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Somaesthetics and the Cross-Cultural Dressing of Desire

Commentary: Richard Shusterman,
Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 436 pages.

*Worldly pleasures have not been enjoyed by us, but we ourselves have been devoured... Desire is not reduced in force, though we ourselves are reduced so senility.*¹

Somaesthetics, the field cultivated by Richard Shusterman since 1997,² bore another juicy fruit for our enjoyment. This time, his interdisciplinary research – integrating the theoretical, empirical, and practical disciplines related to bodily perception, presentation, and performance – resulted in an excellent cross-cultural study of the classical arts of love developed over centuries in such traditions as the Greco-Roman, Chinese, Indian, Muslim, Medieval and European Renaissance. Somaesthetic methodology provides fertile ground for such a comparative inquiry by encouraging new ways to understand the cultural dimension of human sexuality. It complements the popular 4EC perspectives applied in cognitive science which explore cognition as embodied,

1) Vairāgya-Śatakam Bhartrihari, *The Hundred Verses on Renunciation*, trans. by Swami Madhvananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2004), 11. According to Bhartrihari (fifth century), “man’s life is an intricate web of conflicting moments and attractions. It is beautiful and pleasurable, but this beauty becomes bitter when he feels the weight of time and the caprice of fate upon him... Drunk with the wine of a little wealth or some passing enjoyment, a man is deluded by the world – though he experiences the transience of life, he cannot understand the real meaning of time and his own absurd position in existence.” Barbara Stoler Miller, trans., *Bhartrihari: Poems*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), “Introduction,” xxii.

2) Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*, (New York: Routledge, 1997).

embedded, enactive, and expanded:³ emphasizing our bodily interaction with the physical and social environment. Shusterman's analysis of the classical arts of love as aesthetically refining sexual experience gives due acknowledgement to our somatic and sensual, but also emotional and imagery engagement in the world, commonly neglected in modern philosophy. Providing countless examples from a variety of cultures, the author proves that when discussing the ways we satisfy our intimate erotic needs one cannot focus solely on the private domain and disregard a wider context, such as extended family relationships, health and hygiene issues, level of education, economic status, social hierarchy and discourses of power, as well as culturally defined forms of artistic expression predominant in a given time.

Beauty and Eros

*Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*⁴ grows out of Shusterman's pragmatist assumptions and his meliorist belief⁵ that looking at other cultures and other times can provide ample resources for a more complete erotic vision "to enrich the field of aesthetics and our art of living" (AE, 394). According to his original thought-provoking diagnosis, the separation of beauty from *eros* (that is from love and desire), which started soon after their flourishing union in Renaissance Neoplatonism, was one of the reasons for the birth of aesthetics as a science for the "perfection of sensory cognition" (AE, 394) in the mid-eighteenth century. As Shusterman persuasively argue, this change of perspective resulted from the growing power of materialist philosophies as well as from new trends of philosophical sensualism and libertinism. This combination of views made it more difficult to maintain "the traditional idea of *eros* as a physically expressed but spiritual, loving desire that was distinct from lust" (AE, 393). The precursor to this view, which defined the pleasure of beauty as "disinterested and distanced" by explicitly contrasting it to erotic feelings aroused by and in human bodies, was Anthony Ashley Cooper (also known as Lord Shaftesbury). He was followed by Alexander Baumgarten and other influential philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century who rejected from the aesthetic field any activities associated with sexual activity either: by defining the aesthetic pleasure of beauty in opposition to direct sensual satisfaction (Kant), or by identifying sexual experience with "the will-to-live" and opposing it to the brain that represents knowledge (Schopenhauer), or by equating erotic vigor with animal instinct that should be sacrificed "to the advantage of the work" of art (Nietzsche) (AE, 395–96).

Sex and Drama

Due to my research specialization, I will focus mainly on Indian contributions to *ars erotica*. Shusterman's survey is based on three quasi-scientific ancient Sanskrit texts; the *Kamasutra*, the *Raitirahasya* and the *Anangaranga*,

3) 4E Cognition perspectives, which have gained epistemic legitimacy during the last 25 years, go beyond the previously predominate perspective focused only on the functions of the brain. See for instance Francis Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleonor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Albert Newen, Leon de Bruin, and Shaun Gallagher, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

4) Richard Shusterman, *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Hereafter referenced parenthetically in-text as AE followed by page numbers.

5) As Shusterman explains elsewhere, "the idea of meliorism is that we can always change some things for the better and we should pursue this possibility. If there is any basic principle of pragmatism, I think, it is just this idea of meliorism." Richard Shusterman, "Życie, sztuka i filozofia: Wyznania Richarda Shustermana wysłuchane przez Adama Chmielewskiego," ed. and trans. Wojciech Małecki, *Odra* 4, (2004): 44–53; (my translation). This is a Polish translation of an English interview published in 2004.

dated between 400 BCE and 300 CE, which are labelled *kāmaśāstra* literature. He also mentions the early Vedic erotic allusions and summarizes some of the Puranic myths related to the topic. A slight inaccuracy has crept in when the author characterizes the *Upanishads* as “austere” and locates them historically between the *Vedas* and *Puranas* (AE, 205). In fact, the *Upanishads* did not follow the Vedic scripts since they constitute the most recent and philosophically sophisticated part of the *Vedas* (c. 600 to 300 BCE),⁶ which deals with the value of knowledge, meaning of yoga, and the key ontological questions. Also, it is hard to agree with the claim that “it is not at all clear what exactly, for Hinduism, constitutes a god, and therefore how many gods there are” (AE, 205). Well, neither size nor number seem to matter when we manage to go beyond a binary perspective of monotheism *versus* polytheism. To capture the idea of god as it is conceptualized in India we need to embrace the category of henotheism, first used in reference to Hinduism by Max Müller,⁷ to describe a form of devotion focused on a single spiritual principle, the absolute (*brahman*), while accepting the existence of multiple deities, gods or goddesses (*devas*, *devīs*), who come into being together with the world and who are no strangers to desire (*kāma*), adequately proportional to their ontic status.

Yet, what Shusterman brilliantly illuminates is the aspiration of Indian erotology to combine the most detailed, systematic, and practical methods with philosophical ideas, and to integrate erotic desires with ascetic spiritualism (AE, 24, 220), as they both share “the power of generating focused energy and heat” (*tapas*) (AE, 208). The aestheticization of the sexual act “through refining restraint and sublimation of raw sensuality” (AE, 245) helps the lovers keep passion within manageable limits, and produce an attractively fashioned and meaningful erotic performance, while providing some distanced reflection on one’s choices of partner, time, or place. These remarks get us closer to the major paradox of Indian mentality, which is constituted by the tension between two conflicting drives – a profound attraction to sensual beauty, on the one hand, and the yearning for detachment from all worldly desires, on the other.

Shusterman also aptly grasps the unique character of Indian *ars erotica* modelled on the performing arts (AE, 243). Undoubtedly, the art of lovemaking resembles the dynamics of drama with several complementary side threads situating human sexuality in a specific sociocultural, ethical, religious, and political context. As Shusterman rightly observes, Indian erotic arts “drew most heavily on the fine arts and their sensuous aesthetic pleasures” (AE, 202). They have deep roots in theatre and the classical art of dance. The lover’s cravings and beliefs (likened to the mental states of a drama character) are not only essential to love-making (just as they are crucial to stage a drama), but they need to be expressed through certain gestures, sequenced body movements, or other codified signs – both explicit and suggested – which all together make up a specific choreography of sexual performance. This distinctively aesthetic, drama-like character of India’s eroticism makes it different from *ars erotica* developed in other cultures more focused on practical sexual goals of procreation and health.

Incidentally, classical Sanskrit literature, being a vast source of examples of Hindu erotic imagination strongly inspired by *kāmaśāstras*, is referred to in Shusterman’s study in one footnote only (AE, 223), although the literary works of such authors as Kalisada (fourth – fifth centuries CE) and Jayadeva (twelfth century) had, in turn, a huge impact on the way sexual scenes were depicted in the visual arts of the following centuries. This omission is significant insofar as the iconic representations of sexuality have played a crucial role in popularizing Indian *ars erotica* among wider society. Naturally, the best means of educating folks, apart from drama and dance performance, was sculpture – especially in ancient times – and the exquisite miniature erotic paint-

6) Gavin D. Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 40.

7) Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion: As Illustrated by the Religions of India*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1878).

ings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when illustrated editions of the *Kamasutra* grew in popularity.⁸ Here, at least one example of visual arts would be worth discussing a bit closer, namely a group of temples at Khajuraho, often referred to as the “*Kamasutra* temples,” the exterior walls of which are saturated with sexually explicit imagery.⁹ The mystifying carvings, so called *mithuna* sculptures, depict men and women in various lascivious sexual acts. The unclothed, sensual feminine figure (called *apsarā* or *yakṣi*) has always been one of the most canonical motifs of medieval Hindu temple art and at Khajuraho, female nudity is interspersed with portrayals of orgiastic sex. Scholars have tried to understand who sponsored these temples and why they did so. Supposedly these sculptures, dated between 950 CE to 1150 CE, depict tantric sexual practices that were meditated upon.¹⁰ Surely, they show that for the people who erected these monuments sex was not a taboo, but an integral, adorable, and spiritually significant part of their life. However, in largely prudish contemporary Indian society, the *Kamasutra*’s graphic sculptures of Khajuraho look like a sexual extravaganza and are an embarrassment for “traditional Hindu values.”

The reader of *Ars Erotica* may keep in mind that for Richard Shusterman one of the most pressing socio-cultural problems of our time has been the legitimization of popular art, such as rock, country music, and rap.¹¹ Now, he advocates for the aesthetic reappraisal of the erotic arts. But, have they ever *really* been popular among people in the cultures that produced the most famous texts on the art of lovemaking? And, further, were they accessible to people, regardless of their class, gender, and economic position? Richard Shusterman argues for a positive answer to these questions, claiming that both the *Natyaśāstra* and *Kamasutra* share “an impulse toward democratic diversity” and, unlike the *Vedas*, they could be studied and practiced by all castes (AE, 218). Some Indian scholars also believe that in early times, copies of *kamaśāstras* were gifted to adolescent daughters by their mothers, to intimidated wives by their newly wed husbands, and that the public meetings were organized to debate on various issues related to the art of lovemaking.¹² Certainly, sex was valued in Indian society not only as a means to maintain family lineage but also as a key to a successful marriage and stable society, but when discussing the social practices of the past we should avoid idealization and remember that we deal with a tremendously varied (ethnically, linguistically, religiously) and strictly hierarchical society where the literate elite always made up a very small percentage of the population.¹³ Therefore, one can hardly

8) See for instance Devangana Desai, “Art and Eroticism: Going beyond the Erotic at Khajuraho,” in *Indian Art: Forms, Concerns and Development in Historical Perspective*, ed. Brijinder Nath Goswamy and K. Singh (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2000), 91–109; Richard Burton, Forster F. Arbuthnot, trans., *The Illustrated Kama Sutra, Ananga Ranga, Perfumed Garden – The Classic Eastern Love Texts*, (London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd., 1987); Philip Rawson, *Erotic Art of India*, (New York: Gallery Books, 1983); and Devangana Desai, *Erotic Sculpture of India: A Socio-Cultural Study*, (New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., 1975).

9) A group of monuments in Khajuraho was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1986. Since then, it has gained international recognition and attracts huge attention of the tourists who visit this small town in central India just to watch the “oddly titillating” figures covering the temple walls. See Swetha Vijayakumar, “The Sacred and the Sensual,” *Via* 11–12, (May 2017), Accessed August 26, 2021, <http://journals.openedition.org/viatourism/1792>, <https://doi.org/10.4000/viatourism.1792>.

10) David G. White emphasizes that tantric sexual practices were not really about enjoying coitus or blissful states of consciousness. They were rather part of sexualized rituals that entailed collecting, offering, and ingesting the male and female fluids. And this was very different from the “ritualized sex” that is commonly mistaken for “Tantric Sex” in New Age guides. See David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yogini: “Tantric Sex” in its South Asian Contexts*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 10.7208/chicago/9780226027838.001.0001.

Another interpretation is offered by Devangana Desai who suggests that the erotic figures seem to conceal a mystical diagram (*yantra*), which was believed to magically protect the building against obstacles. Devangana Desai, “Textual Tradition and the Temples of Khajuraho,” in *Archaeology and Text: The Temple in South Asia*, ed. by Himanshu P. Ray (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 66.

11) Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

12) Desai, *Erotic Sculpture of India*, 167–68.

13) In 2019 the adult literacy rate was at 73.2 percent, with overall gender gap (adult male literacy rate still surpasses the adult female

imagine that *ars erotica* in the Indian context have ever belonged to popular culture, and that the *Kamasutra* used to be circulating freely across all social strata.

Misogyny in Disguise

The positive pragmatist attitude of Shusterman allows him to turn a blind eye not only to the elitist character of Indian *ars erotica*, but also to the patriarchal and nicely dressed misogynist agenda of the *Kamasutra* narrator. The lovers – that is by default a man and a woman – are seen as the protagonists of a drama, and the dynamics of their intimate close-up is dictated by the man’s needs and man’s understanding of female sexuality. What is more, both the role of screenwriter and director of the lovemaking drama belong exclusively to males. Thus, speaking of the erotic pleasures we cannot forget that the sex performance inevitably involves a gender-and-power struggle. As Shusterman rightly notices, “the *Kamasutra* explains how *ars erotica* is pragmatically advantageous in giving a man greater power over women and more esteem among men” (AE, 240). Women are basically reduced to a passive role, they are a “delicious” instrument to be “played upon artfully,” designed for the pleasure of men (AE, 240). And this sheer objectification of a female is only seemingly mitigated by the advocacy that “women reciprocally play on male instruments, and sometimes even play the male by taking on his coital positions and roles” (AE, 238). Well, does not a female moving body still remain just a tool to please her lover? Besides, the practical hints on the specific ways of lovemaking are dictated by typical patriarchal obsessions, such as vaginal orgasm¹⁴ (AE, 212), anxieties concerning erection, and preference for male superiority in unequal unions (AE, 228).

We can also trace the misogynist bias of the *Kamasutra* in its comments on female sexuality, far more promiscuous than men, and their innate propensity to “lechery” and “lust” which is to justify the need to fully control and subordinate women (AE, 212). Likewise, it is hard to take for granted a remark on deflowering an eight-year-old girl trained to become a king’s prostitute (AE, 215). Nowadays, *ars erotica* does not seem to be a proper label for the dated social practices that involve harming little girls.

Power of Eros

Undoubtedly, Indian erotology demonstrates that there is something like “erotic expertise,” which means that sex is definitely something we can learn, need to cultivate on regular basis, and eventually master to our own satisfactory degree. When evaluating the contribution of Indian *ars erotica*, Shusterman aptly observes that it “is designed to cultivate and refine sensorimotor mastery in terms of heightened awareness and skilled aesthetic shaping of one’s erotic feelings and movements, and to do so in controlled attunement with one’s partner’s” (AE, 213). The advanced sensorimotor skill of lovemaking is to make our life experience complete and joyful.

literacy rate by 17 percentage points). See Tanushree Chandra, “Literacy in India: The Gender and Age Dimension,” *Observer Research Foundation* (ORF), no. 322 (October 2019): 1–18.

14) Apparently, androcentrism is not just a historical phenomenon typical for the ancient, sophisticated textbooks of *ars erotica*. The modern scientific process, providing theories regarding human sexuality, has also been marked with misunderstanding and manipulation. A spectacular example of such a process is discussed by Elisabeth A. Lloyd in her closely argued study on the history of evolutionary explanations of the female orgasm. She persuasively demonstrates that what was presented as a “scientific account” proved to be a culturally biased discourse based on two flawed assumptions: that the female orgasm evolved because it contributed to reproductive success, and that female sexuality is like male sexuality. Elisabeth A. Lloyd, *The Case of the Female Orgasm: Bias in the Science of Evolution*, (London – Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 14–20.

To become a master, “who has truly conquered his senses” (AE, 220), one needs to improve the ways he or she manifests his or her sexual appetite and receives endearment from a well attuned lover.

Another lesson that the Indian tradition can teach us addresses the significance of the aesthetization of sexual desire. It is the aesthetic imagination that empowers us to be passionate in a cultured or even admirable way, and sensuous in a non-selfish way. Thanks to aesthetic rearrangement of lust, one can detach oneself from particular spatiotemporal circumstances and lose oneself in “impersonal subjectivity and ownerless emotions, when I consciously from inside get outside of my individuality.”¹⁵ Indeed, rearranged desires often get more intense the more they are tempered with an unostentatious practice of postponement and selflessness. The aesthetic relish we have when we watch subtle erotic drawings or listen to a sensuous lyric to rejoice at the sensual rapture of the other human being, allows us to intimate the basic impersonality of subjective feelings. In the aesthetic immersion accompanying the erotic performance, if realized with a focused mind’s molding of lust into aesthetic form, the frontiers of the individual ego can provisionally melt away, revealing an inner shared space of loving bliss: a foreshadow of liberation (*mokṣa*). Thus, in the quest for erotic-via-aesthetic fulfilment one may also lean toward spiritual or religious goals. This point is rightly articulated by Richard Shusterman when he captures *ars erotica* “as aesthetic training toward religious fulfilment” (AE, 249). The transformative power of “dressed desire,” exquisitely crafted in India, clearly supports his meliorist expectation that the beautiful can be truly enjoyed through embodied cognition and erotic love that embraces the spiritual along with the carnal.

To conclude, let me share my hope that Shusterman’s monograph, which splendidly reveals the pragmatically beneficial power of *ars erotica*, will also reach readers of the younger generations, who replace all sources of knowledge about how to have sex with the Internet, and who regard dating apps as a handy tool in search for their dream lover.

15) Arindam Chakrabarti, “Play, Pleasure, Pain: Ownerless Emotions in Rasa-Aesthetics,” in *Science, Literature and Aesthetics*, ed. Debi Prasad Chattopadhyaya and Amiya Dev, 189–202, Vol. 15 of *Project of History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture*, (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2009). The theory of aesthetic emotions that need not entail personal or individual ownership is discussed by Arindam Chakrabarti in the context of *rasa*-aesthetics of Abhinavagupta (c. 950–1016 CE), a Kashmiri philosopher, mystic, and aesthetician who authored *Abhinavabhāratī*, a commentary to *Nāṭyaśāstra*.



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