

THE INHERENT DIVERGENCE OF THE COMPARISON. FOUCAULT'S AESTHETIC OF EXISTENCE MEETS SHUSTERMAN'S SOMAESTHETICS

"Foucault's Aesthetic of Existence and Shusterman's Somaesthetics." Ethics, Politics and the Art of Living, edited by Valentina Antoniol and Stefano Marino, London; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. pp. 208.

Anna Keszeg
Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design (Hungary)
keszeg@mome.hu

Foucault's Aesthetic of Existence and Shusterman's Somaesthetics. Ethics, Politics and the Art of Living continues at Bloomsbury a tradition of books interested in the issues of politics of living and political aesthetics.

In recent decades, scholarly discourse has increasingly sought to bridge the divide between the disciplinary domain of philosophy and the lived realities of everyday experience. The volume under review undertakes a comparative analysis of two such integrative frameworks: Michel Foucault's *aesthetics of existence* and Richard Shusterman's *somaesthetics*. Both frameworks aspire to rearticulate the legacy of ancient philosophical traditions in response to contemporary theoretical and practical challenges. Rather than embracing a nostalgic revival of antiquity's conception of philosophy as a way of life linked to different schools of thought, as formulated by Pierre Hadot, these approaches endeavour to construct novel philosophical systems that interweave classical concepts with diverse intellectual lineages. Each, in its own way, seeks to engage with the present: Foucault through a transcendental mode of inquiry, and Shusterman through a corporeal orientation. The volume's subtitle delineates the three principal dimensions through which these conceptual trajectories unfold: the ethical, the philosophical, and the aesthetic.

Edited by Valentina Antoniol (University of Bari "Aldo Moro") and Stefano Marino (University of Bologna), the volume brings together two scholars whose work engag-

es deeply with the intersections between philosophy and various dimensions of contemporary society. Antoniol, a scholar of political philosophy, has conducted research on the concept of war in the thought of Michel Foucault and Carl Schmitt, and focuses on mechanisms of social control in the context of digital technologies. Marino, whose intellectual orientation aligns with the concerns of cultural studies, demonstrates a wide-ranging engagement with popular culture—exploring figures and phenomena such as Radiohead, Frank Zappa, fashion, and critical theorists including Adorno, Gadamer, and, of course, Richard Shusterman. Despite the diversity of these interests, Marino succeeds in articulating a coherent philosophical perspective that traverses traditional disciplinary boundaries.

The book builds on the assumption that for the two philosophers featured in the title, philosophy is a "way of life" and explores specific implications of this thesis in nine distinct chapters. These chapters deal with the following problems. Phillipe Sabot (University of Lille) signs a chapter on the baudelaire-ian roots of Foucault's notion of the aesthetic of existence. Arianna Sforzini (University of Paris-Est Créteil) asks how the body becomes the site of political aesthetics by jeopardizing traditional ways of subject formation. Daniele Lorenzini (University of Pennsylvania) is interested in the inherent radicalism of the somatic *Askesis*. Martin Jay (University of California, Berkeley) addresses the classical dualism of the lived and objectified body by addressing the possibilities of the body to act as a political arena. Vincent M. Colapietro (Pennsylvania State University) reflects upon the practices of bodily care as essential to ethical self-formation and the constitution of responsive communities. In the sixth chapter, Richard Shusterman (Florida Atlantic University), one of the two philosophers addressed in the title of the book, develops the possibility of dealing with somaesthetics as a program of the philosophical life. The last three chapters address specific experiences through the lenses of the two philosophical traditions. Chris Vo-

paril (Lynn University) reflects upon ethical challenges of whiteness. Barbara Formis (Sorbonne University, Paris) analysis what she calls the “stylistic of reciprocity” (pp. 165.) in the phenomena of aphrodisia, eros and caris. And finally, Leszek Koczanowicz (SWPS University, Poland) attempts a critical ontology of the present by using the concept of somapower (pp. 190.) to understand the recent women’s strike in Poland.

As previously noted, one of the chapters in the volume is authored by Richard Shusterman himself—a particularly intriguing aspect from a methodological standpoint. The comparative framework of the volume juxtaposes two philosophical approaches, yet one of these—somaesthetics—is presented not through external interpretation but in the voice of its original proponent. This shift from interpretative to declarative presence introduces a unique dynamic: Shusterman’s own contribution functions as both a theoretical articulation and a self-positioning within the comparative dialogue.

Including Shusterman as a contributor is logically consistent; he has extensively engaged with Foucault’s thought throughout his work, and his project emerges, in many respects, in critical succession to Foucault’s. However, this editorial decision carries important methodological implications. It raises questions about authorial authority, philosophical dialogue, and the role of interpretation in comparative analysis. In this respect, the volume becomes self-reflexive, using its very structure to illuminate the complexities it seeks to explore.

Barbara Formis underscores this tension when she notes, “Indeed, the interpretations of theories are often more restrictive and constraining than the philosophies from which they draw their inspiration” (pp. 166). This observation frames a central issue in the volume: while Foucault’s *aesthetics of existence* emphasizes critique and the inherent subversiveness of subjectivation, Shusterman’s *somaesthetics* foregrounds amelioration, embodiment, and experiential cultivation. Despite their divergent trajectories, the comparative approach em-

ployed throughout the volume reveals points of resonance—particularly in their shared commitment to rethinking the mind/body dualism foundational to Eurocentric philosophical traditions.

Rather than fixating on epistemological or methodological incompatibilities, the essays chart a common ground, building conceptual bridges between postmodern and late modern perspectives on embodiment. In this context, Shusterman’s closing remark acquires particular significance: “We certainly need admirable exemplars to guide us in the thought and action of our philosophical lives. Foucault has been a crucial exemplar, indeed a hero, for me and for somaesthetics. But sometimes heroes are better to admire than to follow” (pp. 141). Here, somaesthetics emerges not as a doctrine but as a cultivated attitude—rooted in freedom and admiration, and the philosophical pursuit of embodied transformation.

A transversal reading of the volume reveals two central themes that, while not explicitly foregrounded by the contributors, emerge as conceptually integral to the overarching inquiry. The first concerns the notion of the present and the ways in which philosophy might engage with contemporary conditions. The second revolves around the body and its positioning within the respective philosophical frameworks of Foucault and Shusterman. These two thematic axes—the ontology of the present in Foucault’s thought and the theory and practice of the purposive, sentient body in Shusterman’s somaesthetics—constitute a shared methodological foundation underpinning the volume’s contributions. More to this, they illuminate a key divergence in the aesthetic orientations of the two thinkers: whereas Foucault’s approach is rooted in an existential interrogation of temporal situatedness, Shusterman privileges embodied experience as the primary locus for cultivating an existential aesthetics.

Within academic discourse on Michel Foucault, considerable attention has been devoted to the tension between his so-called “transcendental presentism” and his sustained engagement with the past, particularly

through genealogical inquiry. In this volume, Sabot and Lorenzini interrogate the historical dimensions of Foucault's *aesthetics of existence*, emphasizing how such a project is preceded and shaped by practices of *Baudelairean* self-stylization and ancient exercises of *askesis* (pp. 63). This historical perspective is further expanded through contemporary theoretical engagements with issues of agency (Sforzini), whiteness and ethical subjectivity (Voparil), somapower (Koczanowicz), care (Colapietro), reciprocity (Formis), and the body politic (Jay). Such reflections not only trace a discursive genealogy of the present but also foreground a radical and activist potential in Foucault's thought—an aspect often criticized as absent. By re-situating Foucault's project within a broader historical and embodied framework, the contributions in this volume underscore its continued relevance for interrogating structures of power, subject formation, and social transformation in the present. In doing so, they offer a powerful rejoinder to critiques that cast Foucault's work as politically disengaged or merely diagnostic.

Conversely, and in light of this presentist genealogy, the body emerges in the volume as a site of critical rearticulation, particularly through its interrogation in relation to contemporary discourses on corporeality and political embodiment—arguably one of the volume's most significant

contributions. The project of sensory perception, from which aesthetics traditionally draws its conceptual impetus, is here reframed by the exigencies of political agency and the recognition of the inherently political nature of *aisthesis*. In this context, concepts such as care and reciprocity acquire renewed urgency, positioning embodied agency as a locus of ethical and civic responsibility.

The collected articles demonstrate how diverse philosophical traditions concerned with the textures of everyday life can meaningfully inform practices of civic engagement, while simultaneously enriching the imaginative horizons of possible life forms. In foregrounding the intersections of aesthetics, ethics, and politics, the volume not only advances scholarly discourse but also gestures toward a transformative vision of philosophy as a practice grounded in lived experience and oriented toward social change.

While there may be a degree of methodological indiscipline in comparing highly asymmetrical philosophical frameworks, the volume testifies to the vitality of philosophical concepts oriented toward the cultivation of *arts of living*. By engaging with both the embodied dimension of experience and the pressing concerns of the present, the volume's contributions demonstrate that philosophy remains a vital exercise in civic responsibility.