

# A Review of Shusterman & Toma's *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths Between Art and Life. A Philosophical Tale*

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SHUSTERMAN, RICHARD & YANN TOMA. *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths Between Art and Life. A Philosophical Tale/ Les Aventures de l'Homme en Or: Passages Entre l'Art et la Vie. Conte Philosophique*. Editions Hermann: Paris, 2016, 127 pp., \$27.79 cloth.

It is advisable, at times, to begin a review by looking at the title of a work. This is the case, it appears, with Richard Shusterman's recent book, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*, narrated by Shusterman himself – the body and vessel of the Man in Gold – and illustrated by Yann Toma, who photographs the creature's aura and dances.

In addition to chronicling the adventures of this bewildering, glittering figure, the subtitle indicates that Shusterman's book is also an attempt to illuminate "paths between art and life" and to do so in the peculiar and undoubtedly charming medium of a "philosophical tale."

From the start, the reader is asked to entertain multiple perspectives, the one of philosophy, of course, but also one of myth and tales. More precisely, one is asked to entertain those multiple perspectives together, as if they belonged to the same logical category. Art and life and philosophy are not to be separated: their synergy is to be explored.

The tale we are presented with is one of two people. One is Shusterman himself, the philosopher. The other is the Man in Gold, a creature that inhabits Shusterman's very body and explores the world through it in an odyssey of self-discovery that is as fictional as it may strike one as leaning towards the autobiographical – a point to which I will return shortly.

Published in French and English, the book nods to both worlds. In the Preface, Shusterman confesses the importance that the French art schools had in inspiring the project and is specifically indebted to Yann Toma not just for being the artist in charge of capturing the aura and movements of the Man in Gold but also as the Man in Gold's very midwife. France is also the Man in Gold's birthplace as he was christened *L'Homme en Or* by Marie-Christine Daudy in the idyllic setting of the medieval abbey of Royaumont (p.17). More contentiously, France is also one of the countries to have more openly embraced Shusterman's work, and has welcomed his provocative style and his desire to challenge accepted traditions.

Challenging paradigms is indeed Shusterman's trademark. In the English-speaking world, and specifically within analytic aesthetics, Shusterman is known for such "boundary-crossings" and for his penchant, and talent, for individuating and questioning some of the leading dichotomies at the core of western philosophy. Such questioning provides a solid theoretical backbone to most of his work and specifically to his brainchild, somaesthetics. Centering on the soma, the body, seen in a broad contextual manner including the sentient and socio-cultural aspects of physicality, somaesthetics begins as a response, and rejection, of the infamous Cartesian split between mind and body. Furthermore, and in light of the mission of the book I am here reviewing, Shusterman is known for promoting a dialogue between art and life, often emphasizing the aesthetic potential of the everyday and its ability to contribute to the philosophical discussion.

As known, somaesthetics has evolved into an actual enterprise counting three main strands: analytical somaesthetics, the most theoretically oriented, pragmatic somaesthetics, which narrows the focus to somatic practices – Shusterman is, after all, a Feldenkrais teacher and practitioner, and, lastly, practical somaesthetics which calls for the direct involvement of philosophers in making of this discipline a life practice, one attentive to the body, beauty, and the everyday life that envelops both.

In many ways, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* fits within the scope of somaesthetics. Most notably, the book centers on a body, that of the Man in Gold. Like mythological creatures, his conception is far from standard. Son of a dancing goddess, Wu Xiaoxing, he has no age—Shusterman tells us that he is both young and old—but also, importantly, has no language, at least if language is to be understood as propositional expression. Our creature communicates instead through gestures, dances, and images. Those images are given to the reader in the form of Yann Toma's photographs, and they deserve a closer look.

To simply see Toma's work as illustrating the adventures of the Man in Gold is deceiving. Inspired by Man Ray's space writing, his pictures are meant to capture the aura of the subject and to transpose it in light: saturated with energy, the light drawings captured by the camera communicate by and through movement, making one wonder whether film and not photography would have better captured their expressiveness. They also frame and encapsulate the otherworldly purity that characterizes the Man in Gold. Toma is an observer who has been given the opportunity to supervise, and aid, the Man in Gold's artistic expressiveness, his research for beauty and for alternative forms of communication.

But what, specifically, is communicated? At the risk of trivializing the form and content of Shusterman's book, it is possible to identify at least two intertwined answers to this question. The first is to see the book as an investigation of autobiographical themes; the second is to highlight how its philosophical contribution and, more narrowly, to how philosophy can be done.

It is hard not to notice an autobiographical vein. The first-person pronoun and the investigation of subjectivity and its boundaries are recurring themes. Shusterman never describes himself as the Man in Gold but acknowledges a certain duplicity of identity. The book is poetic, fictional, but it keeps returning back to real life. It complements life with fiction and in its best passages it may even prove that such blending can ultimately make reality more interesting, more complete. Identity, in the end, benefits from transformation: it has a rather malleable nature.

Shusterman is most certainly an analytic philosopher and recognizes himself as such, but he is attentive to the gentle and somewhat ephemeral nature of the Man in Gold, a creature who, he tells us, is motivated by fear and love. He is attentive, in this sense, to the importance of spontaneity but also to the need of emphasizing, in life, the necessity of emotional understanding and its nurturing. After all, and largely in contrast with how professional academics typically appear, the Man in Gold is a poignantly fragile creature, one that is tremendously sensitive to his surroundings and to how the environment can be both enticing and harmful. In the book, we encounter a set of such environments, all jointly necessary for the development and self-discovery of both the Man in Gold and Shusterman (or a combination of both).

The Man in Gold moves from the cruel urban world—Paris, New York, Cartagena—to nature, but truly accomplishes his journey at the end of the book where the "tale" part of "philosophical tale" is most explicit. Entitled "The Magic Vessels of the Viking Queen" (p.75), the chapter narrates the encounter between the Man in Gold and the creations of the Viking Wizard Queen and her husband King of Mighty Stones and Magical Master of the Lions (the Danish artists Marit Benthe Norheim and her husband Claus Ørntof) in an old farmhouse on the tip of North Jutland. It is here that Shusterman, the philosopher, appears most at ease in lending his body to the movements of the Man in Gold. The chapter reads like a tale, a myth, but it is one that is propelled by art, in at least two distinct ways. To begin with, because the Man in Gold is now in direct contact with artistic creations, a collection of semi-mystical female statues on a giant longship (Marit Benthe Norheim's work). But secondly, because this is also the moment in which the book advances what I take to be its strongest and most innovative point: that philosophers can create and that they are entitled to artistic expression.

This latter point is, arguably, Shusterman's invitation to consider new trajectories in aesthetics, trajectories that, again, are at the juncture between art, life, and philosophy. Perhaps the blending of the three is to be taken as the goal and as the direction towards which somaesthetics is moving.

In a decidedly autobiographical passage at the beginning of the book (p.10), Shusterman makes this point rather clearly when disclosing to the reader a complaint his lover expressed as the two were sharing an intimate moment. "As the sun began to set after a long romantic afternoon," Shusterman writes, "the bewitching woman in my company confessed (perhaps to further enchant me) that though she admired my aesthetics more than any contemporary alternative, there was something it sorely lacked: the artist's perspective. Like most philosophy of art, my theory, she rightly remarked, was totally dominated by the observer's or interpreter's point of view. My aesthetics would be more complete by including also the artist's experience" (p.10). The complaint is not unwarranted. Philosophical aesthetics often lacks the kind of attention to and engagement with artistic expression that the art world commands; art historians, critics, and curators talk less to each other than they should and the perspective of the artist is at times left behind.

Are the adventures of the Man in Gold a way of responding to such criticism? Do they qualify as a performance, as Shusterman's performance? Has he, therefore, become an artist? These are legitimate questions, and the book does not provide an answer so much as it is instead suggesting that these are indeed questions to be asked. Their formulation is central to the development of somaesthetics (after all, Shusterman has no reason to abandon his well-run project) and they may even challenge the way in which today, we, philosophers, think of the future of our discipline.

*The Adventures in the Man in Gold* is a book that grows upon rereading it. The analytically trained philosopher is likely, at times, to find herself lost in those adventures, to misinterpret them. The book can feel narcissistic and practical details sometimes get in the way of the narration, making the reader snap out of the oneiric fictional world Shusterman carefully builds. But a second or even a third reading reveals how mistaken such an approach may be. In the end, Shusterman, in his incarnation(s) as the Man in Gold, was careful not to interpret, but to live that role. If an interpretation or an assessment of the book should then be given, it may have to limit itself to acknowledge that, in the confabulation of art, life, and philosophy, there is more room for actions, images, and beauty than there is for words.

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