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Original article

THE ROLE OF MOTOR ACTIVITIES IN FORMING THE CULT OF THE BODY

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Abstract*

Problem statement. This paper intends to bring to attention the phrase “the cult of the body”, from the perspective of its forms of expression during the entire human ontogenesis up to the present time, in the conditions of modern society subjugated by three factors: sedentariness, overstress, overeating.

The aim of the research. The research aims to highlight the pros and cons from the standpoint of specialists in motor education and processing, with mental interventions on the individual, to exploit certain forms of body processing and to promote a lifestyle focused on physical and psychological development through aesthetic culture.

Conclusions. In an active life, in which man realizes the need to maintain health, to nurture movement and body awareness is crucial for the self-image reflection.

For people living in modern society, the body has become a symbol of their identity. The relationship between body and identity becomes stronger, being concretized in the phrase “physical culture”, as part of an appropriate lifestyle. The body acquires value through shapes which are exploited at the social, economic and cultural levels.

Keywords: cult of the body, physical culture, motor activity, education, artistic expression, lifestyle.

There are three kinds of beauty: that of the souls, that of the bodies and that of the sounds. Beauty of the souls is perceived by the mind, that of the bodies is perceived through the eyes, that of the sounds, through the ears.

MARSILIO FICINO (<http://autori.citatepedia.ro/>)

Introduction

The human being feels fulfilled when surrounded by beauty. The cult of beauty has been reflected throughout history in works of art as a shaping force, an ascent on the scale of fulfillment, “refinement and the horizon of values” (Cucoș, 2014, p. 209).

In its anthropological evolution, mankind has wanted to be in harmony with the aesthetics of nature. This goal could be reached by using physical exercises directed towards creating the perfect body. Thus, movement has played an important role in people’s lives, at the beginning as a form of exploration and perception of the environment, of survival (Epuran, 2011, p. 21), perpetuation of the species, building relationships with others, self-knowledge and as a means of communication.

The human being has developed abilities through work, physical training exercises for military purposes, sports competitions, games and dance. The last ones have become sports disciplines, performing arts and ways of spending time.

If, in the beginning, human activity was expressed through spontaneous and involuntary movements, progressively and in parallel with them, there appeared conscious and elaborated body activities that subsequently turned into precise gestures. Well framed in space and time, increasingly correct as segmental placement, gestures/motor actions/movements have

become carriers of meanings. Through them, the individual relates to the surrounding reality in which they live. It is thus that the concept of “physical culture” emerged, being “considered by many specialists as the first form of culture. It was generated by the primordial need of ancient man to prepare for fighting and hunting, in order to ensure their survival. (Kirîțescu, 1964, p. 7, pp. 379-384)

The evolution of human body has also made possible the emergence, in everyday language, of the phrase “the cult of the body”. This phrase seems to have mystical connotations that make us think of incantations, meditations or mental exercises. The reality is that we have in view physical interventions meant to transform the body and make it more beautiful.

“The cult of the body” is a term reflecting a human ideal of reaching perfection. It entails another human ideal related to self-esteem and gaining the admiration of one’s fellows.

Modern society provides several body care techniques that belong to other active forms of movement, such as bodybuilding, jogging, gymnastics, as well as various diets and medical techniques – aesthetic, reconstructive and plastic surgery. These aspects of modern culture also have an unfavorable side, because sometimes attempts are made to push to the extreme the procedures of intervention on the body in order to reach perfection. This issue is supported by advertising campaigns through promotions in the media channels and on the billboards displayed everywhere in the street. The cult of the body reveals thus, in this combination, its social origin of “religion of the market: what could be more mobilizing and more beautiful than a world of eternally young bodies,

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which are happy to work and consume for their own salvation!" (Mihăescu, 2006)

Purpose and appropriateness of the paper

We aim to argue theoretically the value and benefits of nurturing the cult of the body for a harmonious development of muscles, of physical and mental condition through bodily activities. In the context of contemporary society, practicing various physical and sports activities has become a necessity. More and more people are aware of the role played by these activities in maintaining and improving the movement ability of the body towards implementing a healthy lifestyle.

Current stage of knowledge

In ancient times, the notion of beauty was used to reflect harmony and symmetry. Beauty was a concept related to eurhythmy (<https://dexonline.ro/definitie/euritmie>), as a harmonious combination of the component elements, lines and proportions with the moral virtues. They were the *expression of ideal body*, as a status of beauty associating both physical and moral qualities. In Greek aesthetics, the expression of ideal body designates beauty as perfection of some standard proportions, which is revealed by ancient sculptures. This was a different meaning compared to current usage, by then the *body* being closer to the notions of harmony, symmetry and eurhythmy, and signifying moral virtues rather than aesthetic ones. Beauty did not have an autonomous status, but was associated with other qualities. (Ciocan, 2013, pp. 14-15; Văcărescu, 2014, pp. 12-14)

In different historical periods, mankind was not aware of the body-mind-soul relationship. There were debates about the soul, and one of the promoters was Aristotle, who defined it as a "principle of life and movement for the living beings". (Mihăescu, 2006; Tatarzewicz, 1978, pp. 207-210)

In ancient times, the mind was primarily promoted to the detriment of the body. Plato accredits the idea of immateriality and immortality of the soul. For him, man is a spiritual being "incarcerated" in the body. In reply, Aristotle considers the relationship between "body and soul" similar to that between "matter and form". The mind-body dualism was also noted by the great philosopher, mathematician and physicist René Descartes. (Mihăescu, 2006; https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasiunile_sufletului)

The emergence of modern science in the 17th century led to the creation of a new conception about living bodies. It was also expressed the idea of Descartes, according to which the body was seen as a machine disposing of certain autonomy. An autonomous body can move independently of the soul. (Crișan, 2008, pp. 160-161; https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rene_Descartes)

Besides writings, poems, incantations, the cult of the body is highlighted by a multitude of plastic works, paintings and sculptures of inestimable beauty. They

do not reproduce identically the shapes encountered in reality, but interpret them, managing to express a message with strong emotional and educational impact. The art of sculpture reveals how to model the entire human body at rest or in motion. From this perspective, modeling human body gets a very important artistic function. Static posture, attitudes and movements become valuable communication through nonverbal language used by the artist to convey a message, a story. The forms in which the body has been represented throughout the centuries are a living chronicle of human evolution. Through the visual force of artistic expressiveness, it was immortalized the perfection of women's and men's bodies. Thus, they have become eternal, carrying messages from the historical past of mankind, which was tumultuous, happy, sad, but so glorious, being admired and respected by us, who live in the present days. (<http://www.topculturism.ro/sculptura-si-corpul-uman/>; http://www.wikiwand.com/ro/Istoria_sculpturii)

In ancient Greece, there were worshiped the heroes from the Iliad and the Odyssey, the Legends of Olympus, for their athletic qualities and beauty of the body. Hercules was praised for his huge strength, while heroes like Antaeus, Theseus, Achilles and Odysseus were admired for their athletic qualities and beauty of the body. Milo of Croton was considered the best athlete of ancient Greece, winning seven times the ancient Olympic Games. (Epuran, 2011, pp. 248-250)

Body aesthetics was prefigured in the plastic arts through remarkable works that also imposed several rules of proportions. The sculptors' canon was actually following the nature, not the art. Proportions were estimated as they appeared in nature, especially in a well-built body, rather than those characterizing a statue. (Tatarzewicz, 1978, pp. 103-104; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvius#Proportions_of_Man)

The Greeks considered it self-evident that the nature, particularly the human body, had mathematically defined proportions. Therefore, in the art too, similar proportions had to be displayed. Vitruvius understood this aspect, noting that what the man had to do was to replicate the perfection of proportions existing in nature. (<https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvius>)

The Greek people stipulated the idea that an ideal body could be framed within a square: "aner tetragonos" in Greek or "homo quadratus" in Latin. Vitruvius drew a sketch in this regard, inscribing the body within a square and a circle, and that sketch was repetitively used throughout the art history, especially by Leonardo da Vinci in his famous "Vitruvian Man", a drawing revealing the perfect structure of human microcosm. (Tatarzewicz, 1978, pp. 100-101)

During certain cultural periods, man regarded his own proportion scale as the most beautiful one, modeling his works according to it. This was a feature of classical periods, which had a preference for natural

human proportions, for creating things at a human scale. However, there were also other periods which consciously avoided these shapes and proportions, seeking larger objects than the human ones and more “perfect” proportions than the organic ones. Thus, the taste, proportions, art and aesthetics are subject to fluctuation. (<http://www.topculturism.ro/sculptura-si-corpul-uman/>)

Throughout the centuries, artist sculptors inspired by the human body highlight its shapes and capture its expressiveness and experienced feelings. Sculpture has represented the main way of conveying messages through means that primarily use the human body shapes.

Thus, the cult of the body was expressed by the ancient sculptors, the Renaissance painters and sculptors, the Egyptian frescoes and those from everywhere in the world, representing the so-called “role models” (Epuran, 2011, p. 248), with some differences in each historical epoch.

The human body has always aroused curiosity and has been a source of inspiration for scientists and artists, who revealed the shapes of human body at rest and in motion through artistic anatomy works. External morphology enriches with the “expression”, as a form of communication and understanding of the body segment movements, as an effect of higher nervous

activity. The study of human motion and the explanations of biomechanics displayed as drawings of anatomic and artistic models are shown in illustrated works that harmoniously combine visual art with science. (Ghițescu, 2010, pp. 11-12; Ghițescu, 2011, pp. 13-14)

In modern society, characterized by cultural mobility and globalization, regional differences in beauty have faded, and thus the international “Miss” contests and bodybuilding competitions have regulations through which the most beautiful human beings are chosen by multicultural juries.

The cult of the body gets thus valences that regard not only the body, but also other industries concerned, which are present around these events. They are synthetically shown in figure 1.

The sponsors are fashion design companies, body care producers, cosmetics manufacturers, hair stylists. The list can continue with: jewelry manufacturers, transportation companies, tourism companies, TV media channels, telephone companies, social media and food industry. Public and private entertainment organizations, business agencies, show producers, artistic directors, personal trainers, choreographers and many others are also very interested in the “artistic product” represented by a beautiful body.

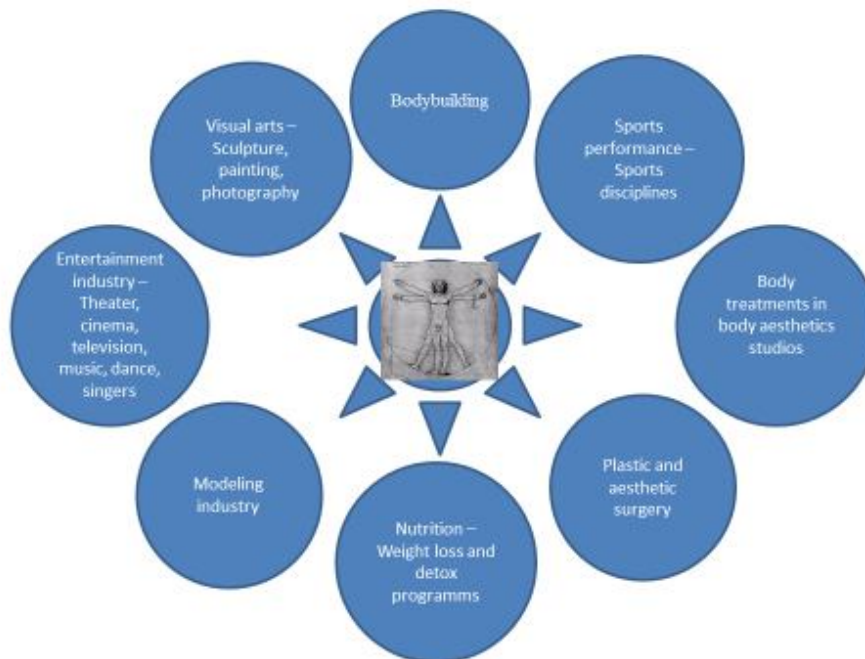


Figure 1. The cult of the body and modern industries

Perspectives in the field

In the field of motor activities, the cult of the body refers to the voluntary practice of activities for health promotion, physical and motor development, and also of recreational and therapeutic activities with an impact on mental development and the formation of personality of the “integral, total man”. (Epuran, 2013, p. 249) Within these activities, the body movement “is goal-oriented, is stimulated and supported by reasons” and is discussed from a triple perspective, as a state phenomenon, a function of musculoskeletal system and a complex system of mechanisms. Within it, the biological, social and cultural sides are associated. (Epuran, 2011, p. 21, 217) This occurs because man is the only rational creature on earth that fulfills the condition of being “bio-psycho-socio-cultural”. (Neacșu, n.d., p. 5)

Developing the cult of the body is of interest to motor maintenance activities that promote education through and for movement. They aim to model the opinion of people and inform them about the benefits of practicing various motor activities. The activity is supported by the need to reduce the negative influence of three factors dominating modern society – sedentariness, overstress, overeating. (Macovei, Ganciu, Ganciu, 2010, p. 4, 25) The ancient slogan “Mens sana in corpore sano”, which supports the preservation of a healthy mind in a healthy body is very appropriate nowadays and can be associated with that of the Romanian Sport for All Federation: “Movement is life, life is movement”.

According to Epuran (2013), health is also seen as “the silence of the body” (pp. 350-351) and involves

harmonization of the body-mind relationship, which can be achieved by practicing the wide range of maintenance exercises. In this context, the guided goal-oriented movement, motivated by the desire to improve functionality of the whole body, but also by trends towards autoplasty, improvement of external traits, self-image, posture and attitude in motion, can be considered a real “natural medicine”. (Macovei, 2008, p. 11) In this regard, we should remember the wise words of Aristotle, who said that: “Nothing weakens a human being more than physical inactivity”. (<http://www.citatecelebre.net/citate-despre-viata/aristotel-10/>)

The importance of motor activities as means of health maintenance and body modeling and beautification has also led to promoting the concept of bodily activities. According to the initiator and supporter of the concept, these activities have their own autoplasmic and autotelic purposes. They respond to man’s desire to practice forms of movement that ensure his physical development and meet his needs of recreation, entertainment, compensation or improvement. (Epuran, Holdevici, Tonița, 2001, p. 11; Epuran, 2013, p. 156)

It is thought that the name of bodily activities is more generous, because it regards movement as a fundamental and permanent component of human being. Their goals are varied, multiple, diversified and directed towards all situations of development-formation, but also prevention, compensation, correction. The content of these activities is systematized in figure 2. (Epuran, Holdevici, Tonița, 2001, p. 11)



Figure 2. The group of bodily activities (according to Epuran, 2001)



In terms of motricity, building the cult of the body brings benefits to the entire body, with improvements in its anatomical, functional and psychological systems. Movement stimulates the release of the so-called "happiness" hormones (endorphins: melatonin, oxytocin, serotonin). Through the adjustments provided by movement, man becomes able to express his highest mental potential, being efficient, assertive, independent. An active man, who respects his body, has positive physical and mental attitudes, which also keep to the psychophysiological and psychological behavioral typology attached to attitudes in the individual personality structure. (Epuran, 2011, p. 175)

In this context, movement represents the "sine qua non" condition, without which the human species would not exist as a form of social organization through occupational activities (Epuran, 2011, p. 203), and this because the practice of motor activities is an important factor in forming a rational lifestyle, in close correlation with occupational activities of human society. Contemporary technical and scientific progress has enabled the access of individuals to information and has provided them the opportunity to choose from a variety of offers related to the practice of different forms of movement suitable to each one's motivations and biological, sanogenetic, prophylactic, compensatory, physical conditioning or aesthetic needs. (Macovei, Ganciu, Ganciu, p. 3; Epuran, 2005, pp. 27-31; Epuran, 2013, pp. 257-258)

Current media benefits from logistics equipment that allows revealing the transformations of human body.

The age of technology and information keeps us abreast of everything related to aesthetic surgery, autoplasmic practices, from the organic diet and bodybuilding to doping. We are living in the "techno-phenomenological" era, where the body undergoes metamorphoses towards perfection through surgery, sex change, graft, procreation influencing, improvement of motor performance and even genetic modification and cloning. The new perfect being is rather associated with a mutant body, and everything occurs under the scrutiny of contemporary media. The new perfect creation falls into the category of "biotechnological" engineering, being closer to virtual dimension than to objective reality. (Caramfil, 2009, p. 53; Vigarello, 2006, p. 223)

There are slippages in the body art; thus, bodybuilders, performers or actors on the border of underground, of pornography and art world promote more or less radical artistic practices intended to modify the body, ranging from tattoos, piercing or transsexuality to the production of monstrosities or anomalies. The body seems merely a piece of meat, a pseudo-rational machinery, a distorted face, an exaggerated silhouette, under the bizarre omnipresence of sex – something dull, with no desire, fantasy or

passion. (Corbin, Courtine, Vigarello, 2008, pp. 422-424; Allain, Harvie, 2012, pp. 276-282)

Conclusions

- Analyzing the literature on the cult of the body and its concrete forms of public, social expression reveals that it is rooted in Antiquity and currently has increasingly branched forms.

- From the specialized information and the media, it is noted a growing interest in motor activities, each author trying to promote and arouse the people's interest in practicing bodily activities in their leisure time for both prophylactic and therapeutic purposes.

- In practice, there is a trend to diversify the contents, objects and auxiliary devices, the purpose of such approaches being both the marketing and the development of motor activities on the ground of body culture and aesthetics, the body becoming thus a symbol of one's own identity.

In the context of the above comments, there are confirmed the multiple benefits of practicing motor activities to promote a lifestyle that aims at the physical and mental development through aesthetic culture.

Modern man can successfully cope with the challenges and demands of society, physical culture, as part of a lifestyle, being the handy weapon against sedentariness, overstress and overeating.

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