

Editorial: Emancipatory Ways of Feeling (the Body as a Subversive Project)

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ABSTRACT

This editorial intends to contribute to the — open — program of soma design by bringing up two moments of rupture in the dualistic conception that opposes the mind to the body. First — through the feminist reading of Moira Gatens —, certain ideas formulated by Baruch Spinoza, implicit in soma design, are made explicit with emphasis on those referring to the radical openness of the body (to the interrelation with other bodies) and the capacities of the body as an object capable of expanding and actualizing its power. Secondly — through Georges Vigarello —, some postulates developed by Denis Diderot concerning the senses and embodied epistemology are highlighted, in particular those that paved the way for us to understand how the modes of perception of the body affect the perception of ourselves and, therefore, our sense of identity. These moments of rupture are linked to the emergence of an emancipatory ethics, committed to the plurality of bodies. Finally, a call is made to promote the rebellious impetus of the body through somatic methods that recognize the various oppressive and disciplined ways of feeling, as well as the power relations inscribed in the phenomenology of bodily experience.

Paradoxically, although we generate knowledge through our bodily experiences (Koeltzsch, 2021, p. 1) and thinking is modeled on our bodies (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 149), the forms of knowing and reasoning par excellence, philosophy and the sciences, established themselves on a common basis: the disavowal of the body. As we know, from Plato to Descartes, philosophy has promoted a profound *somatophobia* (Grosz, 1994, p. 5), that is, an exaggerated aversion to the body (Grosz, 1994, p. 5) and all that it represents, conceiving it as the 'adversary' of reason. At the same time, philosophy has glorified the mind as if it were a disembodied entity (Grosz, 1994, p. 4). And this is far from being a purely philosophical matter: Western culture has been characterized by its ingrained disparagement of the corporeal (Porter, 2001, p. 233) and its systematic praise of the mind (Porter, 2001, p. 235), as became evident in the early development of the scientific method. The very father of modern philosophy, René Descartes, would be responsible for successfully «linking the mind/body opposition to the foundations of knowledge itself, a link which places the mind in a position of hierarchical

superiority over and above nature, including the nature of the body” (Grosz, 1994, p. 6). Since then, subjectivity has been seen as an element that mitigates the “value of scientific formulations” (Grosz, 1994, p. 6).

Although these theories about the body are now part of the rich catalog of discarded ideas, it is not difficult to find the residues they have left behind. Mind/body dualism “has profoundly shaped linguistic usage, classification schemes, ethics, and value systems” (Porter, 2003, p. 265). This dualism forms a constitutive part of our ways of knowing and thinking and is clearly expressed in epistemologies that insist on objectivity and, consequently, are suspicious of subjectivity, embodied knowledge, felt sensations, emotions, intuition, and everything that implies deviation from the phallic route of the quantifiable.

Today the body is no longer relegated.¹ It is no longer a pariah, quite the contrary: its study and the theoretical production that takes it as a protagonist is one of the causes — if not the main one — of the timely renewal of the humanities and social sciences. *Chapeau!* Since the ‘90s, sociology has undergone a ‘body turn’ (Davies & Riach, 2018, p. 135), giving rise to a new sociology of the body (Witz, 2000). At the same time, the history of the body became “the historiographical dish of the day” (Porter, 2003, p. 236). The body turn eventually permeated such abstract disciplines as mathematics, where it is recognized that the bodily basis of cognitive processes can inform the processes of teaching and learning (Graves, 2014).

How did this radical change in the status of the body come about? It may not be an exaggeration to say that the first influence on the current interest in the body comes from feminism (Frank, 1990, p. 131), tremendously effective in explaining the self-body-politics-violence nexus (Frank, 1990, p. 132). As Butler points out, “there is no making of oneself (*poiesis*) outside of a mode of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) and, hence, no self-making outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take” (2005, p. 17). But the leading role assigned to the body by feminist theories — in particular those that problematize the corporeal material of sex instead of paying attention to the (disembodied) sociability of gender (Witz, 2000, p. 3) — has direct antecedents: the works of Foucault and Elias (as well as those of Mauss and de Certeau) are among the main ones.

Undoubtedly, Foucault is the omnipresent figure in any study of the body, an object he conceives as “so deeply invested and shaped by power that it secretes a vision of the world and the social” (Corbin et al., 2005, p. 21). It is worth noting that this conception represented a true revolution in fields such as sociology, where ‘the social’ — as an object of study — had been forged through a conceptual and textual operation that separated ‘the social’ from that which the social was not, that is, ‘the corporeal’ (Witz, 2000, p. 11). Foucault not only dismantled this operation but also opened a door for feminist theorists to disar-

1 In ‘Whose Body Matters?’, Anne Witz (2000) pointed out that in the sociological heritage, the subject body was rather that of men, as women’s was simply excluded.

2 Durkheim went so far as to say the following: “The more elevated it [civilization] is, the more, consequently, it is free of the body. It becomes less and less an organic thing, more and more a social thing” (as cited in Witz, 2000, p. 13).

ticulate this ‘masculinist ontology of the social’ (Witz, 2000, p. 11). The father of sociology, Emile Durkheim, was turning in his grave.²

Increasingly permeable to the humanities, social sciences, and cultural theory, design has not been indifferent to the ‘corporeal turn’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011). Quite the contrary. Without going any further, this issue revolves around somatic design, a program that defies the mind/body divide — significantly, Kristina Höök and her colleagues consider this dichotomy the “greatest misconception of the human condition” (Höök et al., 2019, p. 3). In this context, we are interested in going further back in history and establishing a couple of relationships between what might be the first breaks in the mind/body dualism, on the one hand, and the current design interest in the body, on the other.

SPINOZA: EVERYTHING IS INTERCONNECTED

There would be at least two breakthrough moments in the history of mind/body duality. The first one is an isolated, discontinuous milestone, which only centuries later would be taken up again, like practically everything raised by its protagonist, Baruch Spinoza, one of the so-called ‘anomalous philosophers’ (Grosz, 1994). In the middle of the 17th century, Spinoza dared to conceive “a holistic view of nature, in which everything is interconnected” (Willett, 2019, p. 773). Brilliant! Accordingly, and this is what interests us now, Spinoza suggested that the mind and the body “are not different substances but two aspects of a single stuff” (Willett, 2019, p. 773), “two ways in which the human understanding grasps that which exists” (Gatens, 1995, p. 100).

The truth is that Spinoza rejected all dualisms and defined himself as a ‘monist’, that is, he believed that everything that exists, including the mind, the body, the soul, nature, and so on, are modes of specification — expressions, modifications, or affectations — of a single, infinite, and indivisible substance (Grosz, 1994, p. 10). Long secluded, today Spinoza is at the center of numerous debates on ethics, power, and corporeality. So much so, that authors such as Betti Marenko do not hesitate to point out that we *must* turn to Spinoza to investigate the relationship between bodies, objects, and power (2010, p. 138).

But it is perhaps feminist philosopher Moira Gatens who has most engaged with Spinoza to problematize the body. Indeed, Gatens argues that the Dutch philosopher’s writings not only “may be productively employed in the task of developing a feminist philosophy of the body” (1995, p. xiii), but also provide, in addition, a “multivalent ontology that may provide *a basis* [emphasis added] from which to develop a multiple and embodied politico-ethics” (1995, p. 55). Given that somaesthetics is an ethical project and “by necessity [also], a critical and political project” (Höök et al., 2019, p. 7), it is pertinent to take a look at some of Spinoza’s ideas on the body, for which we will take Gatens and Grosz as our guides.

As anomalous in his days as visionary, Spinoza understood the body as unfinished, in constant interchange with its environment, radically open, creative, productive, susceptible to being composed, recomposed, and decomposed by other bodies, and dependent on many other bodies to be preserved and regenerated (Gatens, 1995, p. 110). In a way, Spinoza seems to anticipate for more than three centuries the ideas of autopoiesis, emergent identity, autonomy, and interaction proposed by Maturana and Varela. Just as for the latter “organisms are fundamentally a process of constitution of an identity” (Varela, 2000, p. 51), so for Spinoza metabolism “is a continuous process in the self-constitution of the organism” (Grosz, 1994, p. 11). While Varela points out that the identity of the organism is localized in a non-substantial way and that it is perfectly capable of generating interactions that have relevance and consequences for the unitary identity (2000, pp. 51–52), Spinoza maintains that “the individuality of the body (...) is the consequence of their specific modalities, their concrete determinations, and their interactions with the determination of other things” (Grosz, 1994, p. 11). Spinoza also anticipates Varela in recognizing the role played by historical context and interaction in the constitution of the identity of the organism. Gatens explains that, for the Sephardic philosopher, context and time cause bodily processes, their meanings, and their capacities to varying (1995, p. 57). Three hundred years later, Varela will write that “the role of historical coupling and contingency is not secondary, but inseparable from organic existence, since identity is not ‘substantial’ or ‘abstract’” (2000, p. 53).

But Spinoza goes further than the Chilean biologist. His idea of the body in process is much more radical. For him, because the body is in permanent change, it does not have a ‘true’ nature and, therefore, cannot be definitely ‘known’ (Gatens, 1995, p. 57). Elizabeth Grosz explains it as follows:

Spinoza claims that the total state of the body at a particular moment is a function of the body’s own formal pattern and inner constitution on one hand and, on the other, the influence of “external” factors, such as other bodies. There are no essential attributes, no inherent “nature” for the organism. (1994, p. 12)

This condition is fundamental for developing a feminist philosophy of the body. When Spinoza argues that we cannot know the limits of the body nor the powers it is capable of attaining, since these limits and capacities can only be revealed to the extent that the body interacts with specific environments (Gatens, 1995, p. 57), he is doing nothing other than “acknowledging the cultural and historical specificity of bodies” (Gatens, 1995, p. 57). Thus, he opens a door to reveal how the different tasks that have historically been assigned to bodies “construct and recreate particular kinds of bodies” (Gatens, 1995, p. 58).

From her analysis of Spinoza, Gatens draws several conclusions that are interesting for the ethical purpose of soma-based design. The first is the following: recognizing that “reason, politics and ethics are always embodied” (Gatens, 1995, p. 100) brings an inevitable consequence: “ethics would no longer pretend to be universal” (Gatens, 1995, p. 56). The reason is that “reason, politics and ethics are always embodied; that is, the ethics or the reason which any particular collective body produces will bear the marks of that body’s genesis, its (adequate or inadequate) understanding of itself, and will express the power or capacity of that body’s endeavour to sustain its own integrity” (Gatens, 1995, p. 100).

From the body’s endeavor to sustain its integrity, another interesting idea for somaesthetic design stands out: “The body itself, in its microforces, is always in a position of self-overcoming, of expanding its capacities” (Grosz, 1994, p. 124). The intention of ‘improving’ (cognitive capacities, aesthetic appreciation, design capabilities, connections between sensations, emotions, and values, etc.) or ‘increasing’ (somatic sensibility, bodily self-awareness, perception of our experiences, etc.), are very relevant in the soma design program. Without going any further, the father of somaesthetics, Richard Shusterman, argues that somaesthetics is oriented to “cultivate the body as means of improving one’s cognitive and ethical virtues as well as one’s aesthetic dimension” (as cited in Höök, 2018, p. 178). In this context, conceiving the body as an “organism or entity [that] strives to affirm, to maximize its potentialities, its powers, its possibilities” (Grosz, 1994, p. 12) does nothing but enrich the scope of soma design methods, since these would not be limited to the body being cultivated as a means (to improve aesthetic appreciation, self-awareness, etc.), but also as an object capable of expanding and actualizing its own capacities, its own power “in terms of the concrete options its situation affords it” (Grosz, 1994, p. 12), let us say, its *design situation*.

Third, the idea that bodies are in a relationship of interdependence with many other bodies to be preserved and regenerated (Gatens, 1995, p. 110), encourages the empathic and intersubjective vocation of soma design (Höök, 2018, p. xvii). Höök emphasizes that we cannot design without engaging with intersubjectivity and empathy, with the bodily presence of others (Höök, 2018, p. 182). Spinoza would say that, without the bodily presence of others, we could not even constitute ourselves. Openness is the condition that allows the body to realize its most fundamental and determining desire: to persevere in its existence (Gatens, 1995, p. 111). Therefore, to design with — and from — the bodily presence of others becomes imperative.

As designers, we cannot ignore that the body is the ground of human action, as stated by Spinoza (Gatens, 1995, p. 57). Spinoza forces us to acknowledge and take “into account the correspondence between mind’s power to think and body’s power to act” (Marenko, 2010, p. 138).

DIDEROT: EMBODIED SENSIBILITY AS A MODE OF PERCEPTION

OF THE SELF

The second breakthrough moment in the history of the mind/body dichotomy has Denis Diderot as its protagonist. In this case, we are not dealing with an isolated milestone, but with ideas that continue to be developed, without stumbling, and are expanding strongly in our days. Guided by Georges Vigarello, the author of *El sentimiento de sí: Historia de la percepción del cuerpo* (The sense of Self: History of the Perception of the Body), we will now take a look at some of the French encyclopedist's ideas, in particular those that resonate with the postulates of soma design.

During the Enlightenment, a concept bridges not only between the body and the mind but also to the social context: *sensibility* (Vila, 2013, p. 126).³ This concept is crucial since its irruption gives rise to an “embodied view of knowledge-seeking” (Vila, 2013, p. 126). Among the factors involved in this ‘embodied epistemology’ (Lloyd, 2013), there are forces that are still very much at work today: the revalorization of sentiments and passions, especially in the moral philosophy and European literature of the time, “the emphasis which philosophers like Etienne Bonnot de Condillac placed on sensations in the formation of knowledge and subjectivity, and the shift towards a more physiological conception of the common sensorium or ‘seat’ of the soul” (Vila, 2013, p. 126).

Thinkers such as the French physician de La Mettrie, the Rhenish philosopher d'Holbach, and especially Diderot “made embodiment, experienced through the senses, the meat of philosophical materialism” (Porter, 2001, p. 234). By “underlining the convergence between ‘internal’ physical sensations and a person’s sense of identity” (Vigarello, 2017, p. 14), Diderot became a pioneer in revealing “how the modes of perception of the body are at the heart of the modes of perception of the self” (Vigarello, 2017, p. 11), a fundamental issue for soma design. Diderot’s originality lies in that he is deeply concerned with inner knowledge, with inner, personalized, ‘intimate’ sensation (Vigarello, 2017, p. 16). It is to him that we owe the emergence of “a completely different way of being and existing” (Vigarello, 2017, p. 11). Somaesthetics, defined by Schusterman as a field that is “devoted to the critical, ameliorative study of one’s experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning” (1997, p. 34) owes much to Diderot and the embodied epistemologies of the Enlightenment.

EMANCIPATORY WAYS OF FEELING

Soma design can further explore the ideas of Spinoza and Diderot, here briefly presented, to contribute to an ethical, pluralistic, and emancipatory practice that is respectful of the particularities of bodies. Höök and her colleagues note that “engaging with a plurality of bodies for effecting positive change is in itself an act of political emancipation” (Höök et al., 2019, p. 5). But reaching that goal is not an

³ In 1991, Varela would say, together with Thompson and Rosch, that “individual sensorimotor capacities are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context” (Cash, 2015, p. 6).

easy task. On the contrary, implementing the ethical program of soma design is extremely demanding, as it requires not only developing the critical capacity to “noticing and challenging how human behavior and movement patterns are to some extent prescribed by an intersection of systems of oppression” (Höök et al., 2019, p. 4) but also recognizing the multiple oppressive and disciplined ways of feeling. Elizabeth Grosz gives us a clear warning we cannot ignore: “Power relations and systems of representations not only traverse the body and utilise its energies (as Kristeva claims) but actively constitute the body’s very sensations, pleasures —*the phenomenology of bodily experience* [emphasis added]” (1989, p. 111).

Let us remember that Spinoza conceives the body as an organism that strives to affirm, actualize, maximize its powers, its possibilities. We know that this ‘impetus’ of the body is in permanent conflict with systems of discipline, production, and inscription (Grosz, 1989, p. x). This implies that, by using embodied epistemologies or bodily experience to design, we may be reproducing oppressive practices. The risk is there, but it is hard to notice, as the “practices can become so deeply engrained within the pre-reflective, habitual life of our bodies that we either cease to notice that we perform them or experience them as ‘natural instincts’ or ‘common sense’” (Crossley, 2006, p. 3). Thereby, it is crucial to develop somatic methods that recognize the many oppressive and disciplined ways of feeling, as well as the power relations inscribed in the phenomenology of bodily experience.

Finally, as designers dealing with the body, the political, social, and cultural object par excellence, we must look for ways to fuel the body’s ability to resist and revolt against the forces that try to discipline and subjugate it (Grosz, 1989, p. x). Butler points out that

bodies never entirely abide by the norms by which their materialization is imposed. In fact, it is the instabilities, the possibilities of rematerialization opened up by this process that mark a space in which the force of the regulating law can turn against itself and produce rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of those same regulating laws. (2003, p. 2)

To the extent that critical design programs — such as the one inspired by somaesthetics — enhance instabilities, rearticulations, and the possibilities of rematerialization of bodies, our discipline will contribute to promote freedom and justice through experiences, so that we can all “live a better life”. **D**

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