

Introduction

Body First: Somaesthetics and Popular Culture

As the highbrowed critics of the mass culture debate (Ortega y Gasset, Adorno, Arnold) mocked popular culture audiences throughout the 1920s, 1930s and the 1940s, Hannah Arendt stepped up to defend the ‘masses’ in her essay “Crisis in Culture” (1959). Arendt reminded the intellectuals that we all need entertainment. She criticized the critics of mass culture by saying that the biggest threat for art is found in the philistines, who snobbishly take art to be only education and civilization—which is not the most fruitful way of thinking about art—and who so use to it for example to build class difference.

2019 intellectuals are not polarized in the same way as in the early 20th century, but an echo of the discourse of the ‘philistines’ of the debate keeps haunting us. We constantly face a rhetoric pointing to ‘active’ viewer of movies, of art projects which activate people in the suburbs and the need to be an active consumer and not to just go with the flow. Could the obsession with the active audience be considered to be one form of the neoliberal? It is definitely, at least, a philistine way of approaching culture. Where the word active is used about audiences, and when it is not pointing to works of art where audience participation is encouraged, it is also not hard to note, that in today’s society that means intellectual activity, not physical—and that often being active means that one consumes culture with some kind of connection to something we might label highbrow. It is not that we’d laugh actively or that we’d dance actively in the disco, it is that we’d for example reflect actively on the environment or the society, or that we would reflect actively on politics.

Without debasing our needs to reflect on political and environmental issues, it is hard to understand what is wrong with *just* getting entertained?

When families cue to the roller coaster in the amusement park or when teens go to watch a movie, which they assume will frighten them and make them nearly jump off their chair, they consciously want to activate their bodies. We find this interesting. The active body is central in many aesthetic inventions and it has motorized the development of countless aesthetic phenomena. Contrary to highbrow arts and the work of academic philistines, popular culture has not been shy about this. The breakbeat in rap music was developed to extend dancing in parties. Many clothes are either autoerotic or designed to arouse others. And for those who are interested in people reflecting on things actively, of course these bodily traditions have sparked and fueled also active analysis and reflection.

Discos and amusement parks are obvious examples of popular culture, where the body is really the priority, but then there are other forms of culture where the active body is if not central, then at least quintessential for the practice. Think about action films and the way you can feel tickling in your sole when Tom Cruise climbs the Burj Khalifa in *Mission Impossible—Ghost Protocol* (2011). Think about horror films where disgust and chills in the spine are central for the experience. Don’t forget how romantic novels warm up the chest and how if nothing else than at least nodding your head is an integral part of listening to live jazz music.

It is not, though, that these forms of culture would only be contemporary. In the classical debate in Indian philosophy on the *rasa* (emotive affect), the 11th century Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta notes the physical side of the experience of theatre by analyzing how sight and hearing, when well stimulated, can sublimate the audience spiritually (spiritual elevation so follows somatic stimulation). And if you think about it, Aristotle’s ‘catharsis’ nails the physical

effects of drama. Today we know that the audience of Greek spectacles came to the ‘show’ like they would arrive to football matches, often late and drunk. (One could think that his theory is as much about popular culture as it is about art with the capital A, the Greek culture was so different from ours.) Aristotle’s way of borrowing the term catharsis from the medics of his time, who talked about bodily purification, is no coincidence. And it is an allegory which is easy to understand. The way good drama, thrillers and horrors of fiction massage our stomachs is a commonplace for modern and postmodern (wo)man.

Sometimes it feels even that popular culture is mainly about the production and consumption of bodily effects. Jan Mukarovsky wrote about ‘aesthetic functions’ in his *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Fact* (1936), and discussed a lot of folk and popular art in his work. Mukarovsky’s function is of course semiotic, as Mukarovsky was a member of the Prague School, but the concept is also very appropriate (and not in dissonance with Mukarovsky’s work) for discussing bodily effects, which are produced to us in popular culture and which we seek for when we enter the realm of popular culture. What is the function of horror or circus? A lot of it is found in the realm of the body.

Anyway, whether the body really comes first, like in the amusement park, or whether it is just integral/quintessential for the practice, we’d like the reader of this volume to think for a while about the role of the body in entertainment, mass culture and the vernacular.

Walter Benjamin writes in his analysis of urban Paris and its poets, “Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism” (1939), how traffic, factory work, new media (photography, film) and Tivoli shared the same rhythm and shocking nature. The body was also central for Richard Shusterman’s theory of rap music (Shusterman 1992), where its function of ‘moving the ass’ sparked the later discourse of somaesthetics. But what we’d like to think of here, in this introduction, is the fact that the body is in so many ways involved in leisure and entertainment, that we might need a small moment for just thinking about it and nothing else. The examples mentioned earlier are just a start when one decides to accept that the body could be seen as the key for understanding the whole field of the popular. It is more like we’d need to ask: in what ways is the body important for this and that practice? The bottom of our stomach gets massaged when we watch an entertaining ice hockey game (ice hockey journalists often talk about the catharsis of the game, especially in relation to hockey fights) and sometimes we want to listen to music which resonates with our pulse. List your 10 major uses of popular culture and think of their bodily extensions. We believe you might surprise yourself.

This volume includes texts by 7 authors, who are Davide Giovanzana, Scott Elliot, Noora Korpelainen, Adam Andrzejewski, Janne Vanhanen, Sue Spaid and Max Rynnänen. Their texts touch upon issues like Ballard’s/Cronenberg’s *Crash*, the everyday practice of yoga, the bodies of popular art works, provoking images of violence, and the way media imagery distances us from the bodies of the ones who suffer. We are not describing their texts in a Reader’s Digest fashion as we believe that it is more interesting for you to go straight into their thoughts. The texts do not always follow our intuitions in this introduction, but the spark was given by some of the thoughts mentioned here. We are very happy to provide you this set of texts, which circulates around the topics explained above, and we have already learned a lot during the editing process.

We hope you, as the reader, enjoy the texts of *Body First: Somaesthetics and Popular Culture* as much as we do.

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