

## Methods? What are they?

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I warmly welcome Falk Heinrich's initiative to invite Aurosa Alison, Stefano Marino, Elena Romagnoli, and myself to a dialogue on the methods of somaesthetics for *The Journal of Somaesthetics*. As an ex-editor-in-chief of the journal (with Falk and Richard Shusterman), I know that the topical and methodological variety of papers which arrive to the journal is broad, and on several occasions I thought that was I totally lost or that the text that I/we had received had nothing to do with our aims or *methods*. This frequently happened when someone's work was based on explicit *methods* or stressed that a certain *method* was used. Therefore, my first reaction to Falk's invitation was to raise my eyebrows. Perhaps his wish is not that we turn methodologically into an approach resembling scholars who do statistics, quantitative studies or laboratory experiments (which I typically associate with 'methods'), and I know that there are certain clear methods for definitions in analytic philosophy and thoughts on the methodological nature of the hermeneutical circle which some of us in philosophy like to think of as *methods*, but at least in my own philosophical habitat, I question the usefulness of thinking of methods in philosophy. However, I definitely share an understanding of the problematics posed by Falk. And I will bring about my own answer, which, in the end, as one can already guess, is not a thorough one to Falk's questions, but a sort of response, from my own part, from my own perspective, and from my own philosophical position/angle, to what is at stake here. I hope it will enhance dialogue.

As hinted at above, I have always had a hard time accepting the idea of methodology in philosophy. One of the key experiences that led me to this was from my studies (and later teaching) in semiotics, which I consider to be an extremely methodological discipline. Returning to the two already mentioned examples, there is no way that I can say that some ways of making conceptual definitions or the use of the hermeneutic circle (which is closer to my own work than the already mentioned definitions in analytic philosophy) would not work as guidelines for thinking, but working with philosophy is still distant from the way methodology is thought of in virtually every other scholarly discipline, such as semiotics, which is governed by many rules. If, in certain forms of sociology, one asks how many people should be interviewed in order to obtain reliable statistics, in semiotics, which my Saussurian colleague Christian Aspalter used to call the "Swiss pocket knife," models are everywhere – often as diagrams, with 4 or 6 boxes to fill in.

Of course, we can still think of methodology in a broader fashion, but I find it more fruitful to think that philosophy, as opposed to semiotics and/or chemistry, works rather like football or playing jazz guitar.

How is philosophy like jazz guitar or football? We learn how to build and then apply argumentation, argumentative patterns, solutions, questioning, and reflective ways to describe issues by imitation; and becoming big in this field often means, that you play your *game/music* (to follow the simile) in your own, sometimes very surprising way. We often appreciate highly original strains of thought, which are untypical for the academy. And most of the time we don't base our work on model thinking or clear rules.

By rehearsing and practicing – reading, listening, talking – we learn to improvise in a variety of situations. There are no hard and fast rules for how to play with a football (although it is useful to practice different kicks and situations and to know the rules of the game), or how to play a

guitar (but learning chords, modalities and licks/riffs played by masters can help). You have to have *tekhne* (technique, skill, practice), and *poiesis* (creativity), but no one can say that there is a clear methodology for successful playing. And for success in philosophy, it is sometimes enough to have a colleague say “that’s interesting.”

In practice, philosophy is a bit like art (or certain sports). On this free ride, where techniques, perspectives, and ways of discussing change according to the need to move forward in increasing understanding, we get results which others can build upon. This makes our practice different from jazz guitar and football. Jazz guitarists and football players do not develop threads like we do regarding the definition of art (continuing on the work of others), although they can of course build on what people have been doing before, and use this in their own game. Our *business* lies somewhere between the scientific and main forms of scholarly work and art/football.

When commenting on this practice, Ludwig Wittgenstein said that you study philosophy to a certain extent so that you can eventually throw away the ladder (1921; *Tractatus* 6.54). And in his own school of analytic philosophy he developed a model for doing so – not a model to rigidly follow formulas, but an example of how thinking can meaningfully go beyond patterns and the shallow rules we have. Others who have been especially efficient in throwing away the ladder (in other schools) include Martin Heidegger, Emil Cioran, and Julia Kristeva. It is also important to mention the tradition of Zen (and other perennial philosophical traditions) as the utmost philosophical game for this, as it strives to relieve us even from the ego and existential problems – although one must bear in mind, that Zen is not an academic discipline at all, though, it is still philosophy (for probably most of us in the context where I am publishing this).

This tendency of drifting out of the scholarly ordinary, which we appreciate in philosophy, happens through unexceptional writing practice. In *Guardare Ascoltando* (2003), Pier Aldo Rovatti states that, technically speaking, the writing of Heidegger and Jacques Derrida is allegorical but in terms of content and philosophy it is not allegorical, which makes the texts tricky to crack, and which, in the end, makes them potent for reaching beyond the ordinary. No methods are failed, though. Like Pat Metheny, the guitarist, or Zico, the football player, who surprised me countless times when I watched Brazil play as kid, they *know things*, they *know how*, and they play against all expectations. Not unlike Michael Taussig's characterization of Jacques Derrida, they are trickster gods.<sup>4</sup>

We know, of course, that we philosophers don't all the time nor even often surprise our colleagues, and this also applies to artists; but the basic way of doing this work still, makes *free play* possible (I hereby give this concept a new life in philosophy), and at least once or twice most scholars in the business have hit the unknown and/or the *new* by turning a question around, or by coming up with a new conceptual perspective. What seems to make sense to the community is what we buy, but there is no clear code/formula for that, just the acceptance of a textual gesture which shows the way to new knowledge/understanding. Not that someone follows rules or strict methodologies.<sup>7</sup>

Somaesthetics has attracted more methodological reflection than most branches of philosophy or aesthetics (by naming both, I want to stress that aesthetics does not always pertain to philosophy, as it can also be sociological). Ultimately, those reflections with which Richard Shusterman started the whole enterprise have not really led to the formation of a methodology in the true sense of the word, nor even to much testing on what could be done in somaesthetics.

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<sup>4</sup> Taussig delivered this analogy in a lecture which I hosted a couple of years ago in Finland, but I have no idea if he has published the thought somewhere.

Maybe John Dewey's philosophy and pragmatism in Richard Shusterman's hands has more broadly developed into an important base for a *style* of doing philosophy, or a way of practicing it. But I know that Shusterman has also tested somaesthetics in action in conferences and events, doing practice and theory hand-in-hand. However, not many have experienced this, and we might want to welcome more ways of testing it. Of course, such approaches could be more related to what contemporary dancers call methods, i.e. ways of testing out movement and being in the body (nearly every bigger name teaching dance talks about their own method, and dancers study these methods all the time). And, if we would use the concept of the method the way dancers do, we'd call e.g. Derrida's philosophy Derrida's method and Heidegger's philosophy Heidegger's method. Talking about somaesthetics, there is reflective work done on practices, which are methodological, of course, e.g. related to yoga (I am referring to the work of Vinod Balakrishnan and Swathi Elizabeth Kurian). Yoga has a clear methodology on how to do things. Comparing it to e.g. contemporary dance, you don't have people who resemble Kristeva or Heidegger showing up and devising their own practices, surprising us with improvisations – just to remind us of the difference of the main meaning of methodological and non-methodological practice. Although yoga is about reflection and consciousness – this it shares with philosophy – you aim at the repetition of patterns which you execute as best you can, without aiming to renew the *language* of the practice. A Derrida of yoga might break your neck!

Philosophy to some extent is really about skill, a game-like activity, and free rides in various topics, which we copy from the masters. Just think of Luce Irigaray's occasionally obscure tripping on the body, seeking various perspectives, asking questions, etc., following the great tradition of experimental writing which challenges metaphysics, or Abhinavagupta's way of *getting* lost with the *rasa* to ultimately shed light on its very nature (see Gnoli 1956), and in a way which can at least be considered non-methodological.

If we do not strive for a stricter methodology, what then? Artists, in their relatively free play, have sometimes used dogmas to come up with new directions. Could we do that too? It could be more effective in advancing with our enterprise, and better than working out a methodology which easily leads to the stiffening of the discourse. The latter happened with phenomenology (not that I would have a problem with that, though). An early reading of phenomenology reveals that it was an experimental branch of philosophy, featuring vibrant outbursts, where new concepts were invented when needed and ways of writing tested. Think of Aurel Kolnai's "On Disgust" (*Der Ekel*, 1929) or radical-conservativist, hard-to-crack essays like Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935-1936/1950, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*). When the methodological considerations and the exegetic attitude took over, German phenomenology became scholastic (the French gave it a new experimental boost in the 1960s, though). However, I have started to welcome its late blending with natural sciences and therapy, which has provided some interesting paths of thinking for all of us. Somaesthetics is still open for anything. Phenomenology absolutely not. As this makes me happy, talking about somaesthetics, I fear a slightly rigid methodology.

The 1995 established dogma school of film, Dogma 95 (von Trier, Vinterberg, etc.) went against the grain to produce low tech works with a handful of rules. The camera must be held by hand, the film format must be Academy 35 mm, the sound must never be produced apart from the images. This provided a way of using dogma in art, and resulted in a new kind of film.

Falk's main interest is in the field of methodological problems in somaesthetics, which deals with the "function and significance of the human body in aesthetic experiences" and has issues with "difficulties regarding the first-person observation of oneself." It is true that to some extent

the subjective and objective points of view can make things messy if the main way of discussing phenomena is always one's own sensation, whether witnessing art or e.g. dancing, which is Falk's own take on this. Still, if one thinks about it, being both the observer and the observed is not always problematic. If anything, here it could be thought of as methodological and in the interest in precision which has haunted philosophy since its origins. Philosophy has nearly always suffered from striving to achieve universality.

Let's say one writes film philosophy, and there is an interest in discussing the tickling of the soles of the feet which occurs when one watches action films where people climb walls. In the fashion of early phenomenology, one can focus on the sensation, and not say too much about it, although maybe playing around with it intellectually. One might be the observer and the observed in some way, but to be precise... we are not the sensation. Like a house that is seen, a pain in the back is felt – and it is not I/we ourself/ves. And, we don't need to immediately aim for total universalism in our claims. I think the problem of simultaneously being the observer and the observed partly actually arises when one aims for too much universalism, and does not only note that this happens to me and to many others testing the boundaries of the phenomenon with the readers – and, just a note, this is something where brain research, which Falk mentions, with its hardcore methodology, gives a helping hand – while, of course, it is notable thing in itself that we sometimes reflect on e.g. being and having a body. Thinking of universalism, brain researchers don't say that all of us experience things the same way. It depends on having/lacking mirror neurons (people with Asberger's don't have the empathy which mirror neurons make us engage with, and/or conditioning.) Why should philosophers? Can't we just talk about phenomena without extending them too much?

This is more broadly a problem for aesthetics. It is not only a problem for the Eurocentrically minded scholar, who thinks that we all look at images alike (Europe's contemplative tradition, among many local ones (the popular traditions of gazing at images are different from the one typical for art), is of course often very different from Japanese or Indian ways of watching images, even if it might find similar traditions in these cultures too). If one looks, for example, at the discussion on environmental aesthetics, it seems that people debate if we can consider ethically complicated issues, such as polluted landscapes, beautiful. Not even touching on the way our experience changes with time (from one moment to another); one second it accentuates the ethical, the next, the aesthetic. We know that some people seem to get more disturbed by ethical issues in their sense of beauty than others (just look at woke discussions (with no negative intent with the word use here)), and there can even be cultural differences regarding our ways of being trained to understand landscapes and images. Japanese erotic shunga images excessively provoke the Western viewer, but not the traditional Japanese viewer, as much as we can still think they exist. Why write so extensively; in other words, why claim for universality, and not just contemplate the issue itself, that I, or some people, get messed up with ethics all the time (or this is how we interpret it) when we look at polluted landscapes? I am not advocating a relativism, but just accentuating that it is not realism to think that there is always a rule which fits everyone (or for every language. I am referring to the way analytic philosophy is totally based on English language). Only in philosophy can someone really believe, or at least practically think that something applies everywhere and for all of us, and this hubris, which we have inherited from Plato all the way through enlightenment philosophers to our day is a real problem, which we should amend. At the end of the day, these issues are partly problems of philosophical hubris, and maybe even writing, which our academic tradition has made too cocky. Even if it led to said results politically, I have always appreciated Heidegger's way of working on specifically, consciously German language, and even local issues, such as life in a village in the Black Forest

(like in *Gelassenheit*, see Heidegger 1966). We should aim for smaller things sometimes.

I'd also like to find ways to be precise, and here I'd like to address the aesthetic experience, one of Falk's foci. The whole concept of aesthetic experience does not look very useful to me. As we use it to describe engaging with kayaking, being at a Pearl Jam concert, and contemplating a Gerhard Richter painting, it does not make much sense using it the way we do. I welcome takes such as Richard Shusterman's "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics" (2003), where he discusses titillation and other reactions to popular culture – and the already mentioned Kolnai (in his footsteps, Carolyn Korsmeyer), Irigaray (with her notes on the morphology of the body, sometimes very precise "soma-maps"), more and many others, who have discussed more detailed issues in experience. But I still think we need to, at least for a while, get rid of the concept of aesthetic experience. A good way to make the situation better would be to simply condemn the fuzzy concept of aesthetic experience for some years. Why accept a concept which often means nearly nothing? Could this dogma, to not have a concept around at all, or to crave that it is used more precisely, ensure that people would have to come up with something different, to work for e.g. *The Journal of Somaesthetics*? As the poets say, don't say flower if you can say rose... Why say aesthetic experience if you can say that a book tickled your imagination or that a film made you feel warm?

I agree with Falk that "practice must be an inherent and recognized part of aesthetics," but this seems to be a thing that happens more when practices have aesthetic thinking on their margins, which is the case with, again, yoga – or why not dancing, where there is also a lot of discussion, but where the main thing remains the bodily dialogue/movement. Instead of working to get this all to the field where aesthetic research dominates, could we try to export aesthetics across the disciplines, institutions, and practices? Why is somaesthetics still rooted in the academy? Can't we become useful somewhere where written discourse and knowledge production is not the number one game? I think we can. Just as aesthetics has become a marginal, but still important part of art education, literature studies, and even some natural sciences (for more, see Ryyänen & Somhegyi 2023), somaesthetics could become integral to dance studies, or yoga, to mention two examples. Should we start *jamming* with people from dance and/or yoga (we are, of course, many of us, often, people who do both (I do yoga))? At least we can 'go out', and this could be a good topic for an issue of *The Journal of Somaesthetics*. How to export the good knowledge we have and achieve more dialogue? Maybe the outcome would make our initial problems of methodology more complicated if we desired to stay there; but on the other hand, as allegorical players of jazz guitar and football, the experience might force and/or entice us to make new moves, though less discursive, to make the *jamming* fruitful. I believe this could have been one of the things that Shusterman was originally aiming at, to not just mix approaches and come up with something new, but to also inform non-philosophers about the potentials and resources that are available in philosophy, and to look for new outcomes.

We also need better descriptions when we attempt to write about different bodily practices. Arnold Berleant has discussed what he calls "descriptive aesthetics" (1992) in pragmatism, but not on the platform we call somaesthetics. He believes that we should start making richer descriptions. We lean too much on descriptions of other, less aesthetically trained people, such as writers. This could again be a new strategy for increasing our skills, and maybe I could think of a shallow use of the word methodology, gaining a more methodological basis. For example, yoga is sometimes well described in classics like Patanjali, but has anyone really attempted the description with philosophical interest and rigidity the way Berleant does, going all the way to small bodily details in the yogic experience? Maybe a theme issue on descriptive aesthetics and somaesthetics could work for the journal too?

Mario Perniola proposed that we should become less interested in results, which stem from modern metaphysics, but rather think of ourselves as mediums (see e.g. Ryyänen 2021), philosophers as mediums of reality. It's worth a try (and Husserl, of course, in phenomenology, might have drifted in the same direction with some of his thoughts on the Epoché, where, after reduction, reality could shine on us philosophically in text). Indian philosophy has always built more on taxonomy, and we might want to follow it (see e.g. Bharata 1999). What kind of somatic reactions and experiences do we have in the body? Should they be listed, just to better understand what we have to play with? There are many ways to choose, but although none will answer, at least discursively, Falk's thoughts, they might offer new ways of wrestling with them - alternatives, if not partners in crime, for the one who thinks of methodology. They might offer methods, ways to walk.

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