

# The Somatic Turn in the Aesthetics and Its Significance——A Cross-cultural Perspective

Hongchen Wang\*

Guangdong Academy of Social Sciences, Guangzhou, 510635, China

\*Corresponding Author

**Abstract:** *The entire history of Western philosophy and aesthetics is a history of struggle between the body and the soul. For a long time, the traditional western philosophy represented by Plato and Augustine insisted on an ideological path of separating the body and mind and restraining the body and raising the mind. In contemporary academic discourse, the sudden emergence of "body" is directly related to the modern trend of thought, and in fact constitutes a reflection and correction of traditional ideological aesthetics. Thinkers such as Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Foucault initiated this thought process, while Richard Shusterman established its basic orientation from the perspective of discipline construction. In response to this, Chinese scholars have also made more obvious theoretical contributions. As a paradigm of Somaesthetic, it sharply criticizes Logocentrism, insists on cultural comparison, highlights the practical function of theory, and implements the life care of aesthetics, which provides a meaningful value scale for the construction of contemporary aesthetics.*

**Keywords:** *somatic turn, contemporary aesthetics, cross-cultural, modernity*

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary academic discourse, "Body" is an emerging topic. A phenomenon called "the rise of the body society" by Brian Turner has gradually affected all aspects of the consumer society from advertising images to sports competitions since the 1970s. As an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research proposition, body research has also been favored by scholars in the fields of philosophy, theology, sociology, history, anthropology, cultural studies, sports and leisure studies. In the field of aesthetics, the appearance of the body is obviously directly related to the above background. When "God is dead", as an important part of the perceptual world, the body is regarded as the sole carrier of life, correspondingly, the contemporary construction of aesthetics inevitably highlights the characteristics of the body and its limits. Therefore, Somaesthetic or aesthetics about the body has become an indispensable and important content in the construction of contemporary aesthetics. This article intends to examine the specific trajectory of the somatic turn in the Aesthetics from a cross-cultural perspective, summarize its evolutionary characteristics, and try to provide a valuable ideological reference for the construction of future aesthetics.

## 2. Body and its enemies

Although Somaesthetic is based on the postmodernist trend of thought in the second half of the twentieth century as a theoretical background, it is a reflection, inquiry and criticism of the long-standing rationalist tradition and its main issues, but the thinking that thinkers have developed around the body actually has a long history. From the perspective of the body, the entire history of Western philosophy and aesthetics is rather a history of the struggle between the body and the soul. In other words, the problem of the body has become one of the core issues throughout the history of Western philosophy and aesthetics. As Baudrillard pointed out, "This long-term disenchantment and secularization of the body has been throughout Western history: the value of the body was its subversive value, and it was the source of the most acute contradictions in ideology". The "absence" and "appearance" of the body constitute an implicit clue in the history of Western ideas.

The traditional western philosophy represented by Plato, Augustine, Descartes, etc. insists on an ideological path and value orientation of separating the body and mind, raising the mind and suppressing the body. In Plato's view, the body is an obstacle to the soul's pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and truth; the soul cannot gain access to pure truth until it gets rid of the ties of the body.

Augustine pushed the dualism of mind and body initiated by Plato to the extreme. In his view, the world is divided into the eternal and immortal "City of God" and the eternal "secular city". The two are "cities opposing and conflicting with each other." The former refers to a holy soul without a physical body, and the latter refers to a physical existence that obeys desires. Only by removing bad habits and obeying the Holy Spirit can you have the opportunity to gain God's grace and blend with the best.

In the context of near-agentism philosophy, Descartes established the principle of reason and the method of universal suspicion, and regarded "I think, therefore I am" as the first principle of his philosophy. He argued that the reason why a person is a person does not lie in having a physical body, but in having a rational soul. In the book "On the Passion of the Soul", Descartes focused on the issue of the relationship between body and mind. He separates the body from the soul and puts them in opposition. He believes that thought comes from the soul, and heat and movement belong to the body. Only rational knowledge is the only reliable and clear thing, while the body and its accompanying feelings are regarded as objects of suspicion set aside.

Obviously, in traditional philosophy, the body is an "absent" existence. Here, the consciousness or soul not only rules the existence as the physical body, but also continuously inputs moral guilt into the body from different angles. From this it can be concluded that in the era when metaphysics dominates everything, consciousness actually constitutes the enemy of the body. The body, which has been repelled, suppressed and marginalized for a long time, has never found an appropriate outlet to release its infinite kinetic energy. The philosophical position of dualism is the root cause of this phenomenon. This artificial separation of body and mind creates an insurmountable gap between sensibility and rationality, finite and infinite, necessity and freedom, theory and practice.

### **3. Aesthetics from the body: West and China**

The appearance of the body in modern aesthetics constitutes a reflection and correction of traditional conscious aesthetics. In the process of constructing this theory, many thinkers contributed their own resources and wisdom. With the courage to "revaluate all values", Nietzsche advocated "everything starts from the body" and pushed the body as a strong will to the pinnacle of philosophy. Merleau-Ponty replaces the consciousness subject with "incarnate subject", which objectively removes the theoretical weapon of consciousness philosophy. Foucault criticized the discipline and punishment of the body by reason in the trend of postmodernism, revealing another truth of life philosophy.

As mentioned above, Nietzsche's questioning and criticism of Western traditional metaphysics laid the philosophical foundation for the aesthetic somatic turn. His enthusiasm for the body and his preliminary thinking on "art physiology" not only expanded the traditional boundaries of aesthetics, but also pointed out a new direction for the construction of aesthetics in the future. "The body is a great reason, a multiplicity with a single meaning, a war and a peace, a herd and a shepherd." These are full of poetic color in "What Zarathustra said" The words, like a hammer, strike at traditional values and their conceptual foundations, and can be called the front horn of this unprecedented physical revolution.

Merleau-Ponty continued to advance this revolution from a phenomenological perspective. He strives to establish a new theory that transcends dualism without departing from the basic principles of phenomenology. Starting from this, he created the concept of "body-subject" and used it to show the identity of the body and the subject. He argued that we actually grasp the world and others through the body, the world is the place where the body can realize itself, and the body is the necessary condition for the world to finally appear. Only in this mutual subject and interweaving can we finally realize the integration and coexistence of self and others, self and the world.

Foucault's attention to the body is revealed through the revelation of power relations. The prison system and punishment system are the tools of power, and the body symbolized by sex, desire and production is the place of power. As the secret and broad foundation of modern society, power uses "panoptic architecture" to discipline and punish the human body all the time, trying to cultivate a "useful and gentle individual body." This unique thinking provides a new direction for the construction of modern aesthetics, and it also prompts us to re-examine the bitter history related to the body.

From the perspective of problem awareness, the physical turn of contemporary aesthetics mainly revolves around the following problems: physical problems in self-identification, physical problems in sex and gender, medical and physical problems, narrative and physical problems, body politics or physical problems Constraint and discipline issues, "incarnation" issues, body representation as a

metaphor of social relations, the relationship between body desires and self in contemporary consumer society, and so on.

In addition, the American scholar Richard Shusterman is known to the world as the proponent of "Somaesthetic". Starting from the tradition of American pragmatism, he not only established a relatively complete framework for "Somaesthetic" from the perspective of discipline construction, but also made "application of the body" as the latest theoretical landscape, which has had an obvious incubation effect in many fields.

However, it should be pointed out that due to the uncertainty of the concept of body, coupled with the increasingly localized trend of Western academic thought in the late twentieth century, although the body-turning research of Western aesthetics has made certain progress in many fields, But it has also caused people to feel more and more confused and confused about related theoretical issues such as "what is a body" and "the meaning of somatic turn".

At the same time, when we set our sights on the east of the world, we were surprised to find that the Chinese academia's attention to the body and Somaesthetic not only did not lag behind that of the West, but also found a Chinese-style aesthetic in related theoretical constructions. The road is particularly noteworthy.

Since the beginning of the new century, inspired by Western academic thought, Chinese academic circles have also made remarkable achievements in the study of the body, which can be regarded as an oriental contribution to the construction of contemporary aesthetics. The main manifestations are as follows: First, clean up the body thinking in the field of European and American phenomenology, such as Yang Dachun's "Perceptual Poetics: Merleau-Ponty and the Mainstream of French Philosophy" and Zhang Yaojun's "Metaphorical Body-Merleau-Ponty" "The Phenomenology of the Body" and so on, the achievement is outstanding, but unfortunately, it is not possible to reflect on Merleau-Ponty's body theory from the overall perspective of the body. Second, under the influence of American scholar Richard Shusterman, Gao Jianping, Zhang Fa, Peng Fuchun, Wang Xiaohua, Zhang Jing, Peng Feng and other scholars described and sorted out contemporary somaesthetics and somatic turning issues, and put forward many suggestions meaningful insights. Third, sort out the view of body in Chinese cultural tradition. Representative works include the collection of essays "Qi Theory and Body View in the History of Ancient Chinese Thought", Liu Chengji's "Metaphysical Immortality: Textual Research on Somaesthetic in the Han Dynasty" and so on.

Fourth, a case study of culture using Foucault's "body politics" theory. Representative works include "History, Body, Country: The Formation of the Body in Modern China" by the Taiwanese scholar Huang Jinlin, the monograph "Body, Space and Postmodernity" by Wang Minan, and the compilation of "Cultural Politics of the Body" and "Post-body: Culture, Power" And Biopolitics" and Zhou Xian's many essays. The above results focus on the influence of various power discourses and ideologies on the body, which are full of positive meanings; however, the value and significance of the political theory of the body have not been analyzed in depth. Fifth, the analysis of physical practice in contemporary aesthetic culture. Liu Chengji's "A Contemporary Case of Somatic Aesthetics" and other scholars' literary criticism on the literary phenomenon of "Chinese-style body writing" can be regarded as this type of academic achievement.

On the whole, the domestic aesthetic research on "body" has sorted out the related Western theoretical resources and summarized the body concept in traditional Chinese cultural thoughts. It can be regarded as an important academic advancement, which is useful for the construction of Somaesthetic in the future to positive meaning. Regrettably, similar to the Western academia, some studies also lack macroscopic and theoretically in-depth reflections, and eventually become fragmented and fragmented. In addition, the thinking on academic methodology also lacks sufficient strength.

#### **4. Somaesthetic as a paradigm**

The basic ideas for the construction of contemporary Somaesthetic can be summarized as follows: Focusing on "somatic turn" as the research focus, focusing on "what is a body", "why does the body become a problem" and "what is the aesthetic meaning of somatic turn". The basic problem is the theoretical focus, combing its academic pedigree, exploring its theoretical form, grasping its internal roots, summarizing its main dilemmas, and then re-examining aesthetics and existence, aesthetics and body, aesthetics and life, etc from the perspective of Chinese and Western comparative aesthetics. A

series of relational propositions help to build a new paradigm of aesthetic research with locality and logical self-consistent in the era of globalization.

As an academic paradigm, the value and significance of Somaesthetic lies in:

First, sharply criticize logocentrism. Traditional metaphysics adheres to a logo-centric world outlook. However, history shows that when dealing with physical problems, the concept of "the body is finite, material, and timeless" can not explain the unity of body and mind, nor can it explain the unity of man and the world, and somaesthetics starts from "why does the body become a problem", to a certain extent, reveals the dilemma of logocentrism, and solves related problems in Western metaphysics.

The dominance of the dualism of mind and body in Western thought has objectively caused the body to be exiled from reason for a long time, and the concepts of sensibility, desire, and instinct related to the body are correspondingly ignored and indifferent. The physical turn of aesthetics corrects this bias to a certain extent, removes the many shackles on the body, and establishes the dominant position of the physiological, lustful, and material body. However, it should also be pointed out that this persistent path of liberation has in fact not finally achieved the purpose of restoring the body—under the influence of postmodernism, the body quickly fell into the quagmire of desire and became one of the tools of increasingly fierce consumerism one.

Second, the thinking about the body has been promoted from a cross-cultural perspective. The problem of the body is a theoretical discourse that most evokes academic thinking. For example, starting from the gendered body, the latest results of feminist body research are Judith Butler's gender performance theory and masculinity research. Similarly, in the field of comparative literature related to the gender body, Chinese cultural circles also have more prominent theoretical contributions. For example, the variation of body writing theory in Chinese literary creation, as well as the misunderstanding of body writing by feminist literary criticism, have promoted aesthetic research from a cross-cultural perspective to a certain extent, thus highlighting the vitality of Somaesthetic contemporary and interpretable.

The emergence of cultural comparative awareness stems from the difference in the cultural identity of researchers. The changes in the concept of cultural identity caused by this difference are not only an inevitable objective fact, but also make the contemporary construction of aesthetics more colorful. The emphasis of Chinese classical philosophy on "self-cultivation" is the most distinctive feature of the emphasis on the ability of "community" in both cognitive and emotional aspects. On the one hand, it regards the body as an external form of the inner mind or mental state, and on the other hand, it also provides a sufficient extension path for the interpenetration of body and mind. The western view of the inanimate body presents an almost completely opposite view of divergence. In short, the intervention of aesthetics from a physical perspective not only helps to see the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, but also opens up new academic fields.

Third, provide theoretical support for the interpretation of contemporary cultural phenomena. The validity of the theory lies in its ability to interpret social and cultural phenomena. Up to now, the research on Somaesthetic has constituted a relatively clear academic pedigree, and its theoretical propositions have also established a basic theoretical outline. From Nietzsche's "Art Physiology" to Merleau-Ponty's "Body Existence Theory", from Foucault's "Disciplined Body Theory" to "Gender Body Theory" in Feminist Studies, to the consumer society the uproarious "Desire Body Theory" provides us with a persuasive ideological weapon to grasp the complex and changeable contemporary life.

In other words, only when there is an overall grasp of the theoretical background, academic pedigree and basic connotation of body research, can there be a clear theoretical basis for "body" as a body. In the final analysis, in the changing wave of modernity, only the body provides a solid material foundation for individual self-identification, and becomes the only temperature-dependent existence that we can rely on. As Shusterman emphasized, "For human beings with a body, even the so-called joy and stimulation of pure thought is incarnate... We must not forget that the mind depends on the health of the body, but also requires the body muscle contraction." The construction of Somaesthetic objectively deepens and concretizes our grasp of the world, and maintains the dignity of contemporary cultural criticism with a powerful "critical weapon".

Fourth, we are committed to regaining the meaning of life. The aesthetic construction around the body, whether in China or the West, has one thing in common, that is, it always runs through a kind of ultimate life care. From the cut-in angle to the basic conclusion, from theoretical criticism to

methodological reflection, they all settle on the shaping of the "complete person" and the pursuit of a "good life". Committed to regaining the meaning of life in a post-theological/industrial/enlightenment/theory/metaphysical era is a consistent pursuit. At the same time, in specific research, emphasizing individual cases, emphasizing experience, emphasizing the passing function of theories, and striving to overcome the theoretical disadvantages of "theory for the sake of theory" in aesthetic writing are also important directions for efforts.

## 5. Conclusion

If the body is the noumenon of the world and the source of the meaning of our existence, then the aesthetic somatic turn is actually a return in the true sense, a theoretical correction of chaos. When Foucault focused on the politics of the body, examining the ways and methods that power and knowledge discourse disciplines the "body" into a "tamed flesh", his concern for life is clearly on paper. Similarly, when Merleau-Ponty rejected the "passive body" and called for the origin of existence, he focused on thinking about how to obtain the meaning of life. In the final analysis, caring for the body is caring for life; caring for the body is caring for our existence itself. The physical turn of aesthetics is not only an adjustment of the discourse style of a discipline, but also a difficult choice of how to settle life.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the key platform and major project of the Guangdong Provincial Department of Education "Research on the somatic turn of the contemporary western Aesthetics" (NO. 2017WTSCX132).

## References

- [1] Friedrich Nietzsche: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Graham Parkes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- [2] Jean Baudrillard: *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writing*, Ed Mark Poster, Stanford University Press, 2001.
- [3] Liang Ding: "On the 'Prestige' of Ancient Chinese Gentlemen from the Perspective of Body Sense", *Journal of Archaeology and Anthropology*, Issue 74, 2011.
- [4] Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.
- [5] Michel Foucault: *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
- [6] Richard Shusterman. *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the End of Art*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000:140.
- [7] Saint Augustine: "The City of God", translated by Wang Xiaochao, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2006 edition, 219.
- [8] Wang Hongchen: "Soul Self-cultivation and Somaesthetic", *Guangming Daily*, September 4, 2017.