

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ
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THE STORY OF A MIGRAINEUR: BLACK HOLES IN SIRI HUSTVEDT'S *THE BLINDFOLD*

Abstract: Most articles on Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold* exclusively focus on gender issues. The general view seems to be that the novel is not concerned with epistemological/ontological questions. Taking into consideration that first-person narrator Iris suffers from scotomata which cause severe hallucinations, one could, however, reach a different conclusion—especially since hallucinations in the context of migraine auras are known as extremely realistic sensory deprivations which radically cut the connection between the experiencing self and the outside world: Since, from the first-person narrator's perspective, hallucinations cannot be distinguished from reality, the question arises in how far fact and hallucination belong to different ontological levels and whether they can be separated at all. Moreover, the hallucinations are repeatedly referred to as black holes devouring the (im-)material world of the novel. These are not mere references, but structural analogies to the astrophysical phenomenon of black holes, which are generally taken to destroy matter. Yet, matter that has been devoured by a black hole is not ultimately destroyed but integrated into the black hole's singularity which raises the 'singularity-question' in the novel. From a neurological starting point, I will develop a radical constructionist reading of the novel based on Iris's repeated perception of black holes.

Key words: Siri Hustvedt, *The Blindfold*, black holes, neurology, migraine, constructivism, post-structuralism.

Despite several enthusiastic reviews of Siri Hustvedt's debut novel *The Blindfold*,¹ the novel has so far elicited only a moderate echo in academia.² Most of the few articles that have been published so far almost exclusively focus on gender issues related to the question of female identity in the age of postmodernism. Consequently, they largely neglect the role of "the epistemological value of the visible" (Dallmann, 2006, p. 72) in the novel. What these interpretations of the novel furthermore ignore is the fact that male characters do not have a stable identity either. Iris's boyfriend Stephen admits that

he feels "divorced from myself" (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 81), Paris refers to an "emptiness inside" (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 127). What is more, none of the articles that have been published so far addresses the blindfold-episode which gives the novel its title. In this episode, Iris bets that she can find her way through labyrinthine New York³ from a restaurant to her apartment – blindfolded. In the context of the novel, the blindfold corresponds to a 'veil of perception', mediating between Iris's consciousness

1 For a summary of some of these reviews, see Versluys (2003, p. 99).

2 For a brief overview of these secondary texts, see Knirsch's (2010, n.p.) introductory remarks.

3 Astonishingly enough, Kristiaan Versluys ignores the blindfold-episode in his study of the qualities of New York as a maze. Due to his semiotic approach, however, his focus rests on the city as a "labyrinth of signs" (2003, p. 101) which is responsible for the "identity crisis Iris undergoes" (2003, p. 100).

and the outer world, thereby expounding the problems of reality construction.⁴

The Blindfold's narrative structure is comprised of "four loosely connected episodes which are ordered anachronically, almost as in a time warp". The narrated time spans "three years in the life of first person narrator Iris Vegan," back then a student at Columbia University in New York. The narration, however, is told from "a narrative distance of eight years." Accordingly, *The Blindfold* is "a retrospective first-person narration" which immediately calls into doubt the narrator's reliability (Knirsch, 2010, n.p.).⁵

Taking additionally into consideration that Iris suffers from a variation of the neurological neglect syndrome as well as a migraine induced "scintillating and negative scotoma" (91) which causes severe visual as well as auditory and tactile hallucinations, among them the visual impressions of black holes, one could, however, reach a conclusion which differs from Antje Dallmann's argument that "the epistemological value of the visible" is of minor importance.⁶ The "epistemological value of the visible" (Dallmann, 2006, p. 72) as well as its ontological foundation are a *core concern* of the novel.⁷

4 Essentialists might argue that a blindfold is not a veil at all. Due to Derrida's (2001, p.64) definition of the veil as a necessarily "opaque veil" in the age of postmodernism, a blindfold may well be treated as a 'veil of perception' in a postmodern novel.

5 For a detailed discussion of the time structure of the novel, see Christian Knirsch's (2010) article "In a Time-Warp."

6 In Hustvedt's recent book, *The Shaking Woman* (2010), her autobiographical neurological case history, Hustvedt explicitly relates neurological phenomena, i.e. migraine induced "visual hallucination[s]," among them the perception of "black holes" (Hustvedt, 2010, p. 5), to epistemological theories in different disciplines, e.g. physics, psychology, or philosophy.

7 Mr. Morning's cognitive interest of "prying open the very essence of the inanimate world" (Hustvedt, 2003, p. 13), formulated in the first episode of the novel, therefore serves as a kind of motto for the whole of the novel and can be seen as a

In a first step, a neurological approach focusing on different neurological phenomena mentioned in the novel confirms the feminist standpoint that the novel is concerned with the problems Iris encounters when she tries to develop a coherent identity within the mayhem of the post-modern world. A neurological approach, however, puts a special emphasis on the physical aspect of the failed identity construction which is explicitly expressed in several passages of the novel: "This can't be my hand, [...]," Iris observes exemplarily (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 175).

Two moments of visual self-confrontation can be identified as triggers of this pronounced incertitude of her bodily boundaries: First, a glance in a mirror in which her reflection is erased during a fit of nausea:⁸

Without thinking, I picked it [the mirror] up and examined my face, [...]. I still can't understand it, but as I looked I was overcome with nausea and faintness. (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 30)

This kind of nausea mentioned in the first chapter is characteristic of her later spell in a neurological hospital during which "nausea and faintness" are Iris's constant companions on her way to recovery.⁹

A second case in point is the close inspection of a photograph George has taken of Iris which is copied and distributed on campus. The picture is described as a simulacrum with "a life of its own" (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 71) behind which the original Iris in her physical and psychological existence

metacomment on the cognitive interests of the novel as such.

8 There are several further foreshadowings in chapter I of Iris's time in the hospital in chapter III, for example the dominance of the colour white, the gloves, the sheets, the mirror, and the tape.

9 With regard to Jacques Lacan's often-quoted mirror stage, one could argue that this fit of nausea and the evaporation of her mirror image hint at a lack or reversion of the function of the I which is usually formed in childhood in confrontation with one's own mirror image and leads to "*an identification*" with this image (Lacan, 1989, 2).

vanishes.¹⁰ This vanishing behind simulacra, however, also holds true for the male characters which raises doubts concerning the feminist interpretation of the novel and the exclusive focus which it puts on Iris's problems in establishing a stable sense of a female self – this problem seems to be more general, a postmodern *conditio humana*. Paris, for example, is said to hire doubles “so he can be in two places at once” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 125), Stephen considers himself to be nothing but a spectator of the movie of his life:

I watch myself live, Iris, like a movie, and that image is everything. [...] It's a matter of appearances, but surfaces are underestimated. The veneer becomes the thing. (Hustvedt, 1993, pp. 80–81)

The conflict between representation and reality is in this case only of secondary relevance. Crucial in this context is the sense of fragmentation, which is a result of viewing the photograph in which she doesn't “even recognize” herself at first. Even when she finally sees herself, it is like “remembering a forgotten event”, like “the fragment of a dream that surfaces for a moment [...] and then retreats [...] into unconsciousness” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 62).

In this passage, the focus is on the oblivion of her bodily existence which is in keeping with my argument that a neurological reading of the novel puts a special emphasis on the physical dimension of the identity problems implied here. The focus, however, shifts when the photograph and its effects on Iris are described in more detail:

It wasn't a full-body shot. I was cut off below my breasts, and my extended arms were severed at the elbows. [...] I had the awful impression that the parts of me that weren't in the photo were really absent. (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 62)

¹⁰ This corresponds to Jean Baudrillard's definition of the “third-order simulacrum” (1993, p. 58), a “closed system” of code and copies (1993, p. 74) in which “the death of the original” occurs (1993, p. 69).

When Iris first sees her picture, she cannot distinguish between the picture and reality; she is convinced that the parts of her that aren't in the photo are really absent. In neurology, this phenomenon is called neglect-syndrome.¹¹ In the context of the novel, it can be interpreted as a physical manifestation of Iris's problems in establishing a stable sense of self. The analogy between the perceived fragmentation of her bodily surface and the sense of psychological fragmentation which prevails right from the beginning is fairly obvious. So far, only the line of argument has changed, its scope has been extended to the male characters, but the conclusion remains the same: It's still all about identity, with a clear focus on Iris.

A neurological approach to the novel, however, does not content itself with a mere reiteration of the research results of the feminist analyses. A closer look at the description of the passage above reveals that the act of literal self-reflection culminates in the disappearance of her simulacrum-like representation in a black hole:

The image was changing. With more curiosity than alarm, I noticed a small black hole in the face. [...] The hole grew, eating away the left eye and nose, [...]. The hole was devouring the entire image, the face and hair, the shoulders, breasts, and torso, and I saw only the arm stumps hanging there alone for an instant, and then they too were engulfed, [...]. There was no sound in me, and I watched as the hole began to swallow the picture's frame. (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 67)

In this passage, the two neurological phenomena mentioned in the novel are connected. Starting from hallucinations which occur in the context of a migraine

¹¹ Neglect or hemineglect, as its most frequent variant is called, names a neurological syndrome due to which patients fail to be aware of certain bodily parts and elements of their immediate environment. In the case of hemineglect, patients report no conscious awareness of sensory information to one side of their body so that men, for instance, typically fail to shave one side of their face (Roth, 2003, p. 33).

induced scotoma, the neglect syndrome is extended to its extreme: All the bodily parts in the picture disappear in a black hole, they are not simply considered to be external to her own body, they dissolve to nothing. The dissolving, however, is not limited to Iris's picture, it is extended to the material world of the frame as well, i.e. not only the subject disappears in simulacra of various kinds, but the complete material world dissolves in a black hole. As one can see from this example, an approach focusing on the neurological phenomena exceeds the previous research results and offers a new perspective on the novel bordering on radical constructivism.

This new perspective on the novel is even more evident in the third episode which is set in a neurological hospital where Iris is diagnosed with "a scintillating and negative scotoma" (Hustvedt, 1993, p.91), whereas the neglect-syndrome remains undiagnosed. As is the case in the novel, this visual phenomenon almost exclusively occurs during migraine attacks as Oliver Sacks points out in his benchmark *Migraine* (1999). Common concomitants are nausea (Sacks, 1999, p. 16), dizziness (Sacks, 1999, p. 22), and a heightened light sensitivity called photophobia (Sacks, 1999, p. 24). Patients frequently mention a bright, glimmering, kaleidoscopic rotating light on a black background excentric to the visual field which expands but usually does not affect the complete visual field (Sacks, 1999, p. 74, p. 276). The direct fixation of text becomes impossible as well, just as when one stares into a strong light source. The duration of a scotoma is limited in time. Usually, it does not exceed 20 to 30 minutes. However, there is also the case of a so-called "aura 'status' lasting hours" (Sacks, 1999, p. 61). As is the case with the neglect syndrome, the scotoma is extended by references to black holes.¹²

¹² I will analyse the implications of this repeated reference to the astrophysical phenomenon of black holes in more detail later in the text.

Due to her medication, Iris intermittently makes a "cocoon of thorazine" (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 91) responsible for certain auditory and tactile hallucinations.¹³ These hallucinations are, however, not ultimately caused by the medication. Even before the use of thorazine, Iris mentions "auditory hallucinations" (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 107) which makes them part of Iris's overall neurological problem.

What makes these hallucinations, visual, tactile, and auditory, extremely significant is their absolute indistinguishability from reality which Iris repeatedly hints at: "How can that be? I said to myself. It wasn't there before. But not for a moment did I doubt its reality," (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 67) she utters when the photo starts to dissolve in front of her eyes. A few lines down, she adds:

I have never been able to write off these experiences as aberrations that are purely neurological, because while they are happening, I am convinced that I am seeing the truth, that the terrible fragility and absence I feel is the world - [...]. (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 67-68)

In a discussion with Dr. Fish, the attending neurologist in the hospital, she stresses the seeming reality of the hallucinations, too: "[...] the strange thing was that I didn't experience it as a problem with my vision. I really thought that a part of the wall was missing." (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 93)

From a neurological point of view, this assertion is absolutely plausible since there is indeed no substantial difference between an actual sense perception and a hallucination. Wolf Singer (2002, p. 103) points out that 80-90% of all brain activities are internal processes, only 10-20% responds to external stimuli. Which part of the picture that appears in front of our eyes

¹³ Iris is medicated with thorazine. Thorazine is a classical psychotropic drug which is used in the medication of schizophrenia due to its sedating effects. Frequent side effects are auditory and tactile hallucinations like variations of temperature (91, 107).

is due to external or internal stimuli is impossible to tell. Yet, it is important to note that the overwhelming majority of neurologists still believe in the existence of an exterior world, even if there is no direct relation between actions in the real world and the contents of human consciousness, as Gerhard Roth (2003, p. 84) emphasizes. During migraine auras, the feeling of “pseudo-objectivity” is especially pronounced since the hallucinations appear “strangely familiar” (Sacks, 1999, p. 65), so that even highly intelligent patients take them to be real, possibly due to limited cognitive abilities during a migraine attack (Sacks, 1999, p. 66). From the perspective of the observer, the hallucination screens the exterior reality, but from the patient's perspective it is “a failure of reality itself” (Sacks, 1999, p. 94). The patient's “observing mind”, however, is not affected, so that he takes the hallucinated reality to be real (Sacks, 1999, p. 280).

If – as in Iris's case – it is no longer clear what is real or hallucinated, the question arises in how far hallucination and reality can be distinguished at all in this first-person narration of a migraineur – even more so since hallucinations in a migraine context include not only simple geometric hallucinations but also extremely complex ones. Furthermore, all the senses can be affected by such hallucinations. Typically, a migraine aura consists of a multitude of isolated illusionary images or episodic scenes which have the status of complete and absolute “sensory deprivations” (Sacks, 1999, p. 297): In this state of mind, there is no connection between the experiencing self and the outside world, the brain does not receive any external stimuli at all; instead it starts producing hallucinations which may appear as the full-fledged scenes from a dream or movie set in the daily life of the patient (Sacks, 1999, p. 275). For the novel, then, a first-person narration told from the perspective of a migraineur, the question arises in how far

fact and hallucination belong to different ontological levels and whether they can be separated at all.

There are several instances in the novel where Iris becomes aware of the fact that she was under the impression of a hallucination which she took to be real at first. Ex post, however, she is able to unmask this perception as a mere hallucination.¹⁴ Kristiaan Versluys (2003, p. 103) reduces the influence of hallucinations on Iris to “a few frightening moments [in which] the connection between herself and the outside world snaps.” The question, however, what Iris, the migraineur, hallucinates in addition to the visual and auditory hallucinations she is immediately aware of, is left open. Particularly as Iris leaves the hospital at her own risk – without being cured (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 177)!¹⁵ If hallucination and baseline reality are not distinct anymore, what is left to be real in the logic of the novel?

An answer to this question can be found in another striking feature concerning the description of the hallucinations: It is of utmost importance that the hallucinations in the novel are frequently referred to as “black holes” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 67, p. 68, p. 91):¹⁶

14 When she talks of “auditory hallucinations” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 107), for example, she must be well aware of the fact that her supposed original auditory perception was an illusion. When the physical world disappears in another black hole while she is teaching an English class “for low level employees in an insurance company,” she admits that “[o]nly later was I able to tell myself that I had suffered a migraine aura” (Hustvedt, 1993, pp. 178–79).

15 Because of her “tone, mature and poised”, Susanne Rohr (2003, p.95) suggests that Iris “recovered.” By referring to the “twisted” thread of the tale as well as the “topsy-turvy” chronology (Rohr, 2003, p. 95), however, she implicitly raises two reasonable objections to her own recovery-hypothesis.

16 There are *en passant* remarks on black holes in *The Blindfold* in Johnson (2002, p. 54, p. 59) and Flieger (1997, pp. 106–07). Hustvedt herself picks up the issue again in her recent publication, *The Shaking Woman* (2010). A detailed analysis of the

As a migraineur, I had low status. Admittedly, I was a bad case: I had had pain in my head for seven months, almost without respite. Sometimes it was mild, sometimes brutal. [...] I saw black holes and tiny rings of light; my jaw tingled; my hands and feet were ice cold.¹⁷ (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 91)

Moreover, these are not mere references, but rather structural analogies to the phenomenon of black holes as known in astrophysics: Consequently, to fully understand the implications of this analogy, one needs to take a closer look at the astrophysical concept of black holes.

To begin with, a black hole emerges when a star has exhausted its thermal and nuclear energy resources and finally collapses under its own gravitational pull. In this process, a so-called event horizon is formed. An event horizon marks the boundary of a black hole, ‘the point of no return’. Any matter that comes beyond this point is irretrievably lost: “[N]othing can ever get out of the black hole through the event horizon” (Hawking, 1988, p. 89). On its way to the so-called singularity of a black hole, matter radiates energy and is forced on a helical path. During the process of compression of any incoming matter, the black hole emits light signals “um den Verlauf des Kollapses dem Beobachter mitzuteilen” (Sextl, 1999, p. 76).¹⁸ Stephen Hawking (1988, p. 49) finally emphasizes that any matter that has been absorbed by a black hole is not ultimately destroyed, but made part of the so-called singularity, the vanishing point of a black hole so to speak, where “the density of matter and

significance of black holes in the novel, however, has not yet been ventured.

¹⁷ The tingling of the jaw as well as the cold feet and hands can be ascribed to the medication with thorazine. This, however, does not explain the pre-medication hallucinations. The phenomena described here could just as well be migraine symptoms as such, as can be deduced from Oliver Sacks (1999, p. 112).

¹⁸ This, indeed, resembles the description of visual perceptions during scintillating scotomas.

the curvature of space-time become infinite.”

Consequently, literary critics and philosophers occasionally refer to black holes as “prime examples” of postmodern science, which generally “seeks to discover the unknown rather [than] the unknown, and is less interested in solving problems than revealing uncharted territory,” as Stuart Sim (2005, p. 289) defines it.¹⁹ The parallels to postmodern literary theory are more than obvious. In a similar vein, Ian Hamilton Grant (2005, p. 175) considers black holes “a genuinely physical instantiation of the postmodern condition” because they – as “entirely hypothetical or theoretical entities” – represent “this lack of certainty, this defiance of monocausal explanations, this opposition to logocentric grand-narratives as well as the uncertainty of a material existence outside of the individual consciousness which is typical of certain schools of postmodern theory” (Knirsch, 2010, n.p.)²⁰

Transferred to *The Blindfold*, this leads to the question what the singularity could be in the novel and what consequences this has for the status of material reality in the novel. On first impulse, one might be tempted to answer this question with regard to the textual existence of the novel. Both matter and the subject have been devoured by the black hole, as we have learnt from the quote above where the black hole extends from Iris’s picture to

¹⁹ For physicists, it is still impossible to explain what the space-time-laws could be like in a black hole “since the Einstein equations and all the known laws of physics break down there” (Hawking, 1973, p. 12).

²⁰ Material reality is threatened from two sides: On the one hand, certain radical post-structuralists take Derrida’s (1997, p. 158) ill famed assertion that “[t]here is nothing outside of the text” at face value and strongly argue in favour of an absolute ontological “totality of the signifier” (Derrida, 1997, p. 18). On the other hand, radical constructivists like Ernst von Glasersfeld claim that we cannot be sure of any material existence outside the individual consciousness (10).

the material world of the frame; what remains is the textile structure of the text as such.²¹ This interpretation would seemingly be in accordance with the title of the novel, *The Blindfold*, a textual structure, a fabric in its own right.

With regard to the reality conception underlying the novel, one could argue that the blindfold is a prime example of the “opaque veil” which Jacques Derrida (2001, p. 64) deems characteristic of the post-modern period. Neither sense experience nor science provide any means to get behind the veil of Isis, which represents the secret of nature; every attempt at unveiling Isis only leads to the “un-veiling of the veil itself”, meaning the textual veil of words,²² the sea of intertextuality which is the world in post-structuralism (1986, p. 212).²³

In a final act of self-destruction, the novel, however, falsifies even this semiotic, meta-reflexive interpretation: In the last scene of the novel, Paris summarizes the plot: “I know you feel bad about all this, but if you look at it in another way, it evaporates. It’s nothing” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 218). This evaporation of the novel is the logical consequence of a dominant language sceptical stance that surfaces again and again, separating the signifier from the signified which literally means the “end of

signification” (Derrida, 1986, p. 31). The novel, for example, starts with an empty signifier, “him” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 9);²⁴ another example of empty signifiers is illuminated advertising for hotels and companies “that no longer exist” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 79). But even the relations among the signifiers in the all-embracing signifying chain are blurred. Words elude any fixed definition or meaning, they mean “nothing”, like words “from a language I didn’t understand”; “a word, often a simple and ordinary word, loses its meaning and becomes gibberish” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 50).

On a more symbolical level, the absoluteness of the textual veil is literally pierced by “a nearly invisible hole” in a sheet, which is one of many symbols of textual structures in the novel which are equated with the textuality of the text itself (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 135). In the end, Iris comes to the conclusion that “we cover up the [black] holes with our speech, explaining away the emptiness until we forget it is there” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 68). “It was all nothing then, nothing and more nothing” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 102), she exclaims.

Behind the textual veil, according to Iris, there is nothing, only emptiness, a black hole covered by language – which brings to mind another Derrida (1986, p. 49) quote:

One undoes the bands, displaces the tissues, pulls off the veils, parts [écarte] the curtains: nothing but a black hole or a deep regard, without color, form, and life.

Beneath the textual veil that is the world in post-structuralism, there is nothing but a black hole, ready to devour our

21 Kristiaan Versluys comes to this conclusion in his semiotic analysis of the novel. Versluys (2003, p. 101) treats the city of New York as a “labyrinth of signs” under the premise of “unknowability.”

22 For more information on the veil as a textual metaphor, see Patricia Oster’s (2002) *Der Schleier im Text*.

23 Even today it is a highly debated question whether Derrida’s theory makes any reference to ontology at all. Many Derrida scholars (Hill, 2007, p. 46) nowadays argue that Derrida’s theory is exclusively concerned with language, and that the ontological dimension that has often been attributed to his works, is actually not implied in Derrida’s works at all. Others (Lewis, 1982, p.13), however, also take the “epistemological question” into consideration. John P. Leavey (1987, p. 65), one of the most important Derrida scholars, also broaches the issue of “[t]he singularity of consciousness.”

24 It is impossible to say who this “him” refers to which leads to the paradoxical situation that one cannot define the literary present of the narrating I: “I met him eight years ago” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 9). If it is unclear who this ‘him’ refers to, it is consequently impossible to determine the literary present. This, of course, brings to mind that “all known laws of physics break down” in a black hole (Hawking, 1973, p. 12).

whole existence. Accordingly, the black holes mentioned in the novel devour both the material and the textual world.

Returning to the question of singularity, then, there is only one possible answer left: The singularity in the novel is the singularity of the first-person narrator's consciousness which means that the reality conception represented by the novel borders on radical constructivism: Nothing but the "empiric singularity" of the individual consciousness offers an access to reality (Derrida, 1986, p. 137).

Throughout the novel, there are various hints at this radical solution of the singularity question: As mentioned above, Iris suffers right from the start from severe migraine attacks which are accompanied by scintillating and negative scotomas. According to Oliver Sacks (1999, p. 297), complete "sensory deprivations" are characteristic of negative scotomas. The problem of fact and hallucination is further complicated by the pronounced indistinguishability of these hallucinations from ordinary perception – being a first person narration, this problem lies at the heart of the novel: Neither for Iris nor for the reader is it possible to distinguish between baseline reality and hallucinations.

On a symbolical level, the medical fact of a complete "sensory deprivation" as described by Sacks (1999, p. 297) is implied in the blindfold-episode: The scarf she is blindfolded with is so dense that Iris cannot see through it: "I saw nothing. The material was dense. 'I'm really blind,' I said" (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 202).²⁵ In this episode, the tactile and the auditory sense seem to come to aid, yet, the reliability of both senses is undermined repeatedly before and after: "Auditory hallucinations" are mentioned verbatim (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 107), tactile insecurities are also frequently

referred to.²⁶ For Iris, then, the sensory deprivation is absolute; she is caught within the epistemological circle which, in the theory of Ernst von Glasersfeld (1997, p.10), is unbreakable: We cannot get out of the epistemological circle since we cannot get out of our consciousness. Everything we see, hear, taste, or smell only exists in our consciousness; it may even be the sole product of our consciousness – if an exterior world exists at all is impossible to say. This leaves us with the "empiric singularity" of the individual consciousness, formerly hinted at by Derrida (1986, p. 137), as singularity in the novel. Developing the analogy between the novel and black holes further, there are yet other analogous elements.

To begin with, the novel in its textual existence corresponds to the rays of light emitted by a black hole that communicate the process of Iris's destruction, the spiraling down to the singularity. Thereby, they exactly fulfill the communicative function Roman Sxl (1999, p. 76) attributes to these light signals which inform the observer about the process of destruction occurring within the black hole. The role of the observer is in the case of the novel taken by the reader.

This spiraling down, in turn, can be interpreted in two ways, one literal and one symbolic: The literal interpretation refers to her repeated and prolonged "wandering" through nocturnal New York in the guise of Klaus, the protagonist of the fictitious German novella *Der brutale Junge* which she translates for her literature professor, Prof. Rose. On a symbolical level, this disguising as Klaus, a "sadistic" alter ego character who is very sure of himself and his identity (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 134), who permanently and self-consciously violates social norms and "celebrates his freedom" as an individual (Hustvedt, 1993, p.

²⁵ As mentioned above, the density in a black hole is especially pronounced, too.

²⁶ The quick succession of freezing and sweating, the tingling of the jaw etc.

135),²⁷ is meant to compensate for her own striving for a strong, fixed identity. “[A]ll summer”, she “walked and walked, from one neighborhood to another, looking at everyone and everything” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 164).²⁸

The radiation of energy in this process which is pointed out by Roman Sexl (1999, p.79) corresponds to Iris's extreme loss of weight during the period of her wanderings:²⁹ “You've lost weight again, I thought. You must eat” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 181). On a symbolical level, this, of course, relates to her pronounced uncertainty of a coherent identity which triggers the search for a fixed sense of self which is considered the central theme of the novel by most literary scholars who have written on the novel so far. This search rather conforms to a psychological spiraling down; Iris does not succeed in finding or establishing this true core of self, but loses more and more energy during the search, both physical and mental.

Once she has entered the event horizon, it is impossible for her to establish the kind of fixed identity she is striving for. In

²⁷ Of course, this sadistic disposition, which remains latent in the beginning of the story and is more or less openly lived out in its course, also torments Klaus who is said to be “troubled by [his] cruel fantasies” (134). Nevertheless, in his self-conscious and self-reliant way, he is a foil for Iris and represents just this self-certainty Iris is searching for throughout the novel. This can easily be seen from the behavioral change which goes along with the disguise. During a discussion with Isabel, a fellow-waitress at a restaurant, Iris shouts: “Stuff it up your ass” – something she “had never said [...] before” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 164). Iris herself attributes this behavioral change to her disguise: “The clothes were more than an armor, they transformed me. Another person had leapt forward and spoken” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 164).

²⁸ For more information on this postmodernist version of the flaneur, see Susanne Rohr's “On ‘The Perils of Going Astray’” (2003).

²⁹ In fact, there are two periods of extended wandering: The first stretches from July to August 1979 (Hustvedt, 1993, pp. 166–69), the second occurs in January 1981 (Hustvedt, 1993, pp. 181–83).

the course of the novel, however, with every new disappointment, she becomes more and more *aware* of the fact that something like a stable identity is not possible at all in the postmodern world.³⁰ Interestingly enough, the novel chronologically starts with Iris's first day at Columbia University where she studies literature (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 119). Ever after, the search for her true identity is doomed. This may be attributed to the fact that she studies literature in a postmodern context, in 1978, during the heyday of postmodernist theory at Columbia and in the United States in general.³¹ Thus, the first contact with literature in a postmodern context marks the event horizon, “the boundary of the region of space-time from which it is not possible to escape” (Hawking, 1988, p. 89): Contaminated by postmodernist thought, one cannot go back to the transcendentalist ideal of a ‘true core of self’, “a black hole, once formed, *cannot disappear*” (Hawking, 1973, p. 52).

Consequently, postmodernism or postmodern theory in general can be regarded as the black hole. Building on the theoretical works of Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, this is not as bold an assertion as one might be tempted to think at first glance. In *The Illusion of the End*, Baudrillard (1994, p. 1) argues that – due to a comprehensive acceleration in modernity – the “escape velocity a body requires to

³⁰ Iris, for example, is almost exclusively drawn to apparently very self-assured men who finally turn out to merely play roles as can be seen from the quotes by Paris and Stephen mentioned above.

³¹ In 1978, Edward Said, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia, published his post-colonial benchmark *Orientalism*. 1978 also marked the tenth anniversary of the 1968 students' uprisings which were especially spirited on the campus of Columbia. This anniversary led to a renewal of the protests, which were now aimed at Columbia's financial ties with companies that profited from the system of apartheid in South Africa. At that time, a postmodern South African author and later Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer, taught literature at Columbia as well.

free itself from the gravitational field of a star or planet” has been reached and “that we have [consequentially] flown free of the referential sphere of the real:” “Once beyond this gravitational effect, which keeps bodies in orbit, all the atoms of meaning get lost in space” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2).

Combined with Jacques Derrida’s “Of an Apocalyptic Tone” (1983, p. 3) according to which an “apocalyptic tone in philosophy” characteristic of postmodernism leads to “the end of history, [...], the end of philosophy, [...], the end of the subject, the end of man, [...], the end of the earth” (1983, p. 20–21) and ultimately to “the end of the world” (1983, p. 24),³² the role of postmodernism as a ‘black hole’ which devours the material and intellectual world becomes fairly obvious: When the end of the world as a material entity has been heralded by certain developments in modernity because the escape velocity has been reached, we have flown free of the referential sphere of the real, and all the atoms of meaning are lost in space, then postmodernism indeed functions as a black hole which devours these atoms of meaning produced by modernity. Having deconstructed all the “grand narratives” of Western philosophy (Lyotard, 1986 p. xxiii), all that is left as an authority of meaning is the least “little narrative” possible (1986, p. 60), the empiric singularity of the individual consciousness.

Moreover, there are several further hints in the text which support a radical constructivist interpretation of the novel:

First, “the anachronic time structure resembling a ‘time warp’” – beginning in the middle, permanently jumping back and forth, time being finally folded back onto itself – is, on the one hand, “typical of

³² Actually, Derrida (1983, p. 3) is rather opposed to this intellectual apocalyptic atmosphere produced by certain post-structuralist and postmodernist theories. Yet, in the very first sentence of the article, he implicitly avows himself to be part of this ‘movement’ by affirming that the article speaks “of/in an apocalyptic tone in philosophy.”

migraine induced scotomas”; on the other hand, it “corresponds to the time structure in black holes” where space-time is warped and comes to an end. Of course, this “correspondence between narrative structure and contents could be interpreted in a typical post-structuralist way, form and content becoming inseparably one” (Knirsch, 2010, n.p.). Nevertheless, this correspondence can be regarded as another hint which contributes to the analogy between black holes and the novel, too.

Second, the multivalence of the protagonist’s name:³³ Iris, of course, is an anagram of the name Siri, which seems to invite an autobiographic interpretation of the novel.³⁴ Iris, too, contains the personal pronoun ‘I’ as well as the homophone ‘eye’, the symbol of occularcentrism, thus problematizing the relation of seeing, being, and knowing. Last but not least, the name Iris hints at the anatomical term for the iris in the human eye. On the one hand, the iris decides on the color of the eyes of an individual; on the other hand, it absorbs and “regulates the amount of light entering the eye” (Crystal, 1999, p. 436), thus resembling the function of a black hole.

A third case in point is the ambivalence of the title itself: *The Blindfold*. On the one hand, as stated above, this could refer to the textual structure of a blindfold as a textile, i.e. the scarf which is used as a

³³ The multivalent quality of the name Iris is especially evident in the syllabic pronunciation by Stephen, the photographer, who calls her “I-ris” (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 56), thus evoking the homophone associations with ‘I’ and ‘eye.’

³⁴ As mentioned before, Siri Hustvedt (2010) has only recently published an autobiography, *The Shaking Woman or a History of my Nerves*, in which she gives a detailed account of her neurological case. Even with regard to *The Blindfold*, Versluys (2003, p. 99) remarks that it is a “semi-autobiographical rendering of personal experience.” In this article, I would, however, like to focus on *The Blindfold* as a novel in its own right, arguing in a Roland Barthesian tradition that the author is ‘dead’ anyway – not even though but precisely because fact and fiction cannot be clearly distinguished.

blindfold in the blindfold-episode. On the other hand, the blindfold could refer to Iris who is the woman with her eyes blindfolded, i.e. the blindfold, as Georg Deggerich (1993, p. 34) points out.³⁵

These analogies as well as its ontological implications which point in a radical constructivist direction are underlined in the ending of the novel: After a final argument with Paris, Iris flees underground to an IRT station: "Then I took off my shoes and ran to the IRT, ran, as they say, like a bat out of hell" (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 221).³⁶ She flees the light, a symbol of enlightenment, truth and objective knowledge, and enters a black hole in the ground – the entrance to the IRT station. With these words, the novel ends. What sounds, at first sight, depressing, is in truth a happy ending: Iris has finally come to accept the relativistic doctrine as inevitable.

This becomes especially evident when one takes a closer look at her relationships with the male characters in the novel. For most of the novel, Iris plays the weaker part in every relationship; Mr. Morning, the journalist she works for, comes up with ever stranger tasks she has to carry out, somehow, he even seems to be related to a murder on which Iris is supposed to do research for him; fear, however, prevents her from taking legal action against the supposed murderer; Stephen, her boyfriend, is unfaithful to her; the photo session with George is described like a seduction or even an actual rape (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 55):³⁷ "his grip", "my blindness", "his breath-

ing", "I lost track of my thoughts", "he shouted encouragements", "we found a rhythm", "my heart raced" – and finally:

George continued to look at me. Drops of sweat had formed above his mouth and at his temples. He looked weary but pleased with himself, like a person who has just eaten well, and as I studied his face, [...], I recoiled from him. [...]. I watched as he ran his tongue over his upper lip. It was an idle motion, but for some reason it struck me as horrible, and I closed my eyes. What has happened?

This is very suggestive of sexual intercourse at least, if not of rape.³⁸ As mentioned before, this inferiority is typical of her early relationships in the novel.

The more Iris comes to accept relativism as *conditio humana*, the stronger she gets.³⁹ Towards the end of the novel, in the

plification of this objectifying gaze. Combined with the Foucaultian proposition that the one who gazes has the power to define the other and the sexual dimension implicit in nude photography in which a camera objective can be interpreted as a Freudian phallus symbol, the interpretation of the photo shooting as an actual rape does not seem to be too far fetched. The equivalence of the objectifying male gaze and rape was not explicitly mentioned by Sartre or Foucault, but certain scholars dealing with Foucault have nevertheless come to a conclusion which points in this direction: Stefan Horlacher (1998, p. 84), for example, describes the male gaze as an attempt at the optical penetration of femininity. Toril Moi (1990, p. 180) reaches a similar conclusion, building on Freudian theory: "[T]he gaze enacts the voyeur's desire for sadistic power in which the object of the gaze is cast as its passive, masochistic feminine victim."

³⁵ Deggerich (1993), however, is not aware of this ambivalence. He only refers to 'the blindfold' in its second meaning.

³⁶ The reference to bats in this case is also of significance: Bats are the prime examples neurologists refer to when they want to point out that there is no direct relation between actions or objects in the real world and the contents of human consciousness (Roth, 2003, p. 84).

³⁷ In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre hinted at the 'objectifying' qualities of the 'gaze'. A photograph as a real object of the realm of the material world thus can be considered an exem-

³⁸ The fact that there are rumors that at least one of the ominous pictures is actually "a study in eroticism" on which Iris is "posing in the nude" (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 73), remarks which obviously do not refer to the photo which becomes so important to Iris, further supports this argument.

³⁹ This interpretation is not only based on the comparison of the two rape-scenes. It is also evident from the attribution of jealousy to the respective partners: In the beginning of the novel, Iris is permanently jealous during her relationship with Stephen, in the end, Prof. Rose plays the jealous part in the relationship with Iris (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 197).

blindfold-scene, Prof. Rose undoubtedly tries to rape Iris. Unlike during the photo-session, Iris doesn't remain passive this time, wondering about what has happened to her afterwards. This time, Iris defends herself. This particular change in the power relations between the sexes, however, is not only a consequence of her growing confidence as a woman, as one could argue from a feminist point of view, but also a result of her increasingly self-conscious relativistic stance on reality.⁴⁰ Prof. Rose, who teaches realistic and naturalistic literature at Columbia University, believes in the clear separation of fact and fiction, Iris grows to understand that this seemingly obvious distinction is artificial and cannot be sustained any longer. In an earlier discussion, these positions become clear (Hustvedt, 1993, p.190):

'[...] Fiction is not life.'

'You don't believe that.'

'I think I do.'

'You know as well as I do that the line can't be drawn, that we're infected at every moment by fictions of all kinds, that it's inescapable.'

'Don't be a sophist,' he said. 'There is a world and it's palpable.'

'I don't mean that,' I said. 'I mean that it's hard really to see it, that it's all hazy with our dreams and fantasies.'

In the end, Iris's position is even closer to radical constructivism. Iris emphatically enters the metaphoric black hole of the IRT-station and comes to accept the empirical singularity of the individual consciousness, thereby escaping the diktat of realism, "like a bat out of hell" (Hustvedt, 1993, p. 221).

To briefly sum up, an interpretation of the novel based on neurological research on migraine and an astrophysical point of view clearly indicates that ontology is, after all, a key concern of *The Blindfold* and that the novel takes a relativistic

stance towards the relationship of self and outward reality.

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⁴⁰ This is not to say that the initial difference in confidence levels may not well be gender induced.

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**PRIČA O PATNJI OD MIGRENE: CRNE RUPE U ROMANU
ZAVEZANIH OČIJU, AUTORKE ŠIRI HASVET**

Rezime

Većina tekstova koji obrađuju roman Širi Hasvet *Zavezanih očiju* uglavnom je usredsređena na problematiku roda. Ponuđena mišljenja zasnivaju se na činjenici da se ovaj roman ne bavi epistemološkim, odnosno ontološkim pitanjima. Uzimajući u obzir da protagonistkinja Ajris, koja pripovijeda u prvom licu, pati od skotoma (ograničenog ispada u vidnom polju), koji uzrokuje teške halucinacije, moglo bi se doći i do drugačijeg zaključka – posebno ako se uzme u obzir da halucinacije u kontekstu migrenskih aura predstavljaju potpuno stvarne osjetilne manjkavosti koje radikalno presijecaju vezu između doživljaja sebe i vanjskog svijeta. Pošto iz ugla prvog lica nije moguće razlikovati halucinacije od stvarnosti, postavlja se pitanje da li i u kojoj mjeri stvarne činjenice i halucinacije pripadaju različitim ontološkim nivoima, i da li ih je uopšte moguće razdvojiti. Štaviše, halucinacije se u više navrata predstavljaju kao crne rupe koje proždiru (ne-)materijalni svijet opisan u romanu. Tu se ne radi o slučajnim predstavama, nego o strukturalnim analogijama sa astrofizičkim fenomenom crnih rupa, za koje se smatra da uništavaju materiju. Međutim, materija koju proguta crna rupa nije potpuno uništena već integrisana u jedinstvenost crne rupe, što podstiče 'pitanje jedinstvenosti'. Polazeći od neurološke tačke gledišta, nastojao sam da razradim jedan radikalno konstruktivistički pogled na roman koji se zasniva na Ajrisinim učestalim uočavanjima crnih rupa.

cknirsch@students.mail.uni-mannheim.de