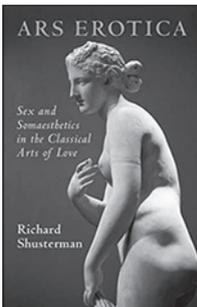


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Sex, love and somaesthetics

Some reflections on the new book by Richard Schusterman

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Richard Schusterman's book, *Ars erotica: sex and somaesthetics in the classical arts of love* (Schusterman, 2021) is a path-finding, innovative contribution that breaks the silence around the long-held body-shying academic deprivation to erotic ideas with its free-flowing comprehensive discussion on carnal desire and erotic thoughts. Schusterman provides a panoramic yet vibrantly profound analysis of the aesthetic inclusion into erotic love following the culture of Asian and Western thoughts from the ancient era to the Renaissance.

The book's scope shows the author's deep inclusive commendable research into erotic study. Schusterman is renowned for his original approach to defining popular art and philosophy as an embodied art of living. He is also famous for his trailblazing concept of somaesthetics, rooted in pragmatist aesthetics, with *Ars erotica* being a fruitful product of his expertise in both.

The Latin term *ars erotica* refers to the methods or styles of lovemaking that can be elevated to the form of art. The primary aim of this book is to critically analyse the traditional philosophical roots and cultures behind erotic behaviours. It also explores how and in what sense the aesthetic notions of beauty and fine art are related to the art of lovemaking. The author tries to argue that the traditional study of *ars erotica* not only provides the art of lovemaking but it enhances our aesthetic education "by developing character, sensitivity, taste, and interpersonal awareness", and contributing to "what many consider the highest art of all: the art of living" (Schusterman, 2021: 1-2). Eros, in its broad sense of

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desires and attractions between people, promotes a better social life by elevating better interpersonal relations between people beyond the relations of lovers. The philosophical inquiry of this study refers to its better ethical insights for conduct that transcends its sexual arena. Summarily, Schusterman argues that since sex belongs to human nature, it is automatically shaped by culture, and as philosophical views develop different human cultures, such cultural aspects design the notion of *ars erotica*. Following this argument, different cosmic, social, religious, moral ideals of different cultures with their associated specific notions of self-realization and social harmony build their distinct *ars erotica*. Thus, the sexual expression of *ars erotica*, being a strong medium of shaping one's own subjectivity and interpersonal relations, can develop the notion of self-cultivation with regard for others. To justify his argument Schusterman raises and analyses the following questions throughout this book:

1. How and in what sense are the aesthetics notions of beauty and fine art related to the art of lovemaking or *ars erotica*?
2. How does *ars erotica* serve as an important component to develop self-cultivation and social relations with others?
3. How do the distinct biological and somatic energies of *ars erotica* reflect a respective culture's ideologies and social order?

To explore the first inquiry, the author gives a general as well as a culturally diversified analysis of aesthetic principles that govern the erotic arts. Despite some cultural variations, Schusterman identifies some general key aesthetic features of *ars erotica*.

- Firstly, the involvement of fine arts and different aesthetic forms of activities such as poems, songs, dances, music, fashion of arts, self-grooming within the concept of *ars erotica*. These different forms of the aesthetic arts enhance the desire, mood, and attractions of lovemaking.
- Secondly, *ars erotica* emphasizes more beauty than utility. Despite its essential features related to reproduction, *ars erotica's* primary focus is on enjoying lovemaking rather than childbirth or any other external product.
- Thirdly, its highlighting features on structural forms elevate *ars erotica* from mere sexual pleasure to its artistic formal aesthetic qualities.
- Fourthly, *ars erotica* invokes the stylized performance of lovemaking that includes beauty within it.
- Fifthly, *ars erotica* includes symbolic richness. Here the act of love, such as a kiss does not only refer to a kiss but it denotes "the sealing of a vow, a mark of acceptance or provocation, or even (as the *Kamasutra* points out) a prefiguring symbol of the sort of coital style desired" (Schusterman, 2021: 8).
- Sixth, *ars erotica* emphasizes its evaluative dimension that includes distinctive achievements of beauty and performative virtuosity.

- Finally, since aesthetics and the fine arts spring up from the culturally shaped forms and attitudes of natural drives and energies, *ars erotica* is a hybrid combination of these three forms of arts.

The second and third inquiries follow on from the first one. Following the first line of inquiry, the notion of *ars erotica* maintains its difference from mere animal sexual coupling for it includes different aesthetic qualities within it. A person's social and cultural background is inspired and originated from these various aesthetic qualities of *ars erotica*. These aesthetically imbued socio-cultural backgrounds of *ars erotica* develop a person in a more aesthetically social and empathic way. The aesthetic qualities of *ars erotica* refine one's emotional and sensory organs and transcend sexual action into aesthetic bliss.

Ars erotica also encourages ethical norms and values in three ways. Firstly, in its disciplined practice, one carefully considers and maintains those kinds of partners (such as children, family members) and actions (oral sex, masturbation, intercourse during menstruation) which are forbidden in particular society or culture and these ethically maintained erotic practices regulate the sexual behaviour of a particular society. Secondly, the art of lovemaking encourages to develop one's character to become more attractive, charming, and ethically admirable. For this, *ars erotica* emphasizes acquiring ethical values such as generosity, understanding, trustworthiness: to make a person's personality more lovable and attractive. Finally, *ars erotica* gives lesson to detect moral vices in others; since a morally incompatible partner creates obstructions for aesthetic erotic pleasure.

Ars erotica also provides scientific body-related medical knowledge and this book efficiently covers this aspect by providing relevant references from ancient Chinese, Indian, and European texts. Again its somatic knowledge teaches us the somatic skills of lovemaking that includes our way of talking, walking, and also the ability of self-control to elevate the practical performative skills. These practical skills also include the conduct of how to dress, sing, dance, or how to gift. And due to these, *ars erotica* historically and traditionally emphasizes the hierarchy of classes and genders such as the upper class and the male, who are entitled to material means and authority to pursue erotic satisfaction.

Despite these few unequal traditional thoughts, *ars erotica* is primarily a positive concept in various manners. Along with health-related scientific knowledge, it also provides rich cultural dimensions by including the fine arts and other artistic practices to enhance the quality of erotic performance that aims for aesthetic bliss. *Ars erotica* also sensitized one to the deeply enrooted philosophical and religious principles that structure and develop one's cultural envision of life. Consequently the author emphasizes *ars erotica*'s religious base by exploring different cultural traditions, both Asian — Indian, Chinese or Japanese — and the European Renaissance to distinguish *ars erotica* from mere mindless, instinctive, solely reproductive-focused animal mating that lacks cultural-artistic thoughts, sensitivity, and aesthetic efficiency. Again, since the art of lovemaking springs

from our different cultural-religious origination, despite its shared human biology, it is shaped differently within respective historical-cultural origination. Richard Schusterman competently unveils how some cultures encourage their aesthetic, religious tradition, while others discourage sensual pleasure, however, none of them can ignore *ars erotica* completely due to its reproductive function which is indispensable to the long-term demographic flourishing of man. By analysing the various cultural import, this book also postulates that the religious and cultural connection of *ars erotica* elevates the carnal, genital, procreative dimension of lovemaking towards a spiritual love for God.

Chapter two to eight of the book are dedicated to exploring the respective aesthetic involvement, self-cultivation, and social development within *ars erotica* by analysing the most crucial erotic theories of Asian and Western cultures from Antiquity to the Renaissance. Chapter two discusses the erotic theories from ancient Greece to their development in the Roman era. Greek erotic theory is hugely inspired by Greek culture's heroic machismo and its intense love for beauty. These cultural tendencies not only inspire their aesthetic sculptures but also influence their aesthetic erotic cultures, ones that go beyond mere sensual pleasure. This chapter explores how the aesthetically imbued *ars erotica* develops the Greek vision of life, self-cultivation, and self-stylization in an artistic beautiful way. No wonder Greek philosophy emphasizes cultivating virtues that will discipline one's life. Virtuous living is required for a harmonized, rationally controlled, aesthetically imbued life with balanced erotic desires. Schusterman efficiently covers the virtue theory from Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle through to the Cynics, Cyrenaics, Stoics, Epicureans, Neoplatonists, and, finally, the hedonistic irony of Ovid's *The art of love* (2nd century CE). From the conflicting strategies of these philosophers, we can find two distinctive thoughts within Greek-Roman eroticism. On the one hand, we find the appreciation of bodily sensory erotic desires, passions, and its reproductive-necessity following Stoics and Epicurean theory. On the other hand, we find a rejection of bodily sensation and pleasure in Cyrenaics theories and transcendental Platonic idealism that directs the passionate spirit towards spiritual aesthetic beatitude. In Greek erotic tradition, homosexual love is considered superior to the heterosexual since it is not constrained within the conventional marriage system. These free-flowing erotic desires of Greek erotism are not welcomed in many other cultures.

The third chapter discusses the erotic thought of Judeo-Christian culture that is based on the first book of *Genesis*. The desire for lovemaking can be promoted if that is God's will. Hebrew tradition, unlike that of pagan cultures, focuses less on the divine model of *ars erotica* but rather emphasizes the reproductive utility of lovemaking. Here, the sexual male organ, the penis, is viewed as the instrument of procreation rather than a pleasure-providing organ. Following this, homosexuality, sodomy, masturbation, incest, marriage outside of the faith are strongly prohibited in Hebrew *ars erotica*.

Again, according to St. Paul's philosophy, sex is legitimate only within marriage with a single lifetime partner of the opposite sex. Here, not only illegitimate sexual life but the uncontrolled sensual desires of the mind are also viewed as sinful even when one's body is not enjoying erotic pleasure. This philosophy discourages *ars erotica* in its carnal sense. Instead, it highly encourages one to dedicate all one's love to God. This view transcends the thoughts of *ars erotica* from its embodied physical desire to a higher spiritual love for God. This chapter discusses the Christian view on marriage and sins following the doctrines of Catholic theologians from Clement, Tertullian, and Origen through Jerome, Chrysostom, Cassian, Augustine, and finally to Aquinas.

The fourth chapter focuses on Chinese *ars erotica*, being probably the most vintage, wide-ranging, and transdisciplinary erotic tradition. Apart from its aesthetic pursuits, Schusterman emphasizes the ontological, and health-related medical aspects of the Chinese idea of lovemaking. Chinese eroticism is driven by the search for sexual hedonistic pleasure but, nevertheless, it is deeply connected with religion, ritual, government, household management, and a disciplined way of ethical self-cultivation. This erotic theory holds ontological import since it views sexual interaction not only as of the procreation of further life but as the creative union of the opposite sexes that embody male and female cosmic principles (*yang* and *yin*), and is symbolised by the union of the heaven and earth with its rich potential outcomes. This chapter also explores how the medical and religious views as well as changing socio-historical contexts shaped Chinese *ars erotica* and made it embrace ethical self-cultivation by practicing proper virtuous physical actions along with emerging mental power. The Confucian and Daoist philosophy contribute the most significant thoughts on ethical self-cultivation through the balanced sublimation of the somatic energy of sex.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to another ancient and the most vibrantly enriched theory of *ars erotica* that is Indian erotic theory. By combining the most detailed, systematic and practical methods with philosophical ideas, Indian theory provides the most affluent background of *ars erotica*, one that tries to integrate erotic desires with ascetic spiritualism. Schusterman explores how religious, social, artistic culture develops Indian *ars erotica* according to three of the most important scriptures in this regard. The most detailed notion of Indian *ars erotica* is found in Vatsyana's *Kamasutra*, regarded as the great contribution to the drama and aesthetic theory that was initiated by the famous *Natyaśāstra* (c. 2nd BCE–2nd CE). This theory deals with the relation of aesthetic components with different kinds of arts, poetry, dance, drama, sculpture. The sculptures of Khajuraho portray the most famous illustrations of Indian *ars erotica*. *Kamasutra* provides the training for a great mastery of perception, of controlling the emotions, of understanding another person's character, mood, specifically the one with whom one is interested in lovemaking. This whole process not only serves aesthetic pleasure but leads to the emergence of

perception, self-knowledge, of control over the senses, and thus shapes the art of living itself. Later, *Ananga Ranga* provides a different doctrine according to which *ars erotica* promotes spiritual and religious life by the gradual systematic harmonious material pleasure that leads to the highest stage where one no longer lusts for any sensuous desire and achieves the sublime state of spirituality. *Kokaśāstra* of the twelfth century also follows this trend.

The sixth chapter starts with the explanation of how Islamic laws and scriptures like the *Quran*, *Hadith*, and *Fiqh* have shaped Islamic thoughts of *ars erotica* both within its polygyny institution of marriage that includes provisional marriage, and sex outside marriage with slaves, and with the women of conquered enemies. The rapid growth of Islam through its fiercely conquering power of male force influences Islamic erotic thoughts with male dominance that includes highly sensual passionate enjoyment even through violent male force. Again, like Indian and Greco-Roman cultures, Islamic erotic thought also exercises the powerful energy of sexual desire for spiritual love and ethical self-cultivation that raise love to a higher or spiritual level. This chapter refers to the prophet of Mahammad and the Sufi thinkers, like al-Ghazali and al-Arabi, who accept aesthetic eroticism that leads to the path of spirituality where the carnal love for women transcends into a holy love for God.

The seventh chapter starts with the discussion of the notion of sex in Japanese mythology and identifies its three key traditions. The first most aesthetically refined, romantic tradition is the courtly love tradition of the Heian dynasty. It emphasizes the arts, tenderness of feeling, elegance of manners, sensitivity, discretion and promotes controlled desire, detached enjoyment, and concealment and understatement. The second tradition of love develops within the community of Buddhist monks and samurai warriors, who while living together largely remain detached from conventional life and society. The third tradition is the high-class courtesan culture in Edo society established in Yoshiwara, modern-day Tokyo. This tradition is influenced by the aesthetic elegance and refinement of Heian eroticism that promotes the fine arts and fashion, and emphasizes displaying a women's modishness, graceful manners rather than their sexual skills. This tradition encourages one to win the heart of a woman more than male enjoyment of her body. However, under this apparent classy refined, fashionable umbrella, deep down, the Japanese culture of eroticism carries with it vicious notions of commercialism, commodification of women (*i.e.* prostitution), distrust, and painful, bloody violence (for instance, the rituals of gifting a torn nail, giving a vow that is sealed with one's blood, cutting off one's hair, tattooing a lover's name, cutting off a finger, and stabbing on the fleshy part of either the upper arm or thigh to show one's desire and devotion for love).

The final chapter of *Ars erotic* is dedicated to exploring the key erotic concepts of the West in medieval and Renaissance Europe. After analysing the various cultural inclusion, the author points out three philosophical ideals of

love in European erotic theory that yield dilemmas and debates. The first kind of love is the love for friendship that is based on pure virtue without any need, dependence, or desire to gain any financial, social or hedonistic pleasure. This kind of love grows between virtuous people specially between men because of their equal financial and social independence and freedom. Interestingly, this kind of love eventually increases homophobia in Christian society. The second kind of love is the heterosexual union of reproductive love within the social custom of marriage. The Christian medieval concept of marrying a single one-life partner suppresses free love, desire and, ultimately, inclines the partners to extramarital heterosexual desire. As Schusterman observes, this concept of love displays misogynist, sexist views against women, and class division from a medieval era, which vividly contrasts with the idea of Christian virtue. The third ideal is the devoted love for spiritual union with God through celibate chastity. Renaissance Neoplatonist Christian thinkers, like Marsilio Ficino, Giordano Bruno, Baldassare Castiglione, Leone Ebreo, are mainly interested in the uplift of spiritual union from carnal desires. The most realistic erotic views are expressed by two Renaissance humanist sceptics, namely Erasmus of Rotterdam and Michel de Montaigne. Whereas, two other Renaissance thinkers — Tullia and Pietro Aretino — ignore within their erotic thought the conventional ideal of marriage and religious devotion. Schusterman concludes this chapter with the speculative hypothesis that although beauty is substantially related to eros, a different concept of aesthetic notion, developed in the eighteenth century onward, promotes disinterested consideration rather than the erotic desire of union. This detachment of beauty from eros has influenced modern material, liberal thoughts that make it difficult to distinguish love from lust, and uplifting erotic desire towards the spiritual union of virtuous souls. This European displacement theory of beauty from love to modern aestheticism makes this avoidance logical yet unfortunate and misleading for the theory of *ars erotica*.

The concluding part of this book reveals the huge inspiration drawn by the author from Michel Foucault's composite creation on sex and soma. In his book, *The history of sexuality*, Foucault argues that from the eighteenth century onward the history of sexuality has become "a repressive hypothesis". The enjoyment of pleasurable objects has been discouraged and controlled, and any kind of erotic pleasure has been considered private and practiced between a husband and wife. Thus sex has been confined and repressed only within this social constitution not only to prevent extra-marital sex but also to make it unspeakable and unthinkable. Schusterman argues that this repressive somatic energy ultimately leads to "improper" sexual perversion, like prostitution or paedophilia. Foucault also discusses the enormous importance of aesthetic components within the somatic energy of one's sexuality. However, Schusterman's study of somaesthetics is mainly concentrated on the erotic theory of Western culture, primarily ancient Greco-Roman culture and early Christianity with

more emphasis on the repression of homosexuality and society's homophobia. Schusterman is hugely inspired by Foucault's crucial contribution to aesthetics and sexuality, however, he leaves his own mark by exploring the erotic culture of Asian as well as Western thought with their distinct perspectives on heterosexuality as well as homosexuality, including the position of women within erotic culture. In erotic theory, major philosophical traditions display the view of women's subjugation and objectification that evoke a global, cross-cultural misogynist approach. The author attempts an analytic, critical study by reviewing most of the philosophical literature in this regard. His captivating writing style while discussing the mythologies of different cultures makes this an engaging, lucid, and attractive read for anyone, even those without a background in philosophy. The complex augmentative justification for the relation of aesthetic notions with *ars erotica* reflects the author's trailblazing ideas and makes the book a significant contribution to the study of erotic thought. However, it could have been more composite if the author had characterized the distinguishable features of Asian erotic thinking from that of Western culture, specifically regarding homosexuality and the position of women in heterosexuality over the ages. Nevertheless, how the notion of materialistic commercialism and commodification infects and affects women's position in society during the ages from antiquity's initial equal and respectful position to that of modern subjugation requires different comprehensive research. This book also lacks any discussion on the contemporary evolving nature of *ars erotica* that is often distracted from its root culture and engulfed by various technological influences, like pornography, social media, etc. Furthermore, the enriched contribution on the aesthetic value of *ars erotica* raises an expectation that the author will critically discuss the overwhelming crucial fact that the aesthetic inclusion of erotic culture can assist in the eradication of sexual perversion, sexual crimes, especially those against women and children. Yet, the prominent benefits of this rich contribution to a comparatively underdiscussed academic field outweigh any minor shortcomings.

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