

From "Skill Acquisition" to "Aesthetic Survival": The Paradigm Shift of University Bodybuilding Programs in Life Aesthetic Education

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Abstract: As a unique educational approach integrating sports and art, university aerobics has long been confined within the "skill acquisition" paradigm. Its teaching focuses on movement standardization, physical fitness attainment, and competitive performance, overlooking the inherent functions of sports in cultivating bodily aesthetics, life experiences, and personal character development. Drawing on Schiller's philosophy of aesthetic education and Shusterman's body aesthetics, this paper proposes "aesthetic existence" as the core concept of life-based aesthetic education, elucidating its multifaceted implications—including the unity of sensibility and rationality, playfulness, everyday relevance, and self-construction. The study demonstrates that university aerobics possesses inherent potential to serve as a vehicle for life-based aesthetic education. The shift toward an "aesthetic existence" teaching paradigm not only aligns with national aesthetic education reform policies but also addresses the fundamental need for holistic human development. The article outlines the essential pathways for this paradigm shift, covering educational philosophies, teaching objectives, curriculum content, and evaluation frameworks.

Keywords: University Aerobics; Aesthetic Existence; Life Aesthetic Education; Paradigm Shift; Body Aesthetics; Schiller

1. Introduction

University aerobics stands as a uniquely captivating discipline within physical education. It seamlessly integrates the power of gymnastics, the rhythm of dance, and musical cadence, employing physical movements as its primary expressive medium and occupying an irreplaceable position in sports curricula. However, an examination of current teaching practices reveals a prevalent trend: course

content is heavily focused on standardized technical training; instructional objectives center on mastering specific routines, meeting physical fitness benchmarks, and passing skill assessments; and evaluation systems primarily emphasize movement accuracy, intensity, and synchronization[1]. While this skill-acquisition-oriented paradigm ensures teachability and assessability to some extent, it fails to fully unlock aerobics' profound value in aesthetic experience, life perception, and character development. Traditional aerobics prioritizes technical proficiency over aesthetic elements, making it difficult for students to cultivate genuine aesthetic appreciation through their movements[2].

The underlying context of the issue lies in the fact that modern education has long been constrained by instrumental rationality, reducing physical education to merely a means of physical skill training and fitness enhancement, thereby systematically marginalizing its perceptual and aesthetic dimensions as "physical education." In college aerobics instruction, aesthetic education—a crucial component for imparting aesthetic culture and inspiring creativity—has not yet been fully recognized. Against this backdrop, re-examining the educational purpose of college aerobics and facilitating its shift from a "skill acquisition" paradigm to an "aesthetic existence" paradigm holds significant theoretical and practical value[3].

The core concept of "aesthetic existence" in this article originates from Schiller's philosophy of aesthetic education. In his "Letters on Aesthetic Education", Schiller states: "Each time, humanity is renewed through aesthetic life." The notion of "aesthetic life" forms the central tenet of Schiller's aesthetic education theory—it does not refer to any form of abstract, life-detached play, but rather to a state of existence where sensory and rational impulses harmonize. In this state, individuals are no longer constrained by material necessities or moral imperatives;

instead, they achieve unity between sensibility and reason through a free "play impulse," thereby realizing a complete expression of life. Shusterman's body aesthetics builds upon and develops this idea, emphasizing that aesthetics should return to vivid bodily experiences and position the body as the central medium of aesthetic perception. Shusterman advocates for a more moderate aesthetic lifestyle, asserting that aesthetics should engage with concrete daily life and particularly incorporate authentic bodily experiences[4]. The convergence of these two theoretical frameworks provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the educational potential of college aerobics.

2. "Aesthetic Survival": Understanding the Core Concept of Life Aesthetic Education

The paradigm shift from "skill acquisition" to "aesthetic survival" first requires a theoretical clarification of the central concept of "aesthetic survival".

2.1 The Concept of Aesthetic Existence in Western Aesthetic Tradition

The concept of "aesthetic existence" traces its origins to the classical tradition of Western aesthetics. In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant defined aesthetic judgment as "the free play of cognitive faculties"-when human sensibility and intellect coordinate purposelessly during aesthetic activities, the subject enters a state of pleasure transcending utilitarian constraints, marking the first rigorous philosophical interpretation of the aesthetic dimension of "existence." Schiller went further, elevating aesthetics from an epistemological category to an ontological level[5]. In *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, Schiller diagnosed the fragmentation of human nature caused by modern capitalist production: the separation between state and church, law and custom; the disconnection between enjoyment and labor, means and ends, effort and reward; reducing humans to fragmented entities. Confronting this fragmentation, Schiller proposed aesthetic education as a solution: through the "play impulse"-the unity of sensory and rational impulses-to bridge the rupture in human nature, enabling individuals to progress from the natural state via the aesthetic state to the moral state. Aesthetics constitutes a "third character" distinct from natural and moral traits, while aesthetic play represents the "third state" where sensory

and formal impulses achieve reconciliation. Thus, Schiller's concept of "aesthetic life" carries dual significance: first, its absence of definitive characteristics inherently contains infinite determinacy, making "human nature" characterized by infinity possible; second, it beautifies the surrounding world by liberating things from the dichotomy between end and means[6].

The body aesthetics of contemporary American philosopher Richard Shusterman builds upon Schiller's concern for aesthetic existence, but places greater emphasis on the bodily dimension. Shusterman advocates transcending the confines of elite artistic aesthetic experiences by integrating art into everyday practices, highlighting the value of popular art in restoring sensory engagement. He promotes the establishment of a new branch of aesthetics-"body aesthetics"-which treats the body as an aesthetic sense and emphasizes its role in aesthetic experience, thereby more fully restoring aesthetics' original function as a "sensibility." In Shusterman's view, the ancient philosophical maxim "Know thyself" can also be interpreted as "know thy body." This body aesthetics provides a direct philosophical foundation for understanding aesthetic existence in sports[7].

2.2 The Multiple Implications of Aesthetic Existence and Its Relationship with Daily Life

Synthesizing the aforementioned conceptual resources, "aesthetic existence" encompasses at least four interrelated dimensions.

First, the unity of sensibility and rationality. Aesthetic existence is neither indulgence in sensory pleasure nor rational abstraction detached from the body, but rather a harmonious interaction between sensory and rational impulses. This concept aligns closely with the intrinsic structure of aerobics: it requires both precise technical control (rational factor) and rhythmic bodily expression (sensory factor), with the two elements merging seamlessly during movement rather than opposing or separating from each other.

Secondly, the aspect of playfulness. Schiller identified the "play impulse" as the central mechanism underlying the aesthetic state. Here, "play" does not imply cynicism or mere entertainment, but rather a mode of existence in which activities themselves become the end in themselves, free from the imposition of external

purposes. Schiller argued that beauty is a "living image"-the unity of sensibility and reason-and that the "play impulse" serves as the bridge connecting these opposing elements and preserving human integrity. When aerobics ceases to be merely an exercise aimed at earning credits or passing assessments, and becomes a spontaneous, pleasurable physical activity for learners, it enters the realm of playfulness within aesthetic existence.

Third, everydayness. Aesthetic existence differs from the specialized, ritualized aesthetic experiences inherent in elite art appreciation; it emphasizes that aesthetics should return to the concrete practices of daily life. Shusterman explicitly opposes the modernist approach of isolating aesthetics from real life, reducing it to a mere formal exercise. This means that, as a sport, the realization of aesthetic existence in bodybuilding lies not in the spectacular moments of stage performances, but in the resonance between the body and music during each training session and in the awareness of one's own life state during every movement-these subtle experiences occurring within the routine context of training sessions constitute precisely the everyday nature of aesthetic existence.

Fourth, self-construction. Aesthetic existence is not a passive experience of pleasure, but an active process of self-shaping. For Schiller, the goal of aesthetic education is to achieve the perfection and freedom of human nature. In the aesthetic state, various human capacities are engaged-both rational abilities can be developed, and one can freely return to the natural state-thereby restoring individuals in polarized real-world societies to a balanced and complete human condition. In the context of aerobics, this means that the learner's body serves not only as a vehicle for movement but also as a medium for self-expression and a space for self-creation. It is precisely in this process that the aesthetic subject is formed.

3. Educational Positioning of University Aerobics: Aesthetic Potential and Paradigm Anchoring

3.1 Functional Interconnection: The Natural Integration of Aesthetic Education Resources in Aerobic Exercise

The unique potential of university aerobics as a form of life aesthetics education stems from its inherent structural characteristics. Aerobics is a

sports discipline that integrates gymnastics, music, dance, and martial arts, organically combining aesthetics with sports science. This interdisciplinary nature naturally aggregates multiple aesthetic education resources: at the physical level, precise movement control shapes harmonious posture and strength, embodying the formal beauty of the body; at the rhythmic level, the coordination between music and movement transforms the exercise into an aesthetic practice organized through time and space; at the expressive level, aerobics requires learners to externalize internal emotions through bodily expression, touching upon the core mechanisms of artistic expression. Research on the aesthetic features of aerobics demonstrates its multifunctional benefits in fitness, mental well-being, and physical aesthetics, playing a distinctive role in cultivating college students' aesthetic abilities.

The aesthetic potential of aerobics manifests not only in its static formal beauty but also in its dynamic process beauty. When learners fully engage in performing a complete routine, the coordinated movements of their body parts, precise responses to musical rhythms, spatial transitions, and the modulation of strength collectively create an instantly formed holistic aesthetic experience. This aesthetic experience is not an externally imposed decoration, but rather an intrinsic quality of the movement itself.

3.2 Paradigm Anchoring: Skill-Oriented Teaching Overwhelms the Fundamental Roots of Aesthetic Existence

However, the aforementioned aesthetic potential remains underutilized in current college aerobics instruction. A critical issue that has not been sufficiently addressed is that aerobics teaching has long been confined within the "skill acquisition" paradigm. This paradigm exhibits three distinct characteristics: First, goal-oriented technical focus: The teaching emphasis lies on standardized training of movement techniques, with the core criterion for evaluation being whether students have "mastered" specific routines. Second, formulaic content: Course materials primarily consist of fixed sequences of movements, leaving minimal room for innovative expression or individual interpretation. Third, quantitative assessment: Evaluation standards predominantly focus on measurable technical indicators such as movement accuracy, power, and synchronization,

while dimensions like aesthetic expressiveness, emotional engagement, and individual style are often marginalized.

The formation of this skills-oriented paradigm has its objective reasons. Physical education curricula require operational and assessable teaching standards, and movement techniques naturally serve as the most convenient evaluation criterion due to their objectivity. A deeper reason lies in the fact that modern physical education itself is profoundly influenced by the mechanistic view of the body-the body is regarded as a machine that can be decomposed, trained, and optimized. Consequently, physical education is reduced to the transmission of skills and the enhancement of physical fitness, with its comprehensive role as life education and aesthetic education artificially obscured. It is precisely this paradigm that prevents the rich aesthetic potential of aerobics from being translated into tangible educational outcomes.

4. The Necessity of Paradigm Shift

4.1 The Guiding Role of National Aesthetic Education Policy

The paradigm shift in aesthetic education is not merely a theoretical ideal; it is driven by clear national policy objectives. The "Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in Schools in the New Era," issued by the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council, explicitly states that aesthetic education should be integrated into the talent cultivation system at the higher education level, and that reforms in disciplinary aesthetic education teaching should be advanced. In 2025, the Ministry of Education convened a pilot reform promotion meeting in Beijing, outlining three key reform initiatives to drive comprehensive quality education reforms and promote students' physical and mental health as well as holistic development. The "Guiding Opinions on Comprehensively Promoting the Construction of Healthy Schools," issued by the Ministry of Education in 2026, further emphasizes advancing disciplinary aesthetic education reform to help students acquire at least one motor skill and 1-2 specialized artistic talents.

These policy documents clearly convey two signals: first, aesthetic education has been

elevated to a vital component of the national education strategy; second, the integration of aesthetic education with physical education has become a key direction for educational reform. Within this policy framework, the paradigm shift of college aerobics-from mere "physical skill training" to a "vehicle for life aesthetic education"-is no longer merely an academic proposition but a practical necessity in educational practice.

4.2 The Rise of the Aesthetic Survival-Oriented Educational Philosophy

From a macro perspective of educational philosophy evolution, the emergence of the "aesthetic survival" educational philosophy poses a profound challenge to the traditional skills-centered paradigm in physical education. As early as two centuries ago, Schiller emphasized that the purpose of aesthetic education is not to cultivate technically proficient artists, but rather to nurture well-rounded individuals capable of achieving "aesthetic survival." This insight has found renewed resonance in contemporary educational reforms. With the widespread adoption of the "people-oriented" educational philosophy, educational goals are increasingly focused on cultivating "complete individuals"-a development encompassing not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also the coordinated growth of emotional intelligence, aesthetic sensibility, value judgment, and bodily awareness.

For physical education, this signifies a shift from "focusing solely on physical training" to "cultivating the mind and character through sports." Physical education should not merely serve as a venue for physical conditioning; it must also become a space where sensibility and rationality, body and soul, converge and engage in dialogue. In the 2025 teaching reform initiatives, some universities have innovatively adopted a tripartite teaching model integrating "skill development, aesthetic appreciation, and ideological and political education" in aerobics instruction, marking a pioneering embodiment of this conceptual transformation.

4.3 The Critique of Instrumental Rationality and the Paradigm Shift Toward a Holistic Humanism

The most fundamental driving force stems from the critique of educational alienation under

instrumental rationality. Dominated by instrumental rationality, all disciplines-including physical education-are reduced to a "input-output" efficiency logic. In aerobics courses, students are quantified based on metrics such as "how many routines mastered," "what level of physical fitness achieved," and "what competition results obtained." While this quantitative approach offers administrative convenience, it fundamentally erodes bodily richness and the integrity of life. Schiller's critique of the human fragmentation caused by capitalist modernization remains acutely relevant in today's educational context: when individuals reduce themselves to mere symbols of skills or professions, they lose existential harmony. If university aerobics remains merely a arena for skill competition rather than an aesthetic space for life, it cannot escape this fate of alienation.

5. Implementation Pathways for Paradigm Shift

Achieving the paradigm shift from "skill acquisition" to "aesthetic existence" requires systematic reforms in educational philosophy, teaching objectives, curriculum design, and assessment methods. This involves expanding teaching objectives from "mastering technical skills" to "cultivating aesthetic existence capabilities," shifting curriculum content from "mechanical replication" to "aesthetic creation," and transforming assessment mechanisms from "technical quantification" to "comprehensive aesthetic evaluation."

More fundamentally, there is a shift in educational orientation: students should be regarded as aesthetic subjects with aesthetic capacity, rather than passive recipients of technical training. This requires teachers to assume the role of aesthetic guides rather than technical supervisors, establishing an experiential, participatory, and reflective relationship between learners and the curriculum content. In this process, "learning aerobics" is redefined as "achieving aesthetic existence through aerobics"-where skills themselves are no longer the end goal of education, but rather a bridge toward aesthetic existence.

6. Conclusion

The paradigm shift in college aerobics-from "skill acquisition" to "aesthetic existence"-not only corrects the instrumental rationality prevalent in current education but also reaffirms

the profound educational value of physical activity. This transformation is grounded in Schiller's philosophy of aesthetic education and Shusterman's theory of bodily aesthetics, both of which highlight a central tenet: the purpose of education is not to train individuals as mere functional entities, but to facilitate the unity of sensibility and rationality in a state of freedom, transforming life into an aesthetic practice. Against the backdrop of national efforts to reform aesthetic education and promote the "health-first" educational philosophy, this paradigm shift aligns with policy directives while addressing the deeper aspiration for holistic human development. As a unique educational format naturally integrating multiple aesthetic elements-including physical expression, rhythm, and performance-the college aerobics program should be redefined: it is not merely a sports skills course, but rather a "laboratory of life aesthetics" that guides learners toward an aesthetic state of being.

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