

Editorial

Unhealthy and Dangerous Lifestyles – and the Care of the Self

The way aesthetics, the body, and lifestyles – or for this theme issue, unhealthy and dangerous lifestyles – come together offers a lot to ponder. In this theme issue, we want to explore the possibilities of *somaesthetics* as a discourse and/or a platform to prompt discussion and produce novel ways to think about addiction and other unhealthy lifestyles.

We have leaned on an idea that addiction, or any other disease or lifestyle that is risky for an individual, cannot be explained only through biology or psychology. Rather, they are supported by, and they are part of, cultural patterns of thinking or social representations (Moscovici 1984), that make our practices sensible (Shelby 2016; Lee 2012; Hirschowitz-Gertz 2011; Barber 1994). What is more, they are also sources of pleasure, even if they are harmful, and that is what makes them so difficult to handle – both on the individual level and at the societal level (Sulkunen 2009).

The Burden of Disease (GBD) reports from the World Health Organization (WHO) provide data on mortality and loss of health as a result of diseases, injuries, and risk factors for all world regions. In WHO's web pages it is stated that noncommunicable diseases (NCD), driven by e.g. unhealthy lifestyles or environmental factors, kill 41 million people each year, or 71% of all deaths globally. Tobacco use, physical inactivity, the harmful use of alcohol, and unhealthy diets all increase the risk of dying from an NCD. Sociologist Pekka Sulkunen (2009) has referred to this as a problem of lifestyle regulation by modern consumption societies. These societies accentuate individualism, authenticity, and self-control as key virtues of the individuals, but, at the same time, they lack the tools to control these individuals and their un-desirable lifestyle choices. (The on-going corona pandemic serves, of course, as a good example with people going to underground parties and refusing to wear a mask, even though they could spread a deadly virus in doing so).

In this theme issue, we have, through and with the help of somaesthetics, endeavored to put a spotlight on the pleasures, dangers, and aesthetic experiences that are connected to unhealthy and dangerous life practices. Our wish has been to shed new light on factors that drive these harmful lifestyles as well as to provide new ways to think about their role in the society and in the life of individuals. We see that there is considerable potential for somaesthetic thinking in finding solutions for curing and caring people who battle with addictions or other lifestyle related conditions (see also Perälä 2018).

People sometimes drive fast just for the thrill of speed. Sometimes, we believe, this thrill is about feeling the speed in the stomach and getting goosebumps. Sometimes, for sure, it is about environmental aesthetics – how landscapes move, how the hands feel the changing roadwork

through the steering wheel, how the body seems to be “flying” through the environment. Sometimes, this reflects behavioral models of certain subcultures or lifestyles to which the individual desires to belong. Heli Vaaranen (2004) writes about fast-driving young males in her study on the decadent romantic ethos of these communities, where being a bit crazy, “going all the way”, was considered the point. Driving in their cars, young males built their identities and developed solidarity with each other, to the mutual benefit of all members of the community. Rock music has traditionally been about excess and rebellion and heavy consumption of drugs and alcohol one its main components (Oksanen 2012). “We learn to [w]e learn to drink, smoke, and take drugs because others show us not only how to do it but also how to enjoy it”, writes sociologist James Barber (in Shelby 2016).

The articles of this theme issue view dangerous and unhealthy lifestyles as they occur in three areas of life that are hard – for the individuals and for society: addiction, suicide, and eating disorders. Societies suffer both on the individual plane, as well as a whole, from all these phenomena. Often, these practices are outside of semiosis, i.e., they lack “sense” and rationality, as Sulkunen (1997) has written about addiction. Often, we explain them with the term “disease” (Barber 1994): if not biological, then at least, of “the will” (Valverde 1998). As our articles show, however, these are also ways of thinking and habits of life that suck individuals into their maelstroms as well as provide them with communities, meaningful perspectives, as well as feelings of pleasure.

Some people, for example, train hard, apply extreme diets and eat growth-enhancing substances to look like statues. These are not just bodybuilders. Practitioners of aerobics also endanger their own health through practices, that do not even make them look “good” in any mainstream way, but only to the others in their “tribes.” Anorexia lurks as a side-track in this dangerous lifestyle. This problematic is in the center of Henri Hyvönen’s article “Care of the Self, Somaesthetics and Men Affected by Eating Disorders: Rethinking the Focus on Men’s Beauty Ideals”, which is a study of six autobiographical narratives of eating disorders (ED) from the perspective of caring for the self. It is a theme the late Michel Foucault made visible in his *History of Sexuality*. In his thought-provoking article, Hyvönen focuses on the dangers of self-stylization by stressing the role of “local social groups” in the formation of men’s ED’s in his empirical data. As he shows in his analysis, for his informants, eating disorders were not a way to achieve some abstract “masculinity”, which is usually provided as an explanation, but a process through which they could be accepted in particular subcultures. Pragmatic somaesthetics, for its part, could contribute to the establishment of local groups and communities that could provide young met with safer bodily self-care practices, according to Hyvönen.

Different hobbies and professions, indeed, offer different tracks for unhealthy and dangerous lifestyles – and often in ways that are connected to aesthetic issues. Skateboarders – the rolling parkour-practitioners that have roamed our streets since the 1970s – try the impossible, with style – and break bones while being filmed. Rock stars are in constant danger of making alcohol

and drug consumption a dangerous habit, and the lifestyle that provides too little sleep but the excitement of life on the road has taken down many performers (Oksanen 2012).

One could, of course, also ask if there are artistic products or genres that are hard to understand deeply without using risky substances. Anyone can understand on a basic level what Jimi Hendrix and The Grateful Dead are about, but is there another level of understanding, another way to interpret their music when one is “experienced”? We do not think that is the case, for example, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1797-1798), even though the bizarre story – one mariner kills an albatross, then sea monsters seize the ship – was written by an avid opium user. While Coleridge used opium as a relaxant and an antidepressant and wrote *Kublai Khan* (1816) directly under its influence, it is hard to say if he used the drug as a creative enhancement. There was no culture to contextualize it or make it meaningful.

In the wave of 1960s psychedelia, it was different, as the drugs were brought to the scene by psychologists like Timothy Leary. His “The Psychedelic Experience” (written with Ralph Metzner, 1964) was not based only on the aspiration to revolutionize perception and experience, but also to incite a political revolution with the help of substances. We try to understand original contexts in art, too, when we discuss the baroque and distant scenes where our favorite films come from. Will people someday take substances when they try to understand 20th century popular music?

Some of the connections mentioned here are the background for Robert Jones’s article on the experimental drug use of William Burroughs, “The Body is a Soft Machine: The Twisted Somaesthetic of William S. Burroughs.” In his text, Jones goes beyond the analysis of poetry to examine the whole dangerous lifestyle of beat poets, with Burroughs in the lead, along with his readings of, e.g., Reich and Jones’s notes on Richard Shusterman’s somaesthetics. Jones uses the term “twisted somaesthetics” to describe Burroughs endeavours to break free of societal control with the help of substances. The lifestyle does not offer physical well-being, but, nevertheless, serves for Burroughs a way to find and explore new ways of being and criticize contemporary forms of how we experience and use our body.

In the most extreme case, dangerous and unhealthy lifestyles might just be about death – one’s own or someone’s else. The key topic in Heidi Kosonen’s “Suicide, Social Bodies and Danger: Taboo, Biopower and Parental Worry” in Films *Bridgend* (2015) and *Bird Box* (2018) is the radical act of denying life and the way this is presented in films. Even though suicide is considered a taboo in Western cultures, it is often handled in films. These films, in turn, are sometimes considered dangerous as e.g. portraying suicide is easily seen as risky and as an invitation to join in death. Kosonen uses a biopolitical framework of Michel Foucault to understand what is going on in film representations of suicide. According to her, most Anglophone films have adopted medical institutions’ views of suicide. They portray suicide in medical terms and frame suicide an anomaly of the mind “through diagnoses, stereotypical and even pejorative depictions of a variety of mental illnesses from depression to psychopathology”. On the other hand, suicide is

depicted as a force of nature, which is uncontrollable and understandable, as the victims are not there to explain themselves. Both these frameworks are stereotypical and do not portray the heterogenous reality on the background of suicide. In the worst case they might enhance prejudices and make it harder for ones living with mental illness to seek medical assistance.

At any rate, the main question for us editors, when we started to edit this issue, was: Can a person use dangerous substances, and – against all prejudices – take care of himself/herself in such a way that aesthetic concepts like harmony or holistic pleasure would make sense? As we have shown so far, the answer is not straightforward. Unhealthy and dangerous lifestyles do give pleasure for individuals and, also, a way of life with friends and communities backing your lifestyle. However, at the same time, people often look for a way out these lifestyles.

In her article “Unhealthy Lifestyle or Modern Disease? Constructing Narcotic Addiction and Its Treatments in the United States (1870-1920),” Irene Delcourt studies the history of interpretations and cures for drug addiction. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries narcotic addiction was considered a lifestyle and the result of bad lifestyle choices of upper and middle-class people. It was also believed that, by “cleansing the body” and removing inappropriate surroundings and habits the compulsion towards intoxication would disappear. A concept of *rehabilitation* started to appear in late 19th century medical literature in connection to both narcotic abuse and alcoholism treatment strategies, as well as *sanatoriums*, predecessors of contemporary “rehab”, as places where addiction was cured with the help of a residential setting, long-term therapy – several weeks to several months – and a mix of psychiatric and physical care.

In the course of the 20th century, this comprehensive view was, slowly, replaced by a more pessimistic approach, according to Delcourt. As faces of addiction became poorer, narcotic addiction was no longer considered to be a lifestyle, but rather an incurable disease, or a criminal proclivity that could not be controlled with treatment or rehabilitation, but, rather, incarceration. In the beginning of 21st century, we find more and more biomedical framing of addiction. From the point of view of somaesthetic it could be asked, was something missed in this process, and could we learn something from the holistic approaches of the 19th century? As Delcourt writes, comprehensive rehabilitation still exists, but it is reserved mainly for “well-offs”, taking place in private addiction clinics. At the same time the majority of people suffering from addiction have to settle with state-sponsored treatment programs, which offer very little help or no help at all for their patients besides medication, not to mention a promotion of healthier lifestyles, ways to take care of one self or a groups one could belong and find new forms of existence (see also Leppo & Perälä 2016).

Crispin Sartwell’s text “What the Drug Culture Meant”, which ends our theme issue, is an autobiography of a political philosopher who has come a long way from being a juvenile delinquent to being one of the most read American philosophers of culture. Sartwell says that he learned criticality through his years of marginalization, and he claims that his experience

with drugs has left a valuable trace on his philosophical work. From the point of view of this theme issue Sartwell's essay has three central points. Firstly, drugs, particularly marijuana and psychedelics, had cultural and counter-cultural meaning and separated the youth who used them from their parents and teachers. Drugs were also aesthetic and provided Sartwell and his friends with music to hear and arts to consume, a whole lifestyle. Finally, drugs were political, signaling anti-authoritarianism or an entire rejection of "the establishment.". "The whole thing" was not fun and great all the time, Sartwell admits, but at the same time he misses part of this culture and the feelings it created.

The question that arises is, what other "things" could offer same kind of a comprehensive world view and feelings of belonging to contemporary youths and young adults – or us adults – besides substances? Are there available forms of resistance, which do not destroy those who want to resist? Could somaesthetics as a discourse and/or a platform be helpful for raising discussions about the techniques of the care of the self in these respects? We hope that our compilation of essays offers insight on this.

One of our central conclusion is that we easily forget that even those people who have, in one way or another, seem to have lost control over their lives – or at least some part of it – have and want to have meaning in their lives and being in control over their lives. For example, substance users and other addicts have hobbies, and they work hard on controlling and/or medicating their addictions through self-care. Many have also succeeded, as the studies of natural recovery without treatment have shown (Klingeman 2001). For many, art has been a central form of self-care and a pathway out of addiction (We know the number of addicts in the history of arts and popular culture.) Sport, too. People can also stop driving insanely – and they can quit smoking.

In this theme issue, we have been interested in connecting social sciences (that have a connection to medicine) and the discussion on somaesthetics (the contemporary pragmatist philosophy of the body), with film studies, literature studies and gender studies. Doing this, we have wanted to explore the possibilities of somaesthetics to provoke discussion and produce novel ways to think about addiction and other unhealthy lifestyles. We, at least, have learned a lot in our dialogue with the contributors.

This issue also contains Noora-Helena Korpelainen's review of Vinod Balakrishnan and Swathi Elizabeth Kurian's *Somaesthetics and Yogasūtra: A Reading through Films* (2019) and Stefano Marini's review of Richard Shusterman's *Bodies in the Street* (2019), "Urban Aesthetics and Soma-Politics: On *Bodies in the Streets: The Somaesthetics of City Life*."

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