

Richard SHUSTERMAN (with Yann TOMA), *The
Adventures of the Man in Gold / Les aventures de
l'Homme en Or* (Bilingual Edition: English / French)

Paris, Hermann, 2017, 128 pages, 40 illustrations

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- ¹ *The Adventures of the Man in Gold / Les aventures de l'Homme en Or* is an interesting, original and, to some extent, also “strange” or “bizarre” book by the American philosopher Richard Shusterman. The book appears in bilingual edition, with Shusterman’s text published both in the original English version and in French translation, and is structured in a very clear way: Preface, three chapters, biographies of the author and all contributors, and acknowledgments. The book is also enriched by many illustrations of the French visual artist Yann Toma (defined by Shusterman as “a faithful guide, playful companion, and creative co-conspirator,” 39), who provided the images for this “hybrid” book. Indeed, Toma’s illustrations – consisting of video stills and photographs taken with an original artistic technique developed by him and called Radiant Flux: “a form of drawing with light” (22) – are essential to the book’s overall meaning and significance that, in turn, is quite multilayered and complex.
- ² As is well-known, Shusterman is a philosopher working in the pragmatist tradition, especially in the field of pragmatist aesthetics that he has also developed since the late 1990s in the direction of a specifically body-centred or body-focused philosophy,

eventually “baptized” with the name of somaesthetics in the tenth chapter of the second edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (2000) and elaborated in subsequent works such as *Performing Live* (2000), *Body Consciousness* (2008), and *Thinking through the Body* (2012). Defined as the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning, and also as a discipline of theory and practice, somaesthetics may be the ultimate achievement of Shusterman’s long-time quest for a broadening of the field of aesthetics beyond the traditional limits of the philosophy of fine art – as aesthetics has been often understood since the early nineteenth century and is still understood today in analytic philosophy, for example. But to some extent somaesthetics also stems from Shusterman’s dissatisfaction with certain trends in pragmatist philosophy itself, as testified for example by the ninth chapter of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* in which he, against Rorty’s model of a postmodern art of living that is focused only on the textualist figures of the intellectual ironist and the strong poet, rather advocates a more embodied pragmatist aesthetic aimed at living beauty: that is, a kind of pragmatism that does not ignore the sensual bodily pleasures and the pursuit of somatic well-being, and may potentially include an aesthetics of full-bodied enjoying, an aesthetic life that also cultivates the pleasures and disciplines of the body. At the same time, as many of his articles and books clearly show, pragmatism, in general, and somaesthetics, in particular, are understood by Shusterman in a very broad and open-minded way, namely as disciplinary frameworks that can prove useful to structurally link and fruitfully unify different body-related perspectives and studies, also originated from different contemporary traditions (phenomenology, post-structuralism, etc.) or non-Western philosophical-religious cultures (Buddhism, Daoism, etc.).

- 3 It is important to bear all this in mind in order to properly understand the particular enterprise undertaken by Shusterman (and Toma) in *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*. As a matter of fact, I have previously used such terms as “strange,” “bizarre,” “hybrid” and “multilayered” precisely to emphasize the unconventional and pluralistic nature of this book, which – to use the rap terminology that Shusterman himself sometimes adopts – represents a sort of “new remix” of philosophy, autobiography, narrative fiction and visual art. In particular, what the reader experiences since the very first pages is the doubling, so to speak, of the main character of the book, inasmuch as the narrative that constitutes the principal text of this book is centred on both Richard Shusterman and the Man in Gold, i.e. the character impersonated by Shusterman when he wears a particular skin-tight golden suit provided by Toma and metaphorically called “magic skin” in the book. So, on the one hand, the book provides an accurate account of the dates and places where Shusterman incarnated the Man in Gold’s performances, but on the other hand, combined with this precise chronology, the narrative also presents the “poetic” or “mystical” view of the same events from the Man in Gold’s own perspective.
- 4 As Shusterman explains, “the text began as an effort to simply record the history of [his] artistic collaboration with Yann [Toma] for a possible art show,” but then “the Man in Gold’s perspective [kept] insistently intruding itself into the narrative, and its romantic energy soon overwhelmed [him], taking control of the storyline while respecting the mundane chronology of the facts” (7-8). The book actually rests upon this kind of intertwinement between the autobiographical and rational perspective of the first-- person authorial voice, on the one side, and the narrative-fictional and somehow mystical perspective of the Man in Gold’s experiences from his first appearance until his final

manifestation, on the other. So, if I have previously used the verb “to impersonate” to describe Shusterman’s act of wearing a skin-tight golden suit (“magic skin”) in order to prepare himself for making the poses and performances that Toma captures in artistic photos and videos, I must now add that this experience is often referred to by Shusterman as a sort of strange possession, as if during those performances it was actually the Man in Gold who “impersonated” him. Consider, for example, the episode of the Man in Gold’s birth dramatically narrated on pages 30-2: “something inside me bristled at my confinement [...]. I could no longer stay motionless. Some inner force compelled me to quiver and shake with irrepressible energy [...]. I no longer knew what I was doing. More precisely, I was no longer I [...]. I lost my sense of self as the Man in Gold possessed me.” One philosophical theme of the book is the idea of “the instability and transformational potential of the self through the powers of possession” (8), which Shusterman highlights through such concepts as “transfiguration” and through “lend [ing] his own silent body as the somatic medium for the Man in Gold” (19-21).

- 5 Notwithstanding the fundamental intertwinement of the two perspectives (namely, Shusterman’s and the Man in Gold’s) on which the book’s whole structure and meaning rest, it is useful for the explanatory purposes of this review to distinguish them. The book begins with a Preface from Shusterman’s first-person perspective explaining the three main factors that led him to engage in his adventures with performance art and his collaboration with Toma. The second factor involves an intimate romantic encounter that resulted in the beginning of the end of a good marriage (12), while the third factor simply consists of Shusterman’s encounter with Toma, who already knew his “experimental and somatic approach to philosophy” and thus thought Shusterman “might enjoy experimenting with his photographic art of Flux Radiants, in which he tries to capture and visually represent the energy or aura of a person by tracing it with lights” (13). The first factor, instead, is strictly philosophical and actually fully understandable in the spirit of the kind of Deweyan pragmatism that Shusterman favours. In fact, a persistent question he repeatedly had to face in the various art schools where he lectured about somaesthetics and/or gave practical workshops in its methods was: “How does somaesthetics apply to contemporary art?” But Shusterman’s usual line of response – namely, “that the soma (with its sensory, motor, and affective resources) is the medium through which we both create and appreciate works of art and that therefore improved somatic mastery could generate better aesthetic experience” – did not completely satisfy the artists, who wanted “a more concrete and practical application of [his] theory in contemporary artistic creation.” Collaborating with a visual artist like Toma gave Shusterman the possibility of making his pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics “more complete by including also the artist’s experience,” beside obviously accounting also for “the observer’s or interpreter’s point of view” (9-10).
- 6 After having made explicit these basic presuppositions in the Preface, in the three chapters of the book Shusterman provides detailed information and explanation about the “mysterious birth” of *l’Homme en Or*, i.e. about his first performance in June 2010 at the medieval abbey of Royaumont (17 ff.), and also about his subsequent appearances, or better – as if he was a ghost or an extraterrestrial alien (42) – his “apparitions.” The list of the Man in Gold’s performances includes those that actually took place in Royaumont and Paris (June 2010 and February 2011), in Cartagena (April 2011), along South Florida’s Atlantic coast (January 2012), again in Paris (May 2012), and finally in Denmark (May 2014). Shusterman’s narration is accurate and – as far as his literary style is concerned –

enjoyable, and the experience of the reader is similar to that of being progressively guided through the various moments and passages of a stimulating journey. It is worth noting that the narrative of the Man in Gold's performances all around the world is also backed up with a few funny anecdotes about people's amused or sometimes shocked reactions at the sight of a "60-year old philosopher's figure in a glitzy skin-tight body stocking that had been designed for lithe young dancers," "an ordinary middle-aged philosopher [transformed] into a golden work of art" (21-2). These humorous elements show Shusterman to be also a philosopher gifted with the quality of a certain self-irony.

- 7 The events – both internal and external, i.e. *both* inner sensations and moods, *and* encounters with things and other people too – experienced by the Man in Gold, and thus told from a third-person perspective by Shusterman (who functions here both as an omniscient narrator and as the individual whose body “hosts” the bizarre creature immortalized by Toma’s “somaflux” photographic art), constitute a series of adventures that form a sort of reunification journey, indeed a twofold reunification. First, it involves a personal reconciliation of the sometimes all-too rational Western thinker with some of his unconscious thoughts (“some people believe [the Man in Gold] gave birth to himself by inseminating the dreams of the philosopher, whose sense of identity he profoundly and quite visibly unsettled,” 18), along with insights coming from the Asian philosophical theories and practices Shusterman studied. Second, this philosophical tale involves a sort of family reunification with the imaginary figures of the Man in Gold’s progenitors, more specifically with the imaginary character he claims as his mother: Wu Xiaoxing, a tiny dancing goddess, whose beauty and love the Man in Gold seems to long for throughout the whole book. As for the Man in Gold’s father, Shusterman briefly explains: “He likes to think he has none” (18). The desire and struggle for reunification with the motherly figure of Wu Xiaoxing permeate many passages of the book. We see this, for example when Shusterman informs the reader about the Man in Gold’s feeling, in one of his performances, to be “as if he were back in his beautiful mother’s womb” (94), or about his fundamental tendency to express himself in gesture and posture (“gestural communication [being] far more dramatic and potently expressive than any words” and thus leading to his defining identity as “a philosopher without words”), or his desire “to emulate the dancing beauties that he loves and learns from, incarnations of the divine Wu Xiaoxing” (58). The mythical mother’s presence also pervades the book’s dramatic and romantic final episode where the Man in Gold finally meets the “treasured beauty” of a sculpted maiden named Wanmei, “excell[ing] all others in loveliness and spirit,” and described as an “ideal archetype” for female beauty and also as “the long-sought incarnation of the loving loveliness he saw in his mother but had never held in his arms” (89).
- 8 In developing this artistic identity and fictional narrative of the Man in Gold, Shusterman reasserts the importance of the soma in his version of pragmatism while elaborating on some basic philosophical themes that shape this creature’s complex personality. The Man in Gold is driven by two great forces: love and fear, in turn divided into love of beauty and love of knowledge; while his fear is of rejection, of being denied recognition or misunderstood. These themes, along with the Man in Gold’s eschewing of “discursive language, recognizing it as the glory of philosophy but also an imprisoning source of its oppressive folly” (61), are all also connected, in Shusterman’s narration, to the unconscious desire for reconciliation with his *alter ego*’s mother: “the love that is his hope and mission [...] provides the shining energy that radiates from his golden skin. With her

divine knowledge of mystic alchemy Wu Xiaoxing extracted the base elements of desire buried in my pragmatist mind and then refined them into a golden elixir of love which she poured into the Man in Gold's heart and also hammered into his finely gilded suit, a shining coat of armor to shape and animate his soma, directing it toward purity of passion" (64).

- 9 In conclusion, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* is a book that surely connects back to Shusterman's strictly philosophical work but can also be interpreted as a potential and indeed promising new orientation for it. More precisely, it is a further development of his tendency – that has always been quintessential to pragmatism as such – to overcome any strong and supposedly insurmountable barrier between theory and practice, and rather build new bridges to fill the gap between them, without for this reason abruptly suppressing the distinction itself but actually reinterpreting it in a more functional way rather than as an ontological dichotomy. In this specific case, the difference between theory and practice is embodied by that between philosophical aesthetics – which, because of its very nature, is a theoretical enterprise – and artistic experimentation – which, instead, is essentially practical, or more precisely “poietic,” “productive” (adapting here for my purposes Aristotle's famous *praxis/poiesis* distinction). The multilayered character of *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*, as I have tried to show, seems to go precisely in the direction of a fruitful intersection between philosophy, narrative fiction and visual art – thus proving to be fully consistent with Shusterman's pragmatist mission of trying to use new media to do philosophy and to introduce artistic experimentation into philosophical aesthetics.
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