

Perceptual and Bodily *Habits*: Towards a Dialogue Between Phenomenology and Somaesthetics

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to examine synergies between somaesthetics and phenomenology by investigating the concept of habit in lived experience. The first section will compare the notion of habit in John Dewey’s aesthetic philosophical-pedagogical project with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. The second section will demonstrate this link through a comparison between critical phenomenology and Richard Shusterman’s somaesthetics, showing a synergy in their respective understanding of the transformative dimension of bodily habits.*

Keywords: *somaesthetics, phenomenology, habit, John Dewey, Maurice Merleau-Ponty.*

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1. Introduction

The concept of habit is a central topic within philosophical tradition. In this context, Carlisle (2014) argued that in the Western philosophical tradition, there are widely diverging views on habit. Different thinkers conceive of habits as indispensable guides both to knowledge and action, but also highlight how habits may also represent obstacles to overcome. For example, she stated that “Aristotle thinks that habit lies at the heart of moral life. Spinoza argues that it leads us astray and prevents us from perceiving the deep intelligibility of nature. Hume regards custom as ‘the great guide of human life,’ since it helps to make our world orderly and predictable. Kant suggests that it undermines our innate moral worth, making us ‘ridiculous’ and machine-like” (Carlisle, 2014, p. 3). Further, she mentioned that habits are like Plato’s *pharmakon*: “both a poison and a cure” (p. 5).

Even though it is important to be aware of the long history of this concept, in this article, we are mostly interested in perceptual and bodily habits and their related ethical implications. Moreover, a rather recent theory that emerged in American pragmatist philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century, following its popularization in Europe, was that by Bergson, “who first attempted to distinguish ‘habit memory’ from ‘image memory’” (Casey, 2013, p. 196). However, in this article, we will focus on Merleau-Ponty and not Bergson. This decision is due to his notable perspective that “habit has its abode neither in thought nor in the objective body, but in

the body as mediator of a world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002/1945, p. 167). Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, the focus is not, as it is with Bergson, on the distinction between different kinds of memory; it is instead on the vital activity and capacity of the body to perform, learn, and teach habits.

However, a preliminary conceptual clarification that is crucial to understanding the concept of the performative body is required here: of it is evident that perceptual and bodily habits can be learned and taught, what does it mean that they are performed? In this context, in Merleau-Ponty’s and Dewey’s theoretical framework, the flesh is not simply a substantialized ontological thing within its boundary, but is instead a relational entity that interacts with the world due to its perceptual and agentic abilities. Based on this perspective, we will argue that the performativity of a body is its power to perceive, feel, and act, reflexively and pre-reflexively, in a specific environment. Thus, the body is performative because it is always open to learn and embody new attitudes and practices. In this sense, every kind of biological determinism is firmly rejected. Furthermore, this performative dimension is sensitive to the very situatedness of the embodied subject—namely, the phenomenological being-in-the-world of the self.¹

Given this foreword, in the second section of the article, we will compare the concept of perceptual and bodily habits in Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s respective philosophies. Even though some comparisons between the two have already been made (Shusterman, 2008; Dreon, 2007), they do not adequately focus on the problem of habits. More specifically, Dreon mainly analyzed the aesthetic, bodily, and evolutionary emergence of human language in terms of the aforementioned authors. Meanwhile, Shusterman (2008) criticized Merleau-Ponty’s theoretical position on the body as a pre-reflexive, silent, and speechless space (pp. 49–50). Additionally, he also argued that Dewey is a better representative of somatic reflection due to his idea of continuity between the body and mind, as indicated by the latter’s compound term “body-mind.”

As will be shown in the first section, we think that this comparison between Merleau-Ponty and Dewey is required at least for three reasons. First, they share a common background—i.e., the critique of behaviorism—at the basis of their re-elaboration of the concept of body. Second, this common target of criticism will lead Merleau-Ponty and Dewey to share a relational epistemology and ontology. Precisely because these two philosophers never met each other, nor was Dewey ever cited by Merleau-Ponty in any of his studies and lectures, they each developed original concepts on perceptual and bodily habits with synergies that are still largely unexplored. Third, we will show the fruitfulness of this comparison for somaesthetics by allowing the latter to embody Merleau-Ponty’s perspective on these habits, their transformations, and the ways in which such habits shape the body.

On the subject of the transformative openness of bodily performance, in the third section, we will explore contemporary synergies between phenomenology—especially in the declension of critical phenomenology—and somaesthetics, through Shusterman’s attention to the analytical premises of bodily transformation. This section, thus, aims to open up a space of mutual connection and dialogue. In particular, we will show that critical phenomenology conceives of processes of marginalization and discrimination as primarily performed and experienced within the corporeal dimension. This allows us to highlight that both approaches take the body seriously and recognize the epistemic value of lived experience. At this point, the notion of habit discloses the entirety of its critical potential: as performative ways of living our own corporeality, our habits are always open to further adjustments through learning, teaching, and reframing. This awareness helps us rethink the racialized and gendered body in a new way: it recognizes

1 For a rigorous panorama of the concept of performativity within phenomenology, see Rentsch and Guidi (2020).

that racialization is not only a social phenomenon, but is also constituted at the level of lived experience (e.g., Fanon, 1967/1952); it also attends to the fact that gendered impositions over one's body are always modifiable and strictly contingent (e.g., Young, 2005). The somaesthetic focus on the transformative power of somatic experience may then offer powerful strategies to become aware of and eventually imagine new possibilities of being-in-the-world.

2. Dewey and Merleau-Ponty: The Experience and Body in Perceptual and Performative Habits

In this paper, we argue that the concept of habit is developed along a somatic axis within both Dewey's and Merleau-Ponty's thought processes. The aim of this section is then to show how the ideas of these thinkers are comparable, since both focus their analysis on the genesis and transformation of perceptual and performative habits, taking lived bodily experience as the primary locus of investigation. By doing so, they approach this issue from an aesthetic perspective or better, from a somaesthetic one. Moreover, while the issue of performative and perceptive bodies has been neglected since Baumgarten, and by Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer thereafter, this topic is the main focus in Shusterman's (2007) analysis (p. 137). More specifically, somaesthetics is not only the study of categories of taste, but rather it is the inquiry into bodies and their affective spheres, within their social, perceptual, and practical transformations. Thus, from this perspective, it is the effort to define the processes by which human beings modify themselves, their feelings, forms, and futures (both reflexively and pre-reflexively); it also addresses the agentic potential of environments over human beings. Therefore, one of the main research topics of somaesthetics is understanding the body as a social, anthropological, and ongoing production, through an understanding of perceptual and performative habits.

First, it is crucial to understand the common theoretical framework from which Dewey and Merleau-Ponty thematized perception and action of bodies as a continuum. The former developed this idea in his critical assessment of the reflex arc concept. This notion had interested Dewey since his reading of James' book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890)² and consequently, in 1892, at the University of Michigan, his Spring class was focused on behaviorism (Dewey, 1969/1892). However, only after four years of elaboration and research, he published the article *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* (Dewey, 1896)—a cornerstone for his philosophical conception of habit.

In this article, the stimulus-response model is understood and criticized as a replacement of the sensation-idea dualism. Here, Dewey (1896) argued that in behaviorism a new polarity is established: peripheral functions and central structures are presented as opposing each other, repositing the old dualism between body and soul in the distinction between stimulus and response (pp. 357–358). The artificial division therefore consists in separating the sensory stimulus, the intellectual elaboration, and finally, the physical movement into three separate and autonomous entities, whose individual existence is independent and characterization takes place in radically discontinuous terms. According to this model, sensation is an ambiguous element. It is a blur between body and soul, physical and psychic, or the intellectual elaboration and movement of the body. Within this framework, stimulus is mainly characterized by passive features. Moreover, such a framework does not consider perceptual-relational activity and instead takes it as an uncritically substantiated given that mechanical input—to the first psychological

² There is evidence that Dewey developed his reflex arc concept idea from this book: while he was in close collaboration with James, Dewey took an example from *Principle of Psychology*, which is cited in *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology*, and in this essay, he tried to solve an issue already underlined in James' theoretical proposal: it "probably makes the lower centres too machine-like and the hemispheres non quite machine-like enough" (James, 1983, p. 39).

and then physical process—will autonomously lead to a response.

Dewey's starting point for criticizing and overcoming behaviorism is the concept of "coordination". This idea appears first in his course at the University of Michigan in 1892 and then, is more fully formulated in the article *The Theory of Emotion, The Significance of Emotions* (1895). Here, coordination is defined as follows:

[...] the mode of behavior is the primary thing, and [...] the idea and the emotional excitation are constituted at one and the same time; that, indeed, they represent the tension of stimulus and response within the coordination which makes up the mode of behavior (Dewey, 1895, pp. 18–19).

This concept is, therefore, fundamental for describing and reimagining the way our body, in its perceptive and performative capacities, interacts with the world. Here, coordination does not simply work as a bridge between perceptual and motor moment, but rather it innervates and constitutes the sensori-motor circuit. Only sensori-motor coordination can facilitate a natural and organic link between the double activity of perceiving and acting, and can direct both towards a teleological end. At the same time, it is important to remember that, in Dewey's view, perception and action cannot be split, and moreover, they cannot even be substantiated as apart. This is because, in their pragmatic function, perception and action respond to each other; the continuum between them is, thus, established through a concept that is not substantial, but pragmatic and relational—i.e., that of coordination (Dewey, 1896).

In *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* (1896), the concept of coordination is further explored: it does not only involve perceptual and performative abilities, but also intimately constitutes the relationship between the individual and the environment. As Bredo (1998) pointed out, the relationship between perception and reality can be described "like a dance with a partner that acts back, then like conforming to a fixed thing, or forcing to conform to oneself" (p. 458). This circular mutual modeling involves the continuous rearticulation of perception and the world. Hence, experience underlies a psycho-physical situated activity, which cannot be reduced to physicalist, idealistic, or substantialist terms. Furthermore, the concept of situated bodily activity was also developed in Dewey's philosophy. More specifically, in his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (Dewey, 1938) "situation is not equivalent to the environment – it also always includes the agent in such a way that agent and environment are co-defined" (Gallagher, 2020, p. 13). This holistic concept of situation steers away from a new dualism, such as a strict distinction between subject and environment. In the situated framework, it is impossible for any agent in a given situation to escape it without also transforming it, and this is because all possible bodily movements involve the situation itself (Gallagher, 2020, p. 13).

Merleau-Ponty's book *The Structure of Behavior* (1942) similarly regarded the perceptive and agentive capacities of the body as a unitary and active process in a situated environment. His main critical point relates closely to that forwarded by Dewey: behaviorism is an atomist, objectivist, consequentialist, and determinist perspective. They both contended that, for these reasons, behaviorism is unable to account for the complex relationship that is established in the human situation.

In particular, in the first section of the volume, Merleau-Ponty explicitly engaged with supporters of the theory of the reflex arc, showing how this model raises major critical issues. Further, he required that behaviorist psychologists have a radical change in perspective based on a scientific principle: the economy of explanation. The principle adopted by behaviorists—

especially by Charles Scott Sherrington—is as follows: to overcome the charge of unidirectionality stimulus-response, they are limited to increase—both theoretically and experimentally—the number of the ranges through which the stimulus is determined, while maintaining the consequential relationship between this and the response (Merleau-Ponty, 1967/1942, pp. 16–26).

Instead, Merleau-Ponty further developed *Gestaltpsychologie*'s concept of form. This psychological movement regarded form mainly as a concept able to describe the object of perception and how it is synthesized by humans. Therefore, it focuses on the exosomatic sphere which, due to the concept of form, appears as an organized and structured whole. Here, it is worth considering the renewed proposition of a dualistic structure: the human law of perceptual organization versus exterior environmental space. Merleau-Ponty was looking for the lowest common denominator to avoid this dualism. He found it in the concept of form [*forme*], which is able to describe not only perception but also the body and psychophysical activities. Thus, bodies are forms, which are organized and structured within their specific ontogenetic ability. Such shifting from an exosomatic perspective to an endosomatic one is crucial because it allowed Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology to find a common background for both the perceptual-performative body and the environment.

Even if “vital forms” and “physical forms” are comparable, thanks to the common denominator described briefly above, they also have specific ontological characteristics. In particular, in vital form, the virtual and pragmatic possibilities of interaction with the environment are presented as essential for maintaining life. These are given through a dialectic relationship:

Aided by the notion of structure or form, we have arrived at the conclusion that both mechanism and finalism should be rejected and that the 'physical', the 'vital' and the 'mental' do not represent three powers of being, but three dialectics. Physical nature in man is not subordinated to a vital principle, the organism does not conspire to actualize an idea, and the mental is not a motor principle in the body; but what we call nature is already consciousness of nature, what we call life is already consciousness of life and what we call mental is still an object vis-a-vis consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1967/1942, p. 184).

Thus, form, as a dialectic between the physical, vital and mental, introduced Merleau-Ponty's philosophical work on the body. It plays active roles in the dialectic with the environment—the body structures fields of forces and is plastically formed by them (Malabou, 2009/2004, 2012/2009). However, not all life forms have the same agency. In this context, Merleau-Ponty recognized that when going up in the evolutionary chain, behavior becomes more and more differentiated. This means that the most complex organisms, within their bodies, are able to structure a greater number of dialectical relations with the situation, and so exhibit different behaviors as compared to less complex organisms.

Moreover, human habits are distinguished from the behavior of other animals by more than just the linguistic break.³ The difference is more specifically traceable in the plasticity of our bodies' interactions—i.e., the ability to modify our form and radically transform the pragmatic dialectic between us and our situation. Further, such an idea of form is developed in another key

3 In this continuous perspective, there is no linguistic break, but only more or less complex behavior. Even becoming a speaker is enabled by our capacity to embody and perform habits; the letters feedback and constitute other, different, and new behaviours.

concept of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy: "body schema" (*schéma corporel*),⁴ which is a pragmatic knowledge that allows us to perceive our body and its actions at a pre-reflexive level (Merleau-Ponty, 2002/1945, p. 113). For example, I can grasp the glass of water on the desk without thinking about the action my body is taking, nor do I have to focus my gaze on the glass or on my hand. I know this because while I am drinking, I am simultaneously looking at the computer, reading, and correcting this paper. I know where my body is, its peripersonal space, its movements, and its possibilities through the habits that I perform in such situations.

However, this description of the body schema may lead to a misunderstanding: it seems to assume biological form as a transcendental a-priori— the condition of possibility for any kind of experience. This idea is bypassed in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). If the form of the body is the body schema, then a different "form [...] is a new type of existence" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002/1945, p. 114). This new existence could be created by different kind of incorporations, such as the embodiment of a plumed hat by someone who is used to wearing it, the pre-reflexive knowledge of a car's size for an expert driver, and, famously, the blind man who uses a cane as an extension of his own perceptive body. All these examples show that the body schema is not simply a biologically given, but is created by situated, specific, and cultural interactions with technological objects that surround us. However, mostly, these examples show that this process of embodiment is possible only due to constant practice, which allows "the acquisition of habits as a rearrangement and renewal of the corporeal schema" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002/1945, p. 164).

Moreover, the interaction between the human body and technologies is currently taken into consideration by post-phenomenology. This interaction is not read only in instrumental terms, but also according to the generative abilities and unprecedented experiences and practices that technologies have created (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015). Since the seventies, Ihde put how human intentionality is shaped by inorganic tools at the core of his research. Nevertheless, in the first section of *Techniques and Praxis* (1979), he described a phenomenological model where he rejected the Husserlian "consciousness of ---" version of intentionality for the more existential Heideggerian "Analytic of Dasein" which has 'being-in-the-world' as its interpretation of intentionality. He enriched this with the idea that experiences and intentionality with machines themselves are diverse and not simply reducible to any single conceptual modelling (Ihde, 1979, p. 4).

By connecting phenomenology and pragmatism, Ihde (1979) defined four different ways in which technology affects intentionality: embodiment (pp. 6–11), hermeneutic (pp. 11–13), background (pp. 13–15), and alterity relations (1990, pp. 97–108).⁵ In all these instances, technologies are media: they stand between body and world, actively modelling the situation. Further, each set of human-technology interactions models relational ontology. Technologies transform our experience of the world, our intentionality, and consequently, our perceptions and interpretations of our world. Human beings, in turn, become transformed in this same

4 Although, in the translation of *Phenomenology of Perception* that we used, *schéma corporel* is translated to "body image", we think it is more appropriate in this paper to replace it with "body schema." This is not only to remain more faithful to the original French text, but mainly because body schema and body image are distinguished in post- and critical phenomenology.

5 A brief definition is in order: "We embody technologies (producing 'embodiment relations') when they extend or amplify our basic perceptual capacities [...]. By contrast, when we use technologies like clocks and dashboard speedometers we pay attention to the technologies themselves, which represent the world through readouts or other symbolic displays. Since they require us to engage in interpretive work, Ihde terms these 'hermeneutic relations'. In other cases, we relate to technologies as though they are quasi-human, such as when we ask questions of virtual assistants like Apple's Siri or Microsoft's Cortana. These Ihde calls 'alterity relations'. And finally, some technologies operate wholly out of sight, without soliciting any interactions from users. Our relations to technologies like air conditioners and the electric grid Ihde calls 'background relations'" (Susser, 2017, pp. 32–33).

situated process through the material history of things.⁶

If Merleau-Ponty and after post-phenomenology had mainly considered habits from an endosomatic perspective, Dewey approached habits from an exosomatic one due to his concept of experience. In *Experience and Nature* (1925), habits are presented as a force that shapes experience—i.e., the mutual dialectic between a human body and the situation (Dewey, 1929/1925, pp. 279-280). They are not fixed, rather they are defined as follows:

Habit is formed in view of possible future changes and does not harden so readily. [...] Each habit demands appropriate conditions for its exercise and when habits are numerous and complex, as with the human organism, to find these conditions involves search and experimentation; the organism is compelled to make variations, and exposed to error and disappointment. By a seeming paradox, increased power of forming habits means increased susceptibility, sensitiveness, responsiveness (Dewey, 1929/1925, p. 281).

Moreover, habits look like vital forms. They change through time to fit better with the social, political, economic, and biological situations. This characteristic—i.e., the plasticity of habits—is something that emerges only through their pragmatic application. Habits open the door to new habits, possibilities, and virtual experiences as well as practices, performances, and perceptions. The human body is, in this regard, like an art object in its classical Kantian definition: an object “that is purposive in itself and, though without an end” (Kant, 2007/1790, § 44), and that is always in a process of genesis.

Furthermore, both the authors being discussed account for perceptual and bodily habits in two different ways: Dewey from the *exosomatic* point of view and Merleau-Ponty from the *endosomatic*, but both from a dialectic perspective. Further, the perceptual and bodily habits raise, for both, a new philosophical interest: they become key concepts in analyzing and demonstrating the plasticity of body perception and practices. In doing so, they also rethink the agency of experience, situation, technology, and social language. This perspective is exactly the common ground where somaesthetics, our comparison, and our further analyses have their epistemological value. Somaesthetics, due to its closeness to Dewey’s thought, is mainly focused on what has been defined here as the exosomatic perspective⁷—i.e., how sociocultural habits are embodied in practical everyday life. This framework on perceptual and performative habits may be enriched by some concepts taken from phenomenology and post-phenomenology: form and body-schema, transparency and proprioception as well as intentionality and media-intentionality are powerful conceptual tools that may help constitute a new idea of the bodily and situated subject.

Finally, this analysis could allow us to distinguish, in somaesthetics, habits that positively implement emotional and agentive possibilities for the body, rather than annihilate them. If the analyses carried out in this section are fundamentally related to somaesthetics’ analytical project,⁸ they also lead to a guiding principle able to determine an ethical boundary between

6 “Things” may seem a generic term, but on this occasion, it is based on Ian Hodder’s definition: “Thing is an entity that has presence by which I mean it has a configuration that endures, however briefly. But this is also true of all entities and objects. I have been using the word ‘thing’ so far, but why not use the word ‘object’? [...] The term ‘object’ is very tied up in a long history which opposes subject and object, mind and matter, self and other.” (Hodder, 2012, p. 7).

7 In somaesthetics, there is a particular focus on education (Shusterman, 2004), pop culture such as Rap (Shusterman, 2000/1992, pp. 201–236), and Chinese and Japanese techniques (Shusterman, 2017). So far, this discipline has mostly inquired into how different sociocultural and environmental (i.e., exosomatic situations) feeds back and shapes human beings.

8 Shusterman defined it as follows: “analytic somaesthetics describes the basic nature of our perception and practices, and their function in

practices that enrich embodiments and those that are underdeveloped in these processes (issues inquired in pragmatic and practical somaesthetics).⁹ It is in fact a matter of preserving, in the application of habits, the virtuality and the genesis of experiences. However, this is not to make our possibilities of movement, action, and thought unidirectional. This project, far from being solely focused on Merleau-Ponty and Dewey, is resumed, re-articulated, and discussed by critical phenomenologists. This discipline will be central in the next section as it examines the reciprocal transformations between material, scientific, and social technologies and bodies.

3. Bodily Habits Today: Towards Transformative Tools of Theory and Praxis

In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project, habits are our pre-personal ways of living and navigating the world through our lived body (*Corps Propre*). They are constructed and reinforced via the sedimentation of actions to which we become accustomed and which become part of our body schema. As Crossley (2013) pointed out, habits are properly “structures of behaviour, attaching the embodied actor to their world which take shape and are reshaped (and sometimes extinguished) in the dynamic and always ongoing process of interaction between actor and world” (p. 147).

In this context, Merleau-Ponty's definition of body schema can be considered as intrinsically related to motility and spatiality—namely as a way of expressing that our bodies are in the world (2002/1945), and that they move and perceive (2003/1995). According to him:

We grasp external space through our bodily situation. A 'corporeal or postural schema' gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them. A system of possible movements, or 'motor projects' radiates from us to our environment. [...]. For us the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 5).

By regarding the body as our primary way of being in the world and interacting with the (natural, social, historical) environment, the Merleau-Pontinian account of corporeality refuses to view the body in a reductionist way, recognizing instead the (imperfect) continuity between our intentions, desires, objectives, and the expression of such structures. Here, we suggest complementing Merleau-Ponty's traditional account by turning to critical engagement with issues of gender and race. From there, we will conclude by highlighting how critical phenomenology and somaesthetics are similarly concerned with the process of transforming and re-signifying our being in the world.

Perceptual habits are deeply informed by complex and multi-layered structural conditions that are quasi-transcendental as per Guenther (2019). According to her analysis, there are some structures which are not a priori “in the sense of being absolutely prior to experience and operating in the same way regardless of context,” but otherwise that they have a key role in constitution our experience of ourselves, others, and the world and “in shaping the meaning and the manner of our experience” (Guenther, 2019, p. 11). Patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity,

our knowledge and construction and reality” (1997, p. 37).

9 “Pragmatic somaesthetics is the dimension concerned with methods of somatic improvement and their comparative critique” and it is divided into “representational”, “experimental”, and “performative” methodologies of practice. “Representational somaesthetics emphasizes the body external appearance while experiential disciplines focus not on how the body looks from the outside but on the aesthetic quality of its experience [...] performative somaesthetics could be introduced to group methodologies that focus primarily on building strength, health of skill” (Shusterman, 1997, p. 38). These distinctions for Shusterman (1997) are not rigidly exclusive. Then “practical somaesthetics [...] is about physically engaging in such care not by pushing words but by moving limbs” (p. 39).

for instance, are “ways of seeing” that actively inform our natural attitude and shape the quality of our experiences, and that become ways of “making the world” (Guenther, 2019, p. 12). These structures shape our bodily experiences, often in insidious ways, but accounting for these can reveal the power relations and socio-political structures at play (Weiss et al., 2019). Within the constitution of habits, these structures inform intercorporeal and intersubjective encounters with others, which are lived through in a multi-sensorial way, more specifically through the gaze of an (oppressive) other.

We would like to highlight the following: the constitution of habits is not neutral in terms of one’s particular embodiment in a given social, historical, and cultural circumstance. Classical phenomenology has paved the way for recognizing that some traits of one’s embodiment are particularly salient in intersubjective encounters: the cases of gendered and racialized embodiments will be briefly noted here. This is done, first, because of the historical legacy that phenomenology has with these analyses (see in particular Beauvoir, 1949 and Fanon, 1967/1952). Second, the contemporary urgency calls phenomenologists to engage with these bodily experiences, which are too often marginalized and underrepresented in academic reflections.

As classical phenomenological investigations have shown, an objectifying gaze prevents the self from moving freely and from being in tune with the environment. A *locus classicus* is Fanon’s analysis of the interrupted intentionality and disturbed body schema in a racist context. Here, he assumed that racial objectification is a form of “amputation [...] that spattered my whole body [...] They objectively cut away slices of my reality” (Fanon, 1967/1952, p. 85). Further, in *White Masks, Black Skin*, he carried out an analysis of the racial embodiment moving from the Sartrean ontological framework, describing the sense of objectification due to the (white) others’ gaze, as “nonbeing” or alternately “being through others” (Fanon, 1967/1952, p. 137). In this context, the other’s gaze objectified the racialized subject insofar as it grasped the skin as the element which defines, in a univocal sense, the whole subject. In doing so, the person is merely reduced to their skin color, which entails a loss of their bodily integrity:

Below the corporeal schema, I had sketched a historic-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me... by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories... I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all historicity... (Fanon, 1967/1952, pp. 111–112).

These fundamental insights show how our bodily being in the world is not neutral, but instead built via intersubjective relationships with the others. Further, contemporary frameworks have applied Fanon’s insights to racialized embodiment, highlighting that the lived experience of racism is inscribed into one’s body schema, and problematically, can become an unconscious way to navigate reality. The embodied racism is then a form of habitual perception as Ngo (2017) outlined: “[...] Racist gestures and responses can become inscribed on the level of the body schema through habits and habituated bodily orientation” (p. 25). Thus, the racialization of others starts basically within the visual register, and it is expressed through the sedimentation of routine acts against racialized groups.¹⁰

Phenomenologists of race have also reframed the Merleau-Pontinian idea that the body is simultaneously natural and cultural, by highlighting that our ways of perceiving should be grasped as culturally and historically situated habits. Relatedly, Fielding (2019) noted that this

¹⁰ See, for e.g., Yancy (2016).

strategy is compelling for unveiling presuppositions tacitly implied by our gestures, as well as the responsibility this entails:

Ways of perceiving are also habits at a cultural and historical level—new ways of perceiving are instituted, and these institutions found new ways of moving and hence understanding, becoming part of the background against which things, people, and relations appear. Analyzing racialization as just such a cultural habit of perception, for example, allows us to understand why its structure recedes into the background, making it appear natural, but nonetheless shapes the ways in which we respond to one another (p. 156).

The central idea is that “I can” relies both on our biological body (the body-object of phenomenological investigation) and situation. In this context, our body schema is built through sedimentation and stylization of gestures, attitudes, and stances, which are themselves subject to social and cultural dynamics. Further, the so-called quasi-transcendental structures make some postures possible or impossible to acquire, and some acts possible or impossible to perform. In other words, it means that our bodily intentionalities, as well as our performative agentive potentials, are molded on an endosomatic level.

Feminist phenomenology has also worked in this direction, from its very origin as an epistemic field: Young (2005) showed how women’s movements in a patriarchal society (specifically in the US in the eighties) are basically limited by social environment and education, giving life to peculiar bodily schemas, defining “typically ‘feminine’ styles of body comportment and movement” (p. 28). Consequently, “women often approach a physical engagement with things with timidity, uncertainty, and hesitancy,” which is symptomatic of a general lack of trust in their own bodies (p. 34). Relying on Merleau-Ponty phenomenology, Young also noted the following:

The possibilities that are opened up in the world depend on the mode and limits of the bodily “I can”. Feminine existence, however, often does not enter bodily relation to possibilities by its own comportment toward its surroundings in an unambiguous and confident ‘I can’. [...] Typically, the feminine body underuses its real capacity, both as potentiality of its physical size and strength and as the real skills and coordination that are available to it (p. 36).

However, it is important to note that these are *gendered* limitations and not sex differences. Young made it clear that education and social milieu are key in shaping women’s style of movement as interrupted: the body schema is then influenced by one’s gender and by how this gender role is performed in a given society. Moreover, the main finding of her analysis entails an explicit acknowledgement of how one’s overall situatedness reinforces certain styles of movement.

There are some similarities between Young’s account of gendered body schema and Fanon’s attention to racialized embodiment: both show that our body schema is not neutral, by engaging with traditional phenomenological accounts (in particular with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology), where differences of gender and race are not extensively considered salient in the definition of one’s body schema. Critical phenomenology has pushed this investigation further, following Crenshaw (1991), by assuming an intersectional attitude towards people’s lived experiences and recognizing that the axes of privilege and marginalization work together in molding one’s experience.

These classical accounts are central because they consider the constitution of bodily habits as intrinsically intersubjective, open to further adjustments, and possibly moldable through education and adjustment. Further, the surreptitious *naturalness* of our bodily habits is disclosed as deeply cultural and historically-related. This means that, in principle, it is possible to become aware of our gestures, be educated in changing them, and inaugurate processes of teaching.

We will now try to show that somaesthetics and contemporary instances of critical phenomenology share a space of dialogue in two ways: first, somaesthetics may provide critical phenomenology with crucial insights into the formation of habits, thus supporting practices of conscious self-knowledge; second, critical phenomenology brings a radically transformative agenda to somaesthetics through awareness of how structural conditions as well as social, political, and cultural phenomena often serve to maintain the status quo, and also by showing how sedimented habits must be changed on the micro-political level.

Somaesthetics and critical phenomenology share the awareness that bodily habits are flexible and potentially transformative, precisely because they are learnt, sedimented, and changeable. Thus, since habits are learned and taught, they are open to transformation. Cuffari (2011) examined this point by arguing that it is not only doable but also advisable to actively engage in transformative practice. In particular, she stressed that embodied habits are “rooted in the past and open to alteration in the future” (Cuffari, 2011, p. 536). That means that a certain habit may be acquired through temporal repetition and continuous performance. Moreover, it is not fixed or immutable, but rather modifiable through new bodily acts: “If habits are experienced as lived ambiguities capable of ameliorative transformation, then conscious habit cultivation offers a situated practice of resistance to stagnation” (Cuffari, 2011, p. 536).

The process of becoming-conscious of our bodily habits is therefore a practice of resistance and simultaneously of responsibility in facing our being in the world as embodied subjects. From this point of view, Shusterman (2003) recognized “the productive power of pragmatic somaesthetics for woman’s liberation” (p. 115). The hermeneutical lens with which he read *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir, 1949) may be fruitfully added to the epistemic toolkit of the critical phenomenology. Moreover, somaesthetics as discipline and practice has many declensions, whose combination aims to take seriously Western theory and *praxis* “devoted to the knowledge, discourses, and disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it” (Shusterman, 2000, p. 533). More specifically, in a concise but explanatory sentence, somaesthetics is “the critical, meliorative study of the experience and the use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aisthesis) and creative self-fashioning” (Shusterman, 2000, p. 532). To discover the unexplored continuity between somaesthetics and critical phenomenology, a primary common ground is given by the explicit recognition that the structures of power are active in an insidious and capillary way, often not easily identifiable as noxious and dangerous (in this context, see: Weiss et al. 2019; Guenther, 2019; Stanier & Miglio, 2021). Furthermore, in dialogue with Beauvoir, Shusterman (2003) argued that “[...] entire ideologies of domination can be covertly materialized and preserved by encoding them in somatic norms that, as bodily habits, get typically taken for granted and so escape critical consciousness” (p. 111). In recognizing and challenging the “taken-for-granted” nature of our bodily habits, somaesthetics is perfectly compatible with the question of our “natural attitude” and with taking a position towards others’ assumptions and our own implicit, automatic, and unconscious habits.¹¹ No differently from

11 “However it is construed, this phenomenological intentional consciousness is not easy to come by; it is an achievement - a radical alteration of everyday and theoretical consciousness. Our most common ways of understanding are motivated by biases and habits that can originate individually or culturally. Phenomenology is, as the name implies, an account of appearances, and it begins as a reflection upon experiences as we live them. Lived experience (Erlebnis) is transient, fleeting, and not intrinsically reliable as a form of understanding. Yet

somaesthetics, critical phenomenology conceives philosophical practice as primarily embodied, an exercise in *skepticism*, and the progressive acquisition of an attitude towards reality.

This emphasis on the plasticity of bodily habits allows us to question and re-imagine the norms of our communal living—for instance, by providing concrete alternatives to historically-legitimated praxis of domination and marginalization. Oppressive relations inform bodily habits and the subjective “I can,” and they do so primarily through the body as the very site of these practices of domination. In this regard, the somatic dimension of our subjectivity is not only expressed in quasi-transcendental structures (*à la* Guenther, 2019), but also in the possible site of liberation and renegotiation. As Shusterman (2003) noted:

The norms that women of a given culture should speak softly, eat daintily, sit with closed legs, and walk with bowed heads and lowered eyes both embody and reinforce such gender oppression. However, just as oppressive power relations are encoded in our bodies, so they can be challenged by alternative somatic practices (p. 111)

Moreover, the call for “alternative somatic practices” starts from the awareness of the centrality of our bodily and perceptual habits in making the world and ourselves. The preliminary work shared by critical phenomenology and analytical somaesthetics is then to recognize such habits and to focus on the somatic aspects of our being in the world. In this context, Shusterman (2008) insisted on the relevance of the neglected dimension of bodily lived experience, instead of attending only to the “body’s external form or *representation*” (p. 533). Moreover, he argued that somaesthetics may lead to practices of social action stating the following: “Somaesthetics is helping to initiate a change here, suggesting how sensitizing, consciousness-raising somatic training can deal with issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence” (Shusterman, 2014, p. 10).

Similarly, critical phenomenology engages with the lived experience of marginalization and oppression as lived through one’s flesh. Moreover, critical phenomenology and somaesthetics not only share some theoretical premises—as partially considered in the first section of this paper—but also some toolkits for actively resisting bodily normalization and reimagining the oppressive dimension of some habits.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, our primary goal has been to explore the synergies between somaesthetics and phenomenology along two parallel paths: historical and epistemic.

The first line of investigation was deployed in the second section. Our thesis is that traditional phenomenological accounts and pragmatic projects have some substantial continuities in understanding the epistemic and existential roles of experiences. Here, we compared the perspectives of Merleau-Ponty and Dewey, putting into dialogue their respective understandings of habit by disclosing the continuities and specificities of their respective approaches. This analysis showed how both authors have a specific conception of the lived body as open to transformation, plastic, and positively renegotiable, but that they differ in their discussion of the dialectic relationship between human beings and their situated environment. More specifically, we showed that Merleau-Ponty took an endosomatic perspective, while Dewey and somaesthetics

this is the kind of understanding that prevails in our everyday ways of acting and interacting in the world. Husserl’s name for this uncritical affirmation of the world is the natural standpoint, to which he contrasts the phenomenological standpoint. Phenomenology involves a radical alteration of consciousness—a complete shift in attitude toward what appears that involves a suspension of the natural attitude” (Davis, 2019, p. 4).

are instead interested in the exosomatic. However, they both argue for a third way to understand the human subject—one that profitably avoids the intrinsic aporias of attitudes like physicalism and mentalism.

This definition of the subject as embodied, and of bodily potentials as malleable, allowed us to investigate a contemporary relationship between somaesthetics and critical phenomenology. From there, we showed that the relationship between somaesthetics and phenomenology may be also understood under the sign of an epistemic continuity. On a theoretical level, these approaches value bodily experience as a central concept for understanding human beings, recognizing the power-knowledge nexus that informs our corporeal behavior. In this regard, the notion of habit is particularly appropriate, since it discloses the intrinsic possibility to imagine new ways to conceive ourselves, our being in the world as well as our interactions with others (human, non-human, things). Moreover, critical phenomenology is particularly involved in the explicit recognition that our bodily habits are core elements of our and others' experience of the self. This is done by highlighting that axes of marginalization and discriminatory attitudes are both perpetrated and lived through in bodily experience. This central awareness has compelling social and political goals, and aims specifically to imagine alternative forms of resistance. In this context, taking up our role in the world as embodied subjects is the first step for developing more sustainable, more respectful, and less discriminatory practices. Here, we strongly believe that somaesthetics' call to take somatic experiences seriously is central to this step. In fact, Shusterman himself has read phenomenological texts through a somaesthetic lens: while his analysis of Merleau-Ponty (1945) is focused on other topics (Shusterman, 2005), his reading of Beauvoir's (1949) is completely in line with the theoretical approach we proposed in this paper (Shusterman, 2003).

Thus, the plasticity of our bodily habits, and the potential to reframe them through bodily practices, along with the awareness that our embodiment is not neutral, but instead shaped by social, cultural, historical circumstances, open up a space for thinking about and examining the bodily performative in all its political potentials.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers, as well as the Editor of this special issue. We are very grateful to our research group PIS – Performing Identities Seminar (Università degli Studi di Milano) for the enlightening discussion on the notion of performativity. Parts of the insights developed in this paper has been previously discussed there.

Author's note

We contributed equally as authors to this paper. In particular, Nicole Miglio worked on §3, while Samuele Sartori wrote §2. We conceived the main ideas of this paper together and co-wrote the Introduction and Conclusion.

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