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Gender - Art - Science: Elsa Bernstein's Critique of Naturalist Aesthetics

Professor Astrid Weigert
Georgetown University

Elsa Bernstein (1866-1949) was a successful playwright at the turn of the last century whose works *Wir Drei* (*The Three of Us*, 1892), *Dammerung* (*Twilight*, 1893) and *Maria Arndt* (1908) are generally categorized as Naturalist dramas. Of those dramas, *Dammerung* was the most successful and received critical praise after its performance at the Freie Bühne Berlin, where, under the directorship of Otto Brahm's German audiences were introduced to dramas by Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Holz Schlg to name a few of the best-known Naturalist dramatists. My approach to Bernstein's dramas and, for the purpose of this paper, in particular to *Dämmerung*, from an aesthetic-poetological perspective. This means that I read the drama in the context of the dominant Naturalist aesthetic and programmatic discourse as put forth by a number of male authors in a number of literary journals of the period (such as *Die Gesellschaft*, *Durch!* or *Freie Bühne*). Against the background of this aesthetic discourse, *Dammerung* acquires a new dimension: it becomes an avenue for Elsa Bernstein to partake in the Naturalist aesthetic discourse via the genre of the drama. This genre choice is significant because it foregrounds the limitations which women authors faced at the end of the 19th century with regard

to participation in a public aesthetic discourse. Aesthetic discourse at that time was still an almost exclusively male domain: male authors edited and published the literary journals and the contributors were almost without exception male. More important, though, is the fact that male authors had the option of producing both public aesthetic reflections and literary works and of combining the two to publicly express an aesthetic position. This two-folded approach ensures in many cases the author's literary fame and his position in literary history, since it supports his reception as the "founder" or leading representative of a literary movement. I will argue that female authors like Elsa Bernstein are eager to partake in the aesthetic discourse and find avenues to do so, even though those avenues lack the explicitness available to male authors and aestheticians.

Some genre considerations should be taken into account when considering her approach. The genre drama seems ill-suited to incorporating aesthetic reflections. In contrast to the flexibility of the genre novel, for example, the relative rigidity of the drama hinders the incorporation of aesthetic reflections. In addition, the naturalist drama seem specifically unsuited for that purpose since it rejects such potentially useful dramatic elements as prologue, epilogue, long monologues or asides. Moreover, the content focus on lower-class family conflicts so prevalent in Naturalist drama suggests another hurdle. **However, despite these genre-specific limitations, Bernstein succeeds in referring to Naturalist aesthetics** *in* her drama.

I will take my argument one step further: Elsa Bernstein makes use of the genre of the Naturalist drama not only to partake in the aesthetic discourse but, more importantly, to critique one of the central concepts of Naturalist aesthetic thought, namely the *Verwissenschaftlichung der Kunst* (rendering art more **scientific; applying scientific measures to literature; penetration of literature** through natural science). As I will show, Bernstein critiques the redefinition of the relationship between art and science called for by male Naturalist

aestheticians, by problematizing in her drama the propagated union between both fields via the category of gender.

In the aesthetic program of male Naturalists, the perceived need for the *Verwissenschaftlichung der Kunst* is best laid out in Wilhelm Bölsche's treatise *Die naturwissenschaftlichen Grundlagen der Poesie* of ????. In this treatise, Bölsche expresses his fear that the rapid scientific advances and their increasing influence over every aspect of life will render art, and in particular literature, irrelevant. To counteract this threat, Bölsche urges that literature needs to adapt to the new scientific era. He calls for providing literature with a scientific basis, for a "reconciliation" of the competitive fields of science and literature, and concludes that such a union or reconciliation will, in the end, elevate literature together with science (6; 11).

At first glance, this notion of *Verwissenschaftlichung der Kunst* seems to be unrelated to the category of gender. A closer look reveals though, that gender does play an implicit and explicit role in Naturalist aesthetics. Firstly, the natural sciences at the turn of the century were a decidedly male domain. By referring to images of medical doctors, pathologists, researchers and experimentors, when redefining the role of the writer under the Naturalist paradigm, Bölsche, following Zola, as well as other Naturalist writers such as M.G. Conrad refer to fields of study alien to women and women authors of the time. But there are also more explicit gender specific references which lend credibility to the assumption that the insistence on the *Verwissenschaftlichung* of literature was to at least some extent an attempt to curb and delegitimize the authorship of women. In that vein, male Naturalist authors attribute adjectives such as "masculine" or "virile" to their "modern", "revolutionary" approach to writing whereas previous literary styles are disdainfully categorized as "feminine." Such rhetoric can be

found, for example, in M.G. Conrad's polemic introduction to his journal *Die Gesellschaft* in which he invokes the "masculine powers" (*die mannhaften Leistungen*) of the new literature and announces that his contributors will be "*berufene Fachmanner*" (qualified male experts). Similarly, Eugen Wolff, in his review of contemporary literature, blames dilettante women authors for the perceived crisis in literature.

In *Dammerung*, Elsa Bernstein problematizes the gender-specific aspects of the nexus of art and science called for by male Naturalist authors. In doing so, she explicitly foregrounds the category "gender" which male authors neglect in their call for the *Verwissenschaftlichung der Kunst*. Thus, in Bernstein's drama, gender, art, and science form the axis of her aesthetic reflections. In *Dammerung*, Bernstein foregrounds the category gender in the context of the union of art and science via an unusual character constellation: a male artist and a female scientist who enter into a relationship. The creation of a female character who was a scientist was unusual for the stage and the real world of the time. The scientific field which Bernstein chooses for her female protagonist is the field of medicine, i.e., precisely the field which features so prominently in Naturalist aesthetics (with an emphasis on exact observation, dissection, diagnosis and experimentation).

In addition to the choice of the field of medicine, the medical specialty which Bernstein assigns to her character is also significant. Her female doctor is an ophthalmologist and an ophthalmologic surgeon to boot. [One of the very few other contemporary dramas which has female doctors as characters-Maria Gunther's play *Die beiden Hausarzte* (1889)-portrays two family doctors, who shine mostly through their incompetence]. Bernstein's choice of medical specialty reinforces the connection to Naturalist aesthetics in which "seeing" and "observation" formed the basis for recognizing the "truth". The overall thematic focus of the drama is closely

linked to the concept of "seeing": there is the artist's daughter who suffers from an eye disease that threatens her vision; there are the attempts of the ophthalmologist to cure her; and there is the ultimate blindness of the patient. And, one should not overlook the title of the drama, *Twilight* with its connotations of limited sight, vagueness and imprecision which run counter to the Naturalist call for **precision and exactness**.

Bernstein's female protagonist, Dr. Sabine Graef, is a competent, successful medical specialist who gets called to the house of the musician Ritter whose daughter Isolde suffers from a chronic and progressively worsening eye disease. Her scientific interest in the case causes her to conduct a thorough investigation into the history of the daughter's disease. In pursuit of the truth, i.e., the true cause of the disease, she does not shy away from touching on taboo subjects such as venereal disease nor does she shy away from questioning the treatment methods of her male colleagues. The high point of her professional work with Isolde is her masterful performance of a very difficult eye operation. But unlike her male colleagues, Dr. Graef is not only interested in medical research for its own sake. Observation, analysis and diagnosis are part of her profession but not its ultimate purpose. Indeed, she foregrounds her function as a "healer" and she succeeds in this endeavor through the operation (even if, later in the play, Isolde destroys her own eyesight in a gesture of desperation).

Bernstein's male protagonist, the musician Ritter, functions as the exact counterpart to Dr. Graef. He is a musician of the old school, unable to adapt to or adopt the new kind of music. He lives in the musical past and relives his earlier professional successes. In the course of the play, he makes a number of statements with regard to his position as an artist such as "the world is too modern for me (*die Welt ist mir zu modern*)" (32), "I don't fit in today's world anymore"

(ich passe nicht mehr unter die Heutigen" (80) or "I am one of **the discarded ones**" (**ich bin doch** ein Ausrangierter" (81).

The gap between Dr. Graef's scientific and progressive thought and Ritter's artistic nostalgia initially seems unbridgeable. The careful and hesitant development of a relationship between the two, shows a significant difference in the way in which both persons, representing the fields of science and art, react to the encounter with the other. In the course of the drama it becomes evident that the influence of Ritter, the artist on Dr. Graef, the scientist, is much greater than vice versa. For instance, Ritter's criticism of Dr. Graef's lack of knowledge and familiarity with music and art in general affect her deeply and cause her to take up music lessons. Ritter, however, while he warms up to Dr. Graef as a person, remains eminently skeptical of the natural sciences and in particular medicine. He is reluctant to answer her questions on the history of his daughter's disease. When Dr. Graef ever so slightly hints at the possibility of an inherited disease caused by venereal disease on his part, he bursts into a tirade condemning all of modern medicine: "to hell with all that modern disgusting stuff" (*Der Teufel soll das moderne Sauzeug holen*", 46). Ritter particularly rejects the scientific expectation and endeavor of finding the root cause for a phenomenon. His reaction to Dr. Graef's inability to find the cause of his daughter's disease is one of gloating disdain. Indeed, he welcomes this failure on her part because it proves to him that science cannot triumph over every aspect of life.

A reconciliation or union of the scientific and the artistic sphere does not take place. If at all, it is the scientific realm which is to some degree influenced by the artistic realm. At the end of the play, the musician and the doctor realize that a future together is out of the question. The forces that pull them apart are Dr. Graef's professional ambition and the insane jealousy of Ritter's

daughter. The parting of ways underscores the separateness and incompatibility of both spheres. They continue to exist as alternatives, but they are not united.

The portrayal of a failed relationship between the artist and the scientist represents Bernstein's view of the incompatibility of art and science. Consequently, she critiques and rejects and untenable one of the central premises of Naturalist aesthetics, namely the *Verwissenschaftlichung der Kunst*. She opposes this central Naturalist concept *within* an outwardly rather Naturalist drama. By using the category gender to create unusual genderspecific designations for her male and female protagonist, she is able to take a critical stance towards the prevalent aesthetic. The complex and creative manner in which she presents her aesthetic position in the drama, proves her resourceful in circumventing the generic limitations that existed for the participation of women in the public aesthetic discourse of her time.

Dämmerung is an invitation to take a new look at her other Naturalist dramas and to investigate in how far they, too, allow a similar interpretation as avenues for aesthetic reflection and critique of Naturalist aesthetics. Indeed, *Wir Drei* and *Maria Arndt* do allow such an approach. In *Wir Drei*, Bernstein portrays a successful female, "modern" (in the Naturalist sense of the word) playwright who lives an unconventional life. She is the writer as experimenter par excellence and takes her experiments too far by disinterestedly intervening in and trying to construct the relationship of a married couple who are her friends. Her experiment fails, the couple separates after a bitter fight, the writer as experimenter has failed. In *Maria Arndt*, Bernstein again uses a relationship conflict between an artist and a scientist to formulate her aesthetic position. In that drama, the artist is the former husband of the female character, whereas the scientist, who has given up **on his profession is the newly-found** old love of the woman. While the gender aspect is played out differently here, the artist and the scientist are again constructed as polar opposites who

cannot find common ground. Detailed interpretations of both *Wir Drei* and *Dämmerung*, *would*, *of course*, be another paper or two.