

Book Reviews

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Shusterman R. (2021). *Ars erotica: Sex and somaesthetics in the classical arts of love*. Cambridge University Press. 436 pp. \$29.99 (paperback). ISBN 9780521181204.

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Humans are fantastic. Through somaesthetic expressions, such as erotic imaginations, habits, knowledge, pleasure, and fear, we create culture and society, ourselves and others, through time and space, as they create us. In the impressive and ground-breaking new book, *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetic in the Classical Arts of Love*, the somaesthetic philosopher and historian, Richard Shusterman, captures the human somaesthetic expressions and movements in time and cultures in all their breath, through what he calls *Ars Erotica*. The Latin term *ars erotica* relates to the aesthetic pleasures and qualities of understanding, sensibility, grace, skill, and self-mastery that go far beyond the limits of sexual activity. The varieties of erotically fueled edification range from self-knowledge and knowing others persons to a more general knowledge of culture and the world. Attentive discipline in lovemaking promotes observational and ethical skills in discerning the feelings of others; it teaches how to read subtle, unintended sensory signals that indicate a potential lover is reciprocally interested or erotically aroused.

In a critical, comparative, non-reductive, and gender sensitive way, Shusterman sheds new light on the dialectic relationship between erotic pleasure, sex, gender, politic, culture, religious beliefs, and habits. The book is ground-breaking in the way Shusterman brings light to the many sides of human erotic somaesthetic expressions that share the hybrid status of nature and culture. Beginning with ancient Greece, whose god of desiring love gave eroticism its name, Shusterman examines the Judaeo-Christian biblical tradition and the classical erotic theories of Chinese, Indian, Islamic, and Japanese cultures, before concluding with medieval and Renaissance Europe.

Leaning on the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault's (1984a, 1984b) latest work, that is, the two latest volumes of *The History of Sexuality (The Use of Pleasures and Care of the Self)*, Shusterman work goes far beyond Foucault's subject matter of ancient Western thinking. The views of Foucault have come to dominate many scholars' understanding of

early modern, modern, and postmodern culture, and Foucault's version of the history of sexuality is relied on by many. Foucault's reading of the history of sexuality carries with its assumptions about the original, ubiquitous, and inevitable primacy of masculine subject-formation, of women's subjection and submission, if women are mentioned as subjects at all. Compared to Foucault's later works on the history of sexuality and Western culture, Shusterman's work *Ars Erotica* is much more global, gender-sensitive, multicultural, historical, and socio-political. *Ars Erotica* is a welcome and necessary rewriting of Foucault's story of sexuality and Western culture.

Shusterman's philosophical historical investigations of *ars erotica* through time and cultures are enormously complicated and interdisciplinary; however, he manages, in a convincing, critical, and non-sexist way, to show how somaesthetics is the necessary medium through which one practices philosophy as an art of living. After reading *Ars Erotica*, one understands more of how biological functions and somatic energies reflect (and sustain) a historical-culture's background ideologies and social order so that the seemingly universal human sexual drives take on divergent forms and meanings both across different cultures and within the same culture at different times and places. One realizes that the techniques and disciplines of traditional *ars erotica* were designed in the area of erotic cultures, erotic thinking, erotic political strategies, and erotic sensibility toward oneself and other.

Ars Erotica should be read as a book of enlightenment to everyone who wants to enrich their knowledge of somaesthetics and the aesthetic art of living and who further wants to understand more of the hidden power of gender and erotic visions.

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