

# Between Experience and Representation

## Intimacy and Identity in Texts by Vita Andersen and Marion Hagen

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TODAY IT IS a well-worn conception that postmodern identities are constructed under the pressure of a powerful media culture and that young people shape their identities and develop their intimate lives in negotiations with textual and visual representations. Since at least the 1960s, this phenomenon has also been an important topic in Scandinavian literature, and the two texts that are considered here are prominent examples of this trend. Vita Andersen's short story collection *Hold kæft og vær smuk* (1978) [Shut Up and Be Lovely] and Marion Hagen's novel *Akt* (1999) [Nude] situate their respective characters in a media and consumer society in which the relationship between their personal experiences and mediated representations is the main concern. The more than twenty years separating the publication of the two books provides a ground for an interesting comparison of their way of approaching the subject matter. One of my intents here is to describe their respective profiles and point out some significant aesthetic divergences.

The second goal is to explore a theoretical perspective that emerges from phenomenology and has been developed in order to describe categories that are related in a way that is at once parallel as well as divergent. A central concept in this train of thought is the chiasm, as presented by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Shoshana Felman, and Judith Butler. The word *chiasm* derives from the Greek  $\chi$  [chi].

In classical rhetoric, chiasm is a verbal structure that presents a syntactic sequence that is then repeated in inverse order. For example, in Ibsen's *Et dukkehjem* [*A Doll House*] as Nora leaves and returns her wedding ring to her husband the following chiastic exchange takes place:

“Helmer: Også dette? Nora: Dette også” (8:363) [Helmer: Also this? Nora: This also]. By contrast, in the works of Merleau-Ponty, Felman, and Butler, chiasm is used as a model for thought, rather than as a classical literary trope. It is a foundational concept for both describing and understanding relationships involving perception, corporeality, speech, and reality in general. As an extension of this approach, I will test chiasmic thinking in analyzing the complex connections between experience and representation in literature.

### CHIASMIC CONNECTIONS

In what way can the chiasmic figure help us to understand complex relations *in* and *between* human beings as well as between subjects and their mediated projections? Maurice Merleau-Ponty takes up this classical rhetorical figure and gives it a new phenomenological function related to the body and its perceptions. Perhaps inspired by Paul Valéry,<sup>1</sup> he expands on the idea in [“The Intertwining—The Chiasm”], a chapter in *Le visible et l’invisible* (1964) [*The Visible and the Invisible*]. His main point is that perception is reciprocal; our senses are functions of bodily organs but at the same time cannot operate without an external world, an object of sensation. In terms of this phenomenological understanding, the body is a privileged entity since it is both the source and the object of sensations. It can touch itself and see itself, but only in restricted ways: the eye, for example, cannot see its own retina.

Merleau-Ponty (1968) interprets this intertwining between the body and the elements of the phenomenal world in terms of the chiasm. In this text, he does not elaborate on the term as such, but only mentions it in the title. He lets the reader understand through his almost endless reflections on the relationship between sensing and the sensed, which he

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1. In an essay called “L’Homme et l’adversité” [“Man and adversity” (1951)], which was originally a conference paper, Merleau-Ponty quotes Valéry, who speaks of two gazes that meet: “Dès que les regards se prennent, l’on n’est plus tout à fait *deux*, et il y a de la difficulté à demeurer seul.... Cet échange, le mot est bon, réalise dans un temps très petit, une transposition, une métathèse, un chiasma de deux «destinées», de deux points de vue” (Valéry 2:491) [“As soon as gazes meet, we are no longer wholly two, and it is hard to remain alone. This exchange (the term is exact) realizes in a very short time a transposition or metathesis—a chiasma of two destinies, two points of view” (qtd. in *Merleau-Ponty Reader* 196)].

calls “un mystère” (172) [“a mystery” (393)], that it should be understood as chiasmic. To a large extent Merleau-Ponty deals with this mystery by means of an experimental and creative use of words and images, as if he could never find precisely the right way to express the matter at hand, and we may indeed read his text as a kind of artistic verbal experiment. Because of his poetic style, it is reasonable to understand the chiasm in his discourse primarily as a structural concept encompassing the individual words, figures, and the text as well as its topic.

To mention a few of the words that Merleau-Ponty investigates may be helpful. He tells the reader that he does not see things “*“routés nues, parce que le regard même les enveloppe, les habille de sa chair”* (173) [“‘all naked’ because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh” (393)], and that “*“toute expérience du visible m’a toujours été donnée dans le contexte des mouvements du regard”* (177) [“every experience of the visible has always been given to me within the context of the movements of the look” (396)]. The fact that the body must be construed as both sensible and sentient is a “*paradoxe constitutif*” (179) [“constitutive paradox” (397)] and “*un être à deux feuillets*” (180) [“a being of two leaves” (398)]. Furthermore, he states that this “*insertion réciproque et entrelacs ... il y a deux cercles, ou deux tourbillons, ou deux sphères, concentriques quand je vis naïvement, et, dès que je m’interroge, faiblement décentrés l’un par rapport à l’autre...*” (182) [“reciprocal insertion and intertwining ... are two circles, or two vortices, or two spheres, concentric when I live naïvely, and as soon as I question myself, the one slightly decentered with respect to the other...” (399)].

As can be seen, Merleau-Ponty explores the semantic range of various words. He tries out images and metaphors as models of thought in order to grasp and explain the ways in which we perceive the world through the senses—i.e. primarily sight, touch, and hearing. Towards the end of the chapter he also reflects on the corporeal basis of ideas that manifests itself by way of “[le] même phénomène fondamental de réversibilité qui soutient et la perception muette et la parole” (203) [“the same fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech” (412)]. We do not see or hear the ideas, he maintains, but still they are behind or between the sound and the light and are recognizable only in this relationship. In Merleau-Ponty’s work, then, chiasm becomes less an elaborated, carefully defined concept and more a guiding symbol or formal indication

of the many aspects of the intertwined connection between the body and its surroundings.

In Judith Butler's thinking chiasms appear when she addresses the connection between body and speech. Her thought is inspired by speech act theory, and in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), she discusses how speech acts function, primarily in a context of linguistic vulnerability and hate speech. The profound bodily aspects of speech are a critical idea in her considerations, an idea that must, at least partly, be attributed to Shoshana Felman's book *Le Scandale du corps parlant: Don Juan avec Austin, ou, la séduction en deux langues* (1980) [*The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*]. Speaking itself is a bodily act, Felman asserts. We use our body to produce sounds and gestures, and at the same time, the body is a sign of its own. This simple fact has consequences for the concept of intention because the double source of communication—verbal language and body language—causes a split in the meaning of the utterance. According to Butler, “the speech act says more, or says differently, than it means to say,” suggesting that body and speech are “incongruously interrelated” (10 and 11).

In an analysis of the speech act of the threat, this observation becomes especially relevant, because the threat needs to be performed and interpreted within a certain context. Grammar alone does not suffice to analyze what a threat is or does, or how seriously it has to be taken. “The threat prefigures or, indeed, promises a bodily act, and yet is already a bodily act, thus establishing in its very gesture the contours of the act to come” (11). This act of threat and the threatened act are, in Butler's words, “related as a chiasmus” (11).

But also another and opposite kind of speech act is interesting in this respect, namely the one that Felman investigates, the promise, or more specifically the promise of marriage. In this case, as Butler (2003) asserts in her afterword to Felman's book, the sexual body is involved in decisive ways, not as an “‘intentional’ disposition, but as unconscious fantasy structuring bodily desire” (119). The speaking body is now a “chiasmic relay” where its double identity—as vehicle for speech and a sexual subject (and object)—is being performed (118). A promise of marriage does not function if the speaking body and the addressee do not invest their desire in the verbal exchange.

Butler's interpretation of the speech act makes it not only a verbal act, but a complex event in which bodies and words work together, not

necessarily, though, on the same trajectory. “A speech act is reducible neither to the body nor to a conscious intention, but becomes the site where the two diverge and intertwine,” she writes (122). This divergence and intertwining make up the incongruence, which is a basic feature of the speech act. There is an incongruence between speech and intentions because the intention is both conscious and unconscious; there is an incongruence between speech and body because the body expresses its own message, which may be contrary to the speech; and there is an incongruence between speech and meaning because the verbal utterance may be ironic, paradoxical, or obscure.

Chiasm is therefore, in Butler’s use as well as in Merleau-Ponty’s, not merely a formal construction (as if that were possible) or repeated and reversed speech. It must be understood both literally and metaphorically as a marker of tight but unstable relationships. The chiasm underscores dependence and independence as well as interaction and deferral; it is a form into which different contents—that must be thought both together and apart—can be directed. Merleau-Ponty ties the chiasmic figure to problems of perception and elaborates on the many aspects of bodily encounters with the world or beings in the world. Butler limits her use of the term to speech acts, in particular in connection to sexuality and violence through the promise and the threat. In both cases, the chiasm functions as a helpful pattern for thought and can be useful and illuminating precisely because it does not, on the one hand, exclude any phenomenon from an analysis of intertwined relationships, and, on the other hand, it underscores the tensions, frictions, and unevenness of the connections of the phenomena in question. With these theoretical positions in mind, I will approach these narratives and specifically suggest a chiasmic reading of the incongruent connection between experience and representation.

### INTIMATE LIVES

#### VITA ANDERSEN’S *HOLD KÆFT OG VÆR SMUK*

The Danish author Vita Andersen attracted literary attention in the 1970s with rough descriptions of lonely women in the metropolis. Her books *Tryghedsnarkomaner* [Security Addicts] and *Hold kæft og vær smuk* [Shut Up and Be Lovely] attracted a large audience, but Andersen was also criticized for oversimplification and pessimism, and the former

book even became a prototype for the slightly pejorative stylistic label “knækprosa” [broken prose]. However, a careful reading of her books confirms their aesthetic qualities, not deriving from their realism, but from an intense preoccupation with the problematic aspects of consumer and media culture.

*Hold kæft og vær smuk* consists of two groups of short stories. On the one hand, they are stories about mothers and daughters in which the mothers are all extremely dysfunctional or absent. On the other hand, they are about young women who struggle in order to achieve certain ideals with respect to body, fashion, design, job, love, and marriage. The texts about the girls and their mothers are set in a working class neighborhood of Copenhagen that is riddled with poverty and distress. Those about the adult women are, by contrast, set in an affluent urban society in which the women are deeply affected by the demands of a conformist consumer culture and stumble through life constantly threatened by social and mental breakdown.

Vita Andersen’s adult women are captured in the paralyzing routines of urban life and are neurotically concerned with obeying the rules that constitute the structural framework of their lives. The rules are internalized in their bodies as if they were authoritarian prison guards equipped with crude methods for physical and psychic coercion. The women in Andersen’s universe are helpless victims of sexually offensive men and power-hungry bosses, but first and foremost of their own unsatisfied desires. Through the framing stories of childhood and the description of the media’s immense social pressure on body and soul, Andersen portrays how emotional emptiness arises and why it assumes a clearly narcissistic character.

The short story “Iagttagelser” [Observations] describes an acute crisis in a young woman’s life. Anna is a figure in a metropolis with neither individuality nor specific traits that could make her unique. She is a copy of the many glossy pictures of good-looking women portrayed in the media in the intense propagation of ideal beauty and mainstream fashion. This woman is a chameleon, who can alter her identity in a moment and perform new roles by means of changing her clothes and redoing her make-up. According to the norms of the entertainment and beauty industries, she is simply perfect: a human being with a seemingly ideal appearance at all times.

The story describes a day in this woman’s life when her façade cracks and a different side of her life becomes visible. Early in the story, the

reader is warned that an apparently normal condition hides the abnormal or unhealthy. We meet her early one morning in bed when she “ubevidst” (140) [unconsciously] touches her stomach with her hand, “for at mærke, om hoftebenet stadig kunne føles skarpt på hånd og albue” (140) [in order to make sure that her hip is still sharply palpable with the hand and the elbow]. Her corporeal fixation is thus an integral part of her unconscious self-control. Furthermore, she sees to it that she consumes an exact number of calories, and with a meticulously arranged and measured breakfast tray, she sits in her bed and enjoys the meal.

Anna’s sexual life is mechanical and consumeristic, and her many men are fantasy objects that she enjoys remembering. After sexual intercourse, she either keeps the semen in her vagina for several days and takes pleasure in tasting and smelling it, or purges her body thoroughly depending simply on whether the man had been nice or not. The male sexual partner is obviously not interesting as a person, only as bodily attributes associated with taste and fragrance. The woman’s desire seems to be satisfied with these fragmented aspects of the man’s body. As a sexual being, she is caught between her imaginary and narcissistic projections and her recent experiences.

Her morning preparations reveal that she has, seemingly, very sensitive skin because she cannot tolerate water on her body. It feels as if “vandet ætsede hendes hud så tidligt på dagen” (140–1) [the water burned her skin that early in the day]. Instead of taking a shower, she moistens her face with skin tonic and washes only her hands. If she had stayed overnight with a man, she simulates taking a shower by turning on the water while she sits on the toilet seat. Without make-up, her face feels naked to the extent that anyone can see through her, and the daily procedure of putting on the cosmetics is replete with decisions. “Hun blev næsten altid den pige, der passede til den sminke, hun havde valgt” (141) [She almost always became that girl who suited the make-up that she had chosen]. Her clothing is of course also carefully selected in order to produce the right image, and when she turns up on the street as the perfect example of a modern-day idol, she smiles happily.

This woman presents herself in conformity with the directions from the media and fulfils uncritically the demands of conformity that are made by consumer culture. Her life is one hundred percent governed by instructions, hints, images, and messages that she has read, or rather absorbed, in women’s magazines. Believing that her body does not tolerate water in the morning is a way of internalizing a lie that nevertheless



constitutes her self-image and identity and decisively determines her behavior. Likewise, the idea that her face is transparent without make-up is a self-perception that matches the narratives that are produced by the cosmetic industry, but nevertheless it also mandates how she feels about it. In this manner, Anna is indeed a product of the powers that constantly offer her a perfect life.

How this internalization takes place may be judged from the way she reads the newspaper. When sitting in bed with her breakfast tray, she reads without seeing the letters. "Forsidens sorte samlesæt af bogstaver så hun ikke. Men allerede to sider inde i avisen var der et billede" (140) [She didn't notice the black pattern of letters on the front page. But already two pages into the paper, there was a picture]. Inside the paper, she can admire the spring fashions in photographs of young girls in long skirts. In the newspaper, thus, she only looks at pictures. A hint of what sort of texts she actually reads comes later during her walk to the train station. She talks to herself, but the words are not her own. They are quotations directly reproduced from the world of romantic fiction in which she lives: "Det var en strålende smuk og glad Anna, der gik ham i møde. Jeg elsker dig. Jeg elsker dig, hviskede hun lavt. Det glædede hende også at se ordene" (142) [It was an amazingly beautiful and happy Anna who went towards him. I love you. I love you, she whispered silently. It was also a pleasure for her to utter those words].

Before the crisis arrives, the reader has been given enough information to sense the impending trouble. The substantial part of the novel describes a breakdown that takes Anna to the verge of suicide. Suddenly, at the train station, she turns around and goes home to bed where she regresses into a state of being in which oral needs predominate. She eats all the forbidden food, drinks vast quantities of whisky, wolfs down pills, and even urinates in bed because she does not bother to get up. She disconnects the telephone and stays in bed, apathetic and indifferent, until she gets into the bath tub, throws up, slits her wrists with a razor blade, and looks at how the blood pours out. The next day she walks to her job again, almost in the same shape as before the breakdown, now having the look of a model.

The breakdown has many symptoms that call for a psychoanalytical reading, but for my reading it is more pertinent to discuss the function of the media. Who is this woman, and who does she think she is? When a colleague knocks at the door, Anna is about to be interviewed on television wearing a white, pleated blouse with her hair combed back.



Clearly, she hovers in a fantasy world and tries to cling to a daydream of being famous. The interruption destroys her efforts to turn her thoughts to herself as the public personality she imagines, but when the colleague has left, Anna turns on the television and watches a woman crying. She cries too but feels relaxed and comforted by the scene in which she takes part: two tearful women look at each other from their respective side of the big bed.

How does this text respond to the theoretical considerations concerning the chiasm? In her construction of this fragile young woman, Vita Andersen draws a sharp picture of a life on the border between experience and representation. A chiasmic approach can perhaps assist in seeing both the divergence and convergence of these categories. On the one hand, the woman has a body, sexuality, a job, and she lives as a single individual in an urban apartment. She is a person who experiences the daily routines of a normal life. On the other hand, the woman finds models for her identity in the fashion and cosmetic industry, and she produces a self-image constantly and entirely in negotiating with media representations.

This activity goes so far that she hardly knows the difference between herself and the represented women whom she emulates. On the one occasion in the text in which she speaks her own name, Anna, it *is*—and is not only *like*—a quotation from a romance. Her name as well as her identity are at the same time both reality and fiction. Her palindromic name is even significant for the chiasmic intertwining of the categories. When she dreams of being a television personality, she has to be dragged out of the fictional coma in which she so deeply enjoys dwelling and instead finds herself as a crying victim, again, ironically, with a representational double on the screen. Anna screams but cannot hear her own voice; the televised lady speaks, but Anna can only see her mouth. The tears are both curtains through which she can look, a sensed part of her body, and a moving picture on the monitor in front of her.

The divergent link between sound and hearing, between image and seeing is in Merleau-Ponty's conception a chiasmic relationship. The talking body without words, as well as the talk without body, is in Butler's terms instantiations of incongruent interrelationships. In the end, Anna herself is a chiasmic character, and the story a demonstration of her partly successful and partly unsuccessful struggle to wipe out the differences between experience and representation and to fulfill the task with her own body.

## ON THE MARGINS OF NORMALITY MARION HAGEN'S *AKT*

The Norwegian author Marion Hagen published her first and only novel *Akt* [*Nude*] in 1999. As a novel, it is of course more extended and complex than Andersen's short story. Still, they have interesting characteristics in common since both portray women negotiating the powerful impact of media representation. Hagen's female character, Liv, is in that respect a more fully conscious and advanced media player, and she also uses her body to its fullest potential in different media productions.

The novel is set in Oslo and London in the late 1990s in a bizarre, multicultural milieu of young people absorbed by the media they consume. They spend hours in front of the television and DVD player watching the same movies again and again while eating pudding and pizza. They frequently have sex, seemingly without much passion, and they take part in the night life of the city and are, therefore, prepared for sexual experiments and drug excess. But as a fragile subtext on the fringes of normality and mediated imagery, a love story demands attention. Liv can never forget her former boyfriend, Jo, who has only one arm, and the videotape in which he expresses his longings for her and offers his missing arm, a gesture that makes a profound impression on her.

Liv is working at an academy of arts as a nude model. She has a scar on her chest from heart surgery, which she always covers with make-up before mounting the podium and offering her naked body to the gaze of the male professor and his male students. This process of simultaneously exposing and concealing the body not only responds to the gendered sexual situation that permeates the studio's atmosphere, but also reflects the way a person hovers in a body in which identity is both materiality and mask. The scar can be understood as the novel's chiasmic turning point. On the one hand, the scar is a personal mark of Liv's identity and history and on the other a textual image that condenses the universal problematic of being different.

Liv's work as a nude model has a similar function. It ties experience and representation together in a bodily performance, which includes the conventions and gendered aspects of visual art as well as the model's individual attitude to the situation. The nude is a classic genre that art students need to master, and the model's unclothed body is in this institutional frame a professional nakedness. Still, it is not easy to differentiate between a personal and a professional body, a fact that

Liv's case repeatedly underscores. The male gaze at her naked body is invested with erotic potential, which is also a part of the art form's aim and attraction. The model's personal reaction to the unpleasant aspects of the posing is to direct her look above and beyond the spectators whereas an institutional response demands a continuous presence in the room of more than two students.

On three occasions Liv's posing is interrupted because of her bodily needs; first she collapses because of exhaustion, then she starts menstruating, and finally her scar is disclosed. These reminders of her humanity contrast with the static object that she is supposed to incarnate, and, thus, the body's behavior motivated by outer and inner forces emphasizes the ambiguity of the situation as both experience and representation. Moreover, these interruptions cross the border of normality since Liv's most important aim is to hide her scar. Her concern about her secret being revealed is confirmed when her identity as a marked individual is rejected by a student who wants to finish his drawing but brings the collaboration to an end when he sees the scar. "Jeg ser riktig ut. Jeg har en normal kropp" (113) [I look right. I have a normal body], Liv repeatedly says to herself, but she does not allow the scar on her body to be an integrated part of her identity, or rather, of her visible self. Thus, both her behavior and the student's response to the scar contribute to the conception of corporeal disfigurements and physical disabilities as anomalies. The scar is denied exposure and representation, and Liv's exhibitionistic bravery as a model is contradicted by her profoundly apprehensive attitude as a subject.

Glimpses from Liv's earlier life encourage the reader to interpret her conduct as an understandable answer to the mores of normalcy. Liv was born with a cardiac malfunction that caused a swelling on her chest; her mother made her undress in front of other people so that they could see the external projection of her abnormality. At nineteen she underwent extensive surgery that alleviated her cardiac irregularity, relieved the swelling—and left a scar. As Petra Kuppers maintains, the scar is a "meeting place between inside and outside, a locus of memory, of bodily change" (1). It seems, also in Liv's case, that memory plays a decisive role in understanding her situation as a corporally marked person.

This fact is foregrounded in the description of Liv's relationship to her friend Jo. He lives in London and is trying to establish a career as a film director but nevertheless depends on an inheritance from his parents, who died in an accident. Jo himself lost an arm in the same

calamity and is now trying to forget that it is no longer there. In his case, the phantom limb becomes the site where his traumas are exposed and at the same time the very place where Liv's and his experience meet. One day he leaves the house after having observed Liv who, in a gesture of sympathy and identification, tries to cut some bread while pretending to have only one arm. At the same time, though, Jo seems reconciled to having a missing arm. After their breakup, he sends her a video in which he points at her with his non-existent limb and says that he misses her. The missing limb and the missing Liv are the two losses of his life that are intertwined in the video message.

The video represents a characteristic aspect of their relationship and this generation's way of life, which is based on multimedia experience. The young people who are described in the novel live their lives through and in relation to different media and perform their identities. Liv and her friends spend a great deal of time watching television and movies, and they seize upon and reflect actions and phrases from the entertainment industry in their own conduct. Jo's video is an apt answer to the mediated arrangements that surround and constitute their lives. For Liv and Jo, sex, for instance, means playing games in which he decides the story, and she acts out the various roles. Their sexual behavior resembles a pornographic film, and the line of demarcation between acting and living—between fiction and real life—can be difficult to draw. This border is a construct that contributes to the establishment of identities and relationships, but it can hardly offer more than provisional frames for life in a society saturated by electronic signs.

A significant illustration of the implication of this blurred exchange between experience and representation is seen on the billboards on the wall outside of the house where Liv lives. On the first page of the novel, Liv passes them on her way to the first session at the academy. A beautiful, scantily dressed woman smiles at her from the poster. "Summertime!" the text on the wall announces though ironically it is winter. Later, Liv accepts a public relations job in which she is supposed to pose naked together with a man while they simulate Edvard Munch's painting *The Kiss*. As a result, toward the end of the novel, Liv sees herself on the billboards both when she leaves home and returns as well as when she poses at the academy and directs her gaze to the world outside. Her body has been multiplied on posters all over the city, and she ascertains, not without deep satisfaction that she looks normal.

For Liv, normality seems to be a condition that exists as representation. She finds her appearance acceptable and in tune with the governing norms only in images. During her posing at the academy, she takes photos of the students' art works that show her own body in drawings and paintings. In the end, she can decorate her room with three hundred photos of her naked body, and even though the photos are very different, she concludes that her body is "right." She has a normal body. Ironically, Liv is aware of the idealization effects of the beauty business and analyzes her friend Jenny's constant struggle to look perfect as a result of these forceful mechanisms. Also Milla, another friend, is helplessly subjugated to the powers of the cosmetic industry and gets money instead of objections from her mother when she wants to fix her body by means of surgery.

As an example of the importance of media representations for identity creation and self-esteem, Jo's project is illustrative. In an attempt to understand her friend, Liv reads his many drafts for a film manuscript, which she finds in a box in the basement. They all have identical plots but no conclusion and tell the story of a young man who tries to take his own life but fails and becomes a cripple. He then quits his job, buys a handicap car and a camera, and starts to take pictures of what the text calls "defekte mennesker" (128) [defective human beings], that is—in the text's own words—crippled, deformed, and disfigured people, dwarfs, blind, and mongoloid people. After some time, he becomes intensely preoccupied with a girl with only one leg and starts to map her life. An enclosed video cassette with scenes showing Liv and Jo in different situations makes her understand his project autobiographically. One scene shows Jo while having sex with a drug addicted girl with one leg; perhaps this provocation is why Liv gets angry and destroys the cassette.

The documentation of crippled lives is an ambiguous task in the novel. On the one hand, it seems to be a necessity for both Liv and Jo to see themselves as representations, as fleshless copies projected into mediated forms. On the other hand, this dimension of performed life also constitutes a reminder that maintains and even deepens the traumas of their lives. Thus, there is no direct and simple reading of the bodies and their representations, only a number of situations that cause a variety of reactions and affective responses.

Apart from the main characters, a textual strategy of the novel offers extremely one-sided portrayals of the characters. As if a human being has only one dominant trait, the characters are, cliché-like, called "the

sympathetic man,” “the melancholic girl,” “a fat negro woman,” “the transvestite,” “the full-blooded Sámi,” etc. One girl laughs as if she were Swedish, another speaks with an ugly accent from western Norway, a Negro utters some Negro words, and the two Asian girls giggle in a typically Asian manner. The locations change between London and Oslo, and the milieux are multicultural, multiethnic, and multi-sexual. Often, many categories are exposed at the same time. Liv as a narrator does not seem to perceive the often conventionally pejorative sense of her words but uses them merely as characteristics. But on the other hand, it is possible to read her vocabulary as a protest against the social facts behind and within language. Since she and her friends are profoundly identified and affected by labels like “disabled,” “defected,” “lesbian,” “Sámi,” etc., her speech acts as a normalizing strategy.

The pluralistic mix of sexual attitudes and ethnic backgrounds is a given. This fact does not mean that the borders between the categories are fixed—although they usually are—or that the coexistence of differences is not without severe friction and conflict. Liv’s grandmother is a Sámi woman living in northern Norway; hence, Liv is part Sámi. Once when she and Jo join a party, she finds herself in the midst of a completely white setting. The interior and the decorations are white, and the people are dressed in white. Probably due to drugs, they are all very friendly and happy, but the whiteness, which could connote cleanliness and purity in a number of registers—for instance ethnicity and sexuality—reveals itself as an illusion when it comes to more fundamental attitudes. Liv is introduced to a black American, who asks her where she is from. When she says that she comes from Lapland and is a sea Lap, he becomes overly excited and asks whether the Sámis listen to the Spice Girls, whereupon he calls her “Sea Lap Spice.” Liv’s reaction is to steal his wallet.

She also steals other wallets, but when she is caught, she states miserably that it is all just a game. But what is a game? Her first boyfriend took his own life with a pistol shot to the head. Liv hardly remembers how he looked—only that he was handsome. She did not really know him very well but enjoyed having sex with him in various places and positions. Apart from having sex, they used to discuss—as a blatant irony—the meaning of life. The novel ends when Liv, after having had a bicycle accident that inflicted an ugly wound on her face, takes a look at her own body in the mirror, insists that she is normal, and shoots herself with a toy pistol filled with red wine.

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The novel is of course a pastiche, and references to *Pulp Fiction*—among other movies—underpin a reading in which popular culture serves as a model for this account of the everyday life of young people in a pluralistic and global society. At first glance, it seems very superficial, very consumerist, and scarcely human. At second glance, it is impossible not to notice a deep concern in the text for the way this culture uses and exploits bodies—and thus people—in the interest of power, desire and money, and even in the interest of entertainment and art as well. Hagen's novel illustrates the way experience and representation, real life and mediated fictions, are crucially intertwined in the creation and performing of identities. This mode of living takes place in a manner that underlines mediation as the very condition of the contemporary mode of living.

### CONCLUDING COMPARISON AND SUMMARY

Vita Andersen's short story about Anna introduces a consumer culture in which a woman's existence hovers on the edge between control and chaos. This circumstance is clearly caused by a life style deeply affected by the media. She finds her ideals in magazines and on television and internalizes them in an uncritical effort to change identities. Her sudden crisis, which is probably not just a single event, reveals her most inward constitution and is a symptom of the strains of her way of life as is the sudden restoration of her habits as well.

Marion Hagen's novel places the characters in a more multicultural and international setting and provides the young generation with an all-consuming attitude towards a more diversified media culture than in Andersen's text. Common are the clichés, the conventions, the imitations, and the passive consumerism. Hagen's protagonist, however, is a more learned participant in the media world and her work as a model makes her reflect in more complex and nuanced ways on the performative use of her body. Liv and her friend Jo also create numerous media productions in order to communicate, express, understand, and shape their lives. The scar on Liv's chest is nevertheless a mark, a bodily reminder, that demonstrates how she is almost obsessively preoccupied with normality, and her make-up confirms rather than erases those borders of normality that she struggles to change.



The focus of my readings has been the complex interrelationship between experience and representation, and I hope to have demonstrated how both texts are conspicuously concerned with the construction of identities and intimacies in a postmodern media culture. How the processes of experience and representation are fundamentally intertwined, and how the women in the texts are affected by this interrelationship has been a main concern of my analysis. In this undertaking, I have found the chiasm an illustrative methodological device and model for thought.

My intention has not been, however, to introduce a new theory of reading or a crystal clear concept, but rather a way of handling the difficulties that the subject matter presents. Experience and representation are not pure conceptions or phenomena, but are usually more or less intertwined—sometimes identical, sometimes not. All in all, the human body is perhaps the most prominent site where this interaction takes place, and literature has a unique ability to stage its dynamics and complexities. As a classical rhetorical trope transferred to modern ways of reading and with an elaboration and deepening of its meanings through phenomenology and literary speech act theory, the chiasm has proved to be a useful approach to this problematic.

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