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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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