



## KAZAN'S *STREETCAR* *Film Noir, Woman's Film or Noir Woman's Film?*

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Central to Kazan's *Streetcar*, as to Williams's play, is the portrayal of woman as the lynch-pin of the relationship between the individual and society. In the case of the native-born Lanier, gender, sex and the societal are everywhere woven into a texture, whereas with the Greek immigrant, the emphasis on the two matters engages in shifts from face to crowd. Lonesome Rhode's meteoric rise is offset by strife between wife and lover. *On the Waterfront* (1954) and *America, America* (1962) show a woman waiting in the wings, while she will be crucial to *The Arrangement* (1969). Keeping the reality-related material of both authors in mind, and the fact that Kazan's film is produced by Warner, a veteran of woman's and committed films alike, we take as a premise of *Streetcar* the male as the upholder of Americanness. Woman is supposed to bear him children, mother him, draping herself in billowing dresses. Under Kazan's direction, however, it is Blanche who first enters the broken world, borne towards us on a cloud, the better to wreak havoc by upstaging the male. She is a socially undesirable star. The formal elements in the film draw on the Hollywood genres known as *film noir* and the vast category loosely designated as woman's film. To what extent are they instrumental in conveying the contradictions at the heart of *Streetcar*?

The purpose is to analyse how *Streetcar* functions as *film noir* cross-fertilised by woman's film, not precluding *noir woman's film*. The latter term is used by Andrea Walsh in *Women's Film and Female Experience*, when writing of "films of suspicion and distrust in which *noir* cinematography fuels an atmosphere of claustrophobia and threat", two salient features of *Streetcar*. A feminist slant, an attempt, in Claire Johnston's words, to "uncover the means of the film's production" is not our intent. Those interested may consult Mary Ann Doane's *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, on matters of representation, in which the first 25 pages mention three films, though underscoring the heterogeneity of woman's film. The less overtly theoretical, Jeanine Basinger's *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-60*, bristles with the names and knowledge of films, its overall thesis being the self-contradictory attitudes in and to women's films: what is Blanche, but their stark epitome?

This aim is borne out by three interrelated factors. Firstly, a reminder of the blended strands within Williams's *Streetcar*, variously described as realism and lyricism, or expressionism and impressionism, shaped by Kazan into the conundrum: is screened woman bad news, or is she the victim of an unstable society? David Slocum calls *film noir* "the outstanding vehicle for portraying the disruption caused by unbalanced characters and the violence

of social upheavals." A caveat: woman's role in *film noir*, even that of the femme fatale, is not to be equated with that of murderess.<sup>1</sup> *Streetcar* rather presents woman as a desiring agent and someone who lets things happen, who thinks she is guilty of murder.

Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard alludes to the legacy of *film noir* in the choice of black and white photography, to the implicit spectator's condemnation of Blanche, found also in the formal approach of *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950). Furthermore, *noir* woman's film, according to Andrea Walsh, is exemplified by films contemporary with *Streetcar* such as Mankiewicz's *Dragonwyck* (1946), with Gene Tierney and Vincent Price, a Gothic horror film, where the bride chooses a stranger with a past; again, by Cukor's melodrama, *Gaslight* (1944), where the bride (Ingrid Bergman), in her husband's haunted house, is beset by hallucinations which her husband diagnoses as signs of insanity. Of these films, the melodramatic thriller *Rebecca* (1940) is the prototype, leading us to the theme of husband who plots against wife as in Litvak's *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948) with Agnes Morehead and Barbara Stanwyck. The designing husband crops up in *Sleep my love*, Sirk's incursion into *noir* woman's film (1948), where Claudette Colbert is saddled with a murderous better half. One may add Fritz Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door* with Joan Bennett (1948). Minnelli's melodrama *Undercurrent* (1946) combines with *Dragonwyck* to bring grist to our mill. Gene Tierney, supreme *film noir* heroine, shares the strange marriage fate with Katharine Hepburn, who is caught between two Roberts, Taylor and Mitchum. From this selection man emerges as the prospective villain. Michael Walker's words suit, "The Hitchcock sense of the chaos in the world as more engulfing and dangerous for heroines than for heroes finds particular focus in the persecuted-wife cycle."

While the concept of the *noir* woman's film seems mood-descriptive, the recurrent motif of the persecuted wife, a variant on the broader woman's film theme of woman as society's victim, is the foil to the *noir* component in *Streetcar*. By crossbreeding woman's film with *film noir*, Kazan came up with a searing persecuted husband film. What are the formal and thematic features of *film noir* in Kazan's *Streetcar* backed up by *noir* woman's film? After the credits, "New Orleans" as part of the establishing shot, bows, not only to *film noir* and 1930s crime movies convention, but to that of the image and word placing technique of the semi-documentary film of the forties such as *Call Northside 777* (1948). Similarly, *Stage Fright* (1950) and *Night and the City* (1950) use the establishing shot of London. As the road-sign, Brentwood, in the opening shot of *The Killers* (1946), shows the setting in *film noir* can also be small-town provincial, underscoring *film noir's* realistic component. Thus, it is implied that the sphere from which the spectator may

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<sup>1</sup> What if *Gun Crazy* had as its working-title *Deadly is the Female*? True enough, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, through her seduction of the male lead and her lying ways, is the prototype of femme fatale, yet the women who murder and take the rap for it are few and far between. The gangster's moll Debbie in *The Big Heat*, played by Gloria Grahame when she shoots the mink-clad widow is doing the male lead and mankind a favour, at the cost of her life. Helen in *Night and the City*, a hard-bitten business woman, causes the suicide of her husband through unfaithfulness.

infer truth is wide. Here, Kazan expands on the freeze-frame which conveys Williams's Old Quarter, to develop a *film noir* topos, and achieve a more open and more modern view of a US urban conglomeration on a bay. *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) is at work. In this sequence, the black and white photography, and later on, the cars drawing up in front of the tenement, afford a glimpse of another more outgoing Kazanian America. The mysterious side of *film noir*, the Williamsian lighting, is hereby contained by a more cut and dried look at the world, a juxtaposition which many *film noir* will bear out. The credits of *Streetcar* resound to Alex North's musical score, orchestrating the blues of *film noir* in a conjuring up of sex and conflict. Christopher Palmer, in his study of *Streetcar*'s score, shows that the composer for Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata* (1952), Daniel Mann's *The Rose Tattoo* (1955), John Huston's *The Misfits* (1961) and *The Dead* (1987), was adept at psychological drama. Here, the music bears no trace of the melodramatic or lyrical strain that softens David Raksin's score for Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (1948), or Dmitri Tiomkin's for Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951). North's initial chords are closer to Fritz Lang's *Clash by Night* (1952) with Roy Webb's crashing brass and strings.

Faithful to *film noir*, the interiors, and those streets of *Streetcar* that are nocturnal or crepuscular, in excluding nature, play on the aporia of paradise lost. The walk-up tenement is endemic to gangster and *film noir* movies, as is its corollary, the staircase. Think of Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil*, go back to Alfred Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941), look ahead to the spirals in Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). The mixture of class and ethnicity that defines *The Maltese Falcon* renders Williamsian "cosmopolitanism." But *Streetcar*, like *film noir* of the time, depicts Afro-Americans as passers-by. On the other hand, exoticism is amply figured through visual symbols, the most significant being Blanche's trunk: What is in "the pirate's treasure-chest"? All she has. And that is but a variation on the fabulous pirated *Falcon*, a metonymy of sham, a stand-in for the lead-lined coffin. In addition, the decadence of *film noir* is evident in Blanche's refinement. She takes up the literary references that form a subtext from Shakespeare in *Falcon*, through Dowson, in Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944), and on to Christina Rossetti in *Kiss Me Deadly*.

Central to the crisscrossing between *Streetcar* and *film noir* is the notion of the elliptical narrative, entailing the reconstitution of the past. *The Killers* is based on it, and Preminger's *Laura* prefigures Blanche's face being thrust under a naked bulb by a male. This technique of the flashback links *film noir* to the strange marriage type of *noir* woman's films. "Last night, I dreamt that I went back to Manderley" (*Rebecca*). In *Sorry, Wrong Number*, the bedridden woman pieces the puzzle together. This re-creation at the core of Kazan's *Streetcar* is backed up by the *chiaroscuro*. The increasing sexual and social tension can also be seen in the social variety of *noir* woman's film whose outstanding representative is Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* (1945), entirely structured around a flashback. While the role of chief piece of the puzzle rarely falls to a woman, Blanche and Stanley do the job separately, the woman confesses to her sister and Mitch, while he carries out his investigation among his ilk.

*Film noir* convention has set the *Streetcar* scene for the stranger coming to town. Brigid, Christina, later, Barbara Stanwyck in Douglas Sirk's *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956). "The white woman reads as a destabilizing intruder who causes re/creative trouble in the established order." Good-lookers with uncertain pasts, Miss Wonderly and Miss Dubois use their wiles: Blanche is Miss Leblanc's sister. Wearing hats with veils, furs, feathers and lace ruffles and nosegays pinned to their bodices, Mary Astor and Miss Dubois paint themselves white.

O'Shaughnessy lies to her teeth, but simpers, "The lie was in the way I said it, not at all in what I said." Blanche, in Kazan's addition to Williams's text, says "I know I fib, but illusion is 50% of a woman's charm, and when it's important, I tell the truth." Piecemeal she does so. Stanley is the sleuth who like Spade says "You aren't exactly the sort of person you pretend to be, blushing and stammering and all that." Suspicious, both Brigid and Blanche encroach on "A Man's World." The wonderful Kazanian end to the Mitch/Blanche idyll shows that men are, interchangeably, gangsters and policemen who crowd in at her. To help the lady? Or are they there for the kill?

The problem is that Stanley and his buddies hoped to gain on their return from the front, through becoming synonymous with the law. Kazan emphasizes the war by lining up the cosy knickknacks and snaps in uniform on the furniture behind Stanley. Stanley deserves a hero's respect, and not to be labelled as an ape. As has been pointed out, these comrades in arms miss the excitement of combat, where certain urges are given freer rein. Thus, they fight it out over the poker table. A male oriented society may also be a burden for them. In terms of cinema, William Wyler's bitter masterpiece, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), two years after the little known war effort woman's film by John Cromwell, *Since You Went Away* (1944),<sup>2</sup> shows that conjugal life entails glossing over the fact that the banker-husband is one of those whom alcohol "touches often" and who accordingly, doesn't know whether he is in bed with a call-girl, or with his wife. The alcoholic in *Streetcar* is Blanche and this is a woman's picture dilemma, in that her dependence on promiscuous sex and on alcohol, which seems to be borrowed from male characters in *film noir* also pinpoints her clandestinity from a woman's picture viewpoint. Finally, as femme fatale, Blanche needs Mitch and emasculates him, partly, as compensation for her failure to pull the wool over Kowalski's eyes, a strategy similar to that directed against her unambitious husband by Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce*.

While men are pals in *Streetcar*, the relationship between women in *film noir* is either non-existent, or a disaster. In the purportedly more realistic woman's movie, neighbourliness and necessity require it. In Irving Rapper's *Now Voyager* (1942), in Edmund Goulding's *Dark Victory* (1939), sisterliness is essential, as it is in both versions of *Imitation of Life* (John M. Stahl, 1934 &

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<sup>2</sup> *Since You Went Away* by John Cromwell (1944), produced by Selznick, who also wrote the script, adapted from a novel written by Margaret Buell Wilder and published in "The Ladies Home Journal" and in which, by dint of the producer's interference, the standing of the family was slightly lowered in keeping with the convention of depicting women fallen on hard times, having to make do.

Douglas Sirk, 1959). Michael Curtiz's eponymous Mildred Pierce heroine not only carries the whole film, but elicits loyalty from the other females: her spoiled daughter, her boss who then becomes her employee in the restaurant, underline her character rather than oppose it.

***Features of Woman's Films in Streetcar that strengthen or counter the film noir element***

Among the outstanding features of woman's films that find an echo in *Streetcar*, the Blues song, heard during the credits for the first version of *Imitation of Life*, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" has been called the national anthem of the woman's picture. In that sense, Blanche's decadence is mitigated by her pathos. Seduction is a defence against inner and material distress. The contrast between the sexual overtones of North's opening score and the nostalgic source music, together with the painful inner voice, bring out complicity of destroyer and victim. Black and white photography is also characteristic of the woman's film, as used by Wyler and Curtiz. Similarly, the woman's film theme of confining space is well analysed by Basinger in *A Woman's View: How Hollywood spoke to Women, 1930-1960*. Furthermore, the widow or old maid, as stigmas of inferior social status, are commonplaces. (*Imitation*) Blanche adheres to both, through her "poor relative" role, which she clearly finds difficult. Behind woman's films, double standards lurk. Need (*Imitation*) goes with keeping up appearances, one of *Streetcar's* obsessions.

In Jean Negulesco's *Humoresque* (1946), an outstanding example of melodramatic woman's film, the walk-up of film-noir is a grocery-store. Adapted from the novel by Fanny Hurst, with Joan Crawford and John Garfield, the film shows the young violinist fulfilling the American Dream. His success is set against the neurotic female who kills herself at the end, a variation on the theme of self-immolation which Blanche herself obeys. Woman is fatal unto herself.

The themes of men quitting, disappearing, being absent, not living, the subject-matter of *Since You Went Away*, for example, is present in *Streetcar*, through Stanley's war experience and absences for professional reasons. Furthermore, in *Streetcar* the *film noir* element is shot through with the melodramatic woman's film theme of the loss of a child, as in *Mildred Pierce* and the excess of destructive fusional love depicted in Mildred (Joan Crawford) may well be seen as responsible for the loss. Babyhood, immaturity and the refusal of the castration of mortality are all intertwined in Kazan's *Streetcar*. Real mental disturbance is present in the woman's film *Now Voyager*, where Bette Davis is cured, but only by sublimating her libido. She does so through heroic sacrifice to patriarchal mores, thus carrying out what the woman Blanche now proves incapable of. Blanche can neither live out her desire, which is twisted, nor derive satisfaction from sublimation.

One has, furthermore, to distinguish between what is imputed to woman as in *Dragonwyck*, *Rebecca*, *Sorry*, *Wrong number*, *Sleep my love*, *Secret Beyond the Door* and woman as a real patient, or borderline case. "Pull yourself together," says Blanche to Stella, in one of her fits of projective truth. Blanche seems to desire change, calling Stanley insane, but in fact, it is

projection. It is the relationship between Stella and Stanley she aims at breaking up. As Lang's *Woman in the Window* (1945) and *Scarlet Street* (1945) demonstrate, both femme fatale and domesticated women are threats. If Blanche is punished for being promiscuous, a spendthrift, a neurotic, a critical voice, but also a fussy, domesticated tidier-up, in *Dark Victory*, the society girl pays by her early death from a brain tumour for wealth and happiness. The relationship between melodrama and excess includes madness. *Now Voyager* sees Bette Davis nursed back to health, but only via sacrificial altruism.

As to the related themes of physical abuse and of rape, Basinger quotes Ida Lupino's *Outrage* (1950), and the battered wife in Sam Wood's minor western, *Ambush* (1949). *Streetcar's* setting is reminiscent of Wyler's woman's films: of *Jezebel* (1938) and of *The Little Foxes* (1941), set in New Orleans (Warner Bros). The Belle Reve syndrome is in the tradition of intellectual and filmic denigration of the over-civilised, then under-civilised city, a return to the jungle at loggerheads with pastoralism. Heiress to a rotten patriarchy, a poverty-stricken female, thus disinherited, Blanche and her legacy may be linked to Wyler's *The Heiress* (1949), adapted from Henry James' novel *Washington Square*, itself an adaptation with *film noir* elements. Mitch has been sent packing. He, Stanley and the buddies, the police, all punish Blanche on the one hand, through displacement, as the lone female, in fact, for the constraints that post-war domesticity inflicted, a theme most clearly interwoven into the film and rising to its climax in the rape and incarceration.

On the other hand, Blanche also gets her comeuppance as the hoity-toity seductress of Mitch, the disturber of the coloured lights, the belittler of the male. The spokesman of Real America refers to "imagination, lies, conceits and tricks." On both accounts, as dependent relative and as disturber, she is the ideal scapegoat. It is Blanche herself who most suffers from this clichéd old maid woman's film role, yet her sexual impulses reveal deeper imbalance. This is where the ambiguity and ambivalence merge and where the dreaded social role of maiden aunt and spinster is made perverse, since in fact, Blanche's heart and mind are with paradise lost. In the strange marriage *noir* woman's films, *Dragonwyck* and *Undercurrent*, Hepburn and Tierney play brides exiled from their native shores, and ill at ease in a new society. They are Blanche's sister-souls. Again, they go back to *Rebecca*. It will have escaped no-one's attention that the brides-maids glimpsed during the opening of *Streetcar* wear Joan Fontaine's wide-brimmed frilly hats. Blanche's resentment at the downfall that "the apes" represent, encompasses, albeit unwittingly, the family structure restrictive of sexual fulfilment. The femme fatale strikes again, as do her less obvious, weak or strong counterparts, such as the gangsters molls, adulterous wives, abusive mothers, portrayed in *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, *The Killers*, *Kiss me Deadly*, or in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), and Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* (1949).

In *Streetcar*, the two shots and triangular composition of female heads and busts underline sisterhood. Through solidarity, woman's film acts upon the *film noir* elements to produce Kazan's *Streetcar*. The crossbreeding or grafting of woman's film on *film noir* deepens our understanding of the

cinematographic conventions, which convey Blanche's contradictions. On the one hand, the *film noir* brings out how she is seen through the other *dramatis personæ*, while showing their vision of her to the viewer. Conversely, the woman's picture element, conveys her, not as destructive, but as a victim, thus as she sees herself, to wit, doomed from birth, lineage (she is the first-born, but a woman), and by the American heritage.

Accordingly, the rape, thanks to its ellipsis, and to Stella's and Eunice's fussing over Blanche as she dresses for the cruise to end all cruises, might be interpreted as a figment of her imagination, hence repeating the film's notion of significant omission. Could it not be a feature of character, a turning one's back on reality? Herein, however, lies the twist, the springe to catch woodcocks. For the person who turns her back on nastier aspects of reality is, in fact, not Blanche, but her guardian-angel, Stella. Stella and Eunice, Blanche's sisters as victims of men's bullying do not seek comfort in her ways because they accept their women's fates. Through the broad theme of "keeping up appearances," we now come from woman's pictures and *noir* woman's pictures back to *Streetcar*. Sisterly, supportive Stella has got to bring up her baby and stand by her man. Neighbourly Eunice, Stella and Blanche form an ironical female composition at the close of day. Yet, it is her sister whom she double-crosses, at least, in her mind, and by whom she is double-crossed in turn. Betrayal is rife. What light does *Streetcar* shed on *film noir* and women's pictures? Could it be that the femme fatale acts, not just in cahoots with gangsters, but at least in partial revolt against male supremacy, and that this, accordingly, condemns her? Blanche's introspection, side by side with exhibitionism, is reminiscent of the sick Bette Davis in the first part of *Now Voyager* in which the heroine experiences the reverse fate, from illness to sanity and to social integration but at the cost of personal emotional fulfilment. The vestal virgin is there too. Unlike the Wylerian figures, or even that of the spoilt heiress in *Dark Victory*, Blanche's contradictions cannot be whittled down to the opposition between a facade and inner torment. Even of her sister's betrayal of her. She is less corrupt than she is, as a woman alone, destined for unhappiness.

The Kazanian theme of betrayal, deals here, specifically, with woman. The film, a comment on post-war America, as well as a drama of love and desire and hate, looks not only backwards but forwards, in its implicit siding with Blanche, whereas Williams stays put. Kazan uses every filmic tool to ensure our identification with a heroine, who has failed both as a femme fatale and as victim of social circumstances, because she is over-refined. The film *Streetcar* is a *mise en abyme* of *film noir* in that Blanche's culture, emphasising *inter alia* strange romantic writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, "the kindness of strangers," fits in with the paradoxical Americanness of *film noir* itself which, despite the inestimable influence of European culture, remains stubbornly American. Blanche crosses the threshold, with something of the pathos and the poor verse recited by a male counterpart, Laura's Pygmalion: "They are not long the days of wine and roses: Out of a misty dream, Our path emerges for a while, then closes Within a dream."

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