



Body Politics: Revolt and City Celebration



CHAPTER 4

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Matthew Crippen

1 Introduction

This chapter endeavors to articulate somaesthetic forms of expression occurring irrespective of knowledge of the philosophical movement. To this end, it focuses on Mandalay's Water Festival and Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring, which stand as illustrations. These events do so, first, because they exemplify bodily and therewith experiential coordination around urban structures; second, because they are instances of somatic refashioning, for example, through creative conversion of injuries into celebratory badges of dissent; and, third, because they organize around cultural and political concerns, giving them emotional and hence visceral dimensions. Directed almost therapeutically towards life-improvement – whether implicitly or explicitly – these celebrations and protests also have meliorative aspects that mark the somaesthetic movement.

Somaesthetics is notable for drawing upon a diversity of approaches. These range from pragmatism to existential phenomenology to Eastern meditative practices to ancient Greek philosophy to Ludwig Wittgenstein's work,¹ which in fact approximates the aforesaid American and continental schools in its later phases.² A thread common to these traditions is that all offer embodied accounts of human experience. Somaesthetics shares this view, which is more than just the trite claim that the body is necessary for experience; it is to maintain that the body – in combination with things it encounters – constitutes experience. This happens in even relatively simple encounters, as when our fingers coordinate around a bottle, with the structure of our hand and the

1 See Richard Shusterman, “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 3 (1999): 299–313; Richard Shusterman, “Back to the Future: Aesthetics Today,” *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 23, no. 43 (2012): 104–124.

2 Nicholas Gier, *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology: A Comparative Study of the Later Wittgenstein, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981); Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. Ch. 4; Shaun Gallagher, “Philosophical Antecedents of Situated Cognition,” in *The Cambridge Companion of Situated Cognition*, ed. Philip Robbins and Murat Aydede (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 35–52.

entity grasped shaping what we can do and hence what we experience.³ A second distinguishing feature of the movement is its emphasis on everyday aesthetics. In this, it builds on forerunners, especially John Dewey. Only whereas Dewey highlights aesthetics as an outcome of everyday somatic engagements, somaesthetics emphasizes the body as an everyday expressive medium. A third characteristic of somaesthetics is its life-improving trajectory. This is of course common to philosophy from ancient times onwards. However, somaesthetics stands out by drawing on practices such as yoga, Zen and athletic disciplines to advocate hands-on somatic interventions, albeit not in opposition to mental ones since the body is a constituting structure of mind.

All of this is emphasized in Mandalay's Water Festival and Cairo's Arab Spring, which can be conceived as varieties of living somaesthetic practices. In addition to this, these events highlight the largely shared nature of experience. Concordant with this, Richard Shusterman's model of somaesthetics challenges essentially private, internal conceptions of experience as wrongheaded turns in modern Western thinking. Unfortunately, meditative disciplines encouraging self-focus on breath, listening to one's inner voice and other forms of introspection, some of which Shusterman draws on, open his work to misinterpretations along the lines just mentioned. Pragmatic and phenomenological notions of experience as "culture" or "world" offer a corrective.⁴ Though it sounds odd, we in fact use these terms interchangeably, as when talking about parenting culture or the world or experience of parenthood. Since cultures and worlds are here spheres of handling in which bodily capacities, habits and sensitivities synchronize around practical dealings, these conceptions simultaneously point to the somatic character of experience. This, in turn, captures the celebrations and revolts in Mandalay and Cairo, including their political and social dimensions. It does – and this is the central point I want to defend – because these events take hold as a kind of creative somatic dance in which activities and therewith experiences synchronize around surroundings, while

3 See Matthew Crippen, "Body Phenomenology, Somaesthetics and Nietzschean Themes in Medieval Art," *Pragmatism Today* 5, no. 2 (2014): 40–45; Matthew Crippen, "Embodied Cognition and Perception: Dewey, Science and Skepticism," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 14, no. 1 (2017): 121–134.

4 See John Dewey, "Syllabus: Types of Philosophical Thought" [c. 1922–1923], in *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 13, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 352–395; John Dewey, "Unfinished Introduction" [c. 1951], in *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 361–364; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1927], trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962).

also pushing into them, leading to bodily and cultural-physical meliorative refashioning.

2 Evolving Concepts of Experience

The view that experience is essentially private follows from the notion that it is formed out of internal representations. This outlook has become commonplace in philosophy, psychology and neuroscience, even if it is considered edgy in everyday life and movies such as *The Matrix* and *Inception*. Against this, somaesthetic thinkers, pragmatists, and phenomenologists have all worked to highlight public forms of embodied experience. In doing so, some have returned to the ancient idea that having experience means being experienced or skilled.⁵ This claim has etymological basis, for the Greek word *experiri* “means try, to put to the test.”⁶ *Empeiros* means “experienced or practiced in an activity, grounded in *peira*, trial or attempt,”⁷ and consequently inculcated out of habitual routines distilled from the past. This agrees obviously with conceptions advanced in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and *Posterior Analytics*.⁸ It resonates also with Plato if the emphasis on intelligent skill is subtracted.⁹ Since skills are gained in social contexts, these ancient notions simultaneously imply a public concept of experience. Reinforcing this is the fact that there are few references to inner experience, for example, in Homer’s epics, where the ability even to outwardly convey emotions while not feeling them is treated as an exceptional phenomenon.¹⁰

5 See John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920); John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Open Court, 1925); Martin Heidegger, “The Statement of Protagoras” [1940], trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, in vol. 4 of *Nietzsche*, vols. 3 and 4, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 91–95; also see Shusterman, “A Disciplinary Proposal,” 302; Shusterman, “Thinking Through the Body,” 7–9.

6 Joseph Lennon, “The Notion of Experience,” *Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 23, no. 3 (1960): 315–343.

7 John Dewey, *Philosophy and Education in Their Historic Relations* [c. 1910–1911], transcribed by Elsie Ripley Clapp, ed. J.J. Chambliss (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 133.

8 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 981a7–9; Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, trans. G.R.G. Mure, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 99b35–100a8.

9 Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. W.D. Woodhead, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 463b–465b; Plato, *Laws*, trans. A.E. Taylor, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, 720a.

10 Hubert Dreyfus, “Existential Phenomenology and the Brave New World of the Matrix,” *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (2003): 18–31.

To the extent that experience is accordingly not hidden in the head and instead embedded and embodied, it is public, so that Shusterman urges that “body, mind, and culture are deeply codependent.”¹¹ Shusterman and others such as Dewey accordingly object to exclusive emphasis on inner, private experience, along with the isolated individualism that goes with it. There is, to be sure, a fruitful side to this view, namely, that individuals – as opposed to the state, aristocratic powerbrokers or God – have greater jurisdiction over themselves. Dewey appreciates this, writing that the “modern discovery of inner experience, of a realm of purely personal events that are always at the individual’s command” and there “inexpensively for refuge” is a “liberating discovery.”¹² It is so because it “implies a new worth and sense of dignity in human individuality,” this “in contrast to the ancient scheme of experience, which held individuals tightly within a given order subordinated to its structure and patterns.”¹³ For reasons discussed, however, Dewey thinks the position overplayed. Elaborating on the shift from pre-modern to modern views, he notes that from the standpoint of the latter, experience developed into that which greets the senses. It thereby became perception of the new and ceased to be sedimented habits binding us to the past.¹⁴ Grasped as sensory impressions, moreover, these more recent concepts oriented experience as a phenomenon occurring within an internal mental theater, leading to “the subjectivistic, solipsistic and egotistic strain in modern thought.”¹⁵ This was opposed to the ancient idea of experience as a product of publically shared customs and skills.

Though not a majority position, another shift began to take hold in the late Modern period, with some deemphasizing inner experience. A number of scholars did so by arguing that a great deal of human life is pre-reflective, which is to say, just at or below the limits of consciousness. Pragmatists, psychoanalysts and existential phenomenologists were early defenders of this position.¹⁶ Variations of the view also have traction in contemporary psychology.¹⁷

11 Shusterman, “Thinking Through the Body,” 2.

12 Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 172.

13 Ibid., 172–173.

14 See Dewey, *Philosophy and Education*, 133.

15 Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 173.

16 For example, William James, “Are We Automata?” *Mind* 4, no. 13 (1879): 1–22; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, revised edition [1887], trans. Walter Kauffman (New York: Vintage Books, 1974); Sigmund Freud, “The Unconscious” [1915], trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 159–215; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, esp. §12–24; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, throughout.

17 Luís M. Augusto, “Unconscious Knowledge: A Survey,” *Advanced Cognitive Psychology* 6, no. 1 (2010): 116–141.

But while standard contemporary psychological interpretations tend to credit pre-reflective or unconscious activity to vast neural recesses, and although this supplies a partial account, additional explanations lie in the extent to which non-neural bodily and worldly structures enable cognition and perception.

Dewey, once again, was an early proponent of this view, arguing that perception is sensorimotor organization in the world and hence not an event occurring exclusively in our heads.¹⁸ Thus, for example, tactile perception of a bottle is not just sensory excitation. Instead, it is the way our hand adjusts to roundness and the manner in which our fingers glide smoothly over a surface that does not bite flesh. The point is given empirical backing and extended by work on sensory substitution devices where head-mounted cameras deliver stimulation to the skin or tongue, and people actively exploring their surroundings rapidly acquire an analogue of vision.¹⁹ This is not just an argument about perceptual experience, however. Cognition is also embodied. Thus in the case of smartphones, most “know” the keyboard in use and not reflection, and could not draw a diagram of its layout from memory.²⁰ A non-human case in point is the remarkable multi-generational, group migrations of monarch butterflies, which occur partly through the funneling effect of mountains, and thus through interactions between bodies and environments.²¹

These views, insofar as they are embodied, connect closely to the idea of experience as cultural. An initial point to note is that group coordination is the norm throughout the biological realm. Migrating birds interlock to match velocity, maintain proximity and avoid collision.²² They also coordinate flapping to either maximize upwash capture or minimize downwash effects.²³ Dung beetles similarly coordinate, interacting with gravitational forces, friction and one another to roll dung into balls very rapidly over significant distances.²⁴ In some cases, integration is encompassing, with trees communicating through

18 John Dewey, “The Reflex Arc in Psychology,” *Psychological Review* 3, no. 4 (1896): 357–370.

19 Paul Bach-y-Rita and Stephen W. Kercel, “Sensory Substitution and Augmentation: Incorporating Humans-in-the-Loop,” *Intellectica* 2, no. 12 (2002): 287–297.

20 Matthew Crippen, “Intuitive Cities: Pre-Reflective, Aesthetic and Political Aspects of Urban Design,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 3, no. 2 (2016): 125–145.

21 Matthew Crippen, “Dewey, Enactivism and Greek Thought,” in *Pragmatism and Embodied Cognitive Science: From Bodily Interaction to Symbolic Articulation*, ed. Roman Madzia and Matthias Jung (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 233–249.

22 Craig Reynolds, “Flocks, Herds, and Schools: A Distributed Behavioral Model,” *Computer Graphics* 21, no. 4 (1987): 25–34.

23 Steven J. Portugal et al., “Upwash Exploitation and Downwash Avoidance by Flap Phasing in Ibis Formation Flight,” *Nature* 505, no. 7483 (2014): 399–402.

24 Matthew Crippen, “Group Cognition, Developmental Psychology and Aesthetics,” *Pragmatism Today* 8, no. 1 (2017): 185–197.

chemical and auditory signals and behaving almost as single organisms by nourishing one another.²⁵ Something comparable occurs with bacteria, regarded by some as a genetic and functional super-organism.²⁶ On a less grand but equally compelling scale, multiple organisms join to form the Portuguese man o' war to the point that it appears as a single jellyfish-like creature.

Critical to all this is that in working together, organisms do not just build themselves. They build living spaces, whether in the case of networked tunnels, hills and food caravans constructed by ants or the cities erected by human beings. In the case of humans, we start as dependent creatures and remain so throughout life, a condition that only changes in degree. Our coming together, joining and coordinating in groups, moreover, is a form of world-building, not just in biological ways, but also in cultural manners. John Steinbeck (1939) expresses this beautifully in an almost Heideggerian passage about the mass migrations of the Great Depression:

In the daylight they scuttled like bugs to the westward; and as the dark caught them, they clustered like bugs near to shelter and to water.... [T]hey huddled together; they talked together; they shared their lives, their food, and the things they hoped for in the new country. Thus it might be that one family camped near a spring, and another camped for the spring and for company, and a third because two families had pioneered the place and found it good...

In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. [...] In the evening, sitting about the fires, the twenty were one. They grew to be units of the camps, units of the evenings and the nights. A guitar unwrapped from a blanket and tuned – and the songs, which were all of the people, were sung in the nights. Men sang the words, and women hummed the tunes.

Every night a world created, complete with furniture – friends made and enemies established... Every night relationships that make a world, established.²⁷

While emphasizing shared hopes and emotional concerns as organizing principles, Steinbeck also stresses that worlds need a “certain physical pattern.” In his example, this might include “water, a river bank, a stream, a spring, or even

25 Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, trans. Jane Billinghurst (Berkeley: Greystone Books, 2016).

26 Sorin Sonea and Maurice Panisset, *A New Bacteriology* (Boston: Jones and Bartlett, 1983).

27 John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking Press, 1939), 264–265.

a faucet unguarded,” along with “enough flat land to pitch the tents, a little brush or wood to build the fires.”²⁸ Cities require more, of course, though water, space for shelter and fuel are basic amenities that have gotten many off the ground.

Instances of world-building can be more immediate, but the basic pattern remains the same. Thus, for example, a weekend-world of revelry may organize around a concern for wine and sociality. While this typically involves verbal coordination, it also entails intricate synchronizations of bodies around one another and things. This, in turn, connects weekend revelry to overtly physical coordinations in the vein of the earlier discussed synchronization of hand and bottle that realizes smoothness, roundness and other properties. The nighttime world of the migrants follows suit insofar as it gathers around shared concerns for water, companionship, tent space and hopes for a better life. The agricultural, industrial and commercial worlds, not to mention the physical space, of wine-producing communities might likewise cohere around concerns for that commodity. This illustrates some of what Heidegger conveys when he remarks that “the Old High German word *thing* means a gathering, and specifically a gathering to deliberate on ... a contested matter.” As such, “the Old German words *thing* and *dinc* become the names for an affair or matter of pertinence.” They accordingly “denote anything that in any way bears upon men, concerns them.”²⁹ In this passage, Heidegger emphasizes contested matters as subjects for debate. He stresses that this is also captured in the Latin expression *res publica* because the first element of the compound can be translated as entity, thing or affair, with the second part pointing to public, political or cultural concerns. At the same time, most public discourses also occur through the non-verbal language of bodies coordinating around each other and environmental contours, for example, chairs and the layout of a room. Heidegger thus adds: “The thing things world,”³⁰ a point emphatically emphasized by the ways that the worlds of the migrants, revelers and wine-producing communities all gather around particular concerns.

The foregoing accordingly emphasizes the codependence of lived space, concerns, experience and culture. Wine is a crafted item, for example, a physical and cultural product. It is simultaneously made what it is by the ways in which it stands as an object of concern or importance in our worlds. It might be a commodity in the world and experience of the shopkeeper; in the reveler's, a

28 Ibid., 266–267.

29 Martin Heidegger, “The Thing” [1949], In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 172.

30 Ibid., 178.

social lubricant; and for the chemist, a mix of compounds.³¹ The concerns that make wine what it is for us accordingly depend on cultural and physical worlds and vice versa. This is to broaden Shusterman's claim about the codependence of body, mind and culture, and is one of the central points that I will argue Mandalay's Water Festival and Cairo's Arab Spring demonstrate.

3 Somatic Organization in Mandalay

Taken together and applied to Mandalay, the account so far offered suggests that the city's Water Festival not only synchronizes around physical space, but also organizes around codependent cultural concerns. The relevance of cultural concerns simultaneously points to the political and social situation of the country. A former British colony, Myanmar has in recent times been one of the more isolationist and iron-fisted regimes. The situation is evolving, however, with slackening media censorship, opening tourism and the country experiencing its first multi-party election in decades in 2010.³² Despite these developments, Myanmar is not a bastion of free expression, and while more egregious violations exist, broadcasters avoid televising Mandalay's Water Festival. They instead focus on tamer events in Yangon and Nay Pyi Taw, a secretly built city and the new capital since the mid-2000s.³³ The military, moreover, retains much control.³⁴ Predominately Buddhist, religious xenophobia is also rampant against minority Christians, Hindus and especially Muslims. Even the politician Aung San Suu Kyi – former darling of the West and Nobel laureate – stands accused of neglecting abuses against Muslims and purging them from her party.³⁵ Such abuses are longstanding, though they have only received widespread attention with the recent spate of genocidal activity against Muslims, particularly the Rohingya.³⁶

31 William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," *Mind* 4, no. 15 (1879): 317–346.

32 Nehginpao Kipgen, *Myanmar: A Political History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), esp. Ch. 5.

33 Dulyapak Preecharushh, "Myanmar's New Capital City of Naypyidaw," in *Engineering Earth*, ed. Stanley D. Brunn (Berlin: Springer, 2010), 1021–1044.

34 Kipgen, throughout.

35 For an account of abuses against religious minorities, see Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

36 Often regarded as among the least violently disposed religions, Buddhist scriptures are more pacifistic than other major world religions, so the idea of Buddhist monks rampaging and inciting violence in Myanmar seems incongruous. A partial explanation is that all citizens of this religion are strongly encouraged to give a year to monkhood in childhood and again in adulthood. In effect, therefore, many are draftees, as opposed to educated

While Myanmar boasts ancient civilization, Mandalay – comprised of roughly a million people and nestled in the middle of the country along the Irrawaddy River – is relatively young. A past capital, it arose in circumstances similar to the current one, namely, at the behest of the ruler in 1857. Construction of Mandalay Palace commenced the same year, and it forms a centerpiece that is enormous relative to the city.³⁷ Square in shape, four walls encase it, each measuring about 2 km, followed concentrically by moats and wide streets, with webs of narrower lanes spreading beyond the palace throughout the city. With its ample moats, this functional and sentimental heart of the city offers ready sources of water. The latter is essential to the festival, which involves mass dousings, carried out in playful fun and ritualistic cleansing for the Buddhist New Year.³⁸

The word “catharsis” captures much of what occurs during the festival. The word comes from the Greek *kathairein* for “cleanse,” and, in addition to ritualistic cleansing, the playful pandemonium seems a creative catharsis against a historically repressive regime that normally restricts even public assembly.³⁹ During the roughly weeklong celebrations, people splash others in streets, on passing motorcycles, through open windows of trains and vehicles (and also from them). Though the Water Festival is celebrated nationally, Mandalay carries the festivities to an extreme that would be illegal in most jurisdictions, especially around the palace. Here, so much water is launched from pumps in canals that the flooding in some areas mimics a natural disaster. Though no serious damage is done because the water drains at night, it gets deep enough during the day that cars stall and children are able to swim naked in some portions of the streets and drainage trenches leading to canals.

devotees. This lack of enthusiasm is combined with a population that has recently gone from having limited to widespread internet access, with little experience sifting reliable news from junk. Facebook has also become a primary source of information, with hate speech propagated there taken as fact. Though religious tensions were lower when populations were united against military oppressors, Wade (cited above) argues that today's problems are partial artifacts of past British rule, which introduced an ethnic taxonomy for administrative purposes. This hardened once-fluid boundaries between different populations, and some groups that were previously accepted as indigenous are now persecuted as outsiders.

37 For the early history of Mandalay and the palace, see V.C. Scott O'Connor, *Mandalay, and Other Cities of the Past in Burma* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1908), esp. Ch. 1.

38 See Maung Htin Aung, *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2009), Ch. 3; Hsin-Chun Tasaw Lu, “Festivalizing Thingyan, Negotiating Ethnicity: Burmese Chinese Migrants in Taiwan,” *Journal of Burma Studies* 12, no. 1 (2008): 29–62.

39 See Kipgen, esp. Ch. 5; also see “Burma: Events of 2017,” *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/burma>.

Mandalay's Water Festival is esteemed as the nation's wildest, and a decisive factor is the city's structure. The palace, with its water-filled moats, is centrally located and encompasses a significant portion of the city. The celebration radiates throughout the city, with people soaking others from buckets, bottles and pumps drawing from the many canals and ponds in Mandalay or sometimes from water mains. That said, the chief force gathers and synchronizes around the palace, paralleling the way hands coordinate around entities, and Steinbeck's migrants coordinate around faucets, tent space and other people. During the Water Festival, less global bodily coordinations occur as well, because walking on flooded versus dry ground, for example, mobilizes different gaits, or because variations between gentle trickles, quick splashes, torrents from hoses or nothing at all generate different postures and body motions, and hence different experiences.

This account may appear to overstress physical structure and underemphasize culture, but the two are intertwined. Indeed, Steinbeck's earlier Great Depression example frames world-building as culture-generation, while simultaneously laying weight on requisite physical patterns. In his example, this includes things such as firewood, water and flat space for tents. Though affairs are not so schematic, one can imagine Mandalay's Water Festival taking similar form. Perhaps one group came for the water in the moat and because it had been a good gathering place at some point in the past; maybe in following years others joined for like reasons, and also seeking company. Merchants may have increasingly erected booths, and others set up stages for cultural performances. A world may have accordingly gathered, with its own patterns of bodily activity and hence experience.

All of this augments earlier claims about the interdependence of body, mind and culture. Of the body, William James (1905) writes:

The world experienced ... comes at all times with our body as its center, center of vision, center of action, center of interest. ... So far as "thoughts" and "feelings" can be active, their activity terminates in the activity of the body, and only through first arousing its activities can they begin to change those of the rest of the world. The body is the storm center, the origin of coordinates, the constant place of stress in all that experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view.⁴⁰

Although these remarks may seem to contradict Steinbeck's and Heidegger's observations about activity and therewith experience gathering around things,

40 William James, "The Experience of Activity," *Psychological Review* 12, no. 1 (1905): 9.

both of their accounts hearken back to the human bodily center, even if implicitly. They do because things such as firewood, flat space for tents and water are not identifiable as such outside the sphere of human concerns or interests, of which the body is the center. Moreover, insofar as concerns are emotional, they tend towards the visceral and in this sense bodily, more so because they originate in somatic motivations such as thirst and thermoregulation.

In light of this, concerns in Mandalay and the rest of Myanmar warrant more attention. Some concerns specifically echo Steinbeck's example, as with the desires for water, space, and company that characterize the celebrations. The last of these may be accentuated by shared hardships faced in Myanmar, also mirroring Steinbeck's account, and by the ambiguous feelings that locals have toward Mandalay Palace stemming from the forced labor used to restore the site within living collective memory. Military authorities, moreover, inscribe their power by posting signs at exterior points reading: "Only when the army is strong will the nation be strong" or "The tatmadaw [army] and the people cooperate and crush all those harming the union." This arguably adds to collective frustration, perhaps exacerbated because only military and government officials enjoy entry during the festival. Hence, while it is embedded in the city's heart, the palace is cut off and distant. As in religious gatherings, however, the water and canals consecrating the festival bridge some of the distance, pulling the palace and the city into each other's neighborhoods. Its role in the Water Festival accordingly shares similarities with gods in religious ceremonies, which we never see face-to-face and seem both remote and proximate.

Another obvious desire – in fact related to creative cathartic impulses of the Water Festival – is simply that of having fun. Some of this is part and parcel of daily life. Thanaka, a pale-yellow paste made from ground bark and said to protect against the sun, shows up in creative patterns across faces, and a blood-red mixture of paan – made of betel leaf, areca nut, slaked lime and sometimes tobacco – stains many teeth. However, this is not particular to the festival, but the norm throughout the year. Other occurrences are particular, with most of the country, including public transport and many shops, closing for the multi-day celebration. People appear to enjoy the anonymity of crowds, dressing in everyday ways but sometimes wearing Guy Fawkes masks, which are associated with revolt. This seems part of a larger urge to misbehave and lose control in a kind of Dionysian rupture, albeit as a way of ameliorating oppressive conditions and thereby seizing some control.

This losing of control takes many forms, some innocent, some less so. First and foremost, it includes dousing others and getting drenched, with children taking especial relish as they soak passing motorcycles, pedestrians, people through train windows, and others. This behavior inverts normal authority

structures since children target adults. Adults also participate by soaking others or playfully closing metal slots over glassless train windows to block water barrages. The mass pandemonium contains another inversion of authority and acting out insofar as the regime normally restricts mass assembly. These inversions also encompass conventional misbehaviors such as public drinking and sharing bottles with random strangers, sometimes between vehicles and pedestrians and vice versa. At the more extreme end, theft occurs, with attempts on tourists not uncommon in densely packed areas around the palace. Travel literature claims that theft is rare in Myanmar, citing penalties involving hard labor. In Mandalay it appears to be confined to the palace area during the festival, presumably because crowds afford safety and opportunity, but the thievery is also keeping with moral inversions characterizing the celebration.

So these are how some basic concerns unfold and how the Water Festival at the palace organizes them. Interestingly, the palace also answers concerns of government officials by confining the festivities' main force to a definite location, with songs, dances and other cultural displays seemingly restricted to official stages surrounding the palace area, which is cleared after certain times of night. It is as if government officials see a need to let people act out a little and vent emotions, while simultaneously not wanting frustrations to boil over. In line with this, corporate entities construct large elevated stands along the canal, presumably with government consent. Here, attractive, fashionably dressed youth mechanically bob to blaring dance music, spraying people with restrained trickles, in contrast to the firehose-like rushes delivered at informal pumping stations.

From the standpoint of maintaining control, the release-valve afforded by the festival may be important because people in Myanmar – while habituated to political oppression – are not especially accustomed to regulation on the level of everyday life, which is informal and in this sense arguably freer than in the West. Such informality is common in other impoverished regions – including Egypt – because the poor often depend on it for everyday necessities and governments lack the wherewithal to suppress it. Yet it varies between countries, with Myanmar on the high extreme. For example, food vendors greet trains rolling into stations, with some engaged in activities impermissible in the West. These include walking with kettles of samosas boiling in oil, heated by coals in the base, assuredly without formal license. Vendors also travel on trains, preparing and selling food, leaving carriages and returning later to retrieve dishes. Passengers can sleep or sit on the floor of trains or under seats if they can fit. They can dangle feet from openings, puffing cigars despite copious “No Smoking” signs, and police on the train are unperturbed. Separate from the military, unarmed and informal too, police often remove uniforms to evade the

heat once trains are in motion. None of this is a problem. Random motorcycles often pull up, offering rides for negotiated prices. Three or four people and children can pile on, and no one finds it problematic. This everyday informality is a pre-condition of the wildness of Myanmar's celebrations and arguably of the government allowing them within limits as a public release.

The informality of the celebration and of the culture supply many possibilities for aesthetic experience, and not just because of all the fun, though it helps. The strolling, ducking, splashing and dousing integrate into rhythms of doing and undergoing. The creative acting out, the unexpected events, the twists and turns, combined with physical and emotional strain and the relief that follows, add tension and repose. All of this binds incidents that would otherwise remain loosely connected, while making individual moments manifest more sharply. The aesthetic coherence of experience is enhanced if there is a pivotal moment – even an ugly one such as a theft – that reorients and holds everything together the way a climax does for a play. Under these conditions, the events of an hour, day, or the better part of a week may integrate like a narrative, forming an aesthetic whole or what Dewey calls “an experience.”⁴¹

An overarching cultural factor summing up most of what has been said is the celebration's origins in religious ceremonies consecrated with water. Etymologically, the word “religion” connotes a kind of binding together, and the palace and moats are loci around which things bind. This recollects Heidegger's later work, which speaks about jugs and wine chalices gathering people and worlds, while also emphasizing shared religious and consecrating aspects.⁴² This suggests a more complicated, cultural version of basic sensorimotor coordinations, thus reinforcing somaesthetic, pragmatic and phenomenological stress on the interdependence of body, mind and culture. Only in this case, activity and experience organize around the palace and moats. In some ways, the palace simultaneously constrains celebrations, a point also captured by the idea of binding. After all, the Water Festival involves being constrained or bound by what bodies and available environments allow and disallow. Limits, in turn, supply a kind of world grammar that makes coherent experience,⁴³ along with aesthetic form, possible. At the same time, the Water Festival involves being controlled by the regime. Yet this is arguably what motivates some of the creative acting out, so that the festival is simultaneously a venue for

41 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1934), esp. Ch. 3.

42 Heidegger, “The Thing,” 163–180; Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” [1951], in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 143–159.

43 See Matthew Crippen, “William James on Belief: Turning Darwinism against Empiricistic Skepticism,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 46, no. 3 (2010): 477–502.

losing control and an avenue for seizing it back from an oppressive regime. Intriguingly, therefore, this Buddhist festival can be seen as the inverse of a good many Buddhist meditative practices insofar as it entails losing self-mastery. This loss of mastery, however, introduces a modicum of life-bettering control, thereby realigning it with meliorative practices of the religion, doing so, moreover, in richly somatic ways.

4 Somatic Dimensions of Cairo's Protests

Enacted against oppressive conditions and Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian government, the Arab Spring in Tahrir Square adds to the account so far offered. It does so by exemplifying artistic, somatic self-refashioning. In some cases, refashioning is minor, as with demonstrators' use of face paint. In others, it is more radical, as with people creatively reworking injuries into badges of dissent. Shusterman calls such practices "representational somaesthetics," and the category includes everything from surface adjustments achieved through makeup, cosmetic surgery, bodybuilding, hairstyling and dieting to external exhibitions of power and skill.⁴⁴ Representational displays are not inevitably expressions of vanity, but instead can converge with "experiential somaesthetics," here encompassing practices such as athletics and yoga that make "us feel better in both senses of that ambiguous phrase: to make the quality of our somatic experience more satisfying and also to make it more acutely perceptive."⁴⁵ For such reasons, representational and experiential somaesthetics overlap with a third category. This is performative somaesthetics, focused on "building strength, health, or skill," and including activities such as athletics.⁴⁶

Egypt's Arab Spring began on January 25, 2011 as a demonstration against police brutality, but it broadened into a mandate expressed in the slogan: "bread, freedom, social justice, and human dignity."⁴⁷ The specific date was chosen because it marked Police Day, a holiday ironically commemorating the death or injury of police officers who stood against British occupiers. Deplorable economic conditions had been percolating in Egypt for decades, and a number of

44 See Shusterman, "A Disciplinary Proposal," 299–313; "Thinking through the Body: A Plea for Somaesthetics," 1–21.

45 Ibid., 15.

46 Ibid., 16.

47 Andrea Teti and Gennaro Gervasio, "The Unbearable Lightness of Authoritarianism: Lessons from the Arab Uprisings," *Mediterranean Politics* 16, no. 2 (2011): 321–227; Marlies Glasius and Geoffrey Pleyers, "The Global Moment of 2011: Democracy, Social Justice and Dignity," *Development and Change* 44, no. 3 (2013): 547–567.

specific incidents ignited the revolutionary powder keg. One of these included the beating of Khaled Siad, a man in his 20s murdered by police in public view while begging for mercy, the unprovoked attack repeating what had become commonplace. The heart-wrenching images of his mangled face that circulated on protest pages with phrases such as *Kullena Khaled Siad* – meaning “We are all Khaled Siad” – might be regarded as a somaesthetic display for world-bettering purposes and cathartic release.⁴⁸

Though protests combusted throughout Egypt, Tahrir was the sentimental and functional heart, and as it happened my initial encounter with that space occurred on my first day in Cairo proper. It began with a stroll along the Nile, with the tips of the Giza Pyramids poking above the northern horizon. Before going to Tahrir, a colleague took me to Maadi, which appeared normal except for tanks and soldiers and the lack of heavy bustle characteristic of Cairo. We next poked our heads up from a metro station in Garden City, assessing safety. From there we wandered on foot to Tahrir. Approaching from a side-street, we saw burnt cars and other wreckage that scarred the way, and tension increased as we neared some barricades. No violence marred this day, and a carnival-like atmosphere met us upon entering the square, accompanied by relief and mild elation. At the same time, unease about potential violence and surveillance remained, heightening the awareness of bodily vulnerability.

The organization of people in the square was remarkable. They themselves handled security, patting people down at makeshift checkpoints and examining ID, presumably in efforts to repel plainclothes security. Inside the square, protesters had built a little world, complete with food, water, tea and tents pitched for those refusing to leave. An audio system blared music and chants. Along the perimeter, a woman – middle or upper class to all appearances – stood atop a pedestal for utility equipment, weeping and clutching a newspaper with photos of dead protesters. More toward the center, a man dressed in business attire was immersed in conversation, with a small Egyptian flag in the shape of a crest hanging from his neck. His face and head were heavily bandaged and his arm in a sling. Though clearly for medical purposes, the man seemed to proudly display his dressings as insignias of dissent.

Throughout the square, people waved flags and paraded placards, often perched on light poles, one of which had an effigy of Mubarak hanging from

48 For a history of Egypt's Arab Spring, see Ashraf Khalil, *Liberation Square: Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of a Nation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012); Matthew Crippen, “Egypt and the Middle East: Democracy, Anti-Democracy and Pragmatic Faith,” *Saint Louis University Public Law Review* 35, no. 2 (2016): 281–302; Jack Shenker, *The Egyptians: A Radical Story* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

a noose in an artistic display. Most of the placards were haphazard shreds of cardboard, with Arabic captions such as “Don’t let your revolution be stolen” or “The people’s rights will not be lost regardless of delays” or “I don’t think Mubarak has a TV,” this time in English. One man crouched above a battered green electrical box, partly hidden behind a ragged tower made from pieces of cardboard. He appeared poor, an impression affirmed by the uneducated Arabic scrawled across his construction, cursing the government. To drive the point home, he added an outward facing shoe – viscerally insulting in the Middle Eastern world – to his makeshift work of protest art. Welcoming pats on backs were given, and paper Egyptian flags handed out, an emblem interpreted at the time as a banner of dissent. On the edge of the square was a torched police van, overflowing with trash. Much of it was bagged, so protesters living in Tahrir presumably had converted the van to a makeshift dumpster, while simultaneously expressing disdain for police. Soldiers and a tank were stationed just outside the square, the latter strikingly covered with graffiti.

This brief description is distilled from emails sent during the 18-day span that became known as the January Revolution, which was before I heard about somaesthetics. Nonetheless, it captures the representational, experiential, and performative aspects of the discipline. Instances of representational somaesthetics are obvious, whether by the man proudly displaying his injuries or people painting flags on their faces. In addition to altering outward appearances, these actions exhibited strength. Embodied, artistic, performative aspects likewise manifested in the weeping woman stalwartly clutching photographs of the dead, or with the man posing like a statue, holding together his corrugated edifice. One can speculate that these somatic performances supplied cathartic release for those engaged in them and were accordingly experiential as well. Cathartic and hence meliorative experiential dimensions of these bodily-artistic displays were also there insofar as they were part of the collective hope and optimism of that period, even if it turned out to be short-lived and naive. The grief that came with this time and its aftermath, moreover, was an affirming reminder of the compassion that most carry, along with the human will for bettering life circumstances.

The role of the flag in the protest is worthy of more attention. As opposed to Western protest practices of defacing flags, Egyptians co-opted theirs – already a sign of unity – as a coordinating symbol of dissent against ruling authorities. This joint display of dissent kept with the living, collective cultural-historic experience of Egyptians and indeed the square, which hosted celebrations after the 1952 Egyptian Revolution that toppled King Farouk and ejected British occupiers. In the decades that followed, the square sporadically became a protest space, with the most prominent demonstrations occurring in January and

February of 2011 and reoccurrences afterwards up until the summer of 2013. With their shared past, Liberation Square and the Liberation Flag – Tahrir being Arabic for “liberation” – received their official names just after the 1952 Revolution.⁴⁹ The Egyptian flag’s design was a variation of the broader pan-Arab pattern. Many Middle Eastern flags follow this blueprint, introduced by the British diplomat Mark Sykes as a revolt symbol against the Ottoman rulers.⁵⁰ This is ironic since it later was the banner under which Arabs ejected Western powers.

The historic status of the flag – which mirrors that of the square – was arguably part of what led it to become a central symbol of dissent, although flags without revolutionary histories were central in Arab Spring protests elsewhere. In all cases, however, flags shared a role, namely, coordinating existing national unity to cement public exhibitions of solidarity. Egyptian organizers unequivocally saw things this way, asking protesters to display flags and avoid signs of specific religious or party allegiance.⁵¹ Painted on faces, incorporated into placards and clothing, handed out in the square and waved by the masses there, flags saturated the square during the protests that toppled Mubarak. In one dramatic display, men stood once again like sculptures in a representational-performative-experiential exhibition, holding flags propelled upwards from air rushing from subway vents, silhouetted against an angry-looking grey sky.

Perhaps the most striking exemplification of representational-performative-experiential somaesthetics, however, was that of Ahmed Mohamed Ali, a former dentist, better known as Ahmed Harara. “Harara” is Arabic for “heat,” and the appellation was given because of his eagerness in heated situations. During a January 2011 clash on a bridge leading to Tahrir, a shotgun blast left Harara temporally comatose and destroyed the vision in his right eye. In November of the same year, he lost his left eye from a second gunshot, again near Tahrir. Undeterred, Harara turned these injuries into protest art. At times, he has worn a prosthetic eye, inscribed with the Arabic word حرية, pronounced *horiya* and meaning “freedom.” He is also known for his roughly worked metal eye patches, etched with the dates on which he was shot, ٢٨ يناير and ١٩ نوفمبر or January 28 and November 19. These surface representations show strength, but they also do more. In the context of interviews and public appearances, they become forms of performance art. Being consequences of fervent commitment to the

49 Lloyd C. Gardner, *The Road to Tahrir Square: Egypt and the United States from the Rise of Nasser to the Fall of Mubarak* (New York: New Press, 2011), Ch. 1.

50 Elie Podeh, *The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Ch. 2.

51 Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

to the revolutionary cause and expressing an almost Nietzschean way of cheerfully dealing with its painful consequences, these representations of individual and collective resolve are also experiential in Shusterman's sense.

Though I already described my own experience in Tahrir during the uprising, which was also aesthetic and bodily in Dewey and Shusterman's senses, a critical point is worth adding: I am uncertain whether I stood within the boundaries of the square. Indeed, what most encountered in the news and hence regarded as Tahrir was not the physical space of Tahrir, which has a diameter of less than 100 meters. It was instead Tahrir plus the surrounding area that was filled with protesters, and the fact that people defined that larger revolutionary space as Tahrir connects the Tahrir experience to that of Mandalay's Water Festival. Steinbeck notes that a physical pattern is needed for world-building, and this was true for Tahrir in 2011, just as it is during Mandalay's yearly water celebrations. The protest space centered around Tahrir Square and included the congested roads surrounding it, all of it hemmed in by buildings, many of which are representations of state. One of these is the Mogamma, famous as a maze of government bureaucracy. The Egyptian Museum also overlooks the square, as did the ruling party's headquarters until it was burned in 2011 and demolished in 2015. At the functional heart of the city, Tahrir also abuts Sadat Station, a nexus in the metro system. The square is likewise a hub for major streets and Qasr El Nil Bridge, a prominent landmark linking downtown Cairo to Zamalek Island, one of the most affluent areas in the city. While the physical pattern was requisite, the 2011 uprising was a cultural event, defined largely by bodies in streets and Tahrir. But more than this, pre-existing cultural factors made Tahrir a central place of concern. Among these was the fact that the 1952 Egyptian Revolution that finally ended British rule and toppled King Farouk was celebrated in the square and marked the time it was given its name. This led to the erection of representations of state around it, and these made it a good place to express dissent against rulers. Because it was a national symbol of liberation, leaders were likely all the more motivated to clear it to maintain spurious ownership over the ideologies it represents. But it was also a symbol of rebellion, so protesters were likely all the more motivated to revolt and hold the space to protect these same ideologies.

Thus while the centrality and physical space afforded are part of what led people to gather there, this protest – like most others – was not just about holding space. Though capturing Tahrir was unquestionably important and added momentum in 2011, the battle was – and continues to be – preeminently about values and attempts to own and re-shape them. Tahrir Square accordingly is not and was not defined by its official boundaries, but by mutually constituting interactions between people, physical space and culture. This points again

to Steinbeck's and Heidegger's notions of world-building. By virtue of pointing to world-building, Tahrir – like Mandalay's Water Festival – also highlights the codependence of somaesthetic experience, politics, and culture in city life.⁵²

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