

# **Starting from *Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence and Shusterman's Somaesthetics. Ethics, Politics, and the Art of Living***

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This essay takes its cue from the collective volume *Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence and Shusterman's Somaesthetics. Ethics, Politics, and the Art of Living* (eds. Valentina Antoniol and Stefano Marino, Bloomsbury Academic, 2024) is a timely and ambitious work that discusses two major philosophical approaches to the body and subjectivity. While the book's essays explore the intersections and tensions between the aesthetics of existence and somaesthetics—highlighting their shared concern with embodied practices of self-formation, ethical transformation, and resistance to normative power structures—my reading gradually turned into an extended reflection on the notion of the Bio-Soma that emerges from these dialogues. The collection explores the intersections and tensions between aesthetics of existence and somaesthetics, highlighting their shared concern with embodied practices of self-formation, ethical transformation, and resistance to normative power structures. Through a rich and well-structured set of contributions, the volume maps the body as a critical medium, political agent, and aesthetic space of creativity and reciprocity. Contemporary debates on the ethics and politics of embodied subjectivity are relevant for rethinking the relationship between bio- and soma-power today.

Keywords: somaesthetics; aesthetics of existence; bio-soma; embodied practices

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## Aesthetic Existence and Somaesthetics

Among the Richard Shusterman's studies focusing on Michel Foucault and his consideration of the body, there seems to be a progression towards the development of the discipline of Somaesthetics. However, Shusterman tends to criticize the aspects of Foucault's philosophical approach to the body, mainly the absence of the practical, transformative, and improvement aspects of corporeality and life. Nevertheless, Shusterman acknowledges Foucault to be a pivotal figure in redefining and integrating the role of the body to the contemporary philosophical discourse. He particularly notes Foucault's genealogies of disciplines and bodily practices, such as discipline, normalization, and control, illustrating the historical and political shaping of bodies. Foucault's contention that subjectivity is a historical construct and not a given, endured and inscribed within bodies through practices and power relations, is also of great significance. Shusterman further appreciates Foucault's later texts, *L'usage des plaisirs* (1984) and *Le souci de soi* (1984), where Foucault reconsiders ancient philosophy as 'techne tou biou' or 'the art of living'. Foucault ascribed to 'the art of living' a range of ethical and aesthetic practices of self-formation which Shusterman discusses in *L'Éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté* (1984).

Foucault, in this regard, considers a self-embodied philosophy of the body, one that through the body 'breaks' the mental and abstraction that has dominated modernity. In the light of the significance that Shusterman ascribes to Foucault, the author also points out a great limitation that Foucault has in his work. The limitation, to which Shusterman considers Foucault's predominately discursive and critical approach to the body. Shusterman appreciates the work that Foucault contributed to understanding biopower and disciplinary practices as his best work; while Shusterman '...neithers the positive, the experiential that transformative aspect of the body...'. In Foucault's later work of 'care of the self' he still primarily engages in the ethical and discursive practices while neglecting the somatic dimensions of breathing, posture, touch, sensory, and perception. Shusterman believes this difference is important. For him, philosophy should not only expose the mechanisms of power. It should also

provide means and practices to develop bodily awareness and refine the everyday experience in its aesthetic dimensions. Shusterman's somaesthetics is, in this regard, a critical extension of - and, at the same time, a practical overcoming of Foucault's project. While Foucault emphasizes the historical and political dimensions of the bodies, the power relations that shape and control them, Shusterman suggests a different, constructive approach that draws from practices of somatic education - like the Feldenkrais method, the Alexander Technique, yoga, martial arts, and even some modern forms of combat - framed as strategies for individual emancipation and social change. Where Foucault is mostly concerned with the genealogy and critique of power relations, Shusterman is concerned with the ethics and the aesthetics of somatic cultivation in active form: to enhance perception, adjust posture, promote bodily health, and evoke creativity. Thus, in this sense, Shusterman's somaesthetics is a practical enhancement of Foucault's philosophy of the body, rooted in the bodies and practices that transform one's experience.

To that end, *Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence and Shusterman's Somaesthetics*<sup>1</sup> examines the philosophical ideas of Michel Foucault and Richard Shusterman and places their similarities and differences under the spotlight. Both philosophers are concerned with the body at the heart of human existence and share a goal for an aesthetics of life that moves beyond the general confines of aesthetics and opens it up to ethical, social, and political fields. Foucault offers the "aesthetics of existence" as ethical and political praxis that constitutes subjectivity through procedures of subjectivation and techniques of the self. Shusterman offers "somaesthetics" based on the body as a platform for sensorial experience, self-cultivation, and artistic self-fashioning. Both eschew repression in academia and insist on an interdisciplinary treatment of human life. Foucault and Shusterman influence one another. Shusterman recognizes the significance of Foucault's thought in his own development of somaesthetics. Foucault is concerned with resistance against power norms through practices of liberty, while Shusterman is concerned with body development to enhance quality of life. The purpose of this edited volume by Valentina Antoniol and Stefano Marino is to put at center stage the potential of their work to make such contemporary issues as sexuality, power, and emancipation relevant and to challenge readers to consider how their philosophies can be brought into the material reality of everyday life and social problems.

Michel Foucault's aesthetics of existence is a work produced in the third phase of his philosophical thought, a departure from his previous research on power and discipline. It operates with the power that people exercise over themselves via habits that shape them as moral and aesthetic subjects and

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<sup>1</sup> V. Antoniol, S. Marino, (eds.), *Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence and Shusterman's Somaesthetics*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, New York, Dublin, 2024, pp. 198.

make their lives into a work of art. It arises against the backdrop of Foucault's examination of the 'arts of the self', i.e. Greco-Roman antiquity and early Christian era techniques and practices people employed to manage themselves and others. Foucault examines the early Christian era and Greco-Roman antiquity, and how self-care entered into the construction of subjectivity. The form of *tekhne tou biou* is explained by Foucault to be an art of life which converts life into art. It is a technique founded on novel and inventive procedures rather than rigid precepts in order for the subject to mold their own life. Foucault insists that the aesthetics of living are not a return to the sovereign or essentialized subject but rather as freedom practices that resist processes of submission. The invocation of Greco-Roman antiquity is also used to critically reassess our present and historical possibilities of the present. The main characteristics of the ethics of being rely on the Greco-Roman antiquity's philosophical routines, more precisely on Hellenistic ethics and the Socratic-Platonic and Stoic traditions.

It is not for Foucault a shrinking to an introspective character or a single act, but rather a continuous one and a multifaceted one whereby individuals look after their own lives, bodies, and souls and constitute themselves as moral subjects with the ability to lead a conscious and free existence. Self-care is working labor of self-mastery, i.e., possessing the ability to regulate pleasures, affects, and deeds in pursuit of inner equilibrium and moral integrity; a deed of self-constitution, whereby the subject constitutes itself and remakes its relation to the world; and a series of daily disciplines - spiritual exercises, meditation, reflection, physical and intellectual training, toward producing critical discernment, sensorial keenness, and truthfulness. The process cannot occur in isolation, but is indeed deeply interconnected with others: self-care actually involves caring for others, and thereby there forms an indistinguishable connection between personal morality and civic responsibility.

This is where Foucault's concept of technologies of the self comes in, which refers to the set of practices through which individuals act on themselves to know, transform, and improve themselves. Foucault defines them as operations on the body, soul, thoughts, and conduct aimed at achieving states of perfection, happiness, or wisdom. These technologies include spiritual exercises, such as meditation, reflection, and writing about oneself, which are useful for developing inner awareness; forms of bodily discipline, which include regimes of abstinence, physical training, and control of desires to strengthen the body and mind; and practices of self-analysis, aimed at critically monitoring one's behavior and guiding personal transformation. Far from being instruments of submission, Foucault sees technologies of the self as active forms of freedom: they allow individuals to escape external impositions, develop a margin of autonomy from the mechanisms of power, and shape a unique and authentic lifestyle in which ethics and aesthetics intertwine in the construction of the self.

Similarly, somaesthetics broadens the field of aesthetics by including the body as a place of sensory and creative experience and proposes a normative approach that differs from Foucault's aesthetics of existence. While sharing Foucault's focus on the body in the transformation of the self, Shusterman differs in his pluralism, the accessibility of somatic practices, and his focus on continuous improvement, avoiding extreme and transgressive experiences. The ethical and aesthetic dimension of somaesthetics considers the body to live a philosophical life, challenging oppressive norms and developing new forms of subjectivity. It promotes bodily practices such as meditation, yoga, and Tai Chi, and offers tools for interpreting social movements and connecting art to everyday life. Through the concept of soma power, the body is seen as a vehicle for emancipation and social transformation. Somaesthetics represents an innovative project that combines theory and practice to improve body awareness and contribute to personal and social improvement.

A fruitful comparison between Shusterman's somaesthetics and Foucault's aesthetics of existence highlights significant similarities and differences. Both thinkers consider the body central to self-transformation and resistance to oppressive social norms, integrating ethics and aesthetics and criticizing disciplinary norms. However, they diverge in approach, style, and goals. Shusterman's somaesthetics is pragmatic and improvements, promoting accessible somatic practices and a harmonious integration of body and mind, with normative and political potential for social emancipation. Foucault's aesthetics of existence, on the other hand, is critical and deconstructionist, focusing on limit and transgressive experiences to challenge social conventions and create new forms of subjectivity. While, Shusterman emphasizes continuous improvement and bodily activism, Foucault explores individual freedom and resistance to power. Both offer valuable perspectives for understanding the role of the body in philosophy and politics, but with distinct methods and goals.

### **The body as a discipline of improvement**

In Foucault's approach, self-care and technologies of the self-become active tools of subjectivation and transformation. It is worth noting that, during the 20th century, philosophical and practical attention to the living body became increasingly intense and articulated, giving rise to a real paradigm shift with respect to the modern tradition. In this context, Shusterman offers an original contribution, criticizing some phenomenological conceptions and rethinking corporeality in a somaesthetic key. In regard to Merleau-Ponty, he observes in *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy Of Mindfulness And Somaesthetics* (2008) that the French philosopher tends to conceive of the body primarily as a carnal and heavy body, a body that is perceived in its materiality and resistance, but whose living somatic

experience remains in the background, as if concrete sensitivity were perceived more in the flesh than in conscious vitality. Specifically, Shusterman underlines the elements used by Merleau-Ponty that devalue the somatic aspect of the body. Merleau-Ponty denies the possibility of observing one's own body with a view to somatic improvement. He overlooks the value of everyday somatic awareness without anticipating the possibility of improving one's life.

Merleau-Ponty's most radical argument against reflective somatic observation is that one simply cannot observe one's own body at all, because it is the permanent, invariant perspective through which we observe other things. Unlike ordinary objects, the body "defies exploration and is always presented to me from the same angle . . . To say that it is always near me, always there for me, is to say that it is never really in front of me, that I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perceptions, that it is with me." I cannot change my perspective with respect to my body as I can with external objects. "I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk round them, but my body itself is a thing which I do not observe: in order to be able to do so, I should need the use of a second body" (PoP, 90–91). "I am always on the same side of my body; it presents itself to me in one invariable perspective" (VI, 148).<sup>2</sup>

According to Shusterman, what is missing in Merleau-Ponty's powerful account of the body's philosophical significance is a concrete sense of the real body as a site for disciplined, conscious practices aimed at reconstructing somatic perception and performance to achieve richer experiences and actions. Pragmatism offers a complementary perspective, more oriented toward active, embodied engagement in somatic awareness practices. Its aim is to create better future experiences rather than to recover a lost primordial unity of perception, a "return to that world which precedes knowledge." Shusterman places somatic awareness before somatic improvement, arguing that much of twentieth-century philosophical work on the body has not been fully comprehensive in addressing both aspects.

He also takes up the thinking of Simone de Beauvoir<sup>3</sup> (*Le Deuxième sexe*, 1949, 1970). The "body of the second sex" does not only concern women, but also includes other bodily forms considered socially "minor" or "weak," such as those of the elderly. While recognizing the emancipatory potential of bodily awareness, Shusterman argues that Beauvoir remains ambivalent toward somatic cultivation, fearing that it might divert attention from political and social struggles. Nevertheless, her thought provides valuable insights for understanding the body not only as an object of oppression but also as a source of freedom and self-expression through somatic awareness and critical reflection. On the other hand, he proposes a change of perspective: these bodies should not only be indulged or preserved, but can and must be cultivated and improved through conscious somatic practices. In this sense, he takes the concept of the 'weaker sex' beyond Beauvoir's meaning, transforming it from a

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<sup>2</sup> R. Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy Of Mindfulness And Somaesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 102 (PoP is the acronym for M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*).

<sup>3</sup> Ivi, Chapter 3 *Somatic subjectivities and somatic subjugation: Simone de Beauvoir on gender and aging*.

category of disadvantage to a potential place of aesthetic and emancipatory transformation. This reading resonates deeply with a vision of the body as a dynamic field of possibilities, rather than a simple biological or social given.

Aesthetic existence and Somaesthetics engage in a sustained and conceptually rich dialogue, generating a dynamic interplay of correspondences that lays the groundwork for a more articulated theorization of the body/soma, particularly in relation to emerging configurations of the so-called third gender and the transformative impact of digital technologies and artificial intelligence. In such a scenario, it becomes increasingly necessary for our somatic consciousness to be based on solid, conscious, and proactive references capable of guiding bodily experience within complex and changing technological environments. The aesthetics of existence, as outlined by Foucault, offers in this sense a set of principles and practices that constitute an order capable of organizing the improvement of life, placing at its center *téchne* understood not only as a set of tools, but as a form of ordering existence. This reconfiguration of the body as a locus of potential emancipation opens directly onto the broader dialogue between aesthetic existence and somaesthetics, where the body/soma is theorized not only as constrained by social and biological conditions but as capable of transformation through cultural, technological, and somatic practices. This type of order, based on ethical and aesthetic practices of self-construction, can be taken up and developed by somaesthetics, which, establishing itself as an autonomous discipline in the last decade of the 20th century, has progressively assumed a central role both as a daily practice of bodily cultivation and as an applicative method within design, artistic, and technological contexts. In this way, somaesthetics provides theoretical and practical tools for addressing the challenges posed by new forms of hybrid subjectivity and corporeality, helping to integrate the sensitive and embodied dimension of experience with contemporary cultural and technical developments.

The contributions collected in this volume provide the ideal theoretical and critical context for framing these considerations. The analyses dedicated to Foucaultian aesthetics of existence and Shustermanian somaesthetics show how the body, far from being a simple biological fact or a passive object of social norms, is configured as an active place of subjectivation, transformation, and aesthetic elaboration. Foucault's perspective on the technologies of the self-highlights how ethical and aesthetic practices can constitute an operational order capable of guiding the construction of the self and the improvement of life. Shusterman, taking up and critically reformulating these issues within the framework of somaesthetics, radicalizes their scope on a bodily and practical level: subjectivity is not only shaped by rules or representations, but is rooted in conscious somatic vitality, in the cultivation of the senses, and in embodied transformation.

Far from being a mere biological fact or an object of disciplinary control, the body emerges as an active medium of sensory experience, political agency, and aesthetic forms of life. The various contributions address crucial issues: the overcoming of body/mind and spirit/physiology dualisms and the valorization of an erotic and relational dimension of existence (Formis); the body as a field of struggle and political resistance, particularly in the context of women's protests in Poland (Koczanowicz); the aesthetic construction of subjectivity and the transformation of life into a work of art, from nineteenth-century dandyism to practices of individual freedom (Sabot); the emancipatory and meliorative function of somaesthetic practices (Shusterman); the limits and possibilities of embodied subjectivity in dialogue with Foucault and Butler (Sforzini). Other essays explore somatic asceticism and the ethics of pleasure in ancient practices (Lorenzini), the distinction between the lived body (Leib) and the objectified body (Körper) and its ideological implications (Jay), self-care as an embodied, relational, and social practice (Colapietro), and the application of somaesthetics and the aesthetics of existence to the critique of whiteness and somatic privileges (Voparil). Taken together, these contributions outline a rich and articulated conceptual map of contemporary body aesthetics, showing how embodied experience is crucial today for understanding the formation of the self, the production of meaning, and the transformation of individual and collective forms of life.

This articulation also opens new perspectives for understanding the formation of subjectivity in rapidly changing contexts, including technological and digital ones. The fields of the third gender and the transformations introduced by artificial intelligence fit perfectly into this direction: somaesthetics offers critical and practical tools for constructing forms of bodily consciousness appropriate to complex technological environments, while the aesthetics of existence provides the ethical and operational framework for organizing this transformation as a *téchne* of life.

### **Aesthetics, politics, body: Foucaultian itineraries**

The Foucaultian section of the volume offers a coherent journey through some of the fundamental theoretical nodes of Michel Foucault's thought, articulating in an original way questions of subjectivation, body, askeis, politics, and relationship. These five concepts, which emerge from the contributions of Philippe Sabot, Arianna Sforzini, Daniele Lorenzini, Martin Jay, and Vincent M. Colapietro, outline a complex framework in which ethics, aesthetics, and the power of *s* intertwine, demonstrating the extraordinary capacity of Foucaultian thought to open critical spaces and transformative practices for rethinking life, the self, and contemporary forms of coexistence. All the essays address the body as a privileged place of aesthetic and political subjectivation, a space in which life can be transformed into work and critical practice. It is both a weapon of resistance and a



performative scene, capable of generating new forms of subjectivity and subverting established norms and powers. It is investigated in its ascetic and transformative dimension, as an ethical-political tool and a gesture of scandal. It is also analyzed in the tensions between the lived and the objectified, between biopolitics and vulnerability, revealing its centrality in power dynamics and modern political construction. Taken together, these perspectives outline the body as a strategic node of freedom, resistance, and creation.

In the chapter *Aesthetics of Existence: From Foucault to Stirner, via Baudelaire*, Philippe Sabot offers a genealogical and trans-historical reading of the aesthetics of existence, intertwining ethical, political, and artistic practices of subjectivation. Following Foucault's interpretation of Baudelaire, Sabot shows how modernity is defined through a critical and creative attitude towards the present. He writes that "The whole art of the poet or painter of modern life then consists in taking the measure of such a gap, in making the modernity of fashion (and modernity itself) visible or audible, so that not only the snapshots of a particular era, but also the 'permanent reactivation' of a modern attitude are manifested in singular works. This attitude is a 'permanent critique of our historical being'" (Sabot, p. 30). Imagining the present means knowing how to place oneself in an oblique position with respect to it, grasping it "differently than it initially appears, in order to capture, obliquely, its 'highest value' (its poetic use value). According to Foucault, this creative imagination... takes the form of an immanent transformation of reality into beauty" (Sabot, p. 31). Baudelairean dandyism thus emerges not merely as an aesthetic posture, but as an ethical and political practice of self-fashioning. As Sabot underscores, it involves "an exercise of freedom that artists can undertake on themselves, making 'their body, behavior, feelings and passions, and even their very existence, a work of art'" (p. 32). For this reason, "Baudelairean dandyism cannot be reduced to an aesthetic question (in a narrow sense of this concept); it is also an ethical and political concern" (p. 33). Dandyism thus becomes a historically situated modality capable of activating forms of critical subjectivation and stylization of existence. Sabot places this modern practice within a broader genealogy, intertwining ancient cynicism, nineteenth-century anarchism, and the individualist thought of Max Stirner. Baudelaire, he observes, can be placed "at the intersection or even convergence of two genealogical series that allow for a transhistorical dandyism" (p. 36). In this regard, he recalls that "a whole section of nineteenth-century thought can be reread as a difficult attempt, a series of difficult attempts, to reconstitute an ethics and an aesthetics of the self. If you take, for example, Stirner, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, dandyism, Baudelaire, anarchy, anarchist thought, etcetera, then you have a series of attempts that are, of course, very different from each other, but which are all more or less obsessed by the question: Is it possible to constitute, or reconstitute, an aesthetics of the self? At what cost and under what

conditions?" (p. 37). Within this horizon, Stirner plays a fundamental role through a radical critique of forms of moral and social transcendence: "Stirner conducts a radical critique of all the figures and institutions that stand in the way of the recognition of the value of the individual sphere... The rejection of the transcendence of the 'human,' as well as the unconditional affirmation of the self, naturally leads to a rejection of the transcendence of society" (p. 39). His project can be described as "an ethics of independence" (p. 40), based on the absolute autonomy of the individual. Overall, Sabot shows how Foucault, Stirner, and Baudelaire propose three different but converging perspectives on the aesthetics of existence: the construction of the self as a work of art, radical individual autonomy, and the critical stylization of modern life. These practices outline an alternative political and ethical horizon, in which subjectivity is formed through exercises of freedom, resistance, and creativity, challenging social norms and established regimes of truth.

In the chapter *The Body at the Limits of Subjectivity. For a Philosophy-Performance as Political Aesthetics through the Thought of Michel Foucault*, Arianna Sforzini explores in depth the role of the body in Foucaultian philosophy, highlighting its critical, performative, and political dimensions. At the heart of her analysis is the idea that the body is not only the passive object of control devices, but also a terrain of resistance and transformation. As Sforzini writes, the body is "the critical weapon that counters and makes impossible any fundamental claim of philosophy that is aimed at supporting the universality of its discourse" (p. 45). The body is therefore not the limit of subjectivity, but the point of friction where power and resistance, subjectivation and de-subjectivation are articulated. An important part of the chapter is devoted to a critique of the naturalness of the body. Sforzini shows how Foucault dismantles the idea of a given and immutable bodily nature, highlighting instead the historicity and plasticity of bodies. Corporeality is always traversed by power relations, historical practices, and discourses that shape and constitute it. The body should therefore be understood as a place of historical and political production, rather than as a natural given. Sforzini also emphasizes the active and performative dimension of bodies, taking up and expanding on the dialogue between Foucault and Butler. The body, she writes, is not only an object but also an agent: "current philosophical debates have placed the body at the center of new interrogations and struggles based on the development of situated disciplines (Gender Studies, Queer Studies, Theoretical Feminism), as if identities and subjective agencies were now decided on the basis of the body" (p. 48). Performativity thus becomes a crucial key to understanding the transformative power of bodies: through actions, practices, and self-staging, subjects can subvert norms and produce new modes of existence. A particularly original aspect of Arianna Sforzini's reading is her interpretation of Foucaultian genealogies as true "philosophical theaters," in which the body acts simultaneously as a

critical instrument, stage, and actor. Philosophy thereby assumes a performative dimension: it is not merely a theoretical discourse but an embodied practice, capable of generating tangible effects in modes of life and forms of subjectivation. Sforzini articulates this as a form of “philosophy-performance,” which intertwines theory and practice, transforming the body into both a critical medium and an aesthetic-political dispositive. From this perspective arises the notion of political aesthetics, which acknowledges the body as “a critical weapon” (p. 45) and, at the same time, as a space for experimenting with alternative forms of life and for challenging existing power structures. Bodily practices thus become instruments of resistance and freedom, opening up the possibility of non-normative processes of subjectivation. At the same time, Sforzini explores the limits and possibilities of the body, conceived both as a place of vulnerability and as a field of potential transformation: far from being a barrier, the body defines the shifting contours within which new subjectivities and new relationships with power are constructed. Overall, the chapter ' ' analyzes the body as an authentic philosophical and political battlefield, in which criticism, resistance, and creativity intertwine, and in which performativity, genealogy, and embodied political aesthetics open up spaces for imagining and experiencing new forms of existence.

In the chapter *Pleasure, scandal, and the body: Foucault on somatic asceticism*, Daniele Lorenzini turns toward the body as not merely flesh but as a site where subjectivation, resistance, and even transformation unfold. His argument pivots on the ways ascetic practices and the use of pleasures can become ethical - political tools of emancipation. From this angle, what he terms somatic asceticism blurs ethics, aesthetics, and politics, showing how bodily practice may constitute a privileged terrain of struggle, scandal, and subjective re-making. In this reading, Lorenzini pays close attention to Greco - Roman ascetic techniques and Cynic philosophy, highlighting how they made of the body a sort of laboratory where free, yet disciplined subjectivities were crafted. He reminds us that ‘the term askesis, in Greek, has a broad meaning, indicating any type of exercise or practical training whose ultimate goal, far from being the renunciation of oneself, is the elaboration of a positive relationship to oneself characterized by a certain degree of control and self - mastery’ (p. 64). Foucault distinguishes between two main modes, ‘two major types of exercises of the body, or of bodily techniques of the self: the regimen of abstinence and the practice of tests (épreuves)’ (p. 66). Both share the aim of cultivating virtue and reinforcing self - command, in the awareness that, as Foucault put it, ‘virtue must go through the body in order to become active and effective’ (p. 67). What also comes into play here is the reflection on the use of pleasures (chrēsis aphrodisiōn), which are to be regulated in accord with principles of moderation and self - control (enkrateia). Lorenzini underscores Foucault’s claim that ‘Aphrodisia, in the Greeks, is an activity. It is not a property, a feature of nature, it is not a dimension

of subjectivity, it is a type, a series of acts characterized by their form, by the violence of the desire that traverses them, by the intensity of the pleasure one experiences, and by the fact that it is an activity that, due to this violence of desire and intensity of pleasure, is in danger of escaping itself and losing control of itself' (p. 79).

Yet asceticism here does not mean sheer denial; rather it implies a stripping down of existence - an active loosening from conventions and imposed norms. Among Cynic philosophers this surfaced as radical poverty, enacted as both a scandal and a mode of freedom from established powers. In this regard, as Lorenzini notes, 'the Cynic philosopher transforms his ordinary way of living into a militant practice of resistance - the real core of his radical critique of all social hypocrisy' (p. 86). Cynical existence therefore carried an immediate political charge: 'the Cynic makes the aesthetic and ethical shaping of his body and life a stake that is immediately political, because he inscribes his scandalous existence at the heart of the public space, thus using it as a tool to show his fellow citizens the part of what is "singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints" in what is given to us "as universal, necessary, [and] obligatory"' (p. 88). Precisely for this reason, the ascetic body itself may become scandalous, a polemical act, a living critique of both political and social order. Hence somatic asceticism, in Lorenzini's Foucaultian framing, must be understood as a practice of resistance that reclaims the body as a strategic locus of experimentation and emancipation, one capable of producing new subjectivities and of unsettling the very truth - claims through which power seeks to discipline it.

In the following chapter, *Leib, Körper, and the Body Politic*, Martin Jay shifts the emphasis to the philosophical treatment of the body in Western thought, tracing tensions between its lived or phenomenological dimension, its scientific objectification, and its political inscriptions. His analysis hinges on the conceptual separation of Leib and Körper: 'Leib is the lived, subjective body, experienced from within, while Körper is the objective, physical body, seen from without' (p. 78). For Jay, human existence is always caught within this oscillation between Leib and Körper, a movement that exposes both the finitude and the vulnerability of embodied being: 'the human body constantly oscillates between being a subjectively lived Leib and an objectively perceived Körper, a duality that reflects both our finitude and our susceptibility to external control' (p. 80).

A particularly important moment comes with Jay's discussion of the metaphor of the body politic, which, from Hobbes through Kantorowicz, has figured society and the state as a kind of collective organism. Jay re - reads critically the medieval doctrine of the king's 'two bodies', disputing the notion of political immortality and instead insisting on mortality and fragility: 'the medieval notion

of the king's two bodies sought to transcend individual mortality through the fiction of an immortal political body, but this fiction has always depended on the denial of universal vulnerability' (p. 84).

In dialogue with Foucault, Jay also takes up the twin themes of biopolitics and thanatopolitics, underscoring how modern power invests the body as a field for the administration of both life and death. 'Foucault's concept of biopolitics reveals how modern states seek to regulate life processes at the level of populations, but this also opens the door to thanatopolitics, in which power decides who must die, often targeting marginalized groups' (p. 88). Jay here engages as well with Esposito and Agamben. Esposito's notion of 'political autoimmunity' helps explain how societies construe certain groups as pathogenic threats whose elimination secures the health of the collective masses. This highlights the link between biopolitics and thanatopolitics and shows how political rationalities can authorize the elimination of populations deemed toxic. Agamben, on the other hand, is central to the analysis of 'bare life' and the figure of 'homo sacer', representing individuals excluded from the political community and reduced to mere biological existence, as well as to the concept of the 'state of exception', which illustrates how sovereign power can suspend laws in order to exercise total control over life and death. Both philosophers are cited to show how the body, both individual and collective, becomes the site where modern dynamics of power, control, and vulnerability manifest themselves, and to critically reflect on the oppressive implications of contemporary biopolitics. Following Foucault, the chapter interprets the body as a strategic site of power, but also as a possible space of resistance. "The body is not merely a passive surface on which power is inscribed; it is also an active site of resistance and transformation" (p. 90). Modernity has profoundly reshaped the conception of the body, foregrounding its scientific and technological objectification with far-reaching political, cultural, and social implications. As Jay observes, "modernity has increasingly objectified the body through science and technology, turning it into a site of intervention, regulation, and control, but also of new possibilities for resistance" (p. 93). Alongside these references, the chapter also draws on the contribution of Judith Butler, which is fundamental to understanding the political and ethical implications of bodily vulnerability. Butler explores the concept of "lives worthy of mourning" and "lives not worthy of mourning," highlighting how power structures determine which lives are considered valuable and which are marginalized or made invisible. She also analyzes 's performativity as a key to understanding how social and cultural norms are inscribed in bodies, but also how bodies can subvert these norms through alternative practices of resistance. Her reflection on the shared precariousness of bodies provides the basis for an ethical and inclusive politics capable of countering the dynamics of exclusion and oppression, thus linking coherently to the biopolitical discourses of Esposito and Agamben. The chapter closes with a reflection on vulnerability: for Jay,

recognizing the fragility and mortality of the human body is a necessary condition for thinking about a more inclusive and realistic politics. "Acknowledging bodily vulnerability and universal mortality can provide a more humane and inclusive basis for political life, countering the fantasies of invulnerability that have often underpinned exclusion and domination" (p. 96). Overall, Martin Jay's contribution explores the tensions between subjective experience, scientific objectification, biopolitical practices, and political metaphors, showing how the body is a central node in modern dynamics of power, vulnerability, and resistance.

Vincent M. Colapietro, in the chapter *The Social Care of the Self as Embodiment*, develops a conception of the self as an embodied and social reality, opposing the individualistic and disembodied view of the subject. The self is understood as a dynamic process that takes shape through the intertwining of body, social practices, and intersubjective relationships, rather than as a fixed or isolated entity. As he writes, "one might identify oneself as a somatic and social self; and go on to envision care for the self as a project in which care for the embodied self and the social nexus in which that concrete being is implicated [...] can mutually enhance and deepen each other" (p. 116). Subjectivity is in fact constructed in relation to others and to the world, since "the spontaneous exertions of the human infant attain their meaning largely through the responses of others" (p. 115).

Within this framework, Colapietro engages with Foucault and Shusterman to analyze the role of somaesthetics and self-modeling practices in the formation of the self, emphasizing how cultural and social factors profoundly shape embodied experience. At the same time, he insists on the transformative dimension of the self, which is not only a place of subjection but also a space of resistance and reconstruction: "our attention to the self as a figure of subjection and repression ought not eclipse our appreciation of the self as one of the sites of reconstruction, one of the means by which selves and their situations are transformed, sometimes radically" (p. 113). Care for the embodied self is thus configured as an ethical and political practice, capable of intertwining shared vulnerability, social relations, and somatic attention to transform oppressive norms and institutions, promoting forms of solidarity and collective dignity. Finally, Colapietro proposes a vision of the self rooted in the body, open to relationship and oriented toward transformation, valuing the balance between somatic, social, and imaginative dimensions in everyday life.

### **From lived experience to political transformation: somaesthetics perspectives**

The second section of the volume, dedicated to somaesthetics, opens with a decisive change of perspective: from Foucault's genealogical framework, we move to a pragmatic, experiential, and transformative approach, centered on the body as a place of knowledge, ethical practice, and political

potential. The body, conceived by Shusterman as "the indispensable medium for all perception" (p. 122), becomes the starting point for rethinking philosophy as an art of living, based on somatic awareness, everyday pleasure, and practices of self-cultivation. This perspective intersects with pressing contemporary concerns. Voparil demonstrates how somaesthetics and Foucaultian aesthetics of existence can inform ethical and political engagements with whiteness, conceived as a historical and somatic form of transformable subjectivity. Formis further develops this vision by proposing a relational and affective model grounded in eros, aphrodisia, and charis, in which the body becomes a space of reciprocity and creativity. The journey ends with Koczanowicz, who, through the concept of somapower, interprets the women's strike in Poland as a concrete example of the emancipatory power of the body, capable of challenging patriarchal devices and building new forms of solidarity and collective resistance. Together, these essays outline somaesthetics as a theoretical-practical horizon for rethinking ethics, politics, and shared life starting from embodied experience.

Richard Shusterman, in the chapter *Somaesthetics and the Philosophical Life*, opens the second section of the volume, dedicated to somaesthetics, marking a decisive shift from Foucault's genealogical and critical framework toward a more radically experiential, pragmatic, and transformative perspective. While the previous chapters have investigated the body as a place of subjectivation, resistance, vulnerability, and political tension, Shusterman now claims its practical centrality, proposing somaesthetics as a discipline capable of integrating theory and practice in the ethical and aesthetic formation of the self. From the outset, Shusterman brings philosophy back to the lived experience of the body, rooting it in conscious somatic practices and a conception of the body as an indispensable medium of knowing and acting: "I conceived of somaesthetics as a field to highlight and explore the soma - the living, sentient, purposive body, as the indispensable medium for all perception" (p. 122). While recognizing the importance of Foucaultian genealogies of the self and devices of power, he highlights their limitations with respect to the concrete experiential dimension: Foucault, in fact, "illuminates how bodies are shaped by power, but leaves relatively unexplored the positive, meliorative practices through which individuals can consciously reshape their embodied subjectivity" (p. 124). Hence the need for a discipline capable not only of analyzing, but also of cultivating and transforming the bodily self: "somaesthetics is now an interdisciplinary field of research ... concerned with the critical study, meliorative cultivation, and use of the soma as the site of sensory appreciation (aisthesis), effective performance, and creative self-fashioning" (p. 123). Shusterman, in this regard, transcends modern dualisms by introducing the notion of the soma as "a sentient, purposive, dynamic, evolving, vulnerable, and imperfect body-mind union" (p. 133), capable of taking itself as an object and transforming itself through reflective practices. Consistent

with a pragmatist idea of philosophy as the art of living, he claims the priority of the aesthetic model over the therapeutic one: "I prefer the aesthetic to the therapeutic art of living because of its more positive character, its focus on creating beauty rather than healing disease" (p. 125). A central element of Shusterman's somaesthetic philosophy is the revaluation of pleasure, which he interprets differently from traditions that associate it with extreme or transgressive experiences (such as Bataille, Blanchot, or Foucault himself). Shusterman criticizes the idea of pleasure as pure intensity or transgression, preferring a balanced and pragmatic approach, in which pleasure becomes a resource for personal improvement and body awareness, as well as a means of cultivating well-being and growth through daily practices. His philosophy promotes a sensitivity to subtle and ordinary pleasures, which can be deeply rewarding and transformative, enriching everyday experience and making it extraordinary. He denounces contemporary culture for its insensitivity to delicate pleasures and its fetishism for sensationalism, arguing that "the powers of tender, thoughtful touch and of slow, gentle movement" (p. 132) can surpass the pleasure of more extreme and spectacular experiences. Pleasure is thus reinterpreted as a conscious and transformative experience—constructive rather than destructive—capable of refining perception and enhancing the quality of life. The somaesthetic project does not call for spectacular ruptures with everyday existence but for a critical and reflective intensification of ordinary life: "the adoption of a somaesthetic philosophical life ... requires no radical rupture with everyday conduct and social norms ... but resides in the depth of its critical attitude, mindfully reflective subjectivity, and meliorative, self-stylizing drive" (p. 128). It is also inseparable from concrete practice, which includes bodily practices such as dance, meditation, or somatic movement, capable of rooting transformation in sensitive and lived life. The dialogue with Foucault is crucial here: Shusterman takes up Foucault's challenge to think of philosophy as a "practice of the self," but relaunches it by shifting the emphasis from the genealogical and historical to the somatic and transformative, offering concrete tools for an ethical and aesthetic reformulation of everyday life. This chapter, as the threshold of the somaesthetic section, charts the direction of a philosophical project that blends criticism, pleasure, bodily practice, and creativity, inaugurating a path centered on embodied experience as a privileged place of knowledge, freedom, and transformation.

In the chapter dedicated to Foucault, *Shusterman, and Living Somaesthetically as White*, Chris Voparil brings together Foucault's aesthetics of existence and Shusterman's somaesthetic philosophy to explore the possibility of an ethical transformation of whiteness through bodily practices and critical reflections on subjectivity. The author immediately emphasizes the centrality of the body in both approaches, observing that "both Shusterman's somaesthetics and Foucault's aesthetics of



existence emphasize the role of the body in practices of self-formation, ethical transformation, and resistance to dominant norms" (p. 172). Foucault is read as inviting us to "treat one's life as a work of art, engaging in practices of self-care and self-stylization to resist disciplinary norms and create alternative ways of being" (p. 174), while Shusterman proposes somaesthetics as a pragmatic discipline that "provides methods for cultivating somatic awareness and improving both personal well-being and social relations" (p. 176). The distinction between the two approaches is not oppositional but complementary: "Whereas Foucault focuses on critical reflection and self-stylization, Shusterman adds a dimension of practical bodily cultivation aimed at melioration" (p. 177). Voparil connects these perspectives to the theme of white privilege and its ethical transformation, proposing an innovative reading: "Whiteness, understood as a socially constructed mode of embodiment and subjectivity, can itself become the target of ethical self-work and somatic transformation" (p. 179). In this key, somaesthetics offers tools for "developing a critical somatic consciousness that can help individuals recognize and challenge the often invisible dynamics of racial privilege and oppression inscribed in their bodies" (p. 180), while Foucaultian aesthetics of existence stimulates ethical and political reflection on lifestyle and individual responsibility. The author suggests thinking of whiteness as "a style of existence that can be reconfigured through alternative somatic practices and new ways of living" (p. 182). Through the combination of critical bodily awareness and aesthetic-ethical practices of self-transformation, it is possible to "fashion new modes of subjectivity that resist and subvert oppressive racial norms" (p. 183). Overall, the chapter shows how the fusion between Foucault and Shusterman paves the way for an embodied ethical-political reflection, capable of addressing the issue of whiteness not only at the discursive level, but through practical work on the body and lifestyle, transforming subjectivity and social relations from within.

In the chapter *Holistic Body and Reciprocal Relations: Afrodisia, Eros, Charis*, Barbara Formis attempts what she terms an original reflection on the body, as a site not merely of sensation but of knowledge, pleasure, reciprocity. She brings together Richard Shusterman and Michel Foucault's discussions of embodiment, folding in a feminist angle that unsettles older schemes. From the beginning Formis stresses the notion of the holistic body, presenting it almost as a kind of key that might undo the old dualisms of mind and body, physical and metaphysical, theory and practice. As she puts it, 'the holistic body is conceived as a dynamic entity, always in the process of becoming, integrating sensory, cognitive, and affective dimensions' (p. 191). This body then is not a fixed unit, not simply biological, but something transformative, a generative space, producing meaning, relations, through practice and shared experience. She levels a critique at traditional aesthetics here, questioning the narrow reduction of pleasure, insisting it is a cognitive and cultural dimension in its

own right, not to be confined to physiology. 'Pleasure should be understood not only as a physiological reaction but as a cultural and cognitive force that shapes our relations to ourselves and to others' (p. 194). It is in this vein that somatics appears as a sort of unifying approach, bridging body and mind, theory and practice, pushing even into how erotic and affective life might be redefined.

Her comparison of Shusterman's *Ars Erotica* with Foucault's *Care of the Self* produces a reinterpretation of aphrodisia, eros, charis, in order to think new modes of relation and freedom. Charis, in her rendering, 'points to a dynamic and egalitarian form of reciprocity, beyond mere consent, opening new spaces for affective and aesthetic relations' (p. 198). This reading pushes reciprocity as an alternative to possessive desire, or violent eros. It promotes shared freedom, co-creation of experience, not domination. In such a picture, the body is framed as 'a site of reciprocity and creativity, constantly producing new forms of interaction and meaning through affective exchanges' (p. 200). Thus Formis calls on us to rethink erotic - affective life as an aesthetic and political practice, subverting older cultural codes. Reciprocity becomes a mode of living, renewing pleasure, promoting equality and freedom, turning philosophy of the body into a transformative project.

Leszek Koczanowicz, in the chapter *Somapower and the Polish Women's Strike*, shifts the terrain. He examines the feminist mobilizations in Poland in 2020, which erupted after the Constitutional Tribunal's near - total abortion ban. He interprets this movement as somatic resistance, as well as political resistance, to patriarchal control. For him, 'the body became both the object of political struggle and the main instrument of resistance' (p. 211). The protests staged the body in multiple registers: as a claim (for decision - making autonomy) and as a performative tool, through physical presence in public squares, creative protest practices. Koczanowicz coins the notion of somapower, working out of Shusterman's somaesthetics, to name 'the emancipatory and transformative power of the body when consciously mobilized in collective action' (p. 214). He sets this against Foucault's biopower, which operates by regulating bodies through norms, law, inscription. Somapower, he stresses, 'emerges from below, from embodied practices and affective solidarities that challenge established power structures' (p. 216).

Thus the women's bodies occupied public space, transforming streets into places of resistance and affect (p. 218). The strike, moreover, built alliances across movements, bringing in LGBTQ+ groups and marginalized communities, linking around bodily autonomy and rights. He closes by affirming that 'somaesthetics offers a more dynamic and empowering framework than biopolitics for

understanding contemporary social movements centered on bodily autonomy and resistance' (p. 222). Through this lens, the body appears again as a site of emancipation, of political transformation, unsettling control.

### **Towards a new bio - soma**

The curators' inventive link between aesthetics of existence and somaesthetics draws out a central theoretical - political issue: the shifting relationship of bio and soma as sources of power and possibility. In this contemporary moment of biopolitics, digital technologies, daily bodily practices, the body is no longer only object of control or stage of resistance. It becomes producer of power, actor, surface where interiority and social devices cross. The text argues that bio and soma relations can be mobilized not just for improvement of life but also to manage the encroaching forms of control on our bodily, affective, perceptual dimensions.

Soma - power configurations are thus shown as crucial ground today. On the one side, the somatic dimension is a reserve of positive energy - creative, emancipatory - as Shusterman names it, the body's power to self - form and to form the world. On the other side, it is this same energy that is intercepted, managed, captured by political, technological, economic apparatuses. In the transition to what they call a 'third gender' of powers, where discipline, biopolitics, self - monitoring blur, the body appears as a strategic interface, a battlefield.

Queer and transfeminist thought, Paul Preciado among others, make clear how the body has long been situated in a pharmacopornographic regime, combining biotechnologies, markets, gender norms to shape desires. Yet, the same terrain allows counter - powers: dissident, queer, eccentric practices, growing bodily awareness. Here the bio - soma is ambivalent<sup>4</sup>. It is liberation and it is control. The task, then, is to govern this force critically, to steer it toward solidarity, improvement, freedom shared, rather than to allow its capture. In this sense, this volume illuminates the vital relationships between bio and soma as constitutive dimensions of contemporary subjectivity, opening up a theoretical-practical horizon in which the body is no longer a mere political object, but a living resource for rethinking ethics, aesthetics, and power in a transformative way.

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<sup>4</sup> Journal of Somaesthetics, Vol.10, n.1, 2024 *Queering the Soma*  
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