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SYMPOSIUM

Sex, Emancipation, and Aesthetics: *Ars Erotica* and the Cage of Eurocentric Modernity

Response to Botha, Distaso, and Koczanowicz

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1.

In an interview, two years after publishing the introductory volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité* (*La Volonté de savoir*), Michel Foucault boldly claimed that the future of philosophy depended on looking beyond its European home. "It is the end of the era of occidental philosophy," Foucault declared to his priestly interlocutors on his 1978 visit to a Zen temple in Japan. "Thus, if there is to be a philosophy of the future, it must be born outside of Europe or it must be born as a consequence of encounters and impacts (*percussions*) between Europe and non-Europe."[1] Although he had already celebrated Asian *ars erotica* in contrast to the West's *scientia sexualis*, Foucault did not explore the practices and discourses of those erotic arts in his subsequent work on the history of sexuality. Instead he confined himself to Europe, going back to the Greeks and developing his inquiry into Roman and ultimately Christian theorizing concerning sex. Overcoming that severe limitation was a key motivation for my writing *Ars Erotica*.

There were two good reasons for Foucault's concentration on European sexuality. First, he was primarily concerned with understanding contemporary Western culture's problematic attitudes toward sex. He sought to explain the stubborn discomforts "We 'Other Victorians'" still have with sex by showing the error of the conventional Freudian repression thesis and replacing it with a theory of discursive power networks focused on the truth of sex (among them psychoanalysis). These networks have their potent historical

[1] Michel Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen: un sejour dans un temple," in *Dits et Ecrits* (1994), vol. 2, 622-3. It is worth noting how Foucault's rhetoric ignores and occludes the American option by simply equating occidental philosophy with European philosophy, identifying "the crisis of occidental thought" with the fact that "European thought is at a turning point" as a result of "the end of [European] imperialism" (622).

roots in the Christian pastoral tradition of confession (with its array of sexual sins) that itself has roots in Greek philosophy's ascetic ideologies and techniques of self-knowledge through self-exposure to a significant and worthy other, often an older intimate person. Such a relationship was traceable to the young beloved/older lover (*eronemos*/*erastes*) bond in ancient Athens. This Christian but Greek-rooted pastoral focus can explain why Foucault never investigates Old Testament sexual discourse, despite its obvious influence on the Christian theorists he studiously examines and who helped forge that crucial European pastoral tradition. The title of Leszek Koczanowicz's insightful text in this symposium, "Beauty between Repression and Coercion," deftly signals both Foucault's essential politico-theoretical agenda of displacing Freud's repression theory with his own theory of coercive normalization and control through biopower, and also (through the orientation to beauty) the somaesthetic alternative for sexual emancipation that is neither psychoanalysis nor biopolitics.

The other likely reason for Foucault confining himself to European ideas was his greater familiarity with this tradition. To venture beyond European ideas meant going far beyond his comfort zone as a scholar-thinker, evidently too far for him to make the effort. Foucault had already shown intellectual courage in going beyond his established expertise in modern European thought to explore with admirable depth the sexual thought of ancient Western culture, though his inquiries were largely guided by his preoccupation with contemporary culture's biopower and its deployment of truth and heteronormative ideology. Foucault thus remained within the cage of European culture, and, one might argue, largely within the problematics of Western modernity. He could only peek through the bars of that cage into Asian cultures, which he romanticized as an exotic other rather than studied with the dedication and brilliance that he elsewhere displayed.

I speak of a cage rather than a prison because cages do not always entail involuntary imprisonment that precludes leaving the cage. Cages can also serve as protective confinement from foreign dangers outside the cage (as in shark cage diving, where the divers are protected by being caged). Keeping confined to one's expertise provides a cage of protection from error and folly (cardinal sins for the social field of academic research whose ideals are truth and respectability). Moreover, such confinement protects against temptations of curiosity that, in our culture of quantitative performance, would distract us from maximizing our research output through focused use of the research capital we already possess.

In examining the insightful contributions of Botha, Distaso, and Koczanowicz to this symposium on *Ars Erotica*, I see traces of the cage of European modernity and its dominant philosophical mainstream. Discussion of the non-Western erotic traditions is minimal, yet those traditions form the bulk of *Ars Erotica*. Botha's and Distaso's papers deal much more with Kant and Nietzsche than with Foucault and the historical erotic discourses he and I analyzed. Kant and Nietzsche belong only to my book's short "speculative postscript," which briefly explores the hypothesis that the birth of aesthetics in modern times came with a decoupling of beauty from erotic desire and lovemaking. This

hypothesis could help explain why modern aesthetics does not offer an *ars erotica* or consider lovemaking an aesthetic enterprise.

Maintaining that we need to look beyond the dominant tradition of modern aesthetics in constructing an aesthetic *ars erotica*, my book devotes long chapters to the sexual theories of seven influential premodern cultures. Instead, from the sturdy cage of European modernity in which Kant and Nietzsche are towering figures, Distaso and Botha argue that we can interpret these masters as somehow supportive of a robustly aesthetic *ars erotica*. Distaso makes the case for both Kant and Nietzsche; Botha for Nietzsche alone. I recognize the genius of Kant and Nietzsche and their rightful place in modernity's aesthetic pantheon, just as I appreciate the interpretive ingenuity and scholarship of Botha and Distaso. However, the value of Kant and Nietzsche for an aesthetics of lovemaking remains questionable and quite limited compared to what we find beyond Europe. Why, then, focus again on reinterpreting them instead of more profitably looking elsewhere?

No matter how we interpret Kant's notion of aesthetic disinterestedness, how could we enlist him to guide our *ars erotica* given his restrictive views on sex? He defines sexual union as "the reciprocal use that one human being makes of the sexual organs and capacities of another."[2] This "is either a *natural* use (by which procreation of a being of the same kind is possible) or an *unnatural* use, and unnatural use takes place either with a person of the same sex or with an animal of a nonhuman species." Since, for Kant, such "unnatural" and "also unmentionable vices, do wrong to humanity in our own person, there are no limitations or exceptions whatsoever that can save them from being repudiated completely." Moreover, since "the natural use that one sex makes of the other's sexual organs is enjoyment, for which one gives itself up to the other, [in sexual activity] a human being makes himself into a thing, which conflicts with the right of humanity in his own person." For Kant, "[t]here is only one condition under which this is possible: that while one person is acquired by the other *as if it were a thing*, the one who is acquired acquires the other in turn; for in this way each reclaims itself and restores its personality. But acquiring a member of a human being is at the same time acquiring the whole person, since a person is an absolute unity."

Marriage, conceived as reciprocal possession, is therefore the only legitimate realm for sex, even if sex still condemns the couple to thinghood. Kant concludes,

> it is not only admissible for the sexes to surrender and to accept each other for enjoyment under the condition of marriage, but it is possible for them to do so *only* under this condition. That this *right against a person* is also *akin to a right to a thing* rests on the fact that if one of the partners in a marriage has left or given itself into someone else's possession, the other partner is justified, always and without question, in bringing its partner back under its control, just as it is justified in retrieving a thing.

A somaesthetics of sex should aim at empowering people to be emancipated, enriched, and enriching somatic subjectivities, not bodies as things restricted to heteronormative marital use and owned by one's spouse.

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[2] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1996), 61. For subsequent Kant quotations, see ibid., 62.

I turn now to Nietzsche, whom I frequently enlist as a somaesthetic ally and forefather of somaesthetics, not only because of his emphasis on the body but also for his central theme of self-fashioning or creatively stylizing oneself.[3] In *Ars Erotica* I again invoke Nietzsche as "opposing [the modern anti-erotic aesthetic tradition] by ridiculing its prudishness" and its disinterestedness thesis, while "recognizing that erotic 'sensuality' belongs to the generative roots of the 'aesthetic condition."[4] However, I regretfully note that he ultimately "conforms to the anti-erotic tradition" in not proposing an art of lovemaking or even defending the idea of lovemaking as an aesthetic art but instead insisting that the sexual impulse should be sublimated for it to achieve true artistic character. Warning artists "how harmful sexual intercourse can be" to their efforts,[5] Nietzsche urges sublimating the sexual impulse in artistic creation rather than in artfully performing the sexual act with sensitive, reflective, meliorative aesthetic care.[6]

In short, while constituting a far better ally than Kant, Nietzsche provides inadequate support for my aims in *Ars Erotica*. Although he sees an intimate link between the erotic and the aesthetic, Nietzsche ultimately advocates a relationship of aesthetic sublimation of sexual excitement rather than one of aesthetic artistry in sexual performance. His notion of *sôphrosunê*, the focus of Catherine Botha's paper, relates to the same aesthetic demand for sensible sublimation, in which the term "sensible" means not only relating to the senses (hence also to sensuality) but also being sensible in the sense of reasonably measured, moderate, or temperate. This ambiguity is reflected in Nietzsche's somaesthetic advocacy "of an ever greater spiritualization and multiplication of the senses" (WP 820), an advocacy I commended in *Performing Live* (PL 152), though noting it remains "far too vague" and abstract to be adequate for a pragmatic somaesthetics. His eroticism similarly remains too abstract and sublimated; the Dionysian frenzy he believes indispensable to aesthetic experience and that derives "above all [from] the frenzy of sexual excitement" should be mastered by the Apollonian moment of *sôphrosunê* for the creation of a work of fine art, not for the refined, artful movements of physical lovemaking, which we find in Asian *ars erotica*.[7]

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[3] See Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (2000), 147-8, 154, 204-12; *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (2008), 49-51; *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (2012), 145-6. Hereafter these texts will be abbreviated as PL, BC, and TTB respectively.

[4] Shusterman, *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* (2021), 395; hereafter abbreviated in the text as AE.

[5] Cited in AE 395 from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (2002), 80-1; hereafter abbreviated in the text as BGE.

[6] In another passage of his *Nachlass*, Nietzsche similarly explains, "A relative chastity, a prudent caution on principle regarding erotic matters, even in thought, can belong to the grand rationale of life even in richly endowed and complete natures. This principle applies especially to artists, it is part of their best wisdom of life." See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (1967), section 815; hereafter abbreviated in the text as WP, with references to section numbers.

[7] "If there is to be art, if there is to be any aesthetic doing and seeing, one physiological condition is indispensable: frenzy. Frenzy must first have enhanced the excitability of the whole machine; else there is no art. All kinds of frenzy, however diversely conditioned, have the strength to accomplish this: above all, the frenzy

Besides the sublimated abstraction and vagueness of Nietzsche's erotic theory, with its lack of pragmatic, melioristic methods of lovemaking, his value for constructing a somaesthetically satisfying *ars erotica* is diminished because of his questionable attitude towards women. Although interpretive ingenuity may manage to rescue Nietzsche from charges of sexism, I am uneasy with repeated utterances that ring with sexist overtones, affirming woman's "instinct for the *secondary* role" (BGE 102) and claiming that any man

> who has depth, in his spirit as well as in his desires […] must conceive of woman as a possession, as property with lock and key, as something predestined for service and attaining her fulfilment in service – in this matter he must take his stand on […] Asia's superiority of instinct, as the Greeks formerly did: they were Asia's best heirs and pupils and, as is well known, from Homer to the age of Pericles, with the *increase* of their culture and the amplitude of their powers, also became step by step *more strict* with women, in short more oriental (BGE 166-7).

The strategy of my book was instead to condemn the sexism of classical Asian sexology while extracting its most aesthetically rewarding techniques and strategies of erotic performance for the enjoyment of both men and women, so that we could see how they might be reconstructed for effective use today and perhaps extended to new gender identities beyond the traditional binary of male/female.[8]

Kant and Nietzsche had further reasons for not venturing into the aesthetics of *ars erotica*. They had very little experience of physical lovemaking (Kant evidently had none at all, while Nietzsche's sex life seems a vacant mystery, where nothing is known for certain[9]). The Horatian motto *Sapere aude* ("Dare to know") that Kant hailed as expressing his Enlightenment ideal did not extend to a quest for their knowing in the biblical sense of carnal knowledge. Foucault by contrast was a boldly adventurous carnal knower with a distinctly developed erotic taste, even if some might find it too demanding, limited, or even morally suspect.[10]

In rejecting Kant as a guide for aesthetic eroticism and in noting Nietzsche's limitations in that role, I am not concluding that modern European philosophy has nothing valuable to offer *ars erotica*. While highlighting the dominant anti-erotic tradition of modern aesthetics, I noted two eighteenth-century materialist philosophers of the French Enlightenment who took a vivid interest in sexual matters and who in some way straddle the divide that Foucault suggests between *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis*. I refer to Denis Diderot –

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of sexual excitement, this most ancient and original form of frenzy." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Portable Nietzsche,* ed. Walter Kaufmann (1954), 518.

[8] Ancient cultures reveal a multiplicity of gender identities and roles beyond the simple male/female distinction.

[9] Currently there is considerable speculation about his being a homosexual, but no conclusively compelling evidence that he was. For a biography that presents the most extensive case for the gay thesis, see Joachim Kohler, *Zarathustra's Secret. The Interior Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (2002).

[10] See my somaesthetic analysis of Foucault's views regarding contemporary sexual practices, including his advocacy of consensual S/M, in *Body Consciousness*, ch. 1, "Somaesthetics and Care of the Self: The Case of Foucault."

philosopher, art critic, author of erotic fiction, co-creator and chief editor of the influential *Encyclopédie* – and Julien Offray de La Mettrie, medical doctor, physiologist, philosopher, and author of poetic essays celebrating the pleasures of sex. La Mettrie's materialist sensualism was so scandalous that he was compelled to flee, first France and then Holland, to find refuge with Frederick the Great in Berlin, where he allegedly died by overeating a pheasant pâté. Despite their materialism and critique of traditional sexual morality, both Diderot and La Mettrie rejected sexual libertinism as corrupt, jaded, immoral, elitist exploitation, while Diderot also prudently distanced himself from La Mettrie's extreme hedonism.

Foucault's *History of Sexuality* ignores La Mettrie.[11] However, it does include one noteworthy mention of Diderot. Foucault invokes the "great chase after the truth of sex, the truth in sex"[12] by means of Diderot's *Les Bijoux Indiscrets*, an erotic novel concerning the Congo Sultan Mangogul, who is very curious about woman's sexuality and virtue, and especially concerned about the fidelity of his beloved mistress Mirzoza. By rubbing a magic ring and pointing it at any woman, the sultan is able to make the woman's vagina speak out her owner's sexual truth, thereby exposing the lies the woman has told with her mouth and thus creating embarrassed confusion for the woman but also for others closely connected to her (such as the unsuspecting lover or husband wrongly convinced of the woman's sexual fidelity[13]). If Diderot, like his fictional sultan, was curious about the mysteries of female sexuality (while feeling comfortably familiar with his own), Foucault hardly seems interested in female sexuality per se but instead is interested in inquiring about our culture's heightened interest in the individual's own sexuality and about what powers direct this interest and inquiry. Taking woman's sexualities and subjectivities more seriously than did Foucault was a central feature of my *Ars Erotica* project, as Botha and other commentators have realized.[14] The other two principal ways my work transcends the limits of Foucault's is by detailed study of non-Western erotic cultures and by in-depth analysis of *ars erotica*'s aesthetic features, as the symposiasts here recognize. The

[11] The texts of La Mettrie focusing on eroticism are *L'école de la volupté* (1746) and *L'art de jouir* (1751). Towards the end of the former there is a stunning description of how to enjoy lovemaking in a dreamy, drowsy state when one is already sleepy from prior consummations. La Mettrie details how the woman enjoys the breathing of her sleeping lover and with closed eyes feigns sleep herself as her lover awakes to rediscover her naked charms, first with his eyes and then through touch, arousing her first gently and then with increased passion, at which point she opens her eyes and adds her energetic response to the passion as they move toward ecstatic climax.

[12] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: An Introduction* (1980), 79; hereafter abbreviated in the text as HS1.

[13] Denis Diderot, *Les Bijoux Indiscrets* (1748) translated as *The Indiscrete Toys*. The book's chapter 16 clearly points to Foucault's theme of the priestly interest for power through confession of sexual truth. When women find muzzles to silence their talking vaginas, the priests insist that the women "submit […] to the will of Brama […] to awaken [their] conscience […] by confessing the crimes [they] were not ashamed to commit." Diderot's writings (in fiction and philosophy) mix science and eroticism, anatomical reflections and colorful descriptions of erotic desires, seductive methods, and lovemaking (including same-sex couplings and even bestiality).

[14] See, for example, Line Joranger who critiques Foucault's neglect of women's sexuality, noting that "*Ars Erotica* is much more global, gender-sensitive, multicultural" in her review of the book in *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (2021).

difference of cultural scope is too obvious to warrant discussion, but the aesthetic difference between my *Ars Erotica* and Foucault's *History of Sexuality* deserves highlighting.

2.

Foucault clearly suggests that aesthetics is central to his study of sex because he characterizes his history through the notion of "aesthetics of existence," "the long history of these aesthetics of existence and these technologies of the self."[15] He speaks of Greek "aesthetics of existence […] [as] as a way of life" that shone with "the brilliance of beauty" through its "visibly beautiful shape" (HS2 89). However, there is no substantive discussion of the aesthetic principles or source of that beauty. We learn that that life's "moral value did not depend either on one's being in conformity with a code of behavior, or on an effort of purification, but on certain formal principles in the use of pleasures, in the way one distributed them, in the limits one observed, in the hierarchy one respected" (HS2 89). Foucault then relates this "aesthetics of existence" to a voluntary ascetic of "stylization" through "rarefaction of sexual activity"; "sexual moderation was an exercise of freedom that took form in self-mastery […] [as] self-restraint," "the necessary ascesis had the form of a battle to be fought […] [for] dominion of self over self" (HS2 91).

However, we get no real analysis of what the formal or stylizing principles were or in what sense they were aesthetic. Nor do we get an aesthetic analysis of the qualities and forms of pleasure that one had and used in one's sexual activities. Instead, Foucault focuses on "a 'quadri-thematics' of sexual austerity – formed around and apropos of the life of the body, the institution of marriage, relations between men, and the existence of wisdom" (HS2 21); "the concern with sexual austerity was endlessly reformulated" and served "to define an austere style in the practice of pleasures" (HS2 22, 24). With his one-sided emphasis on austerity, Foucault does not give us a proper appreciation of the aesthetic joys of sex, which, though more evident in Asian erotology, also existed within Greco-Roman culture, as *Ars Erotica* makes clear.

A key aim of my book is exploring the aesthetic dimensions of *ars erotica* to show how they could also serve ethical aims of care for self and others, thus providing an aesthetic education and refinement of character through erotic energy and practice that could have broader social and political benefits. All three symposiasts recognize the central role aesthetics plays in my somaesthetic approach to sex. Botha notes "nine key aesthetic features" that I delineate in *ars erotica*, in the book's general introductory chapter, while the subsequent chapters flesh out the concrete forms these principles take in the different premodern cultures I examine. Many of these forms depart from the sexual austerity on which Foucault focuses, even when they show similar ethical concerns of care for self and other. There is more to the pleasures and beauty of sex than the pleasures of self-mastery and victorious self-restraint. Cultivating such pleasures, moreover, has more than selfish

[15] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* (1985), 11; hereafter abbreviated in the text as HS2.

effects. Even if Foucault's driving aim in his study of sexuality is not aesthetic but political, he should not shortchange the aesthetics of *ars erotica*.

The aesthetic power of shared erotic pleasures is key to the political, emancipatory dimension that both Distaso and Koczanowicz discern in my book and that I share with Foucault. Although the book's historical chapters trace how political factors (laws, institutions, wars, and religious conflicts) have shaped premodern sexual ideology and often constrained the paths of erotic pleasure, while also showing how systematic pursuit of such pleasures sometimes served as a form of resistance to conventional norms, I offer no detailed analysis of how a somaesthetics of sex could serve emancipatory political projects today. Koczanowicz and Distaso, though very sympathetic to this liberational strategy, understandably ask for further discussion. Pleasure and its sociopolitical dimensions have long been part of my pragmatist program in aesthetics. Two Parisian philosophers highlighted this democratic hedonic thrust already in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992), one of them claiming that my revaluation of popular art imaginatively suggests "a *con-sensualist* society rather than a merely consensual one," a society whose democratic ideal is to afford egalitarian access to "pleasurable activities."[16] Although that book did not explore sex, some of its arguments for the pleasures of rap, rock, and embodiment could have been extended to sexual pleasures. They were surely in my mind at that time, though not explicitly in my conscious authorial ambitions; but nor was the articulation of my somaesthetic project.

The sociopolitical issues raised by Koczanowicz and Distaso require more extensive thought and detailed argument than I can deliver here, but let me address some of them, however briefly. In speaking of the aesthetic power of shared erotic pleasures as a tool for emancipatory happiness that is not only personal but more generally social and political, we need to understand the complex notion of shared pleasure in the public sphere. When two or more people enjoy pleasure together in sexual activity, this is only the first level of shared pleasure, the pleasure enjoyed by the direct participants. However, the pleasure that those participants enjoy radiates into feelings of satisfaction, well-being, or positive mood that influence the participants' attitudes and behavior in a constructive way as they emerge from their sexual experience into the social world. This positivity and its resultant actions create in turn a favorable, cheerful atmosphere that influences the feelings of those who were not directly involved in the erotic transaction but nonetheless benefit indirectly from its positive effects. Those who benefit need not have any direct contact at all with the satisfied lovers, because the beneficial atmosphere can extend from the positive attitudes of the lovers (call them A) and those that directly encounter their positivity (call them B) to other people (C) who encounter only those B people; and the affect recursively extends to others who encounter the positively affected C people. On the one hand, this notion of the radiation of erotically generated positive affect resembles Plato's famous

[16] I cite here from Antonia Soulez, "Practice, Theory, Pleasure and the Forms of Resistance: Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics*," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 16:1 (2002), 3. See also Rainer Rochlitz, "Esthétiques hédonistes," *Critique* 540 (1992), 353-73. These articles discuss my *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

image of how poetic beauty extends from the muse to the poet, then to the rhapsode and finally to the audience, like the way a magnet's positive pull affects a chain of iron rings. On the other hand, this recognition of the crucial social importance of indirect effects converges with Dewey's definition of the public. "The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for."[17]

This means that a happy con-sensualist society need not be one in which everyone would directly enjoy sexual pleasures, though everyone could indirectly benefit from the atmosphere created by such pleasures being freely enjoyed by those who wish to enjoy them. In my view, a happy society is one whose freedom means that attaining personal happiness is not an obligation, where unhappiness is not a stigma or a sin. In short, my vision of a good society reflects my pragmatist prejudice for pluralism and appreciation of difference. That is one reason why I do not share Kant's commitment to the necessary, universal validity of aesthetic judgment, and why Distaso need not worry that my somaesthetic approach would impose a set of ethical values that would preclude dissent. Somaesthetics, as I conceive it, is especially sensitive to pluralism and freedom rather than advocating a uniform right way of doing things. This pluralism reflects the somatic recognition that our bodies are often very different (with respect to age, gender, size, strength, health, etc.) and that one can perform the same bodily act or movement in a variety of different ways (for example initiating it from different body parts). In practical somaesthetic workshops, we explore these varieties so that individuals can find which option works best for them.

Appreciation of difference is central to what I've elsewhere presented as a three-pronged argument for participatory democracy based on the aesthetic values of enriched communicative experience and self-realization.[18] First, as humans are social creatures, an individual's free and active participation in democratic life make will make her experience richer and fuller in terms of self-fashioning in her aesthetics of existence. Second, if shared experience is richer and more fulfilling than an individual's isolated experience (recalling Dewey's "[s]hared experience is the greatest of human goods"[19]), then the free sharing of democratic life will further reward our lives with greater meaning and satisfaction. Third, democracy's advocacy of the free participation of different types of people (with different views and attitudes) provides an attractive diversity of culture that adds not only the spice of variety to communal life but also gives the individual a heightened sense of her own distinctive perspective and identity in pursuing her aesthetics of existence.

Distaso wonders whether our modern Western tradition contains "subversive elements" that can help us move from individual self-cultivation to more collective cultural refinement and emancipation. Properly answering this question requires more study and analysis than I can provide here, but one might start to look for such helpful elements (subversive or not) in Diderot, Schiller, and in some strands of Marxian thought, including

[17] John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* in *John Dewey: The Later Works* (1984), 245-6.
[18] Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (1997), 96-7.
[19] Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1981), 157.

that of Wilhelm Reich, the psychoanalytic sexologist whom Foucault mentions briefly but approvingly, and in Foucault himself.[20] I also appreciate the idea Distaso mentions of loosening the coercive bond that ties virtue to truth so that we can move ethics closer to beauty and happiness. Nietzsche seems an ally here through his critique of truth and the dangers that the relentless pursuit of truth presents for happiness and well-being. I likewise recognize (and have always insisted) that somaesthetic approaches are only *one* tool for dealing with problems that trouble the social world and the life of individuals. Effective progressive reform requires addressing economic and political dimensions of power relations, but somaesthetics can be enlisted to aid such broader economic, political, and social struggles.

Somaesthetic reflection and critique can reveal and highlight troubling discomforts resulting from social ills, while somaesthetic cultivation can sharpen perceptual and performative skills and build confidence to resist the power relations that generate these discomforts, enabling micro-emancipations that can also eventually build into macro-movements of freedom. *Kulturkritik* has always been part of somaesthetics. In fact, the project of somaesthetics arose in large part through *Kulturkritik* of consumer society's preoccupation with stereotype representations of bodily beauty and norms of well-being that serve the profit motives of the advertising, fashion, dieting, cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery industries rather than the genuine well-being and happiness of the public. The project began by highlighting experiential somaesthetics (and its inner felt beauty and pleasures) in contrast to the conventional emphasis on beautiful external appearance or representations defined by conventional stereotypes that reflect societal power relations and dominating norms. Experienced pleasures of beautiful subjective feelings offered a possible realm of freedom and happiness that could grow through reflective cultivation into greater skills for living well and that could build confidence and powers for taking on social challenges beyond the individual's private concerns.

3.

In pursuit of this project of creating a society with greater freedom and eudaimonia, Distaso rightly remarks "it would be interesting to develop a line of investigation putting somaesthetics into closer dialogue with strands of democratic Marxism and

[20] Foucault admits the importance of Reich's "reinterpreting the deployment of sexuality in terms of a generalized repression; tying this repression to general mechanisms of domination and exploitation; and linking together the processes that make it possible to free oneself both of repression and of domination and exploitation. […] The importance of [Reich's 'historico-political critique of sexual repression'] and its impact on reality were substantial. But the very possibility of its success was tied to the fact that it always unfolded within the deployment of sexuality, and not outside or against it. The fact that so many things were able to change in the sexual behavior of Western societies without any of the promises or political conditions predicted by Reich being realized is sufficient proof that this whole sexual 'revolution,' this whole 'antirepressive' struggle, represented nothing more, but nothing less – and its importance is undeniable – than a tactical shift and reversal in the great deployment of sexuality. But it is also apparent why one could not expect this critique to be the grid for a history of that very deployment. Nor the basis for a movement to dismantle it" (HS1 131).

psychoanalysis." That line of inquiry has already begun with a somaesthetic study of Frantz Fanon and with Leszek Koczanowicz's insightful study of Herbert Marcuse's emancipatory theorizing in the quest of a non-repressive, happier social order through release from sexual repression and the forging of new forms of human relationships nourished by the erotic energy thus released.[21] Koczanowicz further advances this promising line in his symposium text, which astutely suggests that a somaesthetic approach to eroticism can provide a useful alternative both to Freud's repressive hypothesis and Foucault's biopolitical analysis of sex as pastorally inspired *scientia sexualis*.

I share Koczanowicz's sympathy and appreciation of Marcuse's theoretical efforts and utopian hopes for liberation toward greater individual and social happiness. I also share the view that Marcuse's notion of somatic liberation is defined in terms of the removal of external repression that would release "the instinctual basis for freedom which the long history of class society has blocked,"[22] so that the body, in Koczanowicz's words will "*become liberated* rather than *liberating itself*." In contrast, somaesthetics holds less faith in the uncultivated powers of the "instinctual basis" of our bodies (even in such allegedly instinctual matters as sex) but instead regards the soma as powerfully shaped by culture and believes that without such shaping our bodies would be miserably inept (even if some cultural shaping is unhappy misshaping). Somaesthetics therefore insists on working through the body as a tool of liberation that can be coordinated with and supported by activist efforts for sociopolitical change and that can reciprocally support them. Distinctively somatic *praxis* thus forms an important part of somaesthetics, which can also contribute to varieties of political praxis. Marcuse's program of body liberation provides no substantive discussion of the body, its powers, parts, and training.[23] Not only is Marcuse's account of the body too vague and abstract, but his aesthetic theory remains too limited to the bourgeois aesthetic tradition of formalism, disinterestedness, and art as "beautiful illusion (*schöner Schein*)" rather than performative action for it to satisfy my somaesthetic erotic agenda (AD 48).

Given this interest in developing a dialogue between somaesthetics and democratic Marxism, why not go back to Marx himself? Although I've rarely written about Marx, my pragmatist and somaesthetic projects have a clear relationship to Marx's thought, which scholars in mainland China have analyzed.[24] Here is not the place to explore this

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[21] See Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and Politics: Incorporating Pragmatist Aesthetics for Social Action," in *Beauty, Responsibility, and Power*, ed. Leszek Koczanowicz and Katarzyna Liszka (2014), 5-18; and Leszek Koczanowicz, "Toward a democratic utopia of everydayness: Microphysics of emancipation and somapower," *History of European Ideas* 46 (2020), 1122-33.

[22] Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978), 4; hereafter abbreviated in the text as AD.

[23] Pierre Bourdieu offers a much more detailed, social class-centered, and largely Marxian-inspired discussion of the body and its incorporation of *habitus*, but, unhappily, his view is overly deterministic and pessimistic. See Pierre Bourdieu, "Belief and the body," in *The Logic of Practice* (1990). For an example of my critique of Bourdieu's deterministic outlook, see Richard Shusterman, "Pierre Bourdieu and Pragmatist Aesthetics: Between Practice and Experience," *New Literary History* 46:3 (2015), 435-57.

[24] Baogui Zhang, "The possibility of life becoming art: A comparison of Marx's and Shusterman's life aesthetics," (in Chinese) *International Aesthetics* (Beijing) 29 (2018), 213-28. 张宝贵,"生活成为艺术的可能性:马克

relationship in detail, but let me note some key elements of Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* that strongly resonate with central somaesthetic themes.[25] First is the overarching goal of cultivating the senses to make our human existence richer, more insightful, more satisfying, and more humane (an agenda outlined in my "Thinking through the Body. Educating for the Humanities" and in my initial "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal"). With his materialist insistence that "*Sense-perception* (see Feuerbach) must be the basis of all science," Marx argues that "the sense of an object for me goes only so far as *my* sense goes" and that "the *senses* of the social man [formed and cultivated by a humane society] are *other* senses than those of the non-social man," who exists under oppressive capitalist society dominated by private property rather than by the social and humane (PPC 108). As somaesthetics views the soma (its habits, powers, and sensibilities) as essentially shaped by its social (and natural) environment and as currently constrained by contemporary society's excessive consumerism and obsession with image, so Marx complains that capitalism has corruptively impoverished our senses. "Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it. […] In place of all these physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses – the sense of *having*." Humanity has lost its "inner wealth" of sensuous social satisfactions to the barren logic of private ownership. "The transcendence of private property is therefore the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and attributes; but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, *human*" (PPC 106-7).

For Marx, what makes our experiences and actions human and social is *not* that they are done in the company of others but that they have "lost their *egotistical* nature" so that "the senses and enjoyments of other men have become my *own* appropriation" (PPC 107). Marx explains, "[o]nly through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short, *senses* capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being" (PPC 108). In contrast to "*sense* caught up in crude practical need" which is "only a *restricted* sense," cultivation "is required to make man's *sense human*" so that our senses and sensibility develop "to the entire wealth" of human potential, to produce "man in this entire richness of his being," as "*profoundly endowed with all the senses*" (PPC 109). For Marx, as for somaesthetics, one's cultivated senses are not merely perceptive but also critical and reflective, and in this sense theoretical. He speaks of socialism providing us with "positive self-consciousness" that "proceeds from the *practically and theoretically sensuous consciousness* of man." "The senses have therefore become directly in their practice *theoreticians*" (PPC 107, 113).

思与舒斯特曼生活美学思想之比照," *外国美学*,29 (2018), 213-28. Key to his comparative analysis are the themes of materialism, sensuous embodiment, meliorism, democratization, concern with the social shaping of experience, emphasis on praxis and changing reality rather than simply describing it.

[25] I confine my discussion to the manuscript "Private Property and Communism," in Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and the *Communist Manifesto* (with Frederick Engels) (1988), 99-114; hereafter abbreviated in the text as PPC.

Marx shares with somaesthetics a pluralistic, holistic vision that seeks to reconcile presumed oppositions, "subjectivism and objectivism, spiritualism and materialism, activity and suffering" (PPC 109), or as Dewey would say "doing and undergoing," whose apparent opposition is synthesized in every experience. Among these false dichotomies, Marx claims, "[w]hat is to be avoided above all is the re-establishing [*fixieren*; fixating] of 'Society' as an abstraction *vis-à-vis* the individual. The individual *is the social being*" (PPC 105), as the soma is socially shaped and is eminently social; its social character is evident even in activities done alone rather than among others (for instance doing yoga in the privacy of one's room). As Marx writes, "[s]ocial activity and social consumption [*Genuß*, perhaps better translated here as 'enjoyment'] exist by no means only in the form of some *directly* communal activity" (PPC 104). Somaesthetic self-fashioning (like the self it fashions) is always already the product of social existence and is performed with social consciousness, no matter how narcissistic, unconventional, or antisocial. As Marx puts it: "my *own* existence *is* social activity, and therefore that which I make of myself, I make of myself for society and with the consciousness of myself as a social being" (PPC 105).

Finally, somaesthetics and Marx converge on the meliorist primacy of practice and the view that the problems of philosophy find their real solution not through pure theory but through changes of practice that theory can suggest but not accomplish in itself. For Marx, as for somaesthetics, "the resolution of the *theoretical* antitheses is *only* possible *in a practical* way […] Their resolution is therefore by no means merely a problem of knowledge, but a *real* problem of life, which *philosophy* could not solve precisely because it conceived this problem as *merely* a theoretical one" (PPC 109). That is why somaesthetics insists on the element of actual somatic practice and on including practical workshops for in its study and instruction. Reconciling the apparent antithesis of the sexual and the spiritual requires actual changes of practice and attitudes, not merely theoretical gestures to ancient cultures in which the erotic and the spiritual (at least theoretically) converged. However, the study of *ars erotica* in those ancient cultures provides helpful examples to inspire such change of attitudes and practice.

4.

Koczanowicz is correct that *Ars Erotica* does not present a comprehensive contemporary "conception of society grounded in and at the same time grounding sexual life." It could not do so because the book instead sought to explore a variety of different premodern cultures with importantly divergent religious, cultural, social, and political ideologies. To synthesize them in a single vision of society would be to flout or obscure the book's concern for the values (pragmatic as well as ethical and aesthetic) of respecting difference and appreciating variety. Oversimplification and ethnocentric assimilation plague our cultural understanding, even when we try to avoid it. Recognizing these dangers, I equally recognize the danger of shrinking from the search for important factors shared by the different erotic cultures that the book treats and that shape our own. I therefore conclude

by suggesting four such factors shared by the past and still maintaining much (though less) of their power at present.

These interrelated factors are patriarchy, progeny, possession, and penetration. Patriarchy would make little sense if there were no progeny or no knowledge of paternity as causing progeny. As knowledge of the seed-giving father's identity was always far less certain than knowing the birth-giving mother, patriarchy served as a structure to establish well-defined, stable, socially endorsed, and biologically-grounded paternity for progeny by means of greater control of women through male authority.[26] Paternity was a matter not only of knowledge but also of power through the patriarchal possession of one's progeny-producing wives or concubines and of one's children (whose labor and obedience the father possessed). Sexually, possession was understood as penetration, because penetration by the male genitals of the female's genitals was required for conception of progeny, unlike the spawning of fish, as Diderot's dreaming D'Alembert laments.[27] We speak 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. This notion of penetration-possession as active piercing for producing progeny helps shape the patriarchal principle of heteronormativity and masculine notions of potency and erotic action as conquest through stabbing-like violence. If, in cultures of the past, the demand for progeny prescribed heteronormativity, which in turn promoted gender binarism, today's new technologies of fertilization weaken the claim that offspring requires heterosexual coitus and thus weaken the gender binarism that heterosexuality implies.

However, despite the prominence of these factors, we find in premodern erotic thought a recognition of gender roles beyond the heterosexual binaries and an appreciation of erotic satisfactions beyond those of penetration and genital contact. If Abelard was too macho, too insecure, or too penitent to embrace those non-penetrative options (that Heloise longed to provide), other clerics, courtly lovers, and laypersons (Christian and non-Christian) were willing to accept them. Even the avowedly "impertinently genital" Montaigne recognized these non-genital, non-penetrative erotic pleasures (AE 375, 377-9). In this spirit, without advocating a utopian future free from "the deployment of sexuality" and its genital "sex-desire," somaesthetics converges with Foucault's pluralistic call for greater appreciation of "bodies and pleasures" in their polymorphic diversity of possibilities, for "inventing new possibilities of pleasure […] through the eroticization of the

[26] The anthropologist Malinowski alleged that the matrilineal, non-patriarchal Trobiand society of Melanesia was "ignorant of physical fatherhood," that is, its members failed to recognize the father's coital act of inserting semen as having a role in conception. "The father is […] not a recognized kinsman of the children […]. Real kinship […] exists only through the mother," and the "mother's brother represents the principle of discipline, authority, and executive power within the family." See Bronislaw Malinowski, *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (2001), 9-10.

[27] Diderot, "D'Alembert's Dream," in *Rameau's Nephew/D'Alembert's Dream* (1966), 175.

body" beyond its conventional erotic zones and modes (HS1 157).[28] Our powers of invention, our ability to think beyond the dominant contemporary presumptions, can find support from historical inquiry, even if one's aims are ultimately more philosophical and transformative than purely historical. Foucault brilliantly applied this insight to sexuality as well as to other domains. By studying more premodern cultures than Foucault did, *Ars Erotica* aims to provide materials for a broader palette of somaesthetic possibilities of pleasure, including non-sexual aesthetic pleasures that somehow contribute to the arts of making love. It is also worth recalling, in conclusion, that somaesthetics' pluralism embraces a wide range of somatic pleasures that are neither sexual nor erotic and that range from the intense to the subtle, the fierce to the gentle. This broader range of pleasures marks another difference with Foucault.[29]

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[28] See also Foucault, "Sex, Power, and Politics of Identity," in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (1996), 384.

[29] See BC 33-42.

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