



SYMPOSIUM

Beauty between Repression and Coercion: A Few Thoughts on Richard Shusterman's *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*

LESZEK KOCZANOWICZ

SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Poland

Love and sex are central notions in all reflection on humanity. And for obvious reasons, too. These notions defy any simple definition because they connote and reference an almost innumerable multitude of things. Moreover, these notions are highly amenable to social factors and have always been enmeshed in plentiful limitations, prohibitions, and precepts. Consequently, when pondering them, thinkers inevitably find themselves speaking from particular political and cultural discourses and cannot possibly retain a neutral distance to their object of research. Another noteworthy thing is that all considerations of sexual life provoke questions about modernity and postmodernity in this respect. The profound changes that have swept across this sphere of human life over the last 150 years prompt historical – or, to use Michel Foucault's term, genealogical – research aimed at establishing what factors made them possible or, even, what brought them about.

In his *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*, Richard Shusterman addresses an extremely fraught and intricate theme which requires not only a thorough knowledge of the issue itself but also a proficient scrutiny of all the related factors mentioned above. In focusing on the art of love, Shusterman inexorably had to confront, on the one hand, Michel Foucault's groundbreaking *The History of Sexuality* and, on the other, the vast tradition of psychoanalytical writings on sexuality with their fundamental premise of repression, that is, of the problem being expunged from the consciousness of individuals. In this paper, I argue that Shusterman's perspective on *ars erotica* represents an original alternative to these two towering frameworks. Shusterman's immense erudition in his explorations of the discourse on eroticism in various cultures is strictly subordinated to his theoretical design, which stems from his conception of somaesthetics.

Shusterman defines somaesthetics, an original interdisciplinary project which he has been developing for many years now, as “concerned with the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning.”¹ Two elements of this definition are pivotal in the context of *ars erotica*. Firstly, somaesthetics investigates the ways in which we experience our bodies and construct them (in and through self-fashioning). The body (soma) is living matter which may be shaped with more or less skill. Emphatically, the form the body adopts to a large extent depends on our consciousness, including our bodily awareness. Secondly, the body is a locus of meliorative interventions. Perfecting our bodiliness entails perfecting all our relationships with our natural and social environments.

Importantly, as I have discussed in detail elsewhere,² Shusterman’s framework stands in opposition to psychoanalysis and biopolitics; most crucially in that somaesthetics celebrates the body as a potential vehicle for both individual and social emancipation. In all its various incarnations,³ biopolitics insists that bodiliness is a site where power institutes its rules to produce what Foucault calls “docile bodies.”⁴ Of course, the rules governing the subjection of the body to power may be determined in more or less democratic ways, but this does not prevent the body either from having no subjectivity or from being passive, at least in the sense that the only thing it can do is to yield or to try to avoid some external pressures.

In its various iterations, psychoanalysis offers highly complicated models of corporeality, starting with Freud’s classic framework, where bodily drives – the sexual drive and the death drive – are subject to complex social processing, which leads to the formation of identity. This model has since been recast in many ways, mainly as a result of the debate over how much the mechanisms of repression and sublimation are intrinsic to human nature and to what extent they are bound to culture and society. In the latter case, the emancipation of the body from external restrictions and the liberation of drives from repression mechanisms must bring forth radical social change.

This vision was propounded by Herbert Marcuse, who envisaged a social utopia of complete liberation from economic and sexual constraints.⁵ While Marcuse’s framework parallels somaesthetics in the sense that both models foreground the body as a vehicle for emancipation, the two differ considerably in all other respects. Like advocates of biopolitics, when Marcuse calls for change in the principles of social life, he means for the body to *become liberated* rather than *liberating itself*. The potential of corporeality is released in and through revolutionary endeavors against the social order in place:

¹ Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (2008), 1.

² Leszek Koczanowicz, “Toward a Democratic Utopia of Everydayness: Microphysics of Emancipation and Somapower,” *History of European Ideas* 46:8 (2020).

³ Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (2011).

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* [1975] (1995), 135-169.

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1954).

This qualitative change must occur in the needs, in the infrastructure of man (itself a dimension of the infrastructure of society): the new direction, the new institutions and relationships of production, must express the ascent of needs and satisfactions very different from and even antagonistic to those prevalent in the exploitative societies. Such a change would constitute the instinctual basis for freedom which the long history of class society has blocked.⁶

Somaesthetics does not seek such a global transformation and tends to locate the potential of melioristic metamorphosis in the ethical and aesthetic betterment of bodiliness.

Shusterman's monumental study overawes the reader with its wealth of facts and analyses. Shusterman is admirably at ease traversing multiple classical cultures: ancient Greek, Judaic, Chinese, Islamic, Indian, Japanese, and European medieval and Renaissance. From this perspective, the book lends itself to being read and interpreted as a model piece of cultural-studies research. *Ars erotica* is examined in a wide-ranging context of culture, social rules, fine arts, and literature. Global references and comparative insights shed additional light on sexual practices in these cultures. For example, it is particularly illuminating to find out that Japanese and Islamic *ars erotica* took shape after the so-called axial age, that is, the period when various cultures discovered transcendence. Remote though the art of love and transcendence may seem, Shusterman masterfully bridges the gap between them in order to explain the "belated, derivative status" of Japanese and Islamic erotic theories.⁷

Shusterman's book abounds with such unobvious and surprising observations. I believe that his revision of the Foucault-disseminated notion that the West and the East vastly differ in their attitude to sex is particularly significant. Foucault made this influential distinction in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*:

Historically, there have been two great procedures for producing the truth of sex. On the one hand, the societies—and they are numerous: China, Japan, India, Rome, the Arabo-Moslem societies—which endowed themselves with an *ars erotica*. In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul.⁸

On the other hand, "[o]n the face of it at least, our civilization possesses no *ars erotica*. In return, it is undoubtedly the only civilization to practice a *scientia sexualis*; or rather, the only civilization to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), 4.

⁷ Richard Shusterman, *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* (2021), 250.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I. An Introduction* [1976] (1978) Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 57.

initiations and the masterful secret: I have in mind the confession."⁹ In his study, Shusterman questions Foucault's differentiation and points out that:

Chinese theories of lovemaking ... deploy sexual pleasure to serve overarching health and medical aims. Far from unrestrained hedonism, China's *ars erotica* is deeply concerned with matters of religion, ritual, government and household management, and ethical self-cultivation through disciplined self-regulation. Lovemaking, moreover, has ontological import. It not only furthers life through procreation, but its creative union of opposite sexes symbolizes (as it enacts) the fruitful cosmic unity of complementary opposites (like heaven and earth) that produces the rich manifold of things.¹⁰

In the chapter devoted to the art of love in ancient China, Shusterman comprehensively justifies his position by citing texts directly focused on love and sex alongside philosophical treatises. His critique of Foucault's stance concerns not only China but implicitly extends to the other cultures Foucault evokes in *The History of Sexuality* but which, as Shusterman asserts, produced their own modes of corporeal development on the basis of their *ars erotica*.

Crucially, the matter at stake is more serious than simply correcting a mistaken factual view, likely resulting from Foucault's limited access to original sources and reliance on the not necessarily dependable secondary literature. The point is that, for Foucault, the idea that the West has a unique attitude to sex is centrally important, for example, because it helps him show that Christian practices – primarily confession – became axial components of Western culture. As argued by Joel Whitebook,¹¹ there is a paramount sequence at work that has the practice of confession at its root: "Through suggestiveness and stimulation of the confessional process, pastoral power implants particular desires in the penitent's soul so that it can later take hold of and manipulate them."¹² Of course, the transition from confession to a *scientia sexualis* in the framework of generally understood modernity triggers the emergence of biopower, which:

seeks to create a population whose sexual and familial life is organized in such a way it will reliably reproduce itself and socialize the young in a way which will provide workers and consumers for the economy. Through the interventions of its regulatory agencies, it seeks to bring about changes that will steer the population into conformity with its statistically determined requirements.¹³

Channeled through the institution of confession, the unique attitude to sex in Western culture has fostered a society in which biological life itself, of which sex is one of the major expressions, has become an object of regulation – of biopower. Psychoanalysis has played a prominent role in *scientia sexualis* by introducing an ostensibly neutral language in

⁹ Ibid., 58.

¹⁰ Shusterman, *Ars Erotica*, 23.

¹¹ Joel Whitebook, "Michel Foucault: A Marcusean in Structuralist Clothing," *Thesis Eleven* 71:1 (2002).

¹² Ibid., 58.

¹³ Ibid.

which restrictions imposed on sexual life (and, in more general terms, on desires as such) are considered natural and intrinsically human.

Shusterman's book does not offer as elaborate a conception of society grounded in and at the same time grounding sexual life as Foucault's account. In the preface, Shusterman briefly outlines his connection with Foucault: "Foucault ... insisted that this lived aesthetics had a crucial somatic dimension in which one's sexuality (one's erotic desires and the way one expressed and managed them) played an important role."¹⁴ Yet, while highlighting his indebtedness to Foucault, Shusterman underscores points of difference too, such as Foucault's preoccupation with the culture and society of the West. Shusterman also references their disparate personal erotic experiences, suggesting that his book can be read as complementary to Foucault's study:

Foucault always arouses my admiration for his powerful work as an advocate, activist, and theorist of homosexual erotic life. His trailblazing study of eroticism, however inspiringly insightful, understandably reflects his own personal interests and enthusiasms, as it should. 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.¹⁵

Shusterman is certainly right to point to a certain complementarity of his *Ars Erotica* vis-à-vis Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, but the two studies actually produce quite divergent accounts of the body, society, and their mutual relations. However, this overall perspective must be gleaned and pieced together from Shusterman's remarks scattered across the text, as well as from his previous works.

Vital to this venture is the "beauty hypothesis," which appears at the beginning of Shusterman's book and is evoked in its concluding remarks. It holds that:

[a]fter millennia during which beauty was intimately linked to eros, and indeed conceptually defined by it, as the object that inspired desiring love, the eighteenth century witnessed, in the birth of the field of aesthetics, a new discourse of beauty. An important aspect of this new aesthetic discourse was that beauty should be appreciated through an attitude of disinterested contemplation rather than an erotic desire for union. If the divorce of beauty from eros was a factor that helped generate modern aesthetics, it is possible that currents of materialism and libertinism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries helped generate the divorce by making it far more difficult to maintain the vision of erotic love as an uplifting spiritual desire for union of immaterial, virtuous souls. If it was harder to distinguish love from lust, then it was safer, for high-minded or pious thinkers, to separate beauty from eros and its associations with carnal appetites for sensual delights and union. If Europe invented modern aesthetics to displace beauty's earlier discourse of love, then modern aesthetics' neglect of *ars erotica* seems perfectly logical, however unfortunate and misguided.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ars Erotica*, xi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

This beauty hypothesis is consequential in several respects. For one, it holds Shusterman's book together and encourages one to read it as a justification of the first part of the hypothesis. Beauty is what connects the iterations of *ars erotica* in various cultures; more precisely speaking, they share a desire for beauty corporeally understood as a certain state of the body which generates certain states of mind. Very intricate depictions of sexual activities, courtship conventions, coveted relationships, emotions, and excitations coalesce in this desire to attain beauty. This was eloquently conveyed by Plato in his love-focused dialogues, such as *Phaedrus* and *The Banquet*, but, as Shusterman competently argues, the craving for beauty is ubiquitous, surfacing in countless variants in all cultures. As its invaluable asset, Shusterman's book meticulously reproduces the aesthetic elements of numerous manifestations of the art of love. Shusterman is definitely on the mark when he observes that Foucault never ventures beyond formal analysis in his grand work:

Foucault provides detailed descriptions of various erotic choices and the criteria governing them but does not explain what makes these choices specifically aesthetic. The mere use of formal principles or stylization does not entail distinctively aesthetic forms or styles; nor does mere orderly or moderate behavior.¹⁷

How the idea of beauty functions in respective cultures, and within one culture, in various authors and thinkers is what Shusterman attends to with utmost care. Furthermore, he shows how aesthetics dovetails with ethics. Rather than being informed by purely hedonistic motives, the art of love, whether in the East or in the West, is always an exercise in self-discipline and/or a touchstone of human relationships.

The thought of ethics brings us to the second part of the beauty hypothesis, which concerns the parting of ways between beauty and bodiliness at the onset and rise of modernity. To comprehend the full meaning of this part of the hypothesis, one must grasp the difference between somaesthetics and Foucault's aesthetics of existence. The two projects are essentially divergent in that the aesthetics of existence is, above all, an exercise in self-discipline, whose aesthetic dimension lies in turning one's life into a work of art. This approach can be traced back to ancient Greece: "This elaboration of one's own life as a personal work of art, even if it obeyed certain collective canons, was at the centre, it seems to me, of moral experience, of the will to morality in Antiquity."¹⁸ This idea reappears in modernity as an expression of a conscious relation to the self and the attitude "of acting and behaving that at one and same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task."¹⁹

Though also emphasizing the interconnectedness of ethics and aesthetics in respect to bodiliness, the somaesthetic approach is radically different. The difference results from the pragmatist idea of amelioration and development as pivotal to understanding the potential of the body. For this reason, Shusterman's profound explorations of the role of *ars erotica* in various cultures consistently highlight how the search for beauty is inscribed in

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (1988), 49.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* (1997), 309.

ethical, social, and even medical discourses. The desire to experience beauty is the binding element that organizes all these discourses or, to use John Dewey's wording, "rounds them up" and imbues them with unique completeness.²⁰ The remarkable philosophical accomplishment of Shusterman's book lies in mobilizing such a vast and diversified material to show that the aesthetic value bound up with desire promotes the somaesthetic development of the body. Moreover, the volume effectively evinces the immense methodological potential of somaesthetics by showing that it is perfectly applicable to an array of humanities and social sciences as a useful analytical and interpretive tool.

Notably, the beauty hypothesis has implications for understanding (post)modern society. Shusterman persuasively argues that, in the classical period, the art of love realized the value of beauty rooted in corporeal desire in both Western and Eastern cultures. There is no room in this model for either repression or a system of cold rules for classifying and, ultimately, normalizing sexual behavior. However, what happens to the art of love at the dawn of modernity, when, in line with the beauty hypothesis, a split takes place between beauty and desire, between the corporeal and the sublime? It is not a reviewer's task to answer this question, but, without a doubt, to examine this issue, somaesthetics would have to engage with political thought, which could reveal the complicated relations between the body and modernity.

References

- Dewey, John, *Art as Experience* [1934]. New York: Penguin Group, 2005.
- Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* [1975], trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Random House, Inc., 1995.
- Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I. An Introduction* [1976], trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Foucault, Michel, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman. New York and London: Routledge, 1988.
- Foucault, Michel, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinov. New York: The New Press, 1997.
- Koczanowicz, Leszek, "Toward a Democratic Utopia of Everydayness: Microphysics of Emancipation and Somapower," *History of European Ideas* 46:8 (2020), 1122–1133.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2020.1761647>
- Lemke, Thomas, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*. New York: NYU Press, 2011.
- Marcuse, Herbert, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1954.
- Marcuse, Herbert, *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
- Shusterman, Richard, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

²⁰ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* [1934] (2005).

Shusterman, Richard, *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Whitebook, Joel, "Michel Foucault: A Marcusean in Structuralist Clothing," *Thesis Eleven* 71:1 (2002), 52-70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513602071011005>

Author info

Leszek Koczanowicz
lkoczanowicz@swps.edu.pl
 Professor
 Cultural Studies
 SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities
 Poland

Leszek Koczanowicz is Professor of Cultural Studies and Political Science at Department of Cultural Studies at the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities. Leszek Koczanowicz specializes in theory of culture, social theory, and cultural aspects of politics. His previous appointments include *inter alia* Wroclaw University, SUNY/Buffalo (1998–1999 and 2000–2001), Columbia University (2004–2005), and SUNY/Geneseo (2013), Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (2015-2016). Leszek Koczanowicz is the author and editor of twelve books and numerous articles in Polish and English, including *Politics of Time: Dynamics of Identity in Post-Communist Poland* (Berghahn Books 2008), *Lęk nowoczesny. Eseje o demokracji i jej adwersarzach* (Modern Fear: Essays on Democracy and its Adversaries, 2011), and *Politics of Dialogue. Non-Consensual Democracy and Critical Community* (Edinburgh University Press 2015). Recently his was an editor (with Idit Alaphandry) *Democracy, Dialogue, Memory: Expression and Affect Beyond Consensus* (Routledge 2018). His last book to date is *Anxiety and Lucidity: Reflections on Culture in Times of Unrest* (Routledge 2020).

Acknowledgement

This paper is part of the National Science Center Grant no 2018/29/B/HS2/00041, "Somapower, microphysics of emancipation: Toward a culture of liberation."