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The Madwoman in the Quarter:

A Streetcar Named Desire
As a Case of Intersemiotic Genre Shift

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Abstract

Modern criticism often classifies Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a tragedy. In this study I argue that Elia Kazan's 1951 filmic adaptation of the play introduced enough elements of melodrama to overshadow the original tragic structure, effectively shifting the work's genre. My definitions of both genres come from essays by Arthur Miller, John Fell, Kent Gallagher and Alan Thompson. Additionally, studies by Maureen Turim and R. Barton Palmer provide an overview of US film industry in the 1940s and 1950s and the predominance of melodrama in popular preference, establishing thus the context for the genre shift operated on Williams's play, rooted principally in the form and morality of Victorian stage melodrama.

Keywords: American theater – American cinema – Tennessee Williams – A Streetcar Named Desire – Tragedy – Melodrama

Resumo

A crítica moderna com freqüência classifica a peça *Um Bonde Chamado Desejo*, de Tennessee Williams, como sendo uma tragédia. Neste estudo argumento que a adaptação da peça para o cinema em 1951, dirigida por Elia Kazan, introduziu elementos suficientes de melodrama para eclipsar a estrutura trágica original, desta forma transformando o gênero da obra. Minhas definições de ambos os gêneros vêm de ensaios de Arthur Miller, John Fell, Kent Gallagher e Alan Thompson. Adicionalmente, estudos publicados de Maureen Turim e R. Barton Palmer proporcionam uma visão da indústria cinematográfica nos anos 40 e 50 e a predominância do melodrama na preferência popular, estabelecendo, desta forma, o contexto para a mudança de gênero que acontece na peça de Williams - mudança esta estabelecida principalmente na forma e na moralidade do melodrama nos palcos vitorianos.

Palavras-Chave: Teatro americano – Cinema americano – Tennessee Williams – Um Bonde Chamado Desejo – Tragédia – Melodrama

Table of Contents

1 Introduction: Working Definitions of Tragedy and Melodrama

No matter how much a scene of shot-reverse-shot film dialogue may differ from the sight of two actors facing a live audience, theater and cinema have more in common than is commonly acknowledged in theory. It is undeniable that cuts and fades bear and imply enough differences from act drops and "exeunts" to constitute a veritable chasm between both medias, and one whose ramifications affect everything from actor diction to admission prices. But that chasm gradually fades away the further one moves from a purely formal concern; once the storytelling effects of a stage production or film are fully realized, theater and cinema have more in common than, say, cinema and the novel, regardless of how often the screenwriter adapts from the novelist or the playwright. One of the most conspicuous intersections of film and theater is their respective genre systems. Even if one would be hard-pressed to find a "western" or a "sci-fi" play, or video store shelves named "farce" and "tragedy," genres offer enlightening glimpses about the two medias and their modes of reception when confronted in intersemiotic[1] comparison.

Literary genres have been for a long time now a slippery notion. Tragedy, specifically, is arguably the most controversial of all genres, having survived civilizations as diverse as Ancient Greece, the Renaissance and Victorian England, always in a prestige position in the literary canon – therefore always bearing the brunt of successive definitions by illustrious

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1 Because this study is not focused on strictly formal concerns, my understanding of the very notion of "intersemiotic" must by necessity remain general. I am concerned with differences not dictated by a medium's formal traits, like plot and characterization, and the social and cultural implications of diverging choices regarding those traits between a play as conceived for the stage and its subsequent film adaptation. The transposition of a work of art from one medium to another is here understood in Holly Willis's definition of adaptation: "the process in which makers take a text, often from another medium, and re-make it" (WILLIS: 1998, p. 119). Because the cultural significance of the derivative work is understood, in its social and cultural context of reception, in the sense of a *version*, and not of a "new original" as Jean Mitry would have it, that is the relation understood in this analysis between the stage and film versions of *A Streetcar Named Desire.*

critical authorities, from Aristotle and Hume to Hegel and Nietzsche, with whom one is seldom at ease to argue. But all genres have had their share of the increasingly subjective debate surrounding the notion, especially in the twentieth century, when nearly all schools of criticism converged to the assessment that different genres share common traits and that works of art rarely conform entirely to a single genre, more often than not combining traits from different ones and receiving their final label from a multitude of readers and the most prominent genres they identify.

Tragedy, consistently considered the noblest genre of all, could hardly have achieved its millenary longevity without adapting its form and content to different historical moments. It has, over history, come a long way from Aristotle's "imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude" performed by "admirable people" (ARISTOTLE: 1996, pp. 9-10). One theory tackling the differences between modern Western society and the classical world is Georg Lukács's studies on the novel, which follow Hegel's contention that epic poetry reflects Ancient Greece's alleged lack of conflict between the individual and society, while the abstract class tensions imposed on modern life by bourgeois society find their literary mirror in the novel (LUKÁCS: 1992, pp. 178-179). Hegel and Lukács do not consider the slave-based economic model and the completely disenfranchised status of women, for instance, as sources of conflict in the classical world; but those conditions can only be considered conflict-free because of the total suppression of dissenting voices by a monolithic social order. History was not the only thing written by the winners in Ancient Greece, and that was the only world where tragedy, in a pure Aristotelian sense as we have come to understand it, could have existed.

Especially in the twentieth century, when an increasingly materialistic society and two World Wars shook all belief in old European models of class, virtue and order, audiences would have seldom related to yet another tale of a tortured ruler paying a fatal price for challenging fate with hubris. With the

conversion of the few remaining monarchies of the world into thinly-disguised parliamentary democracies, paying viewers were now more likely to see kings as Ubus rather than Lears. The most widely known theory of tragedy to account for that shift in popular Western notions of virtue is expressed in Arthur Miller's seminal essays "Tragedy and the Common Man" and "The Nature of Tragedy," both published in 1949. The details of their publication are in themselves significant: on the one hand, the 1940s brought upon a resurgence of the tragic sensibility, producing a parade of unhappy endings and wasted potential led by now canonic authors such as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Lillian Hellman, William Inge and Miller himself; on the other hand, both essays, like the rest of Miller's critical output, was not published in academic periodicals, but in the likes of *The New York Times* and *The New York Herald Tribune* – the common press. Those conditions alone are ample evidence that the nervous center of the English-speaking drama had then moved from The Globe by the Thames to Broadway. Naturally, that shift implied many aesthetic differences: by virtue of American consumerism and the ever-increasing competition from movies, American theater developed a degree of spectacle unseen even in the pinnacles of Victorian melodrama, which was no stranger to sliding platforms, water tanks and livestock onstage (FELL: 1970, pp. 27-28). In the new age of theater heralded by the US, luxury belonged not to the nobility, but to a wealthy bourgeois middle-class. And what excited the sensibilities of that entrepreneurial class of professionals and businessmen and women seasoned in uncertainty and crisis by the Great Depression and World War II was not happy endings of Good triumphing over Evil.

If the continuous rise of the USA as a geopolitical power steered Western culture towards ideals of increasing individual empowerment and emancipation from Church and aristocracy, the theater world has seldom heard a more emancipatory claim than Arthur Miller's contention that "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were" (MILLER: 1978B, p. 4.). The essay's central argument is that the

"tragic feeling" (i.e., Aristotle's "pity and fear") does not depend on "royal beings" like Orestes and Oedipus, but on "a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure (...) his sense of personal dignity," equating thus the class-specific action of classical elites with that of any "individual attempting to gain his 'rightful' position in society" (Idem.). A key feature of the definition is the essay's understanding of "tragic flaw:" a character's "inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he *conceives* to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status" (Ibidem: emphasis added). Miller's definition does not merely democratize tragedy, but relativizes it as well – after all, what a character "conceives" to be his rightful status need not necessarily be a just and ethical assessment of what he deserves[2]. Also important to that definition is the opposition it establishes between tragedy and pathos: the latter is the pity felt for a character who lost "a battle he could not possibly have won" (Ib., p.7); the former derives its peculiar brand of pity from showing viewers, through a character's failures, what he "might have been" or, in other words, how he "has missed accomplishing his joy" (MILLER: 1978a, pp. 10-11).

Miller is but one of many authors in a twentieth-century tradition of updated tragedy theory, and many of his notions have counterparts elsewhere. There is a general understanding, clearly influenced by the traditional appreciation of the genre, that tragedy has a philosophical function beyond mere entertainment. Even when removed from the exemplary heights of kings and princes and re-contextualized in the lives of ordinary people (perhaps precisely because of that), tragedy allows for a glimpse into "the fundamental mystery of existence" (THOMPSON: 1928, p. 828); by showing the ultimate consequences that await "the human being in his struggle for happiness," it shows us "who and what we are, and what we must be – or should strive to become" (MILLER: 1978a, p. 11). From the

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2 If the democratic leanings of Miller's definition are an update specific to the cognitive experience of twentieth-century voting, "enfranchised" viewers, the relativization of character merit is not – Shakespeare made celebrated tragedies about men of questionable integrity like Macbeth and Richard III long before the British Reform Acts of the nineteenth century.

tragic protagonist's "total questioning of what has previously been unquestioned, we learn;" the lesson of tragedy is "the discovery of the moral law" (MILLER: 1978b, pp. 4-5). Or to take Miller's definition a step further, the discovery of the *individual* moral law.

The root of that didactic function is the suffering of the protagonist, which is not a random victimization, but an abnegated sacrifice in the name of an ideal higher than safety from punishment or retribution by the antagonistic existing order of the society the character finds himself in. Because viewers understand the fact that the unavoidable fate of the protagonist results from his own "deliberation and decision," they achieve a state of "aesthetic distance" in which they can meditate upon the tensions that make up that society – and more poignantly so if they can identify the play's society with the one they live in (GALLAGHER: 1965, p. 217).

From such a body of scholarship we may infer the following working definition of tragedy: *a play in which the protagonist feels deprived of some essential right by an existing order and chooses to face unusual risks to reverse that indignity, failing in the attempt and suffering the consequences of challenging that order.* (conceptualization mine)

With tragedy thus accounted for, it is quite simple to reach a definition of melodrama, for all authors tackling the genre seem to measure it against tragedy. Because it is a genre consistently dismissed by critics and connoisseurs as disposable entertainment pandering to the most physiological instincts of unsophisticated mass audiences, one could hardly ask for a clearer outline than the one implied by the detrimental epithets applied to it: "low-grade tragedy," "would-be tragedy," "black-and-white drama" and "illogical tragedy," "irrational tragedy" are some of the nicknames identified by GALLAGHER (p. 215) and THOMPSON (p.815). It doesn't take a degree in psychology to realize the underlying assumption of

those accusations: that melodrama and tragedy have much in common. Pity and fear, for one, are invariably a part of both: viewers fear Laertes's poisoned sword as much as Sweeney Todd's revolving trap-door, and pity both Desdemona and Maria Marten. Those emotional effects, furthermore, could never happen in either genre if it wasn't for a momentary illusion of reality – unlike comic relief, which requires detachment from the viewer, who must see the artificiality and contrast between the onstage world and his own empirical reality in order to laugh of its absurdity (THOMPSON: 1965, p. 811)[3]. Least, but not last (for the list could go on), violence recurs in both, and in varying degrees of graphicness.

But if the aforementioned epithets evidence the common traits of both genres, they only do so in passing, as a side effect to the accusation of their differences. In that sense, too, they are invaluable: by finding the concrete genre traits that have attracted such disapproval, one can grasp its inner workings, find out what makes melodrama melodrama.

Chief and most conspicuous of all the differences between the two genres is the ending, happy in most melodramas and categorically unhappy in every tragedy ever dubbed so. The happy ending is the culmination of all the processes and mechanisms where melodrama departs from its tragic parent.

The immediate melodramatic trait calling for a happy ending is identification. Because human beings typically avoid confronting their mistakes and have a survival instinct of sorts to avoid blame, viewers are likely to identify with a melodramatic hero because of the Manichean opposition between him and the villain: one is perfectly innocent and good,

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3 Thompson, in fact, establishes a very convenient symmetry between the genres, with tragedy/melodrama corresponding to comedy/farce, the latter pair dubbed "plays of laughter" (811). As he supplies no corresponding nomenclature to tragedy and melodrama, we are left to dub them "plays of pity/fear/identification," choosing one of the three as the logical opposite of "laughter" – truly a personal and debatable choice.

the other is completely evil and scheming. There is a great deal of psychological sublimation in that identification – one's frustrations are vindicated onstage, with the viewer's flattering self-assessment prevailing over grievances from real-life offenders in the distorted mirror of art. "Thus admiration and self-congratulation are mingled; vanity is tickled and selfish longing momentarily assuaged" (THOMPSON: 1928, p. 822), even if only for the remainder of a night's entertainment.

With his troubles self-inflicted – and not by recklessness, but deliberately so – tragic heroes are not so comforting to identify with. To most viewers – the "flawless" passive "who accept their lot without retaliation," according to MILLER (1978b, p. 4) – the identification that occurs in tragedy invariably turns into a *mea culpa,* a realization of one's own resignation before indignity, as unavoidable as the hero's tragic fate. Melodrama, on the other hand, provides the extreme opposite: easy escape from the responsibility of confronting one's failures. Rather than self-inflicted, the melodramatic protagonist's misfortunes are either random or entirely the fault of an evil antagonist (ultimately random as well, if seen from an innocent's perspective, because uncalled-for). That random misfortune is what Gallagher fortuitously describes as "removable threat" – a threat whose neutralization is nearly certain, because it is "unthinkable to permit [a thoroughly evil villain] any degree of triumph" (GALLAGHER: 1965, p. 218). Since viewers would be disappointed if Good did not prevail over Evil, all melodramas are doomed to predictability; the only way to avoid that pitfall without incurring moral meditation is to make the villain's triumph seemingly certain, then frustrating it with a spectacular, far-fetched twist: a last minute rescue, a bomb that fails to go off, an unexpected survivor among the villain's victims.

Nearly all differences between tragedy and melodrama are dictated by the opposition of meditation and sublimation: because melodrama must avoid meditation, "the emotion aroused by it must be intense enough to

make up in strength for the lacking cognitive element" (Idem, p. 218), hence its increased emphasis on violence; because no time of the play will be dedicated to reflection (e.g., in soliloquies or extended confrontational dialogue), more incidents must be crammed into the melodramatic plot; even pity becomes thus another point of departure between the genres: melodramatic pity, entirely colored by identification, reveals itself as a projected, thinly-disguised self-pity, while the more philosophical pity one feels for a hero in such a different situation from one's own is rendered a "universalized pity-that-such-things-should-be" (THOMPSON: 1928, p. 828).

From such a body of scholarship we may infer the following working definition of melodrama: *a play in which an absolutely good protagonist is victimized by the scheming of an absolutely evil antagonist, unexpectedly finding deliverance and exacting revenge on his assailant.* (conceptualization mine)

Much more can be inferred from those two definitions. For example, the existing order that punishes the tragic protagonist for his hubris is very often the same that rewards the melodramatic hero for his innocence by redressing his unprovoked tribulations – and punishing the antagonist. That coincidence comes very close to equating the tragic hero and the melodramatic villain. The claim, of course, is not unproblematic: melodramatic villains are unreasonably set in their evil ways, while tragic heroes embrace their agendas in full awareness of what they mean; villains' motives are invariably selfish, while heroes always set out to redress injustice; heroes provoke their downfall, villains provoke other people's. But none of those oppositions is entirely black-and-white. Doesn't Miller concede that the tragic hero's "rightful status" is a "sense," an "image" that he "conceives" to have been denied him? We can once more play the Macbeth card, whose conspiracy against King Duncan is at once selfish, unprovoked and unsuccessful, not unlike the scheming of melodrama villains. Likewise, doesn't the cathartic common expression that So-and-so "had it coming," so

fit and frequent a description of a villain's ultimate punishment, imply that he caused his own misfortune? Differences between both genres might be more relative in the minds of viewers than theory tends to admit.

Theorizing about genres is an enterprise that must always take place in the looming shadow of its most inescapable caveat: that genres are artificial conventions applied *a posteriori* to a corpus of works of art that assume idiosyncratic combinations of traits as often as they fit neatly into their audiences' most predictable preferences. But that caveat should never discourage one from venturing into genre territory; only the most rigid immanentism would fall prey to that mistake. Whenever one looks at art without forgetting to acknowledge the cycle of tensions that shape its diffusion and reception, genres reveal themselves as nothing but guidelines and flagposts signaling the turning points of cultural history. Which is, of course, no small matter.

2 Melodrama and Hollywood: Beyond Good and Evil

Understood in its generic traits and socioeconomic context of consumption, melodrama is the direct predecessor of the Hollywood blockbuster, and of American popular films as a whole. More specifically, the history of Hollywood films as we have come to know them since the 1930s actually begins with Victorian melodrama, because both art forms developed from similar tensions regarding the production, consumption and legislation of narrative works of art. Unlike the drama of other periods, like Renaissance England or even Ancient Greece, melodrama is dictated by the market: it has no part in the religious practice of its audiences, and it does not depend on the endorsement of the monarch to ascertain its value as admirable art or fashionable entertainment as it reaches successive social layers of viewers. Melodrama exists in an environment of pure supply and demand – all its developments result from market dynamics, either directly (i.e., by following or influencing tendencies in popular preference) or indirectly (by arbitrating legally whatever social or political disagreements may arise from the public's cultural reactions to the play). With that in mind, one may say that the history of melodrama developed from the dialectical opposition of *show business* and *controversy*.

In terms of the cultural industry, the two notions are polar opposites in the most practical manner. Other social orders could have it otherwise by removing the onus of approval from the individual – no controversy becomes a taboo when it is sanctioned by royal decree or religious dogma; the viewer is then spared the responsibility of judging whether what he has seen and heard is right or wrong, desirable, permissible or reproachable, etc. Throughout history, however, market dynamics demonstrate that the "freedom" to decide for oneself what kind of art to consume (and pay for, and therefore endorse publicly) quickly becomes a painful dilemma, a heavy

responsibility with too many risks and consequences to one's social status. Many will not bear them alone voluntarily. When people have no agendas of their own to protest in the public sphere, they have no reason to endorse art (or anything else with an identifiable point of view, in fact) that may place them in a group opposed to another. It is perhaps a survival instinct of human beings to avoid unnecessary risk, to "sit on the fence" of all disputes whenever possible. For example, an actively feminist viewer may promptly call for the boycott of a work of art featuring sexually oppressed female characters (as, say, David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*) but remain silent when gay rights advocates protest the depiction of homosexuals in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*, even if the viewer in question does harbor similar views of the latter film. Religion is an even more conspicuous factor: are practicing Jews as likely to denounce the controversial depictions of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* as they are regarding those in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*? It is easier, and perhaps even natural, to bypass all disagreements that do not affect one's immediate status. Immediacy is also to the point in the matter: freedom of speech, for instance, is seldom a cause for general protest, since it is only an immediate threat to "interested" parties in the cultural debate, like journalists and artists. Most members of a society do not need to speak out in public in order to carry on with their personal and professional lives, and therefore would rather not (let alone about the right to speak out at all itself).

Show business and controversy establish themselves as the polar extremes of the free entertainment industry (i.e., the self-regulating entertainment sector as exists in modern capitalist democracies) because viewers left to defend their own status in society will not spend money on anything that could harm them in the esteem of their fellow men. But the opposite of controversy entails some strategic thinking of its own: if a work of art does not entertain a viewer, there is no service provided in the first place, and the invariable result is once again unprofitability. Because human cognition and fancy are excited by conflict and risk – victory, danger,

survival, success, etc. – the free purveyor of entertainment faces the constant challenge of selling a product that, in principle, is at the same time desirable and undesirable. Popular art must be exciting, but not enough to harm reputations; conventional, but not enough to prevent escape from mundane reality into adventurous imagination. The product of show business must be a careful middle ground between dichotomies of good and bad, laudable and contemptible, desire and repulsion. Furthermore, because individual viewers fear incurring the disapproval of their like-minded peers as much as that of opposite persuasions (e.g., a liberal's fear of being disowned by other liberals as much as being singled out as a primary liberal target by conservatives), entertainers must, by default, deliver to the best of their ability, and as often as possible, that which cultural consensus deems undoable: to please everyone. Is it any wonder film producers are so averse to risk of any kind? Even in the long run, when hits and flops offset each other, popular art is a make-or-break field, where all success must overcome near-impossible odds.

That is the background of Victorian Melodrama. Successive democratic reforms were enacted by Parliament over British history, most significantly with the Great Reform Act of 1832, speeding up political inclusion until universal suffrage in 1928. However, a much more significant democratic reform occurred nearly a century before with the Industrial Revolution, which consolidated urban bourgeois society in Britain and promoted unprecedented wealth redistribution, effectively establishing capitalist order in the country. With uncultivated, often illiterate citizens now able to afford the best seats in theaters, show business achieved industrial proportions for the first time in the English-speaking world. Theatrical productions grew in number and complexity: countless farces, musical burlesques, extravaganzas and comic operas competed with Shakespeare productions and serious drama. Authors like Oscar Wilde, W. S. Gilbert and Henry James Byron were having an amazing turn up, the later achieving the mark of with 1,362 consecutive performances of his play *Charley's Aunt* by 1875. If the machinery of

spectacle had hitherto been limited to trap doors and smoke, the repertoire of tricks at the disposal of theater producers grew as well, taking full advantage of the new technologies of the age.

For British commoners in the Industrial age, financial emancipation quickly brought a corresponding measure of political voice. Not only British suffrage was at the time still conditioned to land ownership and income quotas, causing the concrete number of voters to grow promptly with the redistribution of wealth, but material possessions stimulated interest in politics. The most relevant evidence of popular political engagement at the time for this study is Robert Walpole's Theatrical Licensing Act of 1737, a set of censorship measures aimed at silencing the increasingly pamphletary and satirical dramas by acid writers such as Henry Fielding, John Gay and Henry Carey, who variously depicted Walpole as a criminal and a schemer. Many plays were banned altogether, and in time only the most harmless content could be performed publicly. Soon after the Act, the novel became the favored medium for thought-provoking and politically engaged storytelling, and citizens with intellectual tendencies began to shun drama altogether. The theater effectively became a popular entertainment, and melodrama was the genre that best satisfied the working class. With the appalling work conditions of the day, it is no wonder that common melodramatic content tended to focus on the exotic "topical excitements of its period – crime, military adventure, wilderness exploration" (FELL: 1970, p. 23). No proletarian would spend his hard-earned shillings to see social problems and moral dilemmas onstage. They had more than enough of that in their own daily lives.

Whether popular conscience shaped or was shaped by the melodramas so heavily consumed by the lower classes is, and most likely will continue to be, debatable; they were probably a little of both. But the fact was that, by the 1830s, the imagination of British masses operated in terms of extremes. Extremely symptomatic of the period is the massively successful fiction of

Charles Dickens which, as Sypher points out, only deals with oppositions – "the good people and the bad, the proud and the humble, the hard and the soft, the simple and the devious, the rich and the poor" – and allows those dichotomies no greater relativism than "[making] one of his noxious characters wholesome or [turning] one of his clowns into a serious person" (SYPHER: 1948, p.431). The Manichean mentality of the time also showed in the scientific discourse of public debate, which oversimplified the complexity of human existence with, ironically enough, unfounded pseudo-scientific theories like phrenology and hypnotism, and gained renewed strength from the 1859 publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which, rather than demystifying evolution, inspired further oversimplification in the form of Social Darwinism[4]. In the Victorian mind, much like in the latter ideals of Auguste Comte, reason took the place of God in a near-religion that kept nothing but the discourse from actual scientific investigation, blurring the boundaries between fact and fancy, art and science:

> All this is melodrama, not tragedy; and certainly not science. The view of the world as a diagram of polar forces encourages not only a melodramatic ethics (the strong and the weak, the hard and the soft, the good and the bad) but also emotive history and emotive science, which, as Huxley confidently assumed, can satisfy the spiritual longings of man. Having done with a personal God, the 19th Century could now displace the drama in its mind into the universe itself by means of the laws of geology, biology, energy, and, more immediately, economics. By a confusion of categories the inevitabilities of matter and motion and political economy assume a moral sanction, just as in melodrama chance assumes the tenor of poetic justice, just as the impersonal "naturalism" of Zola and Ibsen always moves toward moral conclusions. The world becomes a theatre of tensions between abstractions. Melodrama has become social, if not cosmic. (Sypher: 1948, p. 436)

That collective psychological yearning for boundaries could only be placated with intransigent values. For all its criticizable oversimplification, the Victorian mind can be complimented in its coherence: seldom in history

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4 More schooled in Dickens serials and sensational melodrama than in natural sciences, Social Darwinism was, in fact, the most likely idea that Victorian masses could develop from the full title of Darwin's magnum opus: "On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life."

have lower and upper classes shared morals to the extent that they did in nineteenth-century England. No longer the nobility enjoyed the right to boundless debauchery while the masses attended church regularly; rich and poor alike were expected to button up their cleavages and adhere to strict modesty and unfaltering probity. Victorian morality itself became a conflict of unflinching oppositions that permeated all public life, as summarized by that great authority in melodramatic turpitude, Mrs. Cheveley:

> Remember to what a point your Puritanism in England has brought you. In old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbours. In fact, to be a bit better than one's neighbour was considered excessively vulgar and middle-class. Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, every one has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues. (Wilde: 2000, p. 196)

If, as argued above, free individuals in democratic societies tend to avoid dissonance and deep meditation, then perhaps no oversimplification is more characteristic of the Victorian mind than popular notions of Marxist ideology. Masses as morally intransigent and conservative as they were economically marginalized saw in the *Communist Manifesto* nothing but a promise for the best of both worlds: social change and democratic emancipation without the careful study of complex tensions in history and society. Once properly digested by the illiterate masses, Marx's complex theory of dialectical materialism (inspired in Hegel, of all philosophers) was reduced to communism, a conveniently simple creed that blamed all the problems of society on the exploitation of workers. Nothing could be more melodramatic: masses were given a clearly villainous, utterly corrupted antagonist – the bourgeois employer – and the only way to defeat him – the proletarian revolution. Sypher observes how Engels kept idealization in check by never losing sight of his notion of the world as "a complex of processes without final solutions or eternal truths" (SYPHER, 1948, p. 437), but argues that Marx succumbed to the oversimplification of the age by adopting the form of melodrama to write his philosophical treatise on capitalism, *Das Kapital*. Not only does the sizable work present itself with a beginning, a middle and an end (distancing itself from the elementary

Aristotelian distinction between history and literature), but the revolution it *precognizes* reveals itself as a veritable melodramatic ending, a tableau of spectacular inversion where the seemingly unstoppable designs of the villain are surprisingly frustrated.

This is how esthetics turns to ethics and ethics turns to law. Melodrama is thus at the heart of the English-speaking civilization in the nineteenth-century, both the driving force and the leading development of a society that lived not wisely, but too well.

Despite all the protesting, pamphleteering and rebelling of their efforts to break away from Britain, the United States never ceased to look back across the pond with some degree of nostalgia and envy. Americans still measure themselves against England, looking to the Old World as the ideal model of sophistication, refinement and tradition – which, after all, is the one aspect in which no republic can claim to surpass a monarchy. That cultural subservience permeated all strata of US society, including the lower classes, who also consumed melodrama, throughout the nineteenth century. Much like in Britain, adaptations from novels were popular, and theatrical productions intent on speaking to the cultural repertoire of US viewers would substitute stateside best-sellers like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Ben-Hur* for *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Frankenstein*. The history of melodrama in the English language was practically the same on both sides of the Atlantic, parting ways only with one historical peculiarity of the United States: the massive immigration that started in the 1880s.

Fell chronicles the technical shift in the writing of melodramas that took place when the impoverished audiences that did not object to the genre began to encompass a growing number of immigrants who spoke little to no English: emotion had to be conveyed in action, what was variously called "writing for the eye" (FELL: 1970, p. 25). The ever-advancing technology of the British stage increasingly assumed the role of speeding up transitions between different scenes, already signaling a visual audience's readiness for

the narrative properties of film editing. But by the end of the nineteenth century the expensive machinery demanded by the episodic plots of melodrama made the investment too expensive for a box office that relied on poor immigrants. The novelty of Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope made it better business, and by 1894 it attracted low-income customers willing to pay twenty-five cents of a dollar to lean over a four-foot-tall wooden box and stare into a peephole viewer to see flickering black-and-white sequences of dancers and circus acrobats for three minutes. Not so cheap a thrill: twenty-five cents was then the admission price to an entire evening of vaudeville entertainment or, by 1895, to several rides and attractions at Coney Island's Sea Lion Park (the first American amusement park). That admission price, of course, was to fall dramatically over the following years, down to the legendary five cents of the "nickelodeons." The shift from stage to screen, though, was not immediate. Fell chronicles how, for a brief time in the 1890s, melodrama and film lived side by side, when vaudeville theaters presented thirty-minute live melodramas and short projections of the Lumière Cinematographer as attractions in the same bill, together with singing, dancing, performing animals, etc. Melodrama, however, soon became the least popular of those attractions, and was dropped altogether in most theaters (Idem, p. 24).

With the demise of the Kinetoscope and the rise of projected films, New York suddenly became flooded with small nickelodeon theaters playing ten- to twenty-minute films to audiences ranging from 80 to 200 viewers, at an admission price of a nickel. Movies were then cheaper than theater in every sense: it cost less to shoot ten minutes of police chases, exotic dancers and moving trains than to stage an entire theatrical production of two hours or more, and ticket prices reflected that. Film became thus the entertainment of choice of the poor classes. Theater, suddenly considered "expensive," experienced a shift in target audience, becoming the refined and respectable art form favored by the higher classes who valued cultivation as a means of distancing oneself from the rough masses, and therefore sneered at cinema

as cheap thrills for the poor. For all the technological innovations that stormed show business at the turn of the twentieth century, though, subject matter remained in the same viewer niches as they had been since the British Licensing Act of 1737: if elite theaters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had stood apart from popular venues by presenting Sophocles, Racine and Shakespeare instead of melodrama, their twentieth-century counterparts kept relying on sophisticated and cultivated content in order to guarantee wealthy patrons that they could not be further from the cheap thrills of the working classes; because the poor no longer attended theatrical performances, their favorite dramatic genre quickly became the specialty of film.

But more than canonical tradition separated upper class drama from lower class melodrama. The 1920s and 30s saw a soaring increase in the popularity of psychoanalysis, which was to have a decisive impact on subsequent dramatic performances and show business – in Maureen Turim's words, "Freud reached Hollywood in the same manner as it did in the rest of the US, through assimilation into popular literature and magazines as well as by way of his followers' couches" (TURIM: 1984, p. 323). On the one hand, the middle and upper classes, through psychotherapy, became increasingly familiar with a very straightforward debate on sexuality and moral repression (if only, once again, in discourse); on the other, Freudian jargon like depression, sublimation, projection, subconscious, libido, fetish, exhibitionism, ego and many others that have for a long time now been taken for granted in common vocabulary began to circulate in non-clinical, non-scientific literature, including art criticism and the press. Theatergoers of the time were now more interested in themes like adultery, compulsion, addiction and homosexuality for the individual dilemmas and pity they incited, not for the shocking climate of front-page scandal they commanded on the Victorian stage. Also significant is psychoanalysis's appropriation of elements from Greco-Roman mythology: on the one hand, they helped the fledgling field of psychoanalysis build a reputation for credibility,

constituting the "citations" of its claim to be unlocking the mysteries of the human soul that art had been cathartically purging for centuries; on the other, once established, psychoanalysis fostered new interest in old classics, with the rising number of educated, upper-class psychotherapy patients growing curious to find out about the likes of Antigone, Narcissus, Hamlet and that Oedipus guy everyone's been talking about. It marked the resurgence of tragedy in the twentieth-century: despite Arthur Miller's complaint in the late 1940s that in his age few tragedies were written (MILLER: 1978b, p. 3), the most pronounced and long-lasting tendency in twentieth-century American drama was the virtual banishment of the happy ending, to the point that the very word "drama" has come to mean a story of emotional conflict and suffering (especially as a movie genre). Eugene O'Neill, arguably the most canonical of all American dramatists, composed one single comedy (the now all-but-forgotten *Ah! Wilderness*), otherwise focusing on social issues and family tensions (many of them explicitly tragic in form); the vast majority of twentieth-century American playwrights of note followed thematically in his footsteps, including Edward Albee, Lilian Hellman, William Inge, Thornton Wilder, David Mamet, Sam Shepard, all the way to the luminaries of our days like Tony Kushner, Paula Vogel and John Patrick Shanley. In the American performing arts of the last one hundred years or so, sadder is better – a preference shared by the world of film criticism, as demonstrated by the Academy Awards and the Golden Globe – and if that shift wasn't almost single-handedly motivated by the rise of psychoanalysis in the public sphere (a couple of World Wars and other examples of real-life pathos must also be accounted), then it was at the very least simultaneous.

Though psychoanalytical discourse would soon be adopted by the movie industry precisely to reinforce the shock value of pathological behavior in a new era of lurid melodrama (as observed by Maureen Turim's essay "Fictive Psyches: The Psychological Melodrama In 40s Films"), that first instance of Freud getting up from the couch served to further distance popular and cultivated tastes in American show business.

For all its hypocritical notions of "freedom," the laissez-faire culture of American show business in the early twentieth century did allow more license to artists than their British counterparts enjoyed, especially politically: theater as late as the 1930s saw hits like Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, which frankly promoted, if not revolution, then at least the emancipation of workers through labor unions; even government-subsidized plays often displayed open left-wing tendencies, like the WPA's *Triple A Plowed Under*. Ideological censorship would only come to the US with McCarthy's persecution in the 1950s; however, moral censorship, then as now, came quick on the heels of any art form successful with the masses and financially profitable.

US censorship began in strict accordance with the same ideology as every other institution in the history of the country: self-regulating liberalism a la Adam Smith. Film censorship in the US has never been controlled by federal government agencies as in many other countries, but by committees appointed by distributors, producers and other members of the industry itself to preside over the concession of "certificates" of appropriateness. For all the bigotry and Puritanism associated with US film censorship to this day, no one can deny that the institution is, for all intents and purposes, democratic. The continuation of such industry-appointed committees is only possible because of public adherence – it is the American viewers who worry about controversial content in a movie before deigning to watch it. And it was in that democratic spirit that it started.

The first effective censorship office in the US was the Production Code Administration (PCA), established by film producers in 1934 to placate Catholic lobbying that demanded morally-safe movies, to the point of organizing blacklistings and boycotts across the nation. For the first time industry logistics demanded that a film received a seal of approval before distribution. Within the logics of the show business-controversy dichotomy

outlined above, film studios quickly realized that public notoriety had extremely contagious effects among the American population, vastly decreasing film attendance as individual viewers found themselves unwilling to cross the morals of their fellow men, even if they themselves are not so adamant about this or that particular instance of controversial film content. As a result, all studios agreed to the seal requirement, followed by distributors and exhibitors, and it soon became the industry standard.

The resulting mutual hysteria that permeated every phase and every participant of that "free" system of censorship went beyond mere morality, trespassing – as it invariably does – into essential artistic issues. Palmer observes that the PCA criteria followed "Victorian notions of uplift," which

> Demanded not only that various aspects of human existence be avoided by Hollywood films, but that these vehicles of mass entertainment should also be structured by the central principle of nineteenth-century melodrama: evil was to be punished and good rewarded, while any sympathy for wrongdoing should be eliminated by compensating moral value (such as the unlikely reform in the last five minutes of hitherto enthusiastic sinners). (Palmer: 1997, p. 208)

In the climate of reigning morality that followed, several timeless classics became unpopular and undesirable, perhaps for the first time in history. No Sophocles play, for instance, was adapted into film in the US between 1911 and 1956. Likewise, no adaptation of *Othello* was released in the US between 1922 and 1946, when Orson Welles released his version, perhaps placating the overtly racist sensibilities of the age by starring himself in the title role, covered in black make-up, but famous enough to assure viewers that no actual interracial interaction was taking place on the set between the actors dramatizing history's most notorious interracial love affair. Excisions and revisions of Shakespeare's bawdier lines, from Hamlet's fair thoughts to lie between Ophelia's legs to the bawdy gatekeeper scene in *Macbeth*, are too numerous to count, for an even longer period, in fact. Together with all theatrical content conforming to a laxer pre-Victorian morality, tragedy had now been effectively banned from the most popular art

form in the United States. All that remained was the sound and fury of melodrama, and the rest was silence.

Meanwhile, the American stage blossomed with adultery, incest, rape, homosexuality, carnality and all sorts of sin. The questioning drive of modernist drama was more than welcome by the bourgeois elite paying to see them on Broadway. Seldom was censorship so effectively enacted along class lines throughout human history – in Elizabethan England, by comparison, the rich and the poor enjoyed the same dramas, in the same theaters, separated by no more than differently priced seats. But to the American working class of the 1930s and 40s, the daring dramas displayed in the prestigious playhouses no further than a few blocks from their tattered movie theaters were in practice as remote and out of bounds as the many nudity- and impropriety-filled European films denied importation into the US on the grounds of "moral laxity."

It may very well be that the strict diet of unambiguous melodrama forced and enforced upon American masses influenced the morality of the time in a similar fashion as it had happened in Victorian England, with its rigid values confirmed, as discussed above, by every development of the age. There is, of course, no final argument to be made on whether censorship was a cause or a consequence of the mores of early twentieth-century America; it was most likely a little of both. But if any art form reliably mirrored the values and taboos of US society during the twentieth century, it was certainly the nation's commercial cinema. In the 1940s, that mirror showed a great concern with the moral conduct and judgment of women – and the dangerous consequences that their objectionable ways could bring into the bosom of society. Film noir, for example, presented popular depictions of sexually aggressive *femme fatales* who shook tough detectives' self-confidence, ultimately endangering their ability to take control of risky situations and impose themselves in intimidating ways; those women, of course, met unfortunate ends that punished their challenges to the square

jaw of the law. But Hollywood did not limit its paranoid fear of empowered women to the independent vamps who eschewed family life altogether. Women were a liability even when they fit into traditional order and remained in the house as housewives and mothers – if they didn't upset the power structure of society by design, they did so against their better judgment, while overwhelmed by their hysteric emotions. Such was the lesson taught by a very specific genre in 1940s American cinema: the psychological melodrama.

As summarized by TURIM (1984: pp.323-324), psychological melodramas complemented traditional melodrama with the then fashionable discourse of psychoanalysis. What the new development did was to provide the genre with an illusion of causality, but keeping intact all the conventions that fascinated lower-class Victorian audiences. Villains were no longer merely evil – their unexplainable twisted actions were now the consequence of abusive childhoods, shellshock, deprivation and other traumatic experiences. Random action could then procure legitimacy from a wide inventory of pathologies: kleptomania, exhibitionism, egomania, compulsion, and countless phobias provided the "whys" of the plot, literally in a one-word answer. Turim goes on to illustrate how flashbacks, for instance, in films like *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *The Locket* (1946) and *Leave Her to Heaven* (1946) are used with the primary function of explaining criminal behavior by means of a past trauma, oversimplifying it to a single, one-dimensional this-leads-to-that argument. As far as shock entertainment is concerned, that's enough psychology: no attention to oppressive contexts or treatment is needed; the immediate, clear cause is the only missing link required to advance the episodic plot, which was nothing but the linear argument of the inevitable moral conclusion: non-conforming women are dangerous, and must be restrained, eliminated or converted.

The moral conventions of melodrama in US cinema were to become increasingly flexible in the following two decades, culminating with the

replacement of the PCA certificate of approval by the system of MPAA ratings in 1968. Though much less tolerant in its criteria than the current rating system (the number of ratings, for example, has risen from 4 to 5, with concessions made to minors accompanied by a "parent or adult guardian"), the original rating system represented a significant progress in the decrease of moral censorship by understanding appropriateness in terms of age brackets, whereas films between 1934 and 1968 had to choose between appealing to all ages or risking release without a certificate of approval. That change happened in the same spirit of democratic self-regulation as the original PCA, with audiences becoming more tolerant regarding controversial content in film. Palmer documents how the PCA, in the years leading up to the rating system, grew worried about becoming obsolete and out of touch with current moral sensitivity (PALMER: 1997, pp.211, 218-219), which led to increasing compromises and greater leeway for controversial content in certificated films. Perhaps the apex of tolerance in American cinema was the release of *The Godfather* (1972), which, though rated R (i.e., no unaccompanied viewers under 16 allowed), achieved unprecedented popularity and profitability, favored by critics and audiences, only four years after the adoption of the rating system. More relevant than the film's rating (which can be given on the grounds of taboo language alone), is the fact that the mafia epic, perhaps like no previous film, fosters sympathy for criminals and does not punish them in the end.

In 1940s America, though, characters were killed, tortured or locked away for much less.

3 From Death to Desire: *A Streetcar Named Desire* Remade as Melodrama

First performed two years before Arthur Miller's essays defended ordinary people as appropriate protagonists for tragedy, *A Streetcar Named Desire* was predominantly received as a tragedy in its time, and has continued to be so as the play's renown and prestige grew over the years. But "predominantly" does not mean "unanimously," which entails some considerations before one can reliably establish the play as representative of tragedy and tragic tradition.

In *The Moth and the Lantern*, his companion study to the play, Thomas P. Adler observes a strong tendency of *Streetcar*'s contemporary reviews and character studies to point out tragic qualities in the play and the character of Blanche (ADLER: 1990, p. 48). Much of the debate hinges on her insanity and on whether she can be said to consciously bring upon herself the consequences of her acts or, instead, to passively react to external forces. The less disputed reading that "*Streetcar* is about the tragedy of modern civilization" (Idem, p. 49), with Blanche and Stanley being, respectively, the champions of a boxing match between the traditional Southern rural order and modern American urban capitalism, does not contribute to a discussion of genre: it is a matter of symbolism, therefore only indirectly connected to plot and character, to what concretely takes place onstage before viewers. When joining the debate of *Streetcar*'s genre – "it is art, but is it tragedy?" – one must find one's own arguments to defend the chosen side. Naturally, such a debate is only possible when founded on individual readings, not on definitive explanations. What follows, then, is an analysis of a specific reading of the play, how that reading was affected by certain key changes introduced in the filmic adaptation and, based on historical and cultural factors of its context of reception, why such changes took place, and with

what effects[5].

A good starting point is the working definition of tragedy established above, from Miller, Thompson and Gallagher. What "essential right", if any, does Blanche feel deprived of? Is that right denied to her by an "existing order," or by a consummate evil villain (say, a rude and amoral brother-in-law)? What "unusual risks" does she face to regain that right, and does she face them by choice? Finally, how does she suffer from the consequences of her failure?

The most obvious right denied to Blanche is Belle Reve, literally a birthright. As a Southern Belle, it was her right to inherit part of the property, where she was raised to believe she would in time live with her husband in continuation of the DuBois dynasty. That deprivation may seem extremely tempting: it even allows the inclusion of Blanche within the original class of tragic heroes, since, in the traditional civilization that developed in the American South, she belonged to the highest echelon of society, a veritable aristocracy of slave-owners. According to that reading, it is a further indignity for the dispossessed Southern Belle to stoop to labor, abandoning the ballroom and the drawing room for the classroom. But those are not the wrongs Blanche attempts to redress. She is resigned to the loss of Belle Reve, never cogitating any attempt to get it back, and flaunts her teaching job with pride, treating it as the concrete evidence that she is an intelligent and cultivated woman, with "beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart" (WILLIAMS: 1990, p. 396).[6] The one thing Blanche had in better days and continually strives to regain, at any price, is *magic.* She wants a gentlemanly beau who will woo her and indulge

5 It must be stressed that the following analysis is a compared reading of Elia Kazan's film adaptation and Tennessee Williams's 1947 original stage script. The 1947 stage production, also directed by Kazan, is not relevant to the comparison, since my reading understands the film as an adaptation of the *published play,* not of the theatrical production. Therefore, what is here meant by "play" is the published version. The legendary first run of the play, starring Marlon Brando and Jessica Tandy, will be referred to by the words "production" and "performance."

6 From this point onwards, references to this work will consist of the initials of the play, followed by the number of the page, as in: (*SND*, p. 396).

her romantic caprices in all accordance with traditional protocol. Money is of secondary importance: oil baron Shep Huntleigh or Mitch the factory worker will equally do for a prince charming, provided that their married life together be anything but "common" – her chief insult to Stella's husband (*SND*, p. 322).

What is the existing order that denies Blanche her fix of magic? It is clearly not the modern capitalism that is so often symbolically projected on Stanley; Blanche has no qualms about working for money, and not just as a cultivated guardian of literary beauty – a "shop of some kind" will do (*SND*, p. 317). Poverty is also out of the question, since Mitch's working-class status does not prevent her from wanting him. It could be single life: in order to live like a princess, she needs her own knight, and conventional morality does not approve of a woman of Blanche's age indulging in the attention of flirting beaus, or any man other than a proper husband. But Stella and Eunice are married, and nowhere near the magic that Blanche craves. The prevailing order permeating her world that prevents her from getting her magic is nothing but *factual reality.* Despite her own vows (*SND*, pp. 379-380, 397), she is willing to forgive everything she despises in a man, including rudeness and deliberate cruelty, but she will not tolerate to be dragged into the light and exposed for what she is: an aging woman with dwindling perspectives and morally reproachable conduct. It is only when Mitch calls her unclean that she drives him away.

From such a body of scholarship we may infer the following working definition of Blanche's tragedy: that she wishes to cover her decay with magic and is prevented from doing so by the cold facts around her. In order to obtain that magic screen, facing the risk of being caught and disgraced as a liar, she insistently looks for a rescuer who will always indulge her daydreaming, never bringing up the ugly reality, despite knowing it. Because she won't give in to that ugly reality, her failure to procure a prince charming for an accomplice leaves her at the mercy of her fellow men, who identify her

as an outsider and a menace to their cold, common reality and promptly banish her to the only place they see fit for dreamers: the madhouse.

In that sense, the aforementioned contemporary readings pointed out by Adler – that Blanche does not qualify as a tragic hero because her insanity prevents her from conscious choice – do not proceed. In fact, they turn out to be the exact opposite of her situation. Blanche is not haunted by insanity, but by truth. All her hallucinations are echoes from the very concrete event of Allan's suicide. Her quest for magic is what she chooses to escape that haunting reality, and for her it is a very costly choice, which she refuses to go back on even when facing the extreme ostracism of confinement. Her deliberation in her undertaking is truly epic – greater, in fact, than Hamlet's or Oedipus's.

Having thus established not only that *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a tragedy, but one that displays tragic traits of unusual intensity by means of a very sophisticated fabric of existential and philosophical conflicts, one cannot help but agree with Palmer's assessment that Williams's theater was "too arty" to appeal to a widespread mainstream movie audience (PALMER: 1997, p. 209), spoonfed nothing but Manichean melodrama for over a generation as it were in the US of the late 1940s. If the play was to repeat in movie theaters the same booming success and sky-high profits it had amassed on Broadway (and the London West End as well), it would have to be re-tailored to the needs and whims of that new market. Not an easy task: the 1947 play touched so many taboos (family rape and female sexual desire, for starters) that, despite the Pulitzer and the sold-out theaters, two years went by before any producer manifested interest in attempting an adaptation (Idem, p. 214), and then two more years of personnel change, screenplay drafts and bickering with the PCA until the now classical Kazan adaptation was released. Palmer, however, identifies the aspects of the play that signaled the possibility of a successful popular adaptation. He considers the play more "Aristotelian" than "Brechtian" – i.e., with its "primary appeal

emotional, not intellectual" (Ibidem, p. 222). That is perhaps the most important requirement for melodramatic adaptation without the complete defacement of a tragic play, since emotion (specifically pity and fear), as argued above, is the primary trait shared by tragedy and melodrama. Furthermore, the opposition he observes in the play between "gentility" and "sensuality" (*Ib.*, p. 222), like all oppositions, contained the seeds for a good ol' Manichean gunfight between Good and Evil, and was indeed magnified by the adaptation to melodramatic proportions, as evidenced, for instance, in the odd contrast between Brando's realistic Method performance and Leigh's idealized artificiality – i.e., melodramatic opposition taken to the ultimate extremes, leaking from content into form (the Brechtian side effect likely to be lost to the sensibilities of film crowds). And thus a PCA-approved, Kazan-directed *Streetcar* was unleashed upon the world of popular mass entertainment.

The film's most obvious concession was the sacrifice of the play's daring expressionistic devices. Gone are the "lurid reflections," "jungle voices," "train sounds" and jazz drumming that punctuate Blanche's crises. All that remains are church bell chimes, the Varsouviana, Allan's gunshot and the echoing voices of Stanley and the Matron in the committal scene. The expurgation of the play's expressionism is not just a compromise to Hollywood realism, but to melodramatic convention as well: it is no coincidence that all the film's expressionistic devices are common elements of the flashback – the only conspicuous formal element of psychological melodrama, used "to fill in character psychology" and "explain" deviant behavior (TURIM: 1984, p. 323).

Film producers' choice for realism is not just an aesthetic simplification to avoid alienating more literal-minded viewers. In fact, realism and melodrama go hand-in-hand in the service of moral pontification. Melodrama, by definition, is fallacious: it represents reality as made of clear dichotomies of good and bad, sin and virtue, etc. Propositions like "good is

always rewarded" and "sex out of wedlock leads to crime" can only be seriously and persuasively dramatized within that traditional Hollywood aesthetic of illusion stating that competent storytelling in film makes viewers forget that they are watching a film; otherwise, the absurdity of those arguments would be easily seen by viewers as ideological distortions or, at the very least, wishful thinking (for popular mass audiences may be unsophisticated or illiterate, but not stupid). And the case of Streetcar's transition from Tennessee Williams's page to Elia Kazan's screen is especially illustrative of that ideological distortion.

Literary Blanche is much more threatening than Screen Blanche because she is more lucid. In the play, for example, her sexuality is much more pronounced, her flirting sharper: she makes Stanley embarrassed to the point of clumsily ventilating his disapproval of flirting games ("this Hollywood glamour stuff"), and, soon afterwards, even to the point of stuttering (*SND*, p. 279). The film's rendition, by contrast, presents a flirtation so flighty and artificial that all the sexual tension is gone; her flirtation becomes an attempt to fast-talk her way out of Stanley's financial interrogation (0'23"10)[7] no trace remains of Stanley's embarrassment at being nearly seduced. Her sexuality is even more pronounced near Mitch: when he brings her roses, she "coquettishly [presses] them to her lips" (*SND*, p. 339), and at other times breaks into provocative laughter to punctuate flirts, and even risks some naughty talk *en français* (*SND*, p. 344). In the film's reading, the laughter is remarkably childish (and not in that sexy, "baby talk" way bluesmen sing about), and the indecorous French and lip-pressing are excised (1'03"08, 1'05"50).

There is no denying that a desexualized seductress loses her natural weapons for self-assertion in society's negotiations of power; screen Blanche is as threatening as a drugged, declawed tiger in a Las Vegas stage act. Still, the film's desexualization could be convincingly attributed exclusively to the

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7 Still photos from the movie can be seen in the Annexes section.

need to make sexuality of any kind less graphic onscreen. But screen Blanche is much more desexualized than the average 1940s disreputable female character, which leads to the question of punishment: if Blanche must be punished for her promiscuity, wouldn't she make a better cautionary example by having her sexuality *enhanced* – to be depicted as the ultimate succubus, raised to the pinnacle of temptation, only to make her fall more dramatic, like so many film noir *femme fatales*? That would make sense if Blanche was a *femme fatale*. Unlike the average ice queen with a pistol in her stockings, Blanche has the added controversy of being the film's protagonist. Moral censorship works with the premise that audiences sympathize with protagonists and, therefore, constantly run the risk of becoming hypodermically indoctrinated with the character's point of view, justifying all of the character's actions and beginning a countdown to emulation. That is the unique problem presented by immoral protagonists: there is always the risk that merely punishing them at the end will create not an example, but a martyr. In the same logic identified by Palmer that "any sympathy for wrongdoing should be eliminated by compensating moral value" (PALMER: 1997, p. 208), identification with an immoral protagonist must be frustrated repeatedly throughout the film. And it cannot happen by simple punishment, which would only re-incur in the risk of martyrdom: the character must be discredited, ridiculed, rendered ineffective, unimposing, vulnerable, powerless – not unlike a comic character, by most definitions of comedy. And screen Blanche in fact does look, in her artificial "wishy-washiness," almost farcical, especially in contrast with the throbbing realism of screen Stanley. What inevitably happens in that void of identification carefully imposed on the protagonist is evident in the home video packaging and advertising material of the film – all of them, to this very day, centered on an image of Brando in his tight t-shirt, often by himself. It doesn't take a degree in Semiotics to realize the underlying assumption in that imagery: that the audience has come to identify more with Stanley than with Blanche.

But there is more to Blanche's castration than her sexuality. Her

clumsy lies are rendered as caricatural in the film as her flirtation. On the page, for example, there is no doubt that there *is* a Shep Huntleigh: Blanche and Stella talk about him, mention past encounters (*SND*, p. 315), and Blanche even starts to write down drafts of a message to approach and cajole him (*SND*, p. 318); later, those drafts have already become a finished letter, which she promptly confesses to be filled with lies to better seduce him (*SND*, p. 325). With the film's excisions, the millionaire is only mentioned in Blanche's off-the-cuff Caribbean cruise lie to Stanley, becoming, to all those unfamiliar with the play, a fruit of her imagination (1'42"40)[8]. Blanche's "caught in a trap" telephone call, likewise, sounds more like an actual attempt to place a call in the play, and is reduced to spastic make-believe in the film, where she practically talks to herself, not quite eliciting coherent answers from the operator (399, 1'49"40)[9].

The neutralization of Blanche culminates in the committal scene. Nowhere else in the film is she made more helpless, no other passage shows a greater subtraction of power from its stage equivalent. In the play, Stanley's sudden grasp of Blanche's paper lantern causes her to cry out "as if the lantern was herself" and attempt to flee from the matron, resulting in a physical confrontation where "Blanche turns wildly and *scratches* at the Matron" (*SND*, p. 416-417, emphasis added). In the film, she does not cry out or fight back; instead, she feebly grabs the lantern from Stanley and collapses – and goes into seizures on the floor (2'00"40).[10]. Literally declawed, the protagonist's presentation reaches the full extent of its neutralization by playing further into the language of psychological melodrama. The audience can sit back and breathe relieved of any moral dilemma, with no guilt for any trace of identification the movie may have failed to purge – the story they have been watching so far only *seemed* to feature an immoral woman: she was actually mentally ill all the time. Which, of course, explains the odd ticks and artificial affectations. And all the immorality.

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8 See photos 3 and 4 in the annexes section.
9 See photo 5 in the Annexes section.
10 See photos 6 and 7 in the Annexes section.

With that last-minute certification of insanity, the film strips Blanche of the most essential trait that separates tragedy from melodrama: deliberation. If the play chronicled the last stages of a woman's epic quest for magic against a world of cold truth, the film merely traces a spiraling pathology to the traumatic loss of a husband to suicide (with the trademark flashback surfacing not only once, but repeatedly, to make sure it won't go unnoticed by any viewers). Devoid of choice, Blanche's controversial behavior ceases to constitute her tragic flaw – her stubborn opposition against an existing order – and becomes an irresistible random force. None of it was her fault, poor thing. The lady who abominated deliberate cruelty is thus absolved of deliberate immorality. As a result, the door is now open for viewers to finally identify with the protagonist. With a few minutes to go before the end of the movie, there is no time to lose: all compensating moral value[11] and punishment of Evil must be introduced as soon as possible, before some confused viewer get lost in the melodramatic convolutions of the film's symbolism (if not the actual plot) and end up approving of Blanche's behavior.

The sudden confirmation that the film at hand is a melodrama brings the urgent need to find a corrupt villain to take all the blame. In this case, all the characters suddenly turn on Stanley. Mitch, who originally punches Stanley and turns around crying, now announces his blow by screaming "You did this to her!", and is echoed by Steve and Pablo, who stare accusingly at Stanley (417, 2'01"00)[12]; Stella gives up the play's "voluptuous" and "luxurious" sobbing at the hands of her husband – one of the most powerful and poetic conclusions to ever illustrate a play's title – to undergo a last-minute conversion: "Don't ever touch me again! (…) I'll never go back to that house again!" (but not lifting a finger to prevent her sister's confinement). Stella's abandonment of Stanley is Blanche's revenge, a Dantean *contrapasso* to the end of Scene 4, when Stanley, after overhearing

11 See photos 8 and 9 in the Annexes section.
12 See photo 10 in the Annexes section.

Blanche's entreaties that Stella abandon him, is warmly embraced by his then loving wife and "over her head (…) grins through the curtains at Blanche."

Much more of the play is lost in adaptation: Blanche's fantasy of a romantic demise aboard a ship (*SND*, p. 410), so tragic in its undaunted confrontation of death, is completely suppressed in the film; so is the sublimating Madonna reference of her clothes (*SND*, p. 409); the rape, so unequivocally announced by Stanley, is substituted by the in-laws wrestling and breaking a mirror, in a rather confusing shot (*SND*, p. (402, 1'52"20)[13]; and Blanche's blind exit (which, admirably enough, was not construed in the movie as a somatic symptom of hysteria) is changed for a near autistic stare at the doctor – her savior – who escorts her out to confinement. But neither of those moments perform such a drastic revision of the play's original genre as the seizure. The madwoman is once more locked away in an attic, leaving behind a world that, free from her unsavory presence, finds at last a perfect balance of justice. Out of sight, out of mind. And all live happily ever after.

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13 See photos 11 and 12 in the Annexes section.

4 Conclusion: Of Genres, Adaptation and Reception

The 1951 film adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is an emblematic case in the history of mass culture and entertainment in the English language. It illustrates, if nothing else, what a fragile and delicate business award-winning best-selling entertainment is. It is definitely not the gigantic money-fueled plug that, in the belief of some critics and scholars, can dictate what is successful and what is not. Perhaps money does make money, but Kazan's *Streetcar* proves that money does not necessarily bring success – and even that *success* does not necessarily make success; it proves that even the most acclaimed and surefire properties and franchises have to meet cultural and institutional tensions and reach painstaking compromises before their eventual release, especially in a massively popular medium as film. The *Streetcar* case suggests, even, that the more massive the success (concrete or envisioned), the more controversy will arise. The more "noise" something makes in the public sphere, the more groups will react and attempt to benefit from it – and nothing makes more noise in a capitalist democracy than financial success.

The genres involved in the adaptation of *Streetcar* are at the center of its significance: with tragedy and melodrama long established in their respective niches (expensive onstage high art and cheap onscreen popular entertainment), Kazan's film supplied in its time an interesting, long overdue experiment of competition: when those two niches clashed and vied for precedence and influence – over a *creative* enterprise conducted *within* a democratic capitalist context of art *reception* – which would prevail? The older or the newer? The elites' or the people's? The loftily didactic or the ephemerally entertaining? That the balance in the resulting film tended so drastically to one of the sides is an evidence of how money is accountable in the history of art, and of which direction gravity pulls that money: it pulls it down, towards the bottom of the socio-economical pyramid. That financial

exchange may be of secondary importance to some of the key agents involved in the process (it certainly was to Kazan and Williams, who fought the PCA so relentlessly to preserve the integrity of their original visions). But ultimate understanding of an artistic order can only be glimpsed from the film itself, the resulting product of that intricate system of tensions and the compromise it represents – a compromise not only of socio-economical factors, but also of artistic visions (for conservative censors have their own as well as any artist). And that artistic compromise seems to favor the side with the numbers, the bottom of the pyramid. That compromise, a dialectic confrontation of art and their creators, collaborators and arbitrators, is in the long run a clash of works of art, confronted in their influence and in the traditions, repertoires and audiences that grow around them. Literary genres are simply the dictionary entry, the theoretical description and explanation of those very concrete phenomena of reception.

Censorship demands special attention in the study of art and literature, for it constitutes an intersection between all the aspects of art – i.e., form, content, production and reception. Its study may easily become lost in a theoretical thornbush, a shapeless mass of social, historical, aesthetic and psychological persuasions and discourses that quickly resemble those ancient wars where neither side remembers what it is being fought over. Censorship of any kind is a dreadful practice to the members of a society, but only in regard to the negotiations of power that occur among the individuals or the groups they form. But when one studies works of art in themselves, censorship is just one more determining factor, like technical limitations, reproductibility or tendencies in popular preference. Art is not better or worse as a consequence of being censored or not; some totalitarian regimes, for instance, will imbue artists with clever ways to dodge censorship, increasing the sophistication of their work, while others will completely smother all spontaneity and creativity, effectively stifling the production of new art. From an isolated, specialized perspective, art simply is.

But art does not exist in isolation; that specialized perspective is abstract, and ultimately fallacious. However one may choose to phrase it, that triangle of work/artist/public does not make sense unless all three elements are present. In that sense, no matter how neutrally one may choose to look at the historical and aesthetic development of art, censorship must be accounted for, especially in terms of the conflicting interests it bridges, with a clear understanding of ethical and ideological implications – and with an ethical point of view of one's own, as clearly defined as possible, since scholars, like artists and the public, are ultimately human beings. And *A Streetcar Named Desire* is equally relevant to the debate on censorship in both the ethical and the aesthetic dimensions.

Aesthetically, there is no doubt that *Streetcar*'s solutions regarding censorship make it an important watershed in the repertoire of American cinema; it is probably the first such moment since the establishment of the PCA. It was certainly not the last: between the *Streetcar* movie and the next great turning point in movie censorship, 1966's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – ironically enough, another adaptation, which is often said to have been the immediate cause for the adoption of the rating system – there were a myriad other pioneers, like Billy Wilder's *Some Like it Hot* (1959, one of the last hit films to be released without a certificate of approval), Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1964, the first certified film to show nude female breasts) and Otto Preminger's controversial string of gritty films in the 1950s.

Ethically, however, the success of *Streetcar*'s adaptation is much more questionable. To say, as Palmer does, that Kazan's *Streetcar* inaugurated an age of "adult art films" in the US (PALMER: 1997, p. 231) is the same as saying that Lenny Bruce inaugurated an age of free speech: whatever changes were introduced by their advents only took place at the cost of their sacrifice. If the industry, the viewers and American cinema survived the

adaptation of *Streetcar* freer, more tolerant and less hypocritical, the same cannot be said of the play itself, at least as far as Kazan's adaptation is concerned. And perhaps further, if we acknowledge the immense shadow that the film casts over the play still today. A quick survey of current stage productions of *Streetcar*, audiences expectations, and even academic criticism of the play, will most likely reveal that there are perhaps ten people still alive who do not think of Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh when they think of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. And that lasting image is not of a tragedy, but of a melodrama. For all the classic significance and immense prestige that the play has amassed since its 1947 premiere, the full integrity of its tragic dimension may be available only to its readers.

Finally, the *Streetcar* adaptation, as significant, pioneering and legendary as it may be, is in essence not much different from any other film adaptation. The conflicting impulses that shaped the final product still apply, and in fact do so not only to film adaptations, but ultimately to all commercially released art: aren't novels subjected and re-subjected to all manners of revisions by editors and agents, from the moment their nominal author finishes a draft to the moment the first edition hits bookstores? Aren't soap operas rewritten halfway through their plots if viewer ratings do not satisfy network executives? Don't producers and directors imprint all sorts of personal touch on a play's production – and even more so if they set out with the agenda of being faithful to an alleged original vision of its author? Don't all artists confront the dilemma of finding an acceptable compromise between their vision and that greatest of censors, the public's taste?

If there is any clear lesson to be learned from an analysis of the 1951 film adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it is that the only notion more illusory than authorship is freedom, and no notion as underrated as either.

₅ Annexes

Photo 1

Photo 2

Harmless flirt: in the film, Stanley's hesitation is virtually absent, and Blanche's sexuality is mostly gone.

Photo 3

Photo 4

All in her imagination: Blanche cooks up an imaginary telegram with an invitation for a cruise on the Caribbean. In the play, Shep Huntleigh is discussed by the DuBois sisters before this scene. In the film, the lie is the only mention of him.

Photo 5

Caught in a trap: Kazan's film reduces the conversation between Blanche and the telephone operator to a disconnected string of nonsequiturs. The conversation in the play is much more coherent, leaving no doubts that Blanche is actually placing a call.

Photo 6

Photo 7

She's lost control again: instead of fighting the Matron and scratching her with her nails, Blanche grabs the paper lantern from Stanley and seizes up on the floor, convulsing.

Photo 8

Photo 9

Compensating moral value: in the film, Stella overcomes her desire and leaves Stanley.

Photo 10

"What are you staring at me for? I never once done touched her:" Steve and Pablo join the club as all the core characters of the film blame Stanley for raping Blanche.
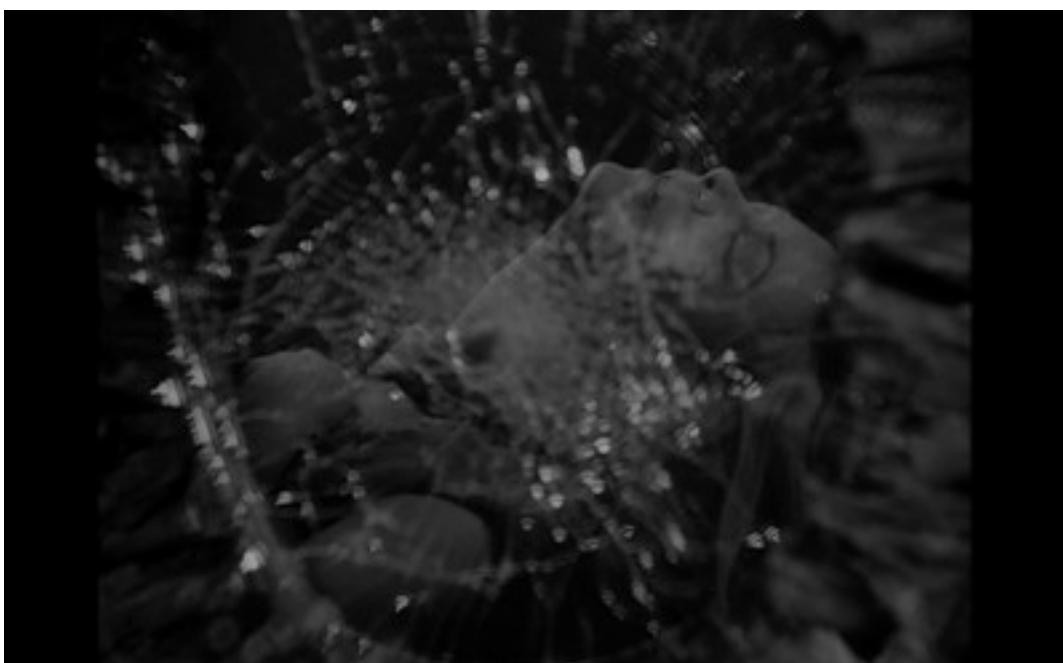
Photo 11

Photo 12

A little roughhouse: Stanley's line to Blanche about "having this date with each other from the beginning" is absent from the film, replaced by a shot of a mirror broken as the in-laws wrestle.

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