

CHRISTINE MARKS, *"I Am because You Are": Relationality in the Works of Siri Hustvedt*, (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014), 234 pp.

In her study *"I Am because You Are": Relationality in the Works of Siri Hustvedt* (2014), Christine Marks analyzes Hustvedt's fictional and non-fictional works, including the latest novel *The Blazing World* (2014). Marks approaches Hustvedt's works with an intersubjective focus which presupposes that Hustvedt "finds intersubjectivity to be the basis for a healthy development of the self and scrutinizes the detrimental effects of American society's failure to promote relational identity formation" (2). Identity for Hustvedt, as Marks argues, is "relational, focusing on the interdependencies that shape identity and the physical connectedness between self and world" (3), thus she creates "relational models of identity" (3).

Marks's analysis of the relationship of self and other, that is, of the relationality of the characters in Siri Hustvedt's fiction, is based on an extensive discussion of relevant philosophical theories as put forward by, for example, Friedrich Hegel, Martin Buber, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emanuel Levinas, Jacques Lacan, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Mikhail Bakhtin. Concepts such as the master-slave constellation, the mirror stage, the power of the gaze, and dialogism serve as starting points for an in-depth and well-versed discussion of Hustvedt's fiction, which often also draws on selected essays by the author.

The study, originally submitted as a dissertation in American Studies at the University of Mainz, proceeds from a detailed chapter on philosophies of intersubjectivity via a discussion of vision and the visual arts in Hustvedt's work, to a systematic analysis of identity and the boundaries of the body that are questioned in cases of hysteria and anorexia nervosa, and finally to a discussion of attachment, loss, and grief and how characters in Hustvedt's fiction deal with the sudden emptiness of place through the absence of the other.

Photography is one of the media used in Hustvedt's fiction to delineate the unstable positions and identifications of self and other. Although photography, just like the mirror image, might suggest an authentic and true representation of the self and then may potentially fill the hole in the self, it is used by Hustvedt to show how such images can contradict one's own self-image and how they potentially

distort the subject because of the subjective choice of "an isolated fragment" (91). Photographs, because they hardly ever correspond to people's self-image, indicate "a feeling of absence, fragmentation, and disorientation" (93), as Marks observes with reference to Iris Vegan, the protagonist of Hustvedt's debut novel *The Blindfold* (1992). The power of the self is given up in the moment of transition from being subject to becoming object; it is the photographer who "gains power over [Iris's] identity [...]" (96). Photography, as Marks continues to argue, is similarly used in *What I Loved* (2003) and *The Sorrows of an American* (2008). While in the former, photographs of Charcot's hysterical women at the hospital La Salpêtrière in Paris in the late nineteenth century are perceived as "an intrusion into the subject's privacy, delivering a part of the self to the world in a representation that is beyond the control of the person photographed" (98), in the latter, photography is revealed as a form of theft (98). Ultimately, as Marks points out, the photograph in this negative sense turns into "a manifestation of the objectifying potential of the other's gaze, and the self becomes consummated by the other" (100). However, as Marks emphasizes, with reference to Hustvedt's essays on photography, the author, in spite of being highly critical, "does not condemn the medium of photography altogether" (101).

Vision is further discussed in Hustvedt's use of the blindfold in the novel of the same name as well as with reference to voyeurism and the visual arts. In contrast to the representation of photography, Hustvedt's use of the "*Reciprocal Gaze*" (105) seems to endorse vision "as a medium of connection and mutuality rather than separation" (105). In line with Merleau-Ponty, Marks depicts Hustvedt's representation of selves as inevitably "inseparable from the world" (106); the perspectives of self and other intersect, and both fuse "into a synthesized existence" (107), which is even more enhanced by touch as a sensory perception that transcends the gaze (110). Ultimately, voyeurism as represented in some of Hustvedt's fiction, "leads to a softening of the definite borderlines between separate subjects. The loss of a stable perception of one's subjectivity and the assumption of the other's position, however, does not bring about a complete decomposition of identity, but rather leads to an amplified and eroticized perception of self as mixed with the other" (115).

Similarly, Hustvedt's notion of art is embedded and only exists in intersubjectivity. As Marks shows, for Hustvedt, "art happens in the moment when it is perceived"; it enters "a dialogical relation with its recipient [...]" (117). Marks continues to elaborate on the "dialogical exchange" (119) between artist and spectator/observer, and this exchange is always also "determined by the symbolic order of language and by personal experience" (122). Bill Wechsler's paintings in *What I Loved*, in particular his *Self-Portraits*, are shown as mixing identities and as gradually giving way to other media such as the film camera (128).

In another main chapter, Marks focuses on the phenomena of hysteria and anorexia nervosa as instances of the self's negotiations of bodily boundaries that are constitutional to the self but also permeable and unstable. Both phenomena are considered disorders that signify, as Marks sees it, "a disconnection between self and other" (133) but in opposite ways. While the hysteric seems to give up any boundaries between self and other, the anorexic attempts to preserve "a pure and uncontaminated self" (135) by rejecting any form of mixing through the intake of food. In contrast, Marks uses Hustvedt's position on pregnancy as an example of a unity of self and other to which human beings constantly strive to return (139).

The history of hysteria, with its origins in Hippocrates's *On the Disease of Women*, has given way to "conversion disorder[s]" (143) and is, today, no longer considered a typically female disease. As Hustvedt argues in *What I Loved*, hysteric patients imitated the epileptic seizures of other patients who were also put into insane asylums in the nineteenth century. Thus, hysteria is seen as the imitator of other diseases (145) and "is invariably tied to its cultural surroundings" (145). Taking this idea of hysteria to an extreme, all human imitative actions, for example the unconscious imitation of a writing style, as the narrator in *What I Loved* shows, could be considered cases of hysteria. The hysterics whom Bill Wechsler uses in his art furthermore reveal the "objectification of the female patient" through the "cruelty of the male gaze" (149) and the doctor's appropriation of these bodies as if they were works of art (149). In this context, the skin as the dividing line between inside and outside is turned into a blank slate by the medical profession only to be then filled with a text literally written by the doc-

tor (151) who, thus, completes a Pygmalion-like act (152).

In contrast to hysterics, anorexics attempt to keep the mind-body split intact because they feel they have control over their mind but not their body. To her analysis of Hustvedt's representation of anorexics, Marks applies Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque in which the biological and the aesthetic merge. While for Bakhtin, eating transgresses body boundaries and constitutes a "triumphant moment of overcoming the world" (160), Hustvedt's anorexic characters' eating habits are pathological in their consideration of the intake of food as "a moment of contamination and powerlessness" (160) and in their subsequent need to seal "off the self from the world" (161). Marks also successfully applies Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject to her discussion of the anorexic's loathing of food as a form of abjection (163). As Marks concludes, the anorexic in this context considers "food" as "a contagion invading the inside" (164) and, thus, "a threat to her identity" (165). The body, according to Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics, becomes "a site of discursive struggle" (166), and the anorexic identity denies "Hustvedt's ideal of a reciprocal exchange between self and other" (170).

Marks's final chapter zooms in on issues of attachment, loss, and grief as inevitable features in intersubjectivity. As Marks points out, in Hustvedt's fiction many of the characters suffer from the loss of people that are dear to them whether through death or abandonment. For Hustvedt, as Marks shows, the mother-child relationship is crucial in the formation of intersubjectivity. With the help of D.W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic work and John Bowlby's attachment theory, Marks analyzes Hustvedt's characters' experiences of separation and attachment that run counter to early childhood phenomena such as the mother as mirror for the child. As Marks concludes, a child's "defective self-other relations at an early age" (187) can have severe repercussions once it grows up (as the character Mark reveals in *What I Loved*). The death of a beloved person is also the death of one part of the self that is intimately engaged with the other, as Leo and Erica in *What I Loved* and Erik in *Sorrows* experience.

Marks's conclusion draws on Hustvedt's knowledge of recently discovered so-called mirror neurons which demonstrate "that human beings mirror each other's action in their

brains" (211) for a more biological explanation of intersubjectivity. Thus, the intricate interwovenness of the identity of the self with that of an other does not only make sense in psychological and social but also biological terms. The body, in addition to the mind, is instrumental in the creation of an identity that is in constant interaction, dialogue, and mirroring with the other. Body and mind, as Marks concludes, are inseparable for Hustvedt and are always also socially embedded. Furthermore, intersubjectivity is also crucial for "the bond between author and reader" through "the dialogical nature of writing" (213). For Hustvedt, the author is not dead (and probably has never been) since, in her fiction, she "maps out a territory between herself and her characters, and ultimately between herself and the reader" (216).

At the end of this knowledgeable and philosophically inspired study of Siri Hustvedt's work, the reader most certainly is convinced of the relevance of what the quotation Christine Marks has chosen for the title of her book suggests: "I am because you are." Marks has revealed intersubjectivity as the most central issue, and also belief, in Hustvedt's fictional and non-fictional work. Marks's line of argument is convincing and is often enriched and supported by the many personal conversa-

tions she has had with a most productive, and, at least in Europe, most successful contemporary American writer, critic, and intellectual. For Hustvedt, as Marks has shown, her life and work are as intimately connected as her fictional characters are with one another on an intrinsic level. Extrinsically, author, text, and reader are dependent on each other, constantly enter into dialogue, and, thus, extensively contribute to fictional and non-fictional identity formation. Self and other, body and mind, and subject and object, as Marks has expertly worked out, mutually shape and depend on each other. Marks's praiseworthy study is one of the first book-length studies on Siri Hustvedt and most certainly deserves high recognition in the American Studies community. Last but not least, the reading of Hustvedt's most recently published novel *The Blazing World* will be enlightened by Marks's "*I am because You Are.*" For anyone with any interest in Hustvedt and/or contemporary American fiction as well as in the fictionalization of research in philosophy and in the life sciences (in particular in biology, psychology, and psychoanalysis), Marks's monograph should be required reading.

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