In the artist novel, women die like flies. At least this was the case up until the First World War, but before then it was a fact in artist novels written by both female and male authors, and with both female and male protagonists.

Why? Well, generally speaking, in male artist novels women die in order to give the protagonist poetic inspiration. In female artist novels, the protagonists die because they cannot combine their artistic calling with love.

In this paper, I will present some preliminary thoughts on my new research project on the female artist novel, in which I want to focus on in which ways the protagonists venture to solve the impossible equation of artistic creativity and procreativity, and how they reason about it. In the novels, contemporaneous constructions of femininity are constantly questioned and sometimes even transcended. But utopian visions of androgyny seem never to be successfully realised.

Historical background

The genre of the male artist novel, or the Künstlerroman, has its roots in early German Romanticism. It is closely linked to the Bildungsroman, since both genres incorporate the new subjectivity which got exposure in literary writings of the late 18th century. By then, the modern self-conscious artist can be detected in contemporary texts.

The Künstlerroman drives on the cult of genius which was hailed among the Romanticists. But genuine artists and geniuses were per definition of the male gender, and initially there were only male protagonists in artist novels. Female characters are portrayed as either muses or temptresses, i.e. either good or bad. The muse inspires the artist self-sacrificingly, and she is supposed to contribute her femininity to his work. The temptress leads the artist astray from his artistic calling, and both she and women in general, really, are considered a threat to art and the artist both in terms of sensuous lust and in the prosaic enforced duty of economic support (Svensson, p. 153).

The artist always had a male body, even though androgynous characteristics were a distinctive trait of the romantic genius. Sometimes the artist had a "feminine" soul, but since the
androgynous ideal built on a gender complementary ground à la Rousseau, the "feminine" male was always preferred over the "masculine" woman. Thus the androgynous ideal never involved truly radical transcendence of limiting gender boundaries (Battersby, p. 10f).

The supposed radicality of Romanticism’s androgyny is contradicted in for instance Friedrich Schlegel’s artist novel Lucinde from 1799. Here, both the male protagonist and his wife and muse, Lucinde, are initially artists. But in order to more fully support her husband, and to succumb to motherhood, Lucinde eventually abandons art. In Hölderlin’s Hyperion the male artist even becomes one with his female muse Diotima (named after Plato’s Symposium). She later dies, of course.

One of the first novels to be called Künstlerroman, is Ludwig Tieck’s Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen from 1798. Here the motif of the dead beauty as muse is typically applied. A very recent example of the employment of the motif of the dead beauty is the motion picture "Moulin Rouge", which won many Oscar’s the other year. As a 19th century pastiche, the plot is built around the male artist with writer’s block and the beautiful muse whose death from tuberculosis releases his creativity. In a meta-fictional move he can then in the end write the script of the film we have just seen.

However, the inspirational death of the female muse was not only fictional. The death of Novalis’ fiancée is for instance supposed to have inspired him to write both a work of prose betitled Heinrich von Ofterdingen (1800) and the famous poem Hymen an die Nacht (1800). The lost love of the poet is here depicted in terms of the ancient myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, a myth still used by poets today (Malmberg). Another real-life example is the German woman named Charlotte Stieglitz who committed suicide in 1834 in order to liberate her husband’s creativity (Bronfen, chapter 17). She was herself an author, but obviously judged Heinrich Stieglitz’ work as more important than her own. Luckily enough, however, there were other women who considered their work important at the time. One of them was Mme de Staël, who wrote was is usually considered to be the first female artist novel in 1807, namely Corinne ou l’Italie. (The "Italy" in the title has prompted many male critics to mistake it for a travel guide...)

The female artist novel

Madame de Staël’s novel Corinne became an exception to the male rule of the artist novel. The female genius in the shape of a celebrated artist challenged established norms of gender. The figure of the female artist may well have been the strongest emancipatory figure of the 19th century. In being a female artist one very distinctively transcended gender boundaries since the definition of an artist was to be a he. Contemporaneous constructions of femininity stressed woman’s role of mother
and wife, and thus the female artist was neither a proper woman, nor a proper artist. She was instead considered a monstrous anomaly.

The very act of creative artistry was also considered lethal for women. This is stated by for instance one of Elizabeth Barrett Browning´s medical doctors (Battersby, p. 12f). And a famous writer like Bettina von Arnim (1785-1859) could for instance identify herself with Goethe´s Mignon, even though the character dies in his story. There were not many women in fiction or real life that could serve as a model for the aspiring female artist.

The definition of a "real woman" during the 19th century did not include creativity. It was literally considered impossible for a woman to serve two masters, i. e. a demanding husband and an all consuming calling. The narration of a choice between calling and marriage is recurrent in the female artist novel, so recurrent that I (with Eva Heggestad) would call it a topos. The question the female protagonists asks themselves is whether they should "follow the voice of their heart and thus their feminine destiny, or wheteher they should follow their artistic calling with all the bitter consequences it brings" (Heggestad, p. 180, my translation). Either way, the chosen alternative does not turn out for the best. The choice of the calling usually brings death and destruction, but the choice of love and marriage does not always bring happiness either.

Not only the combination of creativity and love turned out deadly for female artists. Corinnee chooses love, which turns out catastrophic. Her love for the wimpy Scotsman Oswald silences her and she can no longer create and perform her art. But the story does not end here. Corinne cannot live in a traditional marriage, so Oswald instead marries her bland younger sister. Corinne´s genius and Italian affiliations are as irreconcilable to his social requirements for a domestic and subservient wife as they are to her. Slowly but surely Corinne dies of the consequences of the impossible choice. Toril Moi even claims that Corinne´s impossible choice incarnate women´s myth of modernity, which consists of the impossible equation of individuality and universality. You cannot be both female and human, woman and genius, private and public at the same time, and this is the reason for Corinne´s death (Moi).

To put it very bluntly and simplistic - Corinnee dies beacuse she does not want to get married. But marriage also kills, for example in Mathilda Malling´s Swedish artist novel Malin Skytte (1900). The story starts out with young Malin being sent off to Paris to take art classes. She really wants to become an artist, and works hard in order to get accepted to the yearly spring exhibition. However, before she manages to reach her goal, her boyfriend begs her to marry him. Reluctantly she gives in:

Malin shut her eyes and stooped her head. She had a vague feeling of giving herself up - her inner being, her boldest and dearest dreams. (p. 124, my translation)
Eight years and five children later she starts to paint again. But her husband cannot accept her strong attraction for art and artistry, so she can never display it to him or the family:

He could not understand that her actual habit of suffocating her enthusiasm for work, which she always feared as being a danger to the children and the household, eventually had made her feel almost ashamed of her own talent as being a flaw she could not cure but ought to hide. (p. 207)

Her feelings of shame in relation to the importance she, a wife and a mother, puts to art sickens her. The strenuous combination of family life and painting, the "double existence", becomes too much for Malin. She falls ill and dies.

Malin can be compared to Jenny in Sigrid Undset’s Norwegian novel with the same name from 1910. Both protagonists try to combine artistry with love, but this cocktail turns out to be lethal. Contemporaneous reviews of Jenny defined it as a story about a fallen vestal Órjesæter, p. 105). This stresses the fact that it was considered impossible to be an artist while at the same time being a wife and mother. A female artist was instead expected to live in celibacy in order to keep the flame of art alive.

The topos of the unsolvable choice continues to haunt female artist novels into the 20th century. But when did this established topos start to crackle? Well, some would say that it happened already in 1857, when Elizabeth Barrett-Browning published her poem Aurora Leigh as an explicit answer to Corinne. Aurora gets to keep both her glory and her man, and thus she is not forced to choose.

However, in a later Swedish female artist novel there is another interesting twist. In Ulla Bjerne’s Ingen mans kvinna (No Man’s Woman) from 1919, the engine of the narrative consists of the topos of the unsolvable choice between the sacrifice of either love or artistic fulfillment (Fjelkestam, chapter 2). But the ending is rather surprising. It is not the woman who has to sacrifice her dreams or her life, it is the man who dies and thus leave the protagonist free to pursue her creativity. In other words - the first dead beauty of the male gender has now been introduced to the genre of the artist novel.

The reader of Ingen mans kvinna is informed at length about the consequences of the impossible choice. It is also clear that the choice situation only has to do with women, not with men:

For men love and art belonged together. For women they were two completely separate poles. (p. 75, my translation)
The female protagonist is fully aware of social convention and she knows that she is supposed to suppress her womanhood in order to become a proper artist: the woman "inside of her must die in order to give room to the artist" (p. 74). To be a woman, according to the protagonist, means that you are cut out to live for someone else, not only for yourself. But she feels very ambiguous towards making her choice:

I thought one could choose. That one after rational and mature considerations could release oneself from heart and life to live for a chimera, a beautiful illusion, for the rest of one’s life. The sacrifice of this choice misled me. Since it would be hard for me to bear as a human being and a woman, I thought that it was the most difficult and thus the greatest. I did not realise that this thought included an egotistic and low desire to reach outside my gender, the gender I deep inside rejected. (p. 214)

To choose art at the expense of love would, according to the female protagonist, imply a life dedicated to a "chimera". This chimera, or illusion, would involve the transcendence of gender. The thought of transcending gender includes a revolutionary potential which consists of attempts to break gender boundaries. But in this case, in Ingen mans kvinna, it also includes self-hatred due to internalisation of oppressive mechanisms in a misogynic society - "to reach outside my gender, the gender I deep inside rejected". The female protagonist wants to transcend gender in order to get away from the entrapment of womanhood, which in its turn will enable her to reach beyond everyday reality:

Was it not necessary to rise beyond the average in order to see the stars? There was no chance for her to ever be able to reach them. It was a mistake to struggle for something that you eventually could reach. That created mediocrity. She rests her head against her hands and gazes forward. A man, perhaps it is possible for me to reach this goal. Work, there I loose my way, it never ends... She wanted infinity. (p. 30)

According to the quote, transcending gender involves a wish to rise above the mediocre in pursuit of artistic endeavours. Mediocrity lies in the traditional quest for women, i. e. to find a man to love and to marry, and this choice is too easy to make. Instead, the female artist´s longing for transcendence equals a nietzschean endeavour to overcome oneself and to reach "infinity".

Transcending gender thus implies a vision of androgyne perfection. The emancipatory potential in the androgyne vision has been put forward in some feminist research of later date, where Donna Haraway may be one of the most well-known examples. But terms like "androgyney" and "the third sex" have also been widely criticised for building on established norms of gender.
Gender complementary notions have then rather been cemented than questioned. And this is also
the case in female artist novels. Transcending gender seems like a rather fruitless task in many
respects. But I will continue to look into the question in my research project.

References:

Modernitetens litterära gestalter i mellankrigstidens Sverige, Stockholm/Stehag.
Heggestad, Eva (1991) Fången och fri. 1880-talets svenska kvinnliga författare om hemmet,
yrkeslivet och konstnärskapet, Uppsala.