

Book Review

FOUCAULT'S AESTHETICS OF EXISTENCE AND SHUSTERMAN'S SOMAESTHETICS: ETHICS, POLITICS, AND THE ART OF LIVING, ed. Valentina Antoniol and Stefano Marino. Bloomsbury, 2024. Pp. 205, \$103.50.

The volume edited by Valentina Antoniol and Stefano Marino is the first to be explicitly devoted to a critical dialogue between two of the most influential figures in recent philosophy and aesthetics, bringing into conversation Michel Foucault's late notion of an "aesthetics of existence" with Richard Shusterman's disciplinary project of "somaesthetics." The result is a rich and valuable book, one that makes a significant contribution not only to Foucault and Shusterman studies but also to broader debates in aesthetics concerning the nexus of body, ethics, and life.

The encounter between these two perspectives was long overdue, and this volume is therefore both timely and welcome. Shusterman himself has repeatedly acknowledged Foucault as a central inspiration for his mature philosophical work. This influence is evident from the very conception of somaesthetics in 1992, when—as the editors note—he explicitly cited Foucault alongside John Dewey as one of the few philosophers who avoided the "sad somatic neglect" typical of modern thought (13). His impact is equally visible in Shusterman's more recent writings, most notably in *Ars Erotica* (2021), where the theme—if not the content or method—resonates strongly with Foucault's analyses in the volumes of *Histoire de la sexualité*.

The relationship, however, is not one-sided. While Foucault clearly influenced Shusterman, somaesthetics may in turn offer new theoretical and methodological tools for assessing both the limits and the continuing relevance of Foucault's thought. Bringing Foucault's legacy into dialogue with a thinker who is still alive and active today inevitably forces a confrontation with the present and raises an inescapable question: What remains of Foucault's project forty years after his death, in a philosophical landscape where the body has become increasingly central and in an historical context where the nexus between political power and embodiment is ever more pressing? Now that Foucault has fully assumed the status of a philosophical classic, the challenge is to determine what kind of dialogue with his thought remains possible—and, perhaps, necessary.

The essays in this volume, with their variety of themes, methods, and perspectives, exemplify these ongoing possibilities of dialogue. They do more than trace genealogies of influence or chart lines of reception: Alongside historical reconstruction, they also develop theoretical reflection. Contributors put Shusterman's somaesthetics and Foucault's aesthetics of existence to the test, at times seeking to reconcile them and at other times emphasizing

ing their divergences and limitations, in order to gauge their significance for contemporary aesthetic, political, social, and educational debates.

The volume opens with an extensive introduction by the editors, which stands as the first and most substantial essay of the collection. Antoniol and Marino present the aim of the book as an attempt to “inquire both the affinities and difference between Foucault’s and Shusterman’s philosophical approaches” (1), locating a common core in Shusterman’s notion of a “somatic power that represents a complement to [. . .] Foucault’s notions of bio-power and biopolitics” (2). They then stress the broader implications of this comparison for redefining the limits and possibilities of aesthetics and for reconnecting it with life and experience. The introduction is then organized into two main sections: The first outlines Foucault’s reflections on the aesthetics of existence, with particular reference to his Hellenistic and Roman sources; the second examines Shusterman’s somaesthetics, its fundamental dimensions, the explicit influence of Foucault, and its recent developments in *Ars Erotica*. The introduction concludes with a survey of the individual contributions that compose the volume.

After the introduction, the volume presents nine essays. In keeping with the multidisciplinary and pluralistic character of both Foucault’s and Shusterman’s philosophies, these contributions reflect a wide variety of approaches, perspectives, and styles—a diversity that cannot, for reasons of space, be fully conveyed here and must instead be sketched only in broad strokes. Yet despite this variety, an internal architecture is discernible: The volume moves from essays primarily focused on Foucault to those more centered on Shusterman, and from chapters with a predominantly historical or reconstructive orientation

to others that are more theoretical or even applied in scope.

Chapter 1 by Philippe Sabot, “Aesthetics of Existence: From Foucault to Stirner, via Baudelaire,” examines the problem of the aesthetics of existence and its historical-political character through the question of the possibilities afforded to individual life. Sabot retraces Foucault’s analyses of the “attitude of modernity” embodied by the dandy poet—an attitude at once aesthetic and ethico-political, and, he argues, not far from Max Stirner’s idea of anarchism. He concludes by proposing a vision of a “common aesthetics of existence” that accounts for our shared life and its value.

Chapter 2 by Arianna Sforzini, “The Body and the Limits of Subjectivity. For a Philosophy-Performance as Political Aesthetics Through the Thought of Michel Foucault,” places the body, in its multiplicity and ambiguity, at the center of Foucault’s philosophy. Indeed, for Foucault, the body is, on the one hand, not simply natural but profoundly historical, as it becomes the site of power relations; on the other hand, its vitality provides the almost transhistorical condition of possibility for embodied resistance. Drawing on Judith Butler, Sforzini thus identifies in Foucault an ambiguity “between a radical constructivism of the body and the supposition of a restive immanence” (50). Rejecting the idea of a merely natural resistance, Sforzini emphasizes bodily agency and performance, defending a notion of “somato-creation,” in which one does not simply *have* a body but rather *performs* it—even critically.

Chapter 3 by Daniele Lorenzini, “Pleasure, Scandal, and the Body: Foucault on Somatic Askesis,” focuses on the Hellenistic sources of Foucault’s thought. Lorenzini’s aim is to demonstrate the plurality of “ascetic techniques of the body,” with particular attention to the Cynic school. While

many practices of self-care and aesthetics of existence remain confined to the individual sphere, Lorenzini argues that the Cynic philosopher's "self-stripping" constitutes a form of "philosophical militancy" (69). This is not, as some interpreters maintain, a "reduction of life to its supposed original naturalness" but rather a "reduction of other people's lives to their absurdity" (72). The scandal provoked by the Cynic—embodied directly in his own body—thus acquires a "strategic" character aimed at exposing the arbitrariness of conventions and rules otherwise taken as obvious and natural.

Chapter 4 by Martin Jay, "*Leib, Körper and the Body Politic*," addresses the traditional distinction between *Leib*, the lived body, and *Körper*, the body as object. Jay argues that philosophy has long displayed a "bias for corporal wholeness" (77), tending to sublimate the body as object into the body as life and privileging ideals of beauty and vitality at the expense of the body's more physical and vulnerable dimensions. Against this view, and drawing also on Shusterman, Jay proposes that *Leib* and *Körper* are "recursively and equiprimordially entailed" and explores the political implications of this claim. In contrast to biopolitical approaches that focus primarily on the body as active *Leib*, Jay reasserts the political significance of the *Körper*, as it reveals our "universal human mortality" and "shared finitude" (87). What emerges is an image of the body politic as vulnerable and liminal, in more direct contact with the environment of which it forms part.

Chapter 5 by Vincent Colapietro, "*Care of the Social Self as Embodied*," places the problem of "care" at the center of his analysis, tracing it from the ancient ideal through the decentered postmodern subject and up to Foucault and Shusterman. Against critics who charge these two thinkers

with promoting a "self-indulgent regime neglectful of those [. . .] unable to devote themselves to [. . .] somatic aesthetics" (105), Colapietro argues for a conception of self-care that is transversal, social, and embodied. His principal references are Dewey's idea of human subjectivity as an emergent function and the critique—shared by both pragmatism and Foucault—of the "sovereign subject" in favor of "reflexive agents in their historical specificity" (108), situated and implicated both naturally and sociohistorically. On this view, self-care is not a privilege but rather a personal and political effort, at once embodied and cultural, to appropriate and improve one's own existence.

Chapter 6 by Richard Shusterman, "*Somaesthetics and the Philosophical Life*," stands as a pivotal and distinctive contribution to the volume. Here one of the two philosophers at the center of the book actively engages with the other, thereby clarifying and further developing his own position. Shusterman begins by insisting that somaesthetics should not be understood merely as an academic discipline but as a model of philosophical life. He then compares this model with two other approaches to philosophy as an art of living: those of Pierre Hadot and Foucault. In contrast to Hadot, somaesthetics (1) "emphasizes personal freedom and [. . .] individual expression rather than [. . .] allegiance to a particular school" (125), (2) expands the notion of spiritual exercises through the idea of a "cultivation of the whole incarnate person" (126), and (3) "requires no radical rupture with everyday conduct" (128). With respect to Foucault, who remains a crucial inspiration, Shusterman argues that somaesthetics avoids his "disdain of the common" and "fascination with madness and death" (131). Instead, it advances a more reformist, ameliorative, and ultimately democratic vision

of philosophical life and aesthetics in which beauty no longer pertains to extraordinary deeds or works but to everyday existence and the possibility of its concrete improvement.

The last three chapters apply the philosophies of Foucault and Shusterman to pressing issues of contemporary life. Chapter 7 by Chris Voparil, "Somaesthetics, Foucauldian Aesthetics of Existence, and Living Ethically as White," asks how it is possible today to live ethically as white, given that "white privilege and white supremacy warp white people both epistemically and ethically" (145). Voparil suggests that Foucault's notion of *rapport à soi* can help denaturalize white subjects in their prejudices and expose the ways in which "bodies [are] where normativity is inscribed and practiced" (146). Shusterman's somaesthetics, he argues, complements this perspective "by translating Foucault's transgressive impulses and valorization of limit-experiences into everyday aesthetic experiences" (146). This opens the possibility of a meliorative—rather than revolutionary—transformation of whiteness, understood not as a given but as a performative "style of life," thereby enabling forms of "counter-conduct" through embodied restyling.

Chapter 8 by Barbara Formis, "Aphrodisia, Eros, Charis: Holistic Bodies and the Stylistics of Reciprocity," explores "somatics" as a dimension capable of overcoming traditional dichotomies and of moving beyond the narrow conception of aesthetics as a philosophy of art toward a broader understanding of it as a philosophy of experience as a whole. To illustrate the applications of this expanded conception and the importance of this holistic dimension, Formis undertakes a philosophical and philosophical analysis of key Greek terms: *holos*, and the three traditional modalities of love—*aphrodisia*, *eros*, and *charis*. Drawing both on

Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and on Shusterman's recent *Ars Erotica*, she seeks to "overcome the idea of love as an expression of passionate, possessive desire" in favor of "a holistic, egalitarian erotic practice" (178). This alternative finds its most compelling expression in *charis*, understood as tender and gratuitous love, capable of fostering an "affective reciprocity" between free partners.

Chapter 9 by Leszek Koczanowicz, "The Body Must Be Defended: Soma-power and the Women's Strike in Poland," concludes the volume with an explicit reference to recent events, namely the decision of Poland's Constitutional Tribunal in October 2020 to restrict access to legal abortion and the ensuing waves of women's demonstrations. Drawing on Foucault—more critically—and on Shusterman—more affirmatively—Koczanowicz shows how these protests reveal a dual political dimension of the body: on the one hand as the concrete embodiment of worldviews and social imaginaries, on the other as a "vehicle for [...] liberation," opening the way to what he calls a "microphysics of emancipation" (190).

These essays, for all their variety, cannot of course exhaust the possibilities of dialogue between Foucault and Shusterman. Greater attention might have been devoted to the erotic and sexual dimension, so central to both Foucault and to Shusterman's *Ars Erotica* but here only partially developed (most notably in Formis's chapter). Likewise, it would have been interesting to connect Shusterman's critique of a narrow conception of the aesthetic—the one Dewey already described as the "museum conception of art"—with Foucault's reading of the museum as a *dispositif* for the collection, organization, and preservation of knowledge, functioning as a space of power and classification (*The Order of Things, The Archaeology of Knowl-*

edge) and as a place that seeks to assemble and conserve all epochs and forms, removing them from the flow of time (*Des espaces autres*). A further difference that might have merited discussion concerns the two thinkers' relation to non-Western practices of self-care: far more developed in Shusterman, only briefly acknowledged in Foucault.

Despite these further possibilities, the volume displays a remarkable coherence in identifying what I take to be the central core of a possible dialogue between Foucault and Shusterman and the key to its relevance for contemporary aesthetics, philosophy, and educational theory. Shusterman's somaesthetics and Foucault's aesthetics of existence are best understood as complementary, especially with regard to the ever-delicate relation between lived experience and political agency. Foucault's aesthetics of existence, with its focus on the extraordinary and its examples of marginal, transgressive, even "mad" lives, offers a crucial resource for understanding how a stylistics of existence can take shape as an act of protest and revolution, tearing apart the subjectifying bond between politics and corporeality. Shuster-

man's somaesthetics, by contrast, with its greater attention to the ordinary, the intersubjective dimension, and the idea of an ameliorative, reformist self-stylization, shows how resistance can already be enacted in the everyday practices through which people seek to enhance and beautify their lives. Extraordinary revolution and patient reform are not mutually exclusive. If both Foucault and Shusterman are ultimately concerned with how our lives might become more beautiful and more worthy of being lived, then these two moments should be seen as the systole and diastole of the same beating heart. There are times when rupture is necessary, and times when only reform is effective. Yet reform without revolutionary ambition risks losing any real transformative force, while revolution without the concreteness of reform risks dissipating into an ephemeral countermovement. Taken together and set in critical dialogue, Foucault's aesthetics of existence and Shusterman's somaesthetics can bear concrete and lasting fruit for improving the quality of our lives—precisely as this important and precious volume demonstrates.

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