

Media Information

Title

The Performance of Blindness, Gender, and the Sensory Body

Creator

Gili Hammer

Format

Hardcover, Paperback, Ebook (PDF or ePub)

Version reviewed

Published version provided by the publisher

Publication date

2019

Length

220 pages

Audience

Academic

Reviewer Information

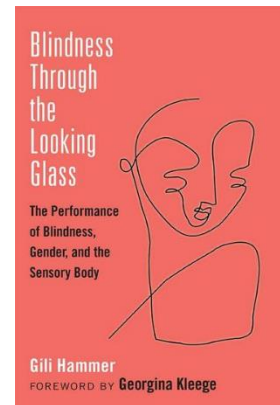
Mollie Frazier

East Caroline University

Editorial information

Peer reviewed by Hope Lappen, copy edited by Jessica Schomberg.

DisLIS Journal v. 2 (2025)
Blindness book review



Frazier
CC BY 4.0

Critical Review

As a sighted, cisgender American woman, I approach this research with awareness of the privileges and limitations that come with occupying a non-disabled identity. Although I have no formal training in gender studies or disability issues, I pride myself on constantly striving to improve my understanding of these topics as a researcher and librarian. Reading *Blindness Through the Looking Glass* provides a perspective into the experiences of blind women, while also demanding a discussion on societal assumptions regarding gender, vision, and the senses. Despite it being impossible to completely ignore my own privileges and biases due to my lived experiences, much like Hammer acknowledges in her book, I believe that initiating a better understanding of these women's lives is a meaningful starting point.

While I cannot speak to what it is like to live as a blind woman, I do recognize the ways in which society's expectations of femininity have shaped my life and those of feminine-identifying individuals around me. Because of this, I am able to identify with Hammer's perspective on beauty standards, even as I remain aware of the limits to understanding the highlighted individuals in this book due to my sightedness.

As humans, we are heavily dependent on images and cultural parameters of what is considered "beauty" to interpret the world, express ourselves, and communicate with others. Anthropologist Gili Hammer challenges this reliance on vision in her book *Blindness Through the Looking Glass: The Performance of Blindness, Gender, and the Sensory Body*. Although Hammer's study focuses on blind women in Israel specifically, it asks the reader to question their understanding of gender, beauty, and identity within their own culture and others.

To support these arguments, Hammer uses her background as an anthropologist and senior lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her research focuses on the anthropology of the body, disability studies, and gender. Drawing on a decade of ethnographic fieldwork and forty interviews with blind women in Israel, Hammer provides a thorough account that combines firsthand narratives with theoretical analysis.

As the title suggests, the book is structured around three concepts: gender identity, visual culture, and the sensory body. First, Hammer details how blind women approach gender, particularly femininity, in a society that puts so much emphasis on visual beauty. In discussing visual culture, Hammer dissects the dynamics of gaze and how it affects daily life for blind women, namely that they can be gazed upon but not do the gazing, leading to feelings of objectification. Lastly, she argues that blindness cannot be discussed without considering the impact of the other bodily senses and how they shape the visionless world around these women, creating their own unique experience of the world. Moreover, Hammer emphasizes that these women's identities and experiences are not marked by what is missing but instead, how it is used to empower their ideas of femininity and societal roles.

Hammer acknowledges her privilege as well, and how her sightedness can cause limitations on her perspective, and the importance of building trust with the participants of her research. She demonstrates her respect for these different lived experiences, writing, "As a sighted woman living in a visual culture, I address both blindness and sight as embodied experiences and social categories from which to investigate the relations between gender norms of beauty, femininity, and appearance, and between visibility and sight" (p. 16). Overall, I highly recommend *Through The*

Looking Glass and believe Hammer lays important groundwork for these conversations that may not be commonly acknowledged, by framing blindness not as a deficit, but as a cultural identity with its richness and complexity.

In sum, this book is

Highly Recommended