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The Art of Love as a Somesthetic Phenomenon and its Cultural Varieties

Book Review: Richard Shusterman*: Ars erotica. Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*, Cambridge University Press 2021, ISBN 978–1-107–00476–4 (hardback), 978–0-521–18120–4 (paperback), 422 S.

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Richard Shusterman is known to be the founder of somaesthetics, understood as a descriptive-analytical and critical investigation of the body (soma) with the aim of practically improving its condition and its aesthetic cultivation. This project, which Shusterman has consistently pursued for several years, varying or expanding it through various emphases, is now supported by its own book series published by Brill and by the journal *The Journal of Somaesthetics* (online, but housed in Denmark). Conferences on somaesthetics are also held regularly both in the U.S. and in Central Europe; most recently, the Center for Somaesthetics and Arts at the Academy of Fine in Krakow was opened in October 2021. The foundations of somaesthetics have already been reported on in polylog (see my review of Shusterman's book Body-Consciousness in polylog No. 29, 2013). In the context of this ambitious project, which combines approaches from body phenomenology, pragmatism, and Foucault's aesthetics of existence with practical knowledge of body techniques (Shusterman is also a trained Feldenkrais trainer), incorporating contributions from other, mainly East Asian cultures, and in the spirit of a clear commitment to the values of modern democracy, the professor at Florida Atlantic University this year presented a comprehensive volume on the sexual aspects of somaesthetics.

With this book, Shusterman expands the subject area of somaesthetics through an almost "paradigmatically somaesthetic art" (8). In addition, he addresses the "suspicion" surrounding eroticism and sexuality in society, as well as the attitude of avoidance or lack of interest in this topic in modern Western philosophy, by setting out to uncover the historical roots of sexism and heteronormativity. He also aims to identify commonalities (such as the treatment of women as objects) and to prepare a "superior synthesis or erotic pluralism that could better serve our transcultural world" by examining the cultural variations of *ars erotica* (2). As sources, Shusterman reaches for classical texts (primarily erotic treatises) from Greek and Roman culture, from the Old Testament and Christianity, from China, India, Japan, and Islam, as well as from the (Western) European Middle Ages to the Renaissance, which he explains through their specific social, cultural, and philosophical-religious contexts. In the process, philosophical interpretations merge into explanations of the history of ideas, just as concrete, sometimes anecdotal and surprising details of erotic acts and sexual practices are embedded in a general theory about the complexity of erotic art. Through this extensive consideration of non-Western cultures and also the expanded time frame, Shusterman's *Ars Erotica* goes far beyond Foucault's history of sexuality.

Nonetheless, the author has chosen a Greco-Latin term for the "art of love." He explains his option for *ars erotica* on the one hand with the more differentiated terminology in ancient Greek for love compared to Latin (hence *ars erotica* and not *ars amatoria* as in Ovid) and on the other hand with the comprehensive meaning of *ars*, which is not limited to the modern object-related concept of art, but was even applied to weaving, navigation or warfare in the Middle Ages. Also, *ars erotica* contains learned and refined practices and styles of action, but in contrast to the previously cited professions, it belonged to the program of self-cultivation of man in different social and cultural contexts. Thus, in pre-modern societies, *ars erotica* was intended not only to intensify sexual pleasure, but also to produce aesthetic pleasures that were accompanied by a cultivation of understanding, sensitivity and empathy, skills, and self-control. The *ars erotica* was thus part of aesthetic education in general and contributed to the art of living through the formation of character, sensitivity, taste and an interpersonal sensibility. Its implications ranged from self-realization and improvement of self-care to the realization of social harmony. According to Shusterman, this view of eroticism in the aforementioned premodern cultures contrasts sharply with our conventional sexual education; their broad perspective went beyond physiological explanations, hygienic recommendations, and moral prescriptions to view sexuality at once positively and critically.

The next seven chapters of the book substantiate these general theses with a richness of historical material. However, these analyses are still preceded by the justification of the aesthetic character of the *ars erotica* through nine arguments: the "art of love" incorporated classical arts, such as poetry and music, perfumery, culinary and fashion arts, cosmetics and body care (which, according to Shusterman's body-consciousness, fall under the representational and experiential disciplines of somaesthetics). Beauty and pleasure come to the fore in erotic art, while "utility" (the reproductive function of sexuality) is merely incidental: eroticism becomes an end in itself. Therefore, in "erotic artistry" formal and structural features are of particular importance: the erotic "performance" was carefully composed. Similarly, not only the sexual acts as such were important, but also the modalities of gestures and movements, in other words, their style. If we return to the original meaning of aesthetics given by Alexander Baumgarten, who defined it as aisthesis, i.e., as the science of sensual cognition, and ascribed to it the task of perfecting perception --which is the starting point not only for Shusterman but for others contemporary aesthetics -- then further objections to the extension of aesthetics to *ars erotica* fall flat. Other aesthetic features of this "art" refer to a complex symbolism, the evaluative dimension (critical judgment, connoisseurship, competitions, etc.), the dual nature of eroticism as a natural and culturally shaped phenomenon, the staging and dramatic construction of an experience, and, last but not least, a cognitive and moral ambivalence.

Ultimately, *ars erotica* has anthropological and moral implications, as it has been understood in several cultures independently as a means of cultivating human humanity. The "training" in erotic art improves the perception of infinitesimal differences of a sensual and emotional nature in relation to oneself and one's partner. Not only practical know-how is necessary to succeed in this art, but also physical health and vital strength, a good relationship with one's own body, as well as social skills that are put at the service of an attractive self-presentation (whether physical, through body arts or even an appropriate conversation). Despite the fundamental rehabilitation of the premodern varieties of *ars erotica*, Shusterman finds fault with the treatises on eroticism he examines-such as Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, the *Kamasutra*, *Ananga Ranga*, and *Koka Shastra* (in India), *The Perfumed Garden* (in Islam), or *Speculum al foderi* (medieval Catalonia) --that they were written by and equally addressed to social elites. In this respect, he would like to see an adaptation and reshaping of the art of love that would correspond to a democratic society, although at the same time he admits that this would not be enough for the establishment of gender justice.

The cognitive dimension of the *ars erotica*, however, was not limited to sensual cognition, but rather presupposed knowledge of social norms and courtly etiquette, as well as a solid education in various arts and art-related practices. Oriental treatises on eroticism went so far as to give (hetero)sexuality a cosmic dimension (as in China), to trace the origin of sexual techniques to a god (*Kamasutra),* to endorse sexual pleasure as a prelude to the knowledge of God (*Ananga Ranga*), and to take successful sexuality as an occasion to praise God's mercy (*The Perfumed Garden*). For Shusterman, religious experience and erotic art are even paradigmatic features of the so-called anthropological difference that elevates humans above (other) animals.

Despite these cited commonalities, a reading of the individual chapters also yields a differentiated picture of the cultural variations of *ars erotica*. In ancient Greece and Rome, the plurality of forms of sexuality are striking: In addition to conventional marital heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality, pederasty, as well as sexual intercourse with slaves and courtesans were practiced and discussed. Philosophical schools argued over the status of desire, tolerable sexual practices, and their compatibility with a *vita philosophica*. In the Judeo-Christian world, on the other hand, the reproductive function of sexuality was paramount; pleasure obtained within a socially and ecclesiastically regulated framework represented solely a means of procreation. In the Chinese *ars erotica*, as the oldest in the world, sexuality was considered to be of special importance for health and vitality. Beauty was the result, not the favoring condition, of sexual intercourse, and the main criterion was the achievement of harmony at all levels, from family unity to state and even cosmic concord. The *ars erotica* was conceptualized just as systematically in India, where, however, unlike in China, erotic desire was intertwined with an ascetic spirituality.

Among the distinctive features of erotic art in Islamic culture and in Japan, Shusterman counts the seductive power attributed to perfumes and an "intriguing combination of great delicacy and extreme violence" (24 f.). In many other respects, however, the two cultures diverge. With regard to Islamic *ars erotica*, the author elaborates on polygamy, the frequent aggressiveness of male passion, the compatibility of sexuality and virtue (using the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who was not averse to erotic lust), and the positive status of a spiritualized eroticism in Sufism in al-Ghazali and al-Arabi. For Japan, in turn, three traditions are treated: courtly love in the Heian dynasty (8th-12th centuries), mostly from the point of view of literary court ladies such as Sei Shonagon; homosexual eroticism among Buddhist monks, samurais, and in the city; and, finally, the refined *ars erotica* of courtesans in the Edo period (17th-19th centuries). At the end of this world tour, we return to Europe in the last chapter. Virtuous amorous friendship among men, sexual love as a divine force holding the world together, and the sublimation of physical love in mystical union with God represented the ideals of the (Western) European Middle Ages, in which the dominant Christian worldview was occasionally colored by Greco-Roman and Islamic influences. At the end of this era, Florentine Neoplatonism emphasized the divine source of love, of beauty, and of all perfection (Marsilio Ficino, Giordano Bruno, Baldassare Castiglione) and, with Leon Ebreo, praised marital intercourse from the dual perspective of worldly reward and the promise of a knowledge of God. Finally, the examples of Erasmus and Montaigne as two humanists and skeptics illustrate the contradictory evaluation of marriage on the threshold of modern times.

Richard Shusterman's latest book is a tour de force through the broad (multi)cultural and temporal horizon of his investigation. In this connection, vagueness is factored in, for all the careful legitimization of terminology at the beginning of the volume, especially the option for *ars erotica*, Shusterman must ultimately present a whole realm of love forms, physical as well as idealized and even mystical in nature. Above all, this investigation, which promises to become a standard work, makes the originally somewhat abstract program of somaesthetics tangible and convincing. Aestheticians will take notice when they read in the volume's "speculative postscript" about Shusterman's hypothesis of how Kant's thesis of disinterestedness basically separates beauty from eros, perhaps as a reaction against the libertinism of the 17th and 18th centuries. Last but not least, the book proves how philosophers who do not count themselves among the current of so-called "intercultural philosophy" *sensu stricto* consider the inclusion of other cultural and thought traditions as natural and necessary.