

Konstanze Kutzbach

## OurSelves at War

Metaphorizations of Identity on the Borderline  
in Twentieth-Century Anglophone Literature

Walter Göbel, Therese Fischer-Seidel, Klaus Stierstorfer (Hg.)

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To my parents



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## Table of Contents

1	Introduction: Critical and Theoretical Perspectives on Gender Identity on the Borderline	1
1.1	Theatres of War: Zooming in on Identity – Themes and Theories	1
1.2	Critical Implications of War (Literature): Between Mimetic Confession and Anti-Realist Philosophy	8
2	Reality and Signification: A Theoretical Approach to Gender Identity	21
2.1	Locating Baudrillard's Paradigm of Simulation	21
2.2	Identity and Linguistic Signification	23
2.2.1	Representation versus Simulation – A Critical Approach to Baudrillard's Three Orders of Simulation	23
2.2.2	Baudrillard and Kristeva: Identity and Linguistic Signification in Discursive Perspective	33
2.2.3	Baudrillard and Bataille: Identity and Linguistic Signification in Hyperreal/Counter-Real Perspective	37
2.3	Identity and Visual Signification	43
2.3.1	Twentieth-Century Spectra of the Visual: The Development of the Gaze	44
2.3.2	Baudrillard, Foucault, and Lacan: Vision in Discursive Perspective	46
2.3.3	Baudrillard and Bataille: Vision in Hyperreal/Counter-Real Perspective	52
3	Representations of Borderline Negotiations in Literature from 1898 to the 1950s – The Gendered Body as Metaphor between Ideology and Psychology	63
3.1	Excluding the Other: The Gendered Body as Political/Ideological Metaphor	63
3.1.1	H. G. Wells: <i>The War of the Worlds</i> (1898)	63
3.1.2	Jack London: <i>The Iron Heel</i> (1907)	72
3.2.	The Other Moving inside: The Gendered Body as Psychological Metaphor	79
3.2.1	Rebecca West: <i>The Return of the Soldier</i> (1918)	79
3.2.2	Virginia Woolf: <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> (1925)	91
3.3	Synthesis and Return	102
3.3.1	William Faulkner: <i>The Unvanquished</i> (1938): Synthesizing the Body as Ideological and Psychological Metaphor	102
3.3.2	William Golding: <i>Lord of the Flies</i> (1954): The Return of the Body as Ideological Metaphor	113

4	The Representability of Borderline Negotiations in Literature from the 1960s to the Present Day – The Gendered Body as Philosophical Metaphor	127
4.1	Postmodern Travels	128
4.1.1	Kurt Vonnegut: <i>Slaughterhouse-Five</i> (1969): Mental Travels in Time and Space	128
4.1.2	Paul Auster: <i>In the Country of Last Things</i> (1987): Geographical Travels in Time and Space	139
4.2	Postpostmodern Inertia and the Collapse of Categories	150
4.2.1	Sarah Kane: <i>Blasted</i> (1995): Beyond Travelling	150
5	Outlook and Conclusion	167
5.1	The Mise-en-Scène of the Theatrical and the Filmic Body: Special Cases of Postpostmodern Inertia	167
5.2	Conclusion	172
6	Bibliography	177

# 1 Introduction: Critical and Theoretical Perspectives on Gender Identity on the Borderline

## 1.1 Theatres of War: Zooming in on Identity – Themes and Theories

"The rhetoric of the end of the subject is, of course, directed against conventional notions of a subject defined as a bounded unity with a specific structure that bestows identity – a subject, in other words, that we have come to identify historically with the Cartesian subject" (Schwab 1994, 5). This range of theoretical attempts at describing subjectivity, from the subject as a bounded unity to its end, is reflected in a broad spectrum of fictional realizations of these negotiations of subjectivity in literature and culture. Influenced by a variety of discourses which, around the turn of the century, increasingly called into question the notion of a unified subject in control of itself, the twentieth century has brought forth literature which fictionalizes these uncertainties. In several literary genres, identity is put at risk not only by conceptual or philosophical (constructivist) implication, but through the plot itself, which – due to generic conventions – directly thematizes identity at risk. One genre which traditionally places the identity of its protagonist or characters against the situational backdrop of an impending threat of violence and death, is what is traditionally referred to as war literature.

War literature – primarily defined through its specific thematic focus (see, for example, Zapf 1997, 179) – provides, by generic implication, a context in which borderline negotiations between hero and enemy, and, by implication, subject and object, take place in a paradigmatic fashion.<sup>1</sup> This genre traditionally features (male) subjects in extreme and often traumatic borderline situations which pose a threat to their physical and psychological well-being. Tying in with Rainer Emig's approach of focussing on the metaphorical implications of war for the negotiation of subject identity rather than on war as an empirical object (see Emig 2001, 16),<sup>2</sup> the aspect of war in my thesis is of relevance mainly regarding its function as a plot constituent by means of which the aspects of violence and death – which will provide the focal point of identity and the body at risk – are foregrounded. As the following quote indicates, fictions of violence lend themselves to such an analysis as the thematic aspect of violence already implies a direct and explicit relationship between body and text, i.e. processes of signification, by means of which it is constituted:

[N]arratives of violence are fictions that dramatize the body, perhaps more so than other narratives, and certainly more explicitly. Violence codifies the knowability of the body according to how it is constituted in its transition from animate subject to inanimate object. Like calligraphy, violence is in a sense a textual inscription on the body, a semantic

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1 Horst S. Daemmrich's survey "Krieg aus Sicht der Themengeschichte" corroborates this thematic particularity of the genre of war literature: "In der Kriegsliteratur ist die Sphäre des Stofflichen besonders markant ausgeprägt" (1999, 3).

2 *Krieg als Metapher im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert*. 2001. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

possibility that requires both the body and the violence in order to become a sign. (Grönstad 2003, 13-14)

The thematic aspect of violence against the implicational backdrop of war shall thus function as the focal point which – by means of literally/thematically and not only theoretically/conceptually putting subjectivity and the body in crisis – provides direct access to a process of destabilization as it marks identity through textual inscription on the body.

The "theatre of war" as a focal point of borderline negotiations will be considered with regard to two dimensions: its thematic dimension refers to the intrafictional or plot level, i.e. to the borderline negotiation between "hero" and "enemy." Its theoretical or conceptual dimension pertains to the extra-fictional analytical level, focusing on the conceptualization of the borderline negotiation between the subject and an object/other. The negotiation of the locatedness of the hero in relation to the enemy structurally corresponds to that of the subject in relation to the object, and both the thematic and the theoretical dimension are based on the generic paradigm of the relational self, which is characterized by the constructionist idea of the self as constituted with regard to what is perceived as other. This negotiation brings into focus the notions of desire and fear, which regulate the constitution of subject identity and which at the same time are influenced by this negotiation. In combining these two dimensions, war-related literature – due to its thematic focus – functions as a focal point zooming in on identity at risk, and therefore provides a more direct comment on the personal and political implications of borderline situations than other genres.

In referencing different contemporaneous moral and socio-ideological contexts, this type of literature provides a projective plane for changing assumptions and concerns regarding subjectivity-constituting discourses. As will be elaborated in the second part of this introduction, recent criticism has focused, among other aspects, on gender as one particular constituent of subjectivity ambiguously at stake in this context. Since violence as a central ingredient of war situations carries the destabilization of identity to extremes, it provides a basis for theoretical de- and recodings of the gendered subject as well. These processes of destabilization and recoding are marked by ambivalence as, on the one hand, they set the stage for chaos – as Berg proposes when she writes "where there is war, there will be gender trouble" (1993, 442). On the other hand, as Higonnet claims, war is deemed "a *gendering* activity, one that ritually marks the gender of all members of a society, whether or not they are combatants" (qtd. in Berg 1993, 441), or, as Anne Goodwyn Jones notes, "if anything in our 'adult' culture has a history of establishing manhood in opposition to the feminine, it is war: war makes men" (qtd. in Clarke 1994, 229). My analysis will trace these ambiguous mechanisms of gendering the body in view of different realities of violence and death that codify the borderline negotiations of the body in a special way. Due to the large number of primary and secondary sources in the field of "war literature," it is necessary to devise a definition of "war" and to elaborate the criteria for the selection of the literary representations in order to locate my approach within the critical field: