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Crispin Sartwell  
Department of Philosophy  
Dickinson College, USA  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0649-8949>  
crispinsartwell@gmail.com

## The Erotic and the Political: The Somaesthetics of Sex in Social Context

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

### I.

Richard Shusterman's work is remarkable, among other things, for extending the range and power of the discipline of aesthetics, conceived by him as fundamental to many dimensions of human experience. Indeed, he has driven aesthetics into entirely new ranges of phenomena and strategies for research, and also perhaps returned to an ancient sense of the centrality of aesthetic concepts such as beauty to virtually every human endeavor. In many ways, I think, Shusterman is fulfilling John Dewey's vision as expressed in *Art as Experience*, as well as spelling out in detail the implications of his own early book *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, exploring the aesthetic dimensions of all sorts of human activities. Shusterman's somaesthetics, however, takes what we might call the aesthetics, or ordinary experience, and centers it on the body in a way that Dewey could not have foreseen.

The book might have been titled *The Aesthetics of Sex*, and as soon as he broaches the topic it strikes one that this subject has been remarkably neglected within philosophical aesthetics, or even in Western philosophy as a whole. Considered as dimensions or arenas of human experience, the aesthetic and the erotic, as Shusterman shows in replete multi-cultural detail, are bound up entirely and from the origins in many or even all cultures. The conscious cultivation of sensual experience and the earliest conceptions of beauty, though these conceptions vary widely, had in some sense to be connected in every culture. If we are seeking pleasure in the senses,

trying to understand what we are doing and why and how – what we are pursuing, what we want – we are going to need a telos that the West calls “beauty”; we’re going to need a sense of why we pursue this activity, and what values it is called upon to realize. Shusterman is right, of course, to dwell among the Greeks, whose aesthetics were so explicitly bound up with eroticism. Plato still surprises in this regard: though he bends erotic desire toward, or transforms it into, or applies it to, a desire for abstract knowledge, he cannot conceive of a discussion of beauty that does not originate in erotic desire and express it, as Shusterman shows so clearly. Plato’s vision of beauty derives in part from Sappho, as he has Socrates acknowledge several times: his desire for knowledge is erotic in a way that is at once inspiring and disturbing.

Shusterman also shows clearly in his “speculative” conclusion why it is that Plato is surprising (to “us”). Modern aesthetics originates, Shusterman argues (too briefly! I would love to see this explored) that modern aesthetics originates in part as an attempt to desexualize beauty, perhaps bound up with the Protestantism of Shaftesbury and, especially, Kant. Or we might say with Shusterman that Kantian “disinterestedness,” a kind of hands-off approach to beauty, is quite the opposite of the neo-Platonic conception of Ficino or Michelangelo, for example which engages, cultivates, and applies erotic experience as an impetus for art and a source of transcendence, or integrates our sensual and our intellectual lives, as certain forms of asceticism might seek to keep them separated.

Shusterman argues, I believe, that the experience of beauty cannot be separated from sex in the way Kant insists it ought to be. Perhaps Shusterman thinks that Kantian disinterestedness in the erotic is both disingenuous and profoundly unfortunate; perhaps somaesthetics is, among other things, intended as a cure for Kantianism, insisting that we find beauty as the bodies we actually are. In that sense too, Shusterman’s aesthetics is still connected to Dewey’s, which embodies an exquisite contrast to Kant’s. But as Dewey might remind us too, we are definitely bodies, but we are not bodies that are fully distinct from one another or from our world. We are bodies in social and environmental contexts: bodies are constructed in and given meaning by these contexts, which we might broadly call political. I’m going to argue briefly below that the aesthetics of the body requires an aesthetics of the body’s social and physical surround; there cannot be an aesthetics of the body in isolation. I expect that Shusterman would agree with me about that, though I am curious about whether he would have any reservations about taking somaesthetics in this direction.

## II.

Shusterman is particularly interested in matters of self-cultivation, in sensual “training” and “mastery,” “perfecting one’s appeal as a lover,” and “methods . . . to maintain proper pacing to ensure endurance and self-control” (AE, 14): these matters he finds discussed in one form or another all over the world, even in cases where this sort of explicit vocabulary of the body and the senses would be rejected by certain authorities. Here to some extent he follows Foucault, who was concerned with how selves, and identities, and persons (particularly male) are formed out of cultural/sexual materials. These topics, as they pertain to philosophical aesthetics, are still so underexplored as to suggest whole new lines of discourse of just the sort that Shusterman keeps opening up; he really is refreshing the discipline, giving it something urgent to do. But I want to point out that such matters do not at all exhaust the aesthetics of sex. Somaesthetics tends to focus on the individual body and its experiences, but each such body is negotiating a social environment, and beauty is not only something each one of us may cultivate (if at leisure), it is a political, spiritual, linguistic, and economic surround in which each body is operating. Understandings of beauty and sexuality circulate through cultures and between them as systems of signs, constellations of meanings, and taxonomies of identity.

Nothing in Shusterman’s treatment precludes this broadening of scope, and indeed he shows its necessity again and again as he describes the history of cultural norms of beauty and sexual identity. But he returns always,

as he must give his themes, to the experience from inside the individual body as it negotiates this environment, seeking intense and meaningful experiences within it. In *Ars Erotica*, he describes somaesthetics as “the critical study and meliorative cultivation of the body as a site of sensory appreciation or perception (aesthesis) and of creative self-fashioning in which one uses one’s bodily appearance and conduct to express one’s values and shape oneself” (AE, xi). What I want to emphasize here is that all this shaping and presenting of the self is happening in a political context and is not fully comprehensible apart from that context.

Certainly, when Shusterman gives us his erudite erotic world tour, one thing that emerges immediately is the cultural malleability of sexuality. His discussions of South Asian treatments of the erotic derived from Hinduism in proximity to Islamic treatments, or the Greeks as opposed to the medievals, display almost entirely distinct taxonomies of sexual identity, as well as conceptions of the purpose of sex, what is permitted and what prohibited, who is authorized and who is taboo. The word “polymorphous” is difficult to avoid as one surveys the whole terrain, nor does Shusterman avoid it. In his treatment, he is necessarily as attentive to the cultural, political, and economic differences in the ways the activity of erotic/aesthetic self-fashioning is expressed as with the seeming universal task of self-fashioning.

Shusterman recognizes perfectly well that many or all the cultures he discusses are problematic as regards gender politics. Many of the texts he quotes are straightforwardly male supremacist, for example; he tends to note that and then go on to focus on the aesthetics of bodily self-fashioning on which the texts also, but connectedly, focus. Perhaps the directly oppressive interpersonal implications are not sufficiently incorporated into the discussion: not ignored or merely glossed over, but also not the direct focus except perhaps in the most egregious cases. I understand these decisions: if the book were a litany of sexual oppressions and their condemnation, it would be dreary and not suited to do what Shusterman wants most to do: explore how the materials bear on the aesthetics of the body. He wants to understand the individual body as something like a work of art, created from inside. The point of view he takes up is the body as self-fashioning subject, not, for example, as abjected, as object, though so many of the erotic disciplines Shusterman discusses lean in various ways on the depersonalization of the people with whom one practices whatever erotic self-fashioning or mastery a particular culture might prescribe at a particular moment. He does explicitly reject the oppressions endemic to the material he discusses, but his initial stance is to accept each culture’s sexual representations and distribution of roles on its own terms, at least long enough to explore them.

### III.

Nevertheless, I think that the somaesthetics of sex is going to need a political aesthetics of sex. Judith Butler shows one way that these themes could be widened and also politicized: how a society thinks about gender roles, including directly about roles in sex, articulates the way each person experiences her own embodiment. Perhaps in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, for example, as Butler generated these ideas, there was a general sense that each person was either straight or gay. The polymorphous possibilities seemed to be narrowed to two, with everyone suspicious of anyone’s claim to be bisexual, for example, or asexual. If so, this was a cultural interlude (with immensely oppressive implications), not some sort of biological truth, said Butler. Here she was herself working from Foucault, showing how sexual identities, while experienced as such from inside, or even experienced or cultivated as one’s authentic or inmost self, circulated publicly as a system of signs, in a system of signs, which in turn takes up a place, for example, in the forms of economic exchange. She immediately widened the focus: the bodies are operating in a cultural imaginary; their public identities and their self-understandings are made within economic and political purposes and institutions. They have to be seen not only as ways of being oneself, but as ways of serving or resisting power.

What connects Butler's work to Shusterman's in a useful way is that Butler, too, is talking about the aesthetics of embodiment, or at least that is the way I would like to read her. Gender, she famously says, is *performative*, usefully conceived by analogy to the theatre. And this bears directly, every day in every way, on the public presentation of the body. We express our gender identities and our sexual orientations above all aesthetically: in the ways we adorn our bodies, the way we move, and the rhythms of our speech, but also the way we arrange our rooms, or our tastes in music or cars. Particularly key in relation to somaesthetics is that the ways each of us experiences ourselves – what we find ourselves taking pleasure in, for example – can only be understood as we emerge from and into the representations which embody the system of sexual possibilities articulated in public space, in the public language, and in a political-economic situation which tries to tell us what we can possibly be or do, or what we must transgress against to be free.

I think we ought to consider the gender system of a given culture at a given time, for example, as a power-saturated system of aesthetics. And it is a *system*: the bodies and the roles and the transgressions between the various actors and concepts are interlinked; they mutate in correlation with one another and with real volatility. So, for example, one might consider the aesthetic presentation of masculinity in the American south over the last, let us say, sixty years. In 1967, having long hair, for example, or wearing an earring, might have caused you to get sort-of gay-bashed, or have drawn a series of slurs intended to impugn one's masculinity. A real man had a sort of military mien and haircut, and wore no body adornment but a decent shirt and perhaps a tattoo of an anchor or one that said "Mom." "We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy, like the hippies out in San Francisco do," sang Merle Haggard. But by 1980, the most macho country stars (Waylon Jennings, for instance) were longhairs. By 2015, the most macho country stars (Kane Brown, e.g.) were wearing all sorts of jewelry as well: a pair of earrings and a number of necklaces and finger-rings, for example. This read effortlessly as masculine by then, even as the signs of femininity likewise shifted radically. Indeed, a lot of the way heterosexual men style themselves is an attempt to convey the message "I'm not gay." So how heterosexual men are presenting their bodies varies inversely with how gay men are presenting themselves (for example, with neat hair and tailored suits, or something like the way Merle Haggard was presenting himself in 1967).

I think that the ways we are each experiencing our own bodies and those of others, the means and meaning of sex and more widely of erotic desire, is varying as the taxonomy of sexual roles and their aesthetic presentation in public space varies. And that is happening, say, in a capitalist economic context in which people are marketing beauty and sexuality to you, or in a social media context in which millions of images are barraging each of us, calling on us to desire or to imitate or to reject. Embodiment, I am saying, is as irrevocably political and economic as it is fundamentally aesthetic. Eventually, the aesthetics of the body is going to have to broaden to the collective bodies we are constituting together, with all their exclusions, but also with all their possibilities.

I don't think there's anything in Shusterman's work that makes this sort of contextualization of somaesthetics impossible; indeed, there is much that requires it, if our self-fashioning cannot be detached from its social context. It seems to me – and the richness of the cultural descriptions Shusterman constructs around the erotic texts on which he focuses suggests – that even beginning on an aesthetics of the particular body as experienced from inside requires placing this body in wider political/aesthetic systems that make its understanding of itself possible even as they constrain it.



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