

Book Review

*Aesthetics and Science Serialized**Alexander Kremer*

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

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.² 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:

This 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:

² 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 the 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

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)

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 fulfillment. 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

- Foucault, M. (1984). *The History of Sexuality. Vol. I: An Introduction*. Translated from the French by Robert Hurley. In: *Three Volumes in one book of Michel Foucault*. New York: Pantheon Books
- Kremer, A. (2022). "Richard Shusterman's Somaesthetics as Philosophy." In: *Shusterman's Somaesthetics: From Hip-hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art*. Ed. Jerold J. Abrams. Leiden: Brill, the expected release is February.