

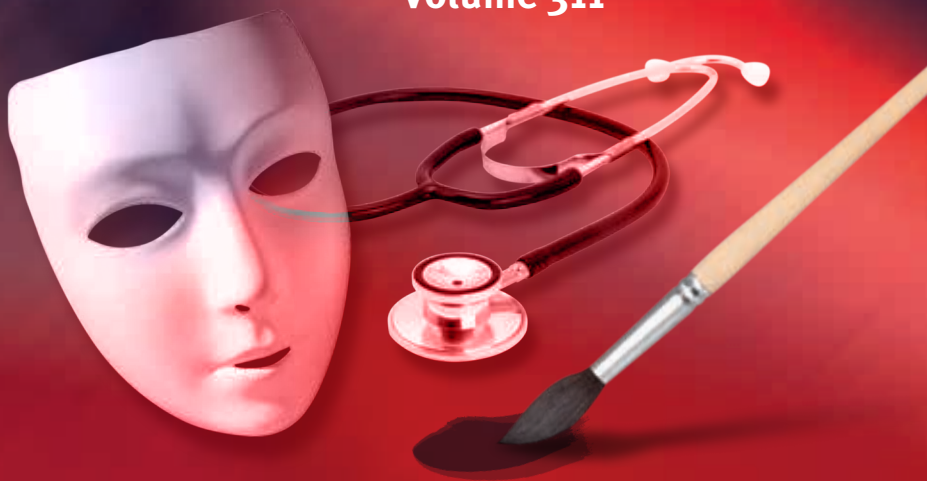
DIANA WAGNER

Seeing and Perceiving

Synesthetic Perception, Embodied
Intersubjectivity, and Gender Masquerade
in Siri Hustvedt's Works

American Studies ★ A Monograph Series

Volume 311



Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg



AMERICAN STUDIES – A MONOGRAPH SERIES

Volume 311

Edited on behalf
of the German Association
for American Studies by
ALFRED HORNUNG
ANKE ORTLEPP
HEIKE PAUL



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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie;
detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet
über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Gedruckt mit Unterstützung
der Wilhelm Hahn und Erben-Stiftung in Bad Homburg
und der Carl und Charlotte Schott-Stiftung

UMSCHLAGBILD

Bildcomposing
Maske und Stethoskop: stock.adobe.com
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ISBN 978-3-8253-4781-9

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© 2021 Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH Heidelberg
Imprimé en Allemagne · Printed in Germany
Umschlaggestaltung: Klaus Brecht GmbH, Heidelberg
Druck: Memminger MedienCentrum, 87700 Memmingen
Gedruckt auf umweltfreundlichem, chlorfrei gebleichtem
und alterungsbeständigem Papier

Den Verlag erreichen Sie im Internet unter:
www.winter-verlag.de

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book began as a doctoral dissertation, which I submitted to Philipps-Universität Marburg in 2019. I am deeply grateful for the invaluable help and encouragement of my family, institutions, colleagues, and friends who supported me in researching and writing this book. First and foremost, I want to thank Prof. Dr. Carmen Birkle, who introduced me to Siri Hustvedt's fiction when I was an M.A. student and who advised, supported, and inspired me during my work on this project. I also owe my immense gratitude to Prof. Dr. Alfred Hornung at Mainz University, the second reader of my doctoral dissertation and the series editor. I thank the other members of my examination committee, Prof. Dr. Martin Kuester, Prof. Dr. Sabine Föllinger, and Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Rieken, the chair of the dissertation committee. I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Andreas Barth at Winter Verlag for his help and patience.

My dissertation could not have been finished without the completion scholarship funded by the STIBET-Program of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). I am also grateful for the two travel grants that allowed me to present parts of my project at the SASS 2017 conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and "Amerikanistendag 2016" in Amsterdam. Finally, my book could take material shape thanks to the generous contributions to the printing costs by Wilhelm Hahn und Erben-Stiftung in Bad Homburg as well as Carl and Charlotte Schott-Stiftung.

I am grateful to have had a chance to attend Alva Noë's insightful lecture "Three Genres of Seeing: Towards a New Aesthetics of Visual Experience" and participate in his thought-provoking three-day Friend-summer-seminar "Art and Experience" at Justus Liebig University in Giessen in the summer of 2018.

I furthermore wish to thank the participants of Prof. Birkle's doctoral colloquium at Philipps-Universität Marburg for their helpful feedback and comments at various stages of this book. My special thanks go to a

number of fellow scholars and friends who supported and assisted me with their valuable insights, advice, and recommendations: Johanna Heil, Connor Pitetti, Birte Christ, Alexander Flaß, Janina Rojek, and Christina Maria Koch. I thank Julia Schneider for many hours of proofreading and formatting assistance. I am also grateful to Andrea Hehn at Winter Verlag for her suggestions and production assistance.

Without the immense help, encouragement, and support of my husband, Matthias Wagner, who took care of our son during the long hours of writing, this book would never have been finished or published. Finally, I wish to thank my mother and parents-in-law for believing in me.

Diana Wagner

INTRODUCTION

[R]eflection—even the second-order reflection of science—obscures what we thought was clear. We believed we knew what feeling, seeing and hearing were, and now these words raise problems. We are invited to go back to the experiences to which they refer in order to redefine them. (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 11–12)

We are a team, [...] a twosome deep in research on the nature of perception: 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. (Hustvedt, *The Blazing World* 59)

We continually find it important to realize that the way we have been brought up to perceive our world is not the only way and that it is possible to see beyond the “truths” of our culture. (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* 239)

The Italian painter Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964), whose work the contemporary novelist and essayist Siri Hustvedt repeatedly discusses in her writings on art, claims that “nothing is more abstract, more unreal than what we actually see. [...] Matter exists, of course, but has no intrinsic meaning of its own, such as the meanings that we attach to it” (qtd. in Hustvedt, “The Drama” 232). Morandi, thus, understands *seeing as always given in perception* and charged with meaning, which is predicated upon linguistic and cultural systems of signification. Therefore, as the art historian James Elkins observes in his book on the nature of seeing, “seeing is irrational, inconsistent, and undependable. It is immensely troubled, cousin to blindness and sexuality, and caught up in the threads of the unconscious” (Introduction 11). Both quotes draw attention to the idea of impossibility of experiencing anything close to ‘pure’ or ‘objective’ seeing—seeing that is divorced from the perceiving

subject, their complex physiology, and situated environment. *Seeing is perceiving* and it is never just a static absorption of light and visual stimuli but an intricately organized activity, which implicates the subject's entire (bio)logical body, with its interacting senses and conscious, non-conscious, and unconscious processes interdependent upon the larger cultural and historical context in which seeing emerges. This intertwining of seeing and perceiving, of the subjective and the intersubjective is at the heart of this book.

As Astrid Böger mentions in her article on the art of perception, “[f]ew authors have tackled the complex relationship between looking and seeing, remembering and feeling as consistently as Siri Hustvedt has” (281). In this book, I examine the concepts and experiences of seeing and perceiving as represented in Hustvedt’s both fictional and nonfictional writings, including all of the seven novels published to date,¹ in which she meticulously researches questions of visibility and perception as reciprocally connected to the fundamental questions of human existence. These include the questions of “what it means to be human”—of “*who we are and how we got that way*”—which are inexhaustible and “open queries” (Hustvedt, “Author’s Note” ix; emphasis in original). Hustvedt explicates her position *vis-à-vis* the questions of perception as “a *phenomenological* one” because the practices of seeing and perceiving cannot be separated from one’s lived experience of the world (cf. “The Drama” 234; emphasis in original). However, the specific understanding of seeing and perceiving fostered in her work goes beyond any single theoretical paradigm or epistemological framework (see chapter 1).

Drawing on ideas from discourses of art, phenomenology, philosophy of mind, psychoanalysis, neuroscience, cognitive linguistics, feminist criticism, and medicine—to name but a few—Hustvedt creates her own interdisciplinary framework for theorizing seeing and perceiving where scientific evidence and philosophical insights co-exist with the poetic, the personal, the lived, the corporeal, and the anecdotal.

¹ Hustvedt’s novels published as of 2021 are *The Blindfold* (1992), *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* (1996), *What I Loved* (2003), *The Sorrows of an American* (2008), *The Summer without Men* (2011), *The Blazing World* (2014), and *Memories of the Future* (2019).

Hustvedt insists on synthesis and interdisciplinarity because “all human knowledge is partial” (Introduction, *Woman* xii) and “[k]nowing turns on perspective, first or third person” (“Borderlands” 344). She challenges the idea of the third-person disembodied ‘objectivity’ because it “is, at best, a working fiction. [...] an agreement about method, as well as shared underlying assumptions about how the world works” (“Author’s Note” xi). Her narratives often present controversial ideas and conflicting positions, creating what Hustvedt calls “zones of focused ambiguity” (“Borderlands” 365). The emphasis on ambiguity as the underlying quality of human existence, experience, and knowledge allows her narratives to dismantle such conceptual hierarchized binaries as self/other, nature/culture, inside/outside, and male/female, through which the world is customarily organized and perceived. As Lakoff and Johnson argue in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, “[o]ur concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities” (4). Seeing and perceiving in Hustvedt’s works emerge as practices inherently constituted by habit, language, culture, and politics.

Hustvedt’s long-term preoccupation with the matters of visibility and perception, which many of her texts explicitly thematize and focus on, allows this study to scrutinize her work as a vehicle for facilitating the discussion about the concepts and experiences of seeing and perceiving, focusing on the aspects of synesthetic perception (chapter 2), embodied intersubjectivity (chapter 3), and gender masquerade (chapter 4). This approach recognizes the active role literary texts play in the expression and interpretation of the ways in which human beings come to see, perceive, and understand the world, themselves, and other people. It considers literature as “responsive to a broader set of influences than the narrow and often purely formally conceived aesthetic sphere” (Jacobs 5). Texts can both articulate the experiences of everyday realities and simultaneously shape these experiences and realities by perpetuating certain policies and ideologies and generating effects and affects through representation.

Literary fiction appeals to the reader’s whole body and prompts them to experience the depicted lifeworld vicariously. Offering its reader a certain point of view to look at things, a text shifts their perspective and invites them to enter the storyworld as another, which “make[s] objects

‘unfamiliar’” and, thereby, “remove[s] the automatism of perception” (Shklovsky 9; 12). As a narrative proceeds, the reader develops their private empathetic responses to the textual events and begins to identify with something other than themselves, which enables the text to re-organize each individual reader’s habitual structures of seeing and perceiving. The ability to both articulate and shape vision and perception permits literature—and Hustvedt’s works in particular because of their strong emphasis on the perceptual aspects of human life—to shed light on the experiences of seeing and perceiving in ways other disciplines are not always capable of. Illuminating the invisible, the implicit, and the emotional, literary work creates its own mode and space of understanding of “*who we are and how we got that way*” (Hustvedt, “Author’s Note” ix).

By pinpointing that “vision is itself invisible” and that “we cannot see what seeing is,” the art historian W. J. T. Mitchell formulates the fundamental aporia of vision (“Showing” 166). Because “perceptual experience is *transparent* or *diaphanous*,” the very possibility to access or adequately verbalize seeing and perceiving is contested (Gendler and Hawthorne 2; emphasis in original). Paradigms and philosophies that favor ‘objectivist’ methods and fixed definitions stumble upon the idea of theorizing experience. The philosopher of mind Tim Crane, for instance, observes that “reflection on what it is like to have an experience does not reveal properties of experiences themselves, but only of their objects” (128). Along these lines, seeing and perceiving emerge as unattainable, always mediated, and constructed experiences. As the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty observes, “[b]etween the self which analyses perception and the self which perceives, there is always a distance” (*Phenomenology* 49). Nevertheless, “the goal of phenomenology is to describe experience” (Sobchack, Preface xvii); therefore, the idiosyncratic representations of seeing and perceiving in Hustvedt’s texts can be considered the author’s phenomenological investigations into the nature of human embodied experience, evocative of the humanities’ recent paradigm shift to corporeality, materialism, and affect.

In her essay “Embodied Visions,” Hustvedt writes: “We are born into meanings and ideas that will shape how our embodied minds encounter the world” (345). Thus, she underscores that people’s perceptual experiences are inherently situated, materialized, and

mediated first and foremost through the body, which is understood in a phenomenological sense—as a prerequisite for having any experience in the first place.² To emphasize embodiment as the fundamental human condition, Hustvedt often refers to Merleau-Ponty, who claims that “we are our body” and “we perceive the world with our body” (*Phenomenology* 239). Blurring the categorical distinction between the self and the other, he also observes that “my body and the other’s are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon” (412). Thus, Merleau-Ponty “envisions the self as inseparable from the body and the world it inhabits” (C. Marks, “*I Am*” 54). The ways in which people see and perceive something are deeply ingrained in the discursive proclivities of a particular socio-cultural and linguistic field in which the person is embedded. People’s perceptions are intersubjective, rather than subjective, dependent upon what Vivian Sobchack calls their “*subjective embodiment and objective enworldedness*” (*Address* 4; my emphasis). In other words, human beings experience their situated environments subjectively, through their bodies as instruments for their existential ‘being-in-the-world,’ and at the same time as ‘objects’ to be seen, perceived, and influenced by others, with whom they mutually constitute and share the world.³

From the phenomenological perspective, it is the body that enables seeing and perceiving as well as analyzing, writing, and reading about these experiences. The acts of writing and reading about concrete, real or fictional, experiences of seeing and perceiving already presuppose a retrospective reconstruction of the meanings of these experiences as well as their inevitable mediation through language. Literary fiction can (re-)present experience and bring the invisible aspects of seeing and perceiving into the materiality of the narrative, which concretizes the described perceptual experience and makes it visible. In her book on the phenomenology of film experience, *The Address of the Eye*, Sobchack

² In this sense, experience is never ‘direct’ but mediated by the lived body (cf. Sobchack, Introduction 4).

³ This ambiguity of the bodily existence collapses the boundary between the subject and the object of perception, leading to the annihilation of the specular subject from the visual field and to the split between the eye and the gaze (cf. Lacan 88; 109; see section 1.4).

describes a film as “an act of seeing that makes itself seen” (3); expanding this premise to other forms of representation, one may characterize literary text as an embodied act of expression of perceptual experience that makes itself sensuously perceived, imaginatively seen, corporeally felt, and reflexively understood.

Hustvedt’s works show that seeing is always more than sight; it is inseparable from other modes of perception, such as touch, hearing, or smell, and oftentimes implicates the entire organism with its intricate inner organization, the nervous system, and the interplay of conscious and non-conscious processes. The idea of synesthetic perception figures prominently in her fiction, especially in her most recent novel *Memories of the Future*. In her nonfictional works, Hustvedt also repeatedly discusses a condition she has herself—mirror-touch synesthesia—which is a form of cross-modal perception, when by merely observing someone being touched a person can feel the touch in their own body. This can be both a pleasurable and a painful experience in which the stimulation of the visual sense involuntarily causes a perception in the tactile. Synesthetic perception in the broader sense refers to how multiple perceptual modalities interact in the body when producing a meaningful experience; perception, thus, is achieved through the cooperation of the senses. Moreover, Hustvedt’s narratives portray synesthetic perception as a mode of tacit, or implicit, understanding, which is deeply intertwined with the intuitive, emotional, and corporeal dimensions of knowledge (see chapter 2).

Hustvedt’s novels and essays often scrutinize perceptual experience through the discussion and ekphrastic descriptions of visual artworks, which include paintings, drawings, photographs, sculptures, installations, films, and crafts—examples of both actual and notional ekphrasis.⁴ Her novels create a kind of a *mise en abyme* of seeing, which can be described by a circular movement from the extradiegetic level of

⁴ A term rooted in antiquity, ekphrasis has been reconsidered and redefined multiple times. In this study, ekphrasis is understood as the literary description of (the experience of) visual artworks. When the text references the artwork which exists outside of its storyworld, in reality, it is called ‘actual’ ekphrasis; when the described artwork is fictional and imaginary, it is referred to as ‘notional’ ekphrasis.

the author's expression of perceptual experience of a particular artwork to the observer-figure's intradiegetic encounter(s) with the piece and then back to the extradiegetic level, on which the work of art finds its way into the reader's embodied imagination. To add even more layers of signification, sometimes the novels include multiple ways in which the same work of art is seen and perceived by various characters. This narrative strategy, on the one hand, opens up both the art piece and the text to new meanings and interpretations and, on the other hand, also provides a meta-commentary on the very nature of seeing and perceiving by showing the different ways in which various individuals experience the same objects in the world. By placing the artworks into different contexts, Hustvedt's narratives foreground the fluidity and instability of visual perception of images and leave much room for the workings of the reader's imagination. In other words, her novels facilitate an intersubjective collaboration between multiple participants—on the intradiegetic level, between the artist, the artwork, and the observer(s) and, on the extradiegetic level, between the author, the text, and the reader (see chapter 3).

I want to draw attention to Hustvedt's innovative approach to the practice of ekphrasis, which she uses in two main ways. Oftentimes, the literary description of an art piece itself emerges as secondary to the way in which the artwork is experienced by a given character. Many of her narratives focus on the embodied effect an art piece produces on the viewer and it is through its perception that the artwork is being represented in the text. Another strategy in which Hustvedt employs the literary practice of ekphrasis in her works is reducing the description of the notional artwork to a few general remarks and, then, loading it with abundant references and postmodern "knots of symbols," to borrow a phrase from her novel *What I Loved* (169). *What I Loved* and her more recent novel *The Blazing World* both contain many examples of this "rambunctious art, thick with allusion" (Hustvedt, *Loved* 168), which produces "an explosive effect" (169) and creates what can be called "a visual overabundance," akin to image search on the internet (cf. Brosch 228). These instances of ekphrasis, evocative of the scholarly character of postmodernist art, are responsive to the current "situation of the all-pervading availability, proliferation, adaptation, and citation of images" that characterizes media culture in the digital age (Brosch 229).

To activate these “semantic bombs” (Hustvedt, *Loved* 169) and untangle the roots of meaning enclosed in the described artworks, Hustvedt’s texts rely on the reader who is conceptualized as an active participant in the co-production of textual meaning and who experiences and interprets the narrative through the lens of their own unique embodied situation. Hustvedt’s texts may offer a certain vision or sometimes multiple perspectives through various narrative ‘I’s/eyes, as, for example, in her polyphonic novel *The Blazing World*, but the meaning of the described visions and perceptions is only born in the communication with the reader. Thus, the meaning of the described perceptual experience is never finalized in or by the text.

Hustvedt’s work shows that human beings’ concrete experiences of seeing and perceiving are organized by habit as well as non-consciously internalized cultural practices and performances, which are perpetually endorsed through language and representation. As “a novelist and a feminist” (Hustvedt, Introduction, *A Woman* xiv), Hustvedt is especially concerned with the cultural habits and practices connected to the perception and expression of gender, which her narratives represent as both embodied—that is, lived and materialized through a particular body—and performed—that is, constituted through a repetition of habituated cultural practices (cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 24–25).⁵ Hustvedt’s novels investigate how deep-seated habits of and ideas about ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ implicitly shape people’s perceptions, attitudes, behavior, as well as their own experience and sense of interiority. Gender performance, thus, is largely informed by the implicit (or tacit) embodied knowledge and by the “received ideas,” connotations, and associations that are loaded with culturally pre-established significations. As part of the “unconscious ideology” (Top 76) and identity politics, these implicit ideas shape not only the

⁵ By arguing that gender is performative, Butler means that it is “performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (*Gender Trouble* 24). In her theorizations, the concept of gender always refers to a certain “doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (25). Therefore, there can be no gender identity that predates the doing of gendered acts: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25).

perception and expression of gender but also of other social categories, such as race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.

To expose gender as performative, in many of her novels, Hustvedt employs the strategies and elements of masquerade, disguise, and cross-dressing, through which she probes identity boundaries and dismantles “easy notions of binarity” (Garber 10)—male/female, self/other, and inside/outside. The motif of masquerade enables the author to lure to the surface the deep-seated beliefs and habitual biases that occupy the intersubjective space between people. As C. Marks shows, Hustvedt portrays identity as always “intersubjective and relational” (“*I Am*” 9), as fluid and unstable. In Hustvedt’s novels, masks—both real and metaphorical—renegotiate the relationships between self and other and encapsulate “a mingled reality created between them” (*Blazing* 273). Characters who cross-dress or wear masks, on the one hand, manage to manipulate perceptions of other people but, on the other hand, under the influence of the disguise, they change their own perception and view of the world: masks influence the ways in which they communicate with others and experience their own subjectivity. At the same time, Hustvedt’s masquerading characters, especially her female protagonists, are prone to unusual actions and demeanor that surprise and even shock them; therefore, masks also trigger and uncover hidden aspects of their own personalities, serving thus not as “a disguise but a means of revelation” (*Blazing* 60–61).

The motif of gender masquerade proves particularly fruitful in uncovering the antifemale bias in the art world (see chapter 4). As a woman writer, Hustvedt herself has been struggling with the gender-based inequalities in her life, being married to a “more commercially successful” writer, Paul Auster, whose achievements are frequently held in higher regard than those of his wife (Williamson 14; 12). Hustvedt has at length discussed the misogyny and the “‘F-word’—feminism” (“The F-Word” n. pag.)—both in the art world and in literary discourse, drawing attention to the fact that female artists are still underrepresented in museums and their works are much lower in price than those of their male counterparts. Many of her narratives focus on the issues of gender perception in the art world, questioning if art itself has a gender identity (cf. Hustvedt, “The F-Word”), and, if it does, whether it is even possible to conceal it behind a ‘mask.’ If, as the protagonist of Hustvedt’s *The Blazing World* observes, “[a]rt lives in its perception only” (234), then

the very possibility to perceive anything ‘objectively,’ “to see beyond the ‘truths’ of our culture” (Lakoff and Johnson 239) is undermined. As another of Hustvedt’s artist figures suggests, “[t]hat’s the problem with seeing things. Nothing is clear. Feelings, ideas shape what’s in front of you. Cézanne wanted the naked world, but the world is never naked” (*Loved* 12). Many of Hustvedt’s narratives explore this exact ‘problem,’ which is connected to the question of how seeing and perceiving shapes and is shaped by human beings’ understanding of the self, the world, and other people.

Hustvedt’s Contemporary Fiction and Nonfiction within the Academic Context

Apart from the seven novels—*The Blindfold* (1992), *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* (1996), *What I Loved* (2003), *The Sorrows of an American* (2008), *The Summer without Men* (2011), *The Blazing World* (2014), and *Memories of the Future* (2019)—Hustvedt has also published a collection of poems, *Reading to You* (1983), the nonfictional autobiographical piece *The Shaking Woman, or, A History of My Nerves* (2010), as well as the essay collections *Yonder* (1998), *Mysteries of the Rectangle: Essays on Painting* (2005), *A Plea for Eros* (2006), *Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012), and *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind* (2016). Scholars from various disciplines have shown deep interest in her versatile writings. For instance, her memoir *The Shaking Woman*, among other works, has drawn multiple responses from psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, philosophers, neuroscientists, and health professionals.

Recent literary studies of Hustvedt’s work, especially Christine Marks’s, Corinna Reipen’s, and Johanna Hartmann’s monographs, Alexander Williamson’s dissertation, and the essay collection edited by Johanna Hartmann, Christine Marks, and Hubert Zapf, have looked at various aspects of the author’s works, focusing on both her fictional and nonfictional writings and foregrounding the importance to approach her texts from interdisciplinary perspectives. This book also adopts the interdisciplinary approach to analyzing Hustvedt’s writings, going beyond the existing body of criticism by focusing on the aspects of perceptual experience and its understanding that have not yet been either

explicitly or exhaustively addressed in the studies by the authors mentioned above. Thus, the present book delineates the conceptual parameters of seeing and perceiving, expanding on the former considerations of literary visibility in Hustvedt's work and bringing to the fore the overlooked idea of synesthetic perception that figures prominently in Hustvedt's fiction. Furthermore, this study complements Marks's examination of philosophies of intersubjectivity, extending them to investigate perceptual experience and stressing the undertheorized corporeal and unconscious processes that shape people's idiosyncratic seeing and perceiving. Ultimately, through the analysis of the motif of gender masquerade, this study explicates Hustvedt's position in the feminist debates about gender, its expression, and perception as connected to the tacit, or implicit, modes of understanding and meaning-making. This book thematically, rather than chronologically, analyzes all seven of Hustvedt's novels published to date, including the most recent *Memories of the Future* (2019), which has not yet been considered in previous studies.

Hustvedt's fiction has been analyzed within the critical frameworks of postmodernism (see, e.g., Knirsch), poststructuralism (Williamson), the period "after postmodernism" (Zapf), 'new realism' (Tappen-Scheuermann), as "employ[ing] realist modes of narration" while "epitomiz[ing] the post-postmodernist episteme" (Hartmann 15; 77), and as moving "beyond the postmodern moment towards a metamodernistic structure of feeling" (Williamson 105; cf. Rippl, "Rich Zones" 27–28).⁶ Hustvedt's early prose, written at the close of the twentieth century, especially her debut novel *The Blindfold*, is largely influenced by postmodernism and postmodernist theories, which find their way into her more recent prose as well.⁷ Even though, as Linda Hutcheon

⁶ The emphasis on "feelings and sentiments, a drive towards inter-subjective connection and communication" are characteristic of the contemporary (post-postmodern) literary situation (Timmer qtd. in Rippl, "Rich Zones" 27).

⁷ Like many postmodernist works that investigate "how we make meaning in culture, how we 'de-doxify' the systems of meaning (and representation) by which we know our culture and ourselves" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 18), Hustvedt's both fictional prose and essays frequently expose many of the presumably 'natural' phenomena as 'cultural' and constructed. In her works,

observes, “[t]he postmodern moment has passed, [...] its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on [...] in our contemporary twenty-first century world” (*Politics* 181); therefore, the postmodern heritage of Hustvedt’s fiction, with its textual play, fragmentation, and insistence on ambiguity, persists in her later novels as well.

At the same time, Hustvedt’s prose mirrors the recent turn in aesthetics that has been termed the “post-postmodernism” (Jeffrey Nealon), “metamodernism” (Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker), or “after postmodernism” period (Zapf), which is reflective of “a broader shift in the contemporary world that brings art, science, and technology closer together” (Heil 14). Many of Hustvedt’s fictional as well as nonfictional works thematize the relationship between art, science, and technology, integrating discourses of neuroscience, medicine, cognitive sciences, philosophy of mind, etc. into her literary narratives. Her hybrid works can be described in the way Kéline Gotman describes a “neuroscientific,” or “a post-postmodern turn”—“an extension of postmodernism wrapped back into science, poeticized and integrated into philosophical thought” (84). However, Hustvedt is skeptical of more radical posthumanist and AI theories or ‘brain in a vat’ scenarios because she insists on embodiment as a fundamental and inescapable condition of human life, which is evocative of the current “‘renaissance of phenomenology’ in philosophy” (Hartmann 17) and the bodily/material(ist) shift in cultural studies.

Hustvedt’s works can be contextualized within various strands of realism or as deploying realist narrative strategies but her fondness of play and experimentation, her fluid and relational understanding of selfhood, as well as her rejection of binaries and dualisms mark a move beyond the practices and conventions of representational realism. Her specific ideas about perception can be considered within the discourse of

she “interrogates certainty,” “received ideas” (Hustvedt, “The Delusions” 149), “half-truths” (178) and “certain truisms” taken for granted that she aims “to dismantle” (156), in order to disclose how they influence the ways in which the world is being codified, formulated, and experienced. This emphasis on epistemological uncertainty is also a feature of poststructuralist and feminist theories.

the philosophy of 'new realism' which "suggests that we do not construct reality, but perceive it" (Tappen-Scheuermann 42), that everything that can be experienced or perceived is real in a certain field of sense (cf. Gabriel 253). Hustvedt emphasizes the 'realness' of fiction as a form of expression and perception which, in a neuroscientific/neurological sense, does not differ from other forms of experience (cf. "The Real Story" 115). The term 'traumatic realism,' as a form of representation of traumatic events which offers a "disconcerting exploration of disorientation, its symptomatic dimensions and possible ways of responding to them" (LaCapra qtd. in Williamson 311), can be applied to Hustvedt's novels *The Sorrows of an American* and *Memories of the Future* as well as her autobiographical memoir *The Shaking Woman* but it does not exclusively or exhaustively describe these multifaceted narratives.

Not only do Hustvedt's writings resist categorization within any single literary period or aesthetics, they also transcend the fiction-nonfiction and real-imaginary dualities, reflecting the contemporary critical situation characterized by the transgression of the generic boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. In her essay "The Real Story," Hustvedt observes that "we have come to a cultural moment in the United States that is inherently suspicious of fiction and attached to an idea of 'real memory' or 'the true story' that is in itself a fantasy" (108). She argues that "[t]he art of autobiography, as much as the art of fiction, calls on the writer to shape himself as a character in a story" because creating any text entails the construction of a narrative self through language (103). As Gérard Genette meditates in the introduction to his *Narrative Discourse Revisited*:

But has a pure fiction ever existed? And a pure nonfiction? The answer in both cases is obviously negative [...]. Nonetheless, the two types can be conceived of; and literary narratology has confined itself a little too blindly to the study of fictional narrative, as if as a matter of course every literary narrative would always be pure fiction. (15)

In her essays and 'nonfictional' prose, Hustvedt sometimes comments on the people or life situations that inspire her novels, throwing light on the obscure art of textual creation and at the same time providing insights into and complementing the readings of her novels. Therefore, it

is worthwhile to examine both her fictional and nonfictional writings parallel to each other.

Hustvedt's interest in hybrid forms, "mingling of genres," and her "increased employment of intermedial strategies (ekphrases, included drawings, etc.)" (Rippl, "The Rich Zones" 36) permits a greater diversity of artistic expression, encouraged by the values of her postmodernist heritage. Furthermore, as Rippl points out,

[c]onfronting her readers in her hybrid novels with the different forms of knowledge generated by the various mixed genres, she plays with their expectations and allows them to question their habitual organization of knowledge, hence to perceive the (fictional) world in a fresh way that transgresses conventional homogenous and one-voiced ways of fictional world-making. ("Rich Zones" 36–37)

Hustvedt's works provide a dialogic *mise-en-scène*, allowing for a more comprehensive and expansive discussion of the human condition that foregoes the established structural systems of significations and hierarchized binary oppositions. Her narratives create an open-ended intersubjective space for communication, ambiguity, and epistemological recalibration, while rejecting the idea of the absolute, indisputable 'truth' in favor of a more flexible and unfolding notion, which is unsealed to contestation. Thus, Hustvedt's interdisciplinary, hybrid, and versatile writings provide an epistemically invaluable framework for theorizing as well as analyzing the concepts and experiences of seeing and perceiving.

The 'I'/'Eye' in Hustvedt's Novels

For Hustvedt, the practices of artistic/writerly creation and viewerly/readerly consumption imply a first-person whole-body experience: "The first-person experience is an embodied one. I don't only bring my eyes or my intellectual faculties or my emotions to a picture. I bring my whole self with its whole story" ("The Drama" 233). To interrogate ways of seeing and perceiving, Hustvedt uses various narrators who either share their experiences in the first person or, as in the case of the only third-person narrative—*The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*—serve as a reflector, whose internal focalization enables the

reader to enter the described storyworld. Hustvedt insists that “[f]irst-person experience is vital to narrative because there is always an agent whose subjectivity and intentionality are part of the story’s movement, narrated from one perspective or another” (“Three Emotional Stories” 179). In her fiction, she rejects the traditional omniscient and omnipresent authorial narrators or ‘zero focalized’ narrative situations, exposing disembodied objectivity as an illusion.⁸ Hustvedt’s goal is to initiate an ‘I-to-‘I’ intersubjective communication with the reader. Therefore, both voice (‘who speaks?’) and focalization (‘who perceives?’)—the ‘I’ and the ‘eye’—are crucial to Hustvedt’s narratives.

Playing and experimenting with different voices and perspectives, Hustvedt tries on different personas as her narrators and focalizers—both women and men—which brings to the fore the idea of the dynamic and fluid identity, unrestricted by the binaries of gender. In “The Delusions of Certainty,” she writes:

I have written from the points of view of women and men with different personalities and backgrounds and troubles and sympathies. Once I hear and feel the imaginary person, even if he or she is unlike me, I can write the character. [...] They take up residence inside me and begin to speak. (310)

Writing from different points of view permits Hustvedt to stretch the identity boundaries, explore the world from a new perspective, and ‘excavate’ the other in the self (cf. “Becoming Others”). For her, writing and reading are liberating activities, which enable one “to leave one’s self and make an excursion into the other” (Hustvedt, “Sontag on Smut” 77); it is “the free play of identifications [that] allows entrance into a multitude of human experiences” (“My Father/Myself” 83).

Hustvedt fosters a specific understanding of the narrative self as plural, elusive, and open to transformation. In her essay “My Father/Myself,” she elaborates:

In my novels, I have written as a woman and as a man. I have written as a father. I have written as a son. A young woman dresses as a man. She

⁸ In her nonfiction, Hustvedt also uses the first person to designate her authorial self.

puts on her armor and wanders the streets. A man paints his self-portrait as a woman. A man dresses as a woman and comes into his own. We are myriad, all of us. (86)

This freedom that the practices of writing and reading can provide is especially valuable for Hustvedt's project of collapsing the male/female duality (cf. Tappen-Scheuermann 44). She describes "reading and writing [as] precisely the two places in life where [she is] liberated from the constraints of [her] sex" (Hustvedt, "My Father/Myself" 83). At the same time, Hustvedt admits that "[she] called on masculine forms to ensure [she] was taken seriously, to hide the girl" (86). Therefore, it could be argued that her writing from a male perspective is also a form of protection, or, using the author's own words, "armor" (86), charged by her desire to appeal to a larger audience and minimize gender bias.

Hustvedt's debut novel, *The Blindfold*, is narrated in the first person by the voice of the female protagonist, a graduate student at Columbia University, Iris Vegan. The novel is known to be based on the aspects and occurrences of the author's own life. Hustvedt reverses her first name (Siri becomes Iris), borrows her mother's maiden name (Vegan), places her protagonist in the New York apartment she herself used to live in (309 West 109th Street), makes her the student of her own *alma mater* (Columbia University), and uses her own experience as a migraine sufferer at a Medical Center. Yet, she claims that "Iris's adventures are not [hers]" ("The Real Story" 111–12). The novel consists of four non-chronologically arranged chapters that focus on the separate episodes of Iris's life after she leaves rural Minnesota to study in New York. She shares her perceptions, feelings, and experiences in the first person and the reader witnesses the way she interacts with other characters through Iris's 'eyes,'⁹ so the narrating 'I' coincides with the experiencing 'I,' which invites the reader to adopt the protagonist's perspective and 'enter' her subjectivity. The novel focuses on Iris's relationships with her boyfriend Stephen, photographer George, her

⁹ Already the protagonist's first name as well as the title of the novel draw attention to the interplay of seeing and blindness, the iris being part of the eye which controls the amount of incoming light by dilating or constricting the pupil and the blindfold inhibiting the visual sense to heighten the others.

university professor Michael Rose, the art critic Paris, and her neurologist Dr. Fish, among others.

Hustvedt's second novel, *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*, as I have already mentioned, is her only narrative told in the third person by a heterodiegetic narrator. However, the reader dives into the storyworld through a fixed internal focalization attached to the 'eye' of the 'coming-of-age' female protagonist Lily Dahl. Even younger than Iris Vegan in *The Blindfold*, nineteen-year-old Lily Dahl is a sensitive, vulnerable, and inexperienced young woman, who lives and works as a waitress in a small fictional town called Webster, in Minnesota. Although formally the novel's narrative situation is different from Hustvedt's debut novel and her subsequent novels, the effect it produces on the reader is very similar to that of the first-person narrative situation. The reader witnesses the unfolding scenes and events by following the adventures, feelings, and perceptions of Lily Dahl, who serves as a reflector of the fictional world. The plot of the novel revolves around Lily's relationships with the mysterious New York artist Edward Shapiro who is painting the inhabitants of the town, her elderly roommate—a former actress Mabel Wasley—on whom the protagonist involuntarily eavesdrops due to their spatial proximity, and her stuttering childhood friend Martin Petersen, a regular customer in the cafe, where the protagonist works.

The narrators of Hustvedt's third and fourth novels, *What I Loved* and *The Sorrows of an American* respectively, are male autodiegetic narrators. In *What I Loved*, which is probably her most renowned novel, an aging art historian who loses his sight—Leo Hertzberg—gives an account of his life story putting bits and pieces of his memory together, in order to create a coherent narrative about the people and things that he loved. The novel features a collection of both actual and fictional works of visual art which are most meaningful to the narrator and which serve as vehicles that drive the narrative forward. Hustvedt describes Leo as her male *alter ego*, who combined many features of both her father and her husband ("Being a Man" 102). Hustvedt's fourth novel is also narrated in the first person by the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Erik Davidsen, whom Hustvedt calls her "imaginary brother": "Brought up in Minnesota by parents very much like mine, he was the boy never born to the Hustvedt family" (*Shaking* 5). Thus, in both novels, Hustvedt explores her poeticized possibilities of experiencing the world from a

male perspective. Like Leo Hertzberg, Erik Davidsen lives in New York.¹⁰ Erik and his sister Inga are solving a family mystery and processing the death of their father, while the larger New York community is processing the traumatic events of 9/11.

In her fifth novel, *Summer without Men* (2011), Hustvedt returns to the female perspective. It is also a first-person narrative, where her autodiegetic narrator—the New York-based award-winning poet Mia Fredricksen—talks about the summer when her husband Boris Izcovich asks her for a ‘pause’ after thirty years of marriage. Throughout the novel, the reader, following Mia’s lead, joins the protagonist in her quest of discovering and restoring her sense of self, as separate from the other (her husband Boris). Mia spends the summer away from New York, in her hometown in rural Minnesota, healing from a nervous breakdown, triggered by her separation from Boris. She regularly visits her mother in the board and care facility and befriends her mother’s close circle of octogenarian women. Mia also teaches poetry to a group of adolescent girls, spends time with her neighbor Lola, and talks on the phone with her already grown-up daughter Daisy and her (female) psychotherapist Dr. S. Apart from her email correspondence with Boris and a mysterious Mr. Nobody, men do not physically appear in the narrative, as the title of the novel implies.

Hustvedt’s polyphonic *The Blazing World* represents a distinct kind of narrative situation, on which I elaborate in chapter 3. The novel is organized as a fictional anthology, which includes a plurality of ‘heteroglot’ (Bakhtin) voices with their idiosyncratic visions, perceptions, vocabularies, intellectual and emotional qualities, etc. Hustvedt uses Kierkegaard’s method of indirect communication to present multiple, often conflicting, perspectives on the same events, various ‘truths,’ and modes of understanding. The novel comprises a collection of texts—journal entries, magazine articles, reviews, interviews, various accounts of different characters—all edited by Professor I. V. Hess,¹¹ whose gender is not revealed. More than any of Hustvedt’s previous writings, this novel implicates the reader, who has

¹⁰ Hustvedt cross-references her own fictional character and makes Leo Erik’s old friend, whom he even meets once at a dinner party.

¹¹ I. V. may stand for Iris Vegan, the protagonist of *The Blindfold*.

to decide for themselves which narrating ‘I’s to trust and which to doubt. Arguing, contradicting, and commenting on each other, these various contributions revolve around the protagonist Harriet Burden’s life and art, especially her controversial project *Maskings*, which allows Harriet to experiment with people’s perceptions of her art by presenting it under the authorship of three different male artists.

The autodiegetic narrator of Hustvedt’s most recent novel, *Memories of the Future*, shares many character traits with Iris Vegan and Lily Dahl from the first two novels, who are both very sensitive and impressionable protagonists—she even lives in the same New York apartment on West 109th Street that is portrayed in *The Blindfold*. Hustvedt lends her protagonist-narrator her initials, S.H., but does not reveal the character’s full name, playing with other possibilities, like Sherlock Holmes, especially considering that the protagonist is trying to write a detective novel. The narrative oscillates between the present-day S.H.—an established writer in her sixties—and the young S.H., a.k.a. ‘Minnesota,’ who writes about her first year in New York in her diary. The older and wiser S.H. goes back the memory lane and comments on the events that happened thirty-eight years ago, including the traumatic sexual assault she has kept secret all this time. Thus, the reader is provided with two perspectives on and perceptions of the events, two narrative ‘I’s—the experiencing ‘I’ and the remembering ‘I.’ *Memories of the Future* is a hybrid, experimental *bildungsroman*, which carefully deploys ambiguity as a narrative strategy to completely destroy the distinction between fact and fiction as well as reality and imagination. The novel is organized by the principle of synesthesia—that is, the protagonist’s senses and feelings trigger her memories and guide the narrative (see chapter 2).

Thus, all of Hustvedt’s novels thematize and represent diverse aspects of seeing and perceiving, which I am going to examine against the foil of various theoretical approaches, which are outlined in chapter 1—“Seeing and Perceiving: Key Concepts and Approaches”—as well as in the opening sections of each of the subsequent chapters. Thus, the first main chapter explicates Hustvedt’s position in the debates between the traditional conceptions of vision and perception (section 1.1) versus the “whole-body-in-relation-to-its-environment” (Hustvedt, “Embodied Vision” 348) theories of seeing (section 1.2). It also presents the

phenomenological concepts of intentionality and embodiment and the feminist understanding of the body as a situation (section 1.3) followed by the psychoanalytical concept of the gaze (section 1.4) and the frameworks of ekphrasis, intermediality, and literary visibility, from which Hustvedt's novels are frequently approached in the scholarly criticism (section 1.5).

The opening of the second main chapter sketches the conceptual parameters of 'synesthetic perception' and 'synesthesia,' foregrounding the phenomenological conception of synesthetic perception as well as the specific understanding of synesthetic perception as a mode of tacit embodied knowledge, which Hustvedt's narratives link to sensibility and carnal affectivity. I analyze synesthetic perception as represented in Hustvedt's first three novels—*The Blindfold*, *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*, and *What I Loved* (section 2.1)—and her most recent novel *Memories of the Future*, where synesthetic perception is crucial to the unraveling of the plot and the narrative organization (section 2.2).

The third main chapter tackles the notion of embodied intersubjectivity that helps to conceptualize the practices of seeing and perceiving as occurring between and embodied by various subjects. It contains a theoretical part of its own, "Towards a Theory of Embodied Intersubjectivity" (section 3.1), which discusses embodied intersubjectivity as related to (feminist) epistemology, phenomenological ideas about perception, as well as linguistic and psychoanalytical discourses—theories that inform and intermingle with Hustvedt's philosophy of embodied intersubjective 'mixing' which finds its manifestations in the practices of writing/reading fiction and creating/perceiving art (section 3.2). The chapter closes with the analysis of the strategies of ekphrastic description in *The Blindfold*, *What I Loved*, *The Sorrows of an American*, and *The Blazing World* and provide psychoanalytical readings of Bill Wechsler's *Self-Portrait* and Miranda Casaubon's dream drawings.

The fourth main chapter, "Gender Masquerade," focuses on Hustvedt's theorizations about the perception of gender, delving into the murky depths of how gender shapes the ways in which human beings see and perceive the self, the other(s), and the world (section 4.1) as well as how specific ideas about 'masculinity' and 'femininity' influence the perception of art in the male-dominated art world (section 4.2). The chapter provides readings of relevant episodes from *The Blindfold*, *The*

Summer without Men, and *The Blazing World*, combining Butler's discussion of gender as constructed and performative with theories of corporeal/material feminist thinkers who connect gender to implicit, non-propositional dimensions of knowledge. The motif of gender masquerade figures most prominently in *The Blazing World* which utilizes it as the engine that drives the plot "not only to expose the antifemale bias of the art world, but to uncover the complex workings of human perception" (Hustvedt, *Blazing* 1). The novel reveals the inescapable complexity of both perception and the underlying (inter)subjective experiences of being gendered and embodied.

Thus, this book provides an interdisciplinary and multidimensional examination of the concepts and experiences of seeing and perceiving as represented in Hustvedt's both fictional and nonfictional works, which enable me to facilitate the discussion and outline the specific paths of understanding and ambiguity, of continuities and discontinuities in and between various discourses and ways of representation. The thematic approach to Hustvedt's writings allows me to draw connections and comparisons between various narratives, plots, and characters as well as track changes and developments of the themes, motifs, and strategies of the depiction of the concrete perceptual experiences. I argue that Hustvedt's narratives create their own paradigm of seeing and perceiving, which transcends any singular theoretical stance or mode of understanding and, with each more recent publication, stronger and more effectively emphasize the implicit, emotional, and embodied forms of knowledge and perception, which are usually not part of the scientific conversation but are the fundamental part of life, literature, and art.

