



## SYMPOSIUM

### *Ars Erotica and Sôphrosunê:* **Examining Shusterman's Nietzsche**

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Unlike Gerrit van Honthorst's *Steadfast Philosopher*, Richard Shusterman rejects "[Western] philosophy's wilful, fearful blindness to the aesthetics of erotic experience."<sup>1</sup> Shusterman's aim is to "rethink the erotic arts in a truly aesthetic sense,"<sup>2</sup> a theme that receives an extended treatment in his 2021 *Ars erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*.

In that text, as well as in his 2007 "Asian Ars Erotica and the Question of Sexual Aesthetics," Shusterman is particularly critical of Western approaches to the erotic due to their tendency to define sexual experience in terms of its contrast to aesthetic experience.<sup>3</sup> As a result, he turns instead to an investigation of non-Western approaches to better explore his contention that we should think of the erotic arts as arts.<sup>4</sup>

I argue here that Friedrich Nietzsche's understanding of the ancient Greek concept of *sôphrosunê* could be a potent analytic tool in the context of Shusterman's rehabilitation of the aesthetics of erotic experience. At first glance, this may appear to be an unusual claim, since Shusterman only mentions the concept twice in his book – once in connection with Athenian society and once in connection with Michel Foucault's conception thereof.<sup>5</sup> In addition, despite acknowledging that Nietzsche grants the "possibility that the peculiar

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Shusterman, "Asian Ars Erotica and the Question of Sexual Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65: 1 (2007), 55.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Shusterman specifically says that since the "Western intellectual tradition seems to offer very little guidance or encouragement in sexual aesthetics, it seems worth exploring the Asian traditions of ars erotica" (ibid., 57)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 42, 75.

sweetness and richness proper to the esthetic condition may involve a sexual ingredient,"<sup>6</sup> Shusterman maintains that Nietzsche "...conforms to the anti-erotic aesthetic tradition."<sup>7</sup>

However, if, with Shusterman, we define the aesthetic as including "not only matters of beauty and art, but also countless other attractive qualities (grace, elegance, harmony, refinement, sensitivity, intelligence, charm, style, care, expressive meanings) that pertain to one's person, character, and conduct of life,"<sup>8</sup> then it seems to me that the Nietzschean reading of the concept of *sôphrosunê* can provide useful insights into how the "art" in the erotic arts can be fleshed out. Specifically, if *sôphrosunê* is understood as "measure" (Maß) – as "the very principle of order rather than [...] merely one of the qualities that have to be arranged"<sup>9</sup> – then it could, in my view, provide a guiding principle for understanding an aesthetics of erotic experience.<sup>10</sup>

To establish my position, I provide an interpretation of Nietzsche's conception of *sôphrosunê*, focusing only on his understanding of the Apollonian and Dionysian in the context of the aesthetics of existence. I begin with a very brief overview of the concept of *sôphrosunê* as it first developed in ancient Greek thinking, and its transformation in the teachings of Christianity. I then consider the key aesthetic features that Shusterman extracts from the major theories on *ars erotica*. This allows me to argue that a Nietzschean conception of the *sôphrosunê* can be of value in the development of a somaesthetics-inspired aesthetics of the erotic for which Shusterman, rightly I think, calls.

### ***Sôphrosunê* in Ancient Greece: Soundness of Mind**

It is not possible here to provide an extensive historical overview of this complex concept and its long history of use. Like most Greek words that end on *-osynê*, the term denotes a personal quality.<sup>11</sup> Its etymological meaning is "soundness of mind" or healthy thinking, and as such, it is often equated with another Greek word – *epiphron* – meaning "sensible".<sup>12</sup> As such, in its beginnings, *sôphrosunê* is not a particular quality, such as grace or charm, but rather the principle that orders those qualities.

Four instances of the term (and its cognates) first appear in Homeric poetry,<sup>13</sup> but already at this point, the term's meaning and significance is disputed. Helen North claims, for example, that in the Homeric poems, *sôphrosunê* is devoid of its "moral and religious implications,"<sup>14</sup> while Adriaan Rademaker disagrees, claiming that North's claim is based

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Ars erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* (2021), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Shusterman, "Asian Ars Erotica," x.

<sup>9</sup> Paul van Tongeren, "Nietzsche's Greek Measure," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 24 (2002), 9.

<sup>10</sup> I reserve the development of the second prong of my argument – an elaboration of a Nietzschean eroticism – for another occasion. I engage there with the work of Joseph Kuzma and Robert Pippin, who characterize the desire that forms the basis of a Nietzschean eroticism as an unconventional one of distance.

<sup>11</sup> Daniela Cammack, "Plato and Athenian Justice," *History of Political Thought*, 36:4 (2015), 616.

<sup>12</sup> Helen F. North, "The Mare, the Vixen, and the Bee: 'Sophrosyne' as the Virtue of Women in Antiquity," *Illinois Classical Studies* 2 (1977), 37.

<sup>13</sup> Adriaan Rademaker, *Sophrosyne and the Rhetoric of Self-Restraint: Polysemy & Persuasive Use of an Ancient Greek Value Term* (2017), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (1966), 3.

on an erroneous overemphasis on the diachronic perspective.<sup>15</sup> As a result, Rademaker's aim is to show how age, gender roles, and social setting all provide for very different uses of the word.<sup>16</sup>

In post-Homeric poetry, *sôphrosunê* takes on a host of new meanings, including religious and political ones that reflect the state of Greek society at that point. The concept is reflective of the Apolline morality that emphasizes "restraint, self-knowledge, and the acceptance of limits," with these limits being imposed "in some cases by the gods, in others by the state, and in the case of women by men."<sup>17</sup>

The concept also appears in various forms in Greek tragedy. In the work of Sophocles, for example, we see how the concept of *sôphrosunê* is closely linked to the concept of self-knowledge, even though the word and its cognates are not frequently encountered in his plays. In *Antigone*, for example, there is only one occurrence of the word, and yet, the issue of self-knowledge and self-restraint remains the enduring theme of the work.<sup>18</sup> In Sophocles' *Electra*, on the other hand, the reference to the concept of *sôphrosunê* is more direct, with the protagonist's failure to behave in a womanly fashion linked to the term.<sup>19</sup>

In the hands of Plato, we see the concept associated with Socrates, who is styled as the paradigm of the *sophron* because of his refined *eros*, and his relentless quest for self-knowledge. In Plato's *Charmides*, Socrates and two future tyrants, Critias and Charmides, engage in conversation about *sôphrosunê*. The account of *sôphrosunê* that emerges sees the concept identified with self-knowledge, where the amount of self-knowledge we have is linked to the proper scope of political power.<sup>20</sup>

As Curzer deftly explains, the familiar understanding of *sôphrosunê* as a separate virtue with its own area of application in the bodily pleasures of eating, drinking, and sex emerges in detail and depth in the work of Aristotle.<sup>21</sup> The concept of *sôphrosunê* as a midway between extremes is born, and, in fact, it is this interpretation of the concept that sees the virtue of temperance being taken up by Christianity, albeit in a new form.

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<sup>15</sup> Rademaker, *Sophrosyne and the Rhetoric of Self-Restraint*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> I cannot discuss this here, but my view is that Rademaker's criticism of North is too strong. North does, for example, acknowledge how the use of the word depends on, for example, gender roles, in her 1977 paper on women in antiquity.

<sup>17</sup> North, "The Mare, the Vixen, and the Bee," 37-38.

<sup>18</sup> Rosanna Lauriola, "Wisdom and Foolishness: A Further Point in the Interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone*," *Hermes* 135:4 (2007), 397, n.37. See my 2011 "On the Way Home: Heidegger and Marlene Van Niekerk's Triomf" for a discussion of the *Antigone*-myth as it is interpreted by Martin Heidegger.

<sup>19</sup> Graham Wheeler, "Gender and Transgression in Sophocles' *Electra*," *The Classical Quarterly* 53:2 (2003), 377-388.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Stern, "Tyranny and Self-Knowledge: Critias and Socrates in Plato's *Charmides*," *The American Political Science Review*, 93:2 (1999), 399. My overview of Plato's position is exceptionally cursory here due to space limitations. In *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature*, North provides a very detailed discussion, noting that "In later dialogues, as Plato moves away from the Socratic position, he becomes increasingly interested in *sophrosyne* as the means of controlling the irrational in man, and in the last of his works, the *Laws*, this conception of *sophrosyne* is completely victorious." (158) See also Stanley Rosen's "Sophrosyne and Selbstbewusstsein" (1989) for an excellent extended discussion.

<sup>21</sup> Howard J. Curzer, "Aristotle's Account of the Virtue of Temperance in *Nicomachean Ethics* III.10-11," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35:1 (1997), 5-25.

### **Sôphrosunê Transformed by Christianity: Abstinence**

In the Christian interpretation, *sôphrosunê*, understood as the virtue of temperance, is again transformed, now into the virtue of abstinence from bodily pleasures, most especially the pleasures of sex and food.<sup>22</sup> As Griffith explains:

For both patristic and medieval followers of the faith, the body was felt to be a burden that must be suffered resignedly during earthly life while yet remaining the crucial material out of which devotional practice and spiritual progress were forged. Thus the body, cultivated as an instrument for salvation, was to be endured, subjected to the scrutiny of the spirit, and strenuously disciplined.<sup>23</sup>

It is this understanding of *sôphrosunê* that is so familiar today, with its provenance in ancient Greek thinking almost forgotten.<sup>24</sup> It is also this interpretation of the concept that is examined in Foucault's monumental three-volume history of sexuality.<sup>25</sup> In the first volume of that history, Foucault introduces his distinction between the West's science of sexuality (*scientia sexualis*) and non-Western erotic arts (*ars erotica*) that is the starting point for Shusterman's analysis, and so it is to that I now turn.

### **Examining the Aesthetic Features of *ars erotica***

Shusterman defines the *ars erotica* as "...skilled methods or styles of lovemaking that are thereby elevated with the honorific term 'art.'"<sup>26</sup> In his detailed consideration of the sources of the term and concept, Shusterman notes that:

The actual term "*ars erotica*" is of much more recent vintage. Its wide currency seems to originate with Michel Foucault's use of the term in his influential *History of Sexuality*, whose first volume distinguishes sharply between the modern Western study of sex as *scientia sexualis* and non-Western sexual knowledge in the form of *ars erotica*.<sup>27</sup>

Shusterman grants that his thinking on the *ars erotica* owes a "deep debt" to Foucault's ideas but notes that he diverges from Foucault's thinking in a number of significant

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<sup>22</sup> Paul van Tongeren, "Nietzsche's Revaluation of the Cardinal Virtues: The Case of Sophrosyne," *Phronimon* 3:1 (2001), 133.

<sup>23</sup> R. Marie Griffith, "'Don't Eat That': The Erotics of Abstinence in American Christianity," *Gastronomica* 1: 4 (2001), 36.

<sup>24</sup> In "Nietzsche's Greek Measure," Paul van Tongeren neatly summarises it thus: "The history of the idea of measure can be traced in the growth of these two roots of European culture: Greek culture and Christianity. On the one hand 'measure' connotes the classical virtue of sophrosyne, but on the other hand it conveys the Christian virtue of moderation and modesty" (6).

<sup>25</sup> As Shusterman also notes, a fourth volume was reconstructed from unpublished manuscripts and published in 2018 (Shusterman, *Ars Erotica*, xi). I do not rehearse Foucault's contested analysis here.

<sup>26</sup> Shusterman, *Ars Erotica*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

ways.<sup>28</sup> As Shusterman himself points out, Foucault's work has been accused of "narrowness, sensualism, hedonistic triviality, and apolitical narcissism,"<sup>29</sup> as well as of being impotent as a theoretical basis for feminist theory, something that a somaesthetic approach aims to avoid.<sup>30</sup> What is of significance is that Shusterman identifies nine key aesthetic features that he claims govern the *ars erotica* understood as the erotic arts:

- 1) incorporation of the fine arts and other paradigmatically aesthetic activities into the practice of *ars erotica*
- 2) an emphasis on beauty and pleasure, rather than mere utility
- 3) the highlighting of form
- 4) the drive for stylization
- 5) symbolic richness
- 6) its evaluative dimension, i.e., a concern with beauty, performative virtuosity, or superior taste in critical judgments, connoisseurship, rankings, and competitions
- 7) exhibits a similarity with the fine arts in terms of the hybrid status of nature and culture
- 8) exhibits a further similarity with the fine arts since art involves the dramatization of experience by presenting and intensifying it within a formal frame
- 9) exhibits a final similarity with the fine arts in terms of cognitive and ethical ambivalence.<sup>31</sup>

These aesthetic features granted, the question remains as to how to understand the form, beauty, pleasure and style that Shusterman names as significant here. What do we mean exactly when we called a particular example of the art of love beautiful, stylish, virtuoso or distinctive? When would a sexual act not be seen as stylish or beautiful? Is there any room for the "ugly" or the "horrifying" in an aesthetics of the art of love?

Shusterman's masterful overview of *ars erotica* in selected Western and Asian traditions already gives us some suggestions as to how these questions can be approached. He explains, for example, that in the context of Chinese *QI* erotics, "Because the 'ugly man named Ai Taitou' had this calm harmony of inner virtue, he was irresistibly attractive so that 'men and women flocked to him' (CWZ 72)."<sup>32</sup> In addition, in the context of his over-

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<sup>28</sup> "Asian Ars Erotica," xi.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and Care of the Self: The Case of Foucault," *The Monist*, 83:4 (2000), 532.

<sup>30</sup> This point deserves further elaboration, but in short, as Jana Sawicki (1994), in "Foucault, feminism, and questions of identity" explains, many feminists refuse to abandon their commitment "to some essential, liberatory subject rooted in 'women's experience' (or nature), as the starting point for emancipatory theory" (289). As a result, Foucault is accused of reducing individuals to docile bodies, or to victims of disciplinary technologies, rather than subjects with the capacity to resist (Nancy Hartsock, "Foucault on power: a theory for women?" 171-172). In contrast, in his discussion of the *ars erotica*, Shusterman notes how class and gender are of significance when engaging in the erotic arts (*Ars Erotica*, 14, 15).

<sup>31</sup> *Ars Erotica*, 5-8.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

view of the mystic tradition in Islamic culture, Shusterman notes that "...acts that conventional people regard as 'ugly,' immoral, or animalistic can be 'praiseworthy for the perfect gnostic' and even essential for his worship."<sup>33</sup> In addition, in his discussion of the tension between erotic love as irrational enchantment and prudent desire in the context of the Greek philosophers, Shusterman notes that philosophers diverged on this issue, "...partly because they differed on whether erotic mania was intrinsically deceptive and damaging or whether its crazed enthusiasm that overwhelms self-regarding self-control could instead awaken us beneficially to higher values and realities beyond ordinary rational self-interest."<sup>34</sup> These examples from three different traditions are suggestive of how the *ars erotica* is not limited to simplistic attributions of physical beauty but involves other dimensions of human existence in its relation to the aesthetic.

This is also well-supported by Shusterman's expression of the overarching aim in his book – to show how the *ars erotica* can provide sensory, emotional and ethical instruction. With regards to sensory instruction, he reminds us that in *ars erotica* the key medium is the human soma, and it is this medium that the erotic arts seek to cultivate.<sup>35</sup> With regards to emotional instruction, Shusterman contends that the *ars erotica* is a means of cultivating one's humanity, a method of care of the self that immediately implies care for others.<sup>36</sup>

Besides sensory and emotional instruction, *ars erotica* also fosters ethical learning in Shusterman's analysis thereof. First, he claims that when it is pursued as a "disciplined, reflective practice," it requires that ethical norms, values, and taboos in a society are understood and navigated.<sup>37</sup> Second, "mastery in *ars erotica* implies making oneself appealing enough to attract, charm, and satisfy one's lovers," and in that way fosters ethical learning.<sup>38</sup> Finally, *ars erotica* fosters learning in that it teaches us how to examine the character of others in order to promote erotic fulfilment.<sup>39</sup>

These suggestions are, I think, a fruitful starting point for an elucidation of an aesthetics of the erotic, particularly because of their emphasis on the embodied nature of human beings, as well as the intertwinement of the aesthetic with the ethical. I suggest in what follows that a Nietzschean understanding of *sôphrosunê*, understood as the principle of measure rather than a particular quality, can provide a potent supplement to this starting point for an aesthetics of erotic experience.

### **Reading Nietzsche on *sôphrosunê***

Recall that even though Shusterman acknowledges that Nietzsche recognises that "erotic 'sensuality' belongs to the generative roots of the 'aesthetic condition,'" he maintains that

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 13.

Nietzsche remains part of the anti-erotic aesthetic tradition because of Nietzsche's insistence that "in genuine aesthetic experience this sensual moment must be 'transfigured and no longer enters the consciousness as a sexual stimulus.'" <sup>40</sup> How, then, could Nietzsche's understanding of *sôphrosunê* be harnessed in an attempt to understand the "aesthetic" dimension of the erotic arts?

Nietzsche does not read *sôphrosunê* as mere temperance or abstinence but develops a sophisticated view of *sôphrosunê* understood as "measure" (*Maß*) in the context of his reading of the ancient Greeks and his critique of contemporary European culture that spans his entire oeuvre. <sup>41</sup> In this section, I can only focus on one expression of "measure" as it occurs in Nietzsche's thinking – the concept as it emerges in his early view of the Apollonian and Dionysian – and its relation to the aesthetic. Despite this limited examination of the concept here, I think it is enough to demonstrate my point that Nietzsche's concept of measure is of value in the development of an aesthetics of the erotic that Shusterman advocates.

In the *Birth of Tragedy* (BT), Nietzsche makes it clear that Apollo's domain is culture. He is the god of sculpture. In Nietzsche's reading, the Apollonian *Schein* (BT 1) <sup>42</sup> gives rise to the idea of measured restraint (BT 1) that was called *sôphrosunê* by the ancient Greeks (BT 15). Apollo is also related to the sense of a limit to the individual (BT 4) and boundaries between individuals (BT 9).

The disciplined sensuality and impulse toward beautiful appearance is what places the Apollonian in a tensioned relation with the Dionysian, since Dionysus is associated with chaos and horror. How does this relate to art and the aesthetic? In his analysis of Sophoclean tragedy, Nietzsche highlights the Apollonian as a kind of mask:

When, by means of an energetic attempt, we focus on the sun, we have, when we turn away, dark spots before our eyes by way of remedy alone: conversely, the luminous images of the Sophoclean heroes, in short, those Apollonian masks, are the necessary productions of a look into the horror of nature, luminous spots, as it were, designed to cure an eye hurt by the ghastly night. (BT 9)

The image of the sun evoked here can be read as a veiled reference to the cave allegory in which the shackled prisoners are said to eventually be able to emerge from their shadowed cave-prison and gaze upon the true reality represented by the sun – the Good. In contrast, by creating a tragedy which is "luminous," Nietzsche postulates that Sophocles is able to "cure" the audience of the terror that the abyss of darkness – the "horror of nature" – causes.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>41</sup> As Van Tongeren ("Nietzsche's Greek Measure," 11) points out, there are at least three different contexts in which Nietzsche uses the word and its cognates- ancient Greece, his engagement with contemporary culture, and his anticipation of the (new) nobility. I can only focus on one aspect of this usage in the current paper.

<sup>42</sup> All my references to the *Birth of Tragedy* are from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* [1872] (2000).

Good art (in this case, the Sophoclean tragedy) is able to expose reality as dark and chaotic becoming but also provide the necessary illusion (the “Apollonian masks”) to temper the fear that this realisation brings forth. However, what is most significant is that Nietzsche believes that good art sees its illusions for what they are without the illusions themselves being undermined.<sup>43</sup> As such, Nietzsche’s point is not to encourage flight from the realisation that there is no stable centre – no sun – but rather that (good) art can be a means to cope with the flux that is reality.

As a result, Nietzsche objects to what he calls the “improvement morality”<sup>44</sup> that Socrates encourages – an attempt to flee the world of flux and change by means of a denial of the passions and the instincts. By denying appearance, the body, and Dionysus – that most radical realisation of multiplicity – Socrates believed human being would be able to access absolute, eternal Truth. On the contrary, in acknowledging that all is Becoming, and that there is no absolute Truth, Nietzsche encourages a life of lightness, play, and dance.

So, Nietzsche’s measure is associated with Apollo and the Apollonian, and Apollo and Dionysus exist always together. Dionysus is the god in whom the excess of nature is deified, but, as Van Tongeren points out, the truth of this chaotic and tension-filled nature can only be acknowledged and enjoyed when it is counterbalanced by the Apollonian appearance of unity and order.<sup>45</sup> As a result, Nietzsche’s most weighty discovery was that great Greek culture emerged not so much from the victory of Apollo over Dionysus, but from the continuing, agonistic struggle between the two.<sup>46</sup>

If we return to Shusterman’s features of the *ars erotica*, then it seems to me that Nietzsche’s conception of measure is able to provide a way towards addressing the questions I raised. Specifically, the form, beauty, pleasure and style that Shusterman names as crucial in the erotic arts can be understood as a product of the agonistic relation between the Apollonian and Dionysian. Each instance of the art of love could be called beautiful, stylish, virtuoso or distinctive because of the specific way in which measure is articulated in it. A sexual act would not be seen as stylish or beautiful if there is no unique measure demonstrated in it. Finally, there should be room for the “ugly” or the “horrificing” in an aesthetics of the art of love, in terms of allowing for the continuing struggle between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements thereof to be expressed.

## Conclusion

Shusterman’s somaesthetic consideration of the erotic arts is of great significance on a number of fronts, including, as Shusterman himself points out, that “the right sort of erotic knowledge could promote better affective relations between persons of all kinds, not just between lovers.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, as he also points out, we can approach the problems of sexism

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<sup>43</sup> Hussain, Nadeem J. Z., “Honest Illusion: Valuing for Nietzsche’s Free Spirits,” in *Nietzsche and Morality*, ed. Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu (2009), 172.

<sup>44</sup> GD/TI “Das Problem des Sokrates”/“The Problem of Socrates”11 KSA 6.73

<sup>45</sup> Van Tongeren, “Nietzsche’s Greek Measure,” 13.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> *Ars Erotica*, 2.



and heteronormativity in a better way if we understand their foundations in the history of erotic theory.<sup>48</sup> This paper has sought to draw out the strengths of the interpretation presented in his 2021 book by attempting to show how the Nietzschean conception of *sôphrosunê* can provide useful insights into how the “art” in the erotic arts can be fleshed out. There is ample room for a much extended investigation into what the limitations of the Nietzschean conception of *sôphrosunê* are in this context, as well as an elaboration of a Nietzschean eroticism, especially from the somaesthetic perspective that Shusterman has presented in the context of the *ars erotica*.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

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