



DESIRE ON SCREEN: INTERPRETING TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' PLAY THROUGH ELIA KAZAN'S LENS

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Abstract

*This paper examines Elia Kazan's cinematic adaptation of Tennessee Williams' Pulitzer Prize-winning play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), focusing on how the director's visual and stylistic strategies reinterpret the original theatrical text. While Williams' play stages the clash between the declining Southern aristocracy embodied by Blanche DuBois and the raw vitality of the urban working class represented by Stanley Kowalski, Kazan translates these conflicts into a distinctly filmic language. Through his use of mise-en-scène, chiaroscuro lighting, camera framing, and diegetic sound. Kazan underscores the tension between illusion and reality, past and present, fragility and brutality. The film also reflects the socio-political constraints of its time, especially the influence of the Hays Code, which necessitated significant yet strategic alterations to the narrative. Ultimately, this study argues that Kazan's adaptation functions not merely as a faithful transfer of Williams' play to screen but as a creative re-interpretation that preserves its thematic essence while exposing new layers of meaning through cinematic form.*

Keywords

*Tennessee Williams, Elia Kazan, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Adaptation Studies, Southern Gothic, Cinematic Symbolism, Method Acting, Hays Code, etc.*

Full Article

A Streetcar Named Desire is a Southern Gothic drama by Thomas Lanier Williams, popularly known as Tennessee Williams, an American playwright and screenwriter. Williams won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1948 for this play. The play begins with the protagonist, Blanche Du Bois' arrival in New Orleans from her Old Southern Estate, Belle Reve, to live with her sister Stella. In the play, a conflict arises between the two "cultural species": Blanche, a representative of the fading Southern Bourgeoisie, and Stanley, a representative of the rising industrial urban Proletariat class of New Orleans. A class antagonism develops between Blanche and Stanley when Blanche attempts to manipulate Stella into leaving her harsh working-class life and returning to her aristocratic roots. Stanley, a symbol of toxic hegemonic masculinity, tries to save his domestic world and marriage by committing the ultimate act of phallic aggression; he rapes Blanche in an act of social Darwinism. This act of violation leads to the tragic downfall of Blanche Du Bois; she succumbs to a world of complete delusion. She is sent away to be institutionalised, probably for the rest of her life.

On December 3, 1947, Tennessee Williams' play premiered on Broadway. The 1951 film version is directed by Elia Kazan, who is also responsible for the original Broadway production. The film features three Academy Award-winning performances: Karl Malden as Harold Mitch, Kim Hunter as Stella, and Vivien Leigh as Blanche DuBois. And, of course, Marlon Brando plays the role of Stanley Kowalski and becomes an instant star, an instant sexual phenomenon in his

tight, sweaty shirt. The film was released in New York on September 19, 1951. It is a wonderful cinematic rendering of the play, despite being shot mostly on a single set.

The influence of theatre is conspicuous throughout the movie in its mise-en-scène; in its fidelity to the text, the dialogue, and the way Kazan blocked the film. The way he sets up the scenes and places his actors in light and dark, as well as the way the actors move, almost feels like live theatre. The camera never gets in the way of the actors, as if it is following a real theatre performance.

At the very opening scene, right after the Credits, Kazan also visualizes in the film one of the most significant symbols of the play.



In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, (00:00:52)

A bird's-eye view or aerial shot of a moving train blowing smoke is seen. The symbolic "streetcar" in the play is replaced with a real train. This is important because it is the mode of transportation that takes Blanche to her sister's home, where she hopes to escape from a sordid and painful past. The film allows us to see the streetcar, which was instrumental in bringing her into a locus where she would eventually be destroyed. This establishing shot does absolute justice to the significance of the title of the original play itself. The streetcar is a metaphor of a roaring locomotive named desire that carries Blanche through cemeteries to the topographical point on Elysian Fields, the land of the dead. And this journey, this cardinal drive of Freudian Eros and Thanatos, dominates the narrative from the beginning to the terminal.

In the next scene, we see Blanche emerging from a cloud of smoke from the train, as if she is coming out of a dream, almost enchanted. She arrived at a strange location, bringing with her a world of hopes, dreams, and imagination, but left heartbroken, filled with despair, and a loss of illusion.

The theme of past versus the present, the lost plantation estate of Southern Belle Reve versus the modern working-class New Orleans, and the class hierarchy and conflict are portrayed in the film in a very subtle way. The film never explicitly states this message in a clunky expositional scene where the characters blurt out the themes; however, the idea is still strongly conveyed throughout the film and is the glue that holds the whole thing together. All of this is accomplished through clever camerawork, sound design, and dialogue. The politics of locale in Williams' Southern Gothic play is carried out most ingeniously:-

"*A Streetcar Named Desire*, however, a film that according to Scott Jordan Harris, captures the 'quintessence of New Orleans,' is remarkable for the fact that only one scene in the film was shot in New Orleans with the bulk of the filming taking place in Burbank, California." (Horsley)

The film's setting functions more as an imagined Southern Gothic space-New Orleans is evoked visually and thematically-rather than authentic location filming.

From the very opening sequence, the film establishes a conflicting dynamic between every symbol of the traditional past and every symbol of the more modern present. When Blanche first arrives in New Orleans, she walks through the streets, uncertainly jumping at the blaring car

horns, street violence, and the cacophony of the pubs. Kazan uses lively jazz music as the diegetic background score, which was considered at the time to be a very forward-thinking progressive musical style, composed by Alex North (North). It is essential to note that jazz is a music genre that originated in the African American community of New Orleans. Therefore, Kazan's inclusion of the 'diegetic sound' of the jazz music, specifically the "Blue piano" score, emphasizes the ethnically diverse nature of his locale.

Kazan continues to employ clever camerawork, dialogue, and symbolism to convey the film's message during Blanche's first major confrontation with the film's symbol of the present world and the working class, Stanley, Stella's husband. The scene primarily uses a split screen to juxtapose Blanche and Stanley, or the past and the present, in the frame. Kazan utilises the clever growing and shrinking of each side of this split screen to effectively convey the ebb and flow of the conflict in this scene. That conflict is over the soul and loyalty of Stella, and at the beginning of the scene, Blanche takes up three-quarters of the frame to show that, at this point in the story, she is winning over Stella and convincing her to return to her aristocratic past.



In *A Streetcar Named Desire* (00:21:40)

However, as the scene progresses, the majority of the frame shifts to Stanley, a clever foreshadowing of the eventual victory of the present over the past.



In *A Streetcar Named Desire* (00:23:10)

The dynamic between Stella and Stanley, or the toxic co-dependence, is translated brilliantly into filmic language. Kim Hunter and Marlon Brando have a scene in which they have just argued, and she has gone upstairs. Brando is standing at the bottom of the stairs with his t-shirt torn. He yells, his iconic line, "O Stellaaaaaa", and Stella come down the staircase. He sinks to his knees, and she bends over his back and tears up his bare back with her nails, and he carries her up, probably to the bed. It is almost choreographed like a dance with Alex North's erotic score playing in the background. Kazan's filmic language is virtually poetic here.

In the play, Blanche seeks to find her world of enchantment, of illusion, and of dreams, but ultimately is condemned to a tragic downfall. Her tragic journey from a world of imagination to an unforgiving reality is beautifully represented through Kazan's lens by the use of mirrors.

Blanche uses mirrors to construct and maintain her desired image, a world of romantic fantasies and social grace. She frequently gazes into mirrors and tries to uphold an idealised, youthful image of herself, refusing to confront her ageing and declining reality. This can be read through a Lacanian lens as a mirror-stage-like misrecognition; she clings to a false ego that is ultimately shattered.

The camera frequently zooms in on Blanche in the vicinity of a mirror, which serves as a significant symbol throughout the film whenever she confronts herself. But Blanche's reflection in the mirror is progressively diminished as the movie unfolds. Blanche eventually succumbs to insanity and stops looking at the mirror in which other characters are reflected more and more.



In A Streetcar Named Desire (00:57:15)

During one of the film's pivotal scenes, Blanche's lover, Mitch, arrives at Stella's house completely inebriated. Mitch confronts Blanche and seeks explanations for the rumours he had heard about her. Blanche checks her image in the mirror one last time before opening the door, but the audience is not permitted to see what she sees in the mirror. Imaginably, her reflection in the mirror has become too distorted and fragmented for the audience to watch. Mitch faces her and demands to see her face up close; the audience is allowed the privilege of a close-up shot of her face, but she is not. Blanche closes her eyes in revulsion as Mitch grabs her face and reveals her to the bright light. Mitch's point of view has now become a reflection of Blanche in the mirror - his eyes reflecting her washed-out, disillusioned, and distorted image.



In A Streetcar Named Desire (01:28:50)

There is another scene where Blanche has completely lost her mind. She dresses up in her fancy clothes and fantasizes that she is at one of the balls she used to attend in her prime. Blanche's fantasy and illusion are lost when Stanley enters the room and turns on the light.

Next time the mirror appears on the screen, Blanche is amidst a squabble with Stanley. She holds a white handkerchief in front of the mirror, as if seeking a truce. The mirror refuses her this

time, and as she falls victim to Stanley's attack, she turns her back on the mirror, facing the harsh reality once and for all. The mirror shatters as Stanley rapes Blanche. The shattering of the mirror symbolizes the collapse of her carefully constructed illusions.



In *A Streetcar Named Desire* (01:44:10)

The last time the camera catches a glimpse of the mirror, it is behind a veil. The curtain serves as a filter between the audience's point of view and the reality of Blanche's demented condition in the narrative. The mirror is conspicuously unbroken, but her reflection in the mirror is; her fragmented reflection is now a testament to her split personality. Now there is a double reflection of Blanche; the one in the physical world and another that has been transported to the actual limbo of the Elysian Fields.



In *A Streetcar Named Desire* (01:52:30)

Kazan's use of Light and shadow is a key tool in conveying the thematic nuances of the play, especially his use of chiaroscuro, including all five areas: highlight, halftone, deep shadow, reflected light, and cast shadow. The high contrast lighting also serves a more symbolic purpose. Blanche always hides in the shadows so that suitors will not realise her actual age. Blanche is an impoverished woman who lives her life in the celebration of Eros while being in denial of the indomitable force of Thanos. She is terrified of her ageing and dwindling beauty. To hide her deteriorating vitality, she crouches in dimly lit areas and shadowy corners of the house, even when she is practising her art of seduction. The fact that no one has seen her in proper daylight adds to her mystique. At night, she even shades the light with a paper lantern. When Mitch viciously throws the Chinese lantern away, her world of fantasies crumbles, and she says,

"I don't want realism... I want magic!" (Williams, 86)

Brightness becomes parallel to her ageing reality, while dim light is her world of illusion:

The absence of bright light portrays –as in a water colour- her inability to see herself and to be seen and accepted as she really is: a faded –yet still attractive- impoverished woman. Blanche's images of a glamorous past,

full of arts, good manners and sophisticated gentlemen are on the other side of the mirror she wants to dwell in (Cabral).



In *A Streetcar Named Desire* (01:55:30)

The politics and censorship of 1950s America, which affected the film's fidelity to the text, have significant implications for the final production of the film. *Streetcar* was not the kind of play that could transition seamlessly into a heavily censored medium subject to the Hays Code or the Motion Picture Production Code:

Streetcar was a commercial and critical success, but its screen transition was a struggle on three fronts as the body politic of the Motion Picture industry's censorship board, the Legion of Decency, and the film's own producers appeared as formidable opponents (Cahir, 73).

The Motion Picture Association of America, or the MPAA, alerted Warner Bros. to a couple of principal problems. First, there was what was called an 'inference of sexual perversion'. Like the reference to homosexuality of Blanche's deceased husband, the general amount of references to sex had to be toned down. The MPAA even recommended that all inferences to rape be entirely eliminated and merely be part of Blanche's hallucination brought on by her dementia. Kazan and Tennessee Williams stood their ground on this because, without it, they explained, the film loses its meaning because the rape of Blanche by Stanley is a crucial, fundamental truth in the play, which is the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate by the savage and brutal forces of modern society: "Kazan watered down Blanche's lustful past and the remembered homosexuality of her first husband, but he was adamant on Stanley's rape of Blanche." (*A Streetcar Named Desire* – Film Notes)

Williams wrote to Joseph Breen (director of MPAA's Production Code Administration), Kazan also pleaded with producer Charles K. Feldman of Warner Bros. in another letter that it was a necessary plot point: "As Tennessee Williams put it eloquently in a letter to the Breen Office... any further changes would be crass... The rape of Blanche by Stanley is a pivotal, integral truth in the play, without which the play loses its meaning..." (*A Streetcar Named Desire* – Film Notes).

Ultimately, they came to an agreement that depictions of rape might be permissible if Stanley were actually punished for his behaviour. Kazan opted for a paradigmatic shift in the film; rather than reuniting with Stanley as she does at the end of the play, Stella takes her baby and leaves Stanley. She says:

‘I’m not going back in there again

Not this time, never going back, never.’ (*A Streetcar Named Desire*)

The film was nominated for 12 Oscars, including, of course, Best Actor. Three of the leading actors won Academy Awards; however, Humphrey Bogart won the best actor award for “The African Queen” over the heavily favoured Marlon Brando.

Brando’s portrayal of Stanley Kowalski in the Broadway production and then on film signalled the arrival, the ascendance of a new style of acting, which came to be known as the “method acting”. A stark difference in acting techniques seemed to pit Leigh against the others even before filming began for the movie. Marion Brando, Kim Hunter, and Karl Malden, like Kazan himself, were trained in the Method of Konstantin Stanislavsky. (Stanislavski, 45) Leigh, in contrast, was trained in an antithetical tradition: a highly Stylised / Classical Acting, a tradition which, at the time, the Method Actors had rejected as formulated and rigid.



In *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Although initially the conflicts between Leigh and Kazan were considerable, hostility grew most severe between Brando and Leigh. Consistent with their contrasting acting traditions, their natural clash of competitiveness was evident both on and off camera; this conflict eventually heightened the dramatic tension between the characters they represented on screen.

Leigh’s performance represents a different tradition and a different approach to acting, one that is based more on formality, gesture, and artifice, and that is very much what Blanche DuBois represents in the world of *A Streetcar Named Desire* that Tennessee Williams gives us: it is a struggle between magic and naturalism, between pretence and authenticity. Leigh as Blanche has a very fluid way of talking; she is very educated and genteel, having been brought up in a bygone era, whereas Brando is just as uncouth and overtly sexual. The affected unrealism of Leigh’s Blanche is an illusion embodied in a character, a series of fantastical and complex decisions.



In *A Streetcar Named Desire*



To conclude, this study aimed to explore the complex interplay between theatrical text and cinematic vision, illuminating how Kazan's adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* both preserves and transforms the original play's thematic quintessence. Through strategic visual framing, paradigmatic and syntagmatic shifts, and the nuanced use of setting and sound, Kazan reinterprets Williams' exploration of desire, power, and fragility for the screen. Kazan's film stands as a compelling testament to the dynamic possibilities of adaptation, highlighting how directorial choices can illuminate new meanings within a classic text while remaining anchored in its dramatic core.

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