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Somaesthetics and Sport

1. Introduction: Philosophy of Sport

Not only knowledge and virtue, not only the true, the good and the beautiful, but sport, too, can be included in the list of phenomena that have been the object of philosophical investigation. Although it can be traced back to ancient phases of human civilization, sport did not emerge as an autonomous field of philosophical investigation until the 1970s. Among the founders of this branch of philosophy worthy of mention here are Paul Weiss and Robert G. Osterhoudt, the first editors of the “Journal of the Philosophy of Sport”. Their work inspired the development and consolidation of the philosophy of sport as an autonomous branch of philosophy. There are numerous ongoing debates in this area, but the foremost and fundamental one still remains the basic question: “What is sport?”.

The various answers that have been proposed can be divided in two main groups¹. Those known as Normative Theories can be grouped together on the basis of their attempt to assess “How Sport Should Be”, from which the externalist position stems, focusing on the import of external forces or actors – namely, social and economic forces – in defining the features of sport. The internalist position, on the other hand, assumes the existence of core internal features that distinguish sport from other human activities. The second group, known as Descriptive Theories, attempt to describe the core elements of sport. Springing from this general and fundamental debate, we can then identify other debates mainly concerning ethical questions and issues arising from sporting situations. For example, the issue of sportsmanship and its opposite – cheating and doping – are frequent topics in philosophical debates on sport. In addi-

¹ I have borrowed many information for this introductory first section from the useful entry “Philosophy of Sport” of *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), authored by J.W. Devine and F.J. Lopez Frias (available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sport/>; last accessed on November 4, 2022).

tion, some sport scholars have devoted their research to assessing how the features and dynamics that characterize sport change depending on the agent, as well as issues of gender, sex and race, and the topic of disability and sport.

Another relevant debate in the philosophy of sport in its broadest sense concerns the aesthetics of sport, focused in particular on answering the question: “Can sport actions/performances be conceived as art?” – or, in more contemporary terms, “Does sport activate the same mechanisms of experiential organization that are activated when we experience a work of art?” As a field of inquiry, the philosophy of sport is also characterized by a recurring paradigmatic division between analytic and continental approaches. The main differences, in this context, seem to be that, on the continental side, attention is largely focused on the experienced and perceived features of sport (post-phenomenological approaches), while on the analytic side, the focus is mainly oriented towards the proper identification of the features that define a sport as such, i.e., as separate and different from other human activities.

Among the notable thinkers of our time who have explored and analyzed sport as a philosophical phenomenon, or at least as a phenomenon worthy of serious philosophical attention, I will limit myself to mentioning the German philosopher Wolfgang Iser. According to Iser, sport can *surely* be viewed as a form of aesthetic experience and activity, and it is also *possible* to investigate considering it as a form of art². In fact, as Iser writes in his notable contribution, *Sport Viewed Aesthetically, and Even as Art?*, “[s]port as well as theater take place in particular spaces, separate from the everyday world. [...] Art as well as sport are, compared to life, symbolic activities in terms of their structure”³. In defining the art-like features of sport, and to justify the juxtaposition of these two topics, Iser turns to the notion of aestheticization and the consequent widening of the perimeter of the aesthetic, beyond the traditional association between art and the aesthetic dimension. As Iser writes:

The increasing insecurity about the borders of art leads to [...] the revaluation of popular art. The distinction between high and low is increasingly being rejected – [...] This opening of the concept of art toward the popular clears a further path for the inclusion of sport, this highly popular aesthetic phenomenon, among the arts. [...] When, for something to be art, its aesthetic

² W. Iser, *Sport Viewed Aesthetically, and Even as Art?*, in A. Light and J.M. Smith (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, Columbia University Press, New York 2005, pp. 135-155.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-144.

character is more important than a specifically artistic one; when art itself strives for transformation into phenomena of the everyday; when art tends to blur its borders; when, finally, the popular is increasingly being recognized as art – then sport becomes a good new candidate for being viewed as art.⁴

Following these new “theoretical coordinates”, Welsch tries to reorient the aesthetic reflection via the notion of performance. The latter idea in fact allows us to bridge the gap between sport and the other “performing arts”; in thinking about sport, there is no *oeuvre*, yet there are subjects that produce a performance. Art history and aesthetic reflections necessarily comprised the performative arts as perfectly legitimate instances of art, and Welsch adds that:

Of course, in painting, works are produced that have an independent existence after the act of painting. Not so, however, in theater, dance or music – in the performing arts. [...] Yet there is a different type of work implied in those artistic as well as in sporting performances: the performance itself. [...] This even makes them comparable to those activities which, ever since Aristotle, have been considered to be our highest ones, precisely for the reason that their proper work is imminent to the process and not something achieved at the end and remaining as a result, an outcome, a product, a work-entirety. [...] Sport, just as the performing arts, is of this type. The sporting performance has, above all, its end in itself. In principle it does not serve outer purposes.⁵

To sum up, in Welsch’s view, sport, if considered a performance, shares those features that appeal to the spectator “aesthetically”. But whether it can be considered artistic is a more difficult question, and depends on which conception of art one utilizes. In the following sections of this article I will focus on a specific philosophical investigation of sport that has been developed in recent times, namely somaesthetic inquiry, as testified by the recent volume *Somaesthetics and Sport*, edited by Andrew Edgar and published by Brill as the fifth volume in the series “Studies in Somaesthetics”⁶. Before immediately focusing attention on this book, however, it may be useful to offer some introductory observations on somaesthetics as a philosophical discipline or, as Richard Shusterman originally defined it, as a “disciplinary proposal”⁷.

⁴ Ibid., p. 141.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 142-144.

⁶ See A. Edgar (ed.), *Somaesthetics and Sport*, Brill, Leiden 2022 (henceforth cited in the text as *SS*, followed by the page numbers).

⁷ See R. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (2nd edition), Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham-Boulder-New York-Oxford 2000.

2. Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal

The philosophical discipline of somaesthetics, twenty-three years after the publication of Richard Shusterman's article "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal", can no longer be considered entirely new or absolutely groundbreaking. When Shusterman first outlined this philosophical discipline, his pragmatist aesthetics had already earned a great deal of academic attention and had sparked various paths of inquiry, inspired publications and occasioned the organization of meetings and conferences. Albeit not immune from critiques – generally from more traditional areas of philosophy – somaesthetics, and the scholars inspired by it, has sought to foster a renewed interest in the lived body reinterpreted as *Soma*. The term refers not only to the *Körper* – the mere material aspect of the body, its objectual side, so to speak – nor only to the *Leib* – the lived body, as we perceive it in our lived experience –, as they have been traditionally distinguished in phenomenological works before the appearance of Shusterman's work, but rather to a holistic conception of the body as a unit that simultaneously includes those different levels, as both object and subject⁸.

Somaesthetics, as a discipline, is divided into three main branches (Analytic, Pragmatic and Practical) concerned with the same "object" – namely, the lived body – as it is perceived by others and by the being that inhabits it, and as it is used performatively, in the broadest possible sense of the word. The main concerns of somaesthetics are thus not strictly limited to the disciplinary field of aesthetics in the traditional sense. "Modernist Aesthetics", largely derived from the thoughts and works of Baumgarten and especially Kant and Hegel, had tried to confine aesthetic inquiries to the field of the so-called highbrow arts or high fine arts⁹.

⁸ As Shusterman claims in his article *Thinking Through the Body, Educating for the Humanities: A Plea for Somaesthetics* (in "Journal of Aesthetic Education", 40, 1, 2006, pp. 3, 9, 16), "[f]or continued progress to be made in somaesthetics, resistance to somatic study and cultivation in the humanities must be overcome. [...] To be recognized as humanity's primal and indispensable tool should constitute an unequivocal argument for humanistic cultivation of the body. But, unfortunately, the very notion of instrumentality retains in humanistic culture strong connotations of inferiority, as noble ends are contrasted to the mechanical means that serve them. [...] The case for the humanistic study and cultivation of the body as our primordial, indispensable instrument [can be] adequately made. But we should not forget, in closing, that the body, as purposeful subjectivity, is also the user of the tool it is". As Shusterman further explains, it is "[t]he living body – a sensing, sentient soma rather than a mere mechanical corpse", that lies at the heart of the research project of somaesthetics (ibid., p. 3).

⁹ See E. Di Stefano, *Iperestetica. Arte, Natura, vita quotidiana e nuove tecnologie*, Aesthetica, Palermo 2012 (Aesthetica Preprint, n. 95), p. 8; G. Matteucci (ed.), *Elementi per un'estetica del contemporaneo*, Bononia University Press, Bologna 2018, p. 10. See also W. Welsch, *Sport Viewed Aesthetically, and Even as Art?*, cit., pp. 139-140.

However, aesthetics – narrowly conceived of in this way – was outsmarted by the artists themselves: consider the conceptual gulf between Leonardo da Vinci’s “Monna Lisa” and Piero Manzoni’s “Merda d’Artista”, or, in the same vein, Salvador Dali’s “L.H.O.O.Q.” In this context, it is of great interest to examine the ways in which artists (firstly) and philosophers (secondly) unwrapped the ideological structures underlying the notion of Art itself – and, more importantly for our purposes here, the ways in which they stressed the need to move away from the idea that the appreciation of a work of art was a purely intellectual endeavor.

Art has been banished from the ivory tower that had been built to keep it safe and separate from the lowly things of the world; not only have its products become incomprehensibly different from those that were supposed to serve as *exempla*, its boundaries have also been extended in unprecedented ways. Although the traditional conception of Art – with a capital A – lost most of its power and ambition during the last century (as well as its idealistic halo and its metaphysical aspirations), we might say that the void left by the old metaphysics of art has been filled by new theories that often stem from psychology and neuroscience, with results that sometimes appear too obsessed with “pinpointing” or too stubbornly reductionist.

Meanwhile, what happened to Art? We might say that it attained a sort of ubiquity. Nowadays Art – or better, a repurposed form of art, in blatant opposition to its alleged purposelessness and disinterestedness – can be found everywhere; the process of “aestheticization” is both a symptom and a consequence of these processes. But let us leave Art aside for a moment and return now to the philosophical perspective that we set out from. From a certain point of view, Shusterman’s dissatisfaction with the purely cognitive model of traditional Aesthetics and its narrow philosophical conception of Art had a dual outcome: firstly, the above-mentioned reconceptualization of the *soma* and the need for a reconsideration of the bodily dimension in the various arts; secondly, and more importantly for our specific purposes, the broadening of the domain of what can be considered of potential interest for aesthetic investigations. A part of the philosophical endeavor of somaesthetics has involved the granular reconsideration of the differences between the arts (with regard to both artistic products and our experiences with them). In this context, Shusterman’s famous advocacy of popular art still holds true in terms of the need to include in the field of aesthetics practices that have long been called “lowbrow arts”. Moreover, in anticipation of something I will discuss later, the renewed framework of somaesthetics made certain physical/spiritual practices whose origins can be traced back to both Western and non-Western cultures eligible as a subject of study. By considering the three dimensions of Analytical, Pragmatic and Practical somaesthet-

ics – as well as the representational dimension dealing with bodies' external appearance, the experiential dimension investigating how the body is perceived from the inside, and the performative dimension concerned with the effectiveness of bodily tasks –, many practices once deemed unworthy of aesthetic interest have finally found a field of study in which they can be properly analyzed and conceptualized. In fact, somaesthetics has generated numerous essays on, and inquiries into, practices that are sometimes of disparate and even incomparable origin. Based on what we have said up to this point, the reader will certainly realize that it was only a matter of time before someone proposed and published a book on the somaesthetics of sport – namely, the essay collection *Somaesthetics and Sport*, edited by Andrew Edgar, which I will analyze in the next section of this article.

3. Somaesthetics and Sports: A Forgotten Liaison or a Rejected One?

In the book's Introduction, Edgar writes: “the neglect of somaesthetics within the philosophy of sport [is] surprising, as it would appear to offer to the philosophy of sport important resources for thinking through core issues” (SS, p. 16). As noted in the previous section, somaesthetics is an already established, albeit multidisciplinary, philosophical discipline that seems naturally linked to sport-related issues, so it would be odd were it not to deal with sport itself. As Edgar writes in the Introduction, the main focus of the philosophy of sport (as a subdiscipline of philosophy that encompasses different areas of the traditional philosophical sphere: ethics, ontology, epistemology, etc.) is the “clever body”: the study and analysis of how a well-educated, well-trained body is able to meet sport-related challenges in a variety of ways, via an incorporated and “pre-conscious” knowledge of action. The clever body, which is the main subject of the philosophy of sport, is clearly very similar to the clever “mind-body” (as Edgar names it), recalling precisely the reconfiguration of corporeality and of the “whole” that is the *soma*. In calling for the extension of somaesthetic interest to the world of sport, Edgar repurposes the ancient caveat about the inevitability of philosophy: all philosophers of sport who were not familiar with *somaesthetics* as a project (Graham Mcfee's essay is highly contentious not only with regard to a somaesthetics of sport, but with somaesthetics in general) were inadvertently already doing somaesthetics. The book begins with a short Introduction by the editor, in which he briefly lists the contents and the general structure of the book; what we learn here is that the book contains ten essays that deal generally with sport and themes common to both spheres.

The first two essays are dedicated to what we might call the foundational question of the “somaesthetics of sport”; where the initial essay is highly favourable towards, and the second strongly against, the extension of somaesthetics to sport issues (and in fact against somaesthetics itself). The second pair of essays focus on the aesthetic components of sport: Morgan’s essay looks at the aesthetic nature of a sport spectator’s experience, while Brand-Weiser’s deals with the question of athletic bodies and their perceived beauty. The third pair revolves around the term “discipline”, which fits nicely into a somaesthetics context, due to the conceptual debt Shusterman owes to the work of Michel Foucault. In first essay in this section, Balakrishnan discusses the practice and representation of Indian cricket player Sachin’s physical body discipline, while Stahl’s essay is dedicated to the policing of the emission of vocal sounds during tennis tournaments from a feminist perspective. Solomon’s essay assesses the impact that physical exercise can have when we are going through difficult times in life, while Toner and Montero’s essay deals with the theme of self-awareness in highly trained and skilled sportspersons. The last two essays, perhaps the most notable in the book, focus on the issue of pain, the uninvited yet ever-present guest at the sport party: Tainio’s and Edgar’s essays openly confront the question of how much pain is involved in sporting activities. Following this general presentation of the book, I will next offer a brief analysis and comment on each essay in *Somaesthetics and Sport*. I will examine and discuss the book backwards, so to speak, starting with the final essays, to provide material for an evaluation of the two opposite claims in the initial essays.

3.1. Pain and sport

In his essay “Difficult Activities – Difficult Experiences,” Matti Tainio aims to redefine the kind of aesthetic enacted by extreme physical activities; considered in this way, it becomes clear that there are different levels of aesthetic experience in this context. The author’s focus is on a new type of extreme race, running events characterized by longer distances and often adverse weather conditions. This new type of extreme marathon is a kind of sporting endeavor that implies a different strain on the athlete’s body, which brings forth a duality of positive and negative aesthetic experiences present in these kinds of activities. As mentioned earlier, the aim of somaesthetics is usually conceived as “[a]n ameliorative discipline of both theory and practice, [which] seeks to enrich not only our discursive knowledge of the body but also our lived somatic experience and performance”, but Tainio’s essay goes in a different direction in considering the painful side of sport. One of the main tenets of Tainio’s essay is the fact that “the somatic experience is not something one has to undergo

as a passive receiver” (SS, p. 217). In reconsidering the possibility of an active re-orientation of one’s own aesthetic perception toward the exterior, Tainio discerns the opportunity for life-changing experiences. In a broader sense, Tainio’s discussion of the topic adds to the possible elements that contribute to determining the aesthetic nature of a given experience. In fact, while the sheer amount of pain involved in these kinds of activities (and what we are talking about here are marathons that cover more than the traditional 42 km, ranging from 70 km up to 160 km run over more than one day) takes its toll on the aesthetic structure of the athlete in terms of a “disconnection with the environment”, it is also true that these extreme conditions generate opportunities to experience the sublime. The strain and physical toll on the athlete is a catalyst for experiences of a potency unmatched by traditional aesthetic activities. If we consider that the traditional conception of the sublime (as put forward by Kant and Burke) implies different kinds of feelings of the sublime, and if we think of the above-mentioned expansion of the boundaries of traditional aesthetics and the end of the once-exclusive identification of aesthetics with “embellishment or cognitive pleasure deriving from the sight of a work of art”, Tainio’s essay offers valuable new insights, as well as an interesting interpretation of Somaesthetics. Reconsidered within Tainio’s framework, difficult sport activities and pain come together to engender a new opportunity to experience the sublime in a world in which everyday life is often too domesticated or too far removed from connection with the environment to elicit it.

Like Tainio’s essay, Andrew Edgar’s contribution, “Sport and Pain,” deals with the theme of pain, but in a different manner. The main focus of Edgar’s essay is a reconsideration of the idea of pain as an active agent, involved in World-making and also part of a sort of hermeneutic circle. Although sport – especially in the context of the philosophy of sport – is widely considered a pleasurable experience, it is also true that sport is always accompanied by pleasure’s counterpart, as we saw in Tainio’s text. Sport is usually conceived as a playful activity, guided by a prelusive goal and provided with strict rules that effectively pose challenges to athletes. For example, if the prelusive goal of golf is “to put a ball in a hole”, then the lusory means and the accompanying set of rules forbid the athlete to use his/her hands to put the ball in the hole. This is effectively why sport has often been described as socially relevant, as a source of distinction and merit: because it draws heavily on the intrinsic vulnerabilities of the human body. The ability to overcome all of the challenges posed by the activity is what suggests the dynamics of World-making, the Heideggerian concept used by Edgar here to highlight the fact that overcoming or falling short of a challenge are both substantial components of sport and physical activities. When the athlete succeeds in his/her challenge, the

world itself gains a particular “coloration”; when the challenge posed to the athlete’s body – be it physical or environmental – is too hard to be overcome, the whole world may seem to be alienated from the athlete. However, in Edgar’s interpretation, it is not the mere factual overcoming of the challenge that makes the athlete; in fact, “success” as a social construct is totally irrelevant in the process of getting better at a certain sport, while pain as an incommunicable aspect of sport and everyday life is what generates effective growth for the athlete. While that is obviously one aspect of the problem – which, as I said earlier, could be labeled as “the social aspect of the positive overcoming of the challenge” –, it is not its entirety. As Edgar argues, pain is in fact what constitutes the athlete’s realization. Inasmuch as it is constantly present in processes and activities related to sport, pain is the true indicator, and the one most actively felt in the athlete’s striving for success. Pain is omnipresent in the life of an athlete: it may be the pain of strenuous training, or pain undergone while recovering from an injury, but it can also simply be pain endured in the course of the activity itself, which, once performed successfully, becomes the lived and embodied indicator of success, with an unexpected *katabasis*, a shift from an exclusively negative aspect to one that contributes to pleasure. Both essays, I think, emphasize the need to reconsider pain as a fundamental and inextricable element that describes and at the same time supports our aesthetic activities, in the broader sense outlined by somaesthetics. Not only is pain considered an undeniable aspect of physical activities and a core constituent of the value of sport itself, but it is also thought of as a fundamental aspect to be analyzed by inquiries that strive to go beyond the traditional bounds of aesthetics.

3.2. Body Awareness and Performance

The nature of the text by Claire Solomon, “Yoga as world literature, Somaesthetic ekphrasis and Mis-translation,” is not “orthodox”; it is not actually an academic essay like those discussed above. In fact, Solomon’s contribution has formal and methodological characteristics more similar to an autobiographical ethnography than a philosophical essay. Apart from this necessary distinction, the text presents itself as an autobiographical diary of the author’s journey through life challenges, and focuses on the help that yoga, as a discipline, gave her. The philosophical tool the author uses is *ekphrasis*; she tries to reconstruct the coping mechanisms that proper somatic awareness and the discipline of yoga and exercise can impart, coupled with an “online” description of events.

As I briefly mentioned in the Introduction, John Toner and Barbara Gail Montero’s essay, “Somatic Reflection During Skilled Action,” debates the different impacts that conscious somatic awareness and uncon-

scious spontaneous acts have on the quality of a performance, be it a sporting performance or a training session. The authors dispute the traditional assumption of sport psychology that assigns a negative effect to the conscious act of thinking about what one is doing in the moment it is being done. In fact, as they note, there is a large body of research – with topics ranging from Olympic sportpersons trying to regain their prowess and full physical ability, to jet pilots and their struggle with “habit lag” – that indicates the importance of unconscious and embodied responses in determining the quality and “smoothness” of an action. Relying on this body of research, Toner and Montero propose a new kind of learning curve related to bodily tasks. Traditional learning theory held the model of a unidirectional learning process as fact. This theory posits that, as one begins to train him- or herself (or, to put it in more general terms, to discipline him- or herself in any performative way), the process will go from the early stages of learning, where a large amount of cognitive elaboration is required of the body (in order to memorize and internalize new movements, positions, and feelings for the performance) to the stage in which the performance tasks are fully embodied, so that no cognitive attention and no focus on oneself is required; at this latter stage, excessive cognitive attention and focus on oneself can spoil the smoothness of the performance itself. Toner and Montero agree with the cyclical theory of learning, also proposed by Shusterman, asserting that there are phases in a learning process that alternate between focusing on somatic awareness and unconscious performance. But this essay also attests that there are many different viable ways of learning, and intermediate situations that require different levels and kinds of somatic awareness in different contexts. For example, Toner and Montero relate the case of ballet dancers taught to think in terms of *loci*; when they have to perform a particularly difficult ballet move, they shift their bodily focus from the whole of their body to specific parts that are in some way particularly engaged in the action to be performed. This sort of shifted attention is fundamental in order to perform the action in the smoothest way possible, and it is a component of somatic awareness, an aspect that had not been considered in the traditional learning paradigm.

3.3. Discipline

The varying levels of influence that conscious control of one’s own body can have during a sport performance are the main focus of Anita Stahl’s essay “The Somaesthetics of the Grunt”. Stahl draws on Michel Foucault’s concept of the Panopticon, bringing it into the context of tennis to evaluate the gender-biased treatment of grunting in the case of female tennis players. Stahl recalls the famous cases of Maria Sharapova

and Michelle Larcher De Brito, both held culpable by the biased media of hindering their opponents' focus and flow by grunting too loudly. The main line of argumentation is related to Toner and Montero's, holding that, in the midst of performing a difficult action, even total body awareness is not enough to keep in check all of the involuntary responses stimulated by the fatigue and strain on the athlete's body. In fact, as De Brito used to tell the media, "the grunt comes through my intensity [...] I mean, you play, and the grunt goes by itself" (SS, p. 154). Stahl's essay, however, is not limited to this matter, but positions itself at the crossroad between somaesthetics, feminism and studies on discipline via the usage of Foucault's concept of Panopticon, albeit in an inverted sense. Stahl considers the "specious" nature and imponderable legality of the hindrance represented by grunting as an offshoot of the desire to force women to fit the stereotypical image of weak, docile and submissive beings; by contrast, the proud, strong and affirmative nature of the grunt is a supposed expression of a subversive, wild and rebellious type of woman. In Foucault's view, the main characteristics of the Panopticon are the ability to dehumanize, to take away one's subjectivity, while at the same time individualizing; in addition, the Panopticon's main strength is the ability to control the largest possible population of inmates with the smallest possible expenditure of resources. In this sense, the Panopticon is a useful device for considering power relations and topics such as the process of subjectification and individualization. Stahl tries to repurpose an inverted Panopticon and apply it to the situation of a tennis stadium. In fact, the condition of hypervisibility in which tennis players perform resembles the condition of inmates in the Panopticon. The anonymity of the spectators who booed Sharapova recalls another tenet of the Panopticon, namely that of the invisibility and anonymity of the power that keeps watch over the subjects. The media's reaction to the young Sharapova's grunting is punctuated by the use of sexual images likening the grunting to sexual vocalizations or to animality; this reveals the power relations in play, and the clear will to domesticate a subversive individual via objectification and sexualization. In any case, no matter how metaphorical the image of an inverted Panopticon may be, I do not find it particularly effective, due to the fact that it requires numerous semantic inversions. Although I agree in general with Stahl's argument, I think that it would have been equally striking, and perhaps clearer, if set forth without this reference to the Panopticon.

Vinod Balakrishnan's essay, "The Sachin Mandala, Somaesthetic construction of a cricket legend," is in my view one of the most difficult to summarize in the entire collection, for two reasons; firstly, my admitted lack of familiarity with the sport and the "hero" at the center of this essay, namely Sachin Tendulkar, whose fame and glory in India apparently can-

not be overstated; and secondly, the complex framework Balakrishnan guides us through and his numerous references from outside the realm of philosophy. Sachin is depicted as a personality whose importance can be read and measured on several levels: as a national hero, as an example of self-discipline, and as an aesthetic subject. Balakrishnan helps us to read Sachin's journey in sport as both an aesthetic object, due to the mythological interpretation in India of his sporting achievements (Balakrishnan makes a classical Biblical allusion with Sachin as David and Goliath representing all of the many challenges Sachin faced), and at the same time a *soma* and the ways of fashioning it. Sachin is described via references to his autobiography and to numerous biographies that have been written about him emphasizing the brutal, endless training sessions of training he went through. Balakrishnan concentrates on the Indian batsman's ability to continuously modify his style of play, and his ability to shift between consolidated habits acquired via harsh training and the need to respond quickly at any given moment, the "spontaneous body of the moment" factor (SS, p. 121). The author relies on Shusterman's re-reading of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology when he debates the lack of a mediation between acquired bodily habits and the needs of the moment; Shusterman argues that, in order to make the two levels communicate (the body's unconscious habits and the body in time), one must theorize a third element, that of active somatic awareness.

3.4. Athletes' Bodies and Perception

Peg Brand Weiser's essay, "Changing Perceptions of Beautiful Bodies, The Athletic Agency Model," explores the representational dimension of somaesthetics. Her inquiry is focused on the shifting canon of beauty related to athletic bodies; as Brand Weiser shows, this canon has changed over the course of the last decade, allowing for a new sort of appreciation not exclusively linked to standardized *topoi* of female beauty. In fact, Brand Weiser's contribution deals with the different kinds of appreciation reserved for male athletic bodies and female ones: as far as male bodies are concerned, no problem of legitimacy arises, whereas in a patriarchal framework, female bodies always appear problematic. Brand Weiser recalls the work of several photographers (likewise Helmut Newton, Joe McNally and Annie Leibovitz) whose works fostered the slow process of creating representational legitimacy for the female body, conceived as something other than just an object of desire. She deploys the "athletic agency paradigm", a new visual paradigm in which the sporting female body is appreciated not only for its physical characteristics and corporeal qualities, but also in terms of the athlete's accomplishment as an individual. The paradigm is intended to "educate" the audience and

provide a new way of looking at female bodies without falling into the objectification/sexualization trap – an ever-present risk. Stemming from Gombrich's conception of the gaze, which is never "innocent" and is always imbued with histories and ideologies, Brand Weiser calls for a profound reconsideration of the standards of beauty, affirming the intrinsic aesthetic value of a trained athletic body.

Reconsideration of the kind of aesthetics implied in all sorts of sports is the focus of Williams J. Morgan's essay, "Sport and The Body, An Aesthetic Inquiry". As Morgan argues, the canonical division of sports into purposive and non-purposive categories, rooted in the works of David Best, is a differentiation that does not hold value in the face of in-depth analysis. Morgan argues that the distinction between aesthetic sports (whose goal is the action itself, for example, acrobatics, ice skating or dancing) and purposive or non-aesthetic ones (such as soccer or tennis, that is, disciplines where there is no need for an action to be "aesthetic" to be successful) is a distinction that must be reconsidered. In all sports, according to Morgan, there is more than the eye can see: it is not the mere action itself, in isolation, that elicits the aesthetic experience, but rather the situation and social level of the action. In fact, as spectators watching a game, or observing an exemplary player (and here Balakrishnan's essay comes to mind), we assign qualities and features to sport players' bodies similar to those assigned to players in a drama. As Morgan argues, the intrinsic type of agency that sport allows is the same that Nietzsche asserted pertains to the work of art.

3.5. Somaesthetics and Sports

Last but not least, let us focus our attention on the pair of essays that opens the book. As I said in the Introduction, I have chosen to look at these opening essays last so as to glean several elements from later essays with which to evaluate their contending arguments. While Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza's essay "A Dove in Flight, Metaphysical Shackles, Transformative Soaring, and Sportive Somaesthetics" is encouraging towards the concept of a somaesthetics of sport, Graham McFee's piece, "Somaesthetics of Sport?," seems to challenge the legitimacy of somaesthetics in general.

Ilundáin-Agurruza argues that somaesthetics definitely offers some insights to deepen our understanding of the aesthetic aspects of sport and help us to evaluate various aspects of the nominal object that is sport. Almost as if in response, McFee's essays opens with three questions: "What can a somaesthetic inquiry into sport offer? [...] Why should its claims as a 'disciplinary proposal' or otherwise, be taken seriously? [...] How (if at all) can it bear on the study of sport?" (SS, p.

47). McFee's main line of argumentation is that somaesthetics in itself, as a self-nominated "discipline", lacks the kind of clarity and preciseness required of any philosophical discipline. His second contention is that, given the unnecessariness of somaesthetics, it is hard to see how a spurious version of it (namely, the somaesthetics of sport) can be helpful at all. As the author claims, there is a risk here of pointless doubling, which is something that philosophy should fear rather than encourage. If the philosophy of sport is concerned with the moving human body while it is at work in a lusory context, then it should only focus on sport itself: what could input from other areas add to the inquiry? McFee's supports his argument by noting that that the meticulous level of detail that somaesthetic analyses concern themselves with is already offered and well thought out by physiologists, so nothing philosophers could say will add anything new, much less anything useful. Ilundain-Agurruza's essay, on the other hand, is very optimistic in arguing for the possibilities that a somaesthetic approach to sport could offer the community of researchers and scholars, and conveys a cheerful enthusiasm about this new theoretical enterprise transpires.

Comparing these two theses, I admit that some of McFee's concerns about the "lack of a problem to be solved" are understandable and convincing. As I said, the multiple levels of reading required by the structure of somaesthetics imply a multiplicity and heterogeneity of possible subjects that do not necessarily share a common background, in terms of cultural provenance or in nominal terms. It is effectively difficult to propose a somaesthetics of sport when the concept of sport itself is blurry and its boundaries are not clear. In any case, as we learn from the Introduction to the book, these essays are meant precisely to present two opposite positions in terms of legitimacy. In the formal construction of Ilundain-Agurruza's essay there are no direct answers to McFee's perplexities, which may have helped to clarify the reader's position in this debate. Yet, I must also admit that Ilundain-Agurruza's reflection on the disinterested nature of somaesthetics in a "proficiency and profit-oriented world", configuring it as a wellbeing-oriented discipline that aims to nurture the mind/body whole that we as human beings are, is a compelling one, especially given the current *Zeitgeist*.

In conclusion, Elgar's edited volume *Somaesthetics and Sport* may appear to be an easy book at first glance, but given its structure and the varied nature of the essayists' subjects, it is in fact a complex one, and a coherent synopsis is consequently hard to provide. The contrasting arguments as to the legitimacy or illegitimacy of a somaesthetics of sport cannot and will not be further discussed here, for several reasons. First of all, this book represents the first attempt to assemble a collective work on the somaesthetics of sport, so I partially share Illunda-Agurruza's ex-

citement about the possibility of new interdisciplinary exploration that can shed new light on old subjects or reveal interesting new perspectives from which to look at the current state of sports and somaesthetic inquiry (even though the latter may not contribute to discovering new topics; I agree with McFee on this). At the same time, though, I share some of McFee's doubts, for example the point he makes about "confusion". When trying to open new lines of investigation in any field or subject, it is the task of every researcher to be very clear in terms of which questions his/her investigation will try answer, and perhaps the similarity between the philosophy of sport and a possible somaesthetics of sport may justify the risk of an overlapping of disciplines. As an overall evaluation of the book, I would suggest that *Somaesthetics and Sport* offers a viable contribution to the extent that it is not meant to encroach on the already established field of the philosophy of sport, and to the extent that it is clear that a somaesthetics of sport is a new subject of study in the field of somaesthetics, which has a broad theoretical reach. In my opinion, however, it is fundamental that the somaesthetics of sport be conceived as a theoretical inroad and not as an entirely new discipline.

Somaesthetics and Sport

This article deals with Somaesthetics, in general, as a branch of contemporary aesthetics, and with its application to Sport related topics, in particular. These topics have been recently investigated as in the book “Somaesthetics and Sport” (2022), edited by Andrew Edgar. In the first section of my article I sketch a brief history of the Philosophy of Sport. The second section is dedicated to a brief overview of Somaesthetics as a discipline and a preliminary evaluation of its possible applications to Sport issues. The third section (articulated, in turn, in various subsections) is dedicated to a detailed review of the various essays included in the book “Somaesthetics and Sport”. My aim is to highlight the intimate variety of topics that Somaesthetics as a platform can welcome and its disciplinary versatility. The last subsection provides an overall assessment of the books’ aims and their realization, bearing in mind the exploratory nature of the book itself.

KEYWORDS: Somaesthetics; Contemporary Aesthetics; Philosophy of Sport; Pain; Discipline.