

The Space of Culture and the Theme of Prostitution in Natalie Mei's Drawings

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Natalie Mei (1900–1975) was the only woman in the Estonian art field who dealt with and displayed the theme of prostitution in her oeuvre in the 1920s. Through feminist reading and applying Juri Lotman's theorisations concerning the negotiation of borders between cultural and 'non-cultural' spheres, this article examines the ways in which Mei, in a few drawings, deviated from and challenged the dominance of the traditional patriarchal canon of the prostitution image.

Prostitution as a motif was uncommon amongst female artists of the interwar period and nearly non-existent amongst artists working outside of the Western artistic metropolises. Natalie Mei began challenging the stronghold of the traditional patriarchal canon of images with three drawings which were probably done in 1928. At that time, many of her works had a socio-critical aspect which was contrary to the views of a conservative, chauvinistic male society. While it is clear that she dissented from the dominant art field and her male colleagues' works, a question arises as to the way in which Mei's works follow, and the way in which they deviate from, the canon of prostitution images.

This article highlights a possible interpretation of how the depiction of the theme of prostitution was influenced by the gender of the artists and their position in culture. This interpretation is based on Lotman's theorisations regarding the borders and interaction between cultural and 'non-cultural' spheres.

Mei's graphite pencil drawing *Procurer* (fig. 1) portrays a neat, modestly dressed young woman, who ignores a drink offered by a robust man who is wearing a large ring on his finger, which shows his wealth. Behind the young woman, an older woman with a withered face is excitedly following the course of events. The young woman is also depicted in another of Mei's graphite pencil drawings, *Women* (fig. 2), where she is together with an older woman. They look more like city dwellers, and the thick make-up of the older woman is a particularly strong sign of their occupation. In the third drawing, the same women appear again. In the presumably unfinished drawing *Two Prostitutes* (fig. 3), the younger and thinner one is sitting

with her legs apart, wearing a pressed suit with a turban hat. The other, older and plumper one is standing barefoot with arms akimbo in a diaphanous undershirt. Both women are looking towards the viewer – the one on the right side with an arrogant gaze and the other one with an air of indifference. Mei expressed visually the aging process of the women in their careers as prostitutes, especially via the younger and thinner woman, who was depicted in all three drawings of the same period.

Particularly through the drawing *Procurer*, many dimensions arise for the analysis of the depiction of the theme. From one dimension, the drawing belongs to a *topos* of pictures dealing with procurement. For example, Mei's drawing *Procurer* has several similarities with the Dutch Golden Age artist Jan Steen's painting *The Wench* (1660–1665), especially in the rhetoric of the man's wooing and the old woman's excited voyeurism. Despite the fact that these two works are from very different periods, it is interesting how the procurer's orientation and the young woman's role can be interpreted to imply the artist's gender.

Feminist readings have examined Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings, which depart from the traditional and conventional way of handling female figures in Biblical stories, especially the Apocryphal story *Susanna and the Elders*.¹ The story seems to have inspired Mei's most radical male contemporaries in Estonia. Eduard Wiiralt's lithograph *Susanna* (1924–1925) represents strong verism, and his expressive view reveals his gender. The *Susanna* motif is displayed even more daringly and in a rougher and

more unpleasant manner in the local artistic field by Erik Obermann. In his ink drawing *Susanna* (1910), the woman is pregnant and sitting up-right, with her legs folded under and her birth water having broken, thus fulfilling women's traditional function – under old men's voyeuristic gaze. The writer and artist Aleksander Tassa wrote that Obermann's *Susanna* was a typical representation of a metropolitan woman.² That might have complicated women's aspiration to become cultural agents, although they were of the other gender and therefore belonged to another social and cultural class.

Artists produce works that are influenced by the specific cultural and social environment of the time. It is possible to say that their works are the result of multi-levelled and multi-faceted interactions between the artist and his or her environment. According to the theory of semiotics of culture, artwork is a recoded construction of languages and texts, and it is semantically heterogeneous and multi-levelled. It is also linked in a complicated way with its surrounding culture.

The conception of culture is dependent on and inseparably linked with its opposite, the 'non-cultural' sphere. While the cultural area is organised from the 'inner' point of view, the 'non-cultural' area is chaotic, disorganised and uncivilised.³ Between the two opposed semiotic spheres, there exists a boundary that surrounds the cultural semiotic sphere. The semiotic border is made up of 'filters' or translators,

2 A. Tassa, Erik Obermann. – Noor-Eesti IV. Helsinki: E.K.S. Noor-Eesti, 1912, pp. 235–240.

3 V. Ivanov, J. Lotman, V. Toporov, A. Pjatigorski, B. Uspenski, Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures / Тезисы к семиотическому изучению культур / Kultuurisemiootika teesid. (Tartu Semiootika Raamatukogu 1.) Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 1998, pp. 61–65.

1 See especially e.g. *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*. Ed. M. Bal. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

which may be women, servants and so forth, who may revise the text from one language to another. These 'filters' are also influenced by the period in which they exist. They are individuals who do not belong to the core of the cultural area and who belong or who are connected to the other 'non-cultural' sphere. The boundary is the area where semiotic processes are more active than in the center, in the core of the dominant culture.⁴

In Estonia around 1920, women were on the margins of the artistic and cultural fields, and the general public view was that young women could study art, but being an artist was not very favorable for them.⁵ Therefore, female artists functioned as filters between a female language and the language of traditional art education, with its prejudices against women.

There are many differences in Mei's drawings compared to how her male colleagues handled the theme of prostitution. For example, in the drawing 'Procurer' the young ordinary woman's speechless habitus reinforces the feeling of biological destiny connected to gender. The picture has a documentary quality, lacking any erotic nuances, which was the most important aspect in the way female artists dealt with prostitution in their art. In the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, a change was manifested in the way female artists pictured women:

not as objects of male desire or sexual fantasies, but as ordinary women.⁶

The immorality and decadence of prostitution was associated with women in general. It is possible to notice that class division in Mei's drawings is connected with the division of the sexes: the woman offering service is always from the lowest social class, from the working class. In the local cultural sphere it was also possible to notice another division among the Estonian people: between the common people and the intellectuals.⁷ This followed the pattern of the division of the sexes, and it became visible in connection with the literary circle Young Estonia and the modernisation of society at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁸

At the same time, male artists depicted women and prostitution from a more patriarchal aspect. On the one hand, there was a societal conception of women's dangerousness, and prostitution was seen as a manifestation of social degeneration.⁹ On the other hand, prostitution also represented attractiveness and sensuality, as prostitutes were objects of male desire. This reflected men's fears of female emancipation brought about by the urbanisation and modernisation of society.

4 E.g. V. Ivanov, J. Lotman, V. Toporov, A. Pjatigorski, B. Uspenski, *Theses on the Semiotic*, pp. 61–65.

5 R. Varblane, Karin Luts ja teised tüdrukud. – *Minakujund kui eesti naiskunstnike enesemääratlemise vahend*. – *Ariadne Lõng* 2000, no. 1/2, p. 75; K. Kivimaa, *Rahvuslik ja moderne naiselikkus eesti kunstis 1850–2000*. Tallinn, Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2009, pp. 87–93.

6 D. Ehrenpreis, *The Battle of the Sexes: The New Myth in Art, 1850–1930* by Barbara Eschenburg. – *Woman's Art Journal* 1997, vol. 18 (2), p. 34.

7 The atmosphere of the University of Tartu e.g. S. Tamul, *Naisüliõpilased Tartu ülikooli üliõpilaskonnas 1905–1918*. – *Vita academica, vita feminea*. Artiklite kogumik. Ed. S. Tamul. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 1999, pp. 99–123. The division among the Estonian see also e.g. I. Talve, *Eesti kultuurilugu. Keskaja algusest Eesti iseseisvuseni*. Tartu: Ilumaa, 2004, pp. 493–494, 514–516, 584.

8 E. g. J. Rähesoo, *Eesti ja aastatuhande vahetus. Modernsuses kasvamisest*. – *Valge käabustäht hajuvas kõiksuses*. Esseid. Ed. R. Veidemann. Tallinn: Perioodika, 1998, pp. 96–100.

9 A. Huyssen, *Mass Culture as Women: Modernism's Other*. – *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*. Ed. T. Modelski. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 194–195.

If we look deeper into these works by Mei and compare them with male artists' works, as well as investigating them through Yuri Lotman's theorisation of cultural borders, we could say that Mei transgressed cultural borders. Firstly through being a female artist who portrayed prostitution almost in the conventional way (especially in the drawing *Two Prostitutes*). The secondly, through breaking them down as in the drawing *Procurer*. She distanced herself from the conventional depiction of women.

Mei did not follow the traditional *topos* of representing prostitutes, and she – as a woman and as an artist, and as one who was located on the periphery of culture – had the ability to depict another cultural outsider – the prostitute – from a perspective which differed from the male-dominated tradition: she constructed a new way that did not focus on erotic or vulgar nuances. From a female point of view, Mei's work seems to convey a more realistic impression. She created this impression by using irony. Through the rhetoric of irony, irony allows freedom of interpretation but, in order to use it, one must be familiar with the object of the irony. Irony attracts the interest of the opposition, but at the same time it is sincere in its approach.¹⁰

By playing with the theme of prostitution and by disapproving of it, Mei seems to make ironic the traditional depiction of prostitution and prostitutes – a convention which was in symbiosis with the depiction of prostitution at the centre of the cultural sphere. She took the liberty of ironising the dominant conception.

The female artist can be seen as a 'filter' between 'cultural' and 'non-cultural' spheres. As such, she has a certain affinity with the position of prostitutes, who are traditionally seen as cultural drop-outs, and as a threat to the perception of the traditional woman.

Therefore, through the modernising cultural environment, traditional art education and the other – the female gender – a female artist could commit a transgression against the conventional code. In Lotman's theory, such 'filters' enriched the conventional codes of a cultural area.

10 J. Blomstedt, *Retoriikka epäilijöille*. Helsinki: Lohi-Kirjat, 2003, pp. 100, 165, 167–168; K. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945, pp. 503, 511–517.