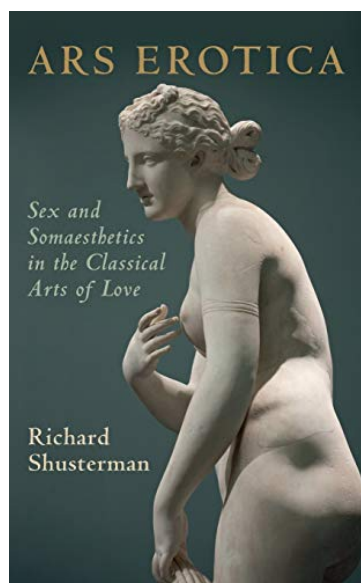


Highbrow Somaesthetics of Sex

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Shusterman, R. (2021) *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-1107004764.



In Finland, in the 1990s and early 2000s, when the everyday aesthetics discussion had not yet really found its current form, all attempts to lead aesthetics out from the realm of art were tagged with the label ‘applied aesthetics’. Applied referred to testing out what one could do with concepts, methods and theoretical models that were originally meant for philosophical art research. In a way, Richard Shusterman’s new book, *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* (2021) is about ‘applied aesthetics’. It bombards the reader with philosophical notes on erotic traditions, and demonstrates that aesthetics might have greater potential for understanding sexuality than we realize.

In another way, the book is more of a historical study of ideas, which really shows how aesthetic theory and (pre-academic) sexology, and aesthetic and

erotic practices have been mashed-up in cultural history –for ages. Like all of Shusterman’s contemporary works, this is done on a global level. The book presents Japanese, Chinese, Indian and Arabic classics on sexuality, i.e., texts that cover sexual problems, self-aid, and sexual metaphysics – without forgetting the works of classical antiquity, like Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*, which, of course, is mainly a strategy book for love. This inevitably demonstrates how much stronger the Asian tradition of philosophical sex writing is – and of course anyone who has ever read the *Kamasutra* (which has been available for all classes in Europe through its lowbrow distribution by hippies and commercial erotica booksellers) knows this: the *Kamasutra* is as much about thinking about sexuality as it is about exploring one’s own sexuality, both in theory and practice. Al-Nafzawi’s *The Perfumed Garden* (Shusterman, 2021, p. 18; all subsequent references are from the same title) with its poetic character and practical self-aid ideas hidden in the stories, is somehow a more attractive read than most European classics. The same is true for Indian tantra and the erotic literature of Japan and China. Ovid’s notes on sex, which accompany his strategic notes for lovers and Don Juans, are primitive in comparison to these works, which are experimental, open-minded and driven by educational ideals.

Focusing (consciously) on volumes of educated thinkers (Shusterman also points out that the historical works of *ars erotica* were mostly written and distributed for privileged males, p. 15) makes the book very much a work on (although radical, just) highbrow ideas on sexuality from around the world. There is nothing wrong with this. It is how we read about the arts in the academy, the upper class’ products first, and then some remarks about the lowbrows of the world – partly for the reason that lowbrow arts have been less documented and analysed by our ancestors. But as Shusterman has always been into popular culture and what Jack Halberstam refers to as ‘low theory’, which answers questions in everyday life (I cannot forget how Shusterman quotes rap lyrics in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and takes them as serious argumentation), it remains interesting to see if he will ever take up thoughts on lowbrow traditions of sex too – traditions, conventions and tricks that have thrived without literary descriptions and analyses. Some of these are well presented in Nick Douglas and Penny Slinger’s *Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy* (1989), which in a sense, is less of a philosophical handbook than a hands-on manual of tricks in different sexual cultures – to the prosaic extent that it feels a bit like a sex version of a car repair manual (about us and our sexual organs and habits, with training methods for PC muscles and ways of finding one’s penis muscles in tricky sex situations). But one cannot say that it should be Shusterman’s next step after his absolutely trailblazing work in *Ars Erotica*. Perhaps, this is for someone who is already into the aesthetics of popular culture and can think of ways of combining sex and pop theory in a way that would supplement Shusterman’s work. Shusterman himself acknowledges that a female and/or feminist version of the more hidden idea history of female *ars erotica* is needed. But *Ars Erotica* is definitely enough for him. This dense work is over 300 pages long and includes so many references that it is not an easy read.

Still, what is highbrow in an applied sense and philosophical in China or Japan, is raunchier than what most people who are into neat middle-class spirituality in the West are able to take. The traditions of the West are of course not forgotten here. Shusterman analyses Chinese and Indian traditions of sex without ejaculation (pp. 152-154), Paul's interest in Christian celibacy as a method for getting closer to God (pp. 122, 152; the idea of Christian virgins as athletes of Christ was new to me, p. 129), the merging of art education and sex education in China's classical upper class (p. 178) and many other topics of somaesthetic interest, like the use of imagination in sex (p. 8) and the use of (controlled) violence in the sexual arts of Japan (p. 16 onwards). And, of course, as in many of Shusterman's works, he grapples with Foucault and thoughts on how to develop a pragmatist philosophy. Thinkers that one does not usually consider sex philosophers are quoted in various ways – like Al-Ghazali (who defends sex as a spiritual path, p. 25). This contributes to a new understanding of the history of philosophy and aesthetics.

Ars Erotica ends with the note.

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 fulfilment. A look at the 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)

Not many philosophers could do this, but Shusterman is really, really global in his approach, and in doing so he continues to set new standards for the rest of us. This comparative study shows how much there is to learn from non-European aesthetics, which we might have to rethink after this book. As opposed to Indian aesthetics, which many Westerners read as another debate with another grasp of the topic, non-Chinese traditions have not yet found resonance in other parts of the world. What if China's contribution to global aesthetics could eventually make a victorious entrance through sexual theory? After reading *Ars Erotica* this is not an impossible question to ask.

In any case, the book is unique. Nothing of this type has ever been written. One cannot but recommend it to everyone who has aesthetic interests. It shows, first of all, what one can do with aesthetics (it can aid sex studies and sexual development). Secondly, it shows the long history of the use of aesthetic theory in ancient, pre-academic sexology, thus broadening our understanding of the outreach of aesthetics, and reminding us that applied aesthetics, everyday aesthetics and body philosophy have flourished in various way throughout history. Today, not many aestheticians believe in the very narrow role assigned to aesthetics in the late 18th century after the invention of art with a capital A. But not many historical works, especially those with such global expertise, have been written to help us to further explore the potential of aesthetics. *Ars erotica* sheds light on a path worthy of future study, and it has definitely established Shusterman's role in the history of aesthetics as a major one – and finally this makes it clear. If popular culture

and somaesthetics marked new possibilities for contemporary aesthetics in the 1990s and 2000s, studying sex with the help of aesthetics takes aesthetics again one step closer to people in other disciplines (read: e.g., sexology). While popular culture scholars outside of aesthetics have not paid much attention to Shusterman's aesthetics, the success of somaesthetics has been wider and deeper – and what would be more fundamental for human beings than the topic of sex, which of course extends the project of somaesthetics. With a title like *Ars Erotica*, which in a sneaky way sounds dirtier than the 'philosophy of sex', this book cannot help but succeed! And, regardless of whether one would think of the content as interesting or not, it is hard to find any weaknesses in the text. It is a bold and brilliant work of philosophical aesthetics.

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