



Aesthetics, Ethics and Politics from the Perspective of the Soma

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**THE SOMA IN CITY LIFE:
CULTURAL, POLITICAL AND BODILY AESTHETICS
OF MANDALAY'S WATER FESTIVAL**

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I contemplate the Water Festival in Mandalay, a city in Myanmar, focusing on the richly somatic—that is, emotional and embodied—qualities of the event. I aim, in particular, to develop an account in the vein of Shusterman's "analytic somaesthetics." This means describing bodily perceptions and practices and their place in our experience. While not offering prescriptions or what Shusterman calls "pragmatic somaesthetics," Mandalay's Water Festival—as an aesthetic gathering that is both bodily and political—emphasizes relations between the soma and values. In making my case, I lean on Dewey's accounts of experience and especially his aesthetics, also pulling modest support from phenomenologists and embodied cognitive scientists. I do this in an effort to account for immediate perception and to connect it to pragmatic and phenomenological concepts of experience as culture. What I aim to show is that festivities in Mandalay—including their cultural, political and religious dimensions—arise in ways comparable to immediate sensorimotor experiences, which on Deweyan, Merleau-Pontian and more recent embodied accounts emerge when doings and the actions consequently undergone coordinate around things encountered. On a political level, I argue that the festival involves taking control, being controlled and losing control, and suggest it is a pre-reflective protest reaction, which governing authorities allow to occur, while also attempting to restrain it.

Keywords: Buddhism, Mandalay, Myanmar, Phenomenology, Pragmatism, Somaesthetics, Water Festival

I. Introduction

Mandalay is mass pandemonium during Myanmar's Water Festival, a celebration based in Buddhism that has people soaking one another in a symbolic cleansing for the New Year and cathartic release against a historically oppressive military regime. That the festivities are particularly out of control in Mandalay is emphasized by the fact that the city has historically been excluded from media coverage, which instead focuses on the tamer celebrations in Yangon and Naypyidaw, a secretly built

city and new capital since 2006. For close to a week, children and adults douse people in the streets, on motorcycles and through train windows. Festivities center around a massive palace and symbol of military authority at the heart of the city, with pumps pulling enough water from surrounding moats to flood streets to a point that children swim naked in them and in drainage sewers.

In this article, I speculate on why the Water Festival in Mandalay is particularly intense, and relate this back to the richly somatic—that is, emotional and embodied—qualities of the celebration. My aim is to develop an account in the spirit of what Richard Shusterman (1999) calls "analytic somaesthetics," which "describes the basic nature of bodily perceptions and practices and also ... their function in our knowledge and construction of reality" (p. 304). While I do not take the next step of offering prescriptions or what Shusterman calls "pragmatic somaesthetics," Mandalay's Water Festival, as an aesthetic coming together that is both bodily and political, highlights connections between somaesthetics and values. I frame the analytic portions of this paper in John Dewey's thinking and especially his aesthetics, drawing modest support from phenomenologists and more recent embodied cognitive scientists. I especially focus on pragmatic ideas equating experience to culture and phenomenological concepts of worldhood. Both of these notions start with the premise that experience arises when bodily capacities and sensitivities synchronize around things and practical handlings, and it follows from this that the bulk of life unfolds pre-reflectively. Worlds—whether the socially intricate ballets of parties or the practical sphere of a carpenter working with wood—build in like manner; and insofar as our involvement is always concerned and interested, mood and emotionality critically bind worlds together—points emphasized in the writings of Dewey and Martin Heidegger, and also stressed in Shusterman's account of the body.

What I aim to show is that cultural festivities in Mandalay—including their political and religious dimensions—emerge in ways comparable to immediate

sensorimotor experiences, which on Deweyan, Merleau-Pontian and more recent embodied accounts arise when doings and the actions consequently undergone synchronize around things encountered. Picking up on a hint in a recent article on Shusterman's somaesthetics by Ewa Chudaba (2017), I also want to show how the festival involves taking control, being controlled and losing control, and how this relates to the political situation in Myanmar. More generally, I suggest the Water Festival is a sublimation, or what I frame as a pre-reflective catharsis and protest reaction; and that governing authorities—consciously or otherwise—use the Water Festival to vent pressure while attempting to keep locals in check.

II. The Body and Pre-Reflective Life

Since the late 19th century, a growing number have argued that much of psychic life occurs below or just at the limits of consciousness, with Friedrich Nietzsche (1887) and Sigmund Freud (1915) prominently defending this position. Thinkers in pragmatic and phenomenological traditions—though not always so keen on the notion of “unconsciousness”—similarly emphasize that most of our doings, whether mental or physical, are pre-reflective. Newer cognitive models repeat the basic point, positing that most information processing transpires automatically, with little or no reflective thought. In line with this, psychologists have found that “nonconscious information-acquisition processes are incomparably faster and structurally more sophisticated” than “consciously controlled cognition” (Lewicki and Czyzewska 1992). Standard interpretations credit this outcome to brain activity; and although neural involvement is unquestionable, an additional reason that a great deal occurs below or just at the limits of consciousness is that myriad functions occur through non-neural bodily structures. Thus while Shusterman (2008) claims to differentiate himself from thinker such as Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty by stressing “‘lived somaesthetic reflection,’ that is, concrete but

representational and reflective body consciousness” (p. 63), embodied positions entail pre-reflective experience.

What I specifically want to emphasize—and what will become relevant when discussing Mandalay's Water Festival—is that pre-reflective experience involves a synchronization of bodily capacities around environmental contours. This occurs on a range of levels and indeed in variety of organisms. One case in point is the astonishing multigenerational migrations of monarch butterflies, partly accounted for by mountain ranges funneling them to their destinations (Crippen 2016a). Another is the knee and other anatomical structures solving complicated problems of physics when striding over ground (Chemero 2009, p. 27; Long 2011, Ch. 5). Expressed generally, the capacities and structures of the body and things it encounters limit possibilities of action (see Crippen 2016a, 2017a). In the case of humans, this constrains possibilities of experience, thus providing a bodily analogue to the Kantian *a priori*, something that Dewey at least acknowledges (1920, esp. pp. 89-91). So whereas we can roll wine bottles between our palms, comparable actions and experiences are impossible with laptop computers. In qualitative experience, moreover, the smoothness of a bottle is not accounted for simply as an aggregate of pressures and sensations received by and integrated in the brain. It is also the way the surface “utilizes the time occupied by our tactile exploration or modulates the movement of our hand” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, p. 315). Enactive cognitive scientists such as Alva Noë (2004) and Erik Myin and Jan Degenaar (2014) advance comparable points, using Paul Bach-y-Rita's (e.g., 1983, 1984; and Kercel 2002) sensory substitution devices as an illustration. Here a camera mounted on the head transmits stimulation through vibrations on skin or electrical current on the tongue. Individuals who actively explore their surroundings come to develop quasi-vision in a relatively short time. This indicates perception has less to do with mere stimulation patterns than with the way sensory and motor function synchronize in action when dealing with the world.

Heidegger's (1927) concept of ready-to-hand likewise indicates that what we normally regard as "cognitive processes" are more appropriately understood as practical engagements with the world. 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. Seen accordingly, practical know-how of smartphones is an embodied understanding of how to negotiate a world of digital devices—"world" here understood in the sense that we also speak of the world of parenthood, students, teaching, Hungarian culture and so forth, where entering a world means being primed for certain kinds of habitual activity without having to consciously reflect.

Cities are of course more complicated than surfaces of bottles, smart phones and the like. Yet they nonetheless offer social and physical terrains through which our bodily capacities and experiences integrate. In Mark Johnson's (2002) assessment, architectural and urban settings are "beautifully situated right at the heart of [the] organism-environment transaction." They are "spatial and bodily, so that they draw out and mobilize "our pre-reflective bodily engagement with the physical dimensions of place and space (pp. 76-78; also see Crippen 2016b). I aim to demonstrate this to be so in the case of the Water Festival in Mandalay, first, by showing that experience of it—both ordinary and aesthetic—is emphatically somatic and consequently pre-reflective; and, second, by demonstrating that what has been said of bodily-environment coordination applies on a group or social level.

III. The Body and Aesthetic Experience

Shusterman emphasizes what he sees as the somatic turn in philosophy (e.g., 2000, pp. 154-181). He regards this as a fairly contemporary development, albeit one rooted in the past, especially the ideas of pragmatists, phenomenologists, post-structuralists and East-Asian thinkers (see Shusterman 2012a). The term "somatic" expresses the necessary involvement of the body in

experience. In the case of Dewey and Merleau-Ponty—two thinkers Shusterman is deeply indebted to—a somatic position implies that perception is a total coordination that occurs through modes other than but also including traditional categories of sense, for motor, intellectual and emotional capacities are also involved, say, when we savor a favorite food or scan a much loved view (see Chudaba 2014, 2017; Crippen, 2014). Shusterman, echoing Dewey in particular, further urges that the somatic turn marks a break from the notion that aesthetic engagement is confined to the experience of fine arts. As Shusterman puts it, "[b]ringing aesthetics closer to the realm of life and practice, ... entails bringing the body more centrally into aesthetic focus, as all life and practice—all perception and cognition, and action—is crucially performed through the body (2012b, p. 140). As such, somaesthetics is a suitable model for considering city life and aesthetic experience within it.

The claim that experience is somatic—whether advanced by Shusterman or his pragmatic and phenomenological predecessors—is more than a simple truism that the body is a necessary precondition. The emphasis on the body specifically stresses that anything counting as integrated experience arises from actions and capacities coordinating around contours of the world. To offer a relevant case in point, suppose I stride around Mandalay Palace during the Water Festival, as I in fact did. I press my legs and feet into the ground, with my body adapting differently to match the unevenness of gashed sidewalks or roads, or to deal with the resistance of water flooding the ground or the slipperiness of wet surfaces. Sometimes I lean and scurry to avoid blasts from hoses. Sometimes I snake to negotiate crowds. Many things grab my attention, and emotional tugs nearly everywhere pull at my eyes. In consequence of all these maneuvers directed at my environment, my body undergoes particular motions and a variety of other actions, synchronizing with my surroundings. Pulses of gait, posture, gaze, emotions and the scant reflections I have all adjust to what I encounter. My doings and undergoings, in Dewey's

language, fall into rhythmic connections of “means-consequence.” Integrated experience of my environment is the result.

Although such integration is necessary for aesthetic experience, it is not enough to achieve it. Here Dewey's (1934) philosophy is particularly helpful once again. He writes: “we have *an* experience”—a term he uses to connote the aesthetic—“when material runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences.” Such an experience “is rounded out so that its close is a consummation and not a cessation.” It “is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience” (p. 35).

To consider another real-life illustration, imagine once again I am at the Water Festival. I stroll mid-morning with my friend Steve, who was my travel companion. The air is heavy with heat and moisture, as it nearly always is in Myanmar. Rays faintly filtered through humid atmosphere beat our sticky faces and shoulders. Sun dazzled water sprays and flows almost everywhere, with the festivities more out of control in informal areas where locals have dropped pumps into the moats surrounding the palace. There, they spurt so much water that children swim in the streets and drainage trenches, and vehicles are submerged at least to the mid point of their tires, sometimes higher. By comparison, only gentle trickles rain from corporate stages, with good-looking youths gyrating mechanically to blaring dance music. Locals seem mildly interested in foreigners, taking extra pride in dousing us. It occurs to me that my wallet may get damaged, so I abscond it in my backpack. Swarms as dense as I have experienced in this country—which normally discourages mass assembly—jostle us. Hemmed in, I tread over the bumper of a jeep while crossing the road. The driver flings what are probably indignant curses. People are celebratory. Alcohol abounds, with a youth in an overfull truck-bed passing a tea-colored concoction in a plastic bottle for me to gulp. Yellowish-white Thanaka—

a cosmetic made of bark said to provide UV protection—streak faces, often in ornate patterns. My eyes fix on the varnished glow of youthful skin, and equally on the affable sun wrinkles worn on older faces.

A thick crowd presses us. A man—likely in his early 20s, albeit appearing older than he probably is—waylays us. He keeps asking my name, and I keep repeating it. An ugly grin slashes his face, teeth permanently stained red and oozing with what looks like blood, but is in fact saliva mixed with an addictive blend of areca nut, lime mineral, tobacco and betel leaf. I am friendly and polite, though also confused. A worried glance over my shoulder, and I see my backpack opened and discover my wallet missing. Steve and I briefly wander in a haphazard and hopeless bid to discover the thief. My stomach is pitted. I feel lightheaded and empty, but also calmer than expected. Returning to the hotel, I make calls to cancel cards. The clerk advises a visit to the police station. The officers there are unexpectedly attentive and concerned, but everyone knows it is a lost cause. Not wanting to ruin the day for Steve or myself, I act light-hearted. Food nearly always boosts my mood, so we go searching for “food-porn,” our word for the tantalizing fare in this country and others we have visited. We stop at a restaurant, and have a beer and stray increasingly farther from the city center. A waterway with lanes, scattered buildings and trees lining both banks captures our attention. Though still in the city, the scene has a rural ambience. We enter a Buddhist temple along the channel and near a rickety bridge, and a monk gives us some wood-bead prayer ropes that we wear as bracelets. We come upon a middle-aged group celebrating along one of the shores. Loud music streams from tinny speakers, and men grab us, dancing. They share food and beer, and then demand an exorbitant sum. We walk away.

It is mid-afternoon and sweltering. We approach a muddy river with a marshy shoreline coated with reeds. What appears to be an island greets us, though it may be a peninsula. Long, lush grass and what resembles dead bamboo encrust the far shore. There are also dwellings

erected with vertical grey-weathered rough-cut planks and rusty metal roofs, some hovering above the river on stilts. Canoes jumble both banks, and a woman gestures that she can take us across. Once on the other side, she—like the earlier revelers—overshoots outrageously in the sum she demands. Though we were prepared to pay, we walk away, not having smaller denominations and not trusting we will get change. We wander along trails, some sandy and some hard packed, and gently penetrate tranquil villages with rustic edifices made of wicker or rough-cut planks, all the while not sure how we will return to the mainland. People here are warm and welcoming, though seemingly unaccustomed to tourists. We cross a group cooking a deep red stew over an open wood fire, and we motion to buy some. They dish out generous servings, and refuse our money. We amble by another temple—a modern-looking brick structure—and are invited in to “sit with the Buddha.” The people here are generous and offer us food again, but we decline.

Somewhere along the way, a peculiar old man latches onto us. He acts both joyful and distraught. Laughing almost constantly, he guides us to a grave, then weeps, blowing snot from his nostrils. He keeps following, laughing. In the eyes of residents, he seems to be the local buffoon. Though not especially concerned, I am wary because of the earlier theft. In one attempt to ditch him, we do a kind of stationary dance to let people hose us—and him—with water. He sticks with us. Eventually we find a causeway across the river, and we jump from it to lower ground, and he finally gives up. We drift towards the hotel, our bodies aching from the day. We stop periodically to take blasts of water and also for an evening meal. Despite and partly because of the theft and other trials, along with the beauty and intrigue of nearly everything we experienced, this is unequivocally the most absorbing, memorable and best day of the trip.

A first point to note is that this day stands out from the stream of ordinary experience. It also stands out from my experience of travelling in the past. It is an

enduring memorial to what travelling and soaking in unfamiliar cultures and places can be. A second point is that I am especially merged with my environment. Under normal circumstances, my bodily movements synchronize around my worldly dealings, but my focus meanders. Throughout this day, my physical actions, my perceptual capacities, almost my whole being integrates with things, events and people I encounter. A third point to note is that my experience is highly dramatic. The day has ups and downs, and these introduce rhythms of tension and repose. Variations in scenes and occurrences—for example, the angry man gesticulating at me, the gift of prayer ropes and food, the discovery of the muddy river and island, concerns about not being able to return to the mainland, the peculiar man who fastened to us—stand as mini-climaxes. The main crisis, obviously, is the theft, and the remainder of the day, which we do more than salvage, supplies resolution. For these reasons, the day stands out as *an* experience. To re-quote Dewey (1934), it is “demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences” (p. 35). It is highly integrated. It carries “its course to fulfillment” (p. 35), or rather a series of interconnected culminations, with notable highlights. Like focal points in paintings or climaxes in novels, these fulfillments and highlights pull the experience into a unified whole that “carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience” (p. 35).

IV. The Water Festival as Cultural Life

As with individual bodies, multi-organism activity synergically coordinates around environmental contours. Illustrative examples from the non-human world includes birds falling into dynamic, self-adjusting wholes when migrating, or beetles coordinating to roll dung rapidly over significant distances. Another especially astonishing case is the Portuguese man o’ war, a colony of organisms that resembles a jellyfish, complete with venomous tentacles. Like instances of group activity in the human world abound, whether in football matches,

toasts at a Budapest dinner or casual banter between colleagues, and they are comparable to coordinations that form bases of our perception of the world (see Crippen 2017b).

The kind of bodily coordination just described happens on a more global level as well and one specifically recognizable as cultural, a point John Steinbeck illustrates beautifully in his 1939 *Grapes of Wrath*. During the Great Depression, he writes, people “scuttled like bugs” to California,

and as the dark caught them, they clustered ... near to shelter and to water. ... 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. And when the sun went down, perhaps twenty families and twenty cars were there.

[...]

Every night a world created, complete with furniture—friends made and enemies established; a world complete with braggarts and with cowards, with quiet men, with humble men, with kindly men. Every night relationships that make a world, established (pp. 264-265).

So in the same way that the night-time world of the migrants gathers around a common concern for water, companionship, space for tents and a dream of a better life in the west, a weekend-world of late night revelry and early morning hangovers may be organized around wine. So too may the agricultural, industrial and commercial world, not to mention the physical space, of a wine-producing region. This illustrates some of what Heidegger (1949) conveys when he notes that “the Old High German word *thing* means a gathering to deliberate on ... a contested matter” (p. 172). A contested matter is a matter of concern, and in the just mentioned examples, life and therewith worlds gather around a concern for particular things. Hence Heidegger adds that “The thing things world” (p. 178).

That worlds gather around things does not mean things are first there and worlds only appear afterwards. In the case of bottled wine, the thing is literally a crafted item, a physical and cultural product of the human

world. But more crucially, it is made into the kind of thing that it is for us by the ways in which it stands as an object of concern or importance in our worlds. William James (1879, 1890, Ch. 22) maintains that what a thing is for us—its essence—varies with our interests, ends, or in other words, concerns. Wine is a social lubricant in the world of the reveler. In the storekeeper's world, it is a commodity. For the chemist, a complex mix of compounds. Taken together and applied to Mandalay, this suggest that the festival not only organizes around interactions with the physical space of the palace, moat and other urban features. It also coheres and becomes what it is by virtue of people's concerns.

So what are some of the concerns of people in Mandalay? To begin with, Myanmar, a former British colony, has been regarded as one of the more isolationist and oppressive regimes in the world. Things are changing, however, with a growing tourism sector, and Myanmar becoming trendy among those who deem themselves as “adventurous.” The political climate is changing too, though the military still retains a great deal of control, with a guaranteed 25% of seats in parliament, among much else. The formerly zealous media censorship is also loosening up. But even individuals who seem progressive in the eyes of the West retain troubling tendencies. For example, religious xenophobia remains strong even among progressives. Demonstrating this are the rampages against Muslims and that the politician San Suu Kyi, former darling of the West and Nobelaurate, has in fact turned a blind eye to abuses against Muslims, sometimes led by Buddhist monks.¹ She has even purged her own party of Muslims,

¹ Such rampages seem out of character for Buddhist monks. However, a contributing factor is that the population is encouraged to dedicate a year of service to monkhood in youth and then again in adulthood. Thus many who appear in monk's robes are, in effect, drafted laypersons. In everyday life, monks exhibit habits out of keeping with conventional conceptions of Buddhism. For example, they allow kilometers of souvenirs to be sold in pathways leading to temples and permit billboard advertisements in them. They toss garbage from train windows. Many also smoke. They thereby violate the

according to some reports. Such occurrences have in fact been ongoing for years, albeit only recently gaining prominent media attention.

While human civilization in Myanmar is ancient, Mandalay—a city of a little over a million located in the middle of the country along Irrawaddy River—is relatively young. It is a past capital of Myanmar, and as in other cases in the country's history, it was founded at the behest of the ruler of on February 13, 1857. Construction of Mandalay Palace begin the same year, and it is a center piece of the city. Square in shape, relative to the city, it is gigantic. It is completely enclosed by four walls, each over 2 km, which are in turn surrounded by water-filled moats.

Most in Myanmar agree that Mandalay's Water Festival is the wildest, and one 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's area. Together the Palace and moats form a locus where activities, ideologies, hopes, frustrations and joys are publically expressed, and this outpouring makes the location what it is during this period. At the same time, because the celebration coordinates around the Palace and moats—much as hands do around bottles or lungs around the humidity or dustiness of air during breathing exercises—the festival and bodily movements are co-determined and to that extent controlled by the environment. On a more immediate level, the same occurs, for example, because wading through water or crowds has a different character than walking on dry ground or empty roads.

The status of the palace is a little ambiguous in the eyes of locals, who are said to resent tourists visiting it on the grounds that it was built with slave labor. The resentment may simultaneously arise from the fact that it remains a symbol of state authority, with signs outside reading, "The *tatmadaw* [army] and the people

cooperate and crush all those harming the union" or "only when the army is strong will the nation be strong." Entry, moreover, is reserved for military and government officials during the Festival. Thus while physically embedded in the city, the Palace is cut off and made more distant. However, the water and canals that consecrate the Festival simultaneously pull the Palace and the city into each other's neighborhood.

During the festival, enough water is launched from the canals that surrounding areas flood to the point that a first impression might be that a natural disaster had hit. The water is literally deep enough in some portions that children swim in the streets and in nearby sewers. Cars obviously stall. And what goes on here sets the tone for the entire city, which is similarly wild throughout, albeit often with reduced water because less is conveniently available, though residents inventively find sources. Revelers also take advantage of string of channels, small lakes and the Irrawaddy River just a little outside the city center.

Now it might seem that I am emphasizing physical structure and paying less attention to culture, but I hope to show the two are intertwined. In the earlier example about the Great Depression, Steinbeck (1939) goes on to say that "[a] certain physical pattern is needed for the building of a world" (p. 266). In his example, this includes objects of concern such as "water, a river bank, a stream, a spring, or even a faucet unguarded." And he says that "there is needed enough flat land to pitch the tents, a little brush or wood to build the fires," and more besides (pp. 266-267). On a hypothetical level, though things do not play out so neatly, one could imagine Mandalay's Water Festival taking similar form over a period of time in the past: one group goes to the moat for the water and because it is a good gathering place; others come for the same reason and for the company; booths are set up and soon you have a little world, with its own patterns of experience. The sense of experience here is like that Dewey used when he said that experience is equivalent to culture—"culture" here understood as embodied and habitual patterns of

empathy to nature that is often associated with Buddhism. Moreover, they transgress that central Buddhist precept that desire—and especially needless ones such as smoking—are primary sources of suffering.

activity that constitute both our worlds and experiences, as when we talk about the “French experience,” “culture” or “world,” or the “world” or “experience” of parenthood. This notion is also familiar to phenomenologists, especially those in a Heideggerian and Merleau-Pontian vein.

To repeat, Heidegger suggests that worlds gather around concerns, and Steinbeck gives a nice illustration of how this plays out. So in addition to a wish for water, space and company, what are other concerns of people in Myanmar during the water festival? Above all, people want to have fun. Most of the country—including many shops, all public transport and so forth—shuts down during the celebration. Also important is the symbolic cleansing or catharsis. After all, this is among the stated reasons for the soakings. Additionally, there is catharsis in the sense of acting out against an oppressive regime. People also seem to enjoy the anonymity of being in a crowd, and sometimes where masks resembling that worn by one of the main characters from the movie *V for Vendetta* (2005). And then there is the urge to just be naughty, to lose control and violate norms, but this is simultaneously a way of seizing control, particularly against oppressive conditions. The situation is comparable to sex. As Chudaba argues, sex can involve, for example, Reichian methods of releasing orgasmic energy (see Shusterman 2000, esp. p. 176), while simultaneously being more “about losing control than controlling” (Chudaba 2017, p. 91).

The naughtiness and losing control plays out in a variety of ways, some innocent, some less so. First and for most, it includes soaking others in water and getting soaked. Virtually everyone partakes, with children taking especial delight, sometimes squealing as they soak passing motorcycles, pedestrians, people through train windows and more. There is an inversion of authority since adults are typically targeted, but also participate in the game both by soaking and by, for example, almost playfully closing metal slots over glassless train windows to block barrages of water, in a kind of synchronized transaction with revelers. Tourists

are especially popular targets not only among children, but also adults.

Another inversion of authority occurs insofar as people seem to be acting out against the regime, and instilling a kind of pandemonium not typically permitted. In fact, large gatherings are normally forbidden. The naughtiness includes, moreover, conventional forms of acting out such as public drinking and sharing bottles with random strangers, often even from passing vehicles. At the more extreme end, theft goes on, with tourists especially targeted, normally very rare, among other reasons, because of penalties involving hard labor. This is only ubiquitous around the Palace and only during the Festival, presumably because the crowds create both safety and opportunity. Yet the opportunity here afforded is in keeping with the general naughtiness of the festival.

So these are how some basic concerns play out, and the concerns and their effects are similar once again to Steinbeck's example and thus also to Dewey's account of experience, both aesthetic and ordinary. Here people's concerns for water, naughtiness and a central location push them towards the most prominent structure in the city, the Palace, around which their activity organizes. And with this as the center of festivities, the wildness radiates through the city, giving Mandalay the reputation as the best place to be in Myanmar during the Water Festival.

Crucially, the Palace also answers concerns of the government. Subtle control is exercised by allowing cultural events to occur on official stages—for example, songs and dances; and by allowing various corporate entities to set up large elevated stands along the canal with attractive, fashionably dressed young men and women mechanically bobbing to blaring dance music and showering people with gentle trickles, as opposed to the almost fire hose rushes delivered by some of the informal pumping stations. The habitual and hence pre-reflective informality of the everyday world of Myanmar seems an additional pre-condition of the Festival taking the wild form it does in Mandalay. It also relates to the

government's response, which seems to be to let people act out, but in a controlled way, with the palace area even officially shut down and cleared after certain times of night. As a central locus, moreover, the palace helps ensure that the main force of activities is confined to the four streets surrounding it.

Arguably, then, a basic concern of government authorities is restraining people who, while accustomed to political oppression, are not especially used to being regulated.

There is informality in everyday life in Myanmar, which, in spite of political oppression, is much less regulated and in this sense freer than the West. Such informality is common in other impoverished regions because poor people often depend on it to get by, yet it varies between country, with Myanmar on the high extreme. For example, as trains pull into stations, you will encounter numerous food vendors, with some engaged in activities that would be totally impermissible in the West, for example, walking around with devices with boiling oil heated by coals selling samosas and assuredly doing so without any kind of formal license. Vendors will hop on trains ready to prepare and sell food. They will then leave the car, and come back at a later stop to retrieve the dishes. You can sleep or sit on the floor of trains or under seats if you can fit; sit with your feet dangling off the back smoking a cigar despite no smoking signs and so on. The police on the train do not care. Distinct from the military, unarmed and very informal too, they often remove their uniforms to escape the heat once the train is on its way. It is all no problem. Random motorcycles will pull up and offer rides for a negotiated price. Three or four people and children can pile on too. No problem here either. The habitual informality of the everyday world of Myanmar seems an additional pre-condition of the Festival taking the wild form it does in Mandalay. It also relates to the government's response, which seems to be to let people act out, albeit in a controlled way, with the palace area, to repeat, officially closed and cleared after certain times of night. As a central locus, to repeat once more, the

palace enables the confinement of the main force of activities to the four streets surrounding it.

Another important cultural factor worth re-emphasizing is that the festival partly originates 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 in fact captures and retraces central themes of this article. It recollects Heidegger's (1949, 1951) later work, which speaks about jugs, chalices and bridges gathering people and worlds, while also emphasizing religious and consecrating aspects. This, in turn, suggests a more complicated, cultural version of basic sensorimotor coordinations and aesthetic experience as described by Dewey and Shusterman. Only in this case the city and therefore activities within it and especially the festival are organized around the Palace and moats. In some ways they are also tied and constrained by it. This too is captured by the idea of binding that is etymologically connected to the word "religion," and is, moreover, a central feature of the festival. It central because while the festival is a space for losing control and thereby seizing it from an oppressive regime, it simultaneously involves being controlled or constrained by both the environment and the regime. On Chudaba's (2017) analysis, this marks a departure from Shusterman's account, which emphasizes increased bodily control through breathing exercises and other measures. This combination of taking control, being controlled and losing control—mirrored in the religious, political and informal aspects of the culture—infuses both the festival and the space, to a significant extent making them what they are for the nearly weeklong event.

V. Conclusion

In this article I set about doing what Shusterman calls an “analytic somaesthetics” of Mandalay’s Water Festival or what otherwise might be thought of as a pragmatic body phenomenology. The reference to the latter, in addition to describing what was done, draws attention to the historical importance of pragmatists and phenomenologists to embodied outlooks, along with their influence on Shusterman. I will review what has been argued.

An initial grounding point was that human experience emerges through practical transactions in the world. This means that the human subject and other factors in the world mutually work upon one another, as when a tourist’s stride presses into a sandy trail, and the trail presses back, modulating and patterning the tourist’s gait, so that a series of interactions integrates into experience. Here experience is not merely integrated in the sense that it pulls together, but also in the sense that it arises out of a “thoroughgoing integration of what philosophy discriminates as ‘subject’ and ‘object’” (Dewey 1934, p. 277). Again, the yielding sand modifies the tourist’s tread, the tourist’s tread the sand; and through this mutual shaping—this integration of one to the other—the sandy quality of “soft give” is realized and brought concretely into experience. The same holds for other perceptual modalities, as illustrated by the case of sensory substitution devices. Notice that while brains are involved in such transactions, the doings and undergoings that centrally constitute experience are not, as the saying goes, “in the head.” Based on this, one would expect the bulk of worldly dealings to be pre-reflective, which they in fact are.

Shusterman rightly suggests that the somatic turn in philosophy comes with increased recognition that aesthetic experience is not confined to fine art. A second point accordingly stressed was that aesthetic experience is a variety of everyday experience. This means that the family of features characterizing the

latter also characterizes the former. As the two are not mere equivalents, however, it also means the former encompasses something more. Aesthetic experience is more integrated than generic experience in the degree to which it hangs together, involves mutual adaptation of subject and object and unites the subject’s capacities into joint action. As with experience in general, it entails creative and active engagement, reconstruction and transformation, yet here too in higher degree. An aesthetic experience is occasioned by what might loosely be called a concentrated sense of reality. To borrow once more from Dewey (1934), it “is defined by those situations and episodes that we spontaneously refer to as being ‘real experiences’” (p. 36). It has a singular quality: it stands out as unique, as a unified whole partly because of its narrative-like quality, and it is literally the sort of experience that we speak of in the singular, as when we say, that was *an* experience. It also stands as an enduring memorial to what some kind of thing or event may be. On this account, an aesthetic experience may be summarized thus: it is an experience that builds dramatically in time, culminating into a coherent whole, yet a whole within which and through which things are transformed into sharper and more coherent forms.

What is true of aesthetic experience on an individual level holds on a social level. Though not typically emphasized, this is consistent with Dewey’s thought and hence with the intellectual trajectory leading to Shusterman. Dewey in fact argues that the feeling of being isolated within our own private sphere of subjectivity is symptomatic of a kind of pathology or breakdown, with thinkers ranging from James to Nietzsche to Heidegger also defending this position. For Dewey, aesthetic experience is the contrary of such breakdown (see Dewey 1934, p. 19; also see Kestenbaum 1977, p. 27). The bulk of scholarship on aesthetics, however, appears insensitive to this. It overwhelmingly adopts the model of the lone perceiver engaging with works of fine art or beautiful, sublime settings. This is in spite of the fact that throughout most of history, not to mention everyday life, aesthetic

experience has been overwhelmingly shared in rituals, memorable feasts, formal and informal celebrations, romantic episodes and other social gatherings. Mandalay's Water Festival is overwhelmingly a shared experience, but not just because it coordinates people into group celebration. It is also shared by virtue of supplying a kind bacchanal rupture that and erodes normal boundaries between self and other.

This rupture relates to political dimensions of the festival, which seems a pre-reflective protest reaction that governing authorities attempt to control in order to keep the population in check. Among the revelers, the situation is akin to a child being in the sun too long, then throwing objects in frustration to vent without knowing why; or like the giddiness that arises after a long week and leads one to let loose with friends in a non-calculated way. From the government's side, the situation is akin to parents or friends, who know complete containment is dangerous and accordingly allow frustrated individuals to act out, but only within degrees.

It is not just the repressive situation in Myanmar that makes the festival take on its bacchanal form, however. The informal everyday cultural habits of the Burmese also feed the pandemonium, and contribute to the richly somatic—that is, emotional and embodied—quality that binds the celebration together into a culture or world. Notice that cultures and worlds are shared. For pragmatists and phenomenologists, they are also exemplars of experience, as when—to repeat—we speak of the culture, world or experience of student life or the Budapest experience, culture or world. Worlds, however, as Steinbeck observes, require physical patterns, and this is also so of the Water Festival. Thus, much as the activities of the hand synchronize to the contours of a bottle, the Festival's organizing locus is Mandalay Palace. Aside from centrality, size and physical and historical prominence, the palace is a good gathering place insofar as its moats supply water and the palace furnishes a symbol of authority to act out against.

The palace, as the physical and emotional core of the Festival, with its source of water and its religious

significance that involves a ritual cleansing for the New Year, is accordingly the pole around which human bodies synchronize. It is also where they lose control and where others attempt to reestablish it. Together this makes the festival what it is for the nearly weeklong event, while also making the space around Mandalay Palace what it is during this period.

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