

Performing Somaesthetics. Future Methodological Developments

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Abstract: *In this paper I make use of hermeneutical concepts to propose some reflections on the method in somaesthetics. First, I show how hermeneutics helps us to put in question the presumed “objectivity” or “neutrality” of any observation or interpretation, reminding us that the specific “situation” in which we are located can never be disregarded. Being situated implies being embodied in a given body, conceived as essentially motion. On this basis I focus on the reassessment of aesthetic experience as opposed to the subject-object dualism (the author and the work of art) and the active-passive dualism (the author and the public) in order to extend it to the body and to somaesthetics itself, conceived of in a performative way, as a practical “doing” of philosophy.*

Keywords: *Hermeneutics, Somaesthetics, Method, Situation, Performativity.*

1. Space, Time and Body

I am very glad to accept Falk Heinrich's invitation to contribute to this *dialogical* issue. Dialogue has characterised philosophy since the very beginning, from Plato to Giordano Bruno, to Schleiermacher, and finally to hermeneutics, with Heidegger and Gadamer. It is precisely hermeneutics which will be the starting point for my reflections about method in somaesthetics – my investigation will have, at times, a sort of scattered order, as it originates as an answer to a dialogue. I will make use of hermeneutical concepts to propose some reflections – which do not want to be systematic, but only point to some potential future developments – which, starting from the reassessment of aesthetic experience as opposed to the subject-object dualism (the author and the work of art) and the active-passive dualism (the author and the public), will extend to the body and to somaesthetics itself, conceived of in a performative way.

Heinrich affirmed that “the grounding methodological paradigm of Western science is observation”, emphasising how somaesthetics should go far beyond the flat application of methods borrowed from science. Without going into an overly schematic view of science, it is worth noting that hermeneutics, too often portrayed as only concerned with texts, is not intended to oppose the *Geisteswissenschaften* to the *Naturwissenschaften*. This is an aspect that Gadamer emphasised several times in the introductions to his works (see Gadamer 2013, xxv-xxvi and 576-577). As Stefano Marino recalled, Gadamer's hermeneutics is not intended as a kind of “anti-methodological” conception. It is high time we retrieve the real Gadamerian conception, whose *dialogue* with somaesthetics can offer promising insights.

The attempt to overcome the subject-object dualism is a crucial point, brought forward by hermeneutics and also present in pragmatist aesthetics (Dewey) and in somaesthetics. The subject-object dualism is often associated with the idea of method, understood as the application of a general theory to a particular and concrete case. I am aware that the so-called “hard sciences” themselves questioned and criticized such naïve conception. However, we could affirm that this simplistic view still operates in some way, sometimes implicitly, in some philosophical contexts.

Disregarding the point of view of the philosopher, or more generally of the one who is

formulating a theory or carrying out an operation, is still considered philosophically valuable. This is the idea of a presumed “objectivity” or “neutrality” of the observer who relates to what he observes as an object. Such an idea is shared by several philosophical approaches that can appear very distant from each other, such as cognitivism and historicism. What they have in common is that they consider being situated in a specific space and time as a limitation on knowledge. Conversely, hermeneutics reminds us that the specific *situation* in which we (the observers, the philosophers) are *located* can never be disregarded. There is therefore no neutral observer who can provide a purely objective description in this respect, like a *tabula rasa* totally capable of mirroring the surrounding reality.

Instead of a subject-object dualism, hermeneutics is characterised by a *relational* and *continuistic* conception, in which the observer is in turn influenced by the observed object, and vice versa. In this regard, as it is well known, Gadamer criticised historicism for its attempt to disregard the observer's historical point of view, believing one could place oneself on the same level as the author of a past text, the *mens auctoris*. According to Gadamer, “historical knowledge opens the possibility of replacing what is lost and reconstructing tradition, inasmuch as it restores the original occasion and circumstances” (Gadamer 2013, 166). Moreover, he continues, “ultimately, this view of hermeneutics is as nonsensical as all restitution and restoration of past life. Reconstructing the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being. What is reconstructed, a life brought back from the lost past, is not the original. In its continuance in an estranged state it acquires only a derivative, cultural existence” (Gadamer 2013, 166).

In contrast to such a view of the observer situated outside of time and space (and, I would add, outside of the body), Gadamer developed the famous concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte*: “If we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always already affected by history” (Gadamer 2013, 311). Juxtaposing these reflections with somaesthetics can appear almost contradictory, given the persistent interpretations of Gadamer's thought as a mere historicism or textualism, far distant from a philosophy of the body (i.e., a reduction of hermeneutics to a mere methodology for reading or interpreting texts). On the contrary, there are crucial points of contact between hermeneutics and somaesthetics. Indeed, Gadamer's philosophy is one of Shusterman's early influences, as it appears from the book *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*. This has been confirmed to me by Shusterman himself, who acknowledged his debt to Gadamer's philosophy on the occasion of the conference “The Promise of Pragmatist Aesthetics. Looking forward after 30 Years” in Budapest on 25-28 May 2022 (on this point, see Kremer 2018 and Romagnoli 2023).

We should note that a reflection on the body is certainly absent from Gadamer's thought. However, the conception of the hermeneutical situation can be developed by stating precisely that, as opposed to an abstract and dichotomous vision, every observation always takes place in a *specific body* (something that distinguishes human individuals from artificial intelligence). For this reason, I believe that anti-dualism and situatedness are closely linked to an embodied conception of philosophy (somaesthetics).

Moreover, a reflection on the body requires the latter to be understood not as static (the body of Greek statues, for instance) but rather as *in movement*, that is, in its interactive and performative expression. This is an aspect that partly stems from thinking of philosophy as of a practical activity, namely as a form of praxis. The philosopher (the observer) is him/herself performing an activity that is not only theoretical, but practical as well: his/her body and movement are involved in the process, even in the process of writing a book or a paper.

Indeed, that philosophy should be understood as a practical activity has been a central theme since Aristotle's *Etica Nichomachea*, something that Gadamer took up in *Truth and Method*: “If we relate Aristotle’s description of the ethical phenomenon and especially the virtue of moral knowledge to our own investigation, we find that his analysis in fact offers a kind of *model of the problems of hermeneutics*. We too determined that application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning.” (Gadamer 2013, 333). This is fundamental in the role of the hermeneutical concept of “application [*Anwendung*]” (see Gadamer 2013, 318 ff.), which is not merely understood as the application of a general case to a particular one, but rather as the intrinsic relationality between the observer and the observed.

If hermeneutics rehabilitates practical philosophy, this is truer in the case of Dewey’s pragmatism and its development in Shusterman. As I already mentioned, the latter was influenced by Gadamer’s rehabilitation of practical philosophy, and it is no coincidence that the last part of his book on Eliot is entitled “Pragmatism and Practical Philosophy” and refers to Aristotle’s *phronesis*: “The doctrine of mean is no fixed or recursively applicable ‘arithmetical proportion’ given in the nature of thing, but needs to be determined anew in relation to us and the changing particulars of our *situation*” (Shusterman 1988, 199).

This aspect relates to the elaboration of Shusterman’s proposal on somaesthetics in its three main constitutive parts, namely the “analytical”, the “pragmatic” and the “practical” (Shusterman 1999, 304-308), the latter being concerned “not with saying but with *doing*” as the one most neglected by academic body philosophers, whose commitment to the discursive *logos* typically ends in textualizing the body” (Shusterman, 1999, 307). This is surely one of the most ambitious and challenging assertions of somaesthetics and represents a promising field of investigation in relation to more “classical” philosophical currents, such as hermeneutics.

To sum up what has been said thus far, 1) investigating a way of “philosophising” that, as opposed to the separation of the observer from the observed (subject-object view), implies a retrieval of the situation in which both are located sounds promising. 2) Being situated implies being embodied in a given body. 3) The body is conceived of as in movement, namely as interacting with and relating to others by becoming active.

2. The Active and the Passive in Aesthetics

Aesthetic experience is undoubtedly a crucial starting point for a practical approach to philosophy. Following Baumgarten, Shusterman stressed that aesthetics is not only a theory of art, but also a theory of sensibility, which paves the way to a reflection on the body (Shusterman 1999, 300-302). Indeed, Shusterman stated that somaesthetics can be provisionally defined as “the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning. It is therefore also devoted to the knowledge, discourses, practices, and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it” (Shusterman 1999, 302).

Along these lines, Heinrich can rightly affirm that “to investigate one’s own aesthetic perception and practice opens a completely different field where the unmediated sensory experiences play the most important part”. A peculiar expression of an aesthetic experience involving the body occurs when we are the subject of an aesthetic act and at the same time we are the “observer” of such aesthetic activity, as in the case of dancing. In other words, the “observer” and the “observed” are one and the same.

We can start exploring such point by analysing the reassessment of a participatory relationship between the artist and the beholders (for a participatory conception of art and beauty, see Heinrich 2014). This aspect can also help define a method in the field of somaesthetics, by questioning the subject-object dualism (the artist and the work) and, consequently, the active-passive dualism (the artist and the audience). While it is certainly true that the body is not as central to Gadamer's hermeneutics as it is to French philosophies (think of Foucault or Merleau-Ponty), we can still benefit from hermeneutics' critique of the separation between the author and the audience, a conception based on the aesthetics of the artistic genius as the one who "reveals the truth" to the audience (on this topic, see Shusterman 2000, 207 ff.). In contrast, we can resort to a paradigm of aesthetic experience that takes into account the intrinsic relationality between the author and the audience.

Such reassessment of the role of the artist and the public is fundamental to hermeneutics, as I argued in Romagnoli 2022 and Romagnoli 2023. Gadamer indeed claims that it is necessary to "pull the rug from underneath the false alternatives of production and reception, of the aesthetics of production and the aesthetics of reception" (Gadamer 2022, 72). Moreover, "on the side of the artist we have the anticipation of the effect which the work will have, whether as fulfilling an expectation, trumping an expectation or producing a contrast to an expectation. On the other side, the work of art is always encountered in such a way that the spectator always ascribes something like an intention or an idea to it or to the artist, who is its creator" (*Ibid.*).

The need to rethink of the aesthetic experience by overcoming the active-passive dichotomy had already been made explicit by Dewey, who lamented the lack of a single word in English that "unambiguously includes what is signified by the two words 'artistic' and 'esthetic.' Since 'artistic' refers primarily to the act of production and 'esthetic' to that of perception and enjoyment, the absence of a term designating the two processes taken together is unfortunate" (Dewey 1934, 53). For Dewey, when the artists create a work of art, that creation must involve a continuous act of perception, which enables them to modify their work in progress. Symmetrically, the perceiver of the work of art is not placed in a purely passive position: in order to perceive, the beholders must *create* their own experience, in a way that is comparable to that of the artist. This means that an act of perception is present in the creation itself. (Dewey 1934, 56.). Similarly, the act of perception is not merely passive, but involves an act of creation (Dewey 1934, 60ff.).

Shusterman also takes up this aspect as he suggests revising the separation between the artist and the audience, "between the active maker or author and the contemplative receiver or reader" (Shusterman 2012, 55). The conception of art as experience thus provides a way out of such dualism, since it "links artist and audience in the same twofold process" (*Ibid.*). Shusterman explicitly affirms that "art, in its creation and appreciation, is both directed making and open receiving, controlled construction and captivated absorption" (*Ibid.*).

We can overcome dualism by rethinking the essence of the aesthetic experience as movement, as activity or as performance. It is precisely relationality that explains the aesthetic experience, not as a pre-determined whole that is formed by the artist, but as a process that may be liable to failure or success, as theorists of the aesthetics of improvisation have emphasized (see Bertinetto 2022). Conceived of in this way, namely as a "work in progress", the aesthetic experience reveals the mutual relationship between the artist and the audience.

As Heinrich affirms, "for the audience, the perception of music and dance entails ongoing expectation of the next move, tone or harmony to come. Enjoying performative arts is not solely a passive perception, perception is always active because the seen and heard is a neurological re-enactment that includes triggered expectation". This is what also happens with the most classical

aesthetic experience ever, the performance of classical music, though I believe it can be extended to any aesthetic experience.

Along these lines, I would like to recall a personal experience that I consider paradigmatic: at the New Year's concert at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin, the famous conductor Daniel Barenboim was certainly influenced by the feeling of the audience and the fact that his performance was charged with special significance, not only because it was the New Year, but because he had made a comeback after a long time. In particular, he conducted Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* in a very slow tempo, as critics also noted, which was due to his personal interpretation that reflected not just his mood but also his body and the exhaustion he felt as a result of his illness. The audience certainly played an important part in this too, as they welcomed the freshness of such interpretation and responded at the end with warm or loud whispers when the conductor was late coming on stage.

Therefore, as Heinrich points out, “doing” cannot be regarded as a limitation of aesthetic theory. It should also be noted that doing relates to the supposedly passive dimension of the audience: the close posture or crossed arms, the clapping of hands, the standing up. The dimension of the body in the first person and thus the “reception in the audience” influences the development of the work of art itself, though this does not entail an art aimed at merely pleasing the audience and degrading into aesthetically inferior products.

An aesthetic experience is therefore not only performed by those who produce it, but also by the “public” that actively participates in it. This aspect leads to important consequences of a social and political nature. In contrast to the idea of the genius, aesthetics embraces a broader perspective, both in terms of a wider range of aesthetic phenomena (not just the “fine arts”) – e.g., drinking a glass of wine or walking in nature as Everyday Aesthetics teaches us (see Saito 2007) –, and in terms of including different strata of the population (not just the elites), thus paving the way to a greater democratisation of it, as proposed by somaesthetics.

Rethinking the role of the audience as involved in the creation of a work of art, that is, those who make it, including its bodily shape, is a way to rethink a method in somaesthetics as well. By considering the body as “soma”, somaesthetics should avoid proposing an internal dualism between myself as the observer and myself as the observed object. In this liminal case, too, it is a question of rethinking a relationship of continuity, i.e. of movement, in a performative sense, of the “subject” and his/her body.

3. Following Bodies' Performances

Given the role of situatedness and rethinking the artist-audience relationship, we can draw a connection with the body. It can be said that a performative paradigm is present *in nuce* not only in the so-called “performative arts”, but also in the other arts that result from the very enactment of the work, as noted by Gadamer's hermeneutics. As I argued in Romagnoli 2023, this paradigm characterizes for example the literary arts, since the reading of a text (even silently) implies enacting the literary work, performing it. In itself, an un-played score would remain a mere text. Only at the moment of its enactment (i.e. play) can one speak of a work of art.

Gadamer speaks of the performance as an inseparable aspect of the work itself: “It is in the performance and only in it – as we see most clearly in the case of music – that we encounter the work itself” (Gadamer 1998, 120). In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer already claimed that “the same is true for drama generally, even considered as literature” (Gadamer 2013, 120). As “a drama really exists only when it is played, and ultimately music must resound” (Gadamer

2013, 120), the same applies to poetry. Such a paradigm can also be extended to the method of somaesthetics in a broader sense, as enactment, as a practice that involves the body. As I mentioned before, the body itself is not conceived of as an object, but precisely as “soma”, it is understood as enactment, as a body in movement.

The conception of art as performance has an equivalent in Shusterman's formulation of “art as dramatization” (see Shusterman 2001) and in the subsequent collection *Performing Live* (see also Heinrich 2023) as well as in the essay *Photography as Performative Process*. In the latter, the aim was precisely to show that photography cannot be reduced to the photographic image, since in doing so “we diminish its aesthetic scope and power by limiting the elements that can manifest artistic value and provide aesthetic experience”. This undervalues the centrality of the body and diminishes “the essential meaning of the photograph (at least in philosophical discussions) [...] to the object photographed”. According to Shusterman, “the reduction of the aesthetics of photography to the photograph risks reducing it to the aesthetics of an object (that is, the real-world referent) actually outside the photograph” (Shusterman 2012a, 119).

This reference to photography is paradigmatic in elucidating a way of understanding the aesthetic experience as a “*mise en scene*”, which is always the *mise en scene* of an action involving bodily movement: “Taking a photographic shot, like any action we perform, always involves some bodily action” (Shusterman 2012a, 69). However, Shusterman also stated that he wants to distance himself from a reading such as that of Davies 2004, which claimed that works of art are not physical objects but the artists' actual performances. What I want to argue here, however, is that the essence of the aesthetic experience is to be found not in the artists' activity (which would fall back to a reading of the artist-genius-creator) but in the praxis involving the audience in which they actively participate. That is to say, not only the movement of the artist's body but also those of the audience somatically create the work.

The emphasis on the bodies' movements allows us to rethink both the aesthetic and the philosophical experiences as lived at first hand. Such an experience can therefore be conceived of as an endless adjustment and check of our own perceptions and the possibility of communicating them to others, whose experiences/perceptions may be similar or different. To avoid falling back into mere solipsism, dualism needs to be overcome and replaced with a relational and performative conception, in which not only do I relate to my own body both as a subject and as an object, but I relate to other bodies as well (as, for example, on the dance floor or at a concert).

Shusterman affirmed that “the body is always somehow constructed” (Shusterman 2000, 150). Similarly, the perception and awareness of our body needs to be constructed. This is similar to the process of “doing” or “performing” philosophy: i.e. when we are aware of our body ourselves, it is not just a mere instant feeling, which would have little to do with philosophical reflection, it is rather a process of constructing corporeality itself as the basis of somaesthetics.

Philosophy itself, if conceived of as a constant practice that is always improvable, goes in a similar direction as that of bodily experience. We started by showing that the aesthetic experience is the result of a process of interaction between the author and the audience, and that a work of art becomes itself only when it is enacted. This also extends to the experience of the body, understood as a relationship between myself as a subject and myself as an object, in a continuous process of adjustment, which involves thinking of the body in its incessant movement, situated in space and time, and constantly interacting with other bodies.

Taking our cue from the continuity of each body with the other, the problem of solipsism can be overcome, and a method in somaesthetics can be worked out. In this sense, somaesthetics can

also be understood as a constant practice, somehow comparable to a certain kind of embodied Socratic dialogue, as a continuous adaptation to the other in its corporeality. Somaesthetics itself is only such when it is enacted as a practical activity, that is, when it is performed.

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