

## Book Review

### *Ars Erotica and Scientia Sexualis*

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If we are interested in sexuality, then we are lucky because Richard Shusterman has presented two recent writings for us to read. One of them is his book, *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* (2021), which will surely be a guide for future generations of scholars, since it has achieved much more than Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1984). The other is an article by Shusterman, "Pragmatism and Sex: An Unfulfilled Connection" (2021), which will be valuable for people who are interested in pragmatism and its hitherto unexplored connection to sex and erotic love. Shusterman has explained why he initially steered away from devoting somaesthetic study to the topics of sex and food because those stereotypical fields of bodily pleasures would distract from his aim of showing the cognitive and spiritual dimensions of somaesthetics. But in recent years he has written about both these topics, while continuing to develop somaesthetics not merely as an aesthetic orientation but as a philosophy more generally.<sup>1</sup>

*Ars Erotica* is a book for everybody, but it is primarily directed to academic readers, and this can be deduced from two perspectives. On the one hand, it offers a very detailed and complex description of premodern cultures—from Greco-Roman, Chinese, Japanese, Islamic and Indian cultures to those of medieval and Renaissance Europe—that we cannot find in Foucault's above-mentioned four-volume work. Foucault confined himself to ancient Greco-Roman culture only before explaining the ancient Christian epoch and modernity, including the emergence of *scientia sexualis*. On the other hand, the complexity of each chapter is also exemplary in Shusterman's book owing to his intention to approach the analysis of each ancient society with clear, unified principles and criteria. We can find these principles in the introductory part of the book, where Shusterman shares his general, methodological presumptions with the reader.

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Shusterman's *Ars Erotica* contains eight parts:

1. *Ars Erotica* and the Question of Aesthetics (which serves as an introduction);
2. Dialectics of Desire and Virtue: Aesthetics, Power, and Self-Cultivation in Greco-Roman Erotic Theory;

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<sup>1</sup> See Shusterman (2014) and Kremer (2022).

3. The Biblical Tradition: Desire as a Means of Production;
4. Chines Qi Erotics: The Beauty of Health and the Passion for Virtue;
5. Lovemaking as Aesthetic Education: Pleasure, Play, and Knowledge in Indian Erotic Theory;
6. Fragrance, Veils, and Violence: *Ars Erotica* in Islamic Culture;
7. From Romantic Refinement to Courtesan Connoisseurship: Japanese *Ars Erotica*;
8. Commingling, Complexity, and Conflict: Erotic Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Europe.

Most people are curious about sexuality. While many could go to Freud's theories and how he exaggerated the role of sexuality in our lives, it is undeniable that sexuality has a significant influence in everyday life. Freud's scientific approach belongs to *scientia sexualis*, contrary to *ars erotica*. Foucault formulated this opposition of the two different approaches to sexuality in his famous book, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. I: An Introduction* (1984). It is worth quoting here a more extended passage from Foucault to better understand this opposition:

Historically, there have been two great procedures for producing the truth of sex. On the one hand, the societies—and they are numerous: China, Japan, India, Rome, the Arabo-Moslem societies—which endowed themselves with an *ars erotica*. In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience; *pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself*; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul. Moreover, this knowledge must be deflected back into the sexual practice itself, in order to shape it as though from within and amplify its effects. In this way, there is formed a knowledge that must remain secret, not because of an element of infamy that might attach to its object, but because of the need to hold it in the greatest reserve, since, according to tradition, it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged. [...] On the face of it at least, our civilization possesses no *ars erotica*. In return, it is undoubtedly the only civilization to practice a *scientia sexualis*; or rather, the only civilization to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret: I have in mind the confession. (1984, pp. 57-58)

In contrast, it is clear that Shusterman defends *ars erotica*, and he explores the classical cultures where he can find elements of this aesthetic approach to sexuality. Shusterman already had this standpoint in 2012, when he published his book *Thinking Through the Body*:

If the painting of Gerrit van Honthorst (1592-1656), *The Steadfast Philosopher*, “reminds us of the familiar ancient quarrel between philosophy and the mimetic arts, it should also recall philosophy's traditional hostility and neglect regarding erotic arts, extending back to Socrates' condemnation of sex as “a savage and tyrannical master,” and despite his provocative self-definition as “a master of erotics.” Making a case for the aesthetic potential of lovemaking means

confronting the problem that modern Western philosophy has tended to define aesthetic experience by contrast to sexual experience. (2012, p. 263)

As he explains in the postscript, this difference between aesthetics and *ars erotica* became more pronounced after the work of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche:

From Plato through the Renaissance, we find the familiar ladder of love that rises from the sexual desire for union with a beautiful body to more spiritual forms that desire spiritual union with beautiful souls or ideas and ultimately with the most beautiful and radiating source of all beauty (identified by monotheistic thinkers with God). Today, the conceptual linkage between beauty and eros is no longer a philosophical commonplace. Instead of defining beauty primarily through desire and love, we now conceive it in terms of the aesthetic, while the aesthetic is essentially defined in terms oppositional to desire and erotic love. *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* thus confidently claims that an acceptable definition of aesthetic experience should exclude “sexual experiences and drug experiences” because the notion of aesthetic pleasure “clearly does not apply to the pleasures of sex or drugs.” (p. 391)

Although Shusterman admits his debt to Foucault for his pioneering studies on sexuality, he intends his study of *ars erotica* to be a “complement” rather than a replacement of Foucault’s *History and Sexuality*, a complement from a broader cultural perspective but also from a different erotic orientation.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that Shusterman’s achievement is noteworthy, as his descriptions and analyses (the product of more than ten years of research), exceed Foucault’s analyses in their cultural breadth and erotic detail. I am convinced that Shusterman’s *Ars Erotica* will be a manual and a guide for future research for decades to come, since he not only approached his topic with a strict methodology but also carried it out in his brilliant analytic style. As he explains in the preface:

The book is a blend of philosophy and cultural history of ideas because I think we cannot properly understand the philosophical meanings and arguments concerning *ars erotica* without setting them in their historical, cultural context, even if our viewpoint on that distant context is inextricably that of our own time. My immense debts to historians of philosophy and culture I register in the book’s bibliography. (p. xii)

Shusterman clarifies six criteria of his investigations in *Ars Erotica* in the book’s introductory chapter. Without these criteria, he could not create a unified aesthetic approach toward a defense and nuanced exploration of *ars erotica*. Shusterman introduces these criteria by asking: What are the general aesthetic principles that govern erotic arts? Do they form a coherent system, or are there conflicting aesthetic principles in different genres, styles, or traditions of *ars erotica*? Properly addressing such questions calls for an exploration of the culturally diverse theories of *ars erotica*. I offer here an introductory outline of some key aesthetic features that those theories display:

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<sup>2</sup> Shusterman writes: “Because my erotic experience has been mostly heterosexual, this book presents a somewhat different perspective than Foucault’s, but one that hopes to complement rather than replace his impressive work.” (p. xii)

1. First is the “incorporation of fine arts and other paradigmatically aesthetic activities into the practice of *ars erotica*.” (poetry and music, culinary arts, arts of design, arts of fashion and grooming) (pp. 5–6)
2. “A second key aesthetic feature of *ars erotica* is its emphasis on beauty and pleasure rather than mere utility.” (p. 6)
3. The third key aesthetic feature of *ars erotica* is “its highlighting of form. What distinguishes a performance of erotic artistry from mere sexual performance is attention to formal and structural qualities.” (p. 6)
4. “Beyond these formalist concerns is a fourth aesthetic feature: the drive for stylization. *Ars erotica* is distinguished from mere sex by the careful attention it gives not simply to which erotic acts are performed – a kiss, caress, cuddle, or love moan – but to how one performs them.” (pp. 7–8)
5. “Symbolic richness is a fifth aesthetic feature of *ars erotica*.” (p. 8)
6. “A sixth aesthetic aspect of *ars erotica* concerns its evaluative dimension: a concern with distinctive achievements of beauty, performative virtuosity, or superior taste that finds expression in critical judgments, connoisseurship, rankings, and competitions. In *ars erotica* we see this dimension in the classificatory rankings of different types of women and men in terms of their sexual desirability, but also in rankings of different pairings of men and women.” (p. 8)

Shusterman provides such a tremendous amount of knowledge to readers and researchers that it would be difficult to surpass. Moreover, the complexity of the seven historical chapters is significant. Each begins with a socio-historical overview of the given culture, followed by a narrower description of the main social layers and gender relations contained therein. Only after presenting these descriptions of the socio-historical background does he begin to analyze the sexual life and customs of the chosen tradition. Each chapter, however, is not an isolated unit. Shusterman smartly orders them to draw connections and fruitful contrasts between the different *ars erotica* theories. This provides a thoughtful sampling of the complexity to be found in the examination of *ars erotica* from a global perspective.

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For most Europeans and myself, the most exciting parts were the descriptions of the sexual practices of the ancient, far-Eastern societies. For example, in Chinese *ars erotica*, where Foucault had previously misunderstood it to involve a glorification of pleasure. Shusterman provides evidence that, “*pace* Foucault, Chinese *ars erotica* was very deeply motivated by health issues and crucially concerned with medical matters and sexual science (albeit not in the dominant forms of modern Western medicine)” (p. 155). The sexual culture of ancient Indian society is also fascinating because the *Kamasutra* is a familiar text to most Westerners; however, most people do not know that this Indian text contains not only sexual but also educational and artistic instruction:

Beyond social roles and practices, Indian *ars erotica* demands and promotes psychological knowledge – proficiency in grasping the particularities of the individual person one seeks to win, please, and keep as one’s lover (or, instead, to

employ effectively as a go-between in one's pursuit of love). India's erotic theory (far more than China's) focuses on knowing the beloved's mind (with its anxieties as well as its desires and inclinations) rather than simply knowing the beloved's bodily state of arousal and physiological sensations of pleasure. The artistic activities that initiate the play of lovemaking performance promote psychological insight by revealing (as they shape) the beloved's aesthetic inclinations and mood so that the lover can harmonize with them before engaging in the more carnal harmonies of sexual arousal. (p. 242)

However, Shusterman, remarks the following in connection with ancient Indian culture:

While China's sexual theory drew most heavily on medical texts and derived its concern for pleasure from the key medical aims of health and progeny, Indian erotology drew most heavily on the fine arts and their sensuous aesthetic pleasures, especially the traditional Indian art of drama, which was also an art of dance. Nonetheless, Indian sexual theory cannot fully support Foucault's sharp distinction between esoteric *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis* because it defines itself in essentially scientific terms as providing knowledge about empirical matters based on observation. Moreover, this knowledge was openly published in texts articulating principles and rules rather than focusing on recondite skills secretly transmitted by an expert master to carefully chosen pupils. (p. 202)

A similarly precise but essential remark can be found in the evaluation of the *ars erotica* of Japanese courtesan culture, which developed in the Edo period (1603-1868) in comparison to the sublime and spiritual Islamic Sufi tradition:

None of Japan's classical ways of love, however, attains the ethical uplift or spiritual sublimity of Islam's Sufism. By comparison, they seem philosophically shallow, and their aesthetic apotheosis in Edo courtesan culture ultimately rings hollow – with no real spiritual substance beneath the richness of ritual. Such conclusions (provisional as they may be) suggest a provocative thesis: that an aesthetic education through lovemaking requires an animating spiritual, ethical dimension to inspire and guide its project of self-cultivation so that it does not degenerate into decadent connoisseurship or self-indulgent, tawdry sensuality. A dimension of ethical and spiritual uplift can render erotic culture more nobly and compellingly aesthetic. (p. 314)

From Shusterman's comparative, interdisciplinary analysis, it becomes evident that he is much more gender-sensitive than Foucault since he depicts the dialectical relationships between pleasure, sex, gender, politics etc. The ugly realities of misogyny and sexism in these ancient cultures, for instance, never escapes his study, and Shusterman always maintains a nuanced and critical perspective regarding sexist practices. (pp. 33, 60, 112, 115, 217–219, etc.).

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The “speculative postscript” was the most edifying part in the book for me. In Shusterman's opinion, beauty became detached from *eros* in European culture following the “flourishing union in Renaissance Neoplatonism and in reaction to the growing power of materialist philosophies

in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.” (p. 392) It is true that the role of *scientia sexualis* in contrast to *ars erotica* is dominant in European culture. Shusterman cannot destroy or neglect the socio-historical tendencies that led to the birth of *scientia sexualis* in European culture. However, he hopes that by exploring the diverse *ars erotica* practices of ancient cultures worldwide, we can come to unify *eros* and beauty to the benefit of the study of aesthetics and, especially, an improved appreciation for sexual arts.

To the extent that our modern philosophical tradition continues to define the aesthetic in opposition to the erotic, it will remain difficult to do proper justice to the beautiful aspects of sensual desire and to the rewarding arts of sexual fulfilment. A look at other cultures and other times can provide, as this book suggests, ample resources for a broader, deeper erotic vision to enrich the field of aesthetics and our art of living. (p. 396)

## References

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