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PLASTIC THEATRE AND SELECTIVE REALISM OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Abstract

Tennessee Williams's inclination towards experimentation became evident early on when he first introduced the concept of "plastic theater," heavily reliant on expressionism and symbolism. As a part of understanding the origins of Williams's (new) theatrical techniques, apart from presenting the idea of "plastic theatre" and selective realism, and the all-pervading lyricism, this paper provides a short overview of Russian Formalism and Brecht's epic theatre, as well as points out the similarities and differences between the *epic* and the *plastic*. In addition, the paper demonstrates how the poetics of "plastic theatre" and its subtler version – selective realism – are actualized in the playwright's work. The characteristics of selective realism as well as techniques and elements used to achieve its aims are presented systematically, including stage directions, the use of props, the "absent presence" (concerning the expressionistic quality determining the action), the language, the use of music and lighting, the use of narrator, and the screen device. The idea that

these elements contribute to a better portrayal of certain thematic concerns is reviewed through the reading of Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1944).

Keywords: Bertolt Brecht, epic theatre, plastic theatre, selective realism, Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*

Introduction

Although often praised as one of the greatest playwrights belonging to the American realist tradition, along with Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams colored his opus with elements characteristic of other artistic movements, many of which were recognized as avant-garde. Williams's inclination towards experimentation became evident early on when he first introduced the concept of "plastic theater"¹ which heavily relied on expressionism and symbolism, but was also characterized by soft lyricism, leading some critics² to identify Williams's dramas as lyrical.

In trying to understand Williams's opus, one must know that his literary aspirations changed under different pressures, usually having to do with traditionalism and conservatism of the American literary context. He himself often modified his scripts, trying to preserve the main idea behind it as well as the tenets of his poetics. For example, stage directions in the original script of *The Glass Menagerie*, his first commercial and critical success, called for some specific plastic elements, including dozens of slide projections, film-like soundtrack music, and dissolving and fading lighting, none of which took place on the stage under Eddie Dowling's direction in 1944 (Kramer). The result was two different editions of the play, one intended for reading, the other for staging.³ On the other hand, during his

¹ Williams first introduced the term in the production notes to his play *The Glass Menagerie* (1944).

² Such as Harold Bloom, who claims that it was a "highly original genre Williams created—lyrical drama, in which the protagonists speak and cry aloud in an idiom that transcends them" (7).

³ Williams also wrote alternative endings for other plays of his, such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), or *The Rose Tattoo* (1951). For more information see Parker, and Devlin and Tischler.

later career, Williams showed almost complete abandonment of realism, and a strong inclination towards the avant-garde, going as far as absurdism, and delighting in the grotesque.⁴

To follow the line of Williams's artistic growth and maturation means to become aware of an impressive network of influences: from Ibsen and Chekhov's realist tradition to their diligent apprentice, Nobel-prize winning O'Neill, who also exerted influence on Williams, to the tradition of Russian formalists and Brechtian epic theatre. The latter significantly helped in bringing the notion of "plastic theatre" to life.

1. Defining the *Plastic* in Theatre

In his letter to Margo Jones, the first director of *Summer and Smoke*, Williams's play from 1948, Tennessee Williams concisely summarized the essence of his poetics by pointing out the importance of stage design since the play in question "deals with intangibles which need plastic expression far more than verbal" (Devlin and Tischler 180).

Williams took on himself to define what "plastic theatre" is and, one could even say, to redefine theatre practices and change their rather fixed understanding. In the "Production Notes" to *The Glass Menagerie* he states that those notes are "not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a conception of a new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture" (Williams, "Production Notes" 299). It is obvious that Williams believed that realist theatre had lost its artistic strength to present universal truths. Further in the text, Williams proceeds to define what he thinks is the justification for his new, "plastic theatre":

Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or

⁴ For example, the one-act play *The Gnädiges Fräulein* (1966), or *Camino Real* (1953). For further information on the experimentations Williams conducted see Quinlan.

certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality . . . but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. ("Production Notes" 299)

Although evidently in service of realism, the purpose of "plastic theatre" was to "generate a theatrical experience greater than mere realism" (Kramer), through the combination of non-literary elements of stage production, such as the setting, props, costume, lighting, sound and visual effects, or screen device, and the literary text. For Williams, "reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance" (Williams, "Production Notes" 299). Thus, in Williams's mind, the plasticity was supposed to enhance the action, the theme, the characters, as well as the language, closely approaching the poetic truth.

One may ask how the notion of plasticity developed in Williams's art. Richard E. Kramer, who investigated this "sculptural" drama in detail, suggests that a possible influence on Williams was the painter Hans Hofmann, whom Williams met in Provincetown in a summer art school, together with many other artist friends.⁵

Kramer states that Hofmann, a friend of the famous abstract expressionist, Jackson Pollock, argued about the plasticity in painting, referring to it as the "vacant space," and underlines that both Williams and Hofmann treated space in art as alive, not inert. Insightfully, Kramer indicates that Williams's friendship with artists of different art forms "impressed on him how integral to theatre all the arts were and how effective the non-realistic forms of theatre and art could be."

⁵ Williams's interest in painting and the pictorial is evident in most of his plays, sometimes even referencing the works of famous painters and paintings in stage directions in order to (poetically) describe the wanted effect. A good example is the reference to El Greco in *The Glass Menagerie* where the light that is supposed to fall on Laura is described as "light in religious paintings, such as El Greco's" (Williams, "Production Notes" 231). For detailed analysis of the use of pictorial effects in Williams see Maruéjols-Koch.

In another letter, written in 1948 to critic Eric Bentley, who had only words of disdain for Williams's plays, the author clarifies his technique and says that the critic:

has a lack of respect for the extra-verbal or non-literary elements of the theatre, the various plastic elements, the purely visual things such as light and movement and color and design, which play, for example, such a tremendously important part in theatre . . . and *which are as much a native part of drama as words and ideas are. . .* I have read criticism in which the use of transparencies and music and subtle lighting effects, *which are often as meaningful as pages of dialogue*, were dismissed as “cheap tricks and devices.” *Actually all of these plastic things are as valid instruments of expression in the theatre as words. . .* (Williams qtd. in Devlin and Tischler 203; emphasis added)

As Kramer notices, “[h]e did not want language to be the principal medium of his theatre, merely supported by a picture-frame set and enhanced by music and lighting effects.” One of the examples of an artistic and structural modification of language in theatre is the screen device that Williams introduced in *The Glass Menagerie* which combines verbal (legends) and non-verbal (images) messages. Kramer points out that

Williams wanted all the so-called production elements traditionally added by the director and designers to be co-equal aspects of the play and part of the playwright's creative process. Instead of merely composing the text of a play and then turning it over to a director and his team of theatre artists who will add the non-verbal elements that turn a play into a theatrical experience, Williams envisioned a theatre which begins with the playwrights who create the theatrical experience in the script because they are not just composing words, but theatrical images. . . . Just as the viewer of a plastic painting has a three-dimensional experience from a two-dimensional work of art,

the audience of a plastic theatre work has a theatrical experience beyond the mere image of actual life.⁶

After the examined material, it seems that we could put the equality sign between the *plastic* and the non-verbal. Having this in mind, it is easier to understand the function of symbolism in the plays. What makes them truly remarkable is the combination of symbolism and expressionism, which inevitably carries the representation of feelings on stage, thus circumventing a purely symbolical representation of a subject and standing on the verge of realism.

One must have in mind that *The Glass Menagerie* was purposefully created with the intention of introducing “plastic theatre” since it is a memory play, and because of this, Williams granted himself the poetic freedom he would not have had if this had not been the case. In the “Production Notes,” he confidently writes about the new role he has given to music and lighting, but his ideas are most concisely presented in the use of the screen device, the purpose of which is “to give accent to certain values in each scene. Each scene contains a particular point (or several) which is structurally most important” (Williams 230). Because it was an unconventional practice, the screen device was not used on stage in the early productions of *The Glass Menagerie*, nor has Williams employed it in his later plays. In the plays to come, the functions of the screen device were, however, “translated” and assigned to props, language, and sometimes music and lighting. During his later career, when Williams was under pressure to write “Broadway material,”⁷ and therefore created more realistic

⁶ In relation to images in composing the plays, Crandell points out the influence of cinema in Williams’s work, claiming that the playwright was influenced by “the poetic freedom of film itself” (2).

⁷ Apart from being the best-known theatres around the world, Broadway theatres are also characterized by commerciality. The given plays are generally part of the mainstream in the sense that the stages are reserved for dramas which usually do not have (which especially was the case during Williams’s lifetime) an experimental trait either in their themes or productions, and which are commonly realist ones, offering a moral lesson. Some of Tennessee Williams’s plays were (auto)censored for Broadway productions, which led to his writing alternative endings (e.g. in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* Williams changed the ending of the original play into a happier,

but still strongly symbolic pieces, he redefined “plastic theatre” into “selective realism,” which is defined as “a type of realism that heightens certain details of action, scenery, and dialogue while omitting others” (Wilson and Goldfarb 344). In this definition we find the exact same meaning Williams provided for the use of the screen device in *The Glass Menagerie*.

Apart from the use of the screen, music, and lighting in *The Glass Menagerie*, the inventive introduction of a narrator, Tom, who is also a character in the play, strongly connects Williams with another branch of his tree of influences – namely that of the Brechtian epic theatre, and through it, the Russian formalists.

2. Russian Formalists and the Brechtian Epic

Russian Formalism appeared in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution in 1917. It is a literary theory whose practitioners and followers were pejoratively called the “Formalists.” Its most prominent figures were Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, and Velimir Khlebnikov. As Cuddon observes, “Russian Formalists were primarily interested in the way that literary texts achieve their effects and in establishing a scientific basis for the study of literature” (285). A literary text, therefore, was an object of (scientific) investigation, and essentially a verbal act, since the focus was on the structuring of language. Some of the theory’s contributions are the distinction between plot and story, definition of the “motif” as the smallest unit of plot, and, most prominently, the “scientifically explored” concept of “ostranenie” or “making strange,” later to be called “defamiliarization” (Cuddon 286). It is crucial to remember that Formalists thought the aim of an art work to be certain cognition, and that they rejected the “art for art’s sake” aesthetics.

In his essay from 1917, *Art as Technique*, Shklovsky introduces the term “ostranenie,” which aims at making “fresh, new, strange, different [of] what is familiar and known. Through “defamiliarization” the writer modifies the

but a significantly different one). For more information on Williams’s Broadway censure see Billington.

reader's habitual perceptions by drawing attention to the artifice of the text" (Cuddon 286). Shklovsky clearly defines it in the following manner: "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar'. . . ." He presents the idea of "deautomatized perception," achieved through the process of "defamiliarization," as by making something strange, the reader is supposed to not just recognize but also see something as it really is, as if (s)he were seeing it for the first time. The true cognition is possible only when recognition does not play a role in seeing and understanding.

The movement wore off by 1930 because of Stalinist and Socialist pressures on the individuals involved, but not before another aspiring playwright and theatre director got familiar with (and influenced by) its theories. Bertolt Brecht travelled to Russia in 1935. During his stay, he saw a number of theatre productions, and the ones involving Chinese actor Meilan-Fan prompted him to write *Estrangement Effects in Chinese Acting* (1936) (Brooker 192). Throughout the rest of his career, Brecht frequently used this experience to portray the so-called alienation or estrangement-effect, which has its roots in the already mentioned defamiliarization, theorized by Formalists. This concept, also known as the V-effect (after the original phrase in German, the *Verfremdungseffekt*), is the essential phenomenon of the epic theatre,⁸ created by Brecht in the 1920s as his response to the political climate of the time, and, therefore, related to the creation of a new tradition in European political theatre.

Brecht was against characters being the most important aspect of the play. He argued that that position belonged to the themes and messages behind a certain performance, and that these would be lost if the audience were emotionally invested in the characters. For him, it was crucial that the characters and the audience acknowledge that (s)he is a character only. For

⁸ The epic drama is the opposite of the realist one. It is defined as a modern episodic drama that seeks to provoke objective understanding of a social problem through a series of loosely connected scenes that avoid the illusion of reality, as found in illusionist dramas, and often interrupt the action to address the audience directly with analysis or argument (as by a narrator) (Cuddon 241).

this purpose, it was essential to prevent emotions from blurring the audience's mind, and defamiliarization was the prevention strategy.

Alienation demands that “both audience and actors ought to maintain a *critical detachment* from the play rather than submitting to the staged illusion or easy emotional identification with character and situation” (Cuddon 20; emphasis added). To achieve that, different techniques are used in order to “persistently draw attention to the work as a dramatic illusion and construct” (Cuddon 20). The political and social aspect is at the core of this theory – the purpose of this distancing is “to resist passive escapism and to compel reflection on the characters as participants in broader historical, social and political processes” (Cuddon 20).

Some of the techniques used “to disrupt the impulse towards realism” are the use of choir, songs, montage, lighting,⁹ role reversals, and alike. Brecht also includes the level of fictional meditation, present only in epic drama, which refers to the use of a narrator figure in the play. The narrator mediates between the action in the play and the audience; (s)he is usually the prologue or epilogue speaker who (ironically) comments on the play through asides – breaking the fourth wall as the ultimate illusion of absolute drama – summarizes the action,¹⁰ even participates in it.

The irony is that the audience in contemporary theatres does not perceive and experience the narrator as a distancing device – one could say it has been overused. An evident alienation device today is the use of multimedia, but the (rhetorical) question asked is: does not this practice deviate from the theatre as an art form? In the first part of the twentieth century, however, the use of the narrator was an uncommon technique, and as such, it has found its place in the scripts of diverse American playwrights.

⁹ In Brechtian plays, the lights were often left on in the theatre, the members of the audience were allowed to smoke, and the curtain, as a long-time illusion-upholding medium, was not used (Moore).

¹⁰ For example, in Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), the audience is acquainted with the action beforehand because it is summarized before every act.

3. An American in Epic Theatre

Thornton Wilder was a playwright who fought against the overuse of realist strategies in theatre on the American soil. In his preface to the play *Our Town*, first performed in 1938, Wilder advocates the abandonment of the old aesthetics of illusionist theatre, and introduces the concept of an anti-illusionist one, which heavily relies on the European epic theatre. Wilder claims that the stage with its illusionist props makes the “imaginative narration become false” (8), ultimately resulting in theatre as a purely escapist experience which cannot impart any cognition to a viewer. He perceives the witnessed loss of universality (referring both to the plays’ themes and productions) in American theatres a mortal wound, and sees in it the reason of the artistic paralysis from which the theatre is suffering. In *Our Town*, the American audience’s favorite metatheatrical play, the level of fictional meditation is realized in the figure of narrator.

When Tennessee Williams made his Tom from *The Glass Menagerie* both a character and the narrator, he knew he was offering something relatively new to the American audience. Williams got acquainted with the theory of epic theatre in the Dramatic Workshop,¹¹ founded and led by Erwin Piscator, Brecht’s collaborator, and for many, the actual founder of the epic theatre.¹² As Kramer notices, Williams got

¹¹ Among other Piscator’s students at this “Dramatic Workshop” in New York were Harry Belafonte, Marlon Brando, and Tony Curtis (Willett 15).

¹² Some of those who believe that Piscator is the father of the epic theatre, especially when it comes to its innovative techniques, are Willett, Moore, Connelly, and Cash. For more information see Dawson and Innes. Apparently, many of Brecht’s ideas and techniques derived from the work of Piscator, who was primarily an expressionist, and whose influence on the former’s plays is most visible in the political nature of Brecht’s works. They parted when Brecht opted for moral issues rather than politics (Willett 8; 15). The critic Fuegi goes as far as to claim that none of these authors should receive credit for certain innovative techniques of the epic theatre, but that the entitlement belongs to playwright Elizabeth Hauptman, whom Fuegi refers to as “the invisible man” (qtd. in Dawson 62). For more information see Fuegi.

first-hand experience when he assisted Piscator in the production of *War and Peace* in 1942. . . . This production contained several aspects which may have foreshadowed some of Williams's later practices, but most provocatively, it used the character of Pierre Besuchov as a commentator, much the way Williams used Tom Wingfield in *Glass Menagerie*.

After Piscator had asked Williams

to make his work more overtly political . . . only if Williams would revise the play [*Battle of Angels*] to include more concern for the poor people of the Mississippi Delta, where the play was set. . . . [Williams] quoted Piscator's scolding: 'Mr. Williams, you have written a Fascist play—all your characters are selfishly pursuing their little personal ends and aims with a ruthless disregard for the wrongs and suffering of the world about them. . . .'" (Kaplan 31).

Williams could never agree to this, and although he admired Piscator's work and, importantly, his staging techniques (Kramer), he left the Workshop (Leverich 346).

From this "private course in epic theatre" (Kramer) Williams got acquainted with the use of cinematic projections, scaffold stages, and different estrangement techniques. Many of these he employed in *The Glass Menagerie*, which catapulted him to fame only a few years after attending the workshop. Some differences and similarities between Williams's aforementioned "plastic theatre" and Brecht's epic theatre are further reviewed.

4. The *Plastic* and the *Epic*

The essence and the main principle of tragedy in Aristotle's *Poetics* is catharsis, purification through emotions. Brecht's theatre is a non-Aristotelian theatre since it aims not for the catharsis, but for inducing critical thinking through the distancing of the audience. This is the key difference between the German and American playwright since, in Williams's plastic theatre and aesthetics, emotions and catharsis are

extremely significant and prominent. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom, the narrator and character, goes through telling this memory play in order to purify himself from guilt (along with the audience's catharsis) that he feels for leaving his sister. Williams does not expect rational thinking either from his audience or from Tom and the other characters. In neither of his plays could Williams escape personal lyricism, as is evident from his work with Piscator, because "it [personal lyricism] is the outcry of prisoner to prisoner from the cell in solitary where each is confined for the duration of his life" (Williams, *New Selected Essays* 73).

Despite this lyrical difference, both Williams and Brecht used their narrators to introduce other characters; sometimes the action stops when the narrators step out of their characters or deliver inner monologues.¹³ It is important to emphasize that Williams found a subtler way to shake off the illusion. By making *The Glass Menagerie* a memory play, defined as "a projection of the conscious mind; and, unlike the traditional drama-of-action . . . concerned only with that action that is understood and retained in the mind of the protagonist" (Nolan 74), Williams attacked the illusion by pinpointing that the play is subjective; it is conceived in the mind of a prodigal and culpable son – it is not objective, it is not real(istic).

Unlike Brecht's practices, which are rather mechanical when it comes to props, in Williams's plays the alienation or estrangement of the everyday objects is achieved poetically, often nostalgically, and this makes the essence of his selective realism. In accentuating props and characters in his plays, Williams makes the audience look into the world of these objects, or pay attention to a certain aspect of a character, in order to fully comprehend its significance in the structure of the play. These objects live a life of their own, orbiting around the message throughout the play, and piercing it down symbolically, in the moments of artistic cognition.

¹³ In Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944), the narrator is the Singer from the choir who explains and summarizes the action; in *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), many characters become narrators for a while, throughout the play; Tom from *The Glass Menagerie* steps out of character in the middle of the action to describe the Paradise Dance Hall behind their apartment (Williams, "Production Notes" 265).

When comparing Brecht's work to that of Williams, Fleche states that "Brecht saw film technique as a tool for the destruction of 'static' Aristotelian or mimetic theater" (67). She notices, furthermore, that "Williams creates and dissolves scenic barriers in *The Glass Menagerie* with titles, music, and lighting; he calls attention to his editorial technique" (Fleche 67). It has already been said that these listed techniques and elements are the core of plastic theatre, and that the screen device used in *Menagerie* was a technique frequently used by Piscator. In the "Production Notes," Williams (1984) claims that "apart from this structural value, I think the screen will have a definitive emotional appeal . . ." (230). It is certain that the screen underlies the episodic character of this play,¹⁴ and this is common in Brecht's plays.

To break the continual flow of the story and shake off the illusion's grip, Brecht created loose episodes: "In the production, the name of the episode would be projected on a screen or be placed on a placard so that the audience can read it. The audience then knows what would happen in the particular episode" (*Epic Theatre and Brecht* 11). The exact same practice is implemented in *The Glass Menagerie*. The screen sometimes ironizes some events, as with the Gentleman Caller and the legend of "The Accent of a Coming Foot"¹⁵ in Scene Six, gives hints of the future, as with the image of the Flying Jolly Roger, appearing in Scene Four when Tom wishes for a (sea) adventure.¹⁶ It is used as a distancing device, just as the role of a narrator,

¹⁴ The play is organized in seven scenes.

¹⁵ This scene begins with the narrator Tom's description of a young man Jim who is about to visit the home of the Wingfields in order to meet Laura, Tom's sister, as by mother Amanda's scheme. None of them knows that Laura and Jim already know each other and that Laura was/is in love with Jim. The legend reminds of Emily Dickinson's 1860s poem "Elysium Is As Far As To" in which the poetess describes the stress of awaiting a hardship in a succinct manner: "What fortitude the Soul contains / That it can so endure / The accent of a coming Foot—/ The opening of a Door—" (Dickinson 2000). These verses appropriately describe Laura's state when she finds out about who is coming to dinner. Williams ironizes this scene with a dose of pity, knowing the effect which the upcoming events will have on Laura.

¹⁶ As a part of a plan to leave his family, Tom wishes to join the Union of Merchant Seamen and to become a sailor (a recurring symbol in literature). With this legend, Williams both ironizes and warns against this wish and Tom's "boiling"

and without its emotional or ironic commentaries, *The Glass Menagerie* would become a soap opera, since it is based on emotional reaction.

“Historification” was also used by both dramatists, but again with a different aim. The term refers to the Brechtian technique of “setting events in another place and/or time in order to distance the emotional impact, yet enhance the intellectual impact for the spectator (audience)” (Cash). By placing the action in some other space and time, Brecht, therefore, tried to reduce the emotions of the audience (inevitable in plays set in their contemporary context), and induce critical thinking.¹⁷

Williams also used to set some of his more avant-garde plays in distant and exotic places. He did so in *Camino Real* (1953), the setting of which is “a dead-end place in a Spanish-speaking town surrounded by desert with sporadic transportation to the outside world. It is described by Williams as ‘nothing more nor less than my conception of the time and the world I live in’” (Brantley). Another example is the already mentioned one-act play *The Gnädiges Fräulein* (1966), where “nearly all elements of *The Gnädiges Fräulein* are characterized by an intensity created through this alienating and distancing effect” (Quinlan).

The décor, costumes, and music are elements not shared by Williams and Brecht. The latter saw all the listed elements as an emotional trap for the audience, and he wanted to avoid it by all means. The choir and songs in

dissatisfaction, since the image of Jolly Roger is a flag of the pirate ships flown to identify a ship about to attack during the early eighteenth century. As Leathers Single observes, “the one image he [Tom] associates with his escape reflects the ambiguity he feels. . . . On one hand, the sailing vessel represents the freedom and movement of the open sea and the Union of Merchant Seamen. On the other hand, the vessel is a pirate ship whose Jolly Roger, the skull and cross bones, symbolizes criminality and death . . . since the memory play is Tom’s attempt to lay the past to rest, the most telling of screen images is the one he chooses for himself: “A sailing vessel with the Jolly Roger” (79).

¹⁷ Such is the case with Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944), in which the play is set in the Soviet Union, more precisely Georgia. This solution fulfills the alienation role, since the audience does not directly identify with the setting or Georgian-named characters, allowing it to perceive other elements of the play more critically.

The Caucasian Chalk Circle are used not for the emotional appeal; quite the contrary – music is applied “to break the emotional involvement of the audience, to reach the desired alienation, usually through the contrast of the content of the words or the play. Also, the music and lyrics of the song in Brecht’s plays would not correlate” (*Epic Theatre and Brecht* 15).

Williams’s detailed instructions for the music in *The Glass Menagerie* contribute to the overall dream-like atmosphere of the play, recreating Tom’s memory, much like the lighting itself, but for Williams, the music is “extra-literary accent . . . used to give emotional emphasis to suitable passages. . .” (“Production Notes” 230; emphasis added). As in his other plays, such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the author lyrically describes its tune as the one that “expresses the surface vivacity of life with the underlying strain of immutable and inexpressible sorrow. When you look at a piece of delicately spun glass you think of two things: how beautiful it is and how easily it can be broken. Both of those ideas should be woven into the recurring tune . . .” (“Production Notes” 230). In *The Glass Menagerie*, the music is, therefore, used as a characterization device, since it expresses Tom’s gentle feeling towards Laura as well as her delicate nature.

Similarly, the costumes are not used for a distancing effect in *The Glass Menagerie*. In certain scenes, they serve as an element of selective realism – Amanda’s dress as a symbol of her passed youth or Tom’s coat, which is “ugly and bulky” (*GM* 262) and probably inherited from his father, symbolizing the imposed obligations towards his family – but these do not have an estranging effect.¹⁸

When it comes to lighting, Williams dictates how in the production of *The Glass Menagerie* “shafts of light are focused on selected areas or actors, sometimes in contradistinction [sic!] to what is the apparent centre” (“Production Notes” 231). By separating and selecting a certain centre, Williams makes the audience pay attention to certain detail in the scene and on the stage, hence, ironically, accentuating, rather than breaking the illusion.

¹⁸ In Brecht’s play *A Man’s A Man* (1939) the characters wore grotesque costumes for the purpose of the alienation effect.

Some of the ideas are shared between the plastic by Williams and epic by Brecht. As has been pointed out, the main difference between the two techniques lies in Williams's poignant lyricism and subtlety in applying some epic techniques, for which the plastic theatre is a perfect frame of reference.

5. Elements of Selective Realism in *The Glass Menagerie*

The evolution of *The Glass Menagerie* is a rather interesting one. Its first form was that of a short story written in the 1930s;¹⁹ *The Gentleman Caller* would have been the movie name had the script been accepted. This play was Williams's first commercial success, despite its partly already discussed unconventional spirit. In it Williams presents his characters in detail – Amanda is “little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place. . . . She is not paranoiac, but her life is paranoia” (*GM* 298). Laura's situation is far worse than her mother's, who has “failed to establish contact with reality” (*GM* 298). The author suggests that Laura's fragile nature and her crippled leg have almost turned her into “a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf” (*GM* 298). Tom is ominously described as “a poet with a job in a warehouse” who, to escape from his misfortune “has to act without pity” (*GM* 298). The subjective, psychological struggles Tom goes through connect him to a character one would encounter in a realist play rather than epic drama, in which some more universal element seeking critical evaluation would be in focus.

Much has been said about the “Production Notes” in question, and therefore the analysis of the play will not focus on it; yet, one has to bear in mind Williams's vision of the play's performance. Since the plastic elements, such as the music, light, and the screen, define the frame within which the play unrolls, some examples that carry the strongest flair of selective realism will be examined.

¹⁹ The short story was titled “Portrait of a Girl in Glass,” published in 1948, and then republished in 1985, in *Collected Stories* (Williams, “Production Notes” 110–19).

The first screen of the play is a legend reading: “Ou Sont Les Neiges” (*GM* 235).²⁰ The whole scene revolves around Amanda’s past and the “seventeen gentlemen callers” story she keeps retelling, as if it is food for her soul. Tom’s subjective memory portrays the situation rather ironically when this legend is followed by an image of “Amanda as a Girl on a Porch, Greeting Callers” (*GM* 238). Just a few lines further, the spot light is on Amanda, with “Ou Sont” legend projected on the screen behind her, and she is remembering her callers by names, showing her acquaintance with their destinies, even after their paths parted. Through the non-verbal elements, the audience gets to know Amanda primarily through her nostalgic longing for the past which defines her present action and persona.

Another interesting example is from the beginning of Scene Two, in which the image of blue roses is on the screen before the audience even knows what it symbolizes or means. It disappears during the conversation between Amanda and Laura, in which we find out about Laura’s incapability to deal with the outside world, but reappears again to follow the explanation of its origin and the revealing of Laura’s deep emotions for her high-school crush. The scene ends with a blank screen after Laura reacts to her mother’s idea of her getting married with a self-explanatory statement that she is crippled. The blank screen serves as a materialization of the dreadful anxiousness Laura lives with, while Laura is staring blankly into the audience.

Most of the legends and images presented on the screen during the play are ironic, especially when they concern Amanda or Tom. For example, the “Glamour Magazine Cover” (*GM* 248) ridicules Amanda’s job in “The Home-maker’s Companion”; the “Sailing Vessel with Jolly Roger” is a bitter commentary on Tom’s comprehension of adventure (*GM* 260). Jim’s image

²⁰ The legend translates as “Where are the snows of yesteryear?,” alluding to Amanda’s passed youth. Williams took the phrase from the “Ballade des dames du temps jadis,” translated as “Ballade of the Ladies of Times Past,” a poem by François Villon, written in late middle ages, that celebrates famous women in history and mythology. It employs the *ubi sunt* formula found in ballads and lamentations; Williams asks where are (*ubi sunt*) Amanda’s gentlemen callers. It is interesting to note that Bertolt Brecht also used this verse in his play *Round Heads and Pointed Heads* (1936). For more information see Cummings.

as a “High School Hero” at the beginning of Scene Six is complemented by Tom’s immediate comment on how “He [Jim] seemed always at the point of defeating the law of gravity” (*GM* 273), and it ironically refers to his image of a successful young man.

During Amanda’s and Tom’s fight over his responsibilities, Williams directs “a clear pole of light on her [Laura’s] figure throughout this scene” (*GM* 249). Through this, it is shown that Laura suffers immensely from their fighting. Tom’s memory may also be reflecting his guilt, thinking that he and his mother were not considerate towards Laura. Laura’s fragility is indicated through the use of a specific light in a particular situation.²¹

Music makes important points during the performance, and one such example is in Scene Five, when Tom breaks the fourth wall to mention the Dance Hall behind their apartment; this is (indicatively) preceded by the song “All the World is Waiting for the Sunshine.” In his monologue, Tom comments on the illusions St. Louis of the 1930s was looking for “sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier and flooded the world with brief, deceptive rainbows” (*GM* 265).

Props have kept their symbolic part in selective realism in all Williams’s plays. In *The Glass Menagerie*, some objects have been given tremendous power, and hence, some of these stand for a character. The most obvious example are the glass figurines, to which Laura is drawn near every time she feels discomfort or anxiousness. For example, in Scene Seven, after asking Jim about his high-school girlfriend, “she remains by the table and turns in her hands a piece of glass to cover her tumult” (*GM* 297). The glass collection lyrically embodies the inner state and nature of Laura, so later when she gives her precious, “most favorite” glass animal – a unicorn – to Jim, Williams puts insightful words in her mouth, “Oh, be careful—if you breathe, it breaks!” (*GM* 300). The breaking of the unicorn’s horn stands for the breaking of Laura’s heart. In her reaction to this “incident” one sees her love for Jim. Jim does not recognize the unicorn at first, but correctly points

²¹ For example, one of the didascaly reads: “The light upon Laura should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas” (*GM* 231).

out that unicorns are extinct in the modern world, which hints at his ability to adapt to the modern, “real” world as well as his lack of imagination. Until the ending of the play, the reader, or viewer, perceives Laura as a piece of translucent glass, too fragile for this world.

The other props that accentuate Laura’s delicate and anxious nature are the old victrola, together with the records, around which she orbits whenever faced with a “fatal” situation; the Jewel box, “that big glass-house where they raise the tropical flowers” (*GM* 244), in which Laura spends her time instead of in the Rubicam Business College. Alongside the unicorn, blue roses also stand as a symbol of Laura as something extremely rare and uncommon.

The coffin Tom talks about in his conversation with Laura presents his entrapment in his world; he cannot read the books he wants (D.H. Lawrence’s book *Sons and Lovers* also symbolizes his rebelliousness); he hates his job which is the primary source of their meager income, and which he has to keep in order to support his (dysfunctional) family. The metaphor with a magician who succeeded in getting out of the coffin without removing a single nail fascinates Tom for an apparent reason. Williams seems to suggest that no one can try to fulfill their dreams without removing the nails, without inflicting the pain.

As a part of setting, the fire-escape is an element of selective realism, as Williams puts it: “The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire-escape, a structure whose names is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all these buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation” (*GM* 233). In Scene Four, Laura’s tripping on the fire-escape on her way to the market picturesquely signifies her inability to cope with the outside world.

Among many other props that have been given a symbolic quality are also Amanda’s old dress, signifying her past, Tom’s oversized coat, a presentation of his heavy responsibilities, which he is unable to fulfill, Tom’s cigarettes, which he is not willing to stop consuming, especially because they represent his silent defiance of Amanda.

The photograph is both a prop and the “absent presence,” used in an expressionistic manner. The father, “a telephone man who fell in love with long distances” (*GM* 253), silently observes the difficulties and suffering of the Wingfield family. Tom only knows him from the photograph; he has been “the parentified child” (Leathers Single 77) ever since he reached his puberty. Tom slowly surrenders to the possibility that he will also leave his family for “the long distances.” Williams states that the photograph-father “is gallantly smiling . . . as if to say ‘I will be smiling for ever’” (*GM* 254). The photograph maybe a representation of the American Dream, unattainable to the family, and the physical presence of all the dreams they will never make real, and is haunting them on every step of their way.

Amanda’s past, compressed in Blue Mountain, together with her seventeen gentlemen callers, sometimes followed by screen projections of her as a young girl, contributes to her characterization. Movies and the warehouse around which Tom’s day and night revolve throw an all-pervading shadow over his character. In Scene Six, he says that “people go to the movies instead of moving!” (*GM* 282), and the legend on screen in Scene Three speaks for itself, “You Think I’m in Love with Continental Shoemakers?” (*GM* 249). Williams suggests the bleak destiny of many people in America who looked for themselves in the industrialized, urbanized, and post-depression cities. An utterly symbolic character appears in the play, and Tom ironically defines it as “the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from the world of reality that we were somehow set apart from. . . . I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for” (*GM* 235). He is the presence hovering over the Wingfield family. That is “[a] nice, ordinary, young man” (*GM* 288), Jim O’Connor, Tom’s co-worker and Laura’s one and only high-school crush. He “materializes” in Scene Six, bringing hope of a possible happy ending. He is all that the Wingfields are not, “always at the point of defeating the law of gravity” (*GM* 273); he supports Tom in his artistic aspirations, but he is the (opposite) future embodied – a man who studies public speaking and radio engineering, “really goes in for self-improvement” (*GM* 270), strives for “the executive position” (ironized on

screen),²² and admires the man who invented chewing gum, “Think of the fortune made by the guy that invented the first piece of chewing gum. Amazing, huh?” (*GM* 292). He thinks highly of himself and believes “in the future of television” (*GM* 299); he claims to know human nature and psychology (*GM* 298), but he fails to understand Laura’s state, or the consequences of his deeds – he enjoys her year-long obsession with him, and places her in his high-school glory days, ultimately behaving like a bull in a china shop. A man from the “real” world could not save this illusion-prone family from their tragic lives.

Amanda’s efforts to have a gentleman caller for Laura by any means bring forth the ultimate crack on Laura’s glass disposition. Betty, O’Connor’s fiancé with a common name, is another obstacle on their path to happiness. The one-way communication of the radio man proves to be true.

Language is also used to enhance the action and characters. Amanda’s “Rise and Shine,” which she “sings” every morning, denotes her strength to carry on with life and depicts her opinion that life calls for “Spartan endurance” (*GM* 259). She does not allow Laura to be identified as “crippled” or “peculiar” (*GM* 271). Her frequent repetition of the word “gentleman caller” and “jonquils” (*GM* 276) presents her inner obsessions with the future and past. When she dresses up for the visit, Williams describes her, in Tom’s mind, with a surrendering mercy: “She carries a bunch of jonquils—the legend of her youth is nearly revived” (*GM* 276). Here Williams uses jonquils to suggest some of Amanda’s traits. The author most obviously hints at the Narcissus legend about a young, beautiful man who fell in love with his own reflection, but committed suicide when he realized that love can never be materialized. Amanda’s admiration of herself, of her physical appearance from her youth, as well as her selfish behavior towards Tom portray her as narcissistic. Moreover, as a plant, a narcissus grows both wild and cultivated. This could be read as a symbol of

²² The image is projected during Jim and Tom’s conversation about Jim’s taking a course in public speaking because it fits for “executive positions” (*GM* 281). The image emphasizes Jim’s ambition and purposefulness in the modern world, the elements which the Wingfield family lacks.

Amanda's resilience and a continual (but failed) effort to “adjust” her children to reality.

Conclusion

Tennessee Williams's enormous opus encompasses his different literary aspirations which fascinated the playwright throughout his artistic career. From a struggling avant-garde artist, who introduced new theatrical ideas to the American theatre, he has grown to be one of the best-known American playwrights whose characters have surpassed the theatrical realm and have entered the consciousness of popular culture. His conception of “plastic theatre,” and later of selective realism, was shaped by the influence coming from Europe, through such figures as Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, major representatives of expressionism and epic theatre. Williams broke away from the drama which primarily relied on verbal language; he re-examined the potential of space in theatre, and succeeded in employing it for a closer portrayal of the themes. His notion of language in theatre is a wide one; it is a language that is not bound to words, but to images, sound, costumes, and props. Although Brecht's epic theatre evoked Williams's tendency towards experimentation, the latter did not adopt the philosophy of alienation as a means of inducing critical thinking, but rather used it for a symbolic and, above all, lyrical expression of the inner life of his plays and characters. *The Glass Menagerie* occupies a unique position in Williams's opus due to its specific use of the screen device, lighting and music, and the level of fictional mediation in the figure of the narrator, which links the play to the European tradition of epic theatre. Selective realism reveals not only the lyrical quality that characterized Tennessee Williams's writing but also his ability to successfully shape his artistic expression into a new, essentially American tradition.

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PLASTIČNO KAZALIŠTE I SELEKTIVNI REALIZAM TENNESSEEJA WILLIAMSA

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Uvođenjem pojma „plastičnog teatra“, utemeljenog na ekspresionizmu i simbolizmu, Tennessee Williams rano u karijeri potvrđuje sklonost k eksperimentiranju u teatru. Uz tematiziranje same ideje „plastičnog teatra“ i selektivnog realizma, kao i njegova sveprisutnog, osebujnoga lirskog izraza, rad uspostavlja odnos između ruskog formalizma i Brechtova epskog teatra kao važnih elemenata za razumijevanje nastanka Williamsovih (u to vrijeme novih) teatarskih praksi, te ukazuje na sličnosti i razlike između epskog i plastičnog. Rad također prikazuje na koji je način poetika „plastičnog teatra“ i njegove blaže inačice, selektivnog realizma, aktualizirana u samome dramatičarevu djelu. Odrednice selektivnog realizma, tehnike i elementi uporabljeni u svrhu postizanja cilja takvog teatra predstavljeni su sistematično i uključuju didaskalije, uporabu rekvizita, „odsutnu prisutnost“ (tiče se ekspresionističke kvalitete koja određuje radnju), jezik, uporabu glazbe i rasvjete, uporabu pripovjedača u drami, kao i vrste multimedijalnog zaslona. Teza da svi ti elementi pridonose uspješnijem prikazu određenih tematskih pitanja analizirana je kroz čitanje Williamsove drame *Staklena menažerija* (1944).

Ključne riječi: Bertolt Brecht, epski teatar, plastični teatar, selektivni realizam, Tennessee Williams, *Staklena menažerija*