



**SIRI HUSTVEDT'S *THE SUMMER WITHOUT MEN* AND *THE BLAZING WORLD*:
AN INSIGHT INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY ARTIST HEROINE¹**

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ABSTRACT. This paper aims to analyse Siri Hustvedt's *The Summer Without Men* (2011) and *The Blazing World* (2014) from the perspective of the female Künstlerroman or Künstlerinroman to show the convergences and divergences between Hustvedt's contemporary artist heroines and twentieth-century ones. Through the methodological framework, I discuss Linda Huf's study of the female artist novel and Evy Varsamopoulou's subsequent revision of it, focusing on the protagonist's interpersonal and social relationships. It could be concluded that Hustvedt's portrayal of the artist heroine is still a result of living in a patriarchal system, but it opens the way for complex representations of female characters, establishing strong emotional bonds between women.

Keywords: Siri Hustvedt, *The Summer Without Men*, *The Blazing World*, female Künstlerroman, artist heroine, contemporary women's fiction.

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**EL VERANO SIN HOMBRES Y EL MUNDO DESLUMBRANTE DE SIRI HUSTVEDT:
UNA APROXIMACIÓN A LA ARTISTA HEROÍNA CONTEMPORÁNEA**

RESUMEN. Este artículo pretende analizar *The Summer Without Men* (2011) y *The Blazing World* (2014) de Siri Hustvedt desde la perspectiva de la novela de la mujer artista para mostrar las convergencias y divergencias que las artistas protagonistas contemporáneas de Hustvedt presentan en relación con la artista del siglo XX. El marco metodológico se basa en el estudio de la novela de la mujer artista de Linda Huf, y su siguiente revisión de Evy Varsamopoulou, centrándose en las relaciones interpersonales y sociales de la protagonista. Se podría concluir que la representación que Hustvedt hace de la artista protagonista aún mantiene las consecuencias de vivir en una sociedad patriarcal, pero da lugar a representaciones complejas de personajes femeninos, estableciendo fuertes vínculos emocionales entre mujeres.

Palabras Clave: Siri Hustvedt, *The Summer Without Men*, *The Blazing World*, novela de la mujer artista, mujer protagonista artista, ficción contemporánea de mujer.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The female artist hero has been present in literary narratives from the nineteenth century to the present time. Critics often consider the novel of the woman artist de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy* (1807) the first of its kind (Boyd 2004:82). With an increased feminist consciousness around the 1850s in Western society, women authors started writing their narratives about the female artist in a more generalised and continuous way from that moment onwards, thus flooding the North-American and European literary panorama over the following decades. However, these stories of the artist heroine tended to be silenced, proving that artistic production was mainly reserved for men. Indeed, Thornton argues that, “[w]hile the figure of the artist-hero has dominated narratives since the Romantic period, the female artist has either been ignored as a significant literary figure, or has been identified as an inferior individual, an amateur to her male counterpart” (2013: 9).

The consolidation of the female *Künstlerroman* or *Künstlerinroman* as a critical frame, on the other hand, occurred due to the second feminist wave by the end of the twentieth century. As Boes points out, “[t]he rise of feminist, post-colonial and minority studies during the 1980s and 90s led to an expansion of the traditional Bildungsroman definition” (2006: 231). Thus, with this new perspective, a considerable number of literary critics revised their interpretation of the artist novel, promoting a greater awareness of the works written by women authors that dealt with the life and ambitions of the artist heroine. Furthermore, critics aimed to trace the origins of the female artist novel as well as the features that could define it. Publications such as Grace Stewart's *A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine*

(1877-1977) (1979) and Suzanne Jones' edited volume of essays, *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics and Portraiture* (1991), are two notable instances of pieces of literary criticism that contributed to the feminist studies of the artist novel. Stewart explains in her preface that, "[b]y examining how female writers structure their novels of the artist as heroine and therein treat certain existing myths and mythic images", it could be concluded that "the mythic pattern of the female artist differs significantly from the so-called universal pattern" (1979: i). Jones and her collaborators, for their part, explored "the many ways in which women writers have seen and dreamed the woman artist as a character in their works" (1991: 1). Other significant works that cover a variety of female artist novels are Susan Gubar's "The Birth of the Artist as Heroine: (Re)production, the *Künstlerroman* Tradition, and the Fiction of Katherine Mansfield" (1983), and Rachel DuPlessis's chapter "To 'bear my mother's name': *Künstlerromane* by Women Writers" (1985), in which she underlines that, "[t]he figure of the female artist encodes the conflict between any empowered woman and the barriers to her achievement" (84).

In spite of the previous writings, there are two works that seek to analyse more specifically the genre of the female artist novel: Linda Huf's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Writer as Heroine in American Literature* (1983) and Evy Varsamopoulou's *The Poetics of the Künstlerinroman and the Aesthetics of the Sublime* (2002). Focusing on the North-American tradition, Huf's study aimed to delineate the common features of the artist heroine from the end of the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, showing a changing tendency in the aspects that define the artist heroine of the late twentieth century. Varsamopoulou, in turn, chose a more heterogeneous group of female artist novels for her discussion and covered metafictional aspects, but still refers to Huf's research by revisiting her main characteristics and expanding the scope of the *Künstlerinroman* beyond autobiographical matters: "[t]he novel may or may not be autobiographical, whether or not it is shaped as a *Bildungsroman* of an aspiring writer, and despite the persistence of many critics to read them as 'portrait of the author'", although she does not deny the "self-reflecting structure" in many female artist novels written by women in the twentieth century (2002: xiii).

Today, women authors continue to write female artist novels, showing the lives and motivations of the twenty-first-century artist heroine. The winner of the Princess of Asturias Award for Literature 2019, Siri Hustvedt (Minnesota, United States, 1955), deals with women artists protagonists in some of her fictional literary works, exposing the circumstances of the artist heroine in current society. Hadley Freeman highlights in an online interview for *The Guardian* that throughout Hustvedt's literary career, and especially since her bestseller *What I Loved* (2003), "she has struggled with two extremely trying public perceptions: that her novels should be seen through the prism of autobiography, and she herself should be seen through the prism of her husband, novelist Paul Auster" (2011). Yet, Hustvedt's novels of the female artist have received several awards: *The Summer Without Men* became an international bestseller, being shortlisted for Prix Etranger Femina for best foreign book of the year in France in 2010, and *The Blazing World* was long-listed for the

Man Booker Prize and won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction in 2014. As Hustvedt's contemporary novels escape from the temporal scope of Huf's study, it seems interesting to discover how today's artist heroine has varied with regard to the ones who preceded her. Thus, this paper aims to analyse Siri Hustvedt's novels *The Summer Without Men* (2011) and *The Blazing World* (2014) from the point of view of the novel of the female artist to show the convergences and divergences that her protagonists present, following key characteristics outlined by Huf and subsequently revised by Varsamopoulou. By doing so, I do not only intend to show the differences and similarities between these artists, but also to highlight the relevance of this author and her literary work, and to bring into discussion a subgenre that tends to be ignored: the female *Künstlerroman*. Considering that there is not much criticism about Hustvedt's fictional work, the time is right to analyse the contribution of this author to the genre of the artist heroine.

2. THE FEMALE *KÜNSTLERROMAN* SUBGENRE DEFINED

Linda Huf reinforces in her introduction to *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* the struggle that artist heroines have faced in order to obtain a central place in literature, and proposes five common characteristics for the female *Künstlerroman* which subvert the male dominating pattern introduced by Maurice Beebe's *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce* (1964). These main features could be summarised as follows: the masculinised behaviour of the woman artist protagonist; a ruling conflict that goes beyond the dichotomy between life (sensual desires) and art (spiritual ambitions), being trapped between the role as selfless woman and her commitment to art; the depiction of the artist heroine against a sexually conventional female foil; men as figures who prevent the woman artist from working, rather as male muses, as the women are in male artist's novels; and finally, the radical nature of the female artist novel, for its protagonist fights for the rights of women and against the patriarchal culture in which she is embedded, acquiring an unenviable reputation (Huf 1983: 4-11).

In addition to this, Huf analyses the evolution and contemporary representation of the artist heroine in the chapter titled "The Artist Heroine Today: A Ritual for Being Reborn". Taking as starting point the fact that women writers produced fewer artist novels than men, and that the condition of these heroines as artists and women implied self-sacrifice, Huf exposes the tendency in the late twentieth-century towards an increased number of artist novels written by women and a presence of artist heroines "who are likelier to succeed than ever before" (1983: 159). The peculiarities that she finds in this new artist heroines are that: they refuse to sacrifice their artistic desires for others' demands; they feel reborn as artists when leaving the domestic sphere, although it is a self-rebirth, since they lack a powerful female model to follow and the figure of a real mother who proves to be supportive; and that they are finally learning to escape from the people who prevented them from flying, however, "[i]f her flight is no longer failed, neither is it wholly triumphant either" (Huf 1983: 152-156). A feature that these female artist novels share with their

predecessors, on the contrary, is that men still play a negative role for the artist heroine: “[i]t still remains for women writers to give us artist heroines who demand—and get—the help of men” (Huf 1983: 159). Finally, this critic argues that the subgenre of the female *Künstlerroman* keeps evolving, a change that goes “along with woman’s changing role in the Western world” (1983: 159).

Evy Varsamopoulou devoted a section of her publication to the analysis of the female artist novel. Through it, she tries to consider the ways in which the *Künstlerinroman* differs from other genres, together with the generic influences that are essential to the tradition of the male and female artist novels. To do so, she does a critical revision of the literary history of the *Künstlerroman*, showing how it detaches itself from the *Bildungsroman* and its importance as a genre from the early German Romanticism. Furthermore, the author provides an overview of some of the fundamental pieces of English literary criticism that have approached the male and female artist novel; among them, one finds the works of Roberta Seret, Maurice Beebe and the aforementioned critic Linda Huf.

It is Varsamopoulou’s review of Huf’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* that should be highlighted here. She revisits the five general features of the female artist novel proposed by Huf, and discusses the unexplored difficulties and also possibilities concerning each of them. With regard to the first characteristic, Varsamopoulou states that in the same way as Beebe, the portrayal of the defining behaviour of the artist protagonist has been stereotyped from a gender perspective: “[b]oth critics assert that a recognizable ‘personality type’ of woman or man will become an artist, but it is more likely that this repeated representation of the male protagonists as ‘feminine’ and female ones as ‘masculine’ stresses the oppressive homogeneity and stereotyping of conventional gender models in their society” (2002: xxi-xxii). As for the second feature, which referred to the ‘divided self’, Varsamopoulou argues that this conflict has to do, in both artist hero and heroine, with “ambivalent desires and a theory of energy: either withdrawal of energy into the self increases the overall ‘amount’ or there is increase of energy from encounters with other people” (2002: xxii). When examining the third and fourth differences that Huf proposes in relation with Beebe’s theory, which made reference to the detrimental relationships that the artist heroine maintains with other female and male characters respectively, the author uses a few cases within the English *Künstlerinroman* tradition that are exceptions to these “generally valid” two differences, such as H.D.’s *Palimpsest* (1926) (2002: xxii). For the last difference presented by Huf, Varsamopoulou delves into the concept of the “radicalism” of the female artist novel, presuming that “it lies in the explicit textualization of the suffocating constraints of gender stereotypes, which virtually dictate against (public) artistic activity” (2002: xxiii).

3. SIRI HUSTVEDT'S *THE SUMMER WITHOUT MEN* AND *THE BLAZING WORLD*

3.1. THE SUMMER WITHOUT MEN (2011)

Mia Fredrickson, the 55-year-old poet narrator of Hustvedt's *The Summer Without Men*, is asked by her husband, the renowned neuroscientist Boris Izcovich, for a "pause", after thirty years of marriage having had a daughter together. This forced situation leads her to suffer a brief psychotic disorder and, consequently, spend a week and a half in a psychiatric ward. After her release, coinciding with the beginning of the summer, Mia decides to leave her apartment in Brooklyn and return to the place where she grew up: Bonden, a city placed at the Minnesota prairies. There, Mia rents a small house and sets herself up "in what appeared to be the husband's study" (Hustvedt 2011: 7).² As time goes by, a "casual sisterhood" (Rajendran 2019: 2) is formed between Mia and the women who surround her. These are her mother and her mother's friends, who Mia calls the "Five Swans", a group of widows who "shared a mental toughness and anatomy that gave them a veneer of enviable freedom" (*SWM*: 8); her neighbour Lola, who is the mother of two little children; and the seven adolescent girls to whom Mia teaches poetry in a workshop for the summer.

A salient feature that Mia shares with her preceding artist heroines is her inner conflict between being a woman and an artist. Huf underlines in her study the "practical impossibility of being both selfless helpmeet and committed craftsman" (1983:6). This means that the artist heroine has to handle the fulfilment of her artistic needs, while she cannot dismiss the expectations imposed on her gender. In *The Summer Without Men*, when Mia is setting herself up in the office of the rented house, she remembers how she had to fully devote herself to the caring of her daughter, which complicated the accomplishment of her role as an artist: "I had the grim thought that there had seldom been room for me and mine, that I had been a scribbler of the stolen interval. I had worked at the kitchen table in the early days and run to Daisy when she woke from her nap" (*SWM*: 6).

As discussed in the late twentieth-century version of artist heroine proposed by Huf, Mia later refuses to prioritise the needs of others, experiencing in this way a period of personal and professional growth; although Mia's rebirth as an artist is partial, for she is already recognised as a poet. When referring to Mia, Appignanesi argues that "[t]he distance from a husband whom she admits she experiences as overbearing allows her to reconstitute her own independent boundaries" (2011). Mia's realisation that she is "better off without him" (*SWM*: 74), empowers her to gain autonomy and undergo an artistic – and personal – rebirth. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that Mia's rebirth as an artist is not completely novel, for was previously a professional poet: "I had my Doris prize and I had my PhD in

² Subsequent quotations of this novel will be cited parenthetically within the text with the initials *SWM*.

comparative literature and my job at Columbia, crusts of respectability to offer as evidence that my failure wasn't complete" (*SWM*: 18).

It has been claimed that, in the rebirth of the artist heroine, she was her own role model, since she was unable to find "a mentor of her own sex who has also thrown in the kitchen towel" (Huf 1983: 153). However, Hustvedt's protagonist does have a woman artist as an inspiration: Abigail, one of the "Five Swans". She is described by Mia as "a remarkable woman, an art teacher for children and an artist, an artist who knew her Bible" (*SWM*: 162). Mia visits Abigail frequently and she profoundly admires "her rigidity" (*SWM*: 160). Abigail divorced her husband, and afterwards she started to teach art at school. She also joined a sewing group, and that was when, as Mia tells, "her double life began", for she started to create works of art, "both conventional and subversive or, as she put it, 'the real ones' and the 'fakes.' She sold the fakes" (*SWM*: 161). According to Thiemann, Abigail's artistic production illustrates "Hustvedt's interest in women's self-empowerment and the problem of ongoing gender discrimination" (2016: 321). In a passage full of ekphrasis, Abigail makes Mia aware of her story as a woman artist by showing her the "real" works of art: "the elderly Abigail bewilders the novel's heroine and narrator, Mia Fredrickson, with her sinister 'amusements' – works of needlepoint planted with secret buttons that open upon sinister worlds that seem to represent her community's history of sexual violence" (Tougaw 2016: 118). Two days before Abigail's death, Mia visits her for the last time at the hospital, where she promises her to make her real artworks appreciated: "I talked to her, told her I remembered everything, would get the will from the drawer when it was time and would do everything in the world to get the secret amusements into a gallery somewhere" (*SWM*: 173).

Mia's biological mother escapes from the literary stereotype of the inadequate model for the rebellious artist heroine. While Huf points out that these characters "are so fanatically feminine that their daughters feel unmothered in effect if not in fact" (1983: 155), Mia's mother proves to have an encouraging attitude and a growing sense of freedom. Even though Mia's mother remained in the domestic sphere during her marriage, now that she is a widow, she does not want to return to that period marked by self-sacrifice: "'That period is over,' my mother said when I asked her about men in her life. 'I don't want to take care of a man again'" (*SWM*: 61). Furthermore, she educated her daughters in a way that deviates from the standard one, as Mia explains, "[s]he had sung to us at night, handed us edifying reading material, censored movies, and defended her daughters to uncomprehending school-teachers" (*SWM*: 12). Mia's mother is a woman who suffered the consequences of a patriarchal culture and who avoided imposing those traditional ideas on her daughters, and now she just wants to devote her last years of life to what makes her happy.

Another characteristic that Hustvedt reverses in *Summer Without Men* is the presence of an artist heroine's female foil. The purpose of this "frivolous friend or enemy, who embodies excessive devotion to the female role" is underlining the heroic behaviour of the protagonist (Huf 1983: 7). Here, at first sight, the only female

character that could serve this function is Lola, Mia's neighbour in Bonden. When Mia first meets her, she describes the "birdcages" that she wears: "[t]he young mother looked bedraggled at that moment, almost slovenly, in her cut-off jeans, a pink halter top, and earrings of her own making, two golden birdcages that hung from her earlobes" (*SWM*: 57). Additionally, while being at Lola's house, Mia discovered that Lola was trapped in an abusive relationship: "By eleven o'clock I had discovered that Pete was a problem, 'even though I love him'; and also, her low academic background: "I wish I knew what you know,' [...] 'I should have studied harder. Now, with the kids, I don't have time" (*SWM*: 58). Taking into account this situation, Lola may endorse certain values that differ from the artist heroine. Nonetheless, Hustvedt does not present this character as an enemy of Mia, stressing their differences, but rather she emphasises the female bond that is forged between them: "What mattered was that an alliance had been established between us, a felt camaraderie that we both hoped would continue" (*SWM*: 59).

In a mainly female panorama, the most prominent relationship with men that emerges in the story is the one between Hustvedt's artist heroine and her husband: a marriage relationship that also here means a "death warrant" (Huf 1983: 159) for the artist heroine. Mia's marriage to Boris placed her in the submissive role, where she was relegated to the caring of the house. Indeed, when looking back at her years as wife, Hustvedt's protagonist acknowledges the dominant role of Boris: "I am screaming, All these years you came first! You, never me! Who cleaned, did homework for hours, slogged through the shopping? Did you? Goddamned master of the universe! Phallic Übermensch off to a conference. The neural correlates of consciousness! It makes me puke!" (*SWM*: 24).

In aiming to subvert this male leadership, it was claimed that the female artist novel acquired a radical nature: *Summer Without Men's* explicitly textualizes Mia's goal of overcoming the obstacles that prevent her from becoming an artist. Bringing back Huf's idea, she defended that the female artist novel was radical because the artist heroine "challenges not only the Babbit and boor, but also the bigot and bully", and because the artist heroine "has internalized society's devaluation on herself and her abilities, she must slay enemies within her own ranks", without forgetting that when she ventures to confront norms and values, "she acquires the reputation of a troublemaker, not the renown of a freedom fighter" (1983: 11). By the beginning of the story, Mia explains how her husband could get a room on his own "without moving a muscle. All he had to do was stand there 'quiet as a mouse'; and she, on the contrary, "was a noisy mouse, one of those that scratched in the walls and made a ruckus, but somehow, it made no difference. The magic of authority, money, penises" (*SWM*: 6). Similarly, there is a moment in which she has to confront her own mind intoxicated by the male-dominated culture:

the deforming constant doubts that my poems were shit, a waste, that I had read my way not to knowledge but into an inscrutable oblivion, that I, nor Boris, was to blame for the Pause, that my truly great work, Daisy, was behind me seemed all to be true. Now, menopausal, abandoned, bereft, and forgotten, I had nothing

left. I put my head on the desk, thinking bitterly that it wasn't even my own, and wept. (SWM: 56)

In addition to this, Mia's fight is seen as problematic for those who are next to her: "I can see in my father's eyebrows that it is not right, in my mother's mouth that it is inappropriate, in Boris's frown that I am too loud—too forceful. I am too fierce" (SWM: 88).

Despite suffering the effects of an oppressive tradition, Mia learns to "fly", meaning that she is able to leave behind her enemies; and in contrast to the uncertain situation proposed by Huf, Mia's flight does end in a successful manner. As Huf stresses in her analysis of the reborn artist heroine, "[t]he contemporary creative heroine is thus a transcendent Daedalus more than a downed and drowned Icarus" (1983: 156). Hustvedt's artist heroine goes from seeing herself in a restricting context, as she states "I am bouncing on the house, but I cannot fly" (SWM: 88), to deciding to move to Bonden, where she experiences an unprecedented artistic and personal freedom. While she stays there, she is "hired to teach a poetry class for kids at the local Arts Guild" (SWM: 4), an activity that places her in front of seven adolescent girls, and that definitely benefits Mia: "by the end, I felt my encounter with the Coven had done me good. I was hugged by all seven, my praises were sung" (SWM: 171). In fact, meeting them encourages Mia to start a new artistic project, which emphasises Mia's acquired selfishness: "I decided to catalog my carnal adventures and misadventures in a pristine notebook, to defile the pages with my own pornographic history and to do my best to leave it husband-free" (SWM: 22). Moreover, Mia's last sentence stresses the successful ending of her flight. When her husband regrets his behaviour and aims to visit her at her home, Mia says to her daughter: "Let him come to me" (SWM: 182), a sentence which indicates putting herself first.

There are also other instances that indicate Mia's success, since one finds two paratextual elements that make reference to her victorious flight, and therefore, her acquired freedom: the cover and Hustvedt's drawings. As for the first, *Picador's* cover of *The Summer Without Men* shows a woman flying with her arms widely open and her face pointing to the sky. This figure can be seen as an intertextual reference to the myth of Icarus: subverting in this case the artist heroine's ending. In Greek mythology, Icarus receives a pair of wings made by his talented father Daedalus to escape from the tower in which they are both prisoned. Nevertheless, Icarus's ego leads him to disobey his father's advice and fly as high as he can, dying in the end because the sun melted his wings. Here, Mia's selfishness has a favourable outcome, because it is this attitude which guides her to free herself from the situation that impossibilities her joy. Hustvedt's drawings, on the other hand, depict the developmental structure of Mia's flight. As Hustvedt states in an interview for *Transatlantica*: "[t]he drawings in *The Summer Without Men* are cartoons, simple drawings, but not illustrations. The four images depict the arc of the story as well as the encounter between narrator and her persona in the narration" (Maniez 2016: 5). The first drawing shows a suffocated woman inside a square, and the last drawing depicts a naked woman flying freely over it.

3.2. THE BLAZING WORLD (2014)

Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World* narrates the story of Harriet Burden (also known as Harry), a sculptor in her sixties who suffers the consequences of gender bias in the art world. Harriet experiences how the New York art world undervalues her, seeing her as just the wife of the successful art dealer and collector Felix Lord. After her husband's death, she decides to abandon her public life as an artist and move to Red Hook. There, annoyed about this lack of recognition, she decides to create *Maskings*, a project by means of which she aims "not only to expose the antifemale bias of the art world, but to uncover the complex workings of human perception and how unconscious ideas about gender, race, and celebrity influence a viewer's understanding of a given work of art" (Hustvedt 2014: 1).³ Harriet presented her artistic work in three different galleries in New York using the pseudonyms – or rather masks – of three male colleagues. The experiment proved that "[w]hen presented as the work of a man, her art suddenly found an enthusiastic audience" (*BW*: 72). When Harriet wants to uncover her ambitious project, her third mask betrays her, claiming that her artistic work was actually done by him. Hustvedt's protagonist dies without proving the authorship of her works to the public eye and therefore without achieving the recognition that she deserved. However, her story comes to light thanks to I. V. Hess, the editor in Hustvedt's novel. This character, who is a professor of aesthetics, comes across a thought-provoking quote by Harriet and she decides to discover the story behind its author, so she manages to gather several testimonies of Harriet's notebooks, family, enemies and friends. She portrays all this in a final polyphonic book that is supposed to be the one the reader has access to. Following Gabriele Rippl's words, "[t]he novel consists of a polyphonic spectrum of voices and incorporates a variety of genres which are barely stitched together. The structure is one of a book within a book" (2016: 35).

Like her female predecessors, Harriet Burden is torn between her domestic role and her artistic inclination. It is evident that "the woman artist has been caught from the star in a double bind. In trying to be both woman and artist—that is, both selfless and self-assertive—she has been trapped in a no-win situation" (Huf 1983: 151). The character of I. V. Hess emphasises this dichotomy when she states that reading Harriet's personal diaries together with the written statement of those who knew her, allowed her to have "a nuanced view of Harriet Burden, the artist and the woman" (*BW*: 10). Attending her role as a selfless woman, Harriet nurtured her children, Maisie and Ethan, without her husband's involvement: "[f]or at least three years I was awash in milk and poop and piss and spit-up and sweat and tears. It was paradise. It was exhausting. It was boring. It was sweet, exciting, and sometimes, curiously, very lonely" (*BW*: 16). In this way, Harriet had to make a remarkable effort to satisfy her artistic ambitions during that period. For instance,

³ Subsequent quotations of this novel will be cited parenthetically within the text with the initials *BW*.

the protagonist narrates that she hired nannies “so I could work and read”, and worked “[i]n the room I called my microstudio” (*BW*: 16).

Harriet's condition as a woman leads her to suffer a constant rejection from the New York art world, however, she dares to fight for herself and dismantle the gender bias that she has experienced: an action that triggers her artistic rebirth. Rachel Cusk writes in her online review for *The Guardian* that “[a]s it stands the critical establishment knows Harriet as the hostess of her husband's dinner parties and the mother of his two children, and grudgingly at that, for she is a woman surprisingly – considering his famously exquisite tastes – lacking in physical and social graces” (2014). Tired of the endless misunderstanding, Harriet decides to take action: “[b]y the time he died, Felix's heyday had passed. He had become historical, the dealer to P. and L. and T. of days gone by. His wife was ahistorical, but what if I could return as another person?” (*BW*: 33). With this purpose, she carries out her project *Maskings*, which leads her to work with three male artists and present her work in three art galleries in New York by using their names. The three solo exhibitions are *The History of Western Art* by Anton Tish, *The Suffocation Rooms* by Phineas Q. Eldridge, and *Beneath* by Rune. Hustvedt herself explains that, “*Maskings* is a game, a form of playing and competition, part of our world usually understood as male not female. Harry wants to open the field of play, to allow women to compete without prejudice” (Becker 2016: 411). Then, without her husband, Harriet “feel[s] emboldened to restart her own career, this time under assorted male personas” (Eberstadt 2014).

Harriet's feeling of having been reborn as an artist requires that she has a female role model. For this, Hustvedt introduces the figure of the writer and intellectual Margaret Cavendish, who is an illuminating example for Harriet. As Rippl states, “[o]n many occasions Burden refers to Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, as a rich source of inspiration. The title of Hustvedt's novel evokes this seventeenth-century British aristocrat's prose work *The Blazing World* (1666), which is considered the forerunner of science fiction in English” (2016: 35). Indeed, Harriet writes in *Notebook D*, “I am back to my blazing mother Margaret” (*BW*: 348), which proves the theory that she sees Cavendish as a guide. In addition to this, the character of I. V. Hess remarks the similarities that these artists share at the beginning of the book, stressing that both women were mocked and misunderstood for being intelligent and outstanding women in a society that kept women under tight control:

Snubbed by many with whom she would have liked to engage in dialogue, Cavendish created a world of interlocutors in her writing. As with Cavendish, I believe that Burden cannot be understood unless the dialogical quality of her thought and art is taken into consideration. [...] Her notebooks became the ground where her conflicted anger and divided intellect could do battle on the page. Burden complains bitterly about sexism in the culture, the art world in particular, but she also laments her ‘intellectual loneliness.’ She broods on her isolation and lashes out at her many perceived enemies. [...] Like Cavendish, Burden's desire for recognition in her lifetime was ultimately transmuted into a hope that her work would finally be noticed, if not while she was alive, then after her death. (*BW*: 6-7)

With regard to the relationship with her mother, Harriet also abandons the role of the artist heroine who feels unmothered. Even though Harriet's mother has to deal with a dominant husband, her daughter maintains a close relationship with her. She tells Harriet: "I rarely got a word in at a dinner party, you know. I brought in the food and I cleared the table and I listened, but when I began to speak, he would cut me off" (*BW*: 218). The reasons for the close relationship may reside in the fact that her mother took care of her unconditionally and also valued her work. For instance, Harriet expresses the admiration that she felt towards her mother when remembering her: "I would cry and, when I cried, I would long for my mother, not the small dying mother in the hospital but the big mother of my childhood, who had held and rocked me and tutted and stroked and taken my temperature and read to me" (*BW*: 37). In turn, Phineas Q. Eldridge, Harriet's second mask, highlights how pleased Harriet's mother was with her daughter's artistic performance: "Her parents came to the opening. Her mother was sweet and proud and full of congratulations" (*BW*: 129). Thus, it seems that Harriet can rely on her natural mother, since she appears to be caring and, most importantly, supportive.

In the same way that Hustvedt creates an enriching union between Harriet and her mother, she also avoids using a female foil for her artist heroine, stressing instead the bonding between women by means of Rachel Briefman, Harriet's best friend. Differing from the character of a woman whose "substance is ice next to the heroine's fire" (Huf 1983: 7), Rachel's personality is strong and sparkling. Both Rachel and Harriet, are presented as women with great goals, who have always supported each other since they were twelve years old:

We studied together, and we daydreamed together. I imagined myself in a white coat with a stethoscope around my neck, marching down hospital corridors, ordering around nurses, and Harriet saw herself as a great artist or poet or intellectual—or all three. We were a team of two against a hostile world of adolescent hierarchies. My mother once said to me, 'Rachel, all you really need is one good friend, you know.' I found that friend in Harriet. (*BW*: 49)

Moving on to Harriet's relations with male characters, Hustvedt reveals complex and detrimental relationships between her artist heroine and the men close to her. To begin with, Harriet's husband saw the work of his wife meaningless in comparison with his own: "Harry said she had found herself tiptoeing past Felix's study so as not to disturb him on the days when he had worked at home, had squelched her opinions at dinners because Felix hated conflict, but he would march into her studio without knocking to ask her some trivial question" (*BW*: 254). Certainly, Huf's suggestion that, when concerning the artist heroines' husbands, "[i]n no instance do they offer the kind of encouragement let alone the services that wives give male artists" (1983: 158), could be taken into consideration here. Along the same lines, Harriet's father proves to be an unsupportive figure, since from the very beginning he rejects the presence of a ten-year-old Harriet in his workplace: "'Harriet, what are you doing here? You should not be here'" (*BW*: 152); and he is bitterly critical of Harriet's artistic work: "Her father was silent, but then right before he left, he said to her, 'It doesn't resemble much else that's out there, does it?'" (*BW*: 129).

The relationship between Harriet and Rune, however, could be understood as the most damaging for the artist heroine. Harriet found Rune as her perfect candidate to complete her experiment, for he was a famous and eye-catching young artist. Rune accepted Harriet's offer and he served as her third name for her last exhibition. Nevertheless, Rune ultimately betrays her and falsely claims that he was the real creator behind *Beneath*. As Tougaw states, "Burden loses. She cannot help becoming Rune's object, and in the end he steals her work and discredits her as a lunatic" (2016: 123). As a matter of fact, there is a fragment in the novel where Rune is asked in an interview about *Beneath* and he firmly denies Harriet's authority, claiming that her accusations were unfounded and stating that he considered her as a "muse", which indicates a return to the passive and traditional position of women as muses or sources of inspiration for the male artist, and not possible creators of the work of art:

Harriet Lord has been really great to me, not only as a collector of my work, but as a true supporter. And I think of her as a muse for the project. Beneath could never have happened without the long talks we had together and her generous backing. What I can't understand is that she seems to claim she is responsible for my work. She seems to believe that she actually created it. I simply can't understand why she would say that. You know, she had a really hard time after her husband died, and she's been in psychiatric treatment for years. For the record, let's just say she's a kind lady, but a little confused from time to time, and leave it at that. (*BW*: 308)

Hustvedt's *Blazing World* conveys the radical elements that form the *Künstlerinroman*, for the novel acknowledges how Harriet refuses to stay quiet before a male *status quo* that undervalues her, gaining an undeserved reputation. Harriet confronts a society in which 'womanhood' and 'artist practice' are incompatible terms. Thiemann points out that Hustvedt's novel "take[s] issue with particular kinds of feminism, especially those that reduce women (artists) to victims of patriarchal oppression" (2016: 324). Then, Harriet Burden is not a defenceless victim, but a "feminist warrior" (*BW*: 168). The very first lines of the novel verbalise Harriet's aim to dismantle the gender bias in the art world: "All intellectual and artistic endeavors, even jokes, ironies, and parodies, fare better in the mind of the crowd when the crowd knows that somewhere behind the great work or the great spoof it can locate a cock and a pair of balls" (*BW*: 1). Moreover, Harriet's second mask underlines the rejection of Hustvedt's artist heroine, and at the same time, how she strives for being heard:

It was true they didn't want Harry the artist. I began to see that up close. She was old news, if she had ever been news at all. She was Felix Lord's widow. It all worked against her, but then Harry scared them off. She knew too much, had read too much, was too tall, hated almost everything that was written about art, and she corrected people's errors. (*BW*: 134)

As seen previously, Huf defends that "[u]nlike other rebels in literature, the artist heroine is seldom accounted a liberator" (1983: 11). The fact that Harriet "scared

them off”, reinforces that when the artist heroine goes against a culture that is constantly undervaluing her, she is likely to be seen as a threat to those who want to limit her freedom.

Harriet dares to escape from the people who prevented her from achieving her goals. “Maisie, I can fly” (*BW*: 22) affirms Hustvedt’s protagonist once far from her home. Her flight begins when she realises that “[t]here’s still time to change things” (*BW*: 18), moving consequently to Red Hook (Brooklyn) in order to fulfil her artistic desires:

I understood that my freedom had arrived. There was nothing and no one in my way except the burden of Burden herself. The wide-open future, the great yawn of absence, made me dizzy, anxious, and, occasionally, high, as if I had doped myself, but I hadn’t. I was the ruler of my own little Brooklyn fiefdom, a rich widow woman, long past babies and toddlers and teenagers, and my brain was fat with ideas. (*BW*: 28)

In this new place, Harriet fully lives as an artist, obtaining a proper place to work and aiming to encourage other young artists to succeed in their careers:

My mother’s place was immense, an old warehouse building. She had two floors, one to live in and other one to work in. [...] she also had a fantasy about supporting young artists directly, putting them up, giving them space to work in. My father had his foundation. My mother had her ad hoc Red Hook artists’ colony. (*BW*: 22)

Despite freeing herself from the people who cut her wings, Harriet meets an unsuccessful end, since she dies without being recognised as the true author of *Beneath*. Thiemann underlines the pessimistic side of the novel when she states that among Hustvedt’s female artist novels, “*The Blazing World* is perhaps the least optimistic” for Harriet’s political project “goes disastrously wrong, and she dies before the novel’s end” (2016: 324). When she wanted to prove the success of her project, for she says: “Yes, it’s time for me to burst into bloom, to find my happiness. It’s time to tell everyone” (*BW*: 293), Rune decided that he was going to keep *Beneath* as his own. In addition to this, when Rune dies, the media trusted Rune’s statement, eluding Harriet’s claim for authorship, which leads her to her defeat:

Tributes to Rune spewed from the media maw, accompanied by photos of still-youthful brooding artist decoratively slouched beside his works, including *Beneath*, no, especially, *Beneath*. [...] Not a word about Harry. Her obliteration was total. [...] He was dead, but she was dead to him, too, dead to the story, dead to the pseudonyms. Her shining vehicle had crashed before it reached its destination, just as his had. [...] She had been more right than she had even known. The powers-that-be would never accept her art, because it was hers. Harriet Burden was nobody, a big, fat, unrecognized nobody. (*BW*: 317-8)

4. CONCLUSIONS

Mia Fredrickson and Harriet Burden share with their female predecessors an inner ruling conflict between fulfilling their role as mothers and wives, and artists. Both characters have to take care of their children and attend their husband's desires, at the same time that they need to satisfy their artistic ambitions. Mia and Harriet start their journey towards a more "selfish" artist heroine in a similar manner: they decline to put the needs of others ahead of their own goals, they feel reborn as artists, and they dare to fly. Mia is already presented as a recognised poet, but she undergoes an artistic and personal rebirth when she understands that she is better without her husband, leaving the city to focus on her artistic career in Bonden. Harriet, for her part, tired of a constant rejection from the New York art world, decides to move to Red Hook, where she carries out her project *Maskings* to show the current gender bias in the art world, experiencing an unprecedented artistic rebirth. Another feature in each of these female artist novels is the troubled relationship that the female protagonist has with men. When it comes to the freedom of the artist heroine, Mia's husband and Harriet's third male mask prove to be obstacles for obtaining it. Besides, the radicalism that Huf stresses in the female *Künstlerroman* is also present in Hustvedt's novels. Mia and Harriet have to fight against gender constraints to succeed as artists, and both confront inner fears and face a difficult social position due to patriarchal culture.

There are, however, significant features that make these contemporary artists different from previous examples. The first one resides in the strong relationship between Hustvedt's artist heroines and the other female characters. Hustvedt does not only reject the idea of the female foil for the artist heroine, but she also offers mothers who are supportive, and other woman artists that serve as a source of inspiration for the protagonists. Mia feels close to her neighbour Lola, and she can count on her mother and the elderly artist Abigail. Harriet has the friendship of Rachel, the protection of her mother, and the figure of Margaret Cavendish as a model to follow. The second variation has to do with the uncertain ending of the artist heroine's flight argued by Huf, for Hustvedt presents two final outcomes for her protagonists: a successful one for Mia, since she recovers the control of her life; and a failed one for Harriet, as she loses the opportunity to prove that she deserved to be appreciated and valued as an artist while she was alive. Hence, it should be concluded that Hustvedt updates her stories of the female artist according to the current needs and situations of the twenty-first-century artist heroine. In her writing, Hustvedt encourages and highlights the bonds between women, and shows that in the same way that the effort of the contemporary artist heroine could be rewarded, there are other cases in which her work may remain unnoticed, suggesting that the woman artist has to continue to raise her voice in today's society, and most importantly, that the rest of the world needs and – has to – listen to her.

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