

RECENZJA KSIĄŻKI *BOOK REVIEW*

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Gili Hammer, *Blindness through the looking glass. The performance of blindness, gender, and the sensory body*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019, 220 pages.

Gili Hammer is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and the Program in Cultural Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her book is focused on 40 women aged 19–66, living in Israel, in various life situations, and with different cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. Most of the research participants were blind since birth or early childhood, which is clearly significant in the context of the main issues raised by Hammer, including gender identity and understanding the norms and principles of visual culture. Her encounters with them, as well as numerous contacts with other blind people, started in 2006 and formed the basis for joint explorations and reflections on femininity, corporeality, seeing, the construction and experience of blindness and disability, and the image building of blind people in Israeli society.

The book consists of three main sections with 2–3 chapters each, together with compact summaries. The analytical sections are preceded by a more general introduction to the author's theoretical inspirations and assumptions, and a methodology chapter. The book ends with an in-depth summary and an epilogue.

In the methodology chapter, *An Ethnography of Blindness (and Sight): The Method of Sensory Knowledge*, the researcher's ethical sensitivity and self-awareness become apparent, fueled by a recurring question asked both by her academic colleagues and by blind people she meets: Why does a sighted woman decide to study blind women? Similar doubts lead Hammer to consider the researcher's (imagined) power over disabled research participants, the role and power of the research gaze, and the ableism prevalent in psychological research on blindness, which considers it in terms of anomaly and problem.

The main methods used during the study were individual in-depth interviews and various kinds of observation. Hammer took on the role of an attentive observer both during meetings with the research participants and at other events – during training and classes for blind people, during tandem rallies of blind and sighted individuals, and within the space of the Dark Museum Exhibit (pp. 23–24).

The selection of participants in terms of education could be considered a limitation of the study – in 35 out of 40 cases, the participants had higher education, which necessarily narrows the picture of the described group. Hammer does not comment on this choice; however, it is constantly visible throughout the book, from which emerges an image of an independent, self-reliant, and self-reflective blind woman.

As this example shows, the selection of participants may be a real challenge for disability researchers for two possible reasons. The first one is the greater openness of people with higher education, who understand the premise of the study and see it as an opportunity to express their own voice. Thus, it leads to the underrepresentation of people with lower education or other cultural and social capital. The second reason is the desire to present a positive image of people with disabilities, which meets their needs and may be an important tool in building social awareness. On the other hand, however, it is a kind of escape from the examination of difficult issues related to lack of self-reliance, loneliness, or conscious or involuntary dependence on the family or care institutions, etc.

The starting point of *Section I. Blind Women's Gender Identity* is the traditional cultural notion that “femininity is so tightly bound to seeing and the visual, that being feminine, to a degree, requires being able to see and to be seen” (p. 37). In chapter 3, *Socialization towards Visual Norms*, Hammer discusses the sources of the research participants' knowledge of visual culture, in particular, the social requirements and valid canons of beauty or female appearance.

Chapter 4, *Practices of Appearance Management*, shows the diversity of attitudes of the participating women in the context of shaping and evaluating their appearance – from hyper-visual forms of expression to prioritizing simpli-

city and comfort over people's expectations and the demands of current fashion trends. In this case, Hammer also writes about an important local determinant that causes these women's clothing (e.g., long skirts or dresses) to be perceived not so much as an expression of their femininity, but as an element of religiousness and ethnicity (p. 53).

As the examples cited by Hammer show, visual awareness and practice serve the research participants not merely to construct an attractive, feminine or sexy appearance, but also a 'normal', 'proper' look. In this sense, visual skills related to dressing, gestures, or facial expression, become part of stigma resistance and a private struggle against the negative image of the blind person as neglected and helpless. As the author points out, this is related to the specificity of Israeli society, in which individuals have to prove their affiliation and contribution to the "national project" in order to receive an "entrance ticket" to the community (p. 58).

Based on my own research, whose participants expressed the same needs and concerns regarding acceptance by 'normals' [Pietrowiak 2019: 255–295], I would argue that this mechanism is somewhat more universal, a thesis perfectly described in Erving Goffman's classic work, *Stigma* (1963). A similar parallel also applies to the other elements described by Hammer – the simultaneous pleasure derived from taking care of one's appearance together with the uncertainty about the effects of these efforts; the sense of constant visual scrutiny and bodily tension that comes with it; the dependence on the often divergent opinions of viewers.

Chapter 5, *Dating and Intimate Relations*, deals with very sensitive and personal issues, showing the clear significance of blindness – or rather the stereotypes about it – in the context of building romantic or sexual relationships. The stories of individual women reveal their insecurities and feeling of marginalization in this area, arising from a still vivid depiction of blind women, who are generally believed to be unable to perform well in their roles as mothers and wives (pp. 65–66).

The situation of the participants of the study is further complicated by the simultaneous treatment of blind women as asexual and that they are attributed with exceptional skills in this sphere, linked to the alleged hyper-sensitivity of their sense of touch. Ultimately, some of them limit their expectations and needs in the area of relationships and intimate relations, e.g., despite initial reluctance, they decide to enter relationships with blind men. Significantly, the experiences and feelings of these participants also overlap with the stories of blind women from Poland [Pietrowiak 2019: 149–157].

Section II. Blindness and Visual Culture. The Dynamics of Gaze, Staring, and Display focuses on the kinds of gazes directed at blind women and blindness

itself, and their defensive strategies in the face of visual expectations and attacks. Chapter 6, *Blind Women's Negotiations of Staring and the Gaze*, reveals the different strategies, tactics, and practices of the research participants towards the starers and viewers – bystanders, casual passers-by, voyeurs. Being observed and watched is an everyday experience of blind women that results from their femininity (woman as an object to be watched) and their visible disability (a disability that simultaneously attracts and repels the gaze). Furthermore, some of the blind women feel both their hyper-visibility (as blind people) and their invisibility or transparency (as women) (pp. 91–92).

The stories quoted by Hammer demonstrate, however, that blind women are not only aware of the existence and significance of everyday glances – hearing the whispers of sighted people or working out with friends a secret communication about the reactions of random onlookers (p. 89) (it is a great pity that the author did not develop this topic). In some cases, they seek ways of embracing, reflecting, and unmasking the gaze cast at them – through a verbal or performative response aimed at educating “sighted” or provoking them to reflect. By these means, they compete – often successfully – for their visual self-agency and recognition from their sighted interaction partners.

In chapter 7, *Visual Dynamics at the Dark Museum Exhibit*, the author presents observations collected during her regular presence in a place where blind people act as guides for the sighted, leading them around an appropriately darkened space. An example of a similar space in Poland is the Invisible Exhibition in Warsaw. However, as Hammer aptly notes, the form and effects of the exhibition are highly ambivalent. For one thing, they break down the dualism of the gazing spectator and the passive object, to some extent reversing the role of power and dependence between the sighted and the blind, weakening the force of the evaluating and orienting gaze.

On the other hand, they build up a narrow and stereotypical image of blindness as living in complete darkness, and thus of a blind person as deprived of any visual experience. In addition, they evoke in visitors a feeling of confusion and incompetence, which they automatically attribute to blind people the moment they leave the exhibition. What is missing from this kind of representation is, in the author's opinion, an emphasis on the social and cultural conditions of the experience of blindness. In “real life,” it is not reduced to a physical lack of sight and the imagined living in darkness that is associated with it; it also means a daily negotiation with the misunderstanding, attitudes, and expectations of “normals” (pp. 108–110).

The author's intention and, at the same time, achievement, is to broaden the meaning of the gaze and to show both its non-visual elements and its strong connection with power, domination, or stigmatization. However, it is worth considering the opposite relationship: it is not so much the gaze that gives us the power and temptation to judge other people and ourselves; rather, judging and hierarchizing are the basic forms of human cognition and a way to find oneself in the world. In this sense, judging glances are barely one of the sensory manifestations or mediums of human thinking and perception.

Inspired by the reflections of Philip Vannini, Dennis Waskul, and Simon Gottschalk (2012), in *Section III. Blindness and the Sensory Body*, the author considers blindness as a kind of sensory and embodied 'awakening' and 'interruption of routines and habits'. In chapter 8, *Blind Women's Sensory Capital*, Hammer focuses on the multisensory experiences of the participants of the study, specifically on how they are articulated. She states: "Blind women's narratives regarding the significance of touch, sound, and smell in their bodily practices are not particular to blind women and may be shared with sighted women as well. However, blind women express a unique verbalization of their awareness of sensory experiences within gender performance (...)" (p. 121).

It is this surprising generalization that may heighten the critical attentiveness of the reader. While some of the statements quoted by the author do indeed draw attention to non-visual sensations and feelings, it is not difficult to imagine that the same sentences in the exact form might be uttered by sighted women. Thus, it seems that the narrative of this chapter is meant to lead to an appreciation of the experiences of blind women by involuntarily reducing the sense of sight to an absorbing, cold, distancing one. Similar representations of sight are also apparent in the individual quotes from the study (e.g., "Sight makes you occupied with seeing and not sensing", p. 127). Consequently, from the chapter – but also, to a large extent, from the preceding sections – emerges a picture of sighted people as people who only see, or who occasionally and insufficiently use other senses.

Some answer to these doubts is provided in chapter 9, *Intersensory Experiences and "Dialogical Performances" of Blindness and Sight*, which, in my opinion, is one of the most in-depth, grounded, and inspiring chapters of the entire book. The author reveals observations and conversations made during her participation in a blind and sighted tandem cycling group. The researcher's intention here was to look at the interactions between blind and sighted participants, not in the context of normalizing practices, but in relation to a field of possible dialogue and multisensory reflection on each other's experiences (p. 136).

Adopting this perspective resulted in some interesting findings. Firstly, Hammer shows the process of building a sense of community, but also the interdependence between the members of the group. Secondly, she describes how people with different visual abilities perceive the environment, movement, and also visibility. Lastly, the experiences she cites enabled her to re-embodiment sight, and to discover the sensory pleasure of seeing. Thus, it allowed her to break the previous perception of sight as a dominant, evaluative, distancing sense, as presented in the previous sections of the book. Perhaps this arrangement of chapters was also intended to represent the author's cognitive journey – from her initial uneasiness with her own vision regarding blind women, through judging sight as an obstacle to experiencing the world and the body more fully, to finally being able to regard seeing as one of many ways of getting to know and connecting with the world.

Another important lesson from this chapter is the potential of face-to-face, informal encounters between blind and sighted people that, when properly arranged, offer hope for mutual acceptance and inspiration, and, just as importantly, the shedding of feelings of guilt or injustice – associated both with being blind and being sighted. This also confirms the intuition expressed earlier – the problem is not the judging gaze but the judging itself; after all, one can look at someone with curiosity, interest, and respect. Then, being seen stops being uncomfortable, tiring, and requiring constant scrutiny.

In chapter 10, *Conclusion. Blindness as a Critical Consciousness*, Hammer writes: "(...) I regarded blindness as potentially evoking a critical awareness of the way we perceive ourselves and others, and as an opportunity that may challenge binaries such as agency/power systems, ability/disability, blindness/sight, and me/others" (p. 154). However, as she goes on to point out, blindness does not automatically generate reflections on vision, the senses, or corporeality – neither among the blind nor the sighted. This movement requires additional, often challenging work, changing or suspending one's perspective

The book ends with *Epilogue*, a kind of autoethnography by the author. Hammer invites the reader into her private, even intimate experiences in the realms of visibility and femininity, which to some extent have influenced her life choices and practices, including beginning research in collaboration with blind women.

In conclusion, Hammer's book is an extremely important work on blindness, femininity, the senses, visual culture, stigma, and interpersonal relationships. It should be placed alongside works on the lives of blind people such as *The Making of Blind Man* by Robert A. Scott, *Blind People* by Shlomo Deshen,

The Mystery of the Eye and the Shadow of Blindness by Rod Michalko, and *On Sight and Insight* by John Hull.

Like the aforementioned canonical works, *Blindness Through the Looking Glass* is written in very clear yet literary language, reveals new ways of looking at seeing and blindness, and provokes a re-examination of oneself, one's visual practices, assumptions, and reactions. In addition, like the above-mentioned authors, Hammer is meticulous in presenting the voices of the blind people themselves. At the same time, she tries to demonstrate their experiences in the light of more general theories, in this case, concerning the senses, normality, and femininity. She does not impose a preconceived interpretation of the data, but follows the study participants, looking for an appropriate and reliable way to present their stories. Finally, she does not limit herself to a single understanding of disability, according to the currently accepted model, but shows the complexity of this phenomenon, which exists at the intersection of the physical, bodily, cultural, and social dimensions of human life and activity.

For these reasons, reading *Blindness Through the Looking Glass* resembles embarking on an intellectual journey together with the author, during which exploratory curiosity is more important than reaching a previously known destination.

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