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Ars Erotica: Sex and somaesthetics in the classical arts of love , Richard Shusterman Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. vii + 420.

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Richard Shusterman's *Ars Erotica* continues his somaesthetic project that concerns *aesthesis*—sensory-aesthetic appreciation—and melioristic cultivation and care of the self. The book focuses on the art of erotic experience, following in the vein of John Dewey's work on art and aesthetics. *Ars erotica* combines the art of sexual expression and experience as activity—what Dewey might refer to as *a doing*—with aesthetics as sensuous perception—what Dewey might refer to as *an undergoing*. As Shusterman indicates in the book, *ars erotica* was a varied set of somaesthetic concepts and practices that were used to educate and enhance experience. Through such practices, persons were to develop both mastery and appreciation within their erotic lives, which was to extend to self and societal cultivation.

The book focuses on *ars erotica* from Western and Asian traditions, beginning with ancient times and culminating in the European Renaissance. For Shusterman, this work was preceded by his more general philosophical discourse on somaesthetics that laid the groundwork for application (cf. 2008). Additionally, Shusterman's works on East Asian thought (2004), including his work focused on Confucianism (2009) and his work that examined Asian *ars erotica* (2007), provide preliminary studies that contribute to *Ars Erotica*, especially the chapters about Chinese and Japanese cultures. Although the book follows in the wake of Michel Foucault's later work concerning histories of sexuality and care of the self, Shusterman is also filling a gap largely avoided by the classical American pragmatists, from whom much of the inspiration for somaesthetics is derived. As Shusterman points out, Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead tended to avoid issues of sex and sexuality in their work (2021). Although Dewey supplied a distinction between human and nonhuman animal sexuality that was rooted in his philosophy of art and aesthetics in *Art as Experience* (1934), this was never pursued in a substantial way. By applying a somaesthetic lens to *ars erotica*, Shusterman reconstructs sexual discourses ignored by previous pragmatists.

In the book, Shusterman tracks written discourse that analyzes and explains human sexual activity and provides recommendations for enhancing aesthetic experiences while cultivating an ideal sexual self that was based in various cultural milieus. Unlike Foucault, Shusterman is not focused on biopower or genealogical methodology. It is evident from the book's introduction that Shusterman is not wrestling with quite the same issues with which Foucault wrestled in his later work. Rather, Shusterman tackles the challenge of describing how various traditions of *ars erotica* were artistic and aesthetic practices, as well as practices of melioristic self-cultivation that reflected, sustained, perpetuated, and molded specific cultural beliefs and customs. His interest is not restricted to enrichment of the self but extends to how others may be enriched through one's engagement with a given culture's erotic arts.

The two major themes of *ars erotica*, which follow the more general ideas of undergoing and doing, are aesthetics and the cultivation of humanity. Major features of the aesthetics of erotic arts are the inclusion and incorporation of the fine arts and related activities, acknowledgment of and focus on beauty and pleasure, attention to form, stylization regarding how erotic acts are performed, a richness of symbolic language of erotics, and the importance of evaluation and achievement to erotic experience and character (5–7). These aesthetic features help distinguish the erotic from the merely sexual, which may be understood as being based in hedonic or reproductive utility only.

As a set of methods for improving humanity, *ars erotica* focuses on melioration. Aspects of this theme include improvement of perceptual powers regarding sensuality and emotion, adoption of practices that increase erotic appeal and satisfaction, and methods of surveying and analyzing the characters of others that relate to achieving erotic fulfillment and avoiding erotic disappointment. Shusterman highlights the practical aspects of *ars erotica* as they relate to knowing how beyond merely knowing that. As he indicates, these methods and skills “are primarily meant to be incorporated in actual praxis as practical somatic savior-faire” (13). Sexual experience and character are understood as improved through tools and techniques that, upon reflection, prove to be somaesthetic methods. Through historical analysis, Shusterman provides a picture of the evolution of many of these methods as they existed as dominant narratives within and across cultures.

Following the introduction, which provides a philosophical outline and explanation for the book, the chapter themes are based on general cultural categories, beginning with ancient Greco-Roman cultures. From the cultures of Greece and the Roman Empire, the next chapters move to Hebraic and Judeo-Christian cultures, which are followed by Chinese, Indian, Islamic, and Japanese cultures. The final chapter returns to Western culture by focusing on medieval and Renaissance Europe. Because the parameters of the book are based on a particular historical trajectory of written work and influence devoted to *ars erotica*, cultures indigenous to the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa are omitted.

According to Shusterman, the ancient Greeks linked erotic desire with beauty, which provided the foundation for Western conceptions of *ars erotica*. Although this unity between Eros and beauty is evident from the inception of Greek thought regarding the sexual arts, the contesting, often contradictory, views concerning sex and love within Greco-Roman cultures are described with a focus on the beliefs of the major thinkers of the time. The second chapter moves from myth and art through various schools of philosophy and the overarching focus on erotic education within the Greco-Roman world. The last section of the chapter, "The Roman Context," provides a segue between Greek philosophical reflection concerning erotic education and the Old Testament, which initiates the next chapter, concerning biblical tradition.

Biblical tradition marks a narrowing of *ars erotica* to concerns mostly related to reproduction and sin. In this third chapter, Judeo-Christian thought represents a negation of sexual aesthetics based upon pleasure. The practical concern for progeny, coupled with what might be considered a somaesthetics of shame, replaced the synthesis of erotic desire and beauty that had been emphasized in Greco-Roman thought. Sexual pleasures and arts that were open to consideration within the Greco-Roman world, such as those concerning erotic pleasure shared between members of the same sex, were designated as inherently sinful within this tradition. Here Shusterman raises the question of whether the *technē* of virginity became a somaesthetic art through the Pauline cult of chastity (129). Questions of virginity, devotion to God through sexual discipline, and the sanctity of marital fidelity that emerged within discussions of sexual activity that are presented in this chapter become sources of debate within the final chapter in the book, which returns to ideology in the West during the Renaissance.

The fourth chapter of the book is devoted to Chinese Qi erotics and is the most directly oppositional to Foucault's work. Unlike Foucault, who "defined the Chinese *ars erotica* as an aesthetic pursuit of pure pleasure," Shusterman explains Chinese theories of the erotic as methods to "deploy sexual pleasure to serve overarching health and medical aims" (23). The beginning of the chapter is an argument against Foucault's misunderstanding of Chinese sexology, which is followed by in-depth readings of Daoist and Confucianist texts that indicate the importance of health to somatic self-cultivation and preservation within their theories. This chapter highlights the medical as well as the sociopolitical aspects of Chinese erotics. Whereas the Greco-Roman tradition focused on visual beauty and the biblical tradition strayed from somaesthetics of pleasure and beauty, Chinese *ars erotica* presented beauty as the result of erotic activity, which stressed the importance of health and procreation (181). Here sexual activity became highly stylized and rooted in qualities such as calm and harmony. Male and female energies were considered core components within this set of beliefs, which are especially prominent in Daoist thought. This chapter is connected not only to Shusterman's previous work on Asian *ars erotica* but also to his creative work, such as *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*, which links Daoist somaesthetics with performance art (2016).

Indian erotic theory is the theme of the fifth chapter, which rivals the fourth in terms of richness and originality. This chapter proves an overwhelming devotion to somaesthetics within Indian erotic praxis that combined the art of pleasure and beauty with cognitive, psychological, ethical, and spiritual aspects of life. The central theme of this chapter is devoted to variety as it applies to ars erotica and ultimately to becoming a better person. Variety includes forms of romantic interaction, sexual positions and roles, and even sensations, including pain.

Shusterman points out that within Indian erotic theory, erotic cognition was proffered as both knowing how and knowing that, so that one improved somaesthetic awareness through the fine and sexual arts (241). If there was a goal to this type of ars erotica, it was erotic mastery that increased knowledge, honed the ability to moderate passion, and enhanced virtuous character.

Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to what Shusterman designates as derivative cultures: Islamic and Japanese. Within Islamic ars erotica, there was a striking combination of Jewish, Christian, Greek, Persian, and Indian influences expressed through religious ideology. Like Indian erotic theory, there was a focus on self-perfection through mastery of sensual pleasure within the stages of lovemaking, including foreplay and following coitus. Islamic erotics also derived a form of erotic askesis from Jewish and Christian ideology, which highlighted repression of sexual desire and engaging in sexual activity for the sole purpose of procreation. Relatedly, sex with one's spouse was understood as a marital duty that provided a way of worshipping and bringing one closer to God. Varieties of Islamic ars erotica include writings advocating nonheterosexual forms of lovemaking, including pederasty and lesbianism. The somaesthetics of Islamic erotics includes multisensory training, including sensations of smell and taste. The final section of the chapter is devoted to the Sufi path of sexual spiritualization, which supplied a nuanced and transcendental conception of sex roles in which males were to become female through their subordination to God through the sexual act.

Chapter 7 indicates the derivative nature of Japanese ars erotica, which inherited many aspects of its traditions from Chinese cultures. This chapter highlights three traditions within classical Japanese eroticism: the courtly love tradition of the Heian period (794–1185); the tradition of love between males that was developed by Buddhist monks and samurai warriors; and the erotic connoisseurship of high-class courtesan culture in Edo society (1600s). Unlike the previous chapters, this chapter recounts traditions that include female voices who provided insight regarding ars erotica. The Heian period's defining texts concerning the art of love were almost entirely written by women. Although drawing on Chinese traditions, Japanese culture developed a more fully realized ars erotica devoted to male–male sexual activity than had previously been the case. Courtesan culture expanded the erotic arts to include artistic considerations included in social interactions, including calligraphy, tea ceremonies, and olfactory identification of incense. Within the Japanese traditions that Shusterman highlights,

there is a shift in focus from sexual pleasure to the pleasures of courtship that also emerges in the final chapter, concerning medieval and Renaissance erotic theories.

Medieval and Renaissance conceptions of *ars erotica* were derived from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions mostly, although there were Greco-Roman and Viking pagan influences also. Shusterman indicates that there were three central philosophical ideals of love that shaped medieval erotics: the classical idea of loving friendship that was purely in pursuit of virtue without thought of gain; a supreme beneficent force naturally expressed in heterosexual marital union for the sake of procreation; and spiritual union with God expressed through celibacy (326). Perhaps more than any of the previous traditions within the book, these traditions contended with policing of sexual activity and somaesthetics in a pronounced and dramatic fashion that highlighted the tension between passionate love for another and virtuous love of God (exemplified by Heloise and Abelard). This tradition also includes attempts to synthesize Platonic philosophy and Christian theology through the work of the Neoplatonists, as well as the humanist skeptical philosophies of Erasmus and Montaigne. Before closing the chapter, Shusterman reviews courtesan culture in Europe, which includes the work of the Italian courtesan Tullia d'Aragona, who provided philosophical arguments extolling rational appreciation and virtuous transformation of the self through spiritual union and bodily desire. Also included is the poet and satirist Pietro Aretino, who recounted teachings and techniques of the courtesans through ribald dialogues.

The book closes with the section "Speculative Postscript," which suggests that the Renaissance signifies the last moments of *ars erotica* before the birth of aesthetics. Shusterman speculates that the union of beauty with love and desire within *ars erotica* was broken by the growing influence of materialist philosophies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (392). This decoupling has continued. "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" (391). *Ars Erotica* serves as a reminder—and perhaps a call to action—that there are somaesthetic approaches to love and lovemaking that unify bodily activity with aesthetic education and appreciation.

Ars Erotica connects with Shusterman's previous work in philosophy and somaesthetics nicely, and it also stands on its own as a historical contribution concerning the study of erotic arts. The book may be understood as an argument to revisit and recouple beauty with love and desire within a somaesthetic framework. In another respect, the book may serve as a critique of previous hegemonic narratives concerning sex, sexuality, gender, and the body. Shusterman's reconstruction of these histories of *ars erotica* may be understood as evidence of the sexism, heteronormativity, gender binarism, and ableism across a particular trajectory of cultures. Even in the sections of the book that reveal works that were written by female-identified authors or

that addressed same-sex erotic arts, the guiding narrative tended to be phallogentric and heteronormative, and gender was dichotomized as strictly either male or female. Throughout the histories he recounts, Shusterman indicates that there are problematic issues within each culture that reflect misogyny and heterosexism. In the final chapter, he calls for new erotic thinking that is more inclusive (391). His last statement in the book provides a way forward. "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" (396). *Ars Erotica* supplies somaesthetic approaches to beauty, love, and desire, while revealing deeply entrenched errors within those approaches. Somaesthetic work should continue and extend beyond hegemonic narratives to underrepresented voices, bodies, and histories.

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