

**“I Am Multitudes”:  
Towards a Cultural Phenomenology in Siri Hustvedt’s *The Blazing World***

Siri Hustvedt’s sixth novel *The Blazing World* (2014) has a focus on the gender bias deeply ingrained in New York’s art world. Crafted as an academic investigation, the American writer presents the character Harriet “Harry” Burden, a passionate artist and intellectual, whose astutely conducted experiment unveils how the term ‘female genius’ equates to a cultural oxymoron in a male-dominated industry. However, aside from the art establishment’s institutional misogyny, the narrative subtly investigates the underlying root of discriminatory tendencies, that is, the habitual intricacies of human perception and how unconscious ideas about cultural categories fundamentally shape a person’s reception and understanding of a given work of art.

Yet, on another layer, by contrasting notions of autonomous and definitive self-presence, the novel raises questions concerning the ambiguities of our bodily being-in-the-world. Drawing on concepts of intersubjectivity and the dialectical structure of identity formation within the existentialist phenomenological tradition, the narrative addresses the complex and dynamic facets of the constitution of self.

Building on what the anthropologist Thomas J. Csordas has termed ‘cultural phenomenology’ – a method of inquiry that aims at bridging “the immediacy of embodied experience with the multiplicity of cultural meaning in which we are always and inevitably immersed” (*Perspectives on Embodiment* 143) – I will argue that, by pointing to the ambiguous and transgressive nature of identity categories, *The Blazing World* intricately opposes both atomist and essentialist interpretations concerning the mode of human existence. Instead of joining the ranks of (radical) constructivist thought, however, Hustvedt gives Butlerian theory of body performativity a phenomenological twist, for her narrative subtly explores the fundamentally intersubjective nature of how our embodied minds encounter the world. Thus, apart from exposing the pervasive sexism in the world of art, Harriet Burden’s pseudonymous masks do not disguise but reveal the inherently dialogic character of her artistic creation. The novel’s trajectory goes beyond clear-cut distinctions between art and reality, however, for it also puts into question other binary oppositions such as nature/culture, subject/object, or self/other, that are so deeply rooted within Western academic discourses.

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