

Life and Flesh: The Bacon's Painting in the Perspective of Body Aesthetics

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Body aesthetics believes that the body and spirit are one, and that spirit and consciousness arise in the body, so we should pay attention to the feeling of the body. F. Bacon's paintings take the body as the main content of expression, trying to depict an "image" that can trigger physical feelings. Bacon values the movement of the body in painting, the accidental nature of painting, and believes that art could break the shackles of society on the body. Body aesthetics is well interpreted in Bacon's paintings.

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The exploration of the body is the main connotation of modern body aesthetics, which in a broad sense includes voluntarism represented by F. Nietzsche, the phenomenology of the body represented by M. Merleau-Ponty, and the body aesthetics (somaesthetics) in a narrow sense represented by R. Shusterman and Terry Eagleton. Body aesthetics criticizes Descartes' dichotomy of mind and body, but advocates a unity of mind and body based on the body (or corporeality). In modern contemporary art, some artists, such as L. Freud, R. Meuck and F. Bacon, have also emphasized the representation of the body and life. The famous English painter F. Bacon once said: "I suppose because it (—painting, note from quoter) has a life completely of its own, like the image one's trying to trap; it lives on its own, and therefore transfers the essence of the image more poignantly. So that the artist may be able to open up or rather, should I say, unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently" (Bacon & Sylvester, 1987, p. 17). We can understand that art as a product of human culture has a spiritual nature, but how can we understand that art also has its life and flesh? We can interpret the concern of artists such as Bacon for the life and flesh in terms of modern ideas of the body aesthetics. In addition to depicting flesh and life, art has a life of its own, and this life does not refer to a spirituality that transcends the flesh, but to the flesh itself, from which the spirituality grows. Body aesthetics attempts to liberate the bonds imposed by society on the individual body. And those in Bacon's art who break away from the concrete image, as well as the artist's own emphasis on contingency and trace, can be understood as a desire for the freedom of the body.

Overview of Body Aesthetics

Body aesthetics is a relatively recent concept, but the exploration of the mind-body problem is a rather old topic. Plato divided the body and the mind into two different worlds, the real and the idea, and argued that the soul should abandon the bonds of the body. This mind-body duality dominated Western thought for many years, and the dominant mind developed into the essence of the world, the absolute idea, by Hegel. It was not until voluntarism, especially Nietzsche's philosophy of life, that the body was given its proper name. In the philosophy of life, however, the mind-body dualism of classical philosophy was still not completely eliminated, and E. Husserl tried to go beyond this mind-body dualism by arguing in his late thought that reason and the body should be united. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, turns his attention to the body, the most primordial vehicle of perception, and uses Husserl's intentional approach to explore the relationship between human and the world, the body and the mind. Merleau-Ponty then argues that the origin of the world does not lie in a transcendental spirit at all; the world itself is the body, the flesh. It is the flesh that the subject first deals with the world, and it is the visible sensibility and the invisible sensibility in the flesh that allows one to feel oneself and other things. What Merleau-Ponty calls the corporeal body is not a thing in the sense of physical space-time, but a vehicle of perception through which the subject relates to the object and the subject can feel the object. "indeed its (—my body's, note from quoter) spatiality is not, like that of external objects or like that of 'spatial sensations', a spatiality of position, but a spatiality of situation" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, pp. 114-115). Therefore, it is through this spatiality of the corporeal body that I perceive the external space. The corporeal body is a vehicle of earthly existence, and to have a body means to be able to participate in the environment and to be in relationship with other things. Merleau-Ponty describes this occurrence of relationship as being like the left hand touching the right hand, so that in this touching and perceiving, self-consciousness of the corporeal body arises. The connection between flesh and object can occur through viewing because the two are fundamentally homogeneous, the visibility of the object is the visibility embedded in the flesh. "This is what Cézanne called 'essence is intrinsic'. Mass, light, color, depth, they are all there facing me, they are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies, only because our bodies welcome them" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 22). Merleau-Ponty believes that the relationship between the body and the world, like the relationship between the expression of a work of art and what is expressed, is inseparable and directly related. In this sense, he says: "The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 174). Merleau-Ponty thinks of the relationship between the flesh and the thing in terms of an intentionality. He argues that the painter views the object not in a physical spatio-temporal sense, i.e., in a way that wants to distinguish himself from the object, but in a way that unites him with the object in an intentional structure that can be corporealized. He quotes the poet and critic Apollinaire, who argues that "some sentences seem to have been formed not as if they had been created, but as if they had been formed by themselves" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 69).

The contemporary philosopher R. Schusterman further develops the concept of "Somaesthetics", stating in his book *Pragmatic Aesthetics*: "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 It is, therefore, also devoted to the knowledge, discourses, practices, and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it" (Schusterman, 2000, p. 267). We can see that the fundamental purpose of Schusterman's

somaesthetics is to move away from the conceptual and preconceived study of aesthetic perception and to explore the influence of the body on cognition and the mind from a conception of the "body" as a living organism. Somaesthetics emphasizes the fundamental and prior nature of the body, but does not exclude the knowing, and believes that the body and the mind should be unified. He rejects the Kantian aesthetic division of pleasure into pleasure with interest and aesthetic pleasure without interest, and believes that the satisfaction of bodily senses and desires is inseparable from aesthetic pleasure. Before Schusterman defined somaesthetics, T. Eagleton set the tone for the corporeality of aesthetics when he said, "Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body" (Eagleton, 1990, p. 13). In contrast to Shusterman's emphasis on the organic functional aspects of the body, Eagleton's body is a physical and psychological vehicle of culture.

What Shusterman calls the physical, cultural body has a different meaning from Merleau-Ponty's flesh with intentionality. However, whether it is Schusterman's emphasis on the organic nature of the body and the regulative nature of mind and body, or Eagleton's emphasis on the political and cultural dimensions of the body, or Merleau-Ponty's intentional body, all of them emphasize a non-spiritual body, the body as a vehicle of perception and awareness from which both spirit and life emerge. These theories break with the dichotomy of mind and body of classical philosophy, which sees the mind and body as a whole and the body as a more important foundation. Therefore, from the perspective of body aesthetics, it is inevitable to re-examine the status of sensuality and perception, and to criticize a certain visual centrism with cognitive stereotypes. This has certain critical implications for contemporary art, which tends to be more and more rational and conceptual. Bacon rejects the Illustrative figurative and abstract art as conveying form in an intellectual way, while non-illustrative art is founded first on feeling. Through painting, Bacon sought to return to a state of undivided mind and body—a sense of presence experienced by the nervous system.

Body aesthetics, whether in a broad or narrow sense, is still limited to the question of the relationship between mind and body, and is less concerned with the question of the growth and generativity of the flesh, and the relationship between the flesh and the spirit. In my opinion, if we want to solve these problems, we should first look at how artworks are produced and how they acquire their generativity. The relationship between the artist and the artwork is like that of a mother and child. The artist gives life and body to the artwork, but in itself, the body of anything is derived from the world, and the artist merely gives it an image. The greatest difference between human beings and other things lies in their cultural nature. The artist gives birth to the artwork and also gives it the seed of culture, which is the most important root of the growth of art.

Here we will explore in detail how the life and flesh of a work of art take shape through an examination of Bacon's artwork.

Bacon's Painting in the Perspective of Body Aesthetics

Painting about the Flesh and Painting as Flesh

The flesh, especially the human body, has traditionally been one of the most frequently expressed themes in Western art. In Hegel's art system, Greek human sculpture was the highest rank of art, achieving the unity of idea and sensual image (Hegel, 1986, p. 110). Hegel values the expression of the human mind and ideas through the human body, which is a law followed by many artists.

But for Bacon, all he wants to describe is mere flesh, “Certainly landscapes interest me much less. I think art is an obsession with life and after all, as we are human beings, our greatest obsession is with ourselves. Then possibly with animals, and then with landscapes” (Bacon & Sylvester, 1980). Bacon painted subjects that were mostly instantly kinetic, and Bacon’s extremely impactful flesh was directly able to create a physical resonance in the viewer, “Flesh and meat are life! If I paint red meat as I paint bodies it is just because I find it very beautiful. I don’t think anyone has ever really understood that” (Bacon & Giacobetti, 2003). Also, Bacon often painted flesh directly, flesh without specific images and without organs. An example is his work *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion, F. Bacon, 1944.

“We are meat, we are potential carcasses” (Bacon & Sylvester, 1987, p. 46). In his analysis of Degas’ *After the Bathing* (1903), he states that X-rays change the way we see the human body, no longer as a superficial image, but as a direct flesh. According to Deleuze, it is these organ-less flesh that can make the viewer ignore that it is a specific person. This flesh is the flesh of life and can trigger a resonance, “the body without organs is flesh and nerves; a wave passes through it and traces different dimensions over it; sensations arise when the wave meets the forces at work in the body, a ‘emotional movement,’ a shouting-breath” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 45). In addition, Bacon even directly painted inanimate flesh or anatomical stumps, as in the replication of Velasquez’s *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, i.e. *Painting* (1946) (see Figure 1), the limb on the armrest and in *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962) (see Figure 2), the human figure is also gone, replaced by a dissected flesh. These meats are clearly not intended, but he tries to use them to represent the corporeality of the painting itself, as he explains: “You know the great Cimabue Crucifixion? I always think of that as an image—as a worm crawling down the cross” (Bacon & Sylvester, 1987, p. 14).



Figure 2. *Painting*, F.Bacon, 1946.

From Bacon's paintings comes the idea that painting itself is in some sense corporeal. Commenting on modernist painting, C. Greenberg (1965, p. 136) says, "The picture has now become an entity belonging to the same order of space as our bodies; it is no longer the vehicle of a Pictorial space has lost its 'inside' and become all 'outside'". Painting itself has its own extension and is a material entity in itself. In his phenomenology of the body, Merleau-Ponty argues that the artist does not paint only by the mind, but by "lending the body to the world", and that the world is an extension of the body, a kind of "flesh of the world", in which sense the painting is also an extension of the body (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1964, pp. 16-22). For Bacon, a work of art is a flesh, a figurative flesh, which can be perceived with the nervous system. This flesh can grow on itself, not in a physical way, but in a spiritual way, just as the body and the spirit are not separable. This flesh in the pictorial sense is not just a depiction of real flesh, but generates this corporeality with all the forms of the whole painting. Bacon opposes an illustrative function of painting, as well as figurative and abstractive painting. Figurative painting is an illustrative painting that tells a story. And Bacon suggests, "in abstract art, as there's no report, there's nothing other than the aesthetic of the painter and his few sensations. There's never any tension in it" (Bacon & Sylvester, 2007, p. 60). Abstract painting is further divided into Kandinsky-style abstract painting and the abstract expressionism established by Pollock. What Bacon wanted was to create an image (the Figure) that was neither abstract nor figurative, but the corporeal image of painting itself, "Because this image is a kind of tightrope walk between what is called figurative painting and abstraction. It will go right out from abstraction, but will really have nothing to do with it. onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly" (Bacon & Sylvester, 2007, p. 12). This image is not a figurative, that is, not one built according to a predetermined pattern of images, it is inherently contingent, a disruption of people's sensory and thinking patterns. This Figure painting is haptic, a unity of hand and eye, a direct stimulation of the nervous system (cf. Deleuze, 2003, p. 138). Commenting on Picasso's influence on him, Bacon says that Picasso is the first to create figurative painting that reversed the rules

of representation; he believes that representation should not use the usual codes, should not take into account the reproductive reality of forms, should not use irrational breathing, but make the reproduction more intense and direct; therefore forms should be transmitted directly from the eye to the stomach rather than through the brain (cf. Bacon & Giacobetti, 2003).

Bacon believes that painting paints a sense of presence, and this sense of presence needs to be embodied through the body of the painting. Bacon says: "I don't want to make my painting vague, but I paint in a fog of perception, feeling and thought, although I try to concretize it" (Hammer, 2014, p. 10). By concretizing this feeling, Bacon actually wants to give life and body to the painting itself. With Merleau-Ponty, painting is still an extension of the flesh, still passive, whereas with the artist Bacon, a more radical thought experiment is presented in art, where painting itself has life, a combination of flesh and spirit, so Bacon wants to find its own movement, its own growth, for painting.

The Movement of Life of Painting

The vitality of the body and the flesh lies in its movement and growth, and as a living painting, it must also express this movement as much as possible. While previous painters tried to transcend the finiteness of time and enter into eternity through painting, Bacon seeks to directly represent the moment of life, to express a finite, contingent body.

Bacon is obsessed with the movement of life, and the movement of his paintings is influenced by two aspects: first, paintings that explored movement, such as Picasso's Cubism, U. Boccioni's and M. Duchamp's Futurism; and second, the influence of photography and film, such as E. Muybridge's photographs of human movement, X-ray photographs and medical photographs, S. Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin* and L. Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*.

St. Augustine and G. Lessing believes that the difference between literature and painting is the difference between time and space; they believes that literature is temporal, while painting can only express space but not time. Modern art, on the other hand, strives to break this distinction between time and space. In modernist painting, painting developed in two directions, one is what Greenberg called flatness, and the other is to explore the non-flatness of painting, that is, to try to explore how painting can express three-dimensional space, time and movement. The Surrealist painter S. Dal í for example, uses soft clocks to represent mental time or duration, and the Futurist painters try to do so through the superimposition of images. Bacon is also inspired by the sculptures of Bocconi and Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*.

It is still Picasso's Cubist paintings that have the most profound influence on Bacon, who once says that Picasso is the reason he paints and Picasso is the father figure who gives him hope in painting (cf. Bacon & Giacobetti, 2003). He recalls seeing some of Picasso's revolutionary works, such as *Le Baiser* and *les Baigneuses*, in 1929, and cites them as the inspiration for his series of crucifixion. Picasso's influence on Bacon is in the temporality and movement of the paintings. Comparing Bacon's famous triptych *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) (see Figure 1) with those of Picasso's elongated forms, especially the elongated neck (eg. *On the Beach*, 1937), reveals that these are images projected on a two-dimensional plane while the object is in continuous motion. Bacon's other distorted portraits also show that the artist's point of view is not fixed, but is moving continuously around the subject. The most important innovation in Picasso's Cubism is the change in

point of view, from the focal perspective of classical painting to a multi-point perspective, but these points of view remain limited and static, cutting time into a series of static spaces (Picasso also made a few attempts at painting the continuum of time, such as *Woman Throwing a Stone* (1931), *On the Beach* (1937)). In Bacon, however, these multiple points of view become infinite and dynamic, turning space into continuous time. Picasso's geometrically shaped, abstract, untouchable human body evolves into Bacon's distorted, more realistic, touchable form. Bacon says: "Partly because I see every image all the time in a shifting way and almost in shifting sequences" (Bacon & Sylvester, 1987, p. 21).

Some of the flat frames in Bacon's paintings that are mistaken for room frames actually suggest different spaces. For example, in *Three Studies for a Portrait of John Edwards* (1984), Bacon painted several frames with different sides, suggesting that the face, torso, and legs are on different planes. This suggests that the painter is looking at the subject from different points of view, as Bacon states. Bacon says, "I use that frame to see the image" (Bacon & Sylvester, 1987, p. 22). These viewpoints are not static, but continuous. Bacon used a brush to create this dynamic blur effect. He sometimes likens the image in a painting to a sculpture, arguing that the image could slide along the sculptural support, "people could even alter the position of the sculpture as they wanted" (Bacon & Sylvester, 1987, p. 108), that is, one could view the object from a dynamic perspective. There is also his painting *Study for human body* (1981), in which the human body transforms and tears as it moves from one space to another. Bacon's thinking about motility and temporality can be seen in all of these examples.

It is no secret that Bacon uses photographs for his paintings; he believes that they could be a faithful record of the subject and were good material for painting. He often refers to Maibridge's photographs of human movement, "My principal source of visual information is Muybridge.....For me, who doesn't have any models, it's an unbelievable source of inspiration. The images help me just as much to find ideas as to create them. I look at a lot of very different images, very contradictory and I take in details a bit like those people who eat off other people's plates" (Bacon & Giacobetti, 2003).

However, Bacon does not turn his paintings into photographic reproductions. He says, "People have always believed that I painted movement directly from photos, but that's completely wrong. I invent what I paint. Besides, it's very often the opposite of natural movement" (Bacon & Giacobetti, 2003). Bacon believes that movement is self-created and that photographs were merely "triggers of ideas" (Bacon & Sylvester, 1987, p. 30). Bacon even used X-rays and medical photographs to paint.

Bacon says his image of screaming is influenced by some of the shouting shots in the film *Battleship Potemkin*, "It was a film I saw almost before I started to paint, and it deeply impressed me - I mean the whole film as well as the Odessa Steps sequence and this shot" (Bacon & Sylvester, 1987, p. 34). These shots remind him of the shouting mouths in Poussin's paintings. Bacon hopes would trigger a series of neurological responses from the mouth to the stomach. Bacon also uses blurred, overlapping, black-and-white film-like images in his paintings; for example, he blottes out specific images in some of his paintings to create a blurred, eerie atmosphere.

To sum up, we can see that Bacon uses all the materials at hand, especially photography and video techniques, to help him study the motility of objects and tried to express this motility in his paintings. It is not only the motion of the images drawn, but also the paintings themselves that give a sense of movement, such as the flowing bodies in the paintings, the unstable compositions, and the rather absorbing flat black paint. Deleuze,

commenting on Bacon's figures that hang high above the ground, says that he paints the feeling of falling. It is both a falling and a sense of gravity (cf Deleuze, 2003, p. 81).

Liberation of the Body

The relationship between body and space in Bacon's paintings also embodies a notion of bodily emancipation as stated in body aesthetics. The postmodern philosopher M. Foucault criticizes the neglect of the body in previous philosophies, arguing that the body is not natural and private, and that the human body and behavior are the result of training, a product of socialization, embodying certain power relations, as Foucault says, "In any society, the body is restricted within a very strict range of powers, which impose restrictions, prohibitions or obligations on the body" (Foucault, 1975, p. 138).

For Bacon, a return to an original physical sensation is the basis of his paintings, thus his figures often move strangely or break the figure outright. He wants to "reveal the area of sensation" rather than to schematize an object. He tries to express the same sensual qualities between different bodies. So, in his case, the meat in the slaughterhouse and the Jesus on the cross evoke the same feelings. Bacon paints many bodies in extreme states, such as vomiting bodies, bodies in struggle, and unstable bodies on steel rings, which no longer have a sense of stability and permanence, nor do they have the normal behavior that social beings have. Bacon's most characteristic depiction of the flesh lies in his breaking of the flesh, and these distorted, broken bodies can recall that critique of the social body.

The artist himself could also realize a certain degree of bodily freedom through aesthetic activity and artistic behavior. Bacon's attention to the body is also reflected in the importance he places on chance and the trace of his brushstrokes when painting. Bacon is very conscious of his body's feelings, nausea, excitement, unease, and tries to express them in his art. He says there is a slight blur of emotion when he starts to paint: happiness is a special kind of excitement because misfortune is always likely to follow. It is like life: it is so delicate because death is always tantalizing (Bacon & Giacobetti, 2003).

Bacon attaches great importance to the accident of the painting process. In talking about his *Painting* (1946), Bacon repeatedly explains that all images are not prearranged, but a kind of random, self-growth of images formed by chance according to the picture, "As the way I work is totally, now, now, accidental, and becomes more and more accidental" (Bacon & Sylvester, 1987, p. 18), this is the most unique aspect of Bacon's work. The vast majority of people who paint have some preconceived ideas before they paint, and Bacon may have them as well, but, importantly, Bacon constantly adjusts his painting to the actual situation, gradually deviating from his original ideas. Bacon's use of seemingly random objects, such as photographs, medical manuals, newspapers, or films, is an exploration of the depth of existence, an artist's act in the creation of each work, rather than a pre-existing one in his mind (Marini, 2008, p. 45). These materials came to help him break with the conventional laws established in the art of painting and the practicality of the images themselves. When he revisits these images in an aesthetic manner and brings them to painting, a contingent beauty that does not conform to the rules emerges. Bacon places great importance on the serendipity and improvisation of art, and his belief that visual marks and paint textures can have a significant impact on the viewer's nervous system is rooted in his understanding of the roots of art and the importance he places on human instincts and desires (Hammer, 2014, p. 16).

Bacon attributes his success to this accident, "I use very large brushes, and in the way I work I don't in fact know very often what the paint will do, and it does many things which are very much better than I could make it do" (Bacon & Sylvester, 1987, pp. 16-17). In his painting, Bacon is following his hand (body), not his eye (brain). Deleuze attaches great importance to this contingency in Bacon, arguing that it is this contingency that saves the viewer from a state of mediocre living, from preconceived stereotypes. He distinguishes Bacon's accident from Happening art, which is, after all, a pre-planned artistic event and does not follow a completely unpremeditated contingency. For ordinary people, although there is contingency, they cannot be led by contingency into a state of painting like painters (cf. Deleuz, 2003, pp. 94-95). Bacon emphasizes accident so much precisely because he believes that the work of art should express the artist's physical sensations and neurological reactions, which should be transmitted to the viewer.

Summary

In contemporary aesthetics, body aesthetics is a trend of thought that cannot be ignored. It embodies the importance of the body and sensuality and makes people rethink the relationship between mind and body. And the foundation of visual art is the sensual image. However, with the rise of conceptual art, the tendency to intellectualize and conceptualize art has become increasingly evident. There were still some artists who held fast to the direct sensuality of art, such as Freud, Bacon, and the German neo-expressionist painters. Bacon, in particular, emphasized the direct bodily sensation that painting brings to the viewer, and the relationship between the artist's hand and eye. Thus, from the viewpoint of body aesthetics, Bacon sees bodily sensation as the essence of art, and he is looking for a deeper foundation beneath perception and sensuality, what he calls the sensation of the nervous system.

When we look at Bacon's paintings, we do feel a great stimulation of the nervous system, which brings us dissonance and vulgarity, which is similar to what Eagleton (1990, p. 13) said, "the aesthetic concerns this most gross and palpable dimension of the human". However, the aesthetic does not equate with low-level vital sensations or neurological stimuli, but has to leap above animalism to the cultural dimension. Therefore, while we reveal the concealed human life feeling, we also have to think about how this primitive life feeling gives birth to a spirit and culture, that is, how body and mind, physical and spiritual are truly united. Bacon wants to embody the growth of artistic life and the unity of mind and body in art through movement, chance, touch and trace. But this attempt by Bacon is difficult, as every nascent art form encounters such difficulties. When the artist allows his irrational emotions to surge through the picture, it can produce both unexpected and surprising effects, and may also give an unbearable and bizarre image. This third path, different from figurative painting and abstract painting, this path of giving life to painting itself, Bacon has only taken the first step—perhaps an extremely important one.

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