UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

https://helda.helsinki.fi

Vinod Balakrishnan and Swathi Elizabeth Kurian, Somaesthetics and Yogastra : A Reading through Films

Korpelainen, Noora-Helena P

2020-12-31
Aalborg University
http://hdl.handle.net/10138/338834
Korpelainen, N-H P 2020, 'Vinod Balakrishnan and Swathi Elizabeth Kurian, Somaesthetics and Yogastra : A Reading through Films', Journal of somaesthetics, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 97-101. https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.jos.v6i2.6335

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository. https://helda.helsinki.fi
This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.
Please cite the original version.

Vinod Balakrishnan and Swathi Elizabeth Kurian, *Somaesthetics and Yogasūtra: A Reading through Films*

Book Review

Noora-Helena Korpelainen

Can somaesthetics bridge the Eastern and Western philosophical discourses and practices? This interesting question, I believe, motivates Vinod Balakrishnan's and Swathi Elizabeth Kurian's *Somaesthetics and Yogasūtra*. The polarities are great in the book's ambitious examination of the correspondences between a relatively recent, mainly Anglophone philosophical spin-off from American pragmatist philosophy, and the ancient Indian collection of tightly intertwined aphorisms in Sanskrit. The book's point of departure certainly excites a student of yoga and aesthetics, and I can only join in the chorus with the book's general statement, that we need to value the lived body as the site of experience and development, the critique repeatedly argued by professor Richard Shusterman (e.g. 2012). The book focuses on Shusterman's and Patañjali's ideas about practice, performance, mindfulness, and cultivation, and it uses four characters from four feature films as leverage to claim that these counterparts have "a similar ideology" (p. 9). While the book's contemporarily relevant, albeit ubiquitously affirmative elaboration does encourage the reader to retire into the Gymnastic school of philosophy, the book should be read regardless of the title as a narrow survey.

The book appears, by and large, unfamiliar with its own limitations. While being somaesthetically well-considered, the book doesn't take into account the *Yogasūtra* as an individual and well-discussed text. The book equates the *Yogasūtra*, without justifying or spelling it out, with yoga teacher B. K. S. Iyengar's (1993) influential modern interpretation, which only the book's third chapter hosts explicitly. Especially based on this equation, I find the book's analysis generally unsound. Although somaesthetics may elucidate practicing yoga (Korpelainen, 2019), the relationship between somaesthetics and the *Yogasūtra* is, I believe, far more complex because of the relevance of isolation (*kaivalya*) in Patañjali's system. Unfortunately, the book is not likely to shed much light on this complexity, since Iyengar's interpretation remains uncritically considered, and other treatises on the Yogasūtra, such as modern yoga research (e.g. Baier et al., 2018), are neglected. Furthermore, yoga's exhaustively numerous traditions and embodiments remain unregarded, except for a brief mention in the Foreword by Richard Shusterman. In addition, somaesthetics is approached almost without any opposing critique, and the book beholds, without justifying it, only Shusterman's own works in somaesthetics. The book presents somaesthetics and yoga as solutions to our individual, social, political, and cultural problems that come from separating the mind and the body in both theory and practice. Yet Balakrishnan

and Kurian situate the elaboration in the overall philosophical discourse mainly with secondary sources, such as Shusterman's own works and Barry Allen's *Striking Beauty* (2015). Confusion inevitably follows from the book's ambiguous scope and because the book brings together, uncritically, concepts and ideas from the partially contrasting areas of kung fu, yoga, *Kāmasūtra*, somaesthetics, political theory, and the films being analyzed. Furthermore, the book's main argument, that a yogi is a soma, raises doubts about their understanding of both Patañjali's and Shusterman's conceptions.

The book's upholding topic, the body, "is read as a site for humanistic improvability with perfectibility as an ideal" (p. 18). In the introduction, Balakrishnan and Kurian promote the ideas of yoga as profoundly based in bodily practice and practice as a means for cultivating the soma. The book's four chapters explain the body's progression through practice, empowerment, and mindfulness towards cultivated ability. The *Yogasūtra* also forms four parts (*pāda*): *Samādhi* (immersion), *Sādhana* (practice), *Vibhūti* (powers), and *Kaivalya* (isolation). *Somaesthetics and Yogasūtra* is, however, structurally independent. It deals unsystematically though illustratively with the *Yogasūtra*'s somaesthetically favorable concepts and *sūtras*. The result is that the *Yogasūtra* seems to function much like the films, "as a subtext which convincingly argues for somaesthetics" (p. 35). The field of film studies is unmentioned in the book, and the reading of the selected positive psychology films (Niemiec & Wedding, 2014) remains uncontested. The book's conclusion merely repeats the message that we need to pay (more) attention to everything we, as bodies, do in our everyday lives. I welcome this valuing of the everyday.

"Chapter One: Body as a Channel for Empowerment" considers the nature and significance of practice by considering Haṭha Yoga and the kung fu film *The Karate Kid* (2010). The chapter interprets the protagonist Dre's development in performing everyday action to argue that Shusterman's conception of mindful repetition and Patañjali's conception of *abhyāsa* (practice) are characteristically and structurally similar. Balakrishnan and Kurian hold that both conceptions capture the dynamics of practice leading from repetition to mindful awareness and facilitating the simultaneous development of both the mind and the body. Following Iyengar's interpretation of the *Yogasūtra*, which can be read as contrasting Patañjali's conception, Balakrishnan and Kurian regard both the development in the practice and its goal as fundamentally based on the union of the body and the mind (and the soul). As Broo (2010), among others, points out, for Patañjali, the unquestionable purpose of all yoga practice is *kaivalya*, *puruṣa*'s isolation from *prakṛti*. These metaphysical concepts, which the *Yogasūtra* shares with *Sākṃhya*, are not explicitly discussed in the book with the result that, considering the book's general topic, perhaps the most relevant Patañjali's conception, namely that of the body, remains ambiguous in the book.

That being said, the elaboration in the first chapter is, however, developed. However, the book's discussion about body consciousness is hardly convincing, because of the selective reading of the *Yogasūtra*, which retains only a supportive role in "Chapter Two: Body as a Work of Art." The chapter presents Shusterman's work in line with the ideas from the ancient Indian book of love, *Kāmasūtra*. Through reading the historic and erotic film *Kamasutra: A Tale of Love* (1996) and its protagonist Maya's social empowerment (from being born to a king's courtesan to being a king's courtesan (!)), Balakrishnan and Kurian describe body consciousness as a means to cultivate aesthetic sensibility which is taken to influence one's present experience as well as one's life course. Unfortunately, Patañjali's essential pairing of practice and non-attachment gains too little attention in the chapter, since the discussion of *vairāgya* (non-attachment) remains introductory, like the intriguing discussions of *pratyāhāra* (withdrawal of senses) and the *Guṇa* theory. Furthermore, considering the film and the discussion of empowerment,

the absence of both the concept of *brahmacarya* (chastity) and the discussion about *Siddhis* (perfections) described in the *Vibhūti Pāda* is surprising. In addition, I find the argument of Maya's transformation into a yogini mainly disturbing. Maya's overall detachment after her beloved is killed can be read also, for example, as a sign of depression, especially since the film doesn't explicitly consider Maya a yogini. In using the same dialectics to both yogi and yogini, the book fails to regard Maya on a par with a yogi and the other protagonists discussed in the book, as well as to address the relevant question of the female body.

If the question of the body in the considered correspondence remains open, the question of the mind is left in the fog of interdisciplinarity since too many concepts, like self and *citta*, are treated ambiguously, especially in "Chapter Three: Body as a Self-Expressive Unit." The chapter discusses mindfulness and the *Yogasūtra*'s epistemology, which however seems to be mixed with the epistemology of Advaita Vedanta because they follow Iyengar's interpretation. The chapter claims to analyze the drama film *The Peaceful Warrior* (2006). However, a significant part of the analysis is based non-transparently on the book *Peaceful Warrior: The Graphic Novel* by Dan Millman (2010). Still, the comparison of the bodily grounded mental ability of the film's two main characters, gymnast Dan and his mentor Socrates, presents illustratively the disciple's knowledge formation progress. It's just that Balakrishnan and Kurian also read the progression described by Patañjali uniquely by maintaining that Dan becomes attached to his diet after reaching "the state of renewal" described in the *sūtra* 4:31 (p. 90). Remembering that the finishing *sūtras* 4:29–34 of the whole *Yogasūtra* regard the end of any practice and that non-attachment is related to a yogi's character in the *sūtra* 4:7 (Broo, 2010, pp. 215, 237–242), Balakrishnan's and Kurian's analysis is clearly untenable. Not-surprisingly, the chapter concludes that a peaceful warrior is a yogi.

The book takes the identification of a yogi even further in "Chapter Four: Body as a Weapon of Protest," which again gives *Yogasūtra* only a supportive role. The chapter mingles political philosophy into the reading of the kung fu film *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978) and its protagonist San Te's somaesthetic training. The chapter identifies San Te with Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*, Shusterman's soma, and finally with Patañjali's yogi. Balakrishnan and Kurian use the idea of body politic to recognize the individual's transformations explained in the *Yogasūtra* (p. 109) as "related to the macro social level in terms of scale." However, the reading of the progression of the transformations, described in the related *sūtras* 3:9–13 (pp. 109–110), is reversed (see. e.g. Broo, 2010, pp. 151–155). In addition, the central question of volition is problematic in relation to the *Yogasūtra* when it is not read through Iyengar's interpretation because in the progression of the practice all action ceases, including will. For Balakrishnan and Kurian, a somaesthetically cultivated ability to function for the good of others by both setting an example and acting efficiently marks the end of the body's progress, the "full liberation." This perspective, however, removes non-existence from Patañjali's system, politicizes the body's progression, and explains a yogi uniquely as an everyday hero. Interestingly, this questions the meaning of the everyday, and it calls for incorporating the discussions of everyday aesthetics. Yogi's powers, like the ability to take over another's body (e.g. White, 2012), exceed the intuitive understanding of everyday actions. As regards the film, which ends to the teaching of martial arts to laymen, I would have hoped that the book's elaboration of non-violence (*ahimsa*) would have been more developed. Finally, in the Foreword, Shusterman describes "the soma (the living, sentient, purposive body) as the essential medium of our sensory perception and performance and as the vehicle of our self-expression and self-stylization, the site where our values and tastes are exemplified" (p. 1). Thus, in arguing that a yogi, a cultivated being, is a soma, the book seems to undermine Shusterman's understanding of our everyday existence.

Though the comparison of somaesthetics and yoga philosophy is exciting and calls for further elaboration, in Balakrishnan's and Kurian's book, the consideration of these counterparts remains unbalanced, uncritical, and partially undeveloped. The book could have benefitted significantly from a more narrowly defined scope and aim, as in the separately published articles on the book's content (Balakrishnan and Kurian 2017, 2018). Although the book's set-up is promising, the reading experience is unfortunately frustrating due to the negligent and non-transparent use of sources.

Acknowledgement

The finalization of this review was done with the help of The North Savo Regional Fund of Finnish Cultural Foundation. I thank Harri Mäcklin, Måns Broo, Marko A. A. Mikkilä, and Jussi Sainio, as well as the editors of the *Journal of Somaesthetics* and the anonymous language reviewer.

References

Allen, B. (2015). *Striking beauty: A philosophical look at the Asian martial arts*. Columbia University Press.

Baier, K., Maas, P. A., & Preisendanz K. (Eds.) (2018). *Yoga in Transformation*. Vienna University Press: https://www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com/downloads/openAccess/OA_978-3-8471-0862-7.pdf

Balakrishnan V. & Kurian S. E. (2017). Somaesthetic encounters with Socrates: The peaceful warrior as yogi. *Journal of Somaesthetics, 3*(1), 117–132. https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.jos. v3i1%20&%202.1894

Balakrishnan V., & Kurian S. E. (2018). Thinking through the body of Maya: Somaesthetic frames from Mira Nair's Kamasutra. In R. Shusterman (Ed.), *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*. Brill, Studies in Somaesthetics, vol. 1, pp. 197–216: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004361928_014

Broo, M. (Ed. and Trans.) (2010). *Patañjalin Yoga-sūtra: Joogan filosofia*. Gaudeamus.

Chia–Liang L. (Director) and Shaw Brothers (Producers) (1978). *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* [Film]. Shaw Brothers.

Iyengar, B. K. S. (1993). *Light on the Yogasutras of Patañjali*. Harper Collins.

Larson, G. J. (2012). Patañjala Yoga in Practice. In D. G. White (Ed.). *Yoga in practice* (pp. 73–96). Princeton University Press.

Millman, D. (2010). *Peaceful Warrior: The Graphic Novel*. Illustrated by Andrew Winegarner. H.J. Kramer, New World.

Nair, M. (Director) (1996). *Kamasutra: A Tale of Love* [Film]. NDF International.

Niemiec R. M., & Wedding D. (2014). *Positive psychology at the movies 2: Using films to build character strength and well-being* (2nd ed.). Hogrefe.

Korpelainen, N.–H. (2019). Sparks of yoga: Reconsidering the aesthetic in modern postural yoga. *Journal of Somaesthetics, 5*(1), 46–60. https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.jos.v5i1.3320

Salva, V. (Director) (2006). *The peaceful warrior* [Film]. DEJ Productions.

Shusterman, R. (2012). *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*. Cambridge University Press.

Zwart, H. (Director) (2010). *The Karate Kid* [Film]. Columbia Pictures.

White, D. G. (2012). Yoga, Brief History of an Idea. In D. G. White (Ed.), *Yoga in Practice* (pp. 1–23). Princeton University Press.