

REVIEWS

Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love

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Ars Erotica is not concerned with ‘erotic art’, which is to say fine art having an erotic content, but is rather a study of texts that advocate ‘skilled methods or styles of love making’ (p. 1). More profoundly, perhaps, it is concerned with texts that explore the manner in which the pleasure and beauty—the aesthetic experience—of the sexual act may be enhanced. It seeks to explicate the presuppositions that such explorations make about human nature and well being, about personal and social relationships, as well as wider questions of ethics, social custom, and metaphysics.

The historical and geographical scope of the book is breath-taking. Beginning in ancient Greece and Rome, Richard Shusterman takes in the cultures of the Old Testament Judaism and early Christianity, before turning to China and India, to Islam and Japan, before concluding in medieval Christendom and the European Renaissance. The assurance with which the author brings together such a body of diverse material is to be admired, and at the very least the book has enormous value as a synoptic overview. At this level, it is a masterly exercise in the history of ideas.

The book is, however, much more than just an overview. The complexity and detail of the material addressed entail that *Ars Erotica* may be read in a number of ways. Its focus on the advocacy of methods and style of lovemaking mean that it is not concerned with philosophical questions as to the aesthetic or moral value of erotica or pornography. It is thus not to be read straightforwardly as an essay in aesthetics. It is rather to be understood in the context of the project of somaesthetics, which Shusterman and his

collaborators have been developing over the last two decades or more.

Somaesthetics is a response to what Shusterman perceives as the limitations of contemporary aesthetics and indeed philosophy itself—both of which have shrunk from being ‘a noble art of living into a minor, specialized, university discipline’ (Shusterman, 1999, p. 301). Somaesthetics thus strives to broaden the scope of traditional aesthetics, not least by taking the body, both as an object of representation and as something experienced and cultivated in its own right, as central to the aesthetic experience. This explains, in no small part, the appeal that the ‘ars erotica’ have for the project, precisely in that the ‘ars erotica’ (unlike erotic art) are concerned with the cultivation of embodied practices, and thus with ways of living. Somaesthetics, with its roots in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, American Pragmatism, and Foucault—and indeed *Ars Erotica* continues Shusterman’s long-standing debate with Foucault (see Shusterman, 2008, pp. 15–48)—thus goes beyond being a purely analytic or reflective exercise, to one that has consequences for how we live our lives and care for our bodies (Shusterman, 1999, pp. 304–307).

Shusterman’s reaction to traditional aesthetics can be seen most clearly in the brief ‘Speculative Postscript’ that he provides at the end of the book (and it is such that it is worth reading this passage (pp. 391–396) first, as it situates Shusterman’s discussions in relation to philosophical aesthetics). Shusterman takes issue with the fact that traditionally conceived aesthetics actively excludes consideration of sexual pleasure and desire. This orthodox position would argue—following Kant—that such pleasure is not sufficiently ‘disinterested’. It is motivated purely in the bodily appetites—at best agreeable or charming, but not as such yielding properly ‘aesthetic’ pleasure. Shusterman suggests that

this exclusion occurs because Enlightenment materialism could no longer articulate a ‘ladder of love’—an understanding of the relationship between physical beauty and the spiritual that has its roots in Plato’s *Symposium* (p. 322)—that could link the appreciation of (and desire for) the physically beautiful body to a desire for spiritual beauty and virtue. Love becomes (for example, for Hobbes) indistinguishable from carnal lust (p. 392), and thus radically sundered from virtue or indeed beauty proper. In nineteenth-century aesthetics, appreciation of fine art comes to fill the gap created by materialism’s belittling of the status of the human body and its pleasures. *Ars Erotica* can thus be read as a plea, not merely to reinstate the ‘ars erotica’ as a legitimate object for aesthetic contemplation (as Shusterman has previously defended aesthetic appreciation of hip hop and other phenomena of popular culture), but rather as a defence of the aesthetic legitimacy of sexual desire itself. Sexual desire and the pleasure taken in the beauty of one’s own and of others’ bodies is not sullied by being ‘interested’, but rather legitimated by the part desire and pleasure play in the cultivation of the self, and thus self-knowledge and virtuous living.

The historical arc of the material rehearsed in *Ars Erotica* thus explicates a series of different approaches to the value of sexual pleasure. While, in broad terms, for the Greeks and Romans, sexual pleasure is an end in itself and to be cultivated as such, divorced from the issue of procreation, the culture of the Hebrew scriptures very much subordinates the sexual act to the instrumental need to increase the Jewish population (and so fulfil the divine promise to Abraham that his descendants will be as plentiful as ‘the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore’ (*Genesis* 22:17)). Christianity, with its focus on a Heavenly existence rather than the continuation of an earthly community, presents sexual pleasure as a distraction from the spiritual. Sexual desire is thereby to be suppressed. Thus, Shusterman’s second chapter (on Jewish and early Christian reflection on sexual practices) begins to give a shape and practical dimension to his narrative. In Christianity, with

its denigration of the body and sexual desire, the Western reader sees elements that have contributed to their own, modern culture, and its complex attitudes toward sex and sexuality. The subsequent chapters on China and India, in particular, begin to open up alternative ways of thinking—not least in the Chinese grounding of the ‘ars erotica’ in medicine (and the need to harmoniously balance *yin* and *yang*) that treats sexual practice as at once pleasurable and instrumentally important to health and well-being. The rich ‘ars erotica’ of India draw sexual activity into a close relationship with the aesthetic, entwining sexual practice with art and in particular with drama, so lending the Indian ‘ars erotica’ greater psychological insight than the more physically orientated Chinese texts, but also emphasizing ‘ars erotica’ as a process of learning, and a cultivation of forms of cognition. *Ars Erotica*, by bringing together its eight distinctive sexual cultures, may thus be read as exploring the diverse ways in which the intrinsic (or aesthetic) and instrumental (or practical) valuations of sexual practice and sexual pleasure may be articulated and harmonized, and thereby as offering material through which to rethink our own attitudes towards sexual practice.

If there is a problem with this study, it is a problem that Shusterman himself acknowledges in his Preface. It takes a certain courage to write about ‘ars erotica’ in a culture that has, rightly, become increasingly sensitive to the exploitative and coercive nature of much sexual activity—from overt acts of violence that are inadequately policed, through to cultural assumptions that normalize heterosexuality, and serve to reproduce certain preconceptions of ‘natural’ sexual and gender practice. As Shusterman notes, the material that he brings together in *Ars Erotica* is important precisely for understanding, and criticizing, our own sexual culture. Yet, Shusterman’s overt approach remains, at times, problematic. He explicitly states that he is concerned with texts, and not historical practices. The study is ‘essentially theoretical’ (p. 1). *Ars Erotica* is, as noted, a history of ideas. It is not a sociology. Indeed, there is at times a certain sociological naivety about the analysis. Shusterman too readily assumes a cultural universality

in human nature, for example by appealing to neuroscience, and to evolutionary psychology to offer a supposed description of ‘transcultural beauty-making features’ (p. 180), or failing to explore the possibility that the psychology (and indeed meaning) of emotions or states such as ‘love’ cannot simply be assumed from their modern manifestation.

This approach leads to a certain superficiality in the readings of the material—a ‘surface’ hermeneutics where a depth hermeneutics is required. Shusterman’s original presentation of the project of somaesthetics stressed its ethical and political aspects, not least by appeal to Foucault, and his ‘seminal vision of the body as and a docile, malleable site for inscribing social power’ (1999, p. 303). It is this bio-politics that seems to be missing from many of the expositions in *Ars Erotica*. While at times Shusterman is sensitive to both sexual and class politics (see p. 172 on class in China, for example), and in the case of Islam, to the legitimization of male sexual violence (and indeed the violence of verbal imagery) (pp. 261–264), at other crucial points in the text he fails to make explicit, let alone explore, the fact that his chosen texts are typically written by men and for male readers, and concern the control and use of women. There is at times insufficient exploration of how these texts serve to constitute, and encourage the practice or performance of, certain quite specific ideas of the feminine and masculine. Too infrequently are these texts explicitly presented as bio-political.

This failure to politicize his texts can be explained in two assumptions that Shusterman is apparently making about his reader. First, the all pervading phenomenon of patriarchy, and the sexual dominance of the male over the female, will be taken for granted as the context within which these texts are composed and consumed. Shusterman’s occasional references to patriarchy suggest that he trusts the reader to draw the appropriate implications from the texts as presented. Secondly, Shusterman is inviting the reader to take the texts literally, divorced from actual practices. Thus, if a text is advocating the obligation of the male lover to give genuine pleasure to the female, then the reader is

to assume that the text is sincere (and not concealing a form of manipulation, exploitation, or construction of the female). As such, the text offers a model for the reader’s own practice, the value of which the reader can assess for her- or himself. It is thus that these texts can be drawn into a critical dialogue with contemporary sexual culture. However, without a depth hermeneutics, that would explore the very possibility of the text informing practice without reinforcing patriarchal structures, such a dialogue is overly simplified, and risks reproducing the very forms of sexual oppression that it should challenge.

The root of this approach, I would suggest, lies in Shusterman’s conception of somaesthetics itself. Crucially, the categories of ‘beauty’ and ‘pleasure’ are central to his project. Indeed, somaesthetics may be seen to be, in part, striving to reinstate the centrality of beauty and pleasure in the face of the aesthetic engagement with modern art articulated by the likes of Nelson Goodman and Arthur Danto (see Shusterman, 2000, pp. 20–22). Yet this can, at times, lead to an overemphasis upon the beautiful appearances that the ‘ars erotica’ offer, in contrast to the underlying violence of actual practice. Thus, Shusterman notes of Ovid that he has a ‘tolerance of seductive force that borders on rape’ (p. 90), but no further details or analysis are offered. Shusterman notes the practice of Chinese foot-binding, but simply as one of the ‘attributes of a beautiful woman’, and ‘the most powerful centre of sex-appeal’ (p. 179). Again, it is left to the reader to draw the, perhaps obvious, implications and condemnation. A more radical—feminist or queer—reading of these texts would offer an even more fundamental challenge to orthodox aesthetics than does Shusterman’s somaesthetics, not least by making explicit the mediation of the aesthetic experience by power, exploitation, and violence.

The extraordinary scholarship, and indeed courage, of *Ars Erotica* demands the initiation of much needed debates, not least with feminist and queer theorists. It is an important text, and is so beyond its place in the development of aesthetics or indeed somaesthetics. It should, as Shusterman hopes,

serve in developing the understanding, criticism, and ultimately practice, of our own sexual cultures and their inherent aesthetics.

References

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The Poem as Icon: A Study in Aesthetic Cognition

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Margaret H. Freeman's *The Poem as Icon* addresses the nature and value of poetry, thereby making an important contribution to this developing area of philosophical aesthetics. Her approach is distinctive in that it resists temptation to be drawn away from the specifics of poetry to general discussions of language, art and literature. She achieves this focus by allowing analysis of particular works by poets such as Emily Dickinson, Matthew Arnold and Wallace Stevens to take centre stage in each chapter. That is not to say that her book is limited to the domain of poetry but more that her focus on poetry reveals more general insights by treating poetry as quintessential of the iconic arts. The book presents novel discussion of metaphor, the form–content dichotomy, and aesthetic cognition through an inquiry into the value of poetry. In each case, the study of poetry is used to deepen understanding of themes that have resonance

across the arts whilst simultaneously pointing to the value of poetry as a distinct art form.

The central thesis of the book is that writing and reading poetry makes a significant contribution to the exploration of reality through the imagination, memory and attention to the sensory as richly affective. According to Freeman, the resulting 'modelling' of reality, or iconicity, offers a route to knowledge of 'the experienced reality of being' (p. 1). As Freeman argues, the knowledge we gain from encountering poetry is not as observer but as a participant in reality; we must live it and embody it. Freeman is clear that poem as icon is a potentiality and a marker of success, rather than holding the view that any work of poetry has such cognitive value: 'Sometimes poetic purpose fails because the poet has failed—not necessarily entirely, but essentially—to realize the import of the inspiration that motivated the poem. Sometimes poetic purpose fails when the text reduces to reportage rather than creating the illusion of life. ... And sometimes failure lies in the reader who imposes interpretations of meaning on a poem rather than experiencing what it is doing' (p. 159). Freeman emphasizes the active participation with words; as poet in representing and recreating experience and as reader in receiving something active and open: 'In poetry, words are made to work, not discursively to create meaning but aesthetically to capture the precategorical essence of experience that makes a poem an icon of felt reality' (p. 145).

Such emphasis on the active unfolding of experience is at the heart of Freeman's view of metaphor: 'When one focuses on metaphor as product, problems surface as to whether a metaphor should be considered as a testable model of reality or taken literally when used poetically. On the other hand, focusing on the metaphor as process shows how metaphoring is hierarchical in nature, from the cognitive levels of subliminally sensate to conceptual to linguistic expression' (p. 77). What the icon provides is the active not static, the open not contained, in other words, the poem as icon resists being reduced to singular meaning and instead offers affordances. Here are the