work's "fitness for exhibition increased" through photography's new powers of "mechanical reproduction" (WMP 225). What gets widely exhibited through such mechanical reproduction is the photographic print (or now, ever increasingly, the digital image). Thus, if art has essentially lost its function as ritual (which is a performative process) but instead is constituted by an "absolute emphasis on its exhibition value" (ibid.), then photography should be identified with the photograph and thus its performative process should be neglected as irrelevant or anachronistic.

Despite the obvious force this argument there remains a distinctive ritualistic element in photography. Many ritual events (weddings, graduations, baptisms, conference meetings, and award ceremonies) include the taking of posed pictures that serve not simply to recall the event in future times but to mark out and heighten the current moment as one worth savoring in present experience by putting that moment in a formal frame that dramatizes its qualitative presence and meaning. Despite its serving exhibition value, photography still displays a ritual dimension of

[19] See Richard Shusterman, "Photography as Performative Process," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 70:1 (2012), 67–77; and significantly enlarged in Richard Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body*: *Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 239-261.

[20] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 220,221,224,225; hereafter WMP.

performative, dramatizing process. Contemporary cultures that remain strongly shaped by rich aesthetic traditions of ritual (such as Japan's) display a marked tendency to perform the process of taking photographs with a dedication and style suggestive of ritual performance.

Moreover, even Benjamin recognized the photograph's power to maintain art's auratic "cult value," for instance in "the cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead" (WPM 219). Moreover, in an earlier, less familiar essay explicitly devoted to photography, he insists on this "magical value" and "auratic appearance," affirming that the portrait subjects of "early photography" indeed "had an aura about them." But this was destroyed when photography was "invaded on all sides by businessmen" who, "more concerned with eventual saleability than with understanding," pandered to "changing lights of fashion" and reduced the experienced time and absorption of posing toward the momentary "snapshot." Benjamin also praises early photography for the way it required its subjects "to live inside rather than outside the moment" of the photographic shoot. "During the long duration of these shots they grew as it were into the picture and in this way presented an extreme opposite to the figures on a snapshot." And this absorption of the subject, Benjamin further suggests, had a counterpart in the photographer's absorption and his ability to make his subjects feel comfortably "at home," for example by deploying the camera with "discrete reserve."[21] One gets the impression that such photography provided a profound, sustained experience of performative process, and that such an experience could still be available today if one only took the time, care, and effort to develop this dimension of photographic art.

Benjamin also influenced my work on the somaesthetics of architecture in terms of my exploration of the quality of atmosphere that is important yet elusive in experiencing architectural space. Atmosphere is experienced by the subject as a perceptual feeling that emerges from and pervades a situation; and like other perceptual feelings, atmosphere is experienced in large part as a bodily feeling. Walter Benjamin, at one point, likewise describes the aura as something that we perceive bodily by "breathing" in the atmosphere of its situation – "a peculiar web of space and time."[22] Although architectural theory recognizes that the more tactile, somaesthetic senses are crucial to architecture's experienced atmosphere, the presumption remains that these dimensions of atmosphere are in principle too elusive for the exercise of criticality, except indirectly in terms of its pernicious political and mercenary uses.

[21] Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," trans. Stanley Mitchell, *Screen*, 13:1 (1972), 7,8,17,18,19,24.

[22] I here quote from the first German version of Benjamin's WMP essay reprinted in his *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 440.

The *locus classicus* of this influential presumption is Walter Benjamin's famous account of architectural experience. Here Benjamin contrasts tactile and optical perception while also comparing architectural experience to that of film. Toward the end of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in which he earlier expounded his theory of aura, Benjamin claims that unlike painting (with its traditional aura of uniqueness), film and architecture both enable a "simultaneous, collective experience" for aesthetic reception "by the mass audience" (WMP 234). Benjamin, however, then contrasts film and architecture in terms of the former's greater possibilities for critical consciousness through its objectifying representational photographic technologies and optic focus as opposed to architecture's problematic resistance to critical consciousness through its predominant reliance on habits of tactile reception. According to Benjamin,

> Buildings are appropriated [the German is the less dynamic *rezipiert*] in a twofold manner: by use and by perception – or rather, by touch and sight. Such appropriation [*Rezeption*] cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit (WMP 240).

Benjamin goes on to argue that this unthinking, uncritical tactile absorption through habit also "determines to a large extent even optical reception" in architecture (ibid.).

Moreover, through its persistent deployment in the ubiquitous realm of architecture, this uncritical mode of habitual, somatic reception "acquires canonical value" or pervasive power that extends to other domains of culture and of life. Benjamin can then return to film experience and argue that there too, reception by the masses, though optical, is still essentially a reception governed by habit and characterized by distraction that thus "requires no attention" (WMP, 241). Hence, the mechanical reproduction of art is matched by an unfocussed, absent-minded, uncritical reception through the mechanism of habit. "The public," he concludes "is an examiner, but an absent-minded [or distracted, *zersteuter*] one" (ibid.).

Benjamin, however, provides no evidence that the tactile feelings we experience in architecture *must* remain in the realm of inattentive, absent-minded, mechanical habit that precludes explicit awareness for critical assessment. There is nothing in tactile and other distinctively somatic feelings that prohibits our perceiving them with conscious, focused attention, and in many situations we do so attend to them. In everyday experience, we often notice (and sometimes) even try to de-

scribe varieties of pain, itches, tickles, caresses, sensual pleasures, feelings of dizziness, speed, hot, cold, and the feel of different surfaces or fabrics on our skin. Benjamin, of course, is right that our habitual way of experiencing architecture is in term of blind inattentive habit. But habits, as learned behavior (even if *implicitly* learned behavior) can be changed; moreover, not all habits are blind and inattentive. Although Benjamin understandably contrasts habit with attention, there are indeed habits of attention; and developing such habits is very useful for success in education and in life.

It is certainly true that most of us are far better at focusing critical attention on visual representations than on tactile or somaesthetic feelings, and there may be reasons for this beyond the effects of mere habit (for example, evolutionary reasons and factors concerning the way that distance and visual spatial array can facilitate individuation and objectification). However, we should not erect a dualism between optical and tactile perception, because the former in fact intrinsically involves the latter, since the very act of vision necessarily deploys the muscular movement of our eyes and thus the tactility of proprioception or feeling of muscular movement. Moreover, recent research in the visuo-motor neuron system has shown that perception is significantly transmodal, such that seeing an action will also activate neurons involved in the motor or muscular performance of that action, and apparently vice versa.

If Benjamin argues that our habitual and absent-minded tactile reception of architecture has rendered its optical reception likewise inattentively absent-minded, then why not turn the tables and make the following somaesthetic argument: By heightening our attention to the tactile and proprioceptive feelings in experiencing architecture, we can render not only such perceptions more acute, penetrating, and critical but also sharpen our attentiveness more generally and thus eventually improve our perception of architecture's optical experience. By training and exercising somaesthetic attention we gain a more attentive and explicit consciousness of the vague but influential somatic feelings that constitute our experience of architectural atmosphere so that we can be more focused and penetrating in its critical analysis. Such training is valuable for improving the critical sensibilities not only of designing architects but also of the various populations who inhabit architectural and urban spaces and whose informed input on architectural and urban design would be useful, if such design is truly meant to serve them best. There are a variety of methods for training such somaesthetic sensibility, some of which I discuss in my books and teach in practical workshops.

Urban experience is another area where Benjamin has been important to my work in pragmatist aesthetics. First, I strongly identified with his account of the *flâneur* as essentially "out of place," a creature at home nei-

ther in the bustling crowd nor "in an atmosphere of complete leisure."[23] Exiled in Paris as a refugee from Nazi Germany, Benjamin's own account of roaming through the crowded city streets vaguely suggests another aspect of urban experience: the presence of strangers or foreigners together with their feelings of alienation, of being "out of place." Many individuals who crowd the streets of giant cities are people who feel they lack a proper home or who are missing their homeland. This felt absence, this sense of displacement, keeps them moving through the city streets, foregoing the lure of entry to the stores, restaurants and other attractions that would provide rest from their walking wandering; this sense of strangeness and lack of goal pushes them ever further through the endless network of urban avenues and alleys. Consider Benjamin's description of restless, ceaseless, compulsive roaming through unknown streets that express the loss of the warmth of a familiar home.

> An intoxication comes over the person who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next street corner, of a distant mass of foliage, of a street name. Then comes hunger. Our man wants nothing to do with the myriad possibilities offered to sate his appetite. Like an ascetic animal, he flits through unknown districts – until, utterly exhausted, he stumbles into his room, which receives him coldly and wears a strange air.[24]

Big cities have long served as homes for the homeless, not simply for those lacking proper dwellings but more distinctively for those deprived of their homelands. With the massive flood of migrant refugees and the increasingly globalized work force, this foreign component of the city crowd has greatly grown. Cities and their streets are both a magnet and a refuge for strangers. A foreigner in a big city, though out of place, feels less so because of all the other strangers living there. For those fearful or sensitive about being alien, walking through the streets may be the surest public pastime. Enjoying the freedom of self-sufficient outdoor motion (and as long as his appearance does not arouse suspicion), the foreign *flâneur* can avoid the embarrassment of being "outed" as an alien if he keeps moving through the streets in the right rhythm. But to address the seductions of the stores, bistros, and women means exposing one's for-

[23] Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,"172–173; hereafter SM.
[24] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 417. The phrase "wears a strange air" is the translators' rendering of the German "*befremdet,*" which could equally suggest an "alienating" strangeness. For the German text, see Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), 525.

eignness – through one's accent at the very least. To linger too long at a shop window or street corner would invite suspicions of loitering and risk police encounters with their demand for identity papers validating one's legality in the city. Benjamin's ascetically driven rover of the streets seems a modern urban analogue of the wandering Jew, compelled to roam in diasporic cities, having been exiled from his homeland and dwelling in places that remain strange and devoid of home-like warmth. I empathize with that experience, and know of no place I feel fully at home.

However, Benjamin astutely realizes that the city streets also promise more than the personal pleasure of flânerie or an individual escape from alienated loneliness. Those streets can provide a cultural education for the crowd that, as a human collective, holds the promise of political transformation from an amorphous mass toward an effective public sphere. "Streets," claims Benjamin, "are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally restless and eternally moving being that, in between the facades of buildings, undergoes (*erlebt*), experiences (*erfärht*), learns, contrives as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls." The cultural texts one finds in the streets provide its educational resources. "For this collective, the shiny enameled shop signs are a wall decoration as good as, if not better than, an oil painting in the drawing room of a bourgeois; walls marked "*Défense d'afficher*" are its writing desk, newspaper stands its libraries, mailboxes its bronze busts, benches its bedroom furniture, and café terraces the balcony from which it looks down on its household."[25] Today, we could add that the city streets now serve, all too often, as execution rooms of the unwanted and unwelcome, especially those racially "undesirables" killed by the police who should protect them.

If the large presence of foreigners circulating in the city streets provides the metropolis with more possibilities for varied somaesthetic experience and an enriched aesthetic education in cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity, some citizens regard the introduction of such diversity as unwelcomely transforming the city's (or nation's) prior aesthetic "feel" and thus calling for solutions to this discomfort that are politically problematic. If ghettos are a traditional response to this fear, so are expulsions and xenophobic violence. Wittgenstein (another secular Jew in exile from an antisemitic homeland) notes this troubling aspect of the somaesthetic sense of the *polis* and of the body-politic analogy, evoking its links to antisemitism and genocide.

> Within the history of the peoples of Europe …the Jews… are experienced as a sort of disease, and anomaly, and no one wants to put a disease on the

[25] Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, 533

> same level as normal life [and no one wants to speak of a disease as if it had the same rights as healthy bodily processes (even painful ones)]. We may say: people can only regard this tumor as a natural part of the body if their whole feeling for the body changes (or if the whole national feeling for the body changes). Otherwise the best they can do is *put up with* it. You can expect an individual man to display this sort of tolerance, or else to disregard such things; but you cannot expect this of a nation, because it is precisely not disregarding such things that makes it a nation. I.e. there is a contradiction in expecting someone both to retain his former aesthetic feeling for the body [aesthetische Gefühl für seinen Körper] and *also* to make the tumor welcome.[26]

IV

In my dialogue with critical theory, besides the powerful presence of Adorno and Benjamin, I should not forget Herbert Marcuse, who seems to have enjoyed his exile in America far more than Adorno did and who received much more popular attention there in the 1960s and 1970s. So I encountered Marcuse's work much earlier than I did Adorno's or Benjamin's. As his critique of the affirmative character of culture had an important role in my chapter on aesthetic ideology in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, so his contrasting demand for sensuous satisfaction rather than mere spiritual compensation for unhappy oppression was also of significant encouragement. Marcuse's insistent demand for the satisfaction and emancipation of the senses through freedom from repressive conditions of labor and ideology goes back to Marxism, and my pragmatism has always had a hint of the early Marx. This is one reason, I believe why my work has been well-received in China, where scholars have explicitly compared my pragmatist, somaesthetic approach to the art of living to Marx's views on the praxis of sensuous human activity, "*menschliche sinnliche Tätigkeit, Praxis*," as he puts it in his first thesis on Feurbach.[27]

To conclude this paper, I want to mention an area where I hope to continue my pragmatist dialogue with critical theory, and particularly with Marcuse. It concerns my somaesthetic research into eroticism. Scholars have recognized important affinities between my efforts to redeem the

[26] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen*. I cite from the bilingual edition of this work, translated by Peter Winch and entitled *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 20-21. The italics, parentheses, and brackets are in the original.

[27] The Chinese Marxist literary theorist Zhang Baogui, for example, elaborates the similarities and differences in "The possibility of life becoming art: a comparison of Marx's and Shusterman's life aesthetics," *International Aesthetics* (Beijing),29 (2018), 213-228. 张宝贵：生活成为艺术的可能性 – 马克思与舒斯特曼生活美学思想之比照《外国美学，2018，213-228.

positive, emancipatory power of the erotic and Marcuse's work on sexual emancipation in *Eros and Civilization*.[28] The utopian theme of achieving personal and social liberation not only *towards* greater pleasure but also partly *by means of* liberational pleasures embodying protest or resistance has long been recognized in my work. The mix of liberational pleasure and sociopolitical purpose was already evident in my work on rap and rock music in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. One sympathetic Parisian critic of that book described its vision as advocating "a *con-sensualist* society rather than a merely consensual one."[29] Of course, there are important differences as well as affinities between my views on sex, aesthetics, and liberation and those of Marcuse. To explore them properly would involve going into Freud as well as Marx, so I will defer detailed engagement with Marcuse's views on these topics to another occasion.[30]

[28] See, for example, Leszek Koczanowicz, "Toward a democratic utopia of everydayness: microphysics of emancipation and somapower," *History of European Ideas*, 46 (2020), 1122-1133, and "Beauty between Repression and Coercion: A Few Thoughts on Richard Shusterman's *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*," *Foucault Studies*, 31 (2021), 37-44. The latter was part of a symposium on my book *Ars Erotica*, introduced by Stefano Marino, who also connects my work on eroticism to ideas in Marcuse and Adorno. See Stefano Marino, "Preface to symposium on Richard Shusterman's *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love:* Sexuality and/as Art, Power, and Reconciliation," *Foucault Studies*, 31 (2021), 1-12. The symposium also included papers by Catherine Botha and Leonardo Distaso.

[29] Antonia Soulez, "Practice, Theory, Pleasure and the Forms of Resistance: Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics*," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 16:1 (2002), 2-9.

[30] I do, however, offer a preliminary discussion of my differences from Marcuse in Richard Shusterman, "Sex, Emancipation, and Aesthetics: Ars Erotica and the Cage of Eurocentric Modernity. Response to Botha, Distaso, and Koczanowicz," *Foucault Studies*, 31 (2021), 44-60. In that article I also highlight how the early Marx anticipates key ideas of somaesthetics.