

# Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold* and *What I Loved*

## *A Study of Destructiveness in Art and the Human Psyche*

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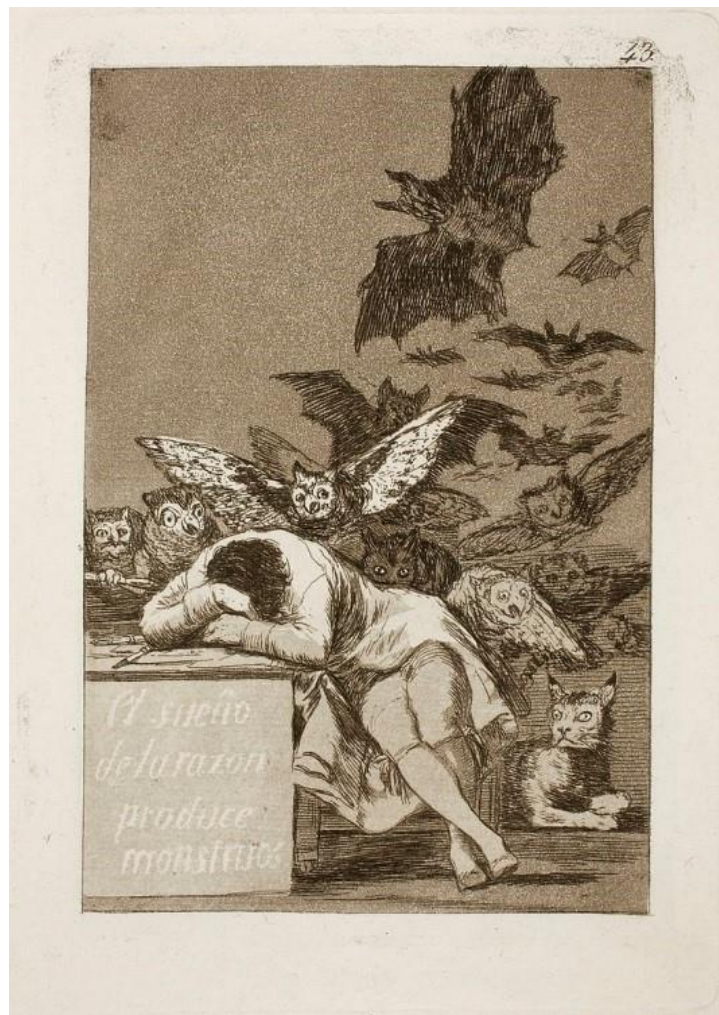


Fig. 1. Francisco Goya, "#43, The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" in *Caprichos* 1799

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# Introduction

*"—the instant shock to my limbic system that comes from seeing a broken human body, the accompanying guilt and shame I feel for my fascination, which mingles with my empathy for the victim".*

(Hustvedt 2012a 339)

## Topic

Some years ago I read *Innocentia Park* by Ingvar Ambjørnsen. Thinking back, I cannot remember much of the plot, and I am not sure if I even finished it. One thing sticks with me, however, and that is a man's relationship with a certain expensive designer chair. The chair strains his back, and precisely for that reason he spends a lot of time sitting in it. Today, I understand this behavior as self-destructiveness without extrinsic motivation. I believe my powerful memory of this particular habit to be a small but significant manifestation of the psycho-aesthetic power destructiveness can have in literature and other art forms. The popularity of the artist Damien Hirst, the film maker Lars Von Trier, and the writer Chuck Palahniuk, indicates that I am by no means alone in this fascination with destructiveness. In a wider sense, this thesis concerns itself with destructiveness and the nature of its attraction, and within this context I focus specifically on the interplay between art and psychology.

The primary source of reference for this thesis is the American author Siri Hustvedt. In addition to a considerable amount of nonfiction about art, psychology, neuroscience and literature, Hustvedt has so far written six novels. The focus will be on the first, *The Blindfold* (1993), and the third, *What I Loved* (2003), henceforth referred to as *TB* and *WIL*. Their unfolding narratives, seen from the respective viewpoints of a young female student of literature and an aging male art historian, are somewhat different when it comes to content, form and style, but there are many similarities when it comes to the incorporation of destructive elements in the works. Their diversity also permits a more complete coverage of destructiveness than if I had compared *WIL* to, for instance,

Hustvedt's more similar novel, *The Sorrows of an American* (2009). This is because *The Sorrows of an American* has a middle-aged male historian as its protagonist and also shares an important central topic with *WIL*, namely grief. As Leo and Erica's incompatible grief processes over the death of their son in *WIL* end up ruining their marriage, this topic is highly relatable to destructiveness. Still, it seems more fruitful to play Leo and Erica's breakup against the destructive relationship patterns of Iris and her men in *TB*. Destructiveness in relationships, both romantic and non-romantic, is one of several types of destructiveness which are represented in the two novels.

The abundance of destructiveness-related phenomena is, as mentioned, one of the main reasons why I have chosen these novels, but there is more about these books and this subject matter that motivated my choice. I have previously studied both art and psychology, in addition to working in psychiatric institutions witnessing destructive behavior in clinical context. In *TB* and *WIL*, both psychology and art are central domains where destructiveness plays important roles. My background therefore makes an interdisciplinary approach to literature, art and psychology both possible and academically inspiring to me. What I address in my research is: **“in what ways, and with what effects, do destructiveness in art and destructiveness in the human psyche relate to one another in Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold* and *What I Loved*?”** In this question lies a presupposition that destructiveness in art and destructiveness in the human psyche are clearly related.

The different ways these features relate to one another are many and manifested on different levels, but my main presupposition is that a piece of art with a destructive theme and/or style will resonate in destructive tendencies in both its maker and its recipient<sup>1</sup>. I have further supposed that this resonance or “mixing” (Hustvedt's term to be explained later) has the potential of opening doors, shedding light from new angles, breaking old boundaries, and thus facilitating insight and possible acceptance and incorporation of repressed thoughts and desires. Still, I anticipate that the fruitful potential of destructiveness in art may have its limits, and that when these limits are crossed, the results may be unaccompanied destruction or destruction with too

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to the individual member of an artwork's audience as "recipient" because, unlike "beholder" and "spectator" etc., it does not semantically discriminate against nonvisual artworks and nonvisual aspects of visual artworks. Among others, Alfred Gell uses "recipient" in *Art and Agency* (1998).

expensively bought gain. I am generally interested in exploring the limit to when too much of a bad thing is indisputably bad, and remain convinced that *TB* and *WIL* may provide a suitable landscape where one can study this threshold from different angles. It is important to note that in addition to the real and fictional artists she depicts, Hustvedt is herself regarded as an artist and the reader as a recipient of her art. A novel is both a container of art and a work of creative art in itself.

## Methodology and Outline

The main scholarly method is close reading and subsequent analysis of passages that relate to destructiveness in Hustvedt's novels. Theory is primarily used to nuance and support my interpretations, which again are based on the analysis. Another tool which has helped increase the understanding of the works, is the search function inside electronic editions of the novels. Immediate access to information which otherwise would have demanded the research capacity of a computer to obtain, affects the way I as a researcher interact with the novels. As an example, searching for "sadis" returns three instances in *TB* and two in *WIL* where "sadism" or "sadistic" is used, which again makes comparisons between their respective textual contexts possible. Without it interfering with academic pursuit, this possibility also involves an impression of the two novels as a sphere around the researcher rather than as linear storylines which are entered separately.

The novels are, however, treated in separate chapters in the thesis, and the first chapter focuses exclusively on *WIL*. The reverse chronology in terms of time of publication shows, is a deliberate choice as I find that the concepts and discussions of this thesis are best introduced by starting with *WIL*. After all, the development in Hustvedt's writing is not something I focus on. Concepts such as "mixing" and "aesthetic defamiliarization" found in *WIL*, and in the secondary sources discussing *WIL*, are introduced in their natural, textual setting, before they are reapplied to the discussions in the second chapter. Moreover, it seems justifiable to spend some time on *WIL* in the second chapter as well because it is a bigger volume which digs deeper into the world of art. The first part of the chapter on *WIL* devotes a large section to the nature of the destructive forces in Mark and their effects on his surroundings, but it also discusses Leo's self-destructive postponement of grief and Bill's hollow side and self-destructive guilt. These individual and intersubjective destructive tendencies will be incorporated

into the depictions of art in the second part of this chapter. Here I will show how destructiveness in Bill's art, and especially in Giles' art, ultimately destabilize distinguishing features between art and reality. As we shall see, art with destructive elements can have therapeutic effects for both the artist, represented by Bill, and the recipient of art, represented by Leo.

The chapter on *TB* follows the same recipe of first discussing psychology, and then focusing on the role of art. Throughout this chapter, I will also make some comparisons to *WIL*, and this arrangement ensures a sense of progression throughout the thesis as accumulated ideas are brought along in further discussions. I discuss the role of "mixing", i.e. intersubjective identity formation, in a novel (*TB*) where the protection of one's core self from outside corruption is a prominent feature. With the related defense mechanisms of using pseudonyms, alter egos and other forms of identity circumvention, new dangers arise. These dangers are associated with the destructive powers of mask wearing, loss of self, and forfeiture of meaningful relationships with other people. The opportunities of therapeutic effects and self-revelations from art with destructive style, content and/or production are often missed by Iris. Instead, they lead to further fragmentation of her self, and the adoption of a destructive, male alter ego. The effects and the ways in which art and the psyche relate to one another in terms of destructiveness are complex and ambiguous in both novels. This thesis will not do away with all ambiguity by forcing through a unifying model of the relationship between art and psyche. Instead, generalizations and comparisons form a web of interconnections where uncertainty is not buried, but highlighted. Incidentally, this is in accordance with Hustvedt's favor of ambiguity and the coexistence of multiple truths across disciplines in both fiction and nonfiction, and her skepticism when it comes to absorbed striving for a single, unambiguous "truth with a capital T" (2011).

The remainder of this introduction consists of a brief summary of the novels, terminology and theory, and former research on these novels along with approaches related to destructiveness in other scholarly work. The summaries are first and foremost written as a courtesy to the reader who has not read both of these novels. Still, emphasis is added on destructiveness, and most of the elements not figuring in the thesis, are left out.

# The Works

## ***The Blindfold***

On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013, I personally met Hustvedt as she gave a guest lecture for the Norwegian Søren Kierkegaard Society at the University of Oslo. During a brief conversation she thanked me in advance for “looking into the strangeness of Iris” (the protagonist in *TB*) and further stated that she herself is Iris Vegan. Iris spelled backwards is Siri, her mother’s maiden name is Vegan, and the tipoff that the work is semi-autobiographical did by no means reveal a secret. Still, it is perhaps not insignificant that of all things she could have told me (and with knowledge of my topic of destructiveness in mind), she chose that particular piece of information, thus implicitly attesting to self-destructive tendencies in herself.

*TB* is divided into four parts. We follow Iris, a 22-year-old graduate student who studies literature and philosophy at Columbia University in New York. The first-person narration presents events that have happened between 1978 and 1981, eight years after they have taken place. The four narratives are not in chronological order, something that corresponds with the time-related confusion of the mind of a migraineur (Knirsch 2010). This confusion is a part of Iris and a part of the novel, but I will describe the narrative's subplots in real-time chronology.

When wearing a man's suit at a Halloween party, Iris is introduced to the art critic Paris, whose cruelty and intellect both attract and repulse her. She also collaborates with Professor Rose on the translation of the German novella *Der Brutale Junge*. After a girl in her building is raped, Iris starts wearing the suit from the Halloween party and soon adopts the name and persona of the protagonist in the novella, "Klaus". With this name, these clothes and a crew-cut, she roams the city, leading a self-destructive nocturnal life which ends after she scares herself by acting on an urge to try to take a policeman's gun.

Some months later, an odd triangular drama between Iris, her boyfriend Stephen, and his friend George ensues. George takes photographs described as suggestive, associative and dark. Stephen keeps a distance to Iris and the mundaneness of the world, and has a rather nihilistic view on life. On one occasion, the three observe a woman’s grand mal seizure, and while Iris is horrified, Stephen and George see only the sublime in

the picture and George photographs it. He also takes a picture of Iris which she finds horrible and alienating, but which Stephen is more fascinated with than Iris herself. When seeing the photograph for the second time, Iris has a migraine attack which leads her to “a revelation about the photograph’s inherent darkness and a sign of infection” (67) in the relationship between Stephen, George and herself. Iris breaks up with both George and Stephen, and the following summer she is hired by Mr. Morning to describe objects by whispering the descriptions into a recorder. As it turns out, all objects belonged to a woman who was killed in Mr. Morning’s building. Among other examples of peculiar requests, Mr. Morning urges Iris to atone “for the sins of the world” (23). After finding out that the woman to whom the objects belonged was murdered, Iris confronts Mr. Morning, but he neither confirms nor denies that he has killed this woman, and says that “the story is yours, not mine” (36).

A while later Iris is hospitalized for migraines, which she suffers from continuously for seven months. At the hospital she is heavily drugged. Iris both blames herself for her illness and deceives the doctor by pretending to be more healthy and cheerful than she actually is, to hide the extent of how she is “a person going to pieces” (92). Seemingly further down the road, her fellow inpatient, Mrs. O, is completely incoherent and her personality is described as “shattered into a thousand pieces” (97). Iris checks herself out of the hospital, and her second phase as Klaus begins. This time she is rescued by Professor Rose whom she accidentally meets in a bar. They become lovers, but the affair ends after Rose turns sexually sadistic while Iris wears a blindfold. The novel ends with Iris trusting Paris with the story of everything that has happened to her in the course of the novel. He reacts by treating it as a big joke and then grabs her between her legs. Iris escapes and runs away, “like a bat out of hell” (221).

### ***What I Loved***

*WIL* tells the story of the families of the artist Bill Wechsler and the art historian Leon Hertzberg (Leo). It is a first-person narrative seen through the eyes of Leo, but as opposed to in *TB*, the narrator is not incontestably the main character. Leo and Erica, have a son named Matt. Roughly at the same time, Bill and Lucille also have a son, Mark. Bill divorces Lucille and forms a new relationship with Violet. When he is 11 years old, Matt drowns while at summer camp. Leo shuts off his feelings while Erica

eventually moves away to work in another city as a way of coping with her grief. Leo spends a lot of time with the charismatic Mark, who in his adolescence repeatedly betrays Leo's trust by lying, stealing and once biting him while he sleeps.

Mark befriends the up-and-coming shock-artist Teddy Giles, and they are suspected of crimes like vandalism, killing cats and even murder. The latter crime is described as “the ultimate work of art” (338) by Giles, but nobody believes he did it. As with Bill, Giles' art plays an important part in the narrative. So does Francisco Goya, whom Leo writes a book about. Goya functions as fuel for Leo's self-destructive semi-sadomasochistic fantasies about his friend's wife. The art of Bill, Giles and Goya is all dark and brutal in some sense, but its motifs and philosophies seem to be different. The conflict between Bill's and Giles' art becomes evident after Bill's death. Giles exhibits a piece where he has destroyed one of Bill's paintings by piercing the figure of a dead woman through the canvas, thus increasing its original value. A thematic mirror to Bill's art is Violet's writings about anorexia and hysteria. Violet calls the hysterics “my lovely lunatics” (51), and Bill had also produced several art pieces depicting hysterics and anorexics, so in their own ways they too adhere to an aestheticization of destructiveness. Leo and Violet's attempts to save Mark from both Giles and himself ultimately fail, and Leo twice turns physically and psychologically violent towards Mark. Soon after Leo confesses his love for Violet, she goes abroad. Towards the end Leo loses his eyesight, in addition to almost all the people who were important to him. It is under these circumstances that Leo writes the book which *is* the entire narrative.

## Terminology and Theory

Having introduced the topic and the primary texts which will be discussed, I will now account for the terminology of destructiveness and specify the understanding of this crucial term as it is applied in this thesis. Based on researching *The MLA International Bibliography*, *The British National Corpus* and various thesauruses, one can say that its range of meaning operates in the space between the following two polarized contexts: The first is that of destructive ability or causation, and whether denoting a weapon, an animal or a cyclone, the thing itself has little to do with psychology. The other side of the scale signifies urges toward something which primarily involves the harming of oneself or others, i.e. unconscious drives, conscious motivations and their manifestations into

actions. As mentioned, these generalizations are arrived at by searching *The British National Corpus* for words with the stem “destructive”, and looking at different semantic meanings and how frequently they occur among the search results. I have also used The International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association in a similar, corpus-based fashion, and looked at trends in literary criticism when it comes to both ‘destructive’ terminology and other terminology used about roughly the same phenomenon.

My use of ‘destructiveness’ is positioned closer to the strictly psychological part of the scale. Still, elements with physically destructive potential are not neglected in this thesis, but rather linked up with the psychological understanding of destructiveness. As an example I will, when dealing with the incident with Iris and the policeman’s gun (*TB*, 174), relate Iris’ urge to take the gun to the destructive potential of the gun. Still, incidents when characters *act* on destructive urges will often be more accessible to the reader than the urges themselves. The inaccessibility of the characters’ urges stems from limitations of knowledge, such as point of view, which authors more or less consciously apply to the work. Since *WIL* and *TB* are narrated from a first-person point of view, we naturally only know what Leo and Iris *report* about their own thoughts and actions, in addition to what they reveal about what other characters say and do. When dealing with destructiveness in its behavioral form, I have therefore had to make assumptions about the mindsets behind specific actions. I also discuss what such actions might entail for both the characters and the reader, regardless of the motives behind such actions. After all, fictional characters are not living, thinking beings and therefore it is problematic to speculate too far from the text itself when it comes to the characters’ hidden thoughts.

Self-destructiveness is also a term which needs some clarification. Technically it forms a hyponymic relationship with ‘destructiveness’, meaning that it is simply the type of destructiveness where one causes harm to oneself. On the other hand, within a psychological understanding of destructiveness, it seems to form an intertwined relationship to its hypernym, or stem-word. The reason for this is that, at least in the realms of fiction and psychology, most destructive behavior tends to entail some form of self-destructiveness, and not only in cause-effect patterns. The way you treat others reflects how you feel about yourself. Sharon Van Hall notes how “murder and suicide are two sides of the same coin”, though it is importantly distinguished by the direction of the



aggression (1975, 15). According to search results found in *The MLA International Bibliography*, among those literary articles which use ‘destructiveness’ as their central terminology Charles Dickens’ works have occurred most frequently during the previous decades. Both Van Hall’s dissertation about destructiveness in Dickens’ characters and Thomas George Mellor’s dissertation, *Charles Dickens’ Self-Destructive Women*, tap into the duality of good and evil in all people, and self-destructive behavioral patterns like self-imposed isolation and women’s pursuits of damaging relationships with men. Interestingly, Hustvedt’s own dissertation, published in 1986, was also about Dickens. This might suggest an early inspiration for the subtle approach to destructiveness one now can find in her fiction.

A common trait in the literature that discusses Hustvedt’s work, is to mention the undeserved lack of scholarly attention given to her work. *TB* is especially noted as “fertile, yet neglected” (Jameson 421) and Kristiaan Versluys describes it as having “sunk into oblivion” (99). Beyond this decreasingly uncharted spot of shared turf, the scholars’ approaches and standpoints diverge in all directions. I appreciate that a few of them give some nourishment to my own branch without being so comprehensive and relevant that they make this thesis superfluous. Alise Jameson writes about power and desire in *TB*, and discusses it from a theoretical perspective of sadomasochism, meaning an approach to S&M that usurps life in general, - not just sex. The leap from sadism and masochism to destructiveness and self-destructiveness is not far, but there are obviously important discrepancies between the two pairs. Intrinsicly, pain and power do not necessitate the involvement of destructiveness and vice versa, but they are often correlated. As Jameson looks at the ambiguously empowering effect of submission and self-disintegration, however, she counterbalances the view of Iris’ behavioral patterns as merely self-destructive.

While Jameson says little about art and nothing about *WIL*, Christine Marks’ dissertation gives an almost encyclopedic account of Hustvedt’s authorship up until her non-fictional *The Shaking Woman or a History of My Nerves* (Hustvedt 2010a). Note that throughout the thesis, “Marks” should not be confused with *WIL*’s character, “Mark”. Her dissertation discusses intersubjectivity, art and medicine in Hustvedt’s works under the overarching topic of identity formation. One of Marks’ mantras is that the totally independent self is neither possible nor something to be striven for. Our lives are

inescapably woven together, and we see and create our self-conception through others. Marks praises Hustvedt's illustrations of this process of "intersubjective identity formation" (8), which Hustvedt more colloquially refers to as "mixing" (*WIL* 82). In relation to destructiveness, *WIL*'s character Violet claims that, though normally positive and inevitable, mixing can also be dangerous, and that too much mixing is a sign of having loose or non-existing boundaries of the self, which again is associated with both anorexia and hysteria.

As seen in Mark, loose boundaries and a weak core of self are associated with being more inclined to cause harm to others as well, but only if this is something you think is desirable for a significant other. The significant other in Mark's case being Giles. Not enough mixing, resulting from too rigid boundaries of the self, on the other hand, can result in apathy, isolation and depression. The latter statement is my own hypothesis, derived at on the basis of Marks' and Hustvedt's concept of "overmixing". Both of these ideas are highly relevant for my thesis since they in effect propose that both too much and not enough mixing may lead to destructive behavior. Further, Marks claims that "[t]he characters' interrelatedness emerges with particular force in moments of mixing in art" (188). This applies to art with destructive themes and style as well, and a given art experience can be either therapeutic or predominantly destructive. Therefore, the increased force of interrelatedness may intensify the positive or negative effects on the characters involved.

Since both *TB* and *WIL* are featured in Marks' dissertation while Jameson's essay deals strictly with *TB*, Hubert Zapf's essay "Narrative, Ethics, and Postmodern Art in Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*", brings balance to the sources that directly discuss the novels. Zapf's essay concerns *WIL*'s ethical function, the characters' dialogical selves (182), and the relationship between art and life. In the following excerpt Zapf comments on his own plot summary:

What the preceding reconstruction of the plot demonstrates is highly contradictory dynamics of interactions, events, and relationships, which stages a multiplicity of human experiences in ways which foreground the tensions between art and life, past and present, trauma and memory, love and violence, empathy and indifference, thus addressing fundamental ethical questions of human value and dignity in a postmodern world torn between humanizing and dehumanizing forces. It is a series of liminal experiences which confront the characters—and the reader—with intense and often agonizing borderline situations, double-binds and ambiguities which, instead of moralizing

certainties, characterize the ethical experience. In the course of the book, the narrator's consciousness and mentality encounter a world beyond good and evil, a confusing and threateningly uncontrollable contemporary world which, like the traumatic memories of the past, resist coherent rational or ethical interpretation. (Zapf 177)

Leo and the other characters operate in the space between different extremes and blurred and sometimes contradicting dos and don'ts. These dualities seem to be mirrored by their dialogic selves. Zapf notes how Leo is drawn to both Eros, represented by the loving, vital Violet, and Thanatos, represented by Lucille with her "repressive, negative energy" (183). Still, even Violet has a fascinated fixation on sickness and destructiveness in her research and also ends up consumed by hate after her loss of Bill and failed attempts to save Mark from himself. Her research on anorexia and hysteria is seen directly in Bill's art. This is for example made evident by one of his art pieces where he wrote "HYSTERIA, ANOREXIA NERVOSA, and EXQUISITE MUTILATION" on pieces of tape on the mouths of Barbie dolls (*WIL*, 73). Despite an easily reached reading of "exquisite mutilation" as ironic and documentary, this element is nevertheless part of an aesthetic product where mutilation is, in part, exquisite. Thus, in art containing destructiveness, attraction and repulsion can work symbiotically together and produce more engagement with the observer than what would be possible without the repulsive qualities.

Hustvedt herself, who has written several pieces of non-fiction on Goya, admits that "there is pleasure in Goya's extreme images; his renderings of sadistic joy is direct, not censored or disguised" (2012a, 325). She also claims that "in Goya, we are the monsters" (2012a), and this link shows that we as onlookers have empathy with the portrayed perpetrators as well as with the victims. We are therefore confronted with our own sadistic tendencies, something which enables insight and an outlet for our questionable desires, without having to incriminate ourselves. In the case of Leo, his semi-sadistic erotic fantasies of Violet were fueled and mediated by Goya's drawings, but never really acted upon. In contrast, the novella *Der Brutale Junge* affects Iris in comparable ways, but what starts as an urge to wear her borrowed men's suit develops into the adoption of the protagonist's name, "Klaus". In the role of this alter ego she faces both physical and psychological breakdown.

In addition to the previously mentioned scholars, including Hustvedt herself, this thesis will refer to some wide-ranging theories and concepts such as art, evil and psychoanalysis, especially regarding Eros and Thanatos. Without my repudiating it, psychoanalytic theory will not be used as a bank of truths, but rather as a landscape the novels often seem to travel in. There will be few direct references to the terms "psychology" and "psyche" throughout this thesis, but it is important to underline that these terms are not interchangeable. "Psyche" refers to the self and the conscious and unconscious mind, while psychology is the science that studies the psyche. The term "psyche" is thus the central object of my research, and psychology is an important part of the applied science used in order to understand its connections with art in the context of destructiveness.

Regarding evil, my main source is Terry Eagleton's *On Evil* (2010), where one of his relevant claims is that the modern artist's function is that of a secular Jesus who sacrifices himself and his morality for art (59). When it comes to the concept of art itself, I treat it as something which not only concerns visual art, but also performing arts and literature as well. I will to a large extent keep to Arthur Danto's and George Dickie's respective institutional concepts of art, where whether a given entity or performance is to be considered art or not relies heavily on the approval of an art world (Adajian 2012). This institutional concept of art is largely chosen because, implicitly, this conception of art seems to prevail in the art worlds in both novels, especially in *WIL*. Given the unfavorable portrayal of *WIL*'s art world, Hustvedt seem to problematize the institutional conception of art. Hustvedt's novels also present some ambiguous situations where members of the New York art world either disagree or simply are not present to classify art-resembling objects and performances. These instances, such as Giles' "art-murder" (343) and Iris spray-painting "NEVER MIND" on a wall, will be treated as borderline situations between life and art. After all, when researching the relationship between art and the human psyche, elements which fall in the overlapping space between these two categories should not be limited to either of them.

# Chapter I : *What I Loved*

*I well understood that I was moving in the direction of something ugly. I was also aware that the ugliness pulled me toward it. I wanted to see what it was, to get close to it and examine it. The tug was morbid, and by giving in to it, I felt that the loathsome thing I was looking for had already stained me.*

(Hustvedt 281)

## **Destructive tendencies in the main characters**

In addition to being a book about love, art and grief, *WIL* is a family saga that introduces many characters in the course of the plot's long timeline. All of these characters appear to embody distinct personalities who wrestle with destructiveness in their own ways. The main characters' perspectives and tendencies in terms of destructiveness and self-destructiveness also seem to develop in the course of the narrative. The present subchapter primarily discusses Leo, Mark, Bill and Violet. The aim is to show the ways in which Mark is predominantly destructive, Bill is self-destructive and Leo is both, but not as lethally dangerous as the other two. Violet is neither very destructive nor self-destructive, but as a theoretician she is deeply fascinated with destructiveness. It is through her that we are given accounts of the girls who overeat or starve themselves and whose virtues are "denial and self-inflicted pain" (106).

There are two ways of viewing Mark as a dark character. First, he lies, steals and causes harm to others. Secondly, and because of his notorious lying, his real thoughts and motives are always hidden. Towards the end of the novel, Violet actually claims that "nothing he's ever said" can be believed (308). He is also part of an underground rave-scene which is practically unreachable for the other characters. These elements leave the reader and Mark's family in the dark when it comes to understanding him, especially since he is so charismatic and well-behaved on the surface.

As a means of shedding light on Mark's true self in order to help him, various theories and diagnoses are proposed by different characters throughout the book.

Suggested at separate stages in the novel, hysteria (275), drug addiction (292), and antisocial personality disorder (375) are all plausibly fitting labels, but the labels themselves seem inadequate as means of fully understanding how and why Mark turned out the way he did. In Mark's early upbringing, the separation of his parents and the way he in effect was abandoned by his father and neglected by his mother drove him to buy back their love by repressing his disagreeable sides and put on a face and voice which pleased everyone.

Considering biological, psychological and social factors, one could reasonably assume that Mark was born with a predisposition towards destructive behavior, that the conditions for this development were met, and that the repression of the undesirable sides of his true self only made them grow in strength behind the façade. In his teens these undesirable sides were finally welcomed in the presence of Giles and his crowd, whose adoration of scandalization and destructive hedonism trumps morality. On a larger scale, these characteristics suggest that Mark and his friends are symptoms of "a postmodern *zeitgeist* and of a deep crisis of ethical values, which threaten to be consumed by the simulacra of a commercial entertainment culture" (Zapf, 185). In Giles' world, the boundaries between art, commercial violence and real life are practically non-existing. This worldview, with its reversed norms of social conduct, provided Mark with the opportunity to both please his peers and discharge the destructive side of his id and ego.

My intention is not to provide a diagnosis for Mark, but rather to show that within the pages of the novel there are a number of conceivable explanations given for how the destructive tendencies of this character came about. These apologetic rationales serve as a counterweight to the demonizing effects of many of his destructive acts. One example of such an act is when Mark bites Leo in his sleep (215). His bite is different from his thefts because it causes bodily harm, but mostly because there seems to be no rationally comprehensible motive behind it. Yet, there is a motive hiding in plain sight to be found. By injuring a significant other, as one says, 'for the hell of it', Mark defies comprehensibility and morality altogether, thus proclaiming his freedom from these qualities. This expression of freedom is, however, not very free since it is carried out under the cover of night with no witnesses, including the sleeping Leo who only wakes up after being bitten.

More so than the bite, Mark's presumed participation in the killings of cats all over the city is not only destructive, but also cruel, some would say *evil*. The concept of evil I refer to is that of moral evil, excluding natural evils and religious conundrums like the problem of evil. It makes sense to mention evil because in the case of murdering cats for sport and art, we have moral agents who deliberately perform lethal acts which are condemned as atrocious by a vast majority of other moral agents. That the idea of evil is thinkable under these circumstances is reason enough for it to be addressed in this thesis, and additionally there are several ties between evil and destructiveness. In his book *On Evil* (2010), Terry Eagleton sees evil as destruction for its own sake, meaning for the sake of annihilation and nothingness. He also claims that there cannot "be evil acts without evil persons to execute them" (151). This entails that evil is dependent on motivation. Following this logic in the case of the cat-murderers, whether all, some, or none of the perpetrators are evil is unknowable without access to their mindset. Therefore, evil is not relevant as a descriptive label, but rather as an idea or a suspicion which contrasts with the different theories that seek to understand and excuse wrongdoers and evildoers.

As already mentioned, and voiced by different characters, the novel presents an abundance of theories about Mark. In her dissertation Christine Marks adds even more theories and depth to the ones already present, especially in her analysis of Mark through the methodological lens of relational psychoanalysis (169-175). In addition to its relevance for her medical approach to Hustvedt's fiction, Marks' elaborate continuation of the many attempts to explain Mark diagnostically perfectly illustrates one of his literary functions. By evoking a desperate need for explanations, the case of Mark shows our inevitably unfulfilled need to contain others through categorization. Regardless of the truth value of individual explanations, they independently reflect their own perspective, and collectively demonstrate what Zapf refers to as "[t]he mysteriousness and final unavailability of a human being to all categories of explanation" (187). Thus, the fact that these theories, which operate on different levels of interpretation, are individually adequate yet collectively inadequate, affirms the complexity and ultimate indefinableness of people in general, and especially of Mark.

To return to presented facts, Mark is a lying chameleon. This means that he can be caught in a lie, but without us knowing his natural color, or true self, the lie is still not

completely exposed. Imagined or not, everything thus becomes role-play, so that there is never any real closure for the reader. Even when he admits that he merely took Matt's knife because he wanted it, and that Matt's displays of remorse were always funny and incomprehensible to him (322-323), we cannot know if he is being sincere. The idea of role-play includes both the voice he uses and that which he voices, something which makes it hard to know how to respond to anything he says.

“There’s a voice inside my head. I hear it, but nobody else does. People wouldn’t like it, so I use other voices for them. Teddy knows about me, because we’re the same. He’s the only one, but even with him it’s not that voice, not the one in my head”. (323)

Whether you believe in this or not, the confession calls for sympathy and dread for both Leo and the reader. If one, despite hard-learned lessons from previous experience, chooses to believe him, one must also take him at face value regarding his use of different voices for different people, and subsequently acknowledge that even the confession does not come from a person, but a persona. Towards the end of the novel, Mark gives Violet the name of his new workplace, but Violet does not even try to find out if this is true or not because it "didn't seem all that important" (347). This suggests that Mark has not only broken all hope of reestablishing trust between them, but that he has also fractured Violet's sense of meaning, at least when it comes to him. There is obviously a significant difference between truth being irrelevant and truth being relative, but in this case the two seem to intersect. The reason for this is that Mark's amorality and fragmented being, which ultimately caused Violet's indifference to the truth, are mirrored by the moral and epistemic relativism of the time that has become extreme in the subgroup Mark belongs to.

By not applying himself, lying and not caring about other people, Mark implicitly adheres to everything being relative, and thus demonstrates how postmodernism can have destructive effects on a single individual and his surroundings. His disrespect for truth also comes in the form of an aversion to knowledge, and even skills. After discovering his talent for chess, Mark's interest in the game waned. Concerning schoolwork, Leo found that "his ignorance had a willed quality to it" (158). Such active avoidance of truth and knowledge can be seen as more purely self-destructive than his drug abuse, since drug use actually involves the pursuit of some desired effects. In addition, when Leo rescues him from overdosing, Mark says "Fuck you" to Leo and scratches his face (291).



Even with the violence, I would say that this could be one of very few moments of clarity in the novel, where we see Mark with his defenses down, a more or less normal teenager who rebels against his adopted uncle.

Using Leo's own terminology, Mark's true nature depends on whether it is the "Manichean" or the "geological" (237) reading of him which is true. In the Manichean reading, Mark pendulates between light and dark, being sincerely nice sometimes, but succumbing to his destructive urges at other times. According to the geological model, however, Mark's good impulses are only a part of the surface which covers and suppresses the deeper, darker layers of his true self, which on occasion "would make a sudden volcanic push toward the surface and erupt" (ibid.). Since we only know Mark from the outside-in, the question of whether one should apply the Manichean or the geological model is unanswerable. Like Schrödinger's cat is simultaneously alive and dead before one opens the box, Mark is, from our perspective, both good and evil as it is impossible to determine whether he willingly destroys for the sake of destruction, or if he has other motives. Accepting the fact that Mark cannot be labeled, or even cured given the right treatment, is something both fictional and real bystanders must come to terms with, but which his father was not able to do.

Bill is the character with the highest degree of hope and faith in Mark. When his son repeatedly lets him down, the disappointment and blame Bill puts upon himself is in the end deadly. Leo claims that "[i]f Bill felt anger, it was turned against himself, and I watched as he slowly, steadily gnawed at his own flesh" (238). Bill's psychological pain is followed by physical deterioration as he drinks too much and works manically hard at his last art project. Ironically, artistic production therefore becomes a self-destructive endeavor. The day he died, Bill listened to an anonymous voicemail message which said "M&M knows they killed me" (262). M&M is one of Mark's aliases and "me" is really a boy named "Me", whom Mark may or may not have participated in killing. With this shocking message as probable cause of death, Bill is given a Shakespearean death like that of *Antony and Cleopatra's* Enobarbus, whose cause of death was a similarly guilt-related heartbreak (IV.IX.9-27).

In addition to his self-destructive sense of guilt, Violet saw an "obtuse side to Bill— a hidden, unknowing, unknowable core that he let out in his work. He was obsessed" (351). This inaccessible attribute of emptiness is also found in Mark, Lucille

and especially in Bill's father, whose "absent quality" is something "Bill never stopped pursuing—even after the man was dead" (24). Even though he managed to use it productively, the emptiness did not diminish, but grew until he died. Violet also admitted that Bill's remoteness kept her alive and in love because her desire to reach this unknown side of him was never satisfied (351). The pursuit of emptiness resembles the concept of the death drive, since they both involve a desire to return to an unknown nothingness. In this sense, Eros is drawn to the nothingness of Thanatos, and the two are united.

According to Zapf, Violet represents Eros and Lucille Thanatos, while Erica "is somewhere between these poles" (183-184). Since Leo is drawn to all three of them, it underlines his middle position which fluctuates heavily in both directions. As narrator, Leo also gives an inside-out perspective to his experiences of desire. Leading in to his sexual encounter with Lucille, Leo "felt like slapping her. Or kissing her. Either one would have satisfied the urge that came over me, an intense desire to smash the brittle surface of her impassive face" (96). His fantasies of Violet are also marked by an interconnection between sexual and destructive urges. Recurrently, he imagines himself a part of the scene where Violet's Parisian piano teacher squeezes her finger hard and whispers "Jules" into her ear (90). In this sense, his turn to Eros is also marked by a fascination with pain and power. The scene with the piano teacher is also colored by Violet's idea of "mixing" which Marks explains as an inevitable overlap between self and other, where a complete separation between the two is impossible (6). In the piano scene, Jules is present as an absent observer, and that is what makes the scene both dangerous and erotic. "When he squeezed my finger, it was like Jules was doing it, don't you see? Jules and Monsieur Renasse were all mixed up together. I was afraid of it, because I liked it" (90). Leo is therefore both a voyeur and a substitute for Jules, temporarily merging his identity with the piano teacher.

As seen in the novel, mixing will more often become damaging when the boundaries of the self, which hinder mixing, are either too rigid or too loose. According to Violet, anorexics feel from the outside. The reason for this is that they have "overmixed" and therefore "[t]hey find it hard to separate the needs and desires of other people from their own" (88-89). The same goes for hysteria, and in *WIL* both of these illnesses are mostly seen as cultural phenomena, which are subconsciously adopted by people with weak boundaries of self, and bodily expressed without pretence in order to

cope with anxiety and stress. We also learn through Violet that Charcot's hysterics started having seizures because they mimicked the epileptics, who were housed in the next building, "[t]hey became what they were near" (56). Similarly, Mark's chameleonism could in part be explained by the same quote. His absorption of present surroundings occurs because he has easily penetrable boundaries of self. He is not portrayed as a hysteric, but certainly as someone who has "overmixed" and who acts mostly according to the wishes of his surroundings. This provides a viable psychological explanation for Mark's literary function; he displays the other characters' desired versions of him, though often in a somewhat misconstrued or perverted form.

Lack of mixing and its consequences is a less pronounced element in the novel, but it is nevertheless an important factor in Leo's imploding grief after Matt's death. He grieved behind an impenetrable wall, and focused on displaying control so that little emotion was let out, and no comfort got in. Erica, on the other hand, grieved openly and uncontrollably, and when she screamed "[g]et away! I want my baby!" at him, Leo envied her (137). Perhaps their closeness and unity contributed to this division of labor in terms of mourning, - since Leo was strong, Erica could be weak and because Erica cried, Leo did not have to. No one benefitted from Leo's stoicism, however, and as Erica gradually improves, she starts to question, and later pity him. Leo's "single minded wish" is that he "will not be comforted". He refuses to go to treatment with Erica, and his "sole satisfactions" are his broken finger and aching body. The fact that he avoids masturbation because "the relief it promised me also seemed to threaten disintegration" (144), supports the notion that he fortifies his boundaries to preserve the core of his self. This is not grief as self-destructiveness but rather dismissal of grief by emotional shutdown, except for other forms of pain as substitution to grief. Retrospectively, Leo calls this process "self-enforced rigor mortis" (148), and with it he manages to postpone the crack that made his walls collapse. Leo believes that this break, which returned him to life, was inevitable, but like his own father, he could probably have remained half-dead until he perished for real. By presenting extreme self-preservation as a form of self-destruction, Hustvedt shows that even though mixing can be dangerous, it is also profoundly vital for our being.

Still, even long after Chardin's painting initiated his resurrection, Leo sits close to an asthmatic boy at Mark's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday party with the sole purpose of hearing him

breathe: "I listened to the hoarse, greedy life in him and let it torture me" (155). Without his son and wife, he is to a large extent incapable of happiness, so by pursuing misery and death he does at least get to curse his own existence without having to annihilate himself. The deliberateness in Leo's self-destructiveness is especially profound when he visits the workplace of a magazine associated with Giles, *Split-World*:

I knew that I could walk away, that I could choose not to know anything more about these overgrown children and their small, sad lives. I chose to press the buzzer, chose to yank open the door on the first floor of that old tenement building, and chose to walk down the hallway, and I well understood that I was moving in the direction of something ugly. I was also aware that the ugliness pulled me toward it. I wanted to see what it was, to get close to it and examine it. The tug was morbid, and by giving in to it, I felt that the loathsome thing I was looking for had already stained me. (281)

The repetition of "I" and "choose"/"chose" emphasizes Leo's autonomy, but the nebulous ugliness he expects to find, turns out to consist of a receptionist who tells him that it is the gallerist Larry Finder who owns the magazine and that everybody is out at the moment. Leo's impression of the "morbid tug" thus seems to be a mere projection from his own inner life, since the monster under his bed was not so mystical and terrifying after all. His continued attempts to save Mark could therefore be just as much a chase for this ominous "it", which frightens and fascinates him, and which in part comes from himself.

Except for Mark's feeble bite and "fuck you" (pp. 14, 16, this thesis), the violent part of that ominous entity or mechanism which Leo seeks, is only actuated by Giles and himself. In Leo's first violent encounter with Mark, he pushes him against a wall and threatens to beat him bloody, in order to get his credit card back (229). This brutality appears out of character, yet somewhat counterintuitively, the worldly cause, purpose and outcome of obtaining his credit card demystify his action, even though materialism is equally out of character for the intellectual narrator. After tracking down and finding Mark with Giles at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville, all practicality is replaced by unpremeditated cruelty, first verbally: "You're ugly and empty and cold. You're something your father would hate" (321), and then physically:

"You're hurting me," he moaned. I gripped him harder. I hadn't known I had it in me. I realized that I was panting for breath, but only because I heard myself gasp out the words, "I want to hurt you." I felt a lifting sensation inside my head, an intense pleasure of emptiness and freedom. I

remembered the phrase “blind with rage” and thought to myself, that’s wrong. I saw every nuance of pain in his face and each one made me feel drunk. (322)

Just like in his visit to *Split-World*, Leo's deliberateness is stressed by an extensive use of "I", which emphasizes a seemingly heightened awareness of what he is doing. Given what Zapf hyperbolically refers to as Leo's "extraordinary emotional intelligence" (Zapf 179), the explicit *want* to hurt the multi-diagnosed young man he is allegedly trying to save, is therefore hard to fathom. As with a lot of the rest of the subject-matter in *WIL*, the meaning of this is highly ambiguous. His "pleasure of emptiness and freedom" is derived from the act of hurting Mark just to cause him harm, and is thus an expression of the delight in destructiveness for its own sake. In terms of mixing, Leo is in a sense subconsciously absorbing the nihilism he suspects that Mark represents. Through this he temporarily gains "satisfaction in being freed from the burden of meaningfulness" (Eagleton 78) which otherwise weighs so heavily on him. On the other hand, Leo is punishing Mark for the way he misuses the life that was taken away from his own son, so in this sense he remains on the imaginary side of justice and meaningfulness. The endeavor, which by no means seems to hurt Mark, also seriously strains Leo's back, and shortly after, Giles smashes his head against a wall. His lapse into destructiveness therefore proves to be self-destructive, which again shows the futility of combatting destructiveness by being destructive yourself.

## **Destructiveness in Art and its Connection to Life**

Art involves an artist creating a product experienced by a recipient. From this follows three perspectives of looking at destructiveness in relation to art, namely the artist's motivation, the nature and properties of the art product, and the effect it will have on the recipient. These perspectives are independent entities that may vary to a great extent in their level of destructiveness, also within one art experience. Further, one can make distinctions regarding how destructiveness makes its marks in a given art product. Art can contain thematic or stylistic elements of destructiveness, or involve physical, psychological or metaphorical destruction to something or someone, including injury to the artist him or herself. As an example, in Tom Otterness' *Shot Dog Film* (1977), Otterness videotapes himself shooting a dog. This physical destruction is obviously

different from using thematic or stylistic destructiveness by painting a dog being shot, even in the hypothetical situation where the artist's motivation is to cause metaphorical or psychological destruction to certain dog owners. The piece is referred to in *WIL* in connection with Giles, whose fictional works also trigger the question of whether there are moral limits to what art can be or do, and still be considered art. I will repose that question later and first focus on the receiving end of the art experience.

As Hustvedt states in her author's note for *Living, Thinking, Looking*, "[a]n image is not a text" (2012a xiii). This will also hold true for references to real artworks by Goya and other non-fictitious artists in *WIL*, but concerning all those art pieces which do not exist outside the novel, it makes sense to specify that a text is not an image either. After Leo's descriptive account of Teddy Giles' first solo exhibition, he pronounces his verdict that "[t]he show repulsed me, but I also found it bad. In the name of fairness, I had to ask myself why. Goya's painting of Saturn eating his son was just as violent" (202). When reading this, a given reader will mentally produce, or possibly obtain by an online search, the visual image of the painting *Saturn Devouring his Son*, and thus the image in the mind of the reader, the author and the fictitious mind of Leo are all identical, or at least refer to the same object. In the case of Giles' show, however, the rendering depends on imagination because the show and its art pieces lack "identifiable extratextual referent[s]" (Zapf 189). As with all reading, a text is therefore also not *one* image, but as many images as there are readers. In the dual role of interpreter and co-creator of my personal visual renderings of *WIL*'s fictitious art, the awareness that readers of this thesis will also have created their own unique images will therefore sober up my reflections to deal with the text merely as text.

In the case of Leo, however, it is natural to discuss his destructiveness-related visual associations to the fictitious art he encounters because, unlike mine, they are actual texts in the novel. Inside one of Bill's *Doors*, Leo panics when he sees "[a] splintered image of a child [which] had been painted onto the underside of the plaster" (186). Afterwards he gathers that "[t]he boy had seemed to float in an oily, heavy liquid, his body in pieces. He would never emerge intact. I spoke breathlessly. "Matt. Drowning. I didn't understand it until now."" (187). In a similar way, Leo also gets hurt by Chardin's *Glass of Water and Coffee Pot* from 1760, which in itself is even less marked by sadness or destructiveness: "'The glass of water is very moving to me.'" I looked up and saw the

surprised faces of my students. "The water is a sign of . . ." I paused. "The water seems to be a sign of absence'" (147). Chardin's painting reminds Leo of the glass of water he used to place on Matt's nightstand. Even though he has seen countless real glasses of water since then, it is the painting that evokes Leo's very first tears after Matt's death. In a similar way, the splintered image of the child behind Bill's door makes him visualize how his son died. Therefore one can say that these two encounters are not permanently destructive for Leo, rather, they are predominantly destructive for his repressive defense mechanisms. It pains him, but it also does him good. Zapf explains this process in the following way:

It is because of its aesthetic defamiliarization and uncontrollable imaginative dynamics that art is successful in triggering cathartic effects that confront people with their deepest repressed problems and enable them to integrate these problems into their conscious selves. The aesthetic activation of the senses causes emotional turbulences which take Leo out of the paralysis of his trauma and help him regain his will to live. (Zapf 189)

Leo's lust and love for Violet is a different type of "repressed problem". "I didn't tell Erica that I liked to breathe in [Violet's] smell, and I didn't tell her that I tried to resist it at the same time. On some nights, I would remove the shirt and throw it into the hamper" (158). Leo's inner struggle between desire and repression is a growing problem until he confesses his love for her at the end of the novel. Through working on his book on Goya, however, he finds both comfort and a sense of outlet. "His demons helped to keep mine [the loss of Erica and his son] at a distance" (166), and at the same time "his savage paintings gave new license to my thoughts—permission to open doors that in my former life I had left closed" (166). Just like with Chardin's painting and Matt's death, Goya's sketches and Violet's piano lessons are seemingly unrelated, but it is partly because of that unrelatedness that the "aesthetic defamiliarization and uncontrollable imaginative dynamics" (Zapf 189) are facilitated. "The loose energy and his fierce rendering affected me like an aphrodisiac", but to Leo's frustration, the aphrodisiac effect of Goya's monsters works exclusively on Violet in her leading role in the violent piano lesson fantasy. Leo "released untold amounts of semen into that fantasy and inevitably felt let down afterward" (168). This suggests that, after climaxing, he returns from the mixed state of the fantasy to his more stable, righteous self.

The piano lesson fantasy illustrates that even when no one is harmed and the evocation comes from notable "High Art", catharsis is in itself not inevitably something positive. According to Freud's principle of catharsis, "performing an act of aggression discharges aggressive energy and temporarily reduces our impulse to aggress", but norms and values ensure that we more often "channel aggressive impulses into socially acceptable behaviors (such as sports) and discharge aggressive impulses *vicariously* by watching and identifying with other people who behave aggressively" (2007, Freud paraphrased by Passer & Smith 650). In this sense, sports are an acceptable channeling of physical aggression, while sexual and interpersonal aggressiveness is more easily discharged vicariously through some cultural medium. When we in this regard, rather less consciously, consider options such as books, television, sadomasochistic pornography and 18<sup>th</sup>-century paintings, the latter involves quite a few compensations, at least when choosing Goya. Apart from being a less acceptable form of channeling, watching explicit footage of violent sex reduces the spectator to the anonymous, passive role of a voyeur. If you, like Leo, on the other hand, prefer the sketch from *Los Caprichos* called "Flying Witch", you will participate in setting both the sensory and the semantic scene of your own adaption of the work.

"...when I looked again at the drawing of a young, naked woman riding a goat on a witches' Sabbath, I felt that she was all speed and hunger, that her crazed ride, born of Goya's sure, swift hand, was ink bruising paper. His beast runs, but his rider is out of control. Her head has fallen back. Her hair streams out behind her and her legs may not cling much longer to the animal's body. I touched the woman's shaded thigh and pale knee, and the gesture sent me to Paris" (167).



Fig. 2. Francisco Goya, unused sketch for *Caprichos*, "Flying Witch" 1797



There are no errors in Leo's description of "Flying Witch" (not to be mistaken for Goya's "Witches Flight"), but at the same time it depicts Violet and her role in *WIL* perfectly. The drawing was not used for *Coprachinos* and is still an unknown piece, and the combination of being obscure and suitable makes it seem handpicked, and therefore important. The goat is a known symbol for the devil, and Violet is in a way being carried away by the evils she is researching. At the end of the novel she "is still looking for the sickness that moves in the air, the *Zeitgeist* that mumbles to its victims: scream, starve, eat, kill" (365-66). In the equivocal role of riding and being carried she is also carnally carried away, which is reflected by her general fascination with delinquency, and specifically by her strong attraction to the Parisian extortionist, Jules. This dual role reflects Eagleton's claim that "the good accept evil by embracing it in their love and mercy. In taking it upon themselves, however, they are drawn inexorably into its orbit" (56). Incidentally, this can also be said about Teenie, Mark's two year girlfriend, and Iris in *TB*.

The description of "ink bruising paper" along with Leo touching the drawn "woman's shaded thigh and pale knee" (167) clearly refers to how he, already at the chronological and discursive beginning of the novel, was aroused by the bruise below Violet's knee in Bill's painting. "It's an ordinary little black-and-blue mark, but the way it's painted makes it stick out. It's like he loved doing it, like he wanted to make a little wound that would last forever" (6). The fact that the eroticism derived from this wound is created by Bill, implies that even he has some role in Leo's mixing-fantasy of Goya, Violet, Jules, the piano teacher and himself. The sheer number of intersubjective connections involved is likely to have contributed to how Leo completely loses himself in this fantasy. In his description of the variations of the fantasy he repeats "one of us would...", which indicates that in the intersubjective frenzy of the fantasy, identities were intermingled and therefore it did not matter who did what. In a similar vein, Marks notes how "[t]he 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 to an amplified and eroticized perception of self as mixed with the other" (Marks 102).

While the spectator's cathartic processes through art consumption are hidden from his or her surroundings, an artist's psychological processes leave traces on the exhibited

artwork. The drive to produce a given art product has both intrinsic and extrinsic origins. In addition to the intrinsic joy of creating something, we have the artist's "repressed wishes and conflicts" which are sublimated through the socially acceptable behavior of art production (Passer & Smith 444-45). Similarly, Bill's painting, *Self-Portrait, by Bill Wechsler*, is comprised of Violet, his own shadow, and Lucille's foot and ankle leaving the painting. At that time he was still married to Lucille, and his repressed feelings are revealed through how "the warmth of the powerful colors Bill uses for Violet's hair contrasts with the shades of black and white and the aggressive force with which Lucille's shoes are painted" (Zapf 191-92). Just like Goya's savage paintings gave Leo permission to open doors, Bill opened closed doors in himself through his own artworks and communicated his inner turmoil to the world through symbolic encryption.

The extrinsic motives for creating art can be divided between what you want to gain for yourself in terms of money and recognition, and those things you want your artwork to say about some aspect of the world. As an example of this division in terms of destructive art, Tom Otterness' *Shot Dog Film* was extrinsically motivated both by previous failings to get noticed, and his wish to give emphasis to "the subjectiveness of an animal's death" (Owen 2012). The aftermath, consisting of an outraged general public and a blasé art world, is represented in the novel. During a dinner with Leo, Violet and a few other art enthusiasts, the naïve innocence of a young actress named Lola drives the conversation:

You remember when Tom Otterness shot that dog?"

"Puppy," Violet said.

Lola's face fell. "He shot a little puppy?"

"It's all on tape," Fred explained. "The little guy's bouncing all over the place and then bang." He paused. "But I guess it had cancer."

"You mean it was sick and going to die?"

Nobody answered Lola.

"Chris Burden had himself shot in the arm," Jillian volunteered.

"The shoulder," Bernie corrected. "It was his shoulder."

"Arm, shoulder." Jillian smiled. "Same area. Schwarzkogler, now there's radical art."

"What did he do?" Lola asked.

"Well, for one thing," I said to her, "he sliced his penis lengthwise and had the whole thing photographed. Pretty gruesome and bloody."

"Wasn't there another guy who did the same thing?" Violet said.

"Bob Flanagan," Bernie said. "But it was nails. He hammered nails into it."

Lola's mouth dropped open. "That's sick," she said. "I mean mentally sick. I don't think that's art. That's just sick."

I turned to look at Lola's face, with its perfectly plucked eyebrows, little nose, and gleaming mouth. "If I picked you up and put you in a gallery, you'd be art," I said to her. "Better art than a lot I've seen. Prescriptive definitions don't apply anymore."

Lola moved her shoulders. "You're saying that anything's art if people say it is? Even me?"

"Exactly. It's perspective—not content." (199-200)

The nonchalant mentions of mutilation combined with quibbling over trivial details, makes the conversation mock shock art and its predictable receptional process in its entirety. While the general public is portrayed as a thin-skinned, moralizing flock of sheep, the connoisseurs' aloof negation of natural response inevitably makes them form their own flock of blacker sheep. On a related note, Eagleton sardonically states that "[o]nce the middle classes get their hands on virtue, even vice begins to look appealing" (120). This polarization is not a general condition, at least not for Violet and Leo since their attitudes are usually involved and sympathetic. Consequently, it is suggested that the conversationalists are conforming to a norm of detachment which is easily adopted after being overexposed to art which is supposed to shock and offend you. Whichever way you see it, it becomes apparent that collective response to a grouping of artworks, based on one distinguishing feature, reduces the individual artworks to mere variations on the monotonous theme of that given feature. In this way, the value of the personal experience is emphasized. In the case of Teddy Giles, whose art seems to be all about the spectacle, the dinner conversation foreshadows two traits of the future development of his art: First, that the level of violence has to increase in terms of extremity and realness in order to get attention, and secondly that nothing is too "sick" to be art. This is also in accordance with Dickie's institutional concept of art which says that something is art simply because an art world say so (Adajian 2012).

The "flayed, skewered and dismembered" cats, dressed in baby clothes signed "S.M." and displayed all over New York (209), trumps Otterness' *Shot Dog Film* when it comes to both extremity and realness. What makes the film arguably less "real" is that when you watch something on a screen which is proposed as art, there is still a sense of aesthetic distance involved. With a tangible cat found far from a gallery, however, and which lacks an artist to take formal credit or blame for its death, there is little distance

left. In the same way, body art, like that of Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) where he receives a gunshot to the arm, "was regarded as an art of presence—positively as an avant-gardist reuniting of art and life, negatively as a nihilistic obliterating of aesthetic distance" (Foster 568). Naturally, Leo, Bill and Violet are more concerned with Mark's likely partaking in nihilistic obliterating of cats than aesthetic distance, but art which not only gets too close, but which destructively reaches into life, remains a recurring theme in the book.

Zapf claims that "for Giles, the distinction between art and reality has completely disappeared, which in its radical consequence is the very reason for the dramatic loss of ethical orientation" (185). My concern regarding this causal inference is that it seems implausible that Giles' sense of distinction between art and life first inexplicably gets lost, and that this further leads to his moral compass breaking down. Rather, neither the reader nor *WIL*'s art world audience seems to be supposed to know what goes on behind the shifting masks of Teddy Giles. There is at least no more evidence to suggest Zapf's causal inference than evidence which suggest that Giles fully appreciates the distinction between art and life, but chooses to ignore it in order to fulfill his sadistic desires. As *WIL* seems to embrace ambiguity regarding most of its contents, it seems plausible to ascribe some truth-value to both of these suppositions. Giles once says the following to Leo: "I use violent material because it's ubiquitous. I'm not my work. As an art historian, you should be able to make that distinction" (287). Looking at Giles' art as one totality, his personas are certainly a consequential part of that totality. According to what Giles says, this entail that the personas are mere constructs and his true self is their distinct creator. Who killed Me, given that it was his persona, "the She-Monster", who "committed the ultimate work of art" (338)? One way of looking at it is that, like Dr. Jekyll's Mr. Hyde, the She-Monster becomes Giles' vehicle and hired assassin who performs something unfulfilled in its maker.

If killing one dog, or a number of cats, is seen as art testing its own ethical confinement, then first-degree-murder is the ultimate test. There is no mention of any reactions from the art world after Giles' conviction of 15 years for aggravated manslaughter (348), but the reception after his imprisonment gives some clues to *WIL*'s art world's sense of the ethical confinement of art:

Because Giles had become a sort of minor celebrity, embraced by critics and collectors, his new designation as possible felon was both embarrassing and intriguing to the world he had left so abruptly. During the first month after his arrest, art magazines, newspapers, and even the television news picked up the story of the "art murder." Larry Finder issued a statement in which he said that in America a person is innocent until proven guilty, but that if Giles was found guilty of the crime, he would vociferously condemn the act and would no longer represent him. In the meantime, however, prices for the work went up, and Finder did a brisk business selling Teddy Giles. Buyers wanted the work because it now seemed that it mimicked reality. (343-44)

Earlier, Giles, presumably posing as one of his personas, claims that "art [is] no more and no less than entertainment—and that entertainment value [is] measured in dollars" (241). Given this premise, the art world is ever more entertained by actual murder, and the complete obliteration of art's ethical limits transpires as the obliteration itself is sold to the highest bidder. In theory, one could further argue as follows: (1) Giles is not his art, but (2) the murder and the claim that art is entertainment measured in dollars are parts of the totality of his art, and (3) therefore the art world fulfils his art of social criticism by taking the bait. True or not, one of his functions in the novel is that of social criticism, and regardless of his intentions he sacrifices his morality for art. In his own sense he thus adheres to Eagleton's notion that "if the artist seeks to redeem a corrupt world by the transfigurative power of his art, then he or she must be on intimate terms with evil" (59). Relatedly, Zapf's characterization of Giles' artistry as "complete dissolution in spectacle, entertainment and commercial interests" is quite to the point, but he forgets to mention its self-referential qualities. With it, the fictional critic Henry Hasseborg, whom Leo incessantly discredits, is at least right when he says that Giles truly "exposes the celebration of violence in American culture" (199).

Returning to Giles as a "sinister action artist and Mephistophelian rival of Wechsler" (Zapf 185), his criminal conviction and subsequent popularity boost suggest that crime can be art, but it is still a crime. Hence, art can be unethical or illegal, but it is still art. The epitome of an artwork, which by no means is illegal but is still portrayed as unethical, is the artwork referred to as the "art rape" (300): "A figure of a murdered woman, missing one arm and a leg, had been pushed through Bill's painting of his son" and "[w]hat excited everyone—outraging some and pleasing others—was that here was an act of genuine violence. It wasn't simulated but real" (299). Giles had bought the painting and since one is allowed to destroy one's own property, he was free to use or

abuse it as he pleased. By destroying it, however, he broke a taboo which few had thought about. The effect of art destroying art being seen as a "real" and offensive "act of genuine violence" seems to subvert the distinguishing features between life and art altogether.

During the confrontation between Leo and Mark at the Opryland Hotel, the art rape and its subverting effects on reality and art reemerge:

"That man destroyed one of your father's paintings. Doesn't that bother you? A portrait of you, Mark."

"It wasn't me," he said in a sulky voice. His eyes had gone blank.

"Yes, it was," I said. "What are you talking about?"

"It didn't look like me," he said. "It was ugly."

(...) "That painting was better than you are, Mark. It was more real, more alive, more powerful than you have ever been or will ever be." (320-21)

Regarding this excerpt, it is tempting to alter my earlier quoting of Zapf by replacing Giles' name with the narrator's: "for [Leo], the distinction between art and reality has completely disappeared, which in its radical consequence is the very reason for the dramatic loss of ethical orientation" (Zapf 185). Leo's strong love for art, Bill's art and Bill himself, may contribute to the subversion, especially since there are so few components of reality left which he cares about. Bill and Matt are dead, Erica is gone and even Violet might be said to play a more important part in Leo's imaginative world of art than in his physical reality. Leo's anger nevertheless suggests that the mutilated painting is, if not necessarily better, then at least more powerful than Bill's original. This contrasts with how he viewed Giles' earlier work as simply "bad" (202) art that he could not connect with. One could label the murder of his painting as a sacrilegious demonstration of disrespect for Bill's memory, but at the same time the new art piece is also a work in Bill's spirit. I would claim it is Giles' most 'Wechslerian' piece, so to speak, because, like Bill's work, its incorporation of reality and artistry is both actual and symbolic.

Zapf notes how in Bill's art "there are always recognizable references to life and the world, although they are defamiliarized in dream-like, surreal and nightmarish ways" (190). In his five-piece narrative installation *The Changeling*, Bill depicts a boy being abducted by a woman and replaced by a smiling replica of the original boy. For the

reader, the allegorical depiction of Mark's story seems almost too obvious, but when Leo points out that the woman's loafer is identical to Lucille's loafer in his painting of Violet Bill reacts in the following way:

Bill looked confused. "That's right," he said slowly. "I used Lucille's shoe for that picture. I'd forgotten."

"I thought it might have been intentional."

"No." Bill turned away from the box and picked up a screwdriver that was lying on his worktable. He turned it over in his hands. (116)

The inadvertent, almost aggressive, act of picking up the screwdriver immediately after the mentioning of Lucille, indicates that his reproach and anger towards Lucille are tightly repressed. His concern for, and sense of estrangement towards, Mark seem repressed in the same manner, and through the sublimation of these repressed feelings into art (Passer & Smith 445), we witness destructive drives utilized in a productive manner in order to aestheticize their own destructiveness. That the symbolic encryption seems undecipherable from the perspective of the artist's conscious self, points to the deep extent of Bill's denial.





## Chapter II: *The Blindfold*

*"I'm not talking about morality, Iris.  
I'm trying to be honest with you. I tell  
you sometimes it's cruelty that makes  
me feel more alive."*

(Hustvedt 81)

### **Destructiveness in Psychology and Life**

*WIL* is framed as a self-referential autobiographical novel, and the implied author of this frame is an art historian who carefully "determines the selection, evaluation and presentation of events" (Zapf 177-78). These events, taken place over a time span of 25 years, involve two families, a number of other characters, and numerous historical and theoretical anecdotes. *TB*, on the other hand, has a chronologically confusing narrative. The plot takes place over three years, and all events relate directly to the narrator. Additionally, it is about half in size, but in the span of the narrative Iris reveals arguably more of her emotions than Leo does. This may, in part, originate in how Leo is portrayed as "undermixing" with his surroundings, i.e. he upholds strong boundaries around his core self, and has an overall preference for art over people. Conversely, Iris' personal, revealing narration may relate to "overmixing", which is marked by her "destabilization of any sense of personal identity" (Jameson 422). In the forthcoming discussions I will show how this destabilization is partly imposed on her by others, and partly something she seeks or allows to happen. Her conscious and unconscious tactics for regaining her lost self is also highly self-destructive as she overcompensates against the destabilizing process by isolating herself and adopting the tough and mischievous alter ego, "Klaus". Apart from that, evil and destructive urges are more pronounced notions in *TB* than in *WIL*, and will be treated accordingly in coming discussions.

*TB* introduces a category of self-destructiveness, again not found in *WIL*, which takes the form of deliberate counterproductiveness in terms of everyday survival. Iris is poor, but she "scrimp[s] on food for cigarettes (30), conceals the severity of her headaches from her doctor, and once "ran home and threw four new glasses against the wall. Twelve dollars plus tax into the garbage" (65). The latter was admittedly done in a fit of jealousy, but then again, all her deliberate, counterproductive actions have their own psychological trigger mechanisms, which in themselves fail to remove the significance of impracticality having its own reward. As an example, after buying a comb, Iris acknowledges that "[t]he purchase was a folly, and I berated myself. It wasn't the comb I wanted, it was the exchange, the act of parting with money" (155). Just like drinking alcoholic beverages in order to cope with being an alcoholic, Iris wastes money in order to cope with being poor. With their quantifiable qualities, Iris' money supply, and corresponding body weight, become a joint barometer that measure her physiological and psychological well-being.

On a related note, Marks' notion of an "anorexic struggle" in Iris (152) is somewhat problematic. She admittedly obsesses over food, but guiltlessly gorges on any that comes her way, and dislikes the looks of her own "skeletal person" (176). "When a mouse has broken into a package of macaroni, leaving his tiny turds all over [her] dinner" (148), she even rinses off the excrements and eats her meal, though she cries from start to finish. That being said, I approve Marks' linking of the weight loss with the "denial of [Iris'] femininity" (Marks 152). Masculinity physically manifests itself in the form of Iris' retreating curves and protruding bones. Still, this is more of an ultimate product of her counterproductiveness, independent of its motives. Through the gaps of the more immediate motives like jealousy, embarrassment and need for cigarettes, one can glimpse Thanatos lurking behind the mesh. Because the death instinct is easier to make out when it is "defused from the life instinct" (Weatherill 14), we see this motivation more clearly when Iris secludes herself from Eros, i.e. from life and people, and especially from the men in her life: "My world shrank, became a cocoon. This isolation was a kind of punctuation, a way of announcing an ending to myself, and it wasn't without its pleasures" (83).

Like Hamsun's protagonist in *Hunger* and Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, Iris' poverty is not intellectual, but economic and relational. She is certainly not without

friends or lovers, but she lacks safe, loving relationships, with the one exception of her friend and fellow student, Ruth Slubovsky:

Ruth was the heroine of her own life story, and when we were together, she made me the heroine of mine. She gave daily hardships the stature of romance or drama. Once when a mutual friend asked about my apartment, and I reported it was small and dark, Ruth laughed and said, "David, it's a rat-infested hovel, a student garret, just awful, but wonderful." (148)

After Ruth falls in love and Iris withdraws from her, Iris' romantic perspective on her own life fades away, the reason conceivably being that it was difficult to conjure without Ruth. She thus lost the incentive to keep up with the imagined demands of her significant other's positive impression, and was in that sense freer to let her apartment, looks and life take a turn for the worse.

In terms of a "healthy balance between autonomy and mixing" (Marks 175), it seems like Iris was ever so slightly submissive to Ruth's style and demeanor. Since Ruth was a New Yorker and Iris had recently moved in from the Midwest, she naturally also lets the local girl take charge; "She led, I followed" (123). Yet, this notion is only hinted at. Ruth is there from the chronological start of the story, but in the narrative she first appears on page 122 and is rarely seen again after page 148. In any case, the idea is that Iris might have been overmixing with Ruth as well, but since their relationship is safe and open, it primarily seems fruitful for her to adapt to some of Ruth's needs and wishes. Because of their mutual confidings, these wants and wishes, though imagined by Iris, are also probably not far from the truth.

Iris has many suitors whom she, somewhat emasculatively, refers to as "boys" (145-46). These visibly expectant young men fail to gain or maintain her interest, and a part of their shared disenchantment seems to be the lack of threat and mysteriousness. According to Jameson, "[t]hat Iris is drawn to danger and steps into hazardous situations suggests a simultaneous wish for control by testing boundaries, and a masochistic tendency to put herself in harm's way" (424). In her social, sexual and professional affairs with Mr. Morning, Stephen, George, Professor Rose and Paris, the conditions for external and internal testing of boundaries, are met with all of them.

When it comes to attraction, two related statements are particularly relevant to destructiveness. Paris says that "all attractions (...) come from an emptiness inside" (127)

and Iris wonders whether "evil [is] an emptiness, a lack of something, not a presence" (193). In response to the latter statement, Rose, without knowing it, repeats Paris' perspective: "That's what desire is, isn't it? The lack of something" (ibid.). The interconnectedness of attraction, emptiness and evil is supported by Eagleton who finds that "evil (...) is about leeching life from others in order to fill an aching absence in oneself" (71). Similarly, the men who fascinate her feed on her identity, but conceal their true selves and their own emptiness from her. In this way they preserve her desire and interest in them, leaving her "in a state of constant longing" (41). Paris invokes and exposes Iris' weaknesses, and George disrupts her sense of self by taking ownership of its "transparency" (56) by perpetuating it in his photograph. For her part, Iris feels "robbed" (78) by George, and when Paris parodies Iris' retelling of her difficulties, she calls him a monster (218). Marks notes how both Paris and George present Iris with a "manipulative and distorting" mirror image (Marks 76) which alienates Iris from herself (Ibid. 83).

Iris does retaliate, however, and it is only after she holds up a distorting mirror to George by referring to him as "the cameraman ghost (...) a man without a body, a man with subjects but no friends" (87), that he confesses his love for her. Cruelty, which manages to penetrate secrecy, is therefore rewarded with honesty, the reason seemingly being that its recipients are both weakened and filled with a need to rectify the half-true representations which are given of themselves. Paris escapes giving his weaknesses and true self away by barricading himself behind his pseudonym, and he easily deflects a cruel remark from Iris by saying "[y]ou're a pistol (...) I like that" (153).

Teddy Giles and Mr. Morning hide behind evershifting personas and pseudonyms, while Paris only has one seamless mask which he physically reinforces with makeup. Each strategy succeeds in protecting their core selves from misrepresentation because it is senseless to distort the unknown. All socializing therefore becomes winning battles, but the victories deprive them of any genuine interaction with other people, and "the masks and performances hide and ultimately endanger the characters' authentic selves" (Marks 77). It must be added, however, that as they are running their own shows behind tinted windows, we do not really know anything about their subjective realities. This means that we can condemn Giles, Mark and Paris as destructive agents on a moral basis, but we cannot conclude anything with any certainty about their subjective realities.

Mr. Morning is, in lack of a precise, formal way of expressing it, merely 'doing his own thing', and there does not seem to be any malice in him. Whether or not his project of resurrection is sincere or just a part of some fetish, is beyond the reader's ability to ascertain. Even his shells are unfathomable, so it makes little sense to discuss him as a subject in the context of this thesis. His philosophy concerning pseudonyms are, however, relevant for the topic of mask wearing in general:

[Iris:] "You enjoy hiding behind masks?"

"I revel in it. It gives my life a certain color and danger."

"Isn't danger overstating it a bit?"

"I don't think so. Nothing is beyond me as long as I adopt the correct name for each project. It isn't arbitrary. It requires a gift, a genius, if I may say so myself, for hitting on the alias that will unleash the right man or woman for the job. (...) But there are risks, too. Even the most careful planning can go awry. It's impossible to know for sure who's concealed under the pseudonym I choose." (12)

Pseudonyms, personas, alter-egos and cinematic self-presentations, are denotations which it is inadvisable to use interchangeably, but all involve putting on masks. There are three entities involved in the presentation of the self, namely (1) the presentation, (2) the internal consciousness which directs the presentation and (3) that consciousness' self-conception (Passer & Smith 451-52). What mask wearers have in common, is the discrepancy between self-concept and presentation, yet, for Mr. Morning, there is also an unpredictable power in the masks themselves. If the pretended presentation is powerful enough, and held up long enough, it may change the consciousness of the person who thought it up, and subsequently the conception of his or her true self. Stephen, who views his life as a film where he strips the leading man of the unenlightened vulgarity he was raised among, discloses that "[i]t's a matter of appearances, but surfaces are underestimated. The veneer becomes the thing. I rarely distinguish the man in the movie from the spectator anymore" (81). Similarly, Klaus gradually changes both the outer and the inner life of Iris.

When she greets Mr. Morning for the first time, Iris Vegan presents herself as Iris Davidsen, and explains the lie as a protective act against "some amorphous danger" (11). The lie ends up haunting her, and she imagines this to be "the beginning of the story, as a kind of door to [her] uneasiness" (ibid.). The fact that Mr. Morning enters the novel at the start of the novel, but in the middle of the chronological sequence of events, suggests that

this reference indicates a *thematic* starting point of the destructive, cyclical process where she rejects and reclaims her own identity. In Iris' first phase of roaming the city as a man, her transformation was arguably at its most decisive when she first introduced herself as Klaus. Jameson highlights the naming of her new identity as the beginning of losing "control over it and her life" (430). The barkeeper, whom she befriends and who asks her for her name, is called Mort. This name could imply that it is not until Death himself asks her who she is that she more officially converts to the cause of destructiveness. Foreshadowing Mr. Morning's words, her conversion is attributed to the name "Klaus", which unleashes "the right man or woman for the job" (12). Moreover, it could well be a factor that it is easier to be cruel or self-destructive on behalf of the opposite sex, the reason being that Iris demonizes something she, with biological certainty, knows she will never become. The fact that she and Ruth dressed up as men for Halloween, is also a way of demonizing men. Comparably, Giles uses the She-Monster for his most horrific acts, and thus demonizes women from the male point of view.

In the fictional novella Iris and Rose co-translate, *Der Brutale Junge*, Klaus is a happy, innocent boy whose brutal daydreams and urges appear seemingly out of nowhere. His attempts to ward them off repeatedly fail, and establish a pattern of recurring guilt and shame from succumbing to his desires. Still, his satisfaction does not seem to arise despite of his guilt and shame, but because of it. As his self-reproach wanes, he has to turn to increasingly more sinful acts in order to procure the same shameful response in himself. Similarly, as Iris' Klaus gradually takes over her being, her satisfaction wanes with the waning presence of her original, more virtuous self; "[t]he joy I had felt in the beginning was over. The bars, the streets were a necessity now, a ritual that had to be performed" (170). She does, however, manage to fend off the urge to kick a homeless man, but later fails to stop herself from trying to take the gun from a policeman who sits next to her at a bar. Like the other destructive urges, it has no apparent motive. All she wants is to "simply take it" (174), so the underlying motives seem to be danger and prohibition alone. She is caught, but manages to escape and the incident functions as a reality check. She recognizes the real "threat of self-annihilation" (Jameson 434), and thus it was the Klausian side of her that provoked its own imprisonment for the next year and a half.

Her experiences with Stephen, George and Mr. Morning are, as mentioned, also corrupting as far as the autonomy and stability of her core self goes. She increasingly suffers from migraines and is ultimately hospitalized. This can be seen as a reaction against this corrupting process, or specifically, an escape through bodily shutdown as an unconscious defense mechanism against the repeated invasions of her true self. Iris relates to this self-rescue in the following way: "It was clear to me that I had made the headache, created the monster myself, and just because I couldn't get rid of the damned thing didn't mean I wasn't to blame" (91). Dr. Fish further alienates Iris from herself by drugging her down and responding to her retellings of feelings of completeness and fright of a black devouring hole with short summaries like "[t]he patient suffered a scintillating and a negative scotoma" (92), thus editing her personal experiences into something she did not understand. Eventually she checks herself out of the hospital, and when presented with the bill that she cannot pay, she eats it, but acknowledges that "[i]t was Klaus who ate the bill" and that she needs him again (181).

Iris relapses into the nocturnal life of Klaus but is eventually rescued by Professor Rose after their chance encounter. Like Chardin's painting helped rescue Leo from his self-imposed rigor mortis, Iris is finally able to cry and grieve for the loss of the girl she was the last time she saw Rose. Her release did not come directly from an art product, but from being told to "stop doing it" (185), meaning Klaus, by the authoritative introducer and cotranslator of the novella where Klaus came from. According to Iris, her alter ego was a result of working with the novella, which is referred to as a "Pandora's box" (143, 189) they had opened together. This is why Iris is upset, and not glad, when Rose announces that the translation of the novella will be published with only her name on it.

Iris' disappointment over how Rose discredits himself from the translation sets off an argument concerning responsibility of the destructive effects of working with the novella. Iris stresses the personal pronouns "us" and "we", and the possessive "our", while Rose insists on ascribing full responsibility to Iris by saying "you" and "your". Hence, he denies that any mixing had been going on. Iris, on the other hand, "feel that it's between us—no, of us" (190). This "it", being the content of that Pandora's box, suggests that without possessing that terminology, she thinks that their destructive mixing has become a part of both of them.

Rose's attitude changes, however, but only after the pivotal moment when Iris states that "'...that thing between us, I think it's evil.'" "Evil?" His eyes clouded, and he pressed his lips together until they turned white" (190-91). This kind of lapse from his normally calm way of expressing himself is repeatedly seen in connection with Klaus and evil: "'Is Klaus evil?" he says quickly, his eyes narrowed" (191), and earlier; "'[d]o you like Klaus?" he said to me, leaning forward over his desk (...) His expression was wry, almost smug", and Iris was "drawn by what he seemed to know but wouldn't say" (139). Rose thus seems to be turned on, at least aesthetically or intellectually or both, by references to evil. Iris appears to have a more ambivalent attitude towards it, which might explain why she does not know whether she likes Klaus or not (140).

During their affair, Rose increasingly preoccupies their time together with the concept of evil, which he intellectualizes by lecturing about it to Iris and discussing its role in literature, history and in themselves. He later reveals that he thinks about the "lost boy" he constantly pictures her dressed up as Klaus in the bar: "I've seen you, really seen you, and what I've seen isn't simple or small. It's complex, ambivalent, mysterious, and it's driven me crazy" (207). In this way, Klaus' presence is not eradicated, but transmitted to Rose. At the same time it exists as something between them. Klaus, in the form of an obsession over evil's true nature, comes from the author Johan Krüger's, Iris' and Rose's intersubjective co-creation. As with Goya, Leo and Violet, the fact that Krüger died in a Nazi concentration camp, does not remove him from the overlapping space between them, but rather adds another subtext concerning evil to the mixing. After they break up, Iris thinks of Rose incessantly, but whenever she thinks of him she also thinks of Klaus. In this way, the amorphous "third presence" (198) is an inextricable part of how they picture one another.

In the middle of their last sexual intercourse, which during its course has turned into a rape, Iris' mind drifts off:

"I remembered our conversations. Unspeakable acts, seizures of cruelty, Klaus. (...) "Witch," he growled, and the name made me cry. He slapped me across the mouth (...) He doesn't know, I thought, he's still inside it". (204)

What the undefined "it", which Iris believes Rose is still shut inside of, refers to, is unclear, and Iris previously wonders whether *Rose's* use of "it" means *The Brutal Boy*,



"evil or an amorphous presence" (199). This suggests that the words at their disposal are inadequate when it comes to finding the heart of "the human impulse to maim and destroy" (198). As "evil" is absent from *WIL*'s register, the ominous "it" which Leo feels is morbidly tugging at him and which he later pursues, takes an even vaguer form, but still seems to correspond with the "its" in *TB*. In both cases it seems like being overly fascinated with the *nature* of evil is not too far from being consumed by evil itself. The former can lead the consumed individual into being seduced by his subject of interest, and subsequently pursue destructiveness in order to personally experience the heart of the mystery of evil's nature.

## **Destructiveness in Art and its Effect on the Characters and the Reader**

While nearly all the characters in *WIL* seem to be connoisseurs of sorts, *TB* provides a slightly more scattered distribution when it comes to characters' level of acquaintance with art, but there is a lot of connoisseurship in *TB* as well. Professor Rose and Paris are authorities in literature and visual art, respectively, while given the right pseudonym, Mr. Morning seems able to excel in any academic field. George is an up-and-coming artist, while Stephen reads a lot of philosophy and writes art reviews after he and Iris split up. As a young student from the Midwest, Iris is neither a true expert on literature nor in visual art, yet Rose calls her "one of my best students" (185). At a dinner party she describes Giorgione's *The Tempest* from memory (150-51). Despite her cleverness and eager studying, she is dwarfed by the men's expertise, something that becomes a factor in her uphill power struggles with them.

As described in the discussion of how connoisseurs and laypeople are expected to respond to offensive art (pp. 25-26, this thesis), the connoisseur will refuse to be offended because the layperson surely will be. Again, these are tendencies as they appear to be portrayed in the novels, and in this sense, snobbishness is certainly a part of moral inversion. Iris belongs to the segment who find themselves between these camps. Members of this segment are given the choice between submitting to the primary definers' opinions on art, or regressing to comply with the shock artists' herding of public

opinion. The third alternative is private or upfront refusal of the expert's power to define what is what. In order to do so, however, one needs to convince oneself that one knows better than the experts, and preferably argue one's case against them. Iris finds herself in this situation when she, together with George and Stephen, witnesses a woman's gramma seizure from a roof terrace:

Then I heard it—a scream, a loud bestial whine that went through me like electricity. For an instant I thought George had fallen, but I saw him rush toward me and snatch up his camera. Stephen leapt from his chair and raced to where George had been standing. I followed him and looked down into the street where a small crowd had gathered around a young woman who was collapsed on the sidewalk. A stream of blood ran onto the cement near her head, and I watched her arm fly upward, as if someone were trying to wrench it from her. Her whole body convulsed. The skirt of her dress was twisted around her hips, exposing her thighs and the white rim of her underpants. (47-48)

This excerpt is the first quarter of the descriptive account of the seizure. Hustvedt paints an elaborate picture, describing different elements in the scene as it evolves. The bird's eye view from the fourth-story rooftop terrace functions as a fixed perspective for the reader to share with Iris and George's camera lens. The characters are as powerless as the reader when it comes to helping the woman, but they do have a choice between looking and looking away, and of taking photos. It is Iris who narrates the event, and her fascination with its aesthetic qualities seems apparent in her colorful retelling, but before the end she backs away from the edge of the roof and looks at George and Stephen. "Their faces, really very different, resembled each other at that moment, their lips parted, their eyes narrowed in concentration" (49). The men thus seem to be in awe, but out of respect for the aesthetically sublime scene, and not for the woman. For them, aesthetics trump ethical considerations, at least granted that it was nothing they could do to help.

The question is whether there are any destructive implications of having a Roman holiday at the expense of a sole gladiator ripping herself apart. The causal agents here are Hustvedt and the woman's biological baggage, and taking pleasure in it is in fact rather involuntary. Additionally, to take pleasure (as well as pain) in other people's pain is "in Hume's view merely a fact of life, not some diabolical perversity" (Eagleton 128-29). It seems highly plausible that the same applies to taking pleasure in the harming of other people. Hence, if there are destructive implications involved, it is the willed yet purposeless *looking* at someone who is vulnerable and unaware which causes harm to the

*dignity* of that someone, and arguably the dignity of the beholder too. Dignity is clearly not at the center of this thesis, but then again, it is a significant aspect of both the making and the beholding of many artworks which contain destructive elements. Examples are advocates of extreme art like Nitsch, Schwarzkogler and Gina Pane who all tested art's ethical and ritualistic limits (Foster 568). *WIL*'s reference to Schwarzkogler slicing his penis lengthwise (*WIL* 199 and pp. 25-26 in this thesis) is incidentally a myth. The historical audience was however duped into believing and being confronted with the artist's assumed death from penis amputation, even though he actually died in an accident (Jarosi 2013). This strongly tested their voyeuristic self-awareness as they were made benefactors of such an undignified "death", and both parties' dignities were thus factors in this artwork.

Photographing takes the act of looking further, but involves manipulation and design too. When George's camera malfunctions, and he and Stephen subsequently fear that he might not have gotten any pictures, Iris says "[m]aybe it's for the best" (...) it would be terrible for her if she knew, and it seems so invasive, recording a person's suffering" (49). The "and" here indicates that her moral judgment does not depend solely on the woman being affected or not. Still, there is a sense of naivety in her statement because regardless of its truth value, an intellectually and culturally deprived individual might have said the exact same thing. George wonders whether she thinks there are subjects that should not be photographed, clearly having the opinion that such subjects do not exist, and Stephen disdainfully accuses her of believing in censorship. In her retort she claims that she does not believe in external censorship, but internal judgment from the photographer, given that "photographing an epileptic fit entails some kind of responsibility" (50). She then starts to cry. As she is consequently ashamed of her emotion, the argument ends with George saying "[d]ont take it so hard" (ibid.). In this way, the agreement between emotion and opinion, which could have reinforced the validity of a statement with emotional truth, instead strips it of its credibility.

The evolving scene George photographs has details like "the head jolt backward and slam the cement again", "then I saw her urinate", and "her face (...) was swollen, red and smeared with blood" (48). Because the argument about photographing the scene is left unresolved, readers are prompted to make up their own minds about it, and are thus forced to add their aesthetic appreciation to the equation. Ethics oppose aesthetics, but

even though artistic freedom of expression and the intrinsic value of documentation belong more to the realm of ethics, they go against Iris' arguments. Conversely, "doing the right thing" has certain aesthetic qualities, but supports Iris' case. These conflicting factors collectively contribute to concealing the essence of the situation, which is that the sound of a skull slamming against concrete makes a powerful impression on us. As recipients of a documentation of this event, especially if it had been real, the ethical implication of being made solicitors in a voyeuristic infringement only makes the impression more powerful. If your goal as an artist or author is to elucidate this predicament, you have the option of getting your hands dirty by aestheticizing destructiveness in all its glory, but there is always the risk of not getting your point across. Relatedly, Hustvedt praises Goya's ability to elicit "titillating, horrifying and shaming effect[s] on the viewer" (2012a, 326).

The pitfall of problematizing the aestheticization of destructiveness without aestheticizing it yourself, is that your artwork may come across as less convincing without the shaming effect of mirroring the recipient's appreciation. Additionally, people might be less interested in your work if it comes across as too cheerful, which would suggest why the single, chosen blurb for the front cover of my edition of *TB* is this: "Brilliant ... a *dark*, mesmerizing debut" (italics added, *The Independent on Sunday*). *TB*'s proclaimed and inherent darkness originates in Hustvedt herself in two ways. First, she has stated in a TV-interview that "there's always been violence and strange material in my novels. You know, novels are generated out of the unconscious, or hugely out of the unconscious" (2010b). Following this statement, violence, strange material, destructiveness, or any other quality one may find in *TB* and *WIL*, stem from an inner life which is normally beyond the author's conscious reach.

The second way that *TB*'s darkness originates in Hustvedt is that there are many autobiographical elements in it. Some are verifiable facts or stories repeated elsewhere, others are half-truths, some are repudiated as false, and everything else is simultaneously true, half true or false, i.e. that the reader cannot know which is what. Hustvedt says that "I often thought of Iris as a skewed, distorted reflection of myself, but *Iris* is also a name that points to the character as a creature of the text" (2012b). So in a sense, Iris is an intentional self-misrepresentation of Siri, placed in a novel where reality and fiction overlap. There is also a dual presence of exhibitionism and social suicide in the novel,

but its predominant feature in terms of self-revelation seems to be that of "the healing narrative" (Hustvedt 2010b). Hustvedt claims that "sometimes, as painful as it may be, talking and telling a story (...) can truly be healing" (Ibid.). Because memory is marked by the present, "the healing narrative is always going to be a form of fiction, it just may be a fiction that holds greater emotional truth than the story that you were telling yourself before" (ibid.). In *TB*, Hustvedt thus adds fiction on top of the fictional qualities of memory, but the emotional truth of the novel may still parallel the author's emotional truth.

As have been illustrated regarding Bill's art production, symbolic and emotional truths seem to overcome both his secrecy and his distorted and guilt-ridden sense of reality. This is particularly pertinent in those instances where his artworks deal with the destructive sides of his immediate surroundings, especially when it comes to symbolic references to Mark and Lucille. Similarly, it seems likely that the destructive violations performed both by and against Iris, presumably ring emotionally true in some aspects of Hustvedt's psyche. In any case, this healing effect benefits the narrator too. As the implied addressee of Iris' tale is progressively weighed down by her confessions, Iris is lightened by sharing her load with a faceless person who cannot use her story against her. In this sense, the novel is one long psychoanalytic session where the implied addressee becomes a mute analyst. This implied analyst is in fact so cold and distant that we cannot witness any transference or countertransference, but confessing to something external is still positively different from internal self-psychoanalysis, which tends to give less benefit (Braatøy 345). The real reader is a subjective voyeur, and in terms of mixing, he or she is also a co-creator of this aestheticized psychoanalytic session.

The reader of *TB* is reading about Iris who reads incessantly, and who writes an essay she titles "Fictions Within Fictions". Interpretations drawn from this title to the whole novel may operate on different levels, both because of its fictionalized autobiographical content, and because the central work of art in *TB* is a fictitious novella, created by Hustvedt herself. The effect of such a double fiction is not reduced involvement. Rather, the involvement may increase because as Hustvedt is using the pseudonym of Johan Krüger, she shows herself as another mask wearer in the story. The novella is darker and more densely filled with destructive urges than the novel as a whole. Therefore, Hustvedt, like Iris, is more destructively inclined when she disguises

herself as a man. In a similar sense, Leo is a male narrator whom Hustvedt embodies, and both he and Bill tend to, rather self-destructively, swallow their pain just as archetypal men tend to do.

*The Brutal Boy* is not the only work of art that points to the adoption of her destructive alter ego. At a dinner party with Paris and other art enthusiasts, the topic of Giorgione's *The Tempest* is brought up. Iris agrees with Paris that it is "better than anything" (150), and is dared to describe it from memory. Her description is elaborate, pointing out details as if she saw the painting before her, but she fails to mention the central figure of a man in the foreground. As if he already knew she would blank out the man, Paris stands ready with an explanation. "Because you entered the painting so completely (...) [y]ou became the man" (152). When someone asks if it is "natural to forget the man" Paris says "[i]n this case it was natural, natural to Iris" (Ibid).



Fig. 3. Giorgione, *The Tempest* c. 1505

Paris thus retracts truths and half-truths from her that she did not have clear access to herself. Given that Hustvedt writes about how she herself blanked the man to the left in the painting when she was Iris' age (*Mysteries of the Rectangle* 5), the author's epiphany about herself is made into Paris' instrument of power over Iris. Still, women's awareness of their masculine side is usually seen as something positive, and the painting

helps in familiarizing Iris with her masculinity. Its destructive implication, however, is primarily that of being one variable in a series of variables. Together, these variables generate her wish for a unifying, empowering defense system. The interaction effects of these variables ultimately lead her to the destructiveness she gives way to in the role of Klaus.

In the role of Klaus, Iris produces a piece of illegal street-art: "I wrote NEVER MIND in huge letters on a wall with spray paint I had bought specifically for that purpose" (182). If indeed one accepts Leo's statement that what determines something as art is "perspective—not content" (*WIL* 200), I would say that this written statement feels and looks like art to *me*. Iris is neither a self-proclaimed artist, nor does she call her "misdemeanor" (*ibid.*) art, but this misdemeanor was a planned, creative action which left a product which can be interpreted in the same fashion as independent artworks. Invasively, it encourages passers-by to *never mind*, i.e. to be carefree and careless about everything. At the same time, it excuses its own existence and urges people to forget about it.

When interpreting this artistic act as an integrated part of the novel, however, the relation to Klaus becomes pertinent. First of all, unlike most of her mischiefs, this act is not triggered by a momentary destructive urge. It is a thought out plan, executed some time after the idea must have sprung. As this was her final act before her reencounter with Rose, the artistry becomes the end-point of her increasing "powerlessness vis-à-vis Klaus" (Jameson 424). "NEVER MIND" also represents what Klaus is to Iris. While Iris worries about herself and others and wants to know what everything means, Klaus is carefree and indifferent to deeper meaning. Not unlike Klaus' effects on Iris, to *never mind* is liberating and pain relieving, but also literally dangerous and potentially emotionally deadening. This explains how it is in their isolated and miserable times that both Leo and Iris are unable to cry. In contrast, before Klaus, Iris was energetic, passionate and easily overwhelmed by life and art. To illustrate she retells the following: "I read my paper on Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* aloud to the class and was so moved by my own words that I felt tears in my eyes" (131).

Through literary studies, well before she encounters *The Brutal Boy*, Iris speculates on the extreme version of a carefree indifference to meaning. In a class where they are discussing Dostoyevsky's *Demons* (In *TB* referred to as *The Possessed*), Iris is

probed to explain what it means that Stavrogin bites Telyatnikov: "'Nothing,' I said. (...) It comes from nowhere, out of the blue, and that's why it's so terrifying. It embodies nihilism for Dostoyevsky, because it's totally ungrounded and meaningless" (121). Relatedly, both Johan Krüger's Klaus and Iris' Klaus have destructive urges, seemingly coming from nowhere. Iris does not know why she wants the policeman's gun or what she would have done with it, if she had gotten hold of it. Her attempt to obtain it is therefore equally "ungrounded and meaningless" as Stavrogin's bite.

Removing the cause in the causal relationship of the bite portrayed in *WIL*, a possible answer to why Mark bites Leo may be that there is no answer, i.e. that it does not mean anything at all. Seemingly, it is when meaningfulness is abandoned that destructive urges starts appearing more often, and the threshold to act on them diminishes as well. There is a kind of logic to meaningfulness holding back motiveless destructiveness, and when meaning is abandoned, urges and acts may occur almost at random. The unpredictability of this condition will conceivably terrorize both the actor and his or her surroundings. Similarly, Rose seems unprepared for his turn towards sexual sadism when Iris wears the blindfold, and afterwards he is transformed back into a crying, pitiful old man who refuses to be forgiven (204-07). From Iris' perspective, she notes that "my blindness made me disappear, or at least made the boundaries of my body unstable. One of us gasped. I didn't know who it was" (203). Marks states that "[t]he absence of vision leads to a loss of identity; the self seems to 'disappear,' and the self's boundaries become loose" (89). As she is unable to see herself, this shows how the self-concept includes body and mind, bound together.

Moving from blindness to visual misrepresentation, Iris is most prototypically treated as a female object when she poses for George. Other mentions of George's photographing are, as with the grand mal seizure, intrusive but involve no interaction between him and his subjects. Having seen these photographs and gotten to know the man who is characterized "as an artist who [takes] photographs, not as a photographer" (42), it is peculiar that Iris does not contemplate how their photo session resembles more that of a fashion shoot than anything else: "George jumped from side to side. He squatted, stood, knelt, and I moved with him" (54). Still, the one photo he finds extraordinary (59) is nothing like a fashion photo. During the session, Iris loses her initial self-awareness, egged on by George's encouragements. "I forgot myself (...) I gyrated



and spun like a lunatic (...) My feet pounded the floor. I made noise (...) hooting with an exuberance that made me dizzy" (54-55). By losing all self-awareness and giving in to George's enticements to "lose control and show herself without restrictions" (Marks 78), Iris' stable sense of self thus temporarily dissolves in ecstasy.

In describing the result of the photo session, George evaluates several of the photographs as "'very pretty, but they're not for me (...) 'They're not art'" (59). By saying this, he implies that both art and his chosen photograph is beyond beauty. Stephen later proclaims that the photograph is "beyond" morality as well (69). The men's view seems to convey that art neither answers to external principles, nor does it have any moral responsibilities when it comes to its production or its effects. The photograph owes its characteristics to a model, an interplay between that model and the photographer, and the photographer's editing. As soon as it becomes art, however, it ceases to be a picture of Iris. Even in Iris' presence, Stephen refers to it as "this woman" (69), deaf to Iris' plea that "[i]ts a picture of me". Here follows Iris' description of this photograph, which apart from its relevance for understanding its effects on herself and others, shows *one* of the many fictitious works of visual art that Hustvedt writes into *TB* and *WIL*:

"It wasn't a full-body shot. I was cut off below my breasts, and my extended arms were severed at the elbows. Photographs are cropped in all sorts of ways, and the results are seldom disturbing. The viewer fills in the missing pieces, but this picture was different. The convention didn't seem to work, and I had the awful impression that the parts of me that weren't in the photo were really absent. (...) what appears of me inside the photograph was also fragmented. A long piece of hair was swept across my right cheek and part of my mouth, slicing my face in two. A dark shadow beneath my uplifted chin made my head appear to float away from my body. My whole face lacked clarity, in part because the light was obscure, but also because the expression I had was nonsensical, an inward leer or grimace that signified no definite emotion or sensation. It was a face without reason". (62-63)

In Iris' ecstatic state during the photo shoot, she gives herself to the moment. The double implication of this is that she gave her *self* to the flashes of moments for George to manipulate both during the session, and through visual effects and cropping afterwards. The fact that she was lost in the moment also left an empty body in the sense that her not being self-conscious visually manifested itself in a face without reason. The result is a photograph which expresses absence, fragmentation and emptiness. Given these overlapping characteristics, it is no wonder that Iris experiences a loss of self when

viewing herself stripped of her *self*. Iris' inclination to mix with other people by adopting their wishes and desires, is in a sense the real subject of the photograph. Changeability without something to change into leaves this quality naked and visible. After the photo shoot, when George says to Iris that she is "transparent" (56), he is stating something which at least is half true, and which he captures and expands in his photograph.

Iris "hate[s] it" and finds it "ugly", "cruel" (63), inherently dark (68) and "horrible" (69). Marks ascribes her strong negative sentiments and alienation to the distorting abilities of the photograph (77-83), but the way I see it, what scares her the most is not primarily the distortion itself, but rather the emotional truth which is partly elucidated through that distortion. In placing her antipathy on the external photo, however, she can avoid this realization by writing it off as aesthetic properties of George's cruelty.

In the hospital, the fragmentation shown in the photograph finally corresponds with Iris' self-conception of "a person going to pieces" (94). There she saw herself heading in the direction of her fellow patient, Mrs. O, who she describes as "a fragmented being, a person shattered into a thousand pieces" (97). In a way, Iris' struggles with, as the idiom goes, 'holding herself together'. This is also shown in the organization of the entire narrative. What could have been one unbroken retelling is instead broken into four unevenly sized parts where each is told as if the reader knows nothing about the other parts. The chronological disarray further defies the unifying elements of long term cause-effect patterns and a unifying narrative which implicitly states that "I know my story and therefore I know myself". Similarly, Violet notes that, unlike Mark's fellow addicts at the drug-rehabilitation clinic in Minnesota, "Mark doesn't have a story" (*WIL* 307). Even though we do not know his story from his perspective, his chameleonic bearing may come from an even more fragmented self than Iris', possibly beyond repair.

When the photograph and the rumors of it circulate, Iris is asked whether she felt "compromised posing in the nude" (73). Rather than admitting that she actually wore clothes, she says "not a bit" (*ibid.*) and inwardly thinks nudity to be "a tame metaphor for what had happened to me. I had not only been stripped. I had been turned inside out" (74). She thus acknowledges that the photograph displays some truth about her inner life, but she fails to realize exactly what that truth is. Further, she neither sees that other

people ascribe different meanings to its power, nor does she place any value to the fact that people find it "stunning" (73). A possible reason for her discontentment and partly justified paranoia, is that the photograph becomes, as Marks notes, "a severed and independent entity, and Iris has lost all control over the identity of her representation, an identity which inevitably reflects back on her own awareness of self" (82). The photograph's portrayal of her fragmented self thus further fragmentizes an identity which is already in crisis.

The photograph of Iris is planned to be exhibited along with a series of pairs. Iris finds them distressing as they bear witness "of a world askew" (45). At the same time, these qualities, along with George's paparazzi-like process of "stealing photographs in the darkness", fascinate her (46). George pairs the photograph of Iris with the photograph of the woman having the epileptic seizure. In doing so, the body which looked like it "was going to come apart" (49) is played off against the psyche that is "going to pieces" (94). Personally, I must admit that this duo, along with Giles' "art rape", is something I would very much have liked to see in real life. For the personally involved, Leo and Iris, however, the aesthetic aspect is muted. When Giles argues that Bill's painting has "transcended itself" in his art piece, Leo replies that "[t]hat's rot" (325), whereas Iris interrupts George by calling it "[g]arbage" when George tries to explain the pairing with the seizure to be counterpointing explorations (86). In this way, victimization not only rebukes aesthetic appreciation, but rejects aesthetic evaluation altogether.

Aesthetic rejection is in Iris' case followed by a rejection of any learning outcome she could have obtained from the photograph and its effect on her. Her formerly expressed opinion that photographs "can convey falseness rather than truth" (49), could have given her comfort and strength, and at the same time, to be able to see and accept those parts that are true could have given valuable insight. Instead, these faculties are both re-repressed and externalized as an effect of the unpleasant alienation derived from the distortions in the photograph. Distortion can also create defamiliarization, and the photograph of Iris certainly presents her familiar looks in a strange and unfamiliar way. For Leo, the cathartic effects and subsequent integration of his repressed grief into his conscious self, are gained through the aesthetic defamiliarization of Chardin's *Glass of Water and Coffee Pot*. For Iris, however, the defamiliarized version of herself seen in the photograph vaguely confronts her with her repressed problem of fragmentation through

overmixing, but because it is confusingly intertwined with disturbing misrepresentation, she fails to notice this problem as *her* problem. That the aesthetic defamiliarization falls short of Iris, suggests that Leo's escape from his self-imposed rigor mortis through cathartic release was by no means inevitable.

Since the characteristics of Klaus are quite out of character for Iris, yet come from inside of her, it is indicated that these qualities are repressed elements of her personality. By assigning these qualities to another name, she can release these repressions without having to acknowledge it as parts of her identity. The problem, and its inherent solution, is that neither Jekyll nor Hyde are full and happy selves. Iris will perhaps never be a "fully functioning self" (Passer 452), at least not before she manages to accept Klaus' energetic, carefree and confident nature. This act of acceptance should be followed by implementing it with the rest of her self-concept, thus, metaphorically speaking, making it green instead of both yellow and threateningly blue. The reader is similarly advised to accept his or her appreciation of destructiveness, but at the same time neither deny its danger nor treat it as an alien and shameful feeling. In terms of mixing, it is tempting to say that this advice comes neither from me nor from Hustvedt, but from our co-creation of my reading of her novels.

# Conclusion

*"Art is useless."*

(Hustvedt 2012a 339)

In this thesis I have shown how destructively inclined characters create and consume art with destructive elements. Both the creators and the recipients are sometimes positively, and other times destructively, affected by both the creation and the experience of these artworks. That which I have attempted to answer is; in what ways, and with what effects, do destructiveness in art and destructiveness in the human psyche relate to one another in Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold* and *What I loved?* I hope to have demonstrated throughout the thesis that there is no single unifying relationship pattern between destructiveness in art and psyche, but rather a complex and ambiguous web of interconnections. This pervasive ambiguity does, however, function as a unifying feature of its own, so that destructiveness never becomes a clear cut matter in any of the novels, including those instances where it is sought exclusively for its own sake.

With this being said, mechanisms concerning catharsis and mixing, i.e. intersubjective identity formation, play important roles in situations pertaining to destructiveness. Art involving psychological, metaphorical and actual destruction made to self or others tend to stem from repressed faculties in the artist. They can thus be seen as acts of sublimation, where repressed impulses are channeled out and released through the acceptable activity of art production. As was clearly seen in Bill's portrayal of Lucille as a monstrous woman who replaces Mark with a changeling (pp. 31-32, this thesis), these processes are highly unconscious.

An artwork occupies an imaginary space between artist and recipient, and these two partakers are co-creators of the recipient's dialogic experience of the artwork. The recipient will therefore also find release for repressed needs and thoughts, both vicariously in the role of an empathetic spectator, and actively in the role of co-creator. Through defamiliarizing and violent style and content, art and literature created by Bill,

Giles, Goya, Chardin, George, Johan Krüger, Dostoyevsky and Giorgione, evoke repressed faculties in Leo and Iris which recurrently overwhelms them. Upsetting as these experiences are, they also evoke eruptions of energy and revelations from their own unconscious selves which e.g. helped Leo to start grieving Matt's death. These cathartic experiences do not, however, always result in gained insight for Iris and Leo. In some cases the released repressions become overpowering, and they are pushed into destructive and self-destructive actions of their own. The threshold between therapeutic and harmful outcome seems to depend heavily on the strength of one's self, and one's awareness to identify and handle disturbing realizations concerning normally blocked thoughts and desires.

Identity, or rather the sidestepping of it by posing as someone else, is something found in several characters in both novels. All central characters in *The Blindfold* alter their identities in one way or another, and they do so both in order to achieve external goals, and to protect their core selves. George's normally sympathetic manners are dimmed when he steps into the role of the unscrupulous photographer, shaming strangers' secret affairs by "stealing photographs in the darkness" (46). Hustvedt indirectly steps into the novel as the real author of *The Brutal Boy*, hiding behind the pseudonym of Johan Krüger. Like Giles, she produces more destructive art when posing as a member of the opposite sex. *The Brutal Boy* inspires Iris to take on the destructively inclined alter ego of the novella's protagonist, "Klaus". This masculine identity helps Iris to enjoy that which previously scared her, and it also protects her easily swayed self from outside corruption, but she is also increasingly overcome by destructive urges and loses more and more control vis-à-vis Klaus.

Giles and Mark are both charismatic and destructively inclined social chameleons, but Giles incorporates his cruelty into different personas which become parts of the totality of his art. By "committ[ing] the ultimate work of art" (*WIL* 338), i.e. murder, Giles carried out the decisive test for art's ethical confinement. By having the value of his artworks rise with his imprisonment, Hustvedt presents a conformable art world which is unprincipled and caught up in materialism and glorification of violence. The art world confirms that nothing is too extreme or immoral to be considered as art. The legal system, which convicted Giles, settles that although a crime can be art, it is still a crime. These notions demonstrate that aesthetics and ethics are completely independent

variables. The futility of Iris' discussions with Stephen and George concerning George's photographing of the epileptic seizure, supports the idea that ethical considerations should not be weighed against aesthetic considerations. One could even say that it was the idea that art is ethically confined that in a sense necessitated Giles' murder as art, the reason being that aesthetic boundaries invite transgression. Giles did however announce that it was his persona, the "She-Monster", who did it, and thus he, at least for his own sake, removed his true self from the equation. The absence of artistic motives to underlie Mark's lies and cruel acts, on the other hand, evokes desperate yet unfulfilled needs to construct unifying theories which might explain his unwarranted delinquencies.

"Art is useless" (Hustvedt 2012a 339) in the sense that it serves no external or practical function, and this mirrors the modernist slogan "art for art's sake". On a related note, evil can be seen as destruction for its own sake, or "purposeful action taken in the name of a condition which is not itself purposeful" (Eagleton 104). Mark biting Leo resembles such an action, but more often the destructive acts in the novels are carried out for the sake of art. This holds especially true in *What I Loved* which shows Giles' compliance with the art world's rising call for real violence and increased extremity. Actual inflicted harm merges art with life, especially for involved parties, whose sense of aesthetic distance is practically obliterated. Partly as a result of this, Iris seems less hurt by being raped than being photographed, and Leo seems less upset with murder than he is with the mutilation of Bill's painting being presented as art.

Self-destructiveness is a clear tendency in the characters' behavior in life, yet violence directed towards others is a more prominent feature in the art they both create and consume. I have not focused on this particular inconsistency in art's representation of life, but register that by portraying this situation more realistically<sup>2</sup> by focusing on self-destructive behavior and destructiveness-related art production, Hustvedt's novels reverse the mentioned tendency in artistic portrayals of destructiveness. Implications of this paradox are one of many possible topics for further research which have not been covered in this thesis. As I discuss a quite particular, but at the same time extensive topic,

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<sup>2</sup> On the basis of an array of credible and less credible sources, it is my unverified presumption that, at least in Western culture, suicide and self-harm are far more common than homicide and other-directed harm. Paradoxically, there seem to be more depictions of murder and other-directed harm in art and popular culture than there are depictions of self-destructive behavior and suicide.

I have chosen to prioritize close reading and in-depth discussion over a wider-ranging, yet superficial covering of destructiveness. The central reason why my preference for in-depth discussion over catalogization failed to prevent me from discussing two whole novels is, however, that the differences between these novels and their narrating protagonists ensured complementing samples of my chosen topic.

In Hustvedt's most recent novel, *The Blazing World*, a female artist presents her artworks as if made by three different male artists. The concept of wearing masks and using pseudonyms in art-production as a potentially dangerous endeavor is thus further, and more explicitly, dealt with, and future research may apply the topic and findings of this thesis for research on *The Blazing World*. Presumably, that novel alone will expand the understanding of destructiveness in art and the psyche in *What I Loved* and *The Blindfold*, and even more so when one includes upcoming research. I suspect that art-related comparative research between *The Blazing World* and *What I Loved* is already in the making, and like me, these researchers will have to consider how much authority and space they want to give Hustvedt as a secondary source.

With her growing number of scholarly publications, Hustvedt's expertise on her own fiction is twofold. She is also the opposite of the late, self-secluded J.D. Salinger, and her intentions and opinions about most questions one may possibly rise about her work are probably somewhere to be found. In accepting her view of art as co-creation between artist and recipient, or writer and reader, Hustvedt's presence becomes rather overwhelming. That being said, the idea of reading as an intersubjective experience also suggests a sense of equality between her and the individual reader, and concomitantly denies her having full authority of the text's meaning. My conviction is that it would be unscientific to turn a deaf ear to Hustvedt's contributions to the understanding of her novels. With her claim that fiction is largely created out of the unconscious self, Hustvedt's conscious self also becomes merely one of us who collaborate in generating its possible meanings.



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