



SYMPOSIUM

Preface to symposium on Richard Shusterman's *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*:

Sexuality and/as Art, Power, and Reconciliation

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For all those who,
following Nick Cave,
are able to "let love in."

1.

"Are you tough enough to be kind? / Do you know your heart has its own mind?," asks Bono, the lead singer of U2, in the song *13 (There Is A Light)* from the band's 2017 album *Songs of Experience*. Allowing myself to freely interpret these lines of a rock song in a philosophical way, I think that we might say that such a metaphorical reference to the "own mind" possessed by our "heart" can be interpreted as pointing more in the direction of the autonomous sense and value of what is "other" (or, in an Adornian fashion, "non-identical") than "the mind" as we usually understand it and talk of it: namely, as understanding, intellect, conceptuality, reason, *Geist* etc. The intellectual and cognitive domain has been often understood in the Western tradition as being dualistically opposed to "the heart" and also as having a primacy over the realm of what we may call the *aisthesis* in the broadest sense of this word, i.e., the whole realm of the sensible and the affective. However, precisely the *aisthesis*, in the fullest and most encompassing meaning of this concept, represents the specific domain of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, once aesthetics is not limited anymore to a mere philosophy of the fine arts

(as has happened from Hegel to Danto, so to speak¹) but is rather understood as a philosophical theory of the aesthetic as such.²

Starting from the abovementioned metaphorical reference to “the heart” derived from a line of a song by U2, we can say that what we may call the sphere of sensibility and affectivity undoubtedly represents one of the most fundamental dimensions of human life – which, also with the advent of the so-called “Affective Turn” in various fields of the human and social sciences, has been the object of recent rediscovery and reevaluation.³ And we can add that, if this is true in general, it is probably even more accurate and more evident in the specific case of our experience with art and the aesthetic. In fact, fundamental elements or components of our sensible and affective relation to the real, such as sensations, perceptions, feelings, emotions, phenomena of empathy and sympathy, appetites, atmospheres, desires and moods, seem to play a particularly essential role (although in different ways) in aesthetics, often finding sophisticated and fascinating developments in the various experiences and practices that form the realm of the arts – including the traditional fine arts, but not reducible to them. This, in turn, can easily and above all coherently lead to a rediscovery and indeed a new and intensified philosophical interest in the human body, viewed as the original source and root of the *aisthesis* and the sphere of affectivity (that, as we can add now, clearly includes also sexuality). As noted by Richard Shusterman about somaesthetics, his original disciplinary proposal:

the senses surely belong to the body and are deeply influenced by its condition. Our sensory perception thus depends on how the body feels and functions; what it desires, does, and suffers. [...] Concerned not simply with the body’s external form or *representation* but also with its lived *experience*, somaesthetics works at improving awareness of our bodily states and feelings, thus providing greater insight into both our passing moods and lasting attitudes.⁴

From a certain point of view, such a reevaluation of the sphere of the *aisthesis* in its broadest sense and complete significance for human life corresponds to some of the original impulses that had led Baumgarten in the mid 18th century to found (or, so to speak, to “baptize”⁵) a new philosophical discipline, namely aesthetics, understanding it not simply as a theory of fine art and natural beauty but also as a theory of sensory cognition and perceptual knowledge. However, as noted by Shusterman, while “Baumgarten define[d] aesthetics as the science of sensory cognition and as aimed at its perfection,” and while “the senses surely belong to the body and are deeply influenced by its

¹ See Tiziana Andina, *Filosofie dell’arte. Da Hegel a Danto* (2012), in particular 11-37.

² On this topic, see for instance Giovanni Matteucci’s recent works: *Elementi per un’estetica del contemporaneo* (2018) and, on a more theoretical level, *Estetica e natura umana. La mente estesa tra percezione, emozione ed espressione* (2019).

³ On aesthetics and affectivity, let me remind the reader to the essays collected in the volume *Aesthetics and Affectivity*, ed. by Laura La Bella, Stefano Marino and Vittoria Sisca, *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics*, 60:1 (2021).

⁴ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (2000²), 265, 268.

⁵ I borrow this concept from Leonardo Amoroso (ed.), *Il battesimo dell’estetica: Alexander G. Baumgarten, Immanuel Kant* (2008).

condition" (dependent as they are "on how the body feels and functions," on "what it desires, does, and suffers"), nevertheless Baumgarten, probably due to religious and philosophical prejudices, "refuse[d] to include the study and perfection of the body within his aesthetic program."⁶ If it is so, then it can be reasonably said that somaesthetics, as a discipline of both theory and practice, on the one hand "shares the same enlarged scope, multiple dimensions, and practical element that Baumgarten urged, and also promotes precisely those aims that philosophy traditionally defines as central to its own project" (such as, for instance, "knowledge, virtue, and the good life"); however, on the other hand, "in pursuing Baumgarten's broad practical vision of aesthetics," somaesthetics "goes even further by also embracing a crucial feature that Baumgarten unfortunately omitted from his program – cultivation of the body."⁷ According to Shusterman, "modern philosophy too often displays the same sad somatic neglect,"⁸ although 20th-century thinkers like Dewey, Plessner, Merleau-Ponty, Marcuse, Foucault and still others surely represent notable exceptions to this general rule. This proves to be even more true and clear if the philosophical discourse on *aisthesis*, sensitivity, affectivity and embodiment is developed in the direction of a philosophical rediscovery of erotic experience – as Shusterman's recent book *Ars Erotica. Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* precisely does.

2.

"Sexuality is the strongest force in human beings," claims Joe, the main character (portrayed by Charlotte Gainsbourg) in Lars von Trier's famous, outrageous and much discussed film *Nymphomaniac* from 2013. Although one could surely put such a primacy into question and wonder whether sexuality is really *the* strongest force in humanity, it is anyway impossible to negate its being at least *one* of the strongest forces in our life. Now, as it also happens with things, events or persons who apparently display a huge power on us at various levels and in different ways, even in the case of erotic experience, it is not strange to discover that its overwhelming force may sometimes scare us. On this basis, it should not appear as surprising to observe how many people still nowadays tend to implausibly deny sexuality's extraordinary power, either embarrassedly retreating from freely talking about it or, vice-versa, almost obsessively talking about it all the time (thus letting the discourse further proliferate in our "hyper-sexualized" but perhaps still "repressed" age) but without paying attention to sexuality's profundity, complexity, diversity and plurality, and hence without fully recognizing its profound force while only scratching the surface of this phenomenon, as it were. In a sense, we might perhaps interpret this fact as a sort of self-defense process in front of a strong force that can sometimes be perceived as a danger or a threat to the human being's hard-earned self-control, stability and balance – that which implicitly confirms and even strengthens the idea of sexuality's overwhelming power, of course.

⁶ Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 265-6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁸ *Ibid.*

This general discourse can also be applied to intellectuals and, perhaps, especially to philosophers, who have been apparently conditioned by a centuries-long tradition of “sad somatic neglect”⁹ that, as we said, has partially characterized the development of modern aesthetics and also, unfortunately, affected sexuality in the history of Western culture and philosophy. However, as a “philosophical” rock band like Pearl Jam is able to teach us in a touching, beautiful and at the same time powerful song like *Dissident* (from their 1993 album *VS.*¹⁰), “escape is never the safest path”: that is – freely applying the words of this song to the present philosophical context –, escaping and denying the force of affectivity and especially of sexuality, and their fundamental role in human life, surely does not represent a good solution. This is especially true if – following the spirit and attitude of a “pragmatist meliorism [that] insists on improving the experience and conduct of life by addressing the real problems of ordinary men and women rather than retreating into purely academic problems of professional philosophy” – we are able to conceive of “the field of sexuality and erotic love” as presenting “a wealth of problems” that are also interesting at a philosophical level and that supply “a realm of experience rich with potential for communicative meanings and for joys of consummation that help make life worth living, while biologically ensuring continued life possible through sexual reproduction.”¹¹ As has been noted by Shusterman in a recent article, what he calls *ars erotica*

deserves serious critical and theoretical attention so that we can reconstruct our sexual attitudes, practices, and techniques to free them from flaws resulting from eroticism’s long association with evils of predatory patriarchy and injustice. [...] Old taboos on philosophizing frankly about sex may have faded, but philosophical discomfort and moral reluctance to write candidly about lovemaking and erotic experience still haunt our pragmatist tradition today. We worry that such writing exposes our “lower nature” or even constitutes a verbal form of sexual aggression on innocent readers. However, without forthright, concrete theorizing about sexual matters, we risk perpetuating mistaken assumptions and inadequate or harmful practices that result in experiences of painful disappointment instead of rewarding pleasure. Excited but still confused and uncertain about the promising pluralism of LGBTQ+ options, our culture needs more critical, yet positively reconstructive, thinking about sexuality and eroticism. This seems a worthy task for progressive pragmatist theory, if not also for other philosophical approaches.¹²

Generally speaking, it seems that the Western cultural and philosophical tradition has mostly tended to assign a certain idealistic primacy over the mortal and material body (that, as Shusterman correctly notes, is “distinctively and importantly sexed and sexu-

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ On what I like to call “the philosophy of Pearl Jam,” let me remind the readers of Stefano Marino and Andrea Schembari (ed.), *Pearl Jam and Philosophy* (2021).

¹¹ Shusterman, “Pragmatism and Sex: An Unfulfilled Connection,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 57: 1 (2021), 2.

¹² Ibid., 21, 25.

al”¹³) to the supposedly immortal soul or, in the modern age, to the presumptively immaterial mind. If so, then the rediscovery of the full, rich and diversified significance of the body, i.e., of the embodied nature of our human condition and our way of being in the world, acquires a relevant and, to some extent, even revolutionary significance. Such a rediscovery is precisely at the core of Shusterman’s philosophical project, at least since the original introduction of a new disciplinary proposal in the second edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (2000), namely somaesthetics, that has gradually led him to investigate different fields and aspects of the human experience of life, including now sexuality and erotic love.

Following Shusterman’s definition of somaesthetics, the latter must be understood as a “critical study and meliorative cultivation of the body as the site not only of experienced subjectivity and sensory appreciation (aesthesis) that guides our action and performance but also of our creative self-fashioning through the ways we use, groom, and adorn our physical bodies to express our values and stylize ourselves.”¹⁴ In this context, the soma, i.e., “the sentient purposive body,” is philosophically conceived of “as both subject and object in the world,” as both *Körperhaben* and *Leibsein*, leading to the insight that “[o]ur experience and behavior are far less genetically hardwired than in other animals”: for Shusterman, “the soma reveals that human nature is always more than merely natural but instead deeply shaped by culture,” and it expresses “our ambivalent condition between power and frailty, dignity and brutishness, knowledge and ignorance,” proving to be “a single, systematic unity that however contains a multiplicity of very different elements (including diverse organs) that have their own needs, ailments, and subsystems.”¹⁵ On the basis of such a wide and far-reaching somaesthetic conception of our sentient purposive body, and on the basis of the distinctively and importantly sexed and sexual character of the soma, it must not appear surprising that somaesthetic investigations have ultimately led Shusterman to coherently and, as it were, systematically inquire into the phenomena of love and sex.

I have intentionally used the term “systematically” in the previous sentence because already a simple and quick look at the Table of Contents of *Ars Erotica. Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* shows how Shusterman’s last book is aimed at offering to the readers a broad, complex, well-structured and very coherent presentation of his somaesthetic investigations of this field.¹⁶ Starting from *ars erotica* and the question of aesthetics (and analyzing this first topic with reference to the terminology and conceptuality used, to the nature of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, and to the fundamental purpose of self-cultivation that also philosophical inquiry must be functional to), Shusterman then takes into examination the dialectics of desire and virtue, and the relation between aesthetics, power and self-cultivation in erotic theories developed in the Greco-Roman context. The following chapters of *Ars Erotica. Sex and Somaesthetics in the*

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ Shusterman, “Bodies in the Streets: The Soma, the City, and the Art of Living,” in Id. (ed.), *Bodies in the Streets: The Somaesthetics of City Life* (2019), 15.

¹⁵ Ibid., 15-7.

¹⁶ See Shusterman, *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* (2021).

Classical Arts of Love offer a detailed and in-depth investigation of the Biblical tradition, with regard to both the Old Testament and Christianity (“desire as a means of production”), and then, in the multi-cultural attitude and openness to non-Western civilizations that has always characterized somaesthetics, they also focus on lovemaking, aesthetic stylization, the sensual and the sublime, the art of loving in the art of living, and the relation between sexuality and power in Chinese, Indian, Islamic and Japanese erotic theories, finally concluding his reconstruction and interpretation of the “adventures” of *ars erotica* with a chapter on erotics in Medieval and Renaissance Europe.

3.

An important role, in such a broad and complex philosophical work, is played by Shusterman’s comparison and critical confrontation with Foucault’s influential theory of the “aesthetics of existence,” which conceptualized it in terms of an ethical and political practice of the production of subjectivity through processes of subjection and practices of subjectification that determine the relationship of the self with itself and with its *actualité*.¹⁷ As Shusterman had already observed in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*:

Michel Foucault’s seminal vision of the body as a docile, malleable site for inscribing social power reveals the crucial role somatics can play for political philosophy. It offers a way of understanding how complex hierarchies of power can be widely exercised and reproduced without any need to make them explicit in laws or to officially enforce them. Entire ideologies of domination can thus be covertly materialized and preserved by encoding them in somatic norms that, as bodily habits, typically get taken for granted and therefore escape critical consciousness.¹⁸

Thanks to their openness, their interdisciplinary character, their common and indeed strong focus on the central role played by the dimension of the body in the whole of human experience, and their capacity to intersect different but related concepts and fields profitably, both Foucault-inspired aesthetics of existence and Shusterman-inspired somaesthetics are able to offer a complex and stimulating framework for the investigation of specific topics not only limited to the field of aesthetics narrowly understood but, rather, open to the connection between aesthetics, political philosophy and society. In general, both Foucault’s aesthetics of existence and Shusterman’s somaesthetics break aesthetics out of its narrow focus on art and beauty, while insisting on the fundamental somatic but also ethical, social, and political dimension of the aesthetics of life. In this perspective, the most recent developments of somaesthetics offered by *Ars Erotica* also provide a notion of somapower that presents a complement to (or, for some, an alternative to) Foucault’s notions of biopower and biopolitics.

It is not possible here, i.e., in the context of a relatively short Preface to a symposium, to spell out and carefully analyze in detail the affinities and differences, the resemblances and contrasts, between the respective approaches to aesthetics, existence and

¹⁷ I would like to thank Valentina Antoniol for this definition.

¹⁸ Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 270.

erotic experience offered by the two philosophers. In general, it can be observed that both Foucault and Shusterman extend the aesthetics of life deeply into the realm of sexuality, and from a certain point of view *Ars Erotica* can be understood as an extension of Foucault's approach to this topic in his seminal and ambitious *Histoire de la sexualité* in three volumes (*La volonté de savoir*: 1976; *L'usage des plaisirs*: 1984; *Le souci de soi*: 1984),¹⁹ but to some extent also as a critique of what Shusterman considers its limits. In fact, while there are some similarities in the two philosophers' historical and philosophical approaches to sexuality, there are also some obvious differences. For example, the serious consideration of non-Western cultures and an equally serious consideration of the experience of women in the historical development of various experiences and practices of lovemaking throughout the centuries and in different contexts surely played an important and indeed a central role in the book's motivation. Apropos of this, in a recent book review of *Ars Erotica*, it has been observed that Shusterman's new book especially leans on Foucault's "latest work, that is, the two latest volumes of *The History of Sexuality* (*The Use of Pleasures* and *Care of the Self*)," but then

goes far beyond Foucault's Western ancient thinking on the subject matter. The views of Foucault have come to dominate many scholars' understanding of early modern, modern, and postmodern culture, and Foucault's version of the history of sexuality is relied on by many. Foucault's reading of the history of sexuality carries with its assumptions about the original, ubiquitous, and inevitable primacy of masculine subject-formation, of women's subjection and submission, if a woman is mentioned as subjects at all. Compared to Foucault's later works on the history of sexuality and Western culture, Shusterman's work *Ars Erotica* is much more global, gender-sensitive, multicultural, historical, and socio-political. *Ars Erotica* is a welcome and necessary rewriting of Foucault's story of sexuality and Western culture. [...] The Latin term *ars erotica* relates to the aesthetic pleasures and qualities of understanding, sensibility, grace, skill, and self-mastery that go far beyond the limits of sexual activity. The varieties of erotically fueled edification range from self-knowledge and knowing other persons to a more general knowledge of culture and the world. Attentive discipline in lovemaking promotes observational and ethical skills in discerning the feelings of others; it teaches how to read subtle, unintended sensory signals that indicate a potential lover is reciprocally interested or erotically aroused.²⁰

Of course, such an evaluation and judgment (like all evaluations and judgments) must not be "a priori" taken for granted and accepted, but it can be critically examined and discussed, especially with regard to the objections that the author of this book review of *Ars Erotica* apparently raises against Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. I think that this is something that is particularly important to underline in the context of a symposium published on a journal entitled *Foucault Studies*. However, whatever one's specific and autonomous judgment about the relation between the two philosophers' approaches

¹⁹ As is well-known, in 2018 a posthumous fourth volume, *Les aveux de la chair*, has appeared.

²⁰ Line Joranger, "Book Review: *Ars erotica: Sex and somaesthetics in the classical arts of love*," *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 7 June 2021 (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/03616843211021833>).

may be, what is for sure is: (1) that Shusterman, with his recent book, “in a critical, comparative, un-reductive, and gender sensitive way [...] sheds new light on the dialectic relationship between erotic pleasure, sex, gender, politic, culture, religious beliefs, and habits”²¹; and also (2) that Foucault, with his seminal contribution to the history and philosophy of sexuality, apparently aimed to inscribe his analysis of this phenomenon into a more general context centered on elements and dimensions such as “instances of discursive production,” “of the production of power,” “of the propagation of knowledge.”²²

The connection of sexuality to “a transformation into discourse” and especially to “a technology of power”²³ plays a central and indeed fundamental role in Foucault’s original project, and it seems to allow certain comparisons between his *History of Sexuality* and at least some parts and dimensions of Shusterman’s broad, complex and multi-layered analysis in *Ars Erotica*. However, during the 20th century other thinkers and other philosophical traditions have also at times paid great attention to questions concerning the human body, in general, and erotic experience, in particular, thus potentially paving the way for different connections and other comparisons with Shusterman’s pragmatist approach. In this context, I think that it can be worthy of attention to hint at the Frankfurt School’s attempt to emphasize the relation of sexuality with domination in the unreconciled and administered world (in a somehow comparable perspective to Foucault’s focus on power, notwithstanding the obvious differences between the concepts of *Herrschaft* and *pouvoir*) and, potentially, its relation with emancipation and freedom in the perspective of a future reconciled condition. In reflecting on the role played by the dimension of eros in the history of human civilization, most readers will probably and understandably think in a spontaneous way of Marcuse’s classical book *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and other works by this author, but Horkheimer and Adorno also emphatically suggest that “sexuality is the body unreduced,” “it is expression,”²⁴ and, as such, it bears the trace of a potential transformation to promote human liberation.

In some of my previous attempts to contribute to the open, multi-faceted and interdisciplinary field of somaesthetics, I have focused on the aesthetics of popular culture, trying to unite the stimulating influence of both Shusterman’s thinking and Adorno’s philosophy and musicology with my own views on this topic.²⁵ In a similar way, and in the present context of a symposium on Shusterman’s *Ars Erotica*, I would like to mention the fact that some original insights on the philosophical significance of erotic experience were offered by a thinker, like Adorno, belonging to the tradition of critical theory, for whom the relation between eros and the aesthetic dimension was a fundamental and indeed constitutive one. As Adorno claimed in *Aesthetic Theory*, his great but unfinished

²¹ Ibid.

²² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: An Introduction* (1990), 12.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (2002), 196.

²⁵ I allow myself to remind the reader of my essays “A Somaesthetic Approach to Rock Music: Some Observations and Remarks,” *Pragmatism Today* 9:1 (2018), 109-25; “Angela Davis as a Commodity? On the Commodity Character of Popular Music and Nevertheless its Truth Content,” in Colin J. Campbell, Samir Gandesha and Stefano Marino (ed.), *Adorno and Popular Music: A Constellation of Perspectives* (2019), 23-63; “Jazz Improvisation and Somatic Experience,” *The Journal of Somaesthetics* 5:2 (2019), 24-40.

masterpiece in the philosophy of art: “[a]esthetic comportment assimilates itself to [the] other rather than subordinating it. Such a constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic comportment joins eros and knowledge.”²⁶ Among other things, it is surely remarkable that in *Negative Dialectics*, his main work in theoretical philosophy, Adorno precisely used an erotic metaphor to formulate what he considered to be the final aim of philosophizing, as he wrote that “in philosophy we literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to it, without placing those things in prefabricated categories. We want to adhere [...] closely to the heterogeneous.”²⁷ Pietro Lauro, the Italian translator of *Negative Dialectics*, has argued that Adorno, in using the verb *sich anschmiegen* in this passage (translated as “adhering,” and actually indicating a kind of “amalgamating oneself with the other,” or also a kind of “coming together,” inasmuch as an *anschmiegende Umarmung* is an amalgamating embrace, i.e., the union of two or more human beings in a sexual encounter), aimed to claim that “an erotic metaphor was able to express the fundamental question of non-identity. Just like in a sexual intercourse the individuals are united together but still different from each other, without cancelling their individuality;” in a similar way, a negative-dialectical form of philosophizing should promote a form of non-coercive union or fusion with the non-identical, without aiming anymore to arrive at “a Hegelian form of synthesis.”²⁸ This may also remind us of a particularly impressive passage of Shusterman’s reply to the three papers in the present symposium, where he notes that many people are used to “speak[ing] of the male as possessing, ‘having’ or ‘taking’ the female by penetrating her body through the vagina or, by extension, another orifice,” but “topographically, it makes equal or more sense to say that the male organ is possessed, contained, held, or taken within the female’s enveloping flesh.” That is, sexual intercourse is *not* a one-sided activity, comparable to a boring monologue of an active subject with a passive recipient, but is rather comparable to a *dialectical* relation of simultaneous “entering in” and “being-received in” or “being-welcomed in,” in which all the partners involved in the intercourse take part in an exciting intersubjective *dialogue* and quite often exchange their roles in a spontaneous and pleasurable way.

Not by chance, returning to Adorno, in his famous collection of aphorisms and maxims *Minima Moralia*, in critically discussing some Freudian ideas about eros, reason and society, the Frankfurt thinker even dared to establish a connection between sexual pleasure, truth and utopia. Here, indeed, Adorno claims that “he [or she] alone who could situate utopia in blind somatic pleasure, which, satisfying the ultimate intention, is intentionless, has a stable and valid idea of truth.”²⁹ In a sense, this means that the joy of lovemaking, with the somehow “blind” character of the somatic pleasure that it brings, is nonetheless able to “open our eyes” (also at a philosophical level) more than many concepts and argumentations can do, if only we are able to overcome certain preconceptions and to fully understand the power and significance of erotic experience in

²⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (2002), 331.

²⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (2004), 13.

²⁸ Pietro Lauro, “Glossario,” in Adorno, *Dialettica negativa* (2004), 370-1.

²⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (2005), 61.

all its nuanced richness. As once noted by Marcuse, art as such “cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world.”³⁰ Shifting our discourse from artistic experience to erotic experience, we can perhaps paraphrase and reformulate Marcuse’s convincing maxim by saying that perhaps a joyful sexuality as such cannot change the world (in an emphatic meaning of the idea of “changing the world”), but it can surely offer a glimpse of freedom and reconciliation even in an unfree and unreconciled world, perhaps pointing in the direction of a gradual transformation of the existing reality and of the human relations starting from our most intimate, delicate, beautiful, communicative and, for this reason, also powerful and sometimes life-changing experiences of unity, fusion, mutual permeation and interpenetration (or, so to speak, of merging together) with other human beings.

In conclusion, and finally returning to Shusterman after this short excursus on Adorno and Marcuse (after the equally brief digression on Foucault), among the many things that we can learn from a book like *Ars Erotica* – beside the breadth and complexity of its historical reconstruction of ideas and practices that are capable not only of exploring the profundity of erotic experience but also of turning lovemaking into an art –, I would also like to mention the possibility of conceiving of sexuality in a radically non-reductive way as a sort of actualization of something that, as we can learn from the Frankfurt thinkers’ theories, also bears in itself a trace of the utopia of reconciliation between human beings. The magnetic and, in a sense, *radieux* words of *Paper-Thin Hotel*, one of the most wonderful and intense songs by Leonard Cohen, seem to testify all this, as they sing of the beautiful “struggle mouth to mouth and limb to limb” of two lovers and of “the grunt of unity when he came in”: a grunt of unity that, following Adorno, with the “intentionless” nature and the intensity that characterize the experience of pleasure is able to satisfy the “ultimate intention” of life, namely happiness and the achievement of a non-suffocating and non-coercive but rather liberating unity between different human beings. In investigating this immense, theoretically fascinating and existentially captivating field from a pragmatist, intercultural, gender sensitive and meliorist point of view (“focused on concrete problems and specific improvements,” as recommended in general by “the long-range aim of meliorism”³¹), Shusterman helps us to understand how a free, consensual, spontaneous and joyous sexual intercourse includes both the apparent superficiality of the physical contact between two or more bodies and the mental/emotional profoundness of an authentic “fusion of horizons”³² between two or more

³⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (1979), 32. We can also add to this passage from *The Aesthetic Dimension* a quotation from Marcuse’s *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972, 116) “Art itself, in practice, cannot change reality, and art cannot submit to the actual requirements of the revolution without denying itself. But art can and will draw its inspirations, and its very form, from the then-prevailing revolutionary movement – for revolution is in the substance of art.”

³¹ Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 177.

³² I obviously borrow the concept of “fusion of the horizons” from Gadamer’s hermeneutical conception of historical consciousness and freely apply it to the present discourse on sexuality (see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2004. For an interpretation of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics based on his

human beings: in doing so, it represents one of the richest and fullest forms of expressions of our soma in its holistic entirety, and it also embodies in the actuality of the present moment the promise of a future conciliation at a broader and higher level. If this is true, then (following Nick Cave) let's "let love in" our lives.

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