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Abstract:

Meliorist pragmatism (or perfectionistic pragmatism), defended by Richard Shusterman, is a view in which ethical and political dimensions are intertwined with epistemological dimensions (Mathias Girel). Experience, the main issue in Shusterman's aesthetics, which is focused on the body, is of great importance in the aesthetics of the digital era as well. The body has become significant again not just as a subject that affects our experience, but also as a subject-object that is particularly important when it comes to receiving messages from various digital forms and popular programs such as film, video games, selfies, social media etc. In this paper, the author begins with the thesis that the aesthetics of the digital era amounts to the aesthetics of excess (Gilles Lipovetsky), which is superficial and based on stimuli and external impressions. By considering the body indispensable from the aesthetic experience, and accepting the thesis of meliorism, it seems that the aesthetics of excess could be socially desirable, especially if we invoke Shusterman's third argument for the aesthetics of popular culture, according to which entertainment plays a positive role in human life. However, in this paper it is argued that the above-mentioned aesthetic theory faces some other problems related with loneliness, emptiness, and passivity.

Keywords:

meliorism/ body/digital age/aesthetics of excess/entertainment

According to Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999), our culture is visual culture. He explained his view by referring to our everyday life, not just to museums, galleries and cinemas. Postmodernism makes our experiences and unconsensable visible. Development of technology enables visual culture to be everywhere.¹

Philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky stated in 1980 that postmodern culture is empty, he called it “the age of emptiness“. By analysing culture about twenty years later together with Jean Serroy, he explains that there are expanded excess images in media. Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013) mention the images of speed, the images of abundance, the images of violence, etc. Therefore, I would like to call the aesthetics of the digital era excess aesthetics.² Its characteristics are superficiality, currentness, and oversaturation³. Hence, there are social values which are ephemeral and insignificant, like in the 1980’s. Perhaps, Richard Shusterman gave one positive view on postmodern culture by using the meliorism thesis, i.e. that popular culture and entertainment could help people connect and give them freedom. In the digital era that could be seen on the example of social media and selfies.

In the paper I explore the following problems: the aesthetics of contemporary society and its effects on our experience and everyday life. I ask if excess images are more plausible than other images. Could social media enhance our lives? Could selfies enhance relationships with others? Are people freer in the digital era? What are the roles of the body in the social media and selfie communication?

1 The aesthetics of the digital age

It is not quite uncommon to say that values are superficial and ephemeral in contemporary society. Gilles Lipovetsky is just one of the theorists who claimed that. His well-known study from 1983 “The Age of Emptiness” presents research of postmodern values in consumer society. Two decades later, Serroy and he conducted new research of aesthetic values in the digital age with focuses on film and smartphones. It is not hard to discern that some values stay the same. But, something new has happened in the field of aesthetics – it is digitalization and its influence on perception, experiences and relation to the body. Lipovetsky criticizes postmodern society and raising of narcissism, which appears by spreading individualism and an enormous focus on self and false needs, false values and wrong habits. That focus

could be recognized in the appearances of selfies and their uses in every aspects of our lives (private, political, business, scientific, entertainment etc.). On the other hand, there are social media whose goal is to connect people and make new contacts.⁴ But there are researches which show that friendships formed on the social media are superficial.⁵ Some other theorists use the term *social capital* in the research of friendship which means: "the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition".⁶ Antheusnis, Valkenberg and Peter (2012) differentiate between two kinds of social capital: bridging and bonding capital. The first one is the benefit from weak ties, found between individuals with loose connections who may give us useful information, but not emotional support and bonding social capital is the benefit from strong ties, found between individuals in emotionally close and high quality relationships, such as family and close friends.⁷

When we are talking about selfies there are possibilities to manipulate images, to choose which selfie you will post on-line, etc. I will come back to Lipovetsky's critique of the digital era in a moment. He calls images made in the digital era excess images and makes a difference between: violence images, speed images, excess images. For all of them the common element is that they present excess. "Excess is a matter of sense" explains Tavin, Kallio-Tavin, and Ryyänen "it is often about transgressing what would be taken as common sense or commonsense standards (political and otherwise)".⁸

According to Shusterman, "Some perceptions are felt with more pleasurable or positive affect than others, but every perception has some affective quality or tone, although the quality often goes unnoticed because it is too faint or subtle or because our attention is focused on other aspects of the perceptual experience".⁹ I ask: Are excess images more pleasurable than others? Those images appear with the rise of digitalization¹⁰. They appear in society in which people are victims of that society which is consumer and affected by multiplied stimuli.¹¹ It is not just images, even the body becomes the excess body. That is presented in the media as well in everyday life. People make corrections on their faces, exercise and use steroids to look stronger and sexier, but results are excess bodies and excess faces. I could say an excess person and to call by right that person a person who enjoys becoming more excess, with intentions and goals (aims) to shock others. Films, television, newspapers and billboards are full of those images. They have one main aim, and that is to shock others. We could connect these images with abjection, but not every images affect disgust with other

people. Livingston (2019) in her investigations of extreme bodies, abjection in arts, visual culture and the classroom found that “disgust does not appeal to all, it does appeal to many people”.¹² That show us that people react differently to the same images, and also that we could not conclude that all excess images are abjective. “Disgust is predicated on excess: too much life or too much death, too much dirt, too much animalism, and so on”.¹³ Considering that excess presents crossing a boundaries and norms, also that disgust is transgression of the boundaries of what is acceptable, many theorists percieve disgust as a parameter for moral values not just for a physical sensation.¹⁴

Images in the digital age are self-referential. There is nothing under them. There are theorists who do not agree with that negative explanation of postmodernism and digital images. Douglas Kellner, (2003) for instance, criticizes modern philosophers and the same critique which they ascribe to postmodernism he assigns to them. He found meanings under images and states that images have hidden meanings.¹⁵ Also, Richard Shusterman will probably, taking the melioristic hypothesis, find a good side of those images. My question is: Are these images more pleasurable and do they spread our experiences? After the explanation of meliorism in the next chapter, I will study this theme on the example of selfies and images in the social media with the focus on the body.

2 Meliorism – *pro et contra*

Meliorism presents the belief in the possibility of progress. Actualization of those possibilities depends on our efforts and our belief regarding the possibility of the access to efforts.¹⁶ We could ask: Is progress possible? William James (2000) asked the same questions when he talked about salvation in his lecture *Pragmatism and Religion*.¹⁷ Progress can be found in any sphere. Beliefs have an important role in a view of progress. Another point, important for meliorism is trust in capabilities. As it is the case when we believe in something, there are more chances to act in a concrete way and similarly, if we trust ourselves and in our capabilities, we could realize them. Meliorists say that progress is possible and it could be more concrete by very belief.

Sommer Robinson (1924) in his paper “A critique of Meliorism“ made distinction between two kinds of meliorism: psycho- dogmatic meliorism and logico-critical meliorism. He said, “When I say that psycho-dogmatic meliorism is uncritical as regards theory of value

I mean that it has no unique and unequivocal theory of what value really is".¹⁸ Psycho-dogmatic meliorism represents realists in a relational theory. "According to this theory, value is a relation between a desire on the one hand and something which satisfies that desire on the other hand. When one speaks of the object which satisfies the value, he/she has lapsed into popular speech and is not scientifically accurate. The value is not the object, but the object as standing in the relation of satisfying certain desire. When the object, whatever it may be, is out of that relation, the value disappears. Hence all values are relative".¹⁹ What is good set up a survey of the situation? Bode (1926) answers that a better world is reflected in the dwelling together of all desires, in the freedom and equality of common devotion to ideal ends.²⁰ The harmony theory of value could help to create this complete socialized world. There are two aspects of interpreting the theory of values: one is that value is constituted by the satisfaction of any desire and value is a matter of quantity, and the other one is that value is constituted by the harmonization of desires and value is a matter of degree of adjustment.

Robinson addresses one of the critiques of value's explanation and improvement of the better world given there: "This, I think, is the first logical defect in psycho-dogmatic meliorism. Operating with two distinct theories of value it reaches two distinct conceptions of a better world, and then assumes that they are identical".²¹ There is no evidence that an increase of adjustment' always entails an increase in satisfaction, "says Robinson.²² Rapid multiplication of artificial desires is a problem in contemporary society. Could we say that the world is better when they are satisfied? Those desires are false, imposed and they imply imposed needs.

For logico-critical meliorism, good and bad, as well as other values are determined in a relation. "Considering any given relation of betterness, this means disregarding the consequences or effects of the two entities involved, observing each one alone and judging that one is intrinsically better than the other. This involves the tacit assumption that betterness is a dyadic relation, of which the converse is worseness. The betterness-worseness relation ties together all existential entities in the value series in such a manner that of any two successive members one is better and one is worse than the other".²³ According Brogan (1919), meliorism is the doctrine in which the fundamental value is intrinsic betterness. Robinson claims that Brogan's statement on values dyad is not tenable because we could not say that A is better than B if we use them alone. When we compare them, then we have a third subject, a judge. Robinson is suspicious when people talking about meliorism and it's incorporating

in social philosophy. The main reason of that doubt is possibility of universal determination of value.

Let us see now Richard Shusterman's view on meliorism. He founded meliorism in pragmatism and in the field of aesthetics. He founded somaesthetics, too. "Somaesthetics can be briefly defined as the critical study and meliorative cultivation of the experience and use of the living body (or soma) as the site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and performative and creative self-fashioning. It involves both discursive theory and embodied practice, whose aim is to enrich not only our propositional knowledge of the body but also our lived somatic experience in perception and performance".²⁴ From this quotation we could see that, for Shusterman, experience and body are in the centre of his investigations. To explain pragmatism he founded, Shusterman has to explicate ten themes he found important for pragmatism: changing open and contingent nature of reality; the primacy of human action and purpose in even our most rational and cognitive pursuits and concepts; a non-reductive, embodied naturalism; anti-Cartesianism; community; Empirical, experience-oriented stance; future-looking; meliorism; holism and pluralism.²⁵ For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on community and meliorism.

3 Importance of community and friendships for meliorism

For community Shusterman said that "It provides the framework for the transmission and sustenance of culture and language without which our cognitive, technological, and cultural achievements could not be preserved and advanced. Communication between individuals provides the means for correcting false beliefs. It allows for a sharing and critique of alternative viewpoints. Communal life, moreover, provides the very contrasts an individual needs to understand herself".²⁶ This explanation of community is corroborated by Aristotelian's view that man is *zoon politikon*. Instead Hob's statement that *homo homini lupus*, if we want a better world, we need to take the first position. If we observe community as Shusterman explains, we will understand better other cultures and make our beliefs and knowledge better. But, Shusterman did not take into account psychological tendency that people behave like others with the intention of being accepted into a group or because they are afraid of excommunication. He does not mention the fact that "lie travels the world while the truth puts on shoes". Maybe we could say that life in community has its good and bad

consequences and meliorism is a view which prefers good and strives for it. Shusterman (2010) thinks that communication in community helps people to express themselves originally. Community is important not just for pragmatism but for ethics, aesthetics, and politics. Pragmatists have offered cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic arguments for democracy.²⁷ We could talk about internet communication in that context and ask if it makes communication more democratic and better. Do friendships become better or not? We can distinguish three types of friendships on social networking sites: "(a) online friendships, which are developed online and remain solely online; (b) mixed-mode friendships (Walther & Parks, 2002), which are developed online but have extended to other, offline settings; and (c) offline friendships, which are developed offline and have extended to online settings."²⁸ There are different results of the researches of online friendships. It is interesting phenomenon that quality of online friendships increases over time. Chan and Cheng (2004) discovered that online friendships who lasted for more than a year, became more qualitative and comparable to offline friendships.²⁹

In pragmatism that Shusterman advocates there are premises that world is determined by action. Accordingly, action is needed to be oriented to make our experiences which could make our beliefs useful and effective. There are similarities with utilitarianism which state that a correct action is the one that makes more people satisfied. Another common element is importance of useful. "Positive meliorist thinking (which should be distinguished from naïve, utopian optimism) can help stimulate positive results"³⁰ This sounds as an imperative or credo for those who want to be meliorists.

4 Body as subject-object of selfies and social media

A selfie is a self-portrait. The first selfies appeared in 1839, made by Robert Cornelius in Philadelphia, but some theorists think that the first selfie appeared in New York in 1920. The appearance of the mobile telephone with a double camera made it possible to make a selfie easily. This is a digital image which could be deleted from camera, social media or to be ameliorated by filters. Also it is important that we could choose to save on the mobile phone or post our best selfies and others that do not satisfy our taste to clean. A selfie stick helped people to make more interesting selfies and enabled our bodies, and the environment to be seen, not just our faces. "There are different determinations of the functions of selfies.

Psychologists and others connected selfies to harmful mental states such as narcissism (Nauert, 2015), body dysmorphia (McKay, 2014), or even psychosis (Gregoire, 2015). Others say that narcissism is not a diagnosis but an accusation (Burns, 2014). This is because narcissism connotes vanity. Another function is self-promotion. Politicians, organisations or public figures use selfies with a self-promotion purpose³¹. When we are talking about selfie aesthetics, the crucial points according to Frosch (2015) are: indexicality, composition, and reflection. “Together these encounters will weave an argument—perhaps surprising, given its emergence from a visually oriented body of thought—that the selfie is a “gestural image” and that we should not understand its aesthetics purely in visual terms. Rather, selfies conspicuously integrate still images into a techno-cultural circuit of corporeal social energy that I will call kinaesthetic sociability. This circuit connects the bodies of individuals, their mobility through physical and informational spaces, and the micro-bodily hand and eye movements they use to operate digital interfaces.”³² When we are talking about selfies on social media as a subject-object, we can assume that someone who make his/her selfie could be the subject, choose which selfie to post online, and at the same time that person is also an object, as a figure in a selfie and as someone who is affected by his/her own or someone else’s selfie. As subjects, we are active in creating selfies. Livingston (2019) refers to the term abjection, not subject nor object, when she is talks about body and disgust. She borrowed this term from Kristeva (1982), who explains objects which exist somewhere between subjecthood and objecthood.³³ Livingston explains that disgust, in her opinion, relies in a binary distinction between cleanliness and dirt³⁴. She explained that disgust is not connected just with physical sensations but with social and moral values. There are individual and social abjection. The first, could say something about individuals in the sense that our personality is determined not by actions we do, but with action we reject. “Social abjection describes all the ways in which the individualistic concept of abjection as ego formation as described by Kristeva can address issues of racism (Hook 2006; Scott 2010), immigration, xenophobia and disability (Young 1990), homophobia (Butler 1993), and classism (Tyler 2013), even environmental devastation and colonialism (Chanter 2008)”³⁵ (Livingston, 2019: 120). If blemishes, fat, scars, body hair etc. ruin the illusion of bodily perfection (Menninghaus 2003)³⁶ it could be the case that moral values are ruined. Some selfies, we could say, presents abjection and excessive soul (Synnott, 1993)³⁷.

In communication on social media our body is passive because we usually sit in front of the computer. Or we could move and chat with someone by using a mobile. If we do not

use a camera, our body is invisible and in chatting our verbal messages or our posts are expressed. In a new relationship we affects others and we could be affected by profile images. Usually those images present us in the best light or present our functional identity. There is one important characteristic – online communication could affect more than communication face to face. If it is abundant in words and other posts, images, etc., could be very affective; on the other hand, we are always in the situation to feel frustrated if someone does not answer fast, or to be deceived or (cheated) or to feel emptiness as a result of deficiencies of contact in reality, which could includes touch, non-verbal communication, and in the end, deficiency of real contact.

The idea about our living and experience bodies is not new. It can be found in the works of William James (1884), Edmund Husserl (1973) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964).

“The current prominence of embodiment research is especially noteworthy considering that we exist at a moment in history where digital spaces, particularly those facilitated by screens, have never been more prominent in our lives“, ³⁸ Ekdahl explains. A view that we tend to regard screen-based virtual spaces as largely disembodied could be found in the work of a lot of theorists.³⁹ Ekdahl (2021) thinks differently and presents his view in the interview with esports practitioners about their experiences. Esports practitioners describe their experiences through avatars as body language which helps them to recognize emotions and intentions.

5 Excess selfies and images

Here are some important characteristics of selfies and images on social media as well as some examples. Often intentions of person from selfies could be recognized. Also, selfies and other images create some emotions or emotional reactions. When we talk about excess images, intentions are always the same: to shock viewers. Here are some examples of excess selfies: a face excess selfie and extreme selfies.



Image 1, Andrea wants to have the biggest mouth in the world⁴⁰

This is a student from Sophia who wants to have the biggest mouth in the world and has had 21 operations with hyaluronic acid to realize this. There are a lot of images and selfies online in which people present themselves and what they are doing with their physical appearance by using contemporary technology and medicine. Some people get money for that they are look differentially and have a biggest chest or bottom.

On the other hand, there are excessive images which are not disgusting. One of the example is extreme selfies that can make our heads spin.



Image 2, Erick Baydron (Photo Erick Baydron/"Instagram")

Erick Baydron often makes selfies on the highest buildings in HonKong. For his adventures he does not use any tools and that puts his life in serious danger.⁴¹

George Kourounis took a selfie from volcanic crater (Image 2). He is an adventurer and host of the Angry planet show. He took a selfie at volcano Marum at archipelago Vanugo in

South Pacific in 2014. The expedition lasted four days and he and his associates descended the crater twice. ⁴²



Image 3, George Kourounis ⁴³

A girl in Romania made a selfie while sitting on her boyfriend's shoulders (Image 4). The selfie was taken on the chimney at the height of 180m. We could not see her body because the shot was made from a bird's - eye view but we could see her face and her smile well. That's show us that she is enjoying herself by taking a selfie. Also we could see outstretched arms of her boyfriend and large opening in front of them.



Image 4, Dangerous selfie ⁴⁴

6 Conclusion

According to Frosch (2015), social environment is an element which gives meaning to a selfie, not just images. From the melioristic point of view, according to Shusterman, community is just one among other element of pragmatism. In the context of melioristic pragmatism we could conclude that selfies make a better community by connecting people, spreading their possibilities to share their experiences through images, affecting other

people, etc. On the other hand, the tendency of digital aesthetics to promote excess images opens a new side of those connections. Excess images are everywhere and that makes our culture shocking. The focus on images, not on the relationship, could be one of the problems of community. Excess images and a flood of celebrities could make people less sensitive to human problems, such as famine, poverty, violence, and what John Berger showed in his work on BBC in the 1970's *The Ways of Seeing*. The second problem is freedom as another important element of meliorism according to Shusterman. Considering freedom of communication in the digital sphere, seeing selfies and images, there is the impression that there are not boundaries in selecting and posting images on the Internet. Selfies often promote friendship and fun, but people could go too far and make dangerous selfies in the sense that they risk their lives. Many people present selfies with the intention of showing their physical appearance, and how good or different they look. Also, in online journalism images are used to attract people to read online articles because they are often shocking. Ethics is not respected. It seems that digital media and majority who are part of the digital community are not ethically sensitive.

¹ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Psychology Press, 1999. 3-13, 3.

² Stojanović Prelević, I. "Medial Turn and Excess Aesthetics" presented on the second Conference with International participation *Social (Dys) function of Art: From Instrumentalisation to Participation*, Faculty of Political Science, University of Banja Luka, 2021.

³ Lipovetsky Gilles, Serroa Jean, *Globalni ekran: od filma do smartfona*, (Beograd: Akademska knjiga, 2013).

⁴ Research on Teens, Friendships and Online groups (Pew Research Center, U.S. 2018) shows that 15 % of friends are people they first meet online, 60 % of them spent every day or almost every day online. Online groups and forums that focus on hobbies or humor are most popular among teens (41%), girls who use online groups are especially likely to say they have helped them through tough time (24%). See more at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/11/28/teens-friendships-and-online-groups/>

⁵ Several studies have compared the quality of online versus offline friendships (Chan & Cheng, 2004; Mesch & Talmud, 2006, 2007; Parks & Roberts, 1998). These studies show that that online friendships are perceived to be lower in quality than offline friendships (Mesch & Talmud, 2006, 2007; Parks & Roberts, 1998).

⁶ Antheunis, M. L., Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. "The quality of online, offline, and mixed-mode friendships among users of a social networking site" *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 6(3) (2012): 1-13.

⁷ Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone*. (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2000)

⁸ Kevin Tavin, Mira –Kallio Tavin, Max Rynnänen, "An Introduction to Excess in Art and Education: Discursive Exploration," in *Art, Excess and Education, Historical and Discursive Contexts*, ed. Kevin Tavin, Mira –Kallio Tavin, Max Rynnänen, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) 1-19, page 2.

⁹ Shusterman, R. "Somaesthetics in Context" *Kinesiology Review* 9, (2020), 245-253, 24.

¹⁰ The view that excess images reises with digitalization is used in this paper. In a broad sense excess images appear earlier. We could see them in art, popular culture etc.

¹¹ Lipovetsky Gilles, Serroy Jean, *Globalni ekran: od filma do smartfona*, (Beograd: Akademska knjiga, 2013), 98.

- ¹² Livingston, Susan. B. „Extravagant Bodies: Abjection in Art, Visual Culture and the Classroom“, *Art, Excess and Education, Historical and Discursive Contexts*, ed. Kevin Tavin, Mira –Kallio Tavin, Max Rynnanen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) 111-129, see page 113.
- ¹³ Ibid 115.
- ¹⁴ See Nussbaum (2003), Korsmeyer and Smith (2004).
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- ¹⁷ William James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2000)
- ¹⁸ Robinson, D.S. "A Critique of Meliorism" *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol 34, N 02, (The University of Chicago Press, 1924.) 175-194, see page 180.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 181
- ²⁰ Bode, B.H. (1926) *Fundamentals of Education*, New York: Macmillan
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- ²² Ibid., 185
- ²³ Ibid., 190
- ²⁴ Shusterman, R. "Somaesthetics in Context" *Kinesiology Review* 9, 245-253 (2020): 245.
- ²⁵ Shusterman, R. (2010) "What Pragmatism Means to Me: Ten Principles", 59-65. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2010-2-page-59.htm>.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 62.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
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- ³¹ Stojanović Prelević, I. *Filozofija medija-pagmatički i aksiološki aspekti*, (Niš:Filozofski fakultet.2020), 139
- ³² Frosch, P. (2015) "The Gestural Image:The Selfies, Photography Theory and Kinesthetic Sociability" *International Journal of Communication* 9, 1607-1628 1608p, 4.
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- ³⁵ Ibid, 120
- ³⁶ Menninghaus, W. *Disgust: The theory and history of a strong emotion* (H. Eilan, & J. Golb, Trans.). Albany: State University of New York Press: 2003.
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- ⁴² <https://www.vesti.rs/Vesti/Selfi-iz-paklenog-grotla.html>.
- ⁴³ <https://twitter.com/georgekourounis/status/504782538624094208?lang=sr>.
- ⁴⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/svet-45747875>.