"I Am Odysseus, But I Have Been Penelope": Corporeal Feminism in Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World*

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"[W]e must not wonder if we truly perceive a world; rather, we must say: the world is what we perceive."
Maurice Merleau-Ponty[1]

Introduction

In the introduction to their recently published book *Theory Matters. The Place of Theory in Literary and Cultural Studies Today* (2016), Martin Middeke and Christoph Reinfandt assert that within the field of literary and cultural criticism, there exists an anxiety among scholars as to where to go after poststructuralist thought,[2] the paradigm that has profoundly dominated both critical theory and practice in the humanities over the last decades. Yet, among many critics of this lopsided development there seems to be a consensus and a shared feeling that deconstruction theory has reached its limits in its aims to arrive at a nuanced understanding of human beings for its

[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Phenomenology of Perception [1945]. New York 2012, p. xxx.

[2] Cf. Martin Middeke, Christoph Reinfandt (eds.): *Theory Matters. The Place of Theory in Literary and Cultural Studies Today*. London 2016, p. 2.

tendency to reduce bodies, experience, and subjectivity to the realm of discourse. Bearing this situation in mind, a turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy may help us to forge new modes of thought and to sidestep the blind spots associated with (radical) constructionism. Starting with the burgeoning embodiment paradigm within the humanities and social sciences, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concepts have recently attracted renewed interest in these disciplines. In his dissertation published in 1945, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty takes the revolutionary step of theorizing consciousness itself as embodied, thereby breaking with many philosophical traditions grounded on the Cartesian 'cogito'. Focusing on the implicit nature of human perception, his compelling account aims to examine the intricate relationship between a subject's bodily existence and the constitution of meaning in her/his everyday experience.

In corporeal feminist[3] scholarship and research since the 1980s, the thought of Merleau-Ponty has occupied a central position. Sharing theoretical sympathy with the French philosopher's privileged focus of attention to the body, corporeal feminists contemplate the relevance of his phenomenological perspectives by adapting these to their theorizations of gender. In doing so, this line of scholars suggests that both discursive formations and dominant ideologies vis-à-vis gender are embodied and reproduced in a body-subject's realm of lived experience, a position that both avoids poststructuralist considerations of social bodies as (mere) cultural constructions or 'texts' and attempts to bridge a rigid nature/culture dualism on the grounds that it plays no role in the intricate ways of how bodies operate and perceive their respective life-worlds. Rather, these feminist takes on gender embodiment seek to examine cultural and historical layers that always already precede a given body-subject's being-in-the-world and thus profoundly shape her/his sense of self as well as relation to others. In her critique of poststructuralist models, Diana Coole remarks that these alternative theoretical contributions are urgently needed to consider agentic

[3] Corporeal feminism designates theoretical angles within feminist scholarship that draw upon phenomenological perspectives on embodiment. This school of thought includes, among others, philosophers such as Linda Martín Alcoff, Diana Coole, Rosalyn Diprose, Elizabeth Grosz, Toril Moi, Gail Weiss, and Iris Marion Young.

capacities of social subjects, for "it is in lived experience and perceptions of dysfunctions and lacunae that resistance is first motivated and appears."[4]

Corporeal feminist angles are also taken up by the contemporary American writer Siri Hustvedt. In both her fiction and non-fiction writing, questions of embodiment and gender's constitutive role in everyday social relations are extensively pondered. With her latest novel, *The Blazing World* (2014), Hustvedt further accentuates the philosophical significance of phenomenology for feminist perspectives. Her narrative, as I will suggest, profoundly mirrors what the anthropologist Thomas J. Csordas terms 'cultural phenomenology' – a method of inquiry that aims at relating "the immediacy of embodied experience with the multiplicity of cultural meaning in which we are always and inevitably immersed."[5] By bridging cultural and historical layers and the dynamics of embodied experience, the novel enters into a dialogue with corporeal feminist perspectives on and commitment to Merleau-Pontian thought. Focusing on both the primacy and the interrelatedness of embodiment and cultural classification, Hustvedt's text is concerned with making explicit what remains implicit in human perception and everyday social interaction, thereby suggesting to subvert a neat theoretical nature/culture dichotomy that has been deeply rooted in Western academic discourses following the linguistic turn. Moreover, by leaving behind the shortcomings of (radical) constructionist positions, the narrative profoundly considers notions of agency in a social environment characterized by confining forces.

In what follows, I will first provide a brief plot summary, which is then joined by a discussion about the manifestation of gender bias as presented in Hustvedt's novel. In the next chapter, I will turn to the book's reflections upon the habitual patterns of embodied perception and link them to body-conceptions and perspectives on gender within corporeal feminist theory. Next, by addressing the dynamics of gender's personal and social spheres,

[4] Diana Coole: *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics after Anti-Humanism*. Lanham 2007, p. 107.

[5] Thomas J. Csordas: Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology. In: Gail Weiss, Honi Fern Haber (eds.): *Perspectives on Embodiment.* New York 1999, pp. 143-164, here p. 143.

the focus will be put on notions of agency that are subtly weaved into the story of the book's protagonist. Finally, I will draw a conclusion and offer some additional thoughts.

The Perception of Art and Gender

The Blazing World follows the protagonist Harriet Burden – Harry to her intimates – a brilliant and passionate New York artist and intellectual working in the field of visual art. Following the sudden death of her husband Felix Lord, she embarks on a secret experiment that attempts to challenge the gender bias in the art world. In order to finally earn the critical appreciation she had been denied as a female artist for most of her creative life, the 55-year-old Harry plots a tripartite art series she entitles *Maskings*. In three installations respectively titled *The History of Western Art*, *The Suffocation Rooms*, and *Beneath*, Harry adopts the personae of three different male artists to mask her own 'female' authorship. Crafted as an academic investigation, the novel is presented as a kind of artifact and includes numerous kinds of testimony. Conducted and edited by a professor for aesthetics named I.V. Hess, the anthology investigates Harriet Burden's claims of authorship years after her death. Pieced together from a variety of sources, the novel comprises, for the most part, the protagonist's journal entries, essays, interviews, personal letters, art criticism, and reviews. The story, set mostly in the years before and after 9/11, illuminates Burden's artistic endeavors during this stage of her life, an artist whose critical reception has only posthumously begun to attract the recognition it always deserved. Yet, instead of invoking endemic forms of overt misogyny, the narrative links Harry's suffering of a muted female artist in a male-dominated field to the basic structures of human experience and the way social bodies perceive the world and others.

New York's androcentric art world as exhibited by Hustvedt profoundly echoes what Iris Marion Young terms the 'sexual division of labor'. According to Young, this division refers to gendered hierarchies of status and power deeply ingrained in social structures, including cultural products, tasks or occupations by default being regarded as more or less appropriately

performed by individual members depending on whether they are identified as female or male.[6]

Young's theoretical framework perfectly exemplifies the conditions that characterize Harry's struggle for artistic recognition. Despite her (obviously) creative talent, the protagonist, identified as a 'female artist', has been positioned on the margins of New York's art scene. The reception of her orchestrated and critically acclaimed tripartite project further substantiates the inherent gender bias deeply ingrained in the field. However, by invoking phenomenological considerations regarding the interrelation between embodiment and cultural categories, the narrative relates Harry's 'fate' to the dynamics and habitual patterns of human perception.

Following her husband's death, driven by a fury both creative and intellectual, Harry, an ardent feminist and avid reader of philosophical and scientific texts, decides to launch her secret experiment, which, above all, the editor points out,

> [was] meant not only to expose the antifemale bias of the art world, but to uncover the complex workings of human perception and how unconscious ideas about gender, race, and celebrity influence a viewer's understanding of a given work of art.[7]

Apart from Harry's personal longing for artistic recognition and her attempt to free herself from being socially labelled as the 'wealthy widow' of one of New York's most famous art dealers, then, *Maskings* would illuminate the intricate relationship between the vicissitudes of perceptual systems and social categories and values within the context of art reception. Hence, the attention her project would finally receive would expose the tacit bias underlying New York's androcentric art scene.

As the story unfolds, the reader discovers that Harry's plan turns out to be quite successful. Even though the reception of her three installations varies, each of the shows is sold and gains, in contrast to her former work, a great

[6] Cf. Iris Marion Young: *On Female Body Experience. "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays.* New York 2005, p. 21-23.

[7] Siri Hustvedt: *The Blazing World.* New York 2014, pp. 1-2.

deal of public interest, with *Beneath*, the third and last piece, being the most critically acclaimed. Thus, *Maskings* substantiates what Harry calls the 'masculine enhancement effect'; namely, attach a man's name to a work within a male-dominated social structure, and it will be deemed better than if a woman's name is attached. As Richard Brickman (alias Harriet Burden) sums up her findings in an academic journal:

> All intellectual and artistic endeavors, even jokes, ironies, and parodies, fare better in the mind of the crowd when the crowd knows that somewhere behind the great work or great spoof it can locate a cock and a pair of balls.[8]

Following the protagonist's 'coming-out', the persistence of an inherent gender-bias is best exemplified by the art critics' reluctance to accept Harry's authorship of the three shows even after her 'involvement' is revealed. Admittedly, however, Harry's public revelation turns out to be somewhat problematic, for her last male mask, the sociopathic charlatan Rune, steals her work and claims the ideas of their giant success in *Beneath* exclusively for himself. The main difference between Rune and Harry's other masks lies in his celebrity status. Rune was already a star in the art scene prior to his collaboration with Harriet. In a written statement added to the anthology, Oswald Case, a neo-conservative voice of art criticism, soberly ascribes the brilliance of *Beneath* to Rune, who simply must have "used Harriet Burden as a muse"[9] for his post-9/11 aesthetic. Case celebrates Rune as a postmodern *wunderkind*, a Baudrillardian simulacrum in the flesh, whereas Burden's art reflected "a neo-Romantic gushing" that reminded him of a "half-baked Existentialism."[10] Even though evidence suggests otherwise, Case dismisses any voiced doubts regarding Rune's unaccompanied authorship in the art piece as a pathetic cry for affirmative action and identity politics: "To suggest, even for an instant, that there might be more men than women in art because men are better artists is to risk being tortured by the

[8] Ibid., pp. 252-253.
[9] Ibid., p. 168.
[10] Ibid., p. 170.

thought police."[11] William Burridge, the art dealer of *Beneath*, responds in a similar vein to Harry's 'claimed' authorship. As Hess confronts Burridge with Harry's obviously vital role in the creation of the project, as well as her published essay under the name of Richard Brickman, the art dealer responds reluctantly to such claims. It becomes apparent that regardless of Hess' coherent line of argument, Burridge does not believe that Harry is capable of fabricating such a sophisticated scheme – let alone the creation of the art masterpiece itself. Rather, according to him, Harriet, who once "gave some great dinners" [12] when Felix was still alive, "never struck [him] as someone who could pull off a work like that solo. […] It's just not her style, but it made sense for Rune."[13] Moreover, Burridge contends that "it strikes [him] as far-fetched that she was some virago mastermind who cooked up these elaborate plots or was playing some game of wits with Rune."[14]

Perceptual Habits

Despite such blatantly sexist reactions, Harry herself remarks that she did not believe there had been a (personal) plot against her. Instead, drawing on phenomenological research within the sciences, she links much of social prejudice and gender biases to unconscious perceptual habits. By addressing the tacit dimension of embodied meaning-making that is an essential part of everyday experience, Harry's work is profoundly concerned with illuminating the interwovenness between embodiment and cultural meaning. She thus wants to explore how prereflective perceptual patterns shape our attitudes, thoughts, and emotions. Prior to *Maskings*, she writes:

> Why do people see what they see? There must be conventions. There must be expectations. We see nothing otherwise; all would be chaos. Types, codes, categories, concepts.[15]

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., p. 257.
[13] Ibid., p. 260.
[14] Ibid., p. 264.
[15] Ibid., p. 57.

Instead of remaining on the level of discursive constructions and cultural macro-forces that (over)determine social identities, it becomes evident that Harry's plot insists on embodiment as a philosophical position whose active and creative characteristics need to be tackled if one attempts to adequately investigate and challenge a social status quo. Hence, Harry's scheme is profoundly political as it not only focuses on her personal situation as a muted artist but serves as a means of social criticism on a wider level. Her decision to lay bare her authorship in an academic journal also indicates her role as devoted scholar and her sincere commitment to cultural inquiry. As Rachel, the protagonist's best friend puts it, Harry's foray into the ambiguities of perception

> was not just to expose those who fell into her trap but to investigate the complex dynamics of perception itself, how we all create what we see in order to force people to examine their own modes of looking, and to dismantle their smug assumptions.[16]

Harry's political project thus attempts to expose social hierarchies based on gender by exploring the habitual patterns that tacitly operate in a body-subject's perceptual field. As Gail Weiss argues, the persistence of oppressive hierarchical dimensions cannot be understood without a phenomenological description of our habitual modes of relating to ourselves, the world, and to others.[17] Following the thought of Merleau-Ponty, lived experience is grounded on alterity and body-subjects actively and creatively perceive their life-worlds against the backdrop of difference. In other words, human perceptual systems possess a fundamentally stereotypical character, with both expectations and habits playing a vital part in the constitution of meaning. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty teaches us that perception should not be conceived of as an act of perceiving something as opposed to perceiving nothing but as "the background against which all acts stand out"[18]. Thus, it is

16 Ibid., p. 104.

17 Cf. Gail Weiss: Can an Old Dog Learn New Tricks? Habitual Horizons in James, Bourdieu, and Merleau-Ponty. In: id.: *Refiguring the Ordinary.* Bloomington 2008, pp. 75-97, here p. 92.

18 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xxiv.

through perceptual experience, which is always "already charged with a *sense*"[19],that our notion of 'truth' is established.

Given Harry's philosophical endeavor, Hustvedt's narrative succinctly echoes phenomenological perspectives on the interwovenness of embodiment and consciousness that "introduces difference into all aspects of one's existence."[20] In other words, by considering the primacy of embodied perception in a particular social environment, the text follows a corporeal feminist position that rules out a perpetuation of a nature/culture dichotomy regarding a theorization of bodies. As to our prereflective and habitual embodied existence, then, meaning and signification cannot be reduced to the interplay of discourse but emerges at the intersection between our bodily experience and semio-linguistic practices. In *The Blazing World*, for example, nondiscursive signification is presented by Harry's reflection on the prelinguistic experience of sensing colors. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Harry insists that colors have a primordially corporeal meaning, thereby emphasizing the prereflective nature of perceiving difference.[21] In her essay "Embodied Visions: What Does It Mean to Look at a Work of Art?" Hustvedt notes: "Red, green, or blue will affect us – we will feel their impact – before we are even able to name the color."[22]

Following *Maskings*, Harry's published essay further ponders the results of her 'perception studies', naming 'inattentional blindness', the 'masculine enhancement effect', and the 'blindness of context' as three burgeoning phenomena that have characterized the reception of her tripartite experiment. Within cognitive sciences, the phenomenon 'inattentional blindness' suggests that there is much around a respective body-subject that

19 Ibid., p. 4.

20 Weiss, Can an Old Dog Learn New Tricks?, p. 93.

21 As Merleau-Ponty writes: "The first perception of colors, properly so called, is thus a change in the structures of consciousness, the institution of a new dimension of experience, and the deployment of an *a priori*. Attention, then, must be conceived on the model of these originary acts, since a second-order attention that limited itself to recalling an already acquired knowledge would refer us back to the acquisition itself" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 32, emphasis in original).

22 Siri Hustvedt: Embodied Visions. What Does It Mean to Look at a Work of Art? In: id.: *Living, Thinking, Looking.* London 2012, pp. 336-354, here p. 345.

he/she simply does not perceive. In *The Suffocation Rooms*, the second part of her scheme, the intrusive but unidentified hints concerning Harry's authorship (e.g. "*Phineas Q. Eldridge is really Harriet Burden*"[23]) may substantiate this notion. The two other phenomena are terms developed by Harry herself to further illuminate the link between perceptual processes and culturally specific values. The 'masculine enhancement effect' addresses the circumstance that in a particular context (here: the field of art) ideas and products supported and crafted by males are unconsciously ascribed a higher value by both men and women. In Harry's case, this would explain the increased attention and success her three exhibitions have indubitably achieved simply on the grounds that she uses three poster-boys. As Harry puts it in her journal: "The crowd is not divided by sex. The crowd is of one mind, and that mind is swayed and seduced by ideas."[24] 'Context blindness', according to the protagonist, characterizes "a radical externalization and reduction of a person's identity to stable and thus limiting categories of marginality."[25] The reception of *The Suffocation Rooms* undoubtedly illustrates Harry's point. A part of the novel comprises a positive review written by an art critic, stating that the hermaphrodite figure in the installation "speaks directly to the LGBT community," with the box "perhaps a little too obviously [representing] 'the closet.'"[26] In Harry's essay, she links this reductionist aspect to the concept of 'critical whiteness.' Whereas the reception of her other two male masks – white and straight – elucidates their 'freedom' in virtue of a culturally unmarked category, Phinny's mask – black and gay – in Harry's words, "pinches hard."[27] As the reviewer puts it: "Eldridge came out in 1995 and has been exploring gay and racial identities in his work ever since"[28]. Here, the interrelatedness between bodily processes and a given cultural context is crucial insofar as unconscious

[23] Hustvedt, *The Blazing World*, p. 129.
[24] Ibid., p. 252.
[25] Ibid., p. 254.
[26] Ibid., p. 197.
[27] Ibid., p. 254.
[28] Ibid., p. 197.

perceptual practices 'allow' certain bodies to "flourish in all their specificity"[29], while other bodies are contained within a limited frame. In other words, in contrast to Phinny, the two other male figures obviously do not need to 'explore their identities,' simply on the grounds that they are both straight and white. Thus, the text goes beyond a gender bias in the reception of art as it voices a wider philosophical position regarding our categorical perception (say, of race and sexual orientation) and the way unconscious aspects shape our attitudes, thoughts, and emotions within that process.

Given Harry's conducted research, the narrative subtly probes the reciprocal relationship between Merleau-Ponty's 'habit-body'[30] and specific cultural values, thereby suggesting to subvert an artificial nature/culture dichotomy. In terms of the intricate link between perceptual systems and enculturation, Alcoff points to 'sedimented contextual knowledge' that constitutes an essential feature of our bodily experience. Alcoff joins Merleau-Ponty in contending that the corporeal processes by which bodies are distinguished and categorized by type precede social discrimination, group oppression, racism, sexism, etc.[31] Considering habitual structures of ordinary experience, it thus becomes clear that gender, as a visible social identity, goes beyond ideas and value judgments articulated through language, for perceptual processes and (resulting) sedimented layers of meaning – with difference as an ontological feature – both consciously and unconsciously frame our bodily being-in-the-world. From a corporeal feminist perspective, then, both the reception of *Maskings* and the reactions towards Harry's disclosed authorship in Hustvedt's narrative underline the significance of

[29] Ibid., p. 254.

[30] Habit-body refers to a body-subject's prereflective acquisition and understanding of a new signification in everyday experience. Following Merleau-Ponty, to 'understand' in this sense means "to experience [*éprouver*] the accord between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and realization … [with the body as] our anchorage in a world" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 146).

[31] Cf. Linda Martín Alcoff: *Visible Identities. Race, Gender, and the Self.* New York 2006, p. 184.

phenomenological concepts to arrive at a nuanced understanding of gender as a perceived reality in ordinary (social) experience.[32]

As for Western culture's long history (and beyond) of social discrimination against and marginalization of particular groups, one may think that, in terms of social change, Merleau-Ponty's theoretical account of perceptual habits gives even less room for hope. In this regard, Hustvedt's narrative itself offers a rather bleak outlook, given the persistent doubt and personal attacks leveled against the protagonist after she goes public. However, by addressing the inherently ambiguous and dynamic nature of perception, Alcoff claims that "even when congealed into habit […] that dynamism can be activated by the existence of multiple forms of the gaze in various cultural productions and by the challenge of contradictory perceptions."[33] In her view, then, and I would agree, Merleau-Ponty's account is of the utmost importance for cultural theorists as it offers a sophisticated "understanding of where – that is, at what level of experience – change needs to occur."[34] Moreover, a theorization of bodily habits must reject the nature/culture divide for habits are both natural and cultural; natural in the sense of exhibiting forms of embodiment general to human beings, and cultural in the sense of attaining specificity through cultural codes. In Hustvedt's narrative, Harry's attempt to "force people to examine their own modes of looking" significantly resonates with Alcoff's own conclusion concerning 'undoing' perceptual habits. As the latter puts it:

> [O]ur first task, it seems to me, is to make visible the practices of visibility itself, to outline the background from which our knowledge of others and of ourselves appears in relief. From there we may be able to alter the associated meanings ascribed to visible differences.[35]

[32] Ironically, the gender identity of the anthology's editorial voice I.V. Hess remains undisclosed throughout the course of the novel. I believe this to be one of Hustvedt's witty shenanigans on a meta-level. While the narrative critically addresses the prereflective dimension of perceiving and discerning cultural categories such as gender, the reader may be forced to question her/his own unconsciously assigned gender category to Hess. Personally, I admit that I categorized the editor's voice as female. Here, I think Hustvedt has proved a point.

[33] Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, p. 189.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., p. 194.

In the story, Harry's scheme attempts to challenge the often tacit component underlying sexism and gender biases in the art scene. In her memoir *The Shaking Woman*, Hustvedt writes: "It is no secret that our personal experiences infect our ideas about how the world works."[36] This as a consequence means that it is through bodily perception that we feed our beliefs and discriminations. In the novel, given the success of *Maskings*, the protagonist would unearth both the fragility and mutability of prereflective perception, "the fact that we mostly see what we expect to see."[37] As Rachel wants her to once more try for a gallery, Harry's response is: "[H]adn't they [art critics] given their verdict over and over again? No one wanted Mrs. Lord's handicrafts and dollies."[38] According to Harry, it required a more radical measure to cause a stir. In Phinny's words, "[t]o be really seen, Harry had to be invisible."[39] Shedding her husband's last name, the protagonist refers to herself as 'Harriet Unbound' in her journal, a name that – in contrast to 'Mrs. Lord' – may be read as a subtle expression of both her artistic/intellectual drive as well as her unadulterated fury. As Harry notes:

> The writer must write and the critics critique and the reviewers review and the pissers piss, and they shall. My time has come, and whatever they say—the mostly mediocrities—is not the point. HOW THEY SEE ME is all that matters, and they will not see me. Until I step forward.[40]

Gender Embodiment and Agentic Possibilities

In contrast to radical constructivist positions, corporeal feminists hold that (social) reality is mediated and not exclusively constituted by discourse. Taking their cue from Merleau-Ponty's thought, this line of feminist thinkers share a growing skepticism towards political and methodological shortcomings of poststructuralist takes on social identity, arguing that, besides their culturally (over)deterministic corollaries,[41] these traditions have

36 Siri Hustvedt: *The Shaking Woman or a History of My Nerves.* New York 2009, p. 138.

37 Hustvedt, *Blazing World*, p. 33.

38 Ibid., p. 29.

39 Ibid., p. 130.

40 Ibid., p. 272.

41 For instance, Alcoff critically reads a neodeterminist undertone into poststructuralist approaches to social identities, in which the subject is not underdetermined but overdetermined

left unresolved the fundamental role of an individual subject's bodily experience in the constitution of consciousness. As Coole asserts, poststructuralism is characterized, among other things, "by a coyness regarding 'reality' or lived experience […] and a troubled relationship with notions of agency."[42] She therefore insists that phenomenological investigations are urgently required, as it is precisely within the realm of bodily experience where agentic capacities can emerge that may help body-subjects to resist, among others, gendered norms.[43] It goes without saying that, on a more macro and structural level, gender also operates as a particular form of social positioning of bodies in relation to one another that exceeds an individual dimension. Yet, even though the positioning of social bodies has a profound influence on our very sense of self, Kelly Oliver cogently argues that individual bodies are never fully determined by their respective subject position. Instead, he elaborates, subjectivity and subject position are fundamentally intertwined in a body-subject's lived experience: "It is possible to develop a sense of agency in spite of, or in resistance to, an oppressive social situation."[44]

Weiss asserts that a body-subject's social identities can be manifold and, depending on the specific cultural context, some identities co-exist peacefully within one and the same individual than others, while others can cause tension. In Harry's case, the tension between her role as 'woman/mother' on the one hand and 'artist/intellectual' on the other is profoundly reflected in the protagonist's role during her marriage and her struggle for recognition in the world of art. In terms of a social identity as mother, Weiss suggests that, "[w]hile society may promulgate specific

and constructed – not by essentialist notions poststructuralists rightly seek to abolish – but by a set of social discourses and cultural macro-forces that leaves little or no room for individual agency (*Visible Identities*, p. 140). In a similar vein, Denise Riley asserts that in the course of the social construction paradigm, the extreme of biological determinism has been substituted by the extreme of cultural determinism, leaving no space in between (*War in the Nursery. Theories of the Child and Mother*. London 1983, p. 2-3).

42 Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics after Anti-Humanism*, p. 11.

43 Cf. ibid., p. 205.

44 Kelly Oliver: Beyond Recognition. Merleau-Ponty and an Ethics of Vision. In: Gail Weiss (ed.): *Intertwinings. Interdisciplinary Encounters with Merleau-Ponty.* New York 2008, pp. 131-152, here p. 148.

standards for motherhood, it is clear that even the woman most devoted to these standards will inevitably end up embodying them in her own way."[45] In the story, it turns out that, while her husband Felix had been away on business trips, Harry alone was responsible for raising their two children. In her journal, she reflects upon the ambivalent character of her experience during these years of her life as follows: "It was paradise. It was exhausting. It was boring. It was sweet, exciting, and sometimes, curiously, very lonely."[46] Given the inherent difficulties of bridging two socially disparate roles – here, female and intellectual – Weiss, referring to her own experiences as mother and scholar, holds that "there will always be occasions when one's identity as a mother intrudes upon one's identity as an intellectual, forcing the individual to shift her priorities suddenly and radically."[47] Harry's reflections on her marriage demonstrate that, besides her marginalization in the art world, her sense of self is also threatened by ideological notions of an essential motherhood. These 'threats,' however, as it turns out, are not simply imposed onto the protagonist but are also actively enacted by Harry herself. In that regard, Weiss argues that it is important to consider that the emerging conflicts and tensions these culturally incongruent identities indubitably produce are not "accidental by-products of one's self-identity but fundamentally constitutive of who that self was, who the self is, and who that self can become."[48] Therefore, despite the inevitably constraining effects of ideological formations on an individual's sense of self, it may be possible to resist them to one degree or another.

In both her journals and conversations with Rachel, Harry self-critically contemplates her former role as 'Felix' wife', and in doing so, she ponders upon notions of agency with regards to her social suffering. She tells her friend that, during her marriage, she had silently accepted and internalized an inferior status, thereby cementing a hierarchical relationship between the

45 Gail Weiss: Mothers/Intellectuals. Alterities of a Dual Identity. In: id.: *Refiguring the Ordinary*. Bloomington 2008, pp. 181-202, here p. 187.

46 Hustvedt, *Blazing World*, p. 15.

47 Weiss, Mothers/Intellectuals, p. 196.

48 Ibid., p. 202.

two. Harry concedes that "it was her mad love for Felix that had made it so hard for her to oppose him."[49] In the same way as her mother had once been in thrall to her own husband, Harry states that she had bent to Felix because deep inside she believed that it should not be the other way around: "Why should he bend to her wishes? Who was she to ask that? *Bend, bend, bend,* Harry said, *always bending and swaying*."[50] Not until she launches *Maskings* does Harry discover her self's forms of resistance, forms of dominance, she claims, that most men take for granted: "*The pull of the other. Girls learn*, she said. *Girls learn to read power, to make their way, to play the game, to be nice*."[51] Harry's thoughts about her own complicity in keeping herself down resonates with Rosalyn Diprose's argument that it is not only the law that works through women to keep them in place, but that women also work on themselves.[52] As Harry states:

> I wanted to fly, you see, and breathe fire. Those were my dearest wishes, but it was forbidden, or *I felt* it was forbidden. It has taken *me* a very long time, a very long time to *give myself* permission to fly and breathe fire.[53]

Given the protagonist's complicity at work in acting out the submissive role during her marriage, note also Alcoff's assertion that it is crucial to address a woman's subjective experience to attain a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between social and personal spheres.[54] For a woman's self-identity is not solely determined by external forces, but rather, as Alcoff states, "she herself is part of the historicized, fluid movement, and she therefore actively contributes to the context within which her position can be delineated."[55] It is only after her husband's death that Harry can realize the full extent of her obedience. After her phase of severe mourning Harry writes

49 Hustvedt, *Blazing World*, p. 238.

50 Ibid., p. 239.

51 Ibid., p. 243.

52 Cf. Rosalyn Diprose: *Corporeal Generosity. On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas*. New York 2002, p. 65.

53 Hustvedt, *Blazing World*, p. 78 (my emphasis).

54 Cf. Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, p. 184.

55 Ibid.

into her journal: “There was nothing and no one in my way except the burden of Burden herself.”[56] Reflecting on her former role as docile wife, Harry states that she had been ‘Penelope’ sitting at home with two children and faithfully awaiting her husband’s home-coming. Through *Maskings*, however, Harry has profoundly changed her self-perception and, despite all social barriers, has understood her agentic potential that had remained hidden for so long. As she finally acknowledges: “I am Odysseus. But I found out too late.”[57]

Conclusion

It seems to me a great loss when poststructuralist and deconstruction models come to be seen entirely coextensive with cultural and literary criticism rather than being regarded as one kind of theoretical approach among other, alternative ones. However, the main critique of this lopsided circumstance as voiced by corporeal feminists, it appears to me, is not to discredit these methodologies per se but, by attending to Merleau-Pontian perspectives regarding our body, to arrive at a better understanding of the dynamics between bodily experience, the world, and meaning. A feminist focus on gender embodiment allows for accurate descriptions of the situated experience of body-subjects, thereby also tackle problems and shortcomings associated with the poststructuralist paradigm.

Such corporeal feminist aspects are profoundly reverberated through Hustvedt’s fictional ‘life-world’. Insisting on the premise that meaning is always embodied, the material dimension of gender as a constitutive reality is subtly taken up in the narrative and considered in nuanced ways. Moreover, the novel can be read as an argument against methodological lopsidedness and isolation as it exhibits the way how poststructuralist and phenomenological takes on gender may be brought together. The story of Harriet Burden draws attention to the fact that gender operates as a complex and multi-layered phenomenon whose ‘reality’ goes far beyond the position that gender works as an assigned subject position whose artificiality can be

56 Hustvedt, *Blazing World*, p. 27.
57 Ibid., p. 326.

exposed if properly deconstructed. As Ingrid Hotz-Davies cogently puts it, "[f]or a category, gender exists exactly insofar as and as long it can signify."[58] By delving into the dialectics of embodied perception and social classification in ordinary experience, Hustvedt's narrative accentuates how body-subjects are both interpellated into categories as well as produce them on their own, thereby addressing what Hotz-Davies terms a 'double bind' regarding the theoretical impasse associated with deconstructionism; that is, even though a category X can be persistently deconstructed, subjects still identify and/or are identified as category X nonetheless.[59] Moreover, by making the reciprocity between our body and consciousness more visible, the text joins corporeal feminists in their attempts to understand where potential agency may be found and at what level social change may be initiated.

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[59] Cf. ibid., p. 136.

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