



## FIGHTING DUELS Stanley vs. Blanche in the Trunk and Rape Sequences

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It's almost cliché to say that Blanche is a living figure of division. The basic dichotomy between her lofty aspirations and debasing bodily drives finds its expression in heavily polarized spaces and bodily movements, as well as verbal sparring scenes and actual physical duels in both film and play. In Elia Kazan's adaptation of Tennessee Williams's 1947 play however, shots and camera angles seem to particularly frame Blanche's character as a highly vulnerable creature. She's often shown in high angle shots and close-ups revealing the wear and tear of the various masks she puts on. Blanche is also often filmed in two-shots, with someone else looking down on her, and these two-shots very much resemble disturbing *pas de deux* between an eager female and an unreliable male.

As Tennessee Williams writes in his *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* "Notes for the Designer,"

The designer should take as many pains to give the actors room to move about freely (to show their restlessness, their passion for breaking out) as if it were a set for a ballet. [14]

The most striking representation of such a ballet is probably the forceful duo played by Blanche and Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. And one should even say *forced* duo here, as this "ballet" is more akin to a forced march and even a dance of death than to any type of seductive tango or ritual rumba. These variations on dueling seem to be unfolding along three major lines all leading to a final, highly ritualized kill.

### *Like caged animals*

What is truly fascinating in these direct confrontations between Stanley and Blanche is the shift from verbal to physical conflicts. It's actually a shift from a sort of verbal flaunting or joust, which would inscribe itself in the genteel southern tradition as far as Blanche is concerned, to an animal form of violence,<sup>1</sup> constructing Stanley into the perfect antagonist. On screen, Kazan filmed the manipulation of body-to-body space and, more specifically, this ballet of bodies as a close combat, eventually degenerating into a mortal assault. And it is this particular proxemics<sup>2</sup> which visually materializes Blanche's descent into hell as her tragic fall. It seems that Marlon Brando's

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<sup>1</sup> David R. JONES refers to "the greasy, simian strength of Stanley Kowalski" in his central analysis, *Great Directors at Work: Stanislavsky, Brecht, Kazan, Brook*, 140.

<sup>2</sup> Keir ELAM defines it as « a science specifically devoted to spatial codes », *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 62.

unrestrained sensuality and brute physical strength can only become meaningful because they create a vulnerable creature whose body, despite its various masks, props and costumes, is gradually uncovered.

As a consequence, each new violent sequence with Stanley and Blanche further precipitates the tragic process. Each one of these two central scenes of contention mercilessly exposes what Kazan calls “the crude forces of violence, insensibility and vulgarity which exist in our South” [Kazan, as quoted by Jones, 144].

Lighting, camera angles, types of shots and framing structure two violently contrasting types—roughly speaking the aggressor and the moth<sup>3</sup>—, just as they structure the stage on which they evolve. Actually *enclosed space* would be a more appropriate formula here. The kind of duels fought more particularly in the trunk and rape sequences, as well as the type of animal force displayed by a young Brando cast “on instinct” by Kazan, are somehow triggered by confinement. In fact, Kazan works hard at enhancing this sense of entrapment, the intensity of the ensuing conflict and the contained violence. He mostly shows Stanley as precisely an animal fiercely resisting constraint and hegemonic attempts, the logical corollary of such a mode of representation being therefore that he should fight for a territory, for his own habitat. As Stanley tells Blanche on their first encounter, “Right, Auriol. That’s not my territory” and later, “Be comfortable, that’s my motto up where I come from.” These two quotes underscore the power of his bodily drives and vigorously sensual and predatory nature. As Jones also further underlines, Kazan used to the hilt the rawness of Brando’s representation of lust, hostility and rage,

Kazan worked to fill his production with interesting social behavior. (Later in this chapter I discuss one of Kazan’s hypotheses about Blanche: “All her behavior patterns are those of the dying civilization she represents”). Stanley’s social behavior “is the basic animal social cynicism of today. ‘Get what’s coming to you! Don’t waste a day! Eat, drink, get yours!’ Kazan noted that “God and nature gave [Stanley] a fine sensory apparatus... he enjoys!” Brando sucked on cigarettes, cigars, and bottles with hedonistic and provocative gusto.” [Jones, 145-146]

The actor’s body, which is the primary stage on which rage and pent-up aggressivity go off, operates as the exact replica of that other macro-stage on Elysian Fields set by Kazan’s favorite designer, Joe Mielziner. Its deliberately limited dimensions and increasingly reduced proportions as the story unfolds also render more acute the inner restlessness and urge to destroy people and things, and even to self-destruct in Blanche’s case. The very structure of the set imposes constraints Kazan had to bypass in order to express this central sense of restraint and unbearable limits ruthlessly imposed on the individual. The first direct confrontation between Blanche and Stanley is staged by the fireplace and the mirror, the two props being used here as vehicles for the fundamental message of “no exit.” They literally root the two antagonists down in a closed up arena, circumscribing

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<sup>3</sup> This moth-like aspect became an obsessional quality for Williams who wrote in his 1942 poem entitled “Lament for the Moths”: “for delicate were the moths and badly / wanted here in a world by mammoth figures / haunted! [In *the Winter of Cities*, 31]

them in a heated contest. They also connect with the card game metaphor the heroine uses to keep Kowalski off. The tight shot of Blanche claiming her innocence then paradoxically points to her strategy of evasion,

All right, cards on the table. [...] I know I fib a good deal. After all a woman's charm is fifty per cent illusion. [...] But when a thing is important, I tell the truth. [...] I never cheated my sister, or you, or anyone else on earth. [...] Everything I own is in that trunk!

The metaphor of the game directly translates the sense of unavoidable destiny. And the two echoing poker nights literally seal Blanche's fate. The progress of the game somehow parallels Blanche's "dark march" [4, 164] in steady rhythm toward the final kill—or rather "the kill in the jungle," as Blanche herself says in her anthropological monologue about Stanley in Scene Four: "the fight is on" [163].

### *Deviant rituals*

Blanche then is the only player whose poker tactic becomes readable as she lays down her guard and lays herself open to the other's destructive touch. The opening of the trunk becomes the visual sign of such an intrusion—one should almost say *divestiture* of someone's interiority. From this standpoint, Stanley's question "What are these *underneath*?" [emphasis mine] is a central one for the trunk functions at once as a metonymy and a metaphor for some uncharted territory about to be broken into and fundamentally disrupted. The outburst of violence the camera tracks down in Blanche is filmed like a desperate attempt by a hunted down individual at breaking out of the frame and avoiding the trap at all costs. Blanche frantically snatches her dead husband's letters out of her brother-in-law's big hands, feverishly drops them on the floor and eventually sinks to her knees, half sobbing, while ultimately opening the tin box containing Belle Reve's papers. Such a desecration of the box within the box seems to have more of an analeptic than a proleptic function. This defiling gesture reenacts the same mechanism as in Belle Reve and later Laurel/Auriol. Blanche is once again hounded out of her own private territory.

She is therefore figuratively and literally being displaced from the voyeur's position to the victim's position as she is herself mercilessly exposed to the other's gaze. Kazan's insistence on lighting and the reflected images of Blanche is remarkable. At the end of the trunk sequence, while Stanley is filmed sitting at the table and methodically going through Belle Reve's papers, the camera dells on Blanche's haggard face in a close-up as reflected in the mirror—the very same which will later get smashed during the rape sequence. Before the actual metonymic crack, this reflection only deceptively operates as an opening onto some other dimension. Deflected from its original ritual and reflecting function, the mirror further imprisons Blanche within a "spectral home,"<sup>4</sup> as it definitely constructs her into a tragic being literally trapped by its own nature and haunted by a past she has to look at obliquely by confronting her own ageing and barren image. In his

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<sup>4</sup> Kazan uses the expression in *A Life* and attributes it to his scenic designer, Joe Mielziner [361].

*Notebook for A Streetcar Named Desire*, Kazan insists on his own reflections on Blanche's character,

The more I work on Blanche, incidentally, the less insane she seems. She is caught in a fatal inner contradiction, but in another society she would work. In Stanley's society, no!

This is like a classic tragedy. Blanche is Medea or someone pursued by the Harpies, the Harpies being her own nature. Her inner sickness pursues her like doom and makes it impossible for her to attain the one thing she needs, the only thing she needs: a safe harbor...<sup>5</sup>

What is fascinating here is that through the slightly blurred reflection sent back by the oval mirror, Blanche is further banished into the Past-caught somehow, in a dynamic eventually functioning in inverse proportion to her sister's. By confirming Stella's inscription in an expanding new lineage (since she's expecting a baby), Stanley sends Blanche back to another further confined space-the space of memory<sup>6</sup> as the frame within the frame. Actually, at the end of the trunk opening sequence, Blanche slowly raises her hand to her forehead in a defensive posture, as if to test the reality of both self and flesh. In the course of the action, this self-protecting ritual eventually becomes the recurrent gesture of "a driven creature backed into a last corner to make a last desperate stand."<sup>7</sup> Of course, in the film even this last stand is denied her, properly taken away from her as Blanche is literally driven back against the wall.

Stanley's steady pursuit of his sister-in-law gradually becomes actual harassment-at once psychological, physical and sexual. The decisive moment when his barrage of attacks turns into a truly deviant ritual is materialized on screen by his crossing over the portières' limit in the rape sequence. The threshold is of course heavily symbolized by Kazan. The dining room side is the space where Stanley makes his final peace offering to Blanche which she haughtily turns down. It's also the space where he watches Blanche from a distance perform her demented tragedian's monologue. Whereas the bedroom side is that other space where Kowalski's full violence is eventually unleashed. At the end of Scene 10 in the play, his steady progression from the dining room "into the bedroom" [213], and the bedroom "into the bathroom" [213] and finally back to Blanche when they are "now both inside the bedroom" [215], is first introduced by a slightly oblique angle shot of Stanley's upper body. As if, from the moment Stanley intrudes upon Blanche's ultimate private space, he could only be perceived from the victim's point of view.

The emphasis turns to the graphic demonstration of the struggle itself and hence only fragments of Stanley's *bodily weapons* can be represented on screen. He seldom appears whole in the frame. His grinning and verbal aggression immediately translate as close shots of parts of his body while

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Jordan MILLER in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of A Streetcar Named Desire*, 23-24.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough analysis of the related question of the interaction between the American South's glorious legacy and haunting past, see Marie LIÉNARD's "Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire* or the Fall of the House of DuBois," in Dominique SIPIÈRE (ed.), *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Paris: Éditions du Temps, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Tennessee Williams in a letter quoted by Elia KAZAN in *A Life*, 329.

Blanche's seems to dwindle conjointly with the set. As Stanley starts pulling at her carnival clothes, tearing her crown off, and as he corners her onto the bed leaning over her, the camera insistently focuses on part of his muscular back, and then of his frightening face on top of Blanche. Meanwhile only a fraction of her hair is still visible in the lower section of the frame. With the subsequent tight shot of Blanche, it looks as if the close-ups' function had been altered. They now seem to enact on screen the erasure of the heroine's frail body from the frame—its actual suppression as a valid contender and fierce duelist.

### *The kill*

In this sense, the final stage of the combat follows a truly realistic pattern. Kazan's "space constricting method" efficiently dramatizes the way in which Blanche locks herself in, and Stanley's parallel predatory closing in on her ruthlessly materializes Tennessee Williams's obsession with a world gone hopelessly awry—or let's say with a malevolent or unconcerned universe whose human occupants prove pathetically absurd.

Kazan's carefully controlled symbolic light and sound effects as well as use of a simultaneous stage of multiple acting areas go even further than Williams's theatrical stylization with its transparent walls on stage. The pent-up violence of the ultimate duel unfolding between Stanley and Blanche seems to be mostly contained in this transitional aspect of the world at large, and the set dressing in particular. As Elia Kazan comments in his autobiography,

We had the walls of Stanley and Stella's home built in small sections that could be removed, so making the set grow smaller as time passed, more constricting and more threatening to Blanche. This was an eerie effect, and it worked. We also decided to take an image Williams had given us, a moth beating its wings against a wall, literally. We asked Lucinda Ballard, our costume designer, to make Blanche's dress for the rape scene of a light, diaphanous material, the same color as the very light window curtains of the bedroom where Stanley corners her. This also worked; it created a sense of mortal panic. [...] We did surpass the effect of the play with certain close-ups. [Kazan, 384-385]

Indeed, Blanche's broken trajectory as well as the close-up on her panic-stricken face closely parallel the camera's framing of Stanley. While he is filmed in enlarging, magnifying low angle shots, Blanche is shot from above once lying on the bed with her face against the wall. And when she sits up again trying to collect herself after Kowalski has disappeared through the bathroom door, a high angle shot of her small bust chronicles the first step of her inner retreat. As her own elaborate self-preserving rituals become ineffective and transcend any "realistic" behavior (she hurriedly collects a few belongings, desperately calls the phone operator, frantically tries to get out of the apartment before retreating indoors, wildly pulls the curtain Stanley draws back immediately, among other things), Blanche moves further within a phantasmagorical world.

This unreal world translates on screen into a number of striking effects ranging from the morbid play on light and shadow on both her own

terrified face and the Mexican funeral flower vendor's dark figure advancing toward her through a haze lit up by a streetlamp, an extreme close-up of Blanche's hand as she desperately hangs onto the front door's barred exit as well as on Blanche's head, shot from behind in the extreme left hand side of the frame, as she's threatening her attacker with a broken bottle, and finally, in rapid succession, to a two-shot of Stanley and Blanche's bodies wrestling and the concluding close-up of her head tossed back and exposed throat reflected in the network of broken glass lines, looking like veins on the bedroom mirror. The heroine literally "go[es] to pieces" as Stella tells her husband in Scene One. The mirror surface becomes then at once an emblematic tragic arena and a literal killing field. The mirror sends back the image of Blanche's head shot from profile—for the benefit of the spectator alone—, eyes closed in virtually the same catatonic trance as in the ultimate scene when lying on the ground with the psychiatrist lifting up her eyelids to check on her condition. And the fade-out accompanied with the dramatic soundtrack functions as a proleptic visual comment on her short address to the poker players in the final sequence: "Don't get up. I'm only passing through."

The expression may be understood literally here, as she seems to have truly passed through the looking glass, Orpheus-like, to *the other side*. Williams has Eunice tell Stella in the entirely different ending of the play: "You done the right thing. The only thing you could do. She couldn't stay here; there wasn't no other place for her to go" [11, 224].

Elia Kazan's masterly exploration of the question of representation dwells on the image of an image—or rather *assemblage* of images—shattered and reduced to absolute stasis by Stanley. However, if Kowalski embodies pure movement, he is by no means the only force that has defiled Blanche, as Mitch before him and the Matron after him do just this as well, even though on a more metaphorical mode. As the images of Stanley's body increasingly invading the screen space show, the dynamic of desire combines with a battle for territory causing the defeated one to stop dead in her tracks.

Significantly, each one of these two sequences of duelling closes with a mirror shot. The first one triggering off once again the maddening melody of memory of "all of those deaths" [1, 126] Blanche is left with, as she tells Stella earlier on, and the second one putting on display the fragmented self of the tragic being—somehow offering us for contemplation a brief but essential view of Blanche's sacrificial body.

At this point, it seems that Kazan achieves the supreme "moment" (for lack of a better term) of "arrest of time" Williams so coveted: "Contemplation is something that exists outside of time, and so is the tragic sense" as he writes in his epigraph to *The Rose Tattoo* entitled "The Timeless World of a Play" [11].

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