

## CHAPTER 10

# The Soma and the City. A Critical Approach

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with urban aesthetics as one of the main research fields in contemporary aesthetics, placing particular emphasis on the recipient's aesthetic experience of the city. The overall aim is to discuss the kind of aesthetic interactions we have when immersed in a city. Somaesthetic experience (Shusterman 1999) represents the core notion in this survey and establishes the discussion about the role of body sensations in the process of experiencing the city. The attempt is to underline the virtues and limits of a somaesthetic approach when applied to the case of the city. One of the main outcomes is the claim that the body, as an instrument for experiencing the city, is insufficient. Cognition, knowledge, context, and information are necessary for a more intense and richer experience of the city.

**Keywords:** Urban Aesthetic, Aesthetic of the City, Aesthetic Engagement, Aesthetic Experience, Somaesthetic Experience

### 1 Introduction

The aesthetics of the city is currently an issue of increasing interest within aesthetic research (see for example Algreen-Ussing et al. 2000; Berleant 1992; Berleant and Carlson 2007; Haapala 1998; Erzen and Milani 2012; Nasar 1988; Shusterman 2019b), bringing many new questions and theoretical challenges in the context of environmental studies. The city itself is not just a cultural and historical place but also a special environment that offers a great number of aesthetic impulses and possibilities for aesthetic interaction. The ongoing global situation has shown us very explicitly how dramatically any aesthetic environment can change from one day to another when one needs to narrow one's own existence to a single flat, and every banal aspect of life acquires

new qualities. Participation in the life of the city shapes our everyday existence (Santora 2012) and the way we perceive and appreciate the city as recipients. Arnold Berleant (1986) stresses the perceptual aspect of experience and understands the city as a “place of vital activity.” This means that the city cannot exist without its dwellers and all the people living there co-create the final picture and the sensation one gets from it. This cooperative and collective interaction is what creates the city. This ‘participation in the life’ of the city raises questions about the position of the recipient in the city, as they are moving freely around the city. What is it like to experience a city aesthetically? And what kind of experience is the experience one can have in a city? Is there room for any ‘aesthetic distance’ between us and the city that we are experiencing?

To answer these questions, we need to distinguish between the city as a place (environment) that we are living in, and the representation of the city as an aesthetic object that we are looking at, a distinction that is crucial for understanding the meaning of aesthetic experience in the urban environment. The first section of the paper deals with this issue, asks about the position of the recipient in the process of aesthetic interaction and in aesthetic experience, and raises the questions of aesthetic disinterestedness and aesthetic engagement. The second section discusses a way of appreciating the city based on the notion of experience, especially the approach developed by Richard Shusterman (1999) in his project of somaesthetics. Shusterman’s approach is inspired by Dewey (see Shusterman 2016, 2019), although there are some discrepancies between the two approaches.<sup>1</sup> Shusterman (2012b) orients his investigation solely on the body, even when he argues that he wants to get rid of the dualism between material and immaterial, body and mind, and elaborately explains how we can understand the world through the body. Following Shusterman, I argue that the body is crucial in the environment of the city, and provides the recipient with all the necessary aesthetic impulses, as the first and most relevant or resourceful tool of experiencing the city. Contra Shusterman, however, I will claim that aesthetic interaction and experience of the city cannot be simply limited to the body. Information, context and cognition play a fundamental role in allowing a deeper and more complex aesthetic experience of the city and need to be also taken into account in their connection and cooperation with bodily sensations.

<sup>1</sup> For a pragmatist critique of Dewey’s understanding of aesthetic experience as formulated by Richard Rorty see Shusterman (2016, pp. 158-169).

## 2 Recipient in/of the City

Let us imagine that we are walking along an alley of a city, an alley that we know about, but we had never walked there before. There is everything in this alley: beautiful small buildings with worn shutters that are in some poetic way really intriguing but also full garbage containers, small dried-up flowers behind windows, industrial buildings that are still running, and also some trees and grass. We experience some sensation, maybe we are attracted by something we see during this walk. We realize that some of the experienced stimuli affect us. This experience of the city cannot be mediated by other means than the body because everything depends on our measure of involvement in the city. Can we aesthetically experience the city *because* we are walking through and are immersed in this environment or *despite* the fact that we are walking and are immersed in it?

The main problem in examining the aesthetics of the city, hidden in this example, is the very fact that recipients are not only impartial observers, but participate in the life of the city by themselves and are a part (or one of the aspects) of the city.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, almost every activity that they do and perform becomes a piece of the city itself and can influence other recipients/dwellers. This problem brings about a crucial issue in aesthetics: the dialectics of disinterestedness and involvement in aesthetic phenomena (Zuska 2002).<sup>3</sup> Arnold Berleant (2017, p. 10) questioned the concept of disinterestedness as a notion that is linked with a lack of interest. In contrast, disinterestedness, according to him, implies a form of appreciation that is not distracted by external interests. The general idea that there is a clear opposition between disinterestedness and interestedness is for him not valid since the dialectical relationship between those two notions is anything but simple. The recipients can either experience some aesthetic phenomena in

<sup>2</sup> An appropriate example could be participating in a happening or performance in the public space, because in city life the recipient is not immune to the city. We cannot change the fact that we are part of the city; we are walking on the streets, living in the infrastructure, hearing the echoes of the city and so on.

<sup>3</sup> According to James Elkins (2001), the more you critically approach an aesthetic object, the more your experience loses in the value of experience. In other words, distancing oneself from an aesthetic object, Elkins believes, may imply being unable to appreciate the object adequately. From another methodological point of view, “we can ask” Theodor W. Adorno (2003), what to do with this dialectic of empirical experience and knowledge and artistic/aesthetic experience. He argues that too much information and empirical knowledge disturbs our aesthetic experience of the fine arts but, according to him, some background knowledge is necessary.

a 'disinterested' state of mind, where they are focused only on appreciating such phenomena, or in an 'interested' state of mind, which does not automatically mean that they are influenced by external facts and that they are unable to react to the experienced phenomena.

The case of the city is particularly revealing in this discussion. To be a city dweller or to be a recipient of a city means that one is living in the city, is active during their exploration, and is constantly experiencing something. One's participation in the city is always immersive, for immersion is the only way one can start to experience the city.

Berleant (2013) introduces in this regard the concept of aesthetic engagement: an alternative to aesthetic disinterestedness that originates in the verb 'to engage with' in an aesthetic sense as opposed to observing something. Engagement is in some sense personal and intimate. Berleant explains aesthetic engagement as a rejection of the subject-object dualism. He resolves the issue of dualism by the suggestion that the object and subject do not have to be separated. In this regard, he introduces the notion of aesthetic fields. Aesthetic fields are defined by four principles: the appreciator, the object, the activity or event, and some kind of activation element (Berleant 2017, p. 11).<sup>4</sup> The components of an aesthetic field are not separated from one another, they are rather interconnected and undergo continuous exchange (Berleant 2017). This continuous exchange is crucial in experiencing the city, because the experience of the city does not take place in one single moment but lasts for a longer time. We experience aesthetic aspects of the city over time, and our experience itself is constantly evolving.

Berleant (2015) claims that most often we are used to thinking of the city as a place, as a carrier of some special identity of a place, but this notion of the city is incomplete. The city always represents something more than a material structure of streets, buildings and parks. The perception of the city, and the structure of all the perceived aspects of the city, creates something immaterial and maybe metaphysical; yet something that we can actually perceive. In general, we can say that every

<sup>4</sup> Vlastimil Zuska (2002) also supports Berleant's approach. He is convinced that, in the act of aesthetic distance, we deliberately choose the objects we are distancing from. We decide what is the subject and what is the object of distance and what is not. In other words, aesthetic distance is always an activity of the subject. Similarly to Berleant, Aleksandra Lukaszewicz Alcaraz (2017) also claims that we are always involved in a certain environment, with the emphasis put on the word involved. To sum up, every time we need to make a decision from some point of view, we are bound to this position.

city is, in some way, special, or special in the combination of those aspects, and therefore it is impossible to experience as a whole during one single moment. In this sense, a city is not simply a physical construction or location. A city is determined by its life, and is more vivid and transformative than just any place: it is *inhabited* and this fact creates the specifics of its atmosphere. In this way, as Berleant (2015) stresses, the city, as an environment of aesthetic interaction and experience, is not simply a locale – it is something much more intangible or ungraspable.

While involvement is present in every interaction we have with the world, experiencing the city thus implies even a further degree of engagement. We are experiencing the city on a daily basis, every time we look from the window; we walk on the street, or open the window and hear the exterior sound. We cannot escape this interaction and therefore we cannot fully (even if we wanted to) distance ourselves. A city is not an object that you can appreciate in a detached way but an entity that we experience only thanks to our participation in it, something that we can appreciate mainly because of this participation. Our involvement in the city is not only emotional or mental but also physical. The city as the object of our aesthetic appreciation cannot be objectified: not even if we are looking at the buildings, streets, trees, lights. The city needs to be understood as a structure that emanates some kind of aura and creates the atmosphere that we are interacting with; our experience is based on the characteristics of the atmosphere of urban space. Therefore, disinterestedness as a theoretical concept does not work in the case of the city, because as a recipient, one needs to be involved to some extent: one needs to be engaged.

In the following sections, I will focus on the notion of aesthetic and somaesthetic experience in the context of urban appreciation. Somaesthetic experience,<sup>5</sup> in particular, will be described as a specific aesthetic experience mainly based on the body sensation. The body is a necessary tool for experiencing the city, to move around the city (see Santora 2012), and to exist as a part of the city. The dominance of the body in this kind of situation is a strong enough reason for Shusterman (1999) to think about a new kind of aesthetic experience altogether, what he calls ‘somaesthetic experience’.

<sup>5</sup> Shusterman (1999) is speaking of somatic experience in the context of aesthetic experience crucial for somaesthetics.

### 3 Aesthetic and Somaesthetic Experience of the City

In the previous section, I argued that our aesthetic interaction with the city needs to be conceived of as a matter of aesthetic engagement. In this sense, I can only agree with French philosopher Nathalie Blanc (2013) that practical experience shapes our aesthetic experience of the city. Practical and aesthetic experience are connected because there is no doubt that we experience some aesthetic sensations during practical everyday activities. These activities are usually perceived and assessed through the body (body cognition): through our senses that are apparatus of our soma/body. According to Shusterman (1999), the body has a crucial role in the aesthetic experience, and is altogether necessary for having an aesthetic experience.

Shusterman (1999) proposes, therefore, a new branch of aesthetics, somaesthetics (as a body centered discipline), which is based on Dewey's (1980) notion of aesthetic experience.<sup>6</sup> His approach stresses that the body is prior to every action and every interaction that we make, and restructures the notion of aesthetic experience according to these assumptions. Bodily perception, body consciousness, body cognition, affection and experience are dominant notions of somaesthetics.

Somaesthetics, as defined by Shusterman, “unconditionally accepts that our bodies represent the core of our being and identity” (Cunningham 2008, p. 56). At the same time, somaesthetics is based on Baumgarten's understanding of aesthetics as a “life-improving cognitive discipline” (Shusterman 1999, p. 301) that involves theory and practical exercise at the same time. This theoretical and practical duplicity of somaesthetics makes it somewhat problematic in philosophical discourse. At the same time, somaesthetics is focused on an “improvement of sensory perception” (Shusterman 1999, p. 300) that creates the base for further more intense experiences. Through our lived experience we can improve the ability of our body and our senses and especially the awareness we have of our body. Indeed, somaesthetics is defined by Shusterman as a “critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory aesthetic appreciation

<sup>6</sup> Key features of aesthetic experience are *particularity* – aesthetic experience differs from all other forms of experience based on something unspecific; *interaction* – aesthetic experience is dependent on the interaction between the recipient and the object, or as was said, on the interaction between the components of the aesthetic field; *activity* – aesthetic experience involves active participation of the recipient in the phenomena or event (see Dewey 1980).

(aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning” (Shusterman 1999, p. 302). The body is in this regard understood as a tool for our experience, an instrument to gain something.

Shusterman (1999) identifies therefore three fundamental dimensions of somaesthetics: 1) analytic somaesthetics, which is focused on the basic nature of bodily practices, functions and perceptions and is descriptive in nature; 2) pragmatic somaesthetics, which proposes specific methods of bodily improvement and contains representational and experiential forms; and 3) practical somaesthetics, which is concerned with activity, not with theory. Shusterman mainly develops the last form of somaesthetics, even if he discusses all of them.

In Shusterman’s (1999) practical somaesthetics, the body is a source, a medium, a tool, yet also the outcome of our experience; it is the agent that allows us to react in some way (mostly bodily, but often aesthetically) and offers a variety of impulses and feelings. Every impulse that humans experience causes some physical reaction. Bodily reactions are natural components of our existence: we smile and feel comfortable when we experience something pleasant; when we feel frightened, we react with chills and feel a real amount of stress. Relevantly to my purposes here, these bodily reactions, according to Shusterman, also represent the basis of our experience of the city, as the body is not just to be thought of as a sensory tool but also as the source of any aesthetic experience can have of an urban environment (see Shusterman 2019a, 2019b). At the same time, he argues that one of the city key elements, functions, values and challenges “is the providing of aesthetic experience” (Shusterman 2019b, p. 32).

Surely, the city as an environment offers many aesthetic stimuli, and we need to use our body to the fullest to interact with all the aesthetic impulses in the city. We use the body to move around the city, to walk through its streets, to sit in a park, and that is exactly why it is the orientation of the recipient/dweller in the urban environment through the body that creates the environment (Santora 2012) or the atmosphere.

The atmosphere of the city results from our interaction (preferably but not exclusively emotional) with the city. Gerold Böhme (2017) actually understands it as a fundamental concept of a new aesthetics: one can enter into an atmosphere and feel it in every environment. The notion of atmosphere “implies a certain affective quality of (lived and non-geometrical) space” (Griffero & Tedeschini 2019, p. 2), and is often understood as an “emotional space that involves one’s body.” This

emotional space is more about our feelings than about some physical properties of the city, even if these properties and different aspects of the city create the conditions for the atmosphere to exist. One central aspect of the atmospheric approach is the nonphysical body that we feel and “whose atmospheric resonances we can describe only from our first-person perspectives” (Griffero & Tedeschini 2019, p. 2). In this way, this approach shares with somaesthetics the fact that everything is based on body sensations, as an atmosphere is an outcome of individual, intuitive, first-hand experience.

Shusterman (2019) also works with the concept of atmosphere, yet he thinks that atmosphere is constituted by the experienced qualities before the division into objective or subjective elements takes place. The interaction of the recipient and environment is, according to him, a key aspect here. Atmosphere is therefore, according to him, something that is experienced on a daily basis, and represents the perceptive aspect of the city based on the material and physical structure of the city.

The notion of atmosphere, as an important concept of urban aesthetics, testifies again to the fact that we cannot interact with the city without our body and biological receptors: we can experience only what we see, smell, touch or hear. Everything we feel is bound to our senses and in some sense limited by our body. Strictly speaking, somaesthetic experience is indeed defined by the transformation of our body according to aesthetic conditions; in our case, according to the urban infrastructure, and through the influence on the movements, or behavior, of our body (Shusterman 1999).

Somaesthetics can thus be beneficial in urban experience and create an advantage for the recipient when interacting with the city: it improves the experience, and allows for more intense bodily feelings. For example, through a somaesthetic approach, recipients might feel the atmosphere of the city in a stronger way, or gain some ‘somatic intuition’ or ‘somatic knowledge’ that they can use in their further interactions with other cities. This kind of learning might help them evolve in their experience of the city and modify their future reactions to cities.

#### **4 Limits of Somaesthetics**

Our experience of the city, however, is not simply based on seeing buildings, streets, or districts. It changes and evolves according to the number of cities that we recipients or dwellers have visited in our life, or according to the information, context and knowledge that we possess.

For example, it seems that we need to know some facts about the history of the city to experience it aesthetically. Correct information can determine aesthetic value and create a basis for meaningful aesthetic experiences. Some information about the reconstruction of burned-out parts of a city, for instance, can increase the quality and intensity of our experience. The fact that we are walking through an old street that was burned down a hundred years ago is the type of information that impresses us as recipients. In these cases, knowledge plays a big role in the aesthetic experience and the body is no longer the most important aspect to consider (see also Shusterman 2019b, pp. 14-15).

Shusterman (1999) admits that somaesthetics cannot only be about the body and that some cognitive/intellectual understanding is also needed. He uses the notion of “informed aesthetic experience” to address this issue. According to him, the facts that we learn from socio-historical inquiry may play a role in our aesthetic experience (Shusterman 2019a, pp. 3-4). However, he believes that an informed aesthetic experience is only necessary if information can transform the quality of experience (Shusterman 2019a). What is in question, he claims, is the value or intensity of the experience, not its occurrence. Aesthetic experience can indeed take place, according to Shusterman, even *without* this information.

While the importance of cognitive information is partly acknowledged by Shusterman, it only occupies a secondary position in his thinking, and neither is accounted for or developed extensively. This is especially problematic. Although somaesthetic experience is a necessary elemental level of every experience, to the extent that we cannot experience anything without it, and it is also an immanent part of aesthetic experience, it is not enough by itself to account for the richness of our aesthetic interaction with the city. Findings that are a necessary part of our perception of the city are determined not only by the body as a receptor or by the atmosphere that is perceived, but also, and primarily, by contextualised knowledge that shapes the outcomes of our bodily or somaesthetic perceptions.

Pentti Määttänen (2010, p. 57), for one, has underlined this limit of somaesthetics. “The body is an object of experience, not an instrument of experiencing the world”. These words express clearly what is the major worry I have concerning Shusterman’s somaesthetic approach as applied to the urban environment. Focusing mostly on body-improvement practices, somaesthetics takes the body as the *goal*, rather than just the *tool*, of the urban experience. Of course, somaesthetic

practices are relevant to our experience of the city. Yet, in Shusterman's characterisation, experiencing the city does not seem to be the real purpose of these practices, but only represents the space where these practices can take place. For example, Shusterman talks about moving *around* the city as a praxis that can improve our health; he reflects on the proper and most efficient way of breathing while walking so as to increase our bodily consciousness and awareness (Shusterman 2019b, p. 16). These performative somaesthetic activities (Shusterman 1999), as he depicts them, are mostly concerned with the body and its improvement, not with the *city* itself as the object of our interest. From the perspective of urban aesthetics, however, the city itself should be the focus of our attention, not the body, even though cities can only be experienced through the body and with the help of the body.

To sum up, my idea is that only by recognizing the role that knowledge plays in our experiences can practical somaesthetics be seen as a truly meliorative praxis able to enhance our perceptual senses and bodily reactions. Knowledge is a determining factor for the improvement of our body as an instrument. It helps the somaesthetic experience last longer and be more intense and remarkable, because it subtracts it from the fleeting sensations of our bodily interaction with the environment and gives it a more stable cognitive basis. Conversely, if all the relevance is put on the body, and if the body is the only object of our concern, then something fundamental of our experience of the city is lost: the city itself.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the city is not a work of art or an object that one can appreciate in a detached way. Urban aesthetics is thus incompatible with a disinterested aesthetic approach. As an immersive, participative experience, it demands engagement. The city is indeed not simply a material place or a physical locale – recipients *interact* with the atmosphere of the city, the perceptual, emotional and immaterial aspects of it. These aspects induce a bodily reaction in the recipient, which is, as I have claimed, a precondition for experiencing a city aesthetically. However, there is much more to an aesthetic experience of the city than just somatic sensations. Considering the role of contextual knowledge and information about the city's history and evolution in time is indeed fundamental to account for the experience we make from an urban environment. Cognitive knowledge prolongs the somaesthetic experience

and intensifies our appreciation, making it more vivid, significant, and permanent.

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