

Analysis of Grotowski's Body Action Method from the Perspective of Zhuangzi

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Abstract: Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999, hereinafter referred to as Grotowski) was a renowned theater practitioner in the 20th century, dedicating his life to the study of theatrical performance. His theatrical works shook the world in the 20th century, and he was well-known in the theater communities of Europe and America. Unfortunately, he passed away prematurely, leaving behind profound and abstruse writings for future generations. His late-life creation, the Art of Vehicle in body action methods, holds profound significance for the study of “states” in various artistic performances. Based on this, researchers, drawing on Grotowski’s lifelong learning and research background, interpret and analyze Grotowski’s study of “art of vehicle” through the Zhuangzi’s concept of “body” in the philosophy of Swiss philosopher Jean François Billeter’s “dynamic mechanism”. This paper is based on the research theory of Professor Mingder Chung from Taipei National University of the Arts on Grotowski’s MPA, aiming to elucidate Grotowski’s interpretation of “body” through Zhuangzi’s “body view”, and further clarify the conceptual framework of MPA. The purpose is to contribute theoretical foundations to the study of Grotowski’s Art of Vehicle.

Keywords: Grotowski, Essence (Body), Operation, Heaven and Human, Dynamic Mechanism

1. Introduction

Jerzy Grotowski, born in August 1933 in Poland, passed away in January 1999 in Italy. In the 1960s, Grotowski (hereinafter referred to as Grotowski) made waves in the avant-garde theater world of Europe and America with his theory and practice of the “Poor Theatre,” establishing himself as one of the four great playwrights of the 20th century. What further astonished the theater world was that after directing the play “Apocalypsis cum Figuris” in 1968, Grotowski never again directed any works, instead embarking on epistemological research replacing “aesthetic of symbols” with “aesthetic of transformation”: the Art of Vehicle. In short, while the study of “Art as presentation” focuses on the aesthetic construction between the audience and the performers, performance appreciation, and other qualities, the study of “Art of Vehicle” focuses on the performer’s states. “Art of Vehicle” is not only Grotowski’s final stage of research from “performative theater” to “participatory theater” to “source theater,” but also a method and approach to help performers transition from “everyday states” to “non-everyday states.” As stated in Grotowski’s essay “From Theatre to Art of Vehicle”:

The “Art of Vehicle” is akin to a primitive elevator, with the performer sitting on a lift that

moves up and down. Through self-control, one can ascend to more refined energies or descend to instinctual bodily states. This is what he calls the objectivity of ritual... When I talk about the lift, that is, when I talk about the Art of Vehicle, I am referring to verticality. We can examine verticality through different categories of energy: the heavy and organic energies (related to vitality, instincts, or sensations) and the finer and subtler energies. The issue of verticality implies a movement from so-called rough levels — in a sense, the energies of everyday life — towards subtler energy levels or even towards higher connections. Regarding this point, I should not dwell too much on it here; I can only indicate one path and direction. However, there is also another path there: if we touch upon that higher connection — from the perspective of energy, meaning touching upon those finer energies — simultaneously, a descent phenomenon will also occur. Bringing this subtlety into the general reality associated with the density of the body.

The key lies in not abandoning any part of our inherent selves — the body, heart, head, feet, and above all must retain their natural positions, all connected in a vertical line, and this verticality must be stretched tight between organicity and awareness. Awareness refers to a consciousness that is not related to language (the machinery of thought) but is related to presence (presence, the now, the divine). [1]

In his writings, Grotowski reveals the core issue of the “Art of Vehicle”: performers maintain a tension between organicity and awareness through the elevation of bodily energy and the descent of life instincts (objectivity) via the lift (verticality), thus entering a process of transformation from the energy of daily life to subtle energy levels and then to even finer energies. Professor Mingder Chung believes that Grotowski’s repeated emphasis on “objectivity” and “verticality” refers to the transformation of consciousness: “objectivity” refers to “verticality” (the vertical ascent and descent of energy). Grotowski coined the term “objectivity of ritual” to mainly refer to the phenomenon of verticality (the vertical ascent and descent of energy) in ritual activities, which is an objective fact. The term “verticality” refers to the ascent and descent from the level of daily life to higher energy levels. Therefore, the transformation of energy states from the level of daily life to non-daily life through the “Art of Vehicle” is the key to Grotowski’s training method. Its purpose is to allow performers to achieve a state of egolessness through artistic means, ultimately reaching the next stage of unity between the self’s “body” and “essence”: the state of “essence (body).”

It is challenging that Grotowski’s ideas and writings are often obscure and difficult to comprehend, which adds a certain resistance to the research of successors. Moreover, constrained by the rational world constructed by the languages of the East and the West, it is difficult for Grotowski’s bodily discourse to find a prominent place. As Grotowski himself said, “The contemporary world has forgotten about the Art of Vehicle, knowing nothing about it.” Fortunately, Grotowski’s concept of the Art of Vehicle has not been lost, and his successor, Eugenio Barba (1936-), the founder and director of Odin Teatret, was not only influenced by Eastern philosophical thoughts like Grotowski but also inherited Grotowski’s early training methods. His establishment of “Theatre Anthropology” is dedicated to the transformation from daily states to non-daily states. Terms such as presence, energy, body-in-life, etc., abound in his research. Particularly, through the discovery of extra-daily body techniques, Barba found the most fundamental concept in theatre anthropology theory: pre-expressivity [2]. However, the steps and processes of energy transformation in the Art of Vehicle are seldom mentioned in Barba’s writings. Fortunately, another successor of Grotowski, Professor Mingder Chung from Taipei National University of the Arts, encountered Grotowski in the late 20th century in the United States and was taught by Professor Schechner from New York University. Based on the transformative experience in the 1998 performance ritual of Ai Ling, Professor Chung devoted himself to the study of the transformation of “performer’s bodily energy” related to the Art of Vehicle. Drawing from the transformative experience in the Ai Ling ritual and analyzing literature related to

the Art of Vehicle such as Grotowski's "Performer" and "From Theatre to Art of Vehicle," Professor Chung interprets the different levels of "self" in the performer, namely the worldly self (body/I1), the self blending body and essence (I-I), and the essence (body) self (I2/awareness), elucidating them within the context of energy transformation in the Art of Vehicle. This forms the energy transformation pathways of "I1" <-> "I-I" <-> "I2," as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Energy Transformation Pathways

Essence (Body)	Target	I2	Awareness	Extra-daily finer energy
Body and Essence (Blend/Unity)	Process	I1-I2	Organicity	Non-daily subtle energy
Body	Starting Point	I1	Mechanicity	Daily heavy energy

From this, we understand:

(1) The core idea of the Art of Vehicle: Performers undergo a consciousness/energy transformation from a state of daily life to a state of non-daily life.

(2) The transformation pathways of the Art of Vehicle: "I1" (body/daily life energy) → "I-I" (the blending of body and essence/subtle energy level) → "I2" (essence (body)/finer energy).

So, what is the method of energy transformation in the Art of Vehicle? Although Grotowski did not directly provide us with a fixed answer, we find the answer in his words: "Subtraction." As Grotowski said, "Our theater training is therefore a kind of subtraction (via negativa), not an accumulation of sets of techniques, but the removal of obstacles." [1] Based on the above research, Professor Chung summarized the creative methods of Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938, hereinafter referred to as Stanislavski), the Russian theater practitioner, and his successor Grotowski into a concept named "Method of Physical Actions" (MPA). This concept integrates Stanislavski's and Grotowski's creative methods, forming the following concepts:

Narrow MPA: A method for performers to enter their optimal performance state through the appropriate execution of a learned or self-constructed performance procedure.

Broad MPA: A method for performers to generate "organicity" or "awareness" through the appropriate execution of a set of bodily action procedures. (Mingder Chung, 2018:21)

In summary, this paper, based on Professor Chung's research findings, employs the philosophical perspectives of Zhuangzi, which were extensively studied by Grotowski, and interprets Grotowski's obscure methodological approach to bodily energy transformation under the interpretation of Zhuangzi's philosophical ideas by the Swiss philosopher Jean François Billeter. It is widely known in the field that Jean François Billeter is a renowned Swiss philosopher with profound research in traditional Chinese culture. Particularly, in his book "Zhuangzi Sijiang," he extensively discusses unique insights into Chinese philosophical thoughts. His research diverges from the conventional notion of "Chinese thought" and questions and restores our fixed concepts. The following paper will be divided into two sections: firstly, it will analyze and interpret the key concepts in the "Art of Vehicle" using the concepts of "operation" and "heaven and human" from Jean François Billeter's "Zhuangzi Sijiang." Secondly, it will elucidate that Grotowski's method of subtraction in energy transformation in the Art of Vehicle is aimed at approximating the functioning of the "dynamic mechanism" at the "heaven" level, using Jean François Billeter's method of "forgetting" in Zhuangzi Sijiang [3]. In conclusion, the researcher's interest is based on the theoretical foundation of MPA by

Professor Mingder Chung from Taipei National University of the Arts, aiming to explore the similarity between Zhuangzi's "view of the body" and Grotowski's "view of the body" not only in methodology but also in conceptual thinking, thereby further clarifying the conceptual framework of MPA. The purpose is to contribute theoretical foundations to the study of Grotowski's Art of Vehicle.

The term "dynamic mechanism" was coined by Jean François Billeter, based on three dialogues from Zhuangzi: "Nourishing Life", "The Way of Heaven", and "Attaining Life". These dialogues focus on the changes in a certain movement and the corresponding changes in the relationship between "consciousness" and "unconsciousness". The term "mechanism" is translated from the French word "regime", which can refer to the speed of an engine, with the variation of speed determining the strength and weakness of the rate of change. Jean François Billeter borrowed this term as a metaphor for the different modes of human activity, serving as the core key to interpreting Zhuangzi's ideas on bodily transformation. In the text, he divides the dynamic mechanism into "low-level", "transitional level", and "high-level" aspects.

2. A Comparative Analysis of Views on the Body

The progression from "I1" to "I-I" to "I2" not only serves as the vital lifeline in unlocking the core of energy transformation in the Art of Vehicle but also stands as the central keywords in Grotowski's essay "Performer." As Grotowski stated in the text:

Ancient books often say: We have two parts. The bird that pecks and the bird that watches. One will die, the other will live. We strive to peck, to immerse ourselves in the life of time, forgetting to let the part of us that watches live. Thus, the danger is in existing only in time, unable to live outside of time. Sensing being observed by your other part (as if outside of time) will bring about another dimension. There is an "I-I" something, the second "I" is half virtual: it is not the gaze or judgment of others because it is within you; it is like a still gaze: a certain silent presence, like the constant sun of all things. The process can only be completed in the context of this "silent existence," in our experience, "I-I" has never been separate, but is a perfect and unique match.

On the path of the performer, he first perceives his essence through the blending of body and essence, then engages in the process: he develops his "I-I." The teacher's looking presence sometimes serves as a mirror for the connection of "I-I" (at this point, the connection between the performer's "I" and "I" is not yet fully established). When the channel between "I-I" has been laid, the teacher can disappear, and the performer continues toward essence (body).....[1]

Regarding the above literature, the term "I1" is derived by Professor Chung from Grotowski's concept of "I-I," splitting it into the first "I" (I1) and the second "I" (I2), based on the research scope of Grotowski's Art of Vehicle. The term "I1" refers to the worldly self, the self shaped by socialization, influenced by language, emotions, and constructed by thought patterns. As Grotowski stated, such a self (I1) is connected to the relationship between oneself and society, representing the socialized flesh of everyday life energy.

Secondly, the term "I-I" originated from Grotowski's essay "Performer," Chapter Two: I-I. Grotowski borrowed the concept from "The Secret Book" regarding the two parts of the bird, symbolizing the inseparable parts of humanity in existence. Humans often immerse themselves in the time and space of the pecker, forgetting or distancing themselves from the observer. However, the observer remains unchanged, seemingly observing and perceiving the pecker in time and space, thus generating a certain "I-I." In Grotowski's view of the performer, the secularized "body" symbolizes the pecker, while the internalized "essence" symbolizes the observer. Through the process of blending body and essence, one can become aware of their essence, discovering their I2. This stage is merely

the process of becoming aware of one's essence, and only by maintaining awareness can one approach the essence, namely the essence (body).

Thirdly, the term "I2" is also proposed by Professor Chung, based on Grotowski's research on the Art of Vehicle. Typically, Professor Chung interprets it as "awareness," while Grotowski refers to it as "essence" or "body of essence." As Grotowski stated, the teacher assists the performer in constructing a certain organism-channel that is recyclable, transformative, and purely practiced in the present moment. This organ constructs the connection between "I1" and "I2," that is, constructing a sound "I-I." When the connection between "I1" and "I2" is established, the teacher can withdraw, and the performer can continue to progress towards the "body of essence" through diligent practice and meticulous actions.

In summary, in the process of energy transformation from "I1" to "I-I" to "I2," we have elucidated the most crucial transformation mechanism of the Art of Vehicle. That is, a performer starts from their secularized "I1," progressing from the socialized "flesh" to the inner "essence," develops into "I-I," and then, through the intermingling of the "I" (flesh) and the "I" (essence), a certain "I-I" emerges. In the practice of embodied knowledge, the body disappears, and the essence emerges (I2). Regarding how to practice and integrate, that is the topic for the next chapter. How to deeply understand "essence" or "body of essence"? This is precisely the key to be elucidated at present. Just as Grotowski explores "essence" and "body of essence" in "Performer," it is stated as follows:

The term "essence," etymologically speaking, pertains to the issue of being, a certain presentness of being. I am interested in essence because it is unrelated to social factors; it is not something you borrow from others, it does not come from outside, and it is not learned. For example, conscience belongs to something of essence, unlike moral laws belonging to society. Breaking moral laws, you may feel guilt because society speaks within them. However, if your actions violate your conscience, you will feel remorse—because the issue lies between you and yourself, not between you and society. Although we almost entirely possess everything from society, essence seems trivial, but it is ours. For example... With age, one may possibly reach the body of essence through the integration of body and essence. This achievement is not easy and requires undergoing difficult transformations and personal changes—perhaps this is everyone's task. The key question is: What is your process? Are you loyal to your process, or do you resist it? The process is like everyone's destiny, your own destiny, unfolding in time. So, what is the nature of your submission to your destiny? If a person can hold onto themselves, if they do not hate their actions, they can grasp the process. This process is connected to essence and indeed leads to the body of essence. During the brief period of integration of body and essence, the warrior should seize their process, merge into it, and the body will no longer resist, almost becoming transparent. Everything is bathed in sunlight, clear and definite, the performer's actions are almost akin to the process. [1]

As per the above literature, Grotowski's notion of "essence" refers to a certain inherent being that is unrelated to external social factors. It transcends the confines of society, having no connection to it but relating to conscience. It is not sought externally but exists internally. Therefore, we can understand it as a certain innate natural attribute inherent in human evolution. "Essence" differs from the external attributes of our socialized bodies, thus we can understand it as the "natural disposition" of life. The "body of essence" is the goal of the performer's actions, that is, the endpoint of conquering unknown actions. It is the formation resulting from the integration of body and essence, the next stage after the unity of body and mind. In other words, the body of essence is essence itself, approached through the body towards a realm that can only be sensed and not verbally expressed.

In comparison, Swiss philosopher Jean François Billeter's exploration of the "Heaven-Human" relationship in "Zhuangzi Sijiang" may perhaps provide an understanding of the internal relationship

between “body,” “essence,” or “body of essence.” In terms of the text’s essence, Zhuangzi believes that humans typically undergo repetitive physical training, gradually transitioning into a state of unconsciousness and spontaneity. In this transition mechanism, all functions of our bodies and everything we are conscious or unconscious of are encompassed. In other words, Zhuangzi’s so-called transition mechanism requires us to integrate our bodily functions with inner potential, based on physical action. [4] (Jean François Billeter: 51) For example, in the process of learning bicycle tricks, beginners must first consciously grasp the basic operating methods, including the driver’s balance and coordination abilities, muscle memory, and bodily perception. After tens of thousands of physical trainings, this technique will enter a state beyond conscious control. In essence, the core concept of “Heaven” and “Human” plays a crucial role in the “transition mechanism.” “Heaven” and “Human” can be interpreted as “natural” and “artificial,” or “nature” and “culture.” In Zhuangzi’s perspective, “Human” refers to intentional, conscious activities, slightly inferior to “Heaven’s” inevitable, spontaneous, unconscious activities. As stated in Zhuangzi’s interpretation of the “Autumn Floods” chapter: “Heaven is within, while man is without. Man’s ability to act lies in everything related to ‘Heaven’ within you. You must understand the actions of Heaven and Man and rely on Heaven to grasp the ability to act...” In other words, “Heaven” and “Human” are two aspects of the non-anatomical or objective external body, explored at the metaphysical level, representing the capacities or potentials of the body under one’s perception. The reason they are observable lies in the specific bodily actions that correspond to “nature and rigidity,” “modification and unmodified,” while the unobservable aspects correspond to “unconscious and conscious.” Therefore, “Heaven” and “Human” are discussed within various transformation mechanisms. In other words, in the transition of various mechanisms, “conscious activity is unique to humans and is the root of errors, failures, exhaustion, and death, while complete, inevitable, and spontaneous activity is defined as the activity of Heaven [4].” Therefore, we can understand “Heaven” above and “Human” below. Based on the above, Zhuangzi’s core idea is precisely the transition of an individual from a lower level (Human) to a higher level (Heaven) through the mechanism, achieving a certain natural externalization dominated by the unconscious “dynamic mechanism” of Heaven’s capability. In comparison, Zhuangzi’s “dynamic mechanism” or body view might be the core view of Grotowski’s “Art of Vehicle.” Zhuangzi’s external, cultural, conscious activity of “Human” corresponds to Grotowski’s secular, mundane “flesh” (I1); the transition from consciousness to unconsciousness in the process of “Heavenly Unity” corresponds to the integration of body and essence (I-I); the internal, spontaneous, inevitable, unconscious activity of “Heaven” corresponds to the ultimate goal of “Heaven”: the visible essence (body of essence) (I2). As shown in the table:

Table 2: Philosophical Exploration of Body Views

	Starting Point	Transition	Objective
Grotowski’s Body View	Socialized Body (body)	Integration of Body and Essence (I-I)	Essence (Body of essence)
	Energy at the Level of Daily Life Process	Process/Subtle Energy Level	Objective/Even More Subtle Energy
Professor Chung’s Interpretation of Grotowski	“Me” in Daily Life I1	Body-Mind Unity/Fusion I-I	Awareness I2

Table 2: (continued)

	Lower Level	Transition	Higher Level
Zhuangzi's Body View	Dynamic Mechanism: Human Level (Culture)	Dynamic Mechanism: Encounter with the Divine/"Heavenly Unity" (Transition from Consciousness to Unconsciousness)	Dynamic Mechanism: Heavenly Level (Inevitable)

As mentioned by Jean François Billeter in his book "Zhuangzi Sijiang," exploring the allegory of "A Magical and Skilled form of Craftsmanship" can further help us understand the similarities in the body views of Zhuangzi and Grotowski. Butcher Ding told Lord Wen Hui that in the initial stages of butchering, he saw the ox as a whole ox. Later, after three years of diligent practice, a qualitative change occurred in the relationship between subject and object (the ox). He said, "I no longer see it as a whole ox." In the later stage of his specialized practice, he reached a point where he encountered it with his spirit, not with his eyes; he knew when to stop by reason, but his spirit desired to act, following the natural order. In other words, at that point, he could face the ox with only his spirit, without needing to rely on sight. His sensory perception was unnecessary; he acted with fluidity. The objectified ox disappeared, and the subjectified person (Butcher Ding) also disappeared. Through this logical sketch, Jean François Billeter believed that "spiritual encounter" is not a specific function but rather a state where the actor achieves complete integration and unity of body and mind, thus advancing to a higher level of mechanism. In this process, Butcher Ding must start from the conscious level of being a beginner and, through practical exercises, gradually detach from conscious control, surrendering to the body of himself, and seeking the inevitable and intrinsic (heavenly) aspects. According to Jean François Billeter's perspective, Butcher Ding, although transitioning towards "body consciousness" through practical exercises, had not yet reached the state of effortless action without conscious control, the "almost instantaneous" state of dynamic mechanism. Indeed, as Butcher Ding stated, "I always find the difficult points, focus my gaze, proceed cautiously, and move the knife very slowly." From this perspective, it appears that Butcher Ding was still consciously controlling his actions and had not entered the transformative mechanism of "nature".

In other words, according to Grotowski's body view, Ding, in his initial learning stage, must first rely on the body controlled by rationalized knowledge and emotions (I1). Through practice, the conscious body gradually withdraws from the forefront, allowing the unconscious essence to slowly take root and blend with the body. As the conscious body still exists, Ding remains in a state of encountering the divine, where the human and divine merge (I-I), without approaching the state of the unconscious essence (body of essence) (I2).

Through the above case analysis, we can conclude that Zhuangzi's "body view" not only shares conceptual significance with Grotowski's "body view" but also aligns in method and approach. Jean François Billeter's method of transitioning Zhuangzi's thinking involves "subtracting the categories of rationality and mind control from the individual to enter the state of 'heaven' in the dynamic mechanism." Similarly, Grotowski's method of transitioning in his theory of Art as Vehicle involves subtracting the rational constraints of knowledge, feeling, and will to enter the state of essence (body of essence), as mentioned by Professor Chung as 'penetrating essence through three bodies.' Therefore, we can explore in the next chapter that the transition mechanism relies on "subtracting conscious activities and moving towards a state controlled by the unconscious, the dynamic mechanism of 'heaven'."

3. “Forgetting” is Penetration

Whether it's Zhuangzi's transition from “lower” to “higher” levels or Grotowski's bodily transformation of “I1 → I-I → I2,” they both involve replacing conscious control and regulation of activities with a holistic operation of many things. This operation removes most of the burden of consciousness, making human actions effortless. “All our functions and potentials, whether known or unknown, are combined together to move in the direction we anticipate, and their cooperation now possesses the characteristics of necessity (heaven). This transformation is the ultimate goal of all learning processes.” That is, I2/heaven. The effective way to achieve this goal is through “subtraction.” Zhuangzi calls this method “forgetting,” while Grotowski refers to it as “penetration.”

As for “forgetting,” it is a concept commonly used by Zhuangzi. It refers to the actor reducing executive control and forgetting the self. However, this “forgetting” is not about forgetting certain things but rather the result of a kind of proficiency. This forgetting occurs when a deep-seated energy takes the lead role. Consciousness gradually relinquishes its dominant role and forgets the self. In the text “Zhuangzi: The Great and Most Honored Master,” it is mentioned: “Abandoning the body, discarding intelligence, leaving form, and discarding knowledge, becoming one with the Great Harmony, this is what is meant by sitting in forgetfulness.” In other words, “We abandon our bodies, let go of sight and hearing, lose consciousness of ourselves and things, and fully comprehend all things; this is what is meant by sitting in forgetfulness. [4]” As seen in the interview with Zhou Yu, a Manchu yangge artist, the interviewer asked, “What do you do at the moment when you go on stage?” He replied, “I empty myself. When the music starts slowly, my pulse follows the rhythm from inside to outside, creating great waves and charm. At that moment (presence), I don't even know who I am.” In this regard, Jean François Billeter may be able to converse with Zhou Yu: “We all know that when we enter a state of emptiness, the power we possess will gather and enter into that inevitable level (heavenly) of action. When we lose this emptiness, we produce repetition and rigidity.” When we “return to emptiness” and are no longer controlled by anyone, we can act appropriately in any situation. And the emptiness here is the “becoming one with the Great Harmony” mentioned earlier.

In this regard, following Zhuangzi's concept of forgetting, we must construct the body as an integrated entity of all known and unknown functions and potentials. In other words, the body is conceived as a world without definite discernible boundaries. In the process of operation, consciousness sometimes disappears and forgets, sometimes freeing itself from the self in different activity mechanisms of the present moment. It can also be said that in Zhuangzi's view, grasping the mechanism of moderate transformation and allowing changes to occur naturally is quite important. Under appropriate conditions, consciousness should accept the disappearance of the self, allowing its transformation to take place freely, thus entering into actions with greater freedom. This is precisely the subtractive mechanism of “forgetting,” “becoming one with the Great Harmony,” and “returning to emptiness.”

By comparison, Grotowski's bodily perspective of “self-penetration” may also adhere to this principle. Grotowski's “bodily perspective” is based on the foundation laid by his predecessor Stanislavski, which focused on knowledge, feeling, and will. This concept originated from Stanislavski's “An Actor's Work,” and Grotowski expanded upon Stanislavski's conventional training system of the “three bodies.” It focuses on the “will” among “knowledge, feeling, and will,” namely, “bodily action” [1]. Grotowski penetrates the rational constraints of knowledge and feeling, initiating bodily actions to approach a state of essence. This is the core concept of Grotowski's “poor theater”: “Actors must self-penetrate, self-expose, or self-sacrifice to become sacred actors. [5]”

Researchers analyze that Zhuangzi's “forgetting” is equivalent to Grotowski's “penetration.” As mentioned earlier, Zhuangzi's forgetting refers to the conscious control of thoughts and emotions at the level of “human.” In the natural process of operational transformation, the subtraction of

conscious control leads to forgetting the self, gradually entering the level of the dynamic mechanism of “heaven.” Similarly, Grotowski’s “penetration” involves breaking free from the rational constraints of thought and consciousness, as well as the rigidly constructed emotional cognition influenced by societal norms, thereby entering the natural and unconscious state of “heavenly” essence.

Just as in Cieslak’s 1965 shocking performance of “The Constant Prince,” it fully demonstrates the young Grotowski’s use of penetration techniques to subtract rational constraints of knowledge and emotion in order to awaken the “inner essence” of transcendentalization. In this work, the portrayal of Richard Cieslak as the incarnation of Jesus Christ is not to present a glorified image shedding humanity’s burdens and worldly entanglements in radiant splendor, but rather to fill the viewers’ eyes with a portrayal of suffering, torment, and lamentation. In the play, he curls tightly on the floor, his hair brushing against his fingertips, immersed in endless agony. His cries resonate as every inch of his muscles trembles, reminiscent of the humiliation of Christ’s body and the brutality of external forces during crucifixion. In his hoarse cries, he leaves traces of saliva on the ground he has licked, as if forgetting himself in the moment. From this, it can be seen that actor Cieslak is not merely playing a role at the level of “human,” but rather acting out himself at the level leading to “heaven.” His curled figure, trembling muscles, and licking of the ground demonstrate his state of penetrating/forgetting conscious control, leading to the essential state of the inevitable, natural, and unconscious dynamic mechanism.

This is akin to what Lieshi Dunbeige wrote in “Tu Xie Shou Ce”: “There are things we do constantly without realizing it, and we get better at them over time. Eventually, perhaps people can do anything unconsciously and truly become a thinking animal.”

4. Conclusion

Through the comparative analysis and interpretation of Zhuangzi’s and Grotowski’s theories of the body, the researcher draws the following three conclusions:

Firstly, the trajectory of Zhuangzi’s bodily transformation, namely from “human” (cultural, conscious control of thoughts and emotions) to “unity of heaven and man” (transition from consciousness to unconsciousness) to “heaven” (heaven/necessity/nature/dynamic mechanism), reflects precisely Grotowski’s theory of the body, namely from “body” (I1) to “body and essence merging” (I-I) to “essence (body)” (I2). Their objectives are to awaken the inner energy of heaven/essence through the transformation of consciousness from the secular level of humanity, ultimately reaching the state of dynamic mechanism/heaven/essence (body) relying on the body.

Secondly, Zhuangzi’s “forgetting” and Grotowski’s “penetration” are the core methods of the “subtractive mechanism” in bodily transformation. The driving force behind this method is what Grotowski calls “knowledge is doing.” As Jean François Billeter puts it: “This kind of knowledge is non-discursive, beyond language.” It is precisely because people are often too familiar with this kind of knowledge that they often ignore its existence. When people master a certain method and repeatedly execute operations, it will inevitably become a kind of unconscious bodily action. In other words, “a person may never have worked with Grotowski, but as long as he can construct a viable action, work, or ritual for himself. One day he will reach the essence (body) or the ultimate purpose of the inner person. [4]”

Thirdly, through the analysis of cases such as “A Magical and Skilled form of Craftsmanship” and the drama “The Constant Prince” employing the technique of entranced performance, we can infer that Grotowski’s method of physical action (MPA) is not only applicable to micro-level artistic performance training but also to macro-level operations that humans are capable of, transcending merely technical aspects.

In summary, based on Professor Chung’s theory of physical action (MPA), the researcher further analyzes and defines MPA from the perspective of Zhuangzi’s philosophy:

Narrowly speaking, MPA refers to the appropriate execution by a performer of a set of learned or self-constructed performance procedures, and under the long-term training where knowledge is doing, gradually transitions from conscious control influenced by secular and cultural factors to an unconscious state. Through action, it explores the inner essence/necessity, ultimately reaching the optimal performance state of natural externalization, which is the “dynamic mechanism.”

Broadly speaking, MPA refers to the appropriate execution by a practitioner of a set of bodily action procedures, and under the long-term training where knowledge is doing, relieves most of the burden at the level of consciousness, making human actions effortless. It gradually transitions from conscious control to an unconscious state, ultimately entering the operation of things in a state of “necessity” and “nature” through the synergistic action of all known or unknown functions and potentials.

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A Performer's Journey: From Visible to Invisible
Conference in Honor of the Retirement of
Professor Mingder Chung

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