

The Cinematic Eye in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*

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When confronted with an unpleasant situation at home, the character Tom Wingfield in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* typically responds by saying, "I'm going to the movies" (188). For Tom, the cinema provides both the impetus and a convenient excuse for escape from unpleasant company and inhospitable surroundings. In contrast with the Wingfield apartment, "one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers" (Williams 143), the movie theater provides Tom with both a temporary respite from the responsibilities of providing for his family and a refuge from the oppressive reality that distresses him. In the relative comfort and pleasant confines of the movie house, Tom delights in the visual pleasures that the cinema affords its viewers. Despite the remarkable frequency of Tom's trips to the movies, the proof of which is "a shower of movie ticket stubs" descending like rain from his pockets (Williams 166), critics have generally neglected to consider how Tom's vision and recollection of events in *The Glass Menagerie* are both a reflection of the shaping influence of the cinema and, more importantly, an articulation of the dominant cultural ideology as expressed by the cinematic apparatus.

Of course, Williams's own close ties to the cinema and its influence upon him have not been ignored. Characterizing the young Tom Williams as "weak, timid, and introspective," Gilbert Maxwell, a friend of Williams since 1940, suggests that Williams went to the movies to escape "from a world of poverty and misunderstanding," and there took comfort in the "make-believe world of . . . motion pictures" (xii). Benjamin Nelson attributes Williams's frequent experience of the cinema to a similar motive: "During the years in St. Louis, out of loneliness and the desire to escape from home, he spent much of his leisure time in movie theatres" (16). Although Will-

iams would later (briefly in 1943) be employed as a screenwriter for a major Hollywood studio, Allean Hale believes that Williams acquired his knowledge of films during the formative years of his adolescence, and in a place that afforded Williams ample opportunity to do so: "St. Louis . . . had more motion picture theatres per capita than New York City. Future biographers would assume that Tennessee learned his cinematic techniques from his six months at MGM, whereas he had spent twenty years at the movies before he went to Hollywood" (610). According to biographer Lyle Leverich, Williams's Hollywood employment was more repugnant than suitable to Williams's taste, but not without its positive impact: "While the experience left him with a distaste for art as a studio product, . . . he was in fact deeply impressed with the wide-ranging, often poetic freedom of film itself, and this would influence his writing of *The Glass Menagerie* as well as other of his major plays" (530). Anticipating Leverich's conclusion, George Brandt writes that "of all American playwrights" Tennessee Williams "has most effectively learnt the lessons in freedom that the cinema has to teach" (165), adding that *The Glass Menagerie* is "the most cinematic of Williams's plays" (181).

Brandt and Edward Murray, in particular, have examined many of the cinematic features evident in Williams's dramatic work. While Murray focuses primarily upon film adaptations of the plays and Brandt directs his attention both to Williams's original screenplay, *Baby Doll*, and the plays, both authors agree that the cinematic techniques that Williams learned enabled him to go beyond the limits of conventional theater. As Brandt explains, Williams "aimed at overcoming the leaden immobility of the naturalistic set," attempting instead "to create on the stage the fluidity and the sense of simultaneity which the editing process can give to the cinema" (168). Certainly while Brandt and Murray demonstrate the importance of Williams's "cinematic imagination" (Murray 52), their studies nevertheless neglect to consider the special, cinematic role of the narrator and how Tom Wingfield's distinctive gaze reveals the extent to which *The Glass Menagerie* replicates the organizational structures of the classic cinema, which, in turn, reflect the ideology of a patriarchal society.

The cinematic influence in *The Glass Menagerie* is most clearly evident in the figure of the narrator. With the aid of this device, Williams duplicates the motion-picture camera's organizing point of view, adapts the shot-to-shot formation for the theater (fostering identification with a fictional

character and replicating the cinematic process of suture), and adopts the patriarchal look that characterizes many of Hollywood's classic films: a man gazing at a woman.

Although the cinema and the theater differ in many fundamental respects, the importance of the narrator's cinematic function in *The Glass Menagerie* becomes readily apparent if we consider some of the connections between the two media, as Barbara Freedman suggests in *Staging the Gaze*: "Theater theorists might profitably examine how various aspects of the cinematic machinery—[for example] the voiceover, [and] the shot-to-shot formation—are fulfilled differently in theater" (68-69). If we add the motion-picture camera to Freedman's list of machinery, and consider its theatrical equivalent in *The Glass Menagerie*, we see that Williams's narrator functions in ways analogous to those of the camera in film. Most obviously, the narrator and the camera both operate to provide the spectator with an orienting point of view, one with which the spectator is then compelled to identify. As we shall see, the narrator also serves as a stand-in for the spectator in the theater, assuming a subject position within the dramatic narrative, a function accomplished in film by means of the camera and the shot-to-shot formation. In his dual role as both narrator and character in the play, Tom Wingfield—similar to the camera—performs not only as the cinematic "eye," but also as the cinematic "I" who sees (and speaks) within the fictive narrative of *The Glass Menagerie*.

By making the narrator an integral presence in the play, Williams not only facilitates identification with a particular point of view, thus duplicating one of the important functions of the camera in film, he also anticipates and addresses one of the difficulties inherent in theatrical production: the organization and control of both identification and point of view. As Freedman explains: "Whereas cinema encourages a more direct perceptual identification with the seeing eye of the camera, theater divides and disperses the possibilities of identification, in the process problematizing both identification and point of view" (68). Unable to reproduce exactly the effect of the camera, Williams nevertheless envisions a cinematic solution to a theatrical problem, substituting in the place of the camera a narrator who organizes and orchestrates what happens on stage. Although each of the characters in *The Glass Menagerie* appears to be an autonomous self, each representing a differing point of view, each is actually but a memory, a product of

the narrator's vivid imagination (at another level of enunciation, each is also the imaginative construct of Tennessee Williams). Prompted by Stark Young's observation, "[t]he story, as we see it on the stage, all happens in the son's mind long afterward" (505), Thomas L. King concludes that—in effect—"Tom is the only character in the play, for we see not the characters but Tom's memory of them—Amanda and the rest are merely aspects of Tom's consciousness" (208). To the extent that Williams's audience accepts Tom's point of view as its own, Williams duplicates the function of the camera and the process of identification in cinema as described by Jean-Louis Baudry: "the spectator identifies less with what is represented, the spectacle itself, than with what stages the spectacle, makes it seen, obliging him to see what it sees; this is exactly the function taken over by the camera" (295). By subsuming all points of view under one, and by facilitating identification with this single gaze, Williams approximates the camera's singular and authoritative point of view, at the same time limiting the possibilities of identification and point of view generally characteristic of the theater.

As a further means of strengthening the sense of identification between narrator and audience, Williams adapts another cinematic technique, the shot-to-shot or shot/reverse shot formation, to establish a clearly defined subject position for the viewer within the fictive narrative. Kaja Silverman provides a concise explanation of this cinematic technique:

The shot/reverse shot formation is a cinematic set in which the second shot shows the field from which the first shot is assumed to have been taken. . . . [T]he viewing subject, unable to sustain for long its belief in the autonomy of the cinematic image, demands to know whose gaze controls what it sees. The shot/reverse shot formation is calculated to answer that question in such a manner that the cinematic illusion remains intact: Shot 1 shows a space which may or may not contain a human figure (e.g. the wall of a building, a view of the ocean, a room full of people). . . . Shot 2 locates a spectator in the other 180° of the same circular field, thereby implying that the preceding shot was seen through the eyes of a figure in the cinematic narrative. (201-02)

Without the device of the narrator, Williams would not be able to approximate the shot/reverse shot formation in the theater; however, the narrator's

presence makes possible the cinematic effect of alternating shots. To illustrate, viewers of the play are initially confronted with the scene of the Wingfield apartment, corresponding to what Silverman calls "Shot 1" (202). While the theater audience may, for a while, take pleasure in witnessing this scene, it, too, like most cinematic audiences, begins to wonder, "whose gaze controls what it sees" (Silverman 202). The answer, corresponding to Silverman's "Shot 2" (202), is revealed when the narrator appears on stage and announces: "The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic" (Williams 145). At this point, viewers realize that what they see on stage is the narrator's vision. It is the narrator, acting as stage manager, who is responsible for and controls everything that happens on stage. During the course of the play, the audience observes a stylized view of what Tom Wingfield himself recalls, subject, of course, to all the imperfections of his memory and the exaggerations of his imagination, as when Tom "remembers" scenes he could not possibly have witnessed (at the beginning of scene six, for example, Tom describes what transpires between Laura and Amanda even before he and the gentleman caller, Jim O'Connor, arrive for dinner).

In most films, the shot/reverse shot formation functions to efface the presence of the camera by convincing viewers that what is visible on the screen is actually the point of view of a character within the cinematic narrative. In effect, this procedure serves to conceal from view the various operations that go into the production of the film. Daniel Dayan contends that the process of production, selection, and arrangement constitutes an "ideological operation" that the cinema "threatens to expose" unless it is hidden from view (28). "In order to do this," Dayan explains, "the filmic message must account *within itself* for those elements of the code which it seeks to hide—changes of shot and, above all, what lies behind these changes" (28). The shot/reverse shot formation, creating a point of view within the cinematic narrative, accomplishes this end. Similarly in *The Glass Menagerie*, the shot/reverse shot formation ascribes to a character within the drama (the narrator) the control of the theatrical apparatus. The play thus accounts internally, at the level of fiction, for its own theatricality. At the same time, the shot/reverse shot formation conceals from view the playwright behind the scenes, and his controlling and ideological influence.

When Williams reproduces the shot/reverse shot formation in *The Glass Menagerie*, he also replicates another cinematic process, called “suture,” which has the effect of binding the viewing audience even more closely with its fictional stand-in, the narrator. Similar to the shot/reverse shot formation, the concept of suture is helpful in understanding the function of the narrator and the cinematic structure of *The Glass Menagerie*. According to Jacques-Alain Miller, suture may be defined as “the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse” (25). In other words, suture describes the process by which subjects are joined to or “emerge within discourse” (Silverman 199-200). Since a subject cannot physically be present in language, the subject depends upon a stand-in, such as the pronoun “I,” in order to participate in language—or to participate in “what [Jacques] Lacan calls the symbolic order” (Silverman 150). In language, the pronoun “I” thus “stands in for the absent subject (i.e. absent in being)” (Silverman 200).

These generalizations about language also apply to the language of cinema. Since viewing subjects in the cinema cannot physically emerge within the cinematic discourse, the film provides a substitute or stand-in for the viewer. According to Silverman:

The classic cinematic organization depends upon the subject's willingness to become absent to itself by permitting a fictional character to “stand in” for it, or by allowing a particular point of view to define what it sees. The operation of suture is successful at the moment when the viewing subject says, “Yes, that's me,” or “That's what I see.” (205)

The success of *The Glass Menagerie* similarly depends upon willing subjects, viewers who will permit the fictional character, Tom Wingfield, to define and control the spectators' point of view. At the moment when these viewers accept the events on stage as stemming from Tom's memory, the theatrical equivalent of suture is likewise successful.

When viewers identify with the narrator and consent to observe the events on stage as if through the eyes of Tom Wingfield, they necessarily adopt the narrator's point of view, a way of seeing that corresponds in two ways to the look presented in many Hollywood films. First of all, as Silverman observes, the “[c]lassic cinema abounds in shot/reverse shot formations in

which men look at women" (225). Obviously, in *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom Wingfield focuses his gaze upon the two women in his life, his sister, Laura, and his mother, Amanda. Silverman also notes that many cinematic narratives are "organized around a demonstration and an interrogation of the female's castrated condition" (222). By this she means that the female protagonist is often employed as a signifier of castration or lack—for example, the lack "of control, power, privilege" (223). A similar demonstration is evident in *The Glass Menagerie*. Tom Wingfield not only directs his gaze upon women, he accentuates their lack—most importantly, their lack of a husband. Of course, Tom directs most of his attention to the "exquisitely fragile" Laura (Williams 129), whose inadequacies—she's "crippled" (Williams 157), she's "not popular" (Williams 150), she needs a man to provide for her—are all the more apparent because of Tom's focusing gaze. Until the final scene, *The Glass Menagerie* is structured to complete Laura's lack by securing for her a gentleman caller, a man who will then (Tom and Amanda hope) marry her and provide for her every need.

As much then as the structure of *The Glass Menagerie* resembles the organizational pattern typical of the "classic cinema," it also reflects the established ways of seeing characteristic of a patriarchal society in which the roles are assigned, as Laura Mulvey explains, according to "[a]n active/passive heterosexual division of labour" (12). Mulvey's characterization of "the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, [of] making things happen" (12) has an obvious parallel in *The Glass Menagerie*. Tom Wingfield, functioning as both narrator/stage manager, literally makes things happen. In addition to prompting what we see on stage, the narrator also controls *how* we see by manipulating the "extra-literary" effects of the play, the music and the lighting, for example (Williams 133). When Tom wants to direct the viewer's gaze to the figure of his mother, he simply "motions for music and a spot of light on Amanda" (Williams 149). As the master of spectacle in *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom Wingfield clearly resembles what Mulvey describes as the typical male protagonist in film: a "controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify" (12), someone who is also "free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action" (13).

In contrast with the man's active role in film, the woman's role is typically that of the passive recipient of the male gaze. As Silverman explains, reiterating and clarifying Mulvey's argument:

[The male subject] is defined in terms of his capacity to look (i.e. as a voyeur) and [the female subject] in terms of her capacity to attract the male gaze (i.e. as an exhibitionist). This opposition is entirely in keeping with the dominant cultural roles assigned to men and women, since voyeurism is the active or "masculine" form of the scopophilic drive, while exhibitionism is the passive or "feminine" form of the same drive. (222-23)

As the objects of Tom Wingfield's gaze, the women in *The Glass Menagerie* offer surprisingly different responses to it, ones that conflict with the conventional view of Amanda as active and Laura as passive. On the one hand, Amanda passively accepts without question the culturally defined role of the exhibitionist. She even expresses delight at the prospect of being, once again, the object of a man's attention. In scene six, moments after preening her daughter by stuffing Laura's bosom with power puffs wrapped in handkerchiefs, Amanda joyfully announces: "I'm going to make a spectacular appearance!" (Williams 193). Amanda's specific instructions to Laura are illuminated by the remarks of John Berger. Observing a distinction similar to Silverman's division of men and women according to the "capacity to look" or "to attract the male gaze" (222), Berger points out how "relations between men and women" may also be defined in terms of vision (Berger 47). More specifically, he notes: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (47). In the scene from *The Glass Menagerie* just described, Amanda hopes that Laura, by looking at herself, will take note of how she appears to men, the better to be able to secure a husband and provide for her future security. As Amanda implicitly suggests, her success in life depends upon her appearance, giving credence to Berger's conclusion: "[the woman] has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life" (46).

On the other hand, Laura actively resists both the role that society prescribes for women as well as Amanda's insistence that she conform to it, as Amanda's remarks to Laura clearly illustrate: "You couldn't be satisfied with just sitting home, and yet whenever I try to arrange something for you, you seem to resist it" (Williams 192). More often than not, Laura's resistance takes the form of a refusal. She refuses to believe that any gentlemen will call for her. She refuses to attend Rubicam's Business College, spending her time instead at the art museum or at the zoo. She refuses to open the door for her brother and the gentleman caller when they arrive. When forced to do so, she quickly absents herself. As much as Amanda seeks to be the focus of attention, Laura actively avoids it. As much as possible, she refuses to be seen.

Unable to avoid altogether the presence of the gentleman caller, Laura actively resists him by trying to elude his gaze. For one brief moment, she succeeds. When Jim first enters the dining room and places the lighted candelabrum on the floor, Laura intentionally takes a seat opposite the burning candles, making it difficult for Jim to see her. "I can't hardly see you sitting way over there," he says (Williams 212). For once, the roles of observed and observer are reversed. Assuming the unfamiliar and (typically male) role of viewer, Laura speaks with hesitation: "I can—see you" (Williams 212). Jim's response, "that's not fair, I'm in the limelight," (Williams 212) betrays no indication that Jim understands the point that for the woman to be in the limelight is also unfair. Of course, the reversal of roles is not sustained for long. Recognizing that Jim is uncomfortable as the object of her gaze, Laura moves within the circle of light. As a result, Jim expresses both relief and satisfaction with what constitutes for him the comfortable norm: "Good! Now I can see you!" (Williams 212). As much as Jim wants to see, Laura prefers to remain invisible, but given that impossibility, she becomes like a transparent piece of glass, both resisting and succumbing to Jim's penetrating gaze.

As the only woman to resist the male gaze in *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura represents an alternative to accepting, as Amanda does, the conventional role of woman in a patriarchal society. In offering resistance, she may represent what Silverman describes as "the temptation to refuse cultural reintegration, to skid off-course, out of control, to prefer castration to false plentitude" (232). Laura offers the possibility that the glass menagerie, her

visible yet invisible retreat, provides a satisfaction equal to, if not greater than, the hope represented by the gentleman caller, "the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for" (Williams 145). Preferring her own "castrated" condition to the uncertain promises or "false plentitude" offered by the gentleman caller (Silverman 232), Laura is only slightly dismayed when Jim accidentally breaks the horn from the unicorn, her favorite piece of glass. Recognizing the unicorn's sudden "castrated" condition as similar to her own, Laura rationalizes that it is "a blessing in disguise" (Williams 226).

Despite Laura's valiant efforts to resist the male gaze, ultimately, Williams depicts her as lacking the power to subvert it. Her silence in the final tableau and her obedience to Tom's command, "Blow out your candles, Laura," (Williams 237) are but the final indicators of the narrator's greater strength, and the playwright's superior control over characters, narrator, and audience. The three organizational structures that Williams appropriates from the cinema—the camera's point of view, the shot/reverse shot formation, and, finally, the patriarchal gaze—all function to control the audience and its way of seeing the characters and events depicted on stage. At the same time, these devices operate to conceal the play's cinematic structure and the extent to which Tom's vision and recollection of events are spoken by the language and the ideology of a patriarchal society.

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