

“I DON’T TELL THE TRUTH. I TELL WHAT OUGHT TO BE THE TRUTH”: ESCAPING CENSORSHIP THROUGH AMBIGUITY IN ELIA KAZAN’S ADAPTATION OF *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This essay aims at scrutinizing Kazan’s film adaptation of *A streetcar named desire* in relation to Tennessee Williams’ play text. Firstly, it discusses the play’s central themes relating them to the Hollywood context of film production of the postwar period. Such relationship intends to highlight particular elements in the content and form of the play that eventually allowed its relatively easy adaptation into the medium of film. Secondly, it presents an analysis of Kazan’s film adaptation covering issues such as cast selection, the additional scenes only mentioned in the play but shot in the film, as well as Kazan’s employment of cinematic technical elements such as camera movement, montage, setting, and lighting that contributed to construct the film’s discourse. Finally, the essay examines the ways in which Kazan got away with the demands of censorship and handled the play’s most daring issues, such as Allan’s homosexuality and Blanche’s rape.

■ **KEYWORDS:** *A streetcar named desire*. Tennessee Williams. Filmic adaptation.

***Streetcar’s* central themes and the American film context of the postwarperiod**

Since its release, in 1951, Elia Kazan’s film adaptation of *A streetcar named desire* (henceforth *Streetcar*), based on the homonymous play by Tennessee Williams (1984), has been regarded as a subversive, steamy and daring film. Despite accomplishing on stage a remarkable realization among theatergoers and critics alike, the adaptation of *Streetcar* into a film, as Phillips (1993, p.225) argues, required from its writer and director a careful work to assure that “the play would achieve an equal success through the narrow straits of film

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industry's production code and consequently reach the screen still keeping its artistic integrity". It comes with no surprise, though, that a play whose central themes deal with polemic issues such as moral disintegration and the urge to seek refuge from unhappiness through the pursuit of sexual pleasure would not pass smoothly through the eyes of the ultra-conservative American society of the 1950s. Nonetheless, as the present essay will demonstrate, in adapting Williams' play text to the medium of cinema, not only did Kazan manage to wisely get away with some of censorship's demands concerning the most scandalous scenes, but also found ways to retain the play's highly symbolic language and convey it through cinematic devices.

In the essay *The shape of film history*, James Monaco (1981) examines the historical context of Hollywood film production right after World War II (1939-1945) by accounting for several changes the war produced in American life as well as their impact on Hollywood film production. Monaco adverts that the war accelerated the mobility of the population, raised citizen's living standards, and altered profoundly race relations and women's roles. As a consequence of a fast-pace changing society, these war effects triggered in Hollywood audiences an interest in films dealing with social problems. During that period, the American film industry produced a growing number of films addressing problems such as ethnic and racial prejudice (*Show boat*, 1936), anti-Semitism (*Crossfire*, 1947), sufferings of badly treated mental patients (*Spellbound*, 1945), and the consequences of alcohol and drug addiction (*The lost weekend*, 1945; *Smash-up*, 1947; *The man with the golden arm*, 1955).

Indeed, although this moment is frequently regarded as the golden age of the American family, several popular Hollywood melodramas produced in the early postwar period reveal a tendency of depicting a pattern of deeply rooted social problems (SCHATZ, 1999), as in *All that Heavens allows* (1955) and *Written on the wind* (1956). Also, numerous films of the time often drew upon themes such as sexual frustration (*Cat on a hot tin roof*, 1958), cold and domineering mothers (*Suddenly last summer*, 1959), insensitive fathers and defiant adolescents (*Splendor in the grass*, 1961), and loveless marriages (*Double indemnity*, 1944). In part, this obsession of portraying the theme of marriage and family life as a bane reflected a popularized trend of psychoanalytic thought which attempted to explain human behavior. In a nutshell, most of these films constantly suggest that marriage and sexual frustration lead inevitably to neurosis.

Tennessee Williams' plays were written and produced within this context of postwar Hollywood film production. In this sense, *Streetcar* can be regarded as the first and most effective of all Williams' series of plays to deal with sexual frustration as a central issue.¹ Williams places his characters in a poor district of New Orleans

¹ Williams studied the problems of solitary women in two more plays: *Summer and smoke* (1948),

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ironically named Elysian Fields. The play starts at the moment Blanche DuBois has arrived to visit her sister Stella, who is married to the muscular and uncouth Stanley Kowalski. Both sisters descend from an old aristocratic French family and were brought up on a large plantation named *Belle Rêve* in Laurel, Mississippi. Despite Blanche's being rather surprised by the poverty of her sister's neighborhood and the dinginess of her cramped flat, she announces that she will be staying with the Kowalskis for a while.

As the story unfolds, Blanche starts a relationship with one of the husband's friends, Mitch, who is charmed by her fine manners and feels grateful for her attention, and, during the time she is living in the couple's apartment, the couple's relationship is disrupted by the guest's influence. The tension increases until, on Blanche's birthday, Stanley reveals that he has been digging up her past and has discovered that she has had countless affairs with men in Laurel. After Blanche lost *Belle Rêve*, her family property, she had resided in a seedy hotel named the Flamingo, welcoming any man who offered her comfort. In addition to that, she had been dismissed from her job as a high school English teacher because of a scandalous relationship with a seventeen-year-old student.

Stanley reveals his discoveries to Mitch, who breaks up with Blanche. This rupture leads her to increase her drinking and to descend more quickly into a state of mental depression. By the end of the play, Stella goes into labor, leaving her husband and sister completely alone in the apartment. After arguing, Stanley rapes his sister-in-law, who is physically and emotionally powerless and cannot fight him off. When Blanche tells Stella what has happened to her, the sister decides that she cannot believe it and, with Stanley's support, chooses to commit Blanche to a mental institution. When a doctor arrives at the Kowalski's apartment to take the patient away, Stella regrets her decision to betray her sister, but Stanley soothes her by easing her emotional pain with his seductive power.

According to Patricia Hern (1994), *Streetcar's* relationship with Hollywood film context can be explained by the fact that the play addresses at least two aspects of American traditions that had also been projected effectively during the 1930s and 1940s by the Hollywood film production. She firstly points out a nostalgic interest in the past, particularly in the romance of the years before and during the Civil War. The film *Gone with the wind* (1939) is a conspicuous example of this. In a sense, mid-twentieth century urban Americans were intrigued and fascinated by the ideas of the South, that is, they were charmed by the picturesque elegance of the landed elite who flaunted their inherited wealth and their studied gentility and high education. The estate of *Belle Rêve* and its symbolism, 'beautiful dream', belong to

a melodrama in which a Southern spinster attempts to ignore the sensual side of her nature, and *The rose tattoo* (1951), a lusty comedy in which a mature widow, after a long inner struggle, rediscovers love.

that tradition of privileged brilliance, which was doomed to be defeated in the Civil War and would then represent an image of decorative decay.

Secondly, the folklore of the Wild West was another aspect of America's past that certainly found wide appeal in the Hollywood cinema during the 1930s and 1940s, as the cases of *West of divide* (1934), *Stagecoach* (1939), *Dakota* (1945), and *Fort apache* (1948) illustrate.² The recurrent thematic of these films was to show heroes proving their worth in combat by sticking to their friends, just as Stanley feels bound to protect Mitch because they were together in war. In addition to that, these films helped depict some very stereotyped ideas of women either as the obedient housewife and child-bearer or as a good-hearted whore, as thoroughly examined by Laura Mulvey's essay (2005) "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)".

Another feature of *Streetcar* which certainly makes it a suitable product to be transformed into a film lies on the binary and stereotyped representation of women above discussed which somehow reflects the on-going ideology as well as the role of women in the American society at that time. The play's portrait of the two sisters as antagonistic figures draws upon stereotypes already established in American society; likewise, Stanley does not escape such portrait either, as he is a typical representative figure of a new raising American, an immigrant, a man of the city. Amongst his group, he is the one most likely to make his mark in a world of industry and commerce. He asserts his maleness and lack of refinement as his major and most powerful traits: where he cannot dominate sexually he uses violence. In this way, he shows a more acceptable version of the typical macho urban jungle portrayed by Hollywood gangster films in the 1930s. This was an idea equally important to the first generations of immigrants who came from Europe and thought of themselves as being genuine Americans. Like Tennessee Williams early plays, *Streetcar* deals with familiar concepts so that even when aspects of his plot or the ideas expressed were shocking, they nonetheless were to a great extent accessible to a large audience.

In that sense, one has to acknowledge that art (especially a popular form of art as cinema) has the power of shaping people's viewpoint and value systems (ADORNO, 2007). In turn, we end up realizing that art is also shaped by its consumers and to a certain extent this is what happens both in Williams' play and Kazan's film version inasmuch as the characters are a sort of emblematic representation of ideological figures in the American society. Neither Williams nor Kazan create them; they already exist and the story merely fleshes them out,

² To exemplify the popularity of the genre, it can be said that, in the late 1940s alone, there is at least one western among the best grossing movies of each year (SCHATZ, 1999), such as *San Antonio* (1945; grossed 3,55 million), *Duel in the sun* (1946; 11,3 million), *Unconquered* (1947; 5,25 million) and *Red river* (the biggest box office hit of 1948, grossing 4,5 million).

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gives them a face, a body, a name, because their essence already exists in the current society's and art's discourses. This can also be accounted as one of the reasons why the play was so successful on Broadway, and, so soon, transported into the big screen. Equally noteworthy, despite the fact that at first sight film audiences were likely to compare Williams' female characters to those common stereotypes of women portrayed in Western films, in *Streetcar*, like in many of his other plays, the characters assumed a level of psychological complexity rarely shown in Hollywood productions of the time.³

The cinematic structure of *A streetcar named desire*

Regarding the particular form of Williams' plays, Gene Phillips (1993), and Patricia Hern (1994) observe several evidences of the structure of his plays that prove their similarities with filmic devices not only in terms of content, but also regarding their form. Hirsch (1973, p.2 apud PHILLIPS, 1993, p.223), for instance, defends that “a movie based on a Tennessee Williams play is a Tennessee Williams film because its chief nourishment comes from the playwright himself”. The critic assertion is accounted on the fact that Williams was also responsible for adapting some of his plays to film, which, in turn, captured the spirit of the play text. In the case of *Streetcar* it is still possible to perceive that the play's tone dominates the film, regardless of a few changes in key points of the plot, and yet it does not bestow a theatrical inflection to the film. According to Hirsch (1973, p.2 apud PHILLIPS, 1993, p.223), such balance is due to the fact that stage-bound works, such as *Streetcar*, have been translated into “eminently successful movies that challenge rigid conceptions of theatrical and cinematic formats”.

In relation to its form, *Streetcar* is rather innovative and does not follow the traditional pattern of dramatic texts, generally divided into two acts. Hern (1994) calls attention to the unusual manner in which Williams structured *Streetcar*, and this setup turns out to be one of the major elements in the play that facilitates its adaptability into the film medium. Namely, *Streetcar* is a three-act play and, according to Spector (1989), this is a rarity in the contemporary world of one-act and two-act plays. Although the play could have been broken into two acts to satisfy the needs of audiences (who were used to an intermission in between acts) Williams wrote the play in three acts with the specific purpose of suggesting the passage of time: act one opens in late spring; act two takes place in the summer; act three occurs in the early fall. These references to time seemingly pose a question as to whether Blanche has overstayed her welcome as she states later in the play. Another possible account for such peculiar way of structuring his plays, which

³ Such complexity was so endemic in the text's main characters that, in the case of Kazan's film version, censors could not tell the “good” from the “bad” characters apart (PHILLIPS, 1993).

brings it closer to a screenplay, could be the result and influence of Williams' experience as a screenwriter in Hollywood. Writing for the cinema rather than for the theater most often requires the playwright to concentrate on sustained sequences of relatively short episodes. As Hern (1994, p.34) explains, this feature in Williams' text "capitalized on the effects that made possible by crisp cutting from one image or event to be the next". Still on that matter, Phillips (1993) posits that Williams' struggle for a continuous flow of action in plays like *Streetcar* resulted in an employment of film techniques into play. Certainly, this fact accounts for the easy way in which Williams' plays have been adapted to films.

In addition to that, Hern (1994) also observes that Williams always regarded both his plays and movies as highly personal affairs, and he insisted on the right of getting involved in his work when his plays were being adapted to films in order to assure that the adaptation would keep its symbolic language. In response to criticism complaining that the themes of his plays were too personal Williams (1975, p.188) once replied that "all true work of an artist must be personal, whether directly or obliquely, it must and it does reflect the emotional climates of its creator". Thus, like in most film adaptations of his plays, Williams himself was in charge of rewriting the script of *Streetcar's* film version. Despite the appearance of Oscar Saul's name in the credits of the film for the adaptation of the play to the screen, Saul was given the task to rewrite only a few lines of dialog. Words that were essential to the story and had to be changed due to several reasons, which will be discussed in more depth further below, were left to Williams himself. That way the plot was left intact in its entirety. The features above discussed can certainly not be disregarded when conjectures are being raised about the fact that many of Williams plays have been transferred with considerable success to the screen.

Kazan's film adaptation of *Streetcar*: the issue of cast and the extension scenes

Certainly the key element to understand the success of *Streetcar* film version lies on Kazan's choice of cast to play the main characters. According to Spector (1989, p.546), for the first stage production of *Streetcar*, Kazan drew his interpretation of the play from a letter Williams wrote to him explaining his dramatic design for the play's characters, who, he explained that "were no good or bad people, some are little better or little worse, but all activated more by misunderstanding than malice". Moreover, Williams instructed Kazan that the audience should feel pity for Blanche, and this pity should be accomplished through Stanley's misunderstanding of Blanche, eventually leading the audience to feel sympathy for her at the end of the story.

Nevertheless, in opposition to Williams' intentions, in Kazan's stage production it was Brando's enthralling performance as Stanley that captured the audience's sympathy and identification. According to Spector (1989, p.549),

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Kazan hoped that Jessica Tandy would play Blanche as “a heroine easy to pity, but such difficult negotiation of sympathy between Tandy and the audience did not occur”, surprisingly enough, it was Marlon Brando who “brilliantly and engagingly unbalanced the equilibrium that both Williams and Kazan had hoped for”. After Tandy's failure in fulfilling both director's and playwright's expectations concerning her Blanche's performance, for the film version of *Streetcar* the protagonist role was given to Vivien Leigh, who had performed Blanche in a London stage production directed by Laurence Olivier. This choice cannot only be accounted by the fact that she had already played the role, but especially due to the tremendous success she had obtained years before in her performance as Scarlet O'Hara in *Gone with the wind* (1939). Undoubtedly, Leigh's name was not only highly regarded but also represented a guarantee of box office success, a guarantee not given by Tandy. Thus, with this sole exception, the rest of the cast remained the same from the stage version to the film, with Brando playing Stanley, Kim Hunter playing Stella, and Karl Malden playing Mitch. Regarding the cast's previous stage experience with Williams' play, Phillips (1993, p.225) points out:

This combination of talents, all of whom had been associated with *Streetcar* on the stage, was assembled to ensure that the movie version would be as close to the genuine article as possible, and so, for the most part, did it turn out. Since the actors and actresses carried with them experience from their countless stage performances, the movie was shot in a relatively short period of time. Kazan, on the other hand, was the only one who did not get much excitement from filming it as he claimed it was difficult to get involved in it again, to generate the kind of excitement which he had had for it the first time around; the actors were fine, he said, but for him there would not be any surprises that time (KAZAN, 1961, p. 308).

Even though Kazan strove to change any aspect of the play in its film version as little as possible, the first striking feature of his film lies in the way he sticks to Williams' play text without giving it a monotonous tone of a photographed play. Kazan achieves such accomplishment by adding to the film scenes only mentioned in the play, which consequently keeps the action moving through different settings. Also, he draws upon several filmic devices such as camera movement, montage, set, lighting effects and *mise-en-scène* that effectively capture and convey much of the symbolism of the play.

Regarding the extension scenes, Phillips adverts that Kazan even considered opening up the movie differently from the play, showing Blanche leaving *Belle Rêve* and moving into the city, an idea he quickly turned down after rehearsing the scenes outside New Orleans. Then, he decided to add only those scenes that allowed him to stick to Williams' original text. On that matter, Kazan (1961, p.309) posits:

I filmed the play as it was because there was nothing to change. I have no general theory about opening out a play for the screen; it depends on the subject matter. *Streetcar* is a perfect play. I did consider opening out the play for the screen initially, but ultimately decided to go back to the original play script. It was a polished script that had played in the theater for a year and a half.

What seems implied in Kazan's statement is a certain concern in keeping the play's spirit. However, it is through his skillful exploration of all cinematic devices that he managed to retain much of such spirit. These film features can be seen right in the beginning of the film as it opens with the arrival of a train in which Blanche DuBois (Vivien Leigh) is on. Right before her first appearance out of a cloud of steam springing from the train's engine, a flock of a joyous wedding party guests rolls through the station. The wedding party does not appear there by chance, and it operates as a symbolic reference of Blanche's desires and frustrated past experiences regarding marriage and male relationship, which are revealed later on in the story. She leaves the train station on a streetcar (named Desire after Desire St.) with the help of a young sailor. A shot showing the streetcar (displaying Desire in large letters) is Blanche's last image at the train station.

The next scene begins with a whole panorama of the section of Elysian Fields. The large setting, full of lights and two-story houses located in a dirty and wet street in which Blanche passes through follows exactly Williams' initial stage directions regarding setting. Despite the scenario grandiosity and dinginess, it reminds us of the directions given right on the first lines of the play as it also enhances Blanche's sense of loss. She crosses the set carrying her battered suitcase, looking fragile and lost, almost in a neurotic emotional state.

Kazan's choice to start the film by inverting the order of the characters' appearance apparently does not alter much of the play's general plot. However, it is interesting to point out that, by showing Blanche first, he aims at establishing the sympathy between her and the audience that Williams initially had in mind. Namely, whereas the film's opening sequences focus on Blanche's ethereal arrival, the play begins with Stanley's arrival at home throwing a package containing raw meat at Stella – an act of him marking his territory. Thus, this inversion softens the harshness of the play's initial sequence for, in the film, the audience first gets acquainted with Blanche as a fragile creature before descending into Stanley's hell-like world.

The next sequence appears as another instance of how Kazan explored other possibilities by shooting extra locations only mentioned in the play. When Blanche arrives at Elysian Fields she finds her sister Stella at the bowling alley where Stanley is bowling with his friends. In this scene, Blanche is shown arriving at the place still looking uneasy, for her face can only be seen from

a mirror she glances at. Showing Blanche's face through the mirror is another device Kazan draws upon several times throughout the film, and its use has two functions: firstly, it highlights Blanche's concerns about her fading beauty; secondly, it also operates as a symbolic device to evince Blanche's sense of illusion in relation to the world.

After having an overview of the bowling parlor, Blanche listens to Stella yelling her name and they barely hug each other before Blanche expresses her shock about the place her sister is living in. Right after this short exchange, Stella points at Stanley, who is first shown amongst a group of wild men all **grunting, gnawing, and hulking** at each other as if they were **ape-like**, as Blanche will later describe Stanley. The next shot moves to a more private place, still in the bowling alley, where the sisters' dialog, originally performed in Stella's shabby kitchen, takes place in shot-reverse-shot sequence creating an atmosphere of intimacy between both sisters, which is reinforced by their dialog. Also, Blanche's attempt to move away from the lamp bulb, placed between them, highlights her fear and avoidance of strong lighting on her face.

Henceforth, most of the sequences take place in the Kowalskis' flat and present just a few small and subtle differences in relation to Williams' play text, with the exception of three more extension scenes, one at the casino ball, another at Stanley's work and another when Mitch breaks up with Blanche. The first one happens at the pier of a dance casino and shows a long conversation between Mitch and Blanche, in which he learns about her young husband's tragic death. In the play, this conversation occurs at the flat porch right after their arrival from the ball, whereas in the film, the scene starts with a medium shot of a jazz band (composed of black and white men) playing joyously at the ball whilst people dance through the room. After that, the camera moves from the jazz band straight to Mitch and Blanche who, after the end of music, look at each other seeming a bit awkward, and they leave the room towards the pier where the dialog is conveyed.

It is not by chance that Kazan chose to place this scene at the dance casino, as the audience learns from Blanche that her late husband killed himself at a similar setting. It creates a dreamlike atmosphere as Blanche tearfully recalls the details about her tumultuous and frustrated marriage, which culminated in Allan's death. In this scene, she is at the pier surrounded by a thin and whitish coat of mist spawning from the lake right behind her. As the sequence goes on, her memories become a painful reminder and she struggles to talk about how she judgmentally failed to love him. The scene's dreamlike atmosphere serves, then, as a perfect upholder for her husband's suicide, and it also shifts the focus to the real cause of his suicide, which is rarely suggested in the dialog. Also, this scene enhances Blanche's female fragility and defenselessness as the last shot ends in a close-up with Mitch holding her in his arms in a highly stereotyped Hollywood scene.

It seems that Kazan deliberately closes the previous scene in a very romantic mood aiming at contrasting its delicacy and romanticism with the aggressiveness that sets the tone of the following sequence. Similarly to all the locations only referred to in the play, Kazan recreates the factory sequence in which Mitch, astonished after learning from Stanley about Blanche's scandalous past, fights against the words Stanley has uttered. The sense of fighting in this scene is enhanced by the very particular way in which the characters are displayed in the set: they stand facing each other, just like those cowboys before a duel in typical Western films. Additionally, the noises of the machinery in the background work well as a *mise-en-scène* element that helps to emphasize the jolt that Mitch has just received. Despite being a short sequence, the factory scene establishes an important link between the sequence portraying Blanche and Mitch at the ball and how Stanley reports about Blanche's past. In the following scene, the audience, already knowing what is about to happen, has their loss of surprise replaced by tension and uncertainty – a mood that initiated previously in the factory scene.

The film's last additional scene reinforces Blanche's state of madness suggested right from the initial sequences of the film, which inevitably increases towards the end of the story. The scene takes place immediately after her hysterical breakdown resulting from Mitch's dismissal. With tense background music, she retreats into the house searching for shelter in the same way she has been retreating into the past throughout the story. She closes all the shutters of the windows as if the darkness of the house could prevent her from being exposed to the crudeness of the real world, as if she could keep the shattered pieces of her fantasy world. Whilst Blanche struggles to lock herself into the house, a policeman knocks on the door in order to investigate what is going on, but, once again, she assures him that everything is fine.

Phillips (1993, p.227) argues that this scene seems superfluous to the material added to the play and serves only "to slow down the tempo of the action temporality". However, it functions as a final summary of Blanche's recurrent traits, as well as reinforces her state of madness for the last time, before her final defeat in the end of the story. Equally noteworthy, due to the subtle way Kazan had to deal with the play's scandalous themes such as homosexuality and promiscuity, the film's overemphasis on Blanche's insanity seems quite appropriate to overshadow these polemic themes, and, eventually, to escape the demands from censorship.

As the analysis of the extension scenes suggests, by adapting Williams' play into the medium of film, Kazan could apply and explore several different film devices, producing considerable impressive effects that a stage production would certainly not allow. Regarding camera movement, for instance, Kazan kept the camera roaming all over the setting and shot the actors from different angles, resulting in a broadening of the area the audience can see. This camera mobility

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associated with the use of editing renders the film a dynamic rhythm and prevents it from acquiring the static atmosphere of a stage setting.

Likewise, Kazan explores camera movements by moving it throughout the whole building in a way that the viewer is allowed to intrude places that could never be shown on stage. The poker scene, for instance, intermingles shots cutting back and forth between Stanley's and Eunice's (his neighbor's) flat. Whereas the men play their game in Stanley's flat, in Eunice's flat she threatens to pour boiling water through the floorboards to break up the bustle. The viewer can follow this scene aware of what is happening in both places. Regarding camera mobility in Kazan's film, Phillips (1993, p.228) comments:

He [Kazan] moved the action fluidly throughout the whole tenement building without, at the same time, sacrificing the stifling feeling of restriction that is so endemic to the play, since Blanche sees the entire tenement, not just in the Kowalski flat, as a jungle in which she has become trapped.

Another interesting example of Kazan's skilled use of editing to increase tension occurs in the scene in which Blanche determinately persuades Stella to run away from Stanley. At the same time that the two sisters' dialog takes place inside the flat, this scene is intermingled with brief shots showing Stanley arriving home. As Blanche insists on the idea of leaving that place, the camera approaches even more the characters' faces, increasing the scene's tension and revealing the emotional state of the three characters.

The film's constant close-ups of the actors' and actresses' faces, for instance, not only enhance the characters' emotional state, but also increase the dramatic power of the action. As a consequence, the audience can see what readers and theatergoers never had the opportunity to see: a close look at Blanche's face showing a tear dropping when she reads her dead husband's love letter. Kazan's obsession with this detail was so intense that he shot this scene several times just to assure Leigh would drop the tear exactly in the moment she said "intimate nature" (KAZAN, 1961, p.309). The scene's dramatic power results in the realistic portrait of Blanche's anguish as her face conveys her struggle to repress her troubled inner state.

Furthermore, several physical and psychological characteristics of Stanley are also conveyed through many close-ups throughout the film. The camera explores the protagonist's physical and sensual masculine beauty aiming at seducing both Blanche and the audience. Right at the first scene in which Stanley talks to Blanche, while he takes off his sweaty T-shirt, the camera is positioned in a way as to sensually show his bare muscled chest and arms. Moreover, when he pleads Stella to come back home after beating her, once again Stanley's chest is shown barely covered by a torn tight wet T-shirt.

Equally remarkable is Kazan's singular employment of lighting effects. In the poker scene, for instance, the table where the men play is illuminated by a single spotlight confined to the table's edge, and, as the scene goes on, the smoke from their cigarettes mixes with light creating an atmosphere of confusion and confinement as if they were animals locked in a cramped cage.⁴ Another interesting instance of light effect is created by the shadows of a fan spinning over Blanche's drunken body lying on the sofa. The spinning shadows over her body recreate for the audience the sensation of dizziness and confusion she is feeling caused by her addiction to alcohol. Moreover, in the same sequence, the lighting effect plays an important role when Mitch tears the paper lantern off the light bulb revealing all signs of Blanche's age. Kazan's use of the light right from the light bulb creates an effect that allows Blanche's every wrinkle to be observed in broad spotlight.

In short, in adapting Williams' play to the medium of film, Kazan's main concern was to employ every cinematic device in a way that it would convey the play's sense of confinement. The use of close-ups and deep shadows, described above, certainly creates the sense of restriction that works well to express Blanche's imprisonment of body and soul, which eventually drives her mad. Kazan also had the setting built in a way that it could become smaller as the story progressed. Similarly to many other film devices, by having the setting become smaller Kazan wished that the whole scenery in the film suppressed Blanche in the same way the characters around her did. Thus, like in any naturalistic work of literature in which the setting plays an important determinant role for the characters' traits, in the film the shadows, the walls and even the furniture seem to endanger Blanche in the trap of the apartment, leaving her no other way out but madness.

Censorship and *Streetcar*: cuts in plot and language

According to Murray Schumach (1964, p.72), even though there was no official censorship operating in order to supervise any movie at the time *Streetcar* was released in movie theatres, in December 1951, "the film producers had to submit this film to an investigation by both the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the Catholic Legion of Decency (CLD)".⁵ As these institutions were

⁴ It is also worth mentioning the recurrent imagery relating to animalism in both play and film, following a more social-based naturalism pertaining to the French literary tradition, as opposed to the American one of a moral-oriented, albeit financially well-to-do, decadence, such as can be found in Dreiser's *An American tragedy*.

⁵ According to Schumach (1964) the MPAA, founded in 1922, had been known as the *Hays Office* for a long time, being named after its first president, Will Hays; however, it was only in 1930 that a *Production Code* for motion pictures was released and four years later Joseph Breen became president and began to enforce the demands. Naturally as strongly powerful as the MPAA, the CLD, created in 1934, had its grounds solidly based on principles which would dictate what the good and respectable American citizens were allowed to see on the screen; Schumach (1964, p.73) adverts that

the two powerful **guardians** of American decency, any motion picture showing clear sexual and violent actions or even using foul language of any kind, such as **damn, hell,** and even **God,** was strictly forbidden.

Considering that the CLD and the MPAA had strong influence on film audiences throughout America, obtaining a good rating from those censorship organs was certainly indispensable. Not surprisingly, as Phillips (1993) explains, despite the reputation of *Streetcar* as a distinguished, prize-winning play, the industry censor of the time, Joseph Breen, did not consider its adaptation appropriate for the medium of movies due to its overt references to scandalous issues. Consequently, as the critic (PHILLIPS, 1993, p.232) points out, if the film was released in its first version, “the Legion of Decency had advised Warner that *Streetcar* was going to receive a ‘C’ (condemned) rating, meaning that Catholics would be discouraged from seeing the film”. Thus, in order to gain a more positive rating, Warner asked the CLD to review the movie, resulting in several cuts. Furthermore, the film was also submitted to MPAA and Breen himself carefully scanned it thoroughly from beginning to end, forcing Williams and Kazan to make several changes in the script to suit the standards of the MPAA's code production. The two major requirements for the film's changes basically regarded the references to Blanche's late husband's homosexuality and Stanley's rape of Blanche. Nonetheless, in all, twelve cuts were made in the film at Breen's behest, amounting to about four minutes of screen time.

Regarding these scenes' minor cuts, the first striking cut occurs in scene II when Blanche deliberately flirts with Stanley by playfully spraying perfume on him with her atomizer. Stanley's line “If I didn't know that you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you!” (WILLIAMS, 1984, p.21) was entirely removed from the film for it was considered a clear hint of a potential and eventual sexual interest between Stanley and Blanche. In scene IV, two long close-ups of Stella lying naked on the bed only wrapped up in a satin sheet were also cut. Moreover, still in the same scene, the following very suggestive and symbolic lines from Blanche's and Stella's dialog were omitted:

Stella: But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark – that sort of make everything else seem – unimportant. [Pause]

Blanche: What you are talking about is brutal desire – just – Desire! – the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another.

Stella: Haven't you ever ridden on that street-car?

Blanche: It brought me here (WILLIAM, 1984, p.39-40).

this institution was obviously “guided by a biased and loose notion of what was decent and indecent, as well as watching over for the sake of quality of maintenance what they called family films”.

Regardless of their shortness, the omitted lines above convey significant hints of the characters' traits, and they also establish important relations with the play's central issue: the urge to seek refuge from unhappiness in the pursuit of sexual pleasure. For that reason, this scene was so abruptly and carelessly removed during the editing of the film that its ban does not pass unnoticed, even to a less attentive viewer.

Due to Williams' reliance on a highly symbolic language, there were some interesting passages in which censors were apparently unable to perceive the effects produced by Williams' word-game. A remarkable example of an unnoticed ambiguity within the characters' dialog takes place towards the end of scene IX, right after Mitch learns the truth about Blanche. He comes to the Kowalskis' apartment and accuses her of not being "straight," to which she replies that "a line can be straight or a street. But the heart of a human being" (WILLIAMS, 1984, p.72). The ambiguous meaning of the word *straight* can lead to two interpretations of this dialog. Firstly, *straight* in a sense of correctness ("linear," just as Blanche uses the expression) can be applied to things such as a line or a street, not to the feelings of human beings. Or, naturally as interesting as the previous interpretation, taking straight as slang for heterosexual, Williams' playful word-choice evinces Blanche's late husband's homosexuality, omitted in the movie.

The reedited scenes above described account for those film sequences that were indeed shot, but not incorporated in the film's final version in order to suit the censorship demands. However, in 1993, Warner Bros. Studios released the Director's Cut version of *Streetcar* presenting the film exactly the way it was meant by Kazan and Williams. According to Phillips (1993), the censorship demands upon *Streetcar* were so strict that Breen, not satisfied with the cuts already made, forced Kazan and Williams to entirely rewrite the sequence in which Blanche's late husband's homosexuality is mentioned. This sequence's symbolic lines are full of word-games, especially when Blanche flirts with Mitch by asking him "*Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir? Vous ne comprenez pas? Ah, quel dommage!*"⁶ (WILLIAMS, 1984, p.52). Williams' original dialog was replaced by a recounting of her frustrated marriage with few direct references to the play's text. Indeed, in the play Blanche tearfully reports to Mitch her disastrous marriage when she unexpectedly found her husband having sex with another man. Although she tried to act as if it had never happened, one night, on the dance floor, she blurted out to him what she saw, and Allan, desperate to hear that his secret had been discovered by his wife, ran away and killed himself.

Following the censor's demands, Williams began the delicate task of rewriting this scene for the film version maintaining loose and subtle references to Allan's odd manners, thus enabling the audience to draw considerations about his possible

⁶ Would you like to go to bed with me this evening? Don't you understand? What a pity!

homosexuality. Hence, in the film version, Blanche tells Mitch that one night she woke up and discovered Allan crying with apparently no reason. Moreover, in another night at the casino's dance floor she, out of a sudden, told him that he was weak and that she had "lost respect for him," and vaguely suggested he was sexually impotent. Therefore, Allan's suicide is accounted by the fact that he was unable to fulfil his wife's desires.

Despite the film's absence of an overt reference to Allan's having a male lover as in the play, Williams skilfully worked out the film's dialog by filling Blanche's description of him with some clues that, for an attentive viewer, it is still possible to conclude so. Especially by the ambiguous way in which Blanches describes Allan by saying:

But I was unlucky, deluded. There was something about that boy, the nervousness, the tenderness and that uncertainty. I didn't understand. I didn't understand why the boy wrote poetry. He didn't seem able to do anything else. He came to for help. I didn't know it. (A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE, 1951)

These lines above give clear hints about Allan's peculiar manners. Although Williams does not overtly mention anything about his homosexuality, he provides to the viewer a dubious description about Allan, which easily allows the viewer to draw considerations about his sexuality. According to Phillips (1993), both Kazan and Vivien Leigh agreed that Williams' replaced speech was so wisely rewritten that it kept underneath the suggestion of Allan's homosexuality.

Naturally as controversial and troublesome as the issue of Allan's homosexuality, the rape sequence involved both Kazan and Williams in massive arguments with the censorship in order to preserve it in the film. In the end, Williams patiently agreed with all the cuts and rewritings on his script, but found it unacceptable to entirely eliminate this scene from the story. Schumach (1964, p.75) reproduces a letter Williams wrote to Breen arguing that the rape scene was, indeed, a "pivotal and integral truth to the play, without it the play loses its meaning". Finally, Breen agreed in keeping the rape, acknowledging that this taboo issue had been previously tackled tastefully in another Hollywood film.⁷ However, he requested that Stanley should not escape unpunished in the end of the story.

Furthermore, in having to adjust this scene to the film, Kazan could explore, through the use of cinematic devices, the psychological aspects of the rape that the reading of the play text may not always allow. Namely, in the text Blanche's and Stanley's sexual intentions can only be accessed through their words. Thus, as explicit references are barely uttered, the readers can hardly find textual evidence

⁷ The film was *Johnny Belinda* (1948), for which Jane Wyman won an Oscar for her performance of a deaf mute who is the victim of a rapist.

of Blanche's showing sexual interest for him. In the film, on the other hand, through the numerous close-ups of both Blanche and Stanley, the viewer can have a closer grasp of Blanche's face and the way she progressively flirts with him. Such evidence occurs since the first time they meet, in the way Blanche furtively grabs Stanley's muscular biceps. Also, in the same sequence, Stanley's undressing is enhanced by the flirting and seductive glance Blanche throws him.

Since the rape could not be explicitly developed, Kazan profited from these hints above described, along with the protagonist's growing state of emotional instability, to set the mood for Stanley and Blanche's final battle. In this sense, the rape scene is meticulously constructed in a way that every single detail serves to suggest their inevitable sexual intercourse, and Kazan deliberately employs several phallic symbols, such as Stanley's opening the bottle of beer and joyfully throwing its foam right up to the ceiling, as if it were an orgasm. This image clearly informs Blanche and the audience of Stanley's lustful intentions.

On the other hand, the use of close-ups of an entirely defenceless Blanche being cornered by Stanley enhance the sequence's tension and dramatic power without making any scandalous reference to the rape itself – a reference that would certainly displease the censors. The scene ends with Blanche's image, totally defeated in Stanley's arms, reflected in a smashed looking-glass. The protagonist's face seen through the smashed looking-glass operates as a symbol of how Stanley ultimately shatters Blanche's illusions about her own refinement and moral character. Right after this scene, Kazan once again draws upon a phallic symbol, similar to the foam from the bottle of beer, in order to reinforce the accomplished rape. The previous sequence, which ends with Blanche's image in the smashed mirror, is followed by a view of a street cleaner's hose gushing a blast of water in the gutter outside the flat, once again resembling a male orgasm. Regarding this scene Kazan comments that, although he considered these symbols appropriate at the time he shot the film, eventually he ended up finding them quite obvious. To this comment, he adds the following remark: "It was certainly a forceful cut, and enabled me to underline the rape implicitly by using the phallic symbolism of the hose, because in those days we had to be very indirect in depicting material of that kind" (KAZAN, 1961, p.311). Nevertheless, according to Phillips (1993, p.232), Kazan's efforts to construct the scene in a way that would satisfy the censor were not enough to please Breen, who, after watching it, still demanded Stanley's punishment. Strategically Williams added the lines in which Stella says to Stanley "We're not going back in there. Not this time. We're never going back." as a way of stating that Stanley was losing his wife as punishment for Blanche's rape, though not moving away.

Surprisingly enough, Williams' skilled way of dealing with language produced another ambiguity apparently not perceived by the censors. That is, considering that Stella always returns to Stanley after his pleading, as the story shows, it is very

“I don't tell the truth. I tell what ought to be the truth”: escaping censorship through ambiguity in Elia Kazan's adaptation of *A streetcar named desire*

likely she might do that again. The playwright has been praised for his particular ability to portray highly complex characters whose personalities refuse either oversimplifications or resemble those stereotyped characters of mainstream films. According to Phillips (1993), these characters' complexity significantly disturbed the censors from both MPAA and CLD as they found difficulties in distinguishing the “good” from the “bad” characters in the film. In this sense, since *Streetcar*'s main issues as well as its characters' traits are deluded into the play, requiring from its readers or viewers an intensive digging, much of these subtle elements fortunately passed unnoticed in the eyes of censorship.

To sum up, the analysis of Kazan's adaptation of *Streetcar* provides interesting instances to evince that the transposition of a dramatic text to the visual media consists of a process in which the latter transforms, elaborates and expands the former. Indeed, the relationship between literature and cinema is not only featured and determined by the way technical and aesthetic aspects are worked out in each medium, but also by the historical and social moment in which they are produced. In his version of *Streetcar*, for instance, Kazan departs from Williams' play text to recreate it in the medium of film by resorting to several film devices and techniques, which prevents the story from becoming too stagery. The director's exploration of several film devices offers the viewer alternative locations when compared to the reading of the play. Also, the use of close-ups, as well as deep shadowing, also strengthens the claustrophobic atmosphere prevailing in the play, something which overtly represents Blanche's imprisonment of body and mental state. Editing techniques allow Kazan to create a sense of mobility, taking the audience to different locations of the story. Also, by using several shot-reverse-shot sequences Kazan emphasizes the characters' lines by showing them exactly in the moment in which they utter their speeches. This technique not only enhances the dramatic importance of what is being said, but also allows the audience to perceive the emotional state of each character as s/he speaks. Likewise, in Kazan's film, the use of lighting also corroborates to stress the play's allusions concerning the dichotomy between fantasy and reality which the characters undergo.

FÉLIX, J. C. “Eu não conto a verdade. Eu conto o que deveria ser a verdade”:
fugindo da censura por meio da ambiguidade na adaptação de Elia Kazan para *Um bonde chamado desejo*. *Itinerários*, Araraquara, n. 36, p.99-117, Jan./Jun., 2013.

■ **RESUMO:** *Este trabalho objetiva escrutinar a adaptação fílmica de Elia Kazan de Um bonde chamado desejo em relação ao texto da peça de Tennessee Williams. Primeiramente, ele discute os temas centrais da peça, relacionando-os ao contexto da produção cinematográfica de Hollywood do período do pós-guerras. Esta relação pretende mapear elementos particulares na forma e no conteúdo da peça que*

permitiram sua adaptação para o cinema. Em segundo lugar, apresenta-se uma análise da adaptação cinematográfica de Kazan, cobrindo assuntos como seleção de elenco, as cenas adicionais apenas mencionadas na peça, mas realizadas no filme, bem como o emprego de elementos técnicos como movimentos de câmera, montagem, ambientação e iluminação e outros elementos de mise-en-scène que contribuíram para a construção do discurso fílmico. Finalmente, o artigo examina as maneiras as quais Kazan se livrou das demandas da censura e lidou com as questões mais ousadas da peça, como a homossexualidade de Alan e o estupro de Blanche.

- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Um bonde chamado desejo. Tennessee Williams. Adaptação fílmica.*

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