Elective affinities: Tennessee Williams and Woody Allen[1]

Afinidades eletivas: Tennessee Williams e Woody Allen

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Abstract

This essay proposes an exercise in comparative dramaturgy by bringing together the works of Tennessee Williams and of the filmmaker Woody Allen. In order to do this, we will start from comments made by the two artists regarding themes in common in both works, as well as a brief analysis of the film *Blue Jasmine* (2017), which takes up themes and forms from the play *A streetcar named Desire* (1947) and updates them to deal with contemporary historical materials.

Keywords: Memory; Comedy; *Blue Jasmine* (film); *A streetcar named Desire* (play).

Resumo

Este ensaio propõe um exercício de dramaturgia comparada a partir da aproximação dos trabalhos de Tennessee Williams e do cineasta Woody Allen. Para isso, partiremos tanto de comentários feitos pelos dois artistas a respeito de temas em comum nas duas obras, quanto de uma análise breve do filme *Blue Jasmine* (2017), que retoma temas e formas da peça *A streetcar named Desire* (1947) para atualizá-los no confronto com a matéria histórica contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Memória; Comédia; *Blue Jasmine* (filme); *A streetcar named Desire* (peça).

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I. Introduction

For film fans who follow Woody Allen's career, the identification of links between his films and the work of Tennessee Williams will not come as a surprise. The relationship is not only explicitly confirmed in the filmmaker's interviews, but has also become the object of attention from specialized critics. In a recently released autobiography, Allen reaffirms the importance of Williams' work for his career and admits to borrowings made in several films. At the same time, he recollects the moment he met his idol in New York and reveals that he became aware of notes in which the playwright made complimentary comments about his work. In this essay, we will reflect on these comments, in which thoughts on the dramaturgical role of memory and comedy converge. Next, we will briefly analyze the film *Blue Jasmine* (2013), partially based on the play *A streetcar named Desire* (1947), by Tennessee Williams, with the aim of proposing an exercise in comparative dramaturgy that can productively illuminate central aspects of both the play as well as the film.

II. Collaborations

Among other notable achievements in Allen's autobiography, which has the suggestive title of *Apropos of nothing* (in which the supposed refinement of the Frenchified term is followed by a disappointing "about nothing"), the filmmaker criticizes systematically, but always with characteristic good humor, the concept of individual authorship. The theme had already been addressed in several of the films he directed, notably in *Stardust memories* (1980), in which the dilemmas of a famous *cinéaste* reveal that, in the climate of the "defeat" of the counterculture and the progressive hopes of the sixties, the concept of *auteur* had survived only as an imperative of the market constituted around the so-called art cinema. The plot deals with an "independent" artist constantly besieged by a legion of fans and entrepreneurs during a festival held in his honor, each interested in taking advantage of the financial support created by his celebrity status. From this point of view, the film deals a clear blow on the central pillars of the theory of *auteur* cinema, which is generally legitimized by alluding to the director's desire to make films marked by his individual style and by the unified control of the production by his/her striking

personality.

However, in the autobiography, this issue takes on a more pragmatic dimension, especially in the several passages in which Allen insists on the collective nature of film production, citing dozens of collaborators – producers Charles H. Joffe and Jack Rollins, editor Ralph Rosenblum, executive Arthur Krim, critic Vincent Canby, casting director Juliet Taylor, photographer Gordon Willis, among others – without whom, he reiterates, his career would have been a resounding failure. In this vein, this time within the scope of influences, the director expands the concept of collaborative work by listing his idols, both in the field of cinema (the works of Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini appear more prominently), and in the field of dramaturgy, emphasizing the importance of the works of writers such as Arthur Miller, with whom he maintained professional liaisons. But a special place in the memoirs is dedicated to Tennessee Williams, about whom Allen writes:

> I grew up idolizing Tennessee Williams. Abe Burrows asked me when I was eighteen if there was anyone I wanted to meet to discuss my interest in writing with. I said Tennessee Williams. He said Tennessee's not the kind of guy whom one can easily sit and chat with. I read all his plays, all his books. Two of my proudest possessions when I was that age were handsome hardcover copies of *One Arm* and *Hard Candy*. I've seen his plays many times. I have my favorite plays and productions. As I gushed earlier, the movie of *Streetcar* is for me total artistic perfection. […] It's the most perfect confluence of script, performance, and direction I've ever seen. I agree with Richard Schickel, who calls the play perfect. The characters are so perfectly written, every nuance, every instinct, every line of dialogue is the best choice of all those available in the known universe. All the performances are sensational. Vivien Leigh is incomparable, more real and vivid than real people I know. And Marlon Brando was a living poem (Allen, 2020, p. 360).

Allen further identifies specific links, notably between *A streetcar named Desire* (the play written by Tennessee Williams in 1947 and the film directed by Elia Kazan in 1951) and some of the films he directed:

> And every time I'm parked before *Turner Classic Movies* and *Streetcar* plays I say to myself, Hey—I can do that. So I try but I can't, which brings us to *Blue Jasmine*. Nice try but no cigar. Blessed with a very great actress, Cate Blanchett, I do my level best to create a situation for her that will have dramatic power. The idea came from my wife and it's a good idea. But it leans too heavily on Tennessee Williams. One will see it again later in *Wonder Wheel*, my best yet, but I have to get out from under the southern influence (Allen, 2020, p. 361).

For the fans of the filmmaker, the affiliation is not exactly new. The film *Blue Jasmine* (2013), just to mention examples provided by the filmmaker himself, deals with the adversities faced by a snobbish millionaire (the Jasmine of the title, played by Cate Blanchett) who loses everything after her husband is arrested for running a scam finance scheme on Wall Street. The starting point of the plot is the decision to visit the poor sister in San Francisco. A good part of the plot deals with the clash between Jasmine's fine habits and the destitution in which Ginger (her sister) and her shabby boyfriend live, in an explicit use of motifs and themes from *Streetcar*. In fact, right after the film was released, references to Williams' play became ubiquitous in reviews and critical assessments:

> Most of Woody Allen's allusions to Tennessee Williams in his films and writings were to the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. So it's no surprise that it is present throughout Allen's recent film, *Blue Jasmine*. But Allen goes beyond adopting and adapting plots and characters from Williams' play. He has so deeply assimilated the previous work that motifs and lines of dialogue, often transferred to different characters or situations, become the imaginative elements from which he constructs his own script. Critics of the film have almost invariably commented on the parallels with *Streetcar*, noting, too, that Cate Blanchett, who plays the title character, Jasmine, also successfully played Blanche Dubois in Liv Ullmann's 2009 production of the play at the *Brooklyn Academy of Music* (Foster, 2015).

A few years later, when writing the script and directing *Wonder wheel* (2017), the imprisonment of the protagonist played by actress Kate Winslet among memories of the past (the "sensitive memories of an irretrievably lost past" [Costa, 2001, p. 135]) and a non-existent future revives motifs dear to the playwright and strengthens links which the critics interested in the relationships between theater and cinema still need to study.

III. Two-way affinities

However, perhaps the most surprising fact for most readers of the autobiography is the revelation that the admiration went both ways. When recounting the moment in which he met Tennessee Williams in person and heard the playwright's enthusiastic praise, Allen attributes the kind words to politeness. However, a few pages later, he adds:

> I'm at Elaine's one night paying my check on the way out when I'm stopped by who? Yes—Tennessee Williams. He is eating there with friends. He has had a few drinks and stops me on my way out to tell me that I was an artist. I looked around to see if there was an actual artist standing

> behind me, but no, he meant me. I wondered who he was mistaking me for. […] I flushed crimson, mumbled a few incoherent obsequies and backed toward the door, bowing over and over like a Chinese eunuch. I wrote his compliment off to too many mint juleps, mistaken identity, routine show business insincerity. Cut to years later when someone did a book on him and stayed with him for months, taking copious notes of their conversations. After Williams's death, the writer was incredibly kind to send me these notes on what Tennessee Williams said about me. I am too shy to quote from them […] (Allen, 2020, p. 362).

For those who take an interest in the works of the playwright and filmmaker, it may be interesting to read these notes carefully, which can illuminate fruitful relationships on both sides. So, bypassing Allen's modesty, let us move on to reading the comments made by Williams:

> Tradition is also memory, and within religion, it is holy. Holy tradition will be held before us like the greatest jewel, and perhaps it is, because it is memory: the shared memory of those who have gone before you, have turned toward you, and are telling you where they walked, what they felt or saw, and are throwing a favor toward you now. A favor of memory. Art makes me comfortable as often as it makes me feel tested or challenged, and with his [Woody Allen] work, I am able to recognize where I am, even as I have no idea where he may now take me. I recognize the vehicle, but the driver is mercurial, so I don't know what will pass by in the windows. I always feel as if all the radio programs of my childhood were somehow placed within the memories of Allen, residing there with sweetness and resentment and the desire to transform that dingy cloth we call reality with some embroidery. Back they come to me—the songs and the banter and the drama and the urgency to feel connected.
>
> There is very much the comedian within me, because humor, more than anything, protected the delicate queer I was, and I could throw some glitter in a corner with a joke, often at my own expense, and survived another day. Memory for me involves humor, and humor, like breathing and swallowing and walking, gets me going, keeps me alive. I am old enough to be Allen's father, but I feel he walked with me, perhaps behind me, finding humor in my awkwardness, but benign for the most part, because he tends to admire the same qualities in women that I do: humor, vulnerability, the handling of words as if they were Zasu Pitts' coins. I told you that long before I had read any Chekhov—my supposed master—I had learned a great deal of narrative, of structure, from George Stevens and John Ford and Howard Hawks and George Cukor and William Wyler. The cameras of Gregg Toland told me where a character should look with greater alacrity than all the textbooks of writing and the noble short stories ever could. I am a movie man, and so is Allen. Our DNAs are oddly similar, because we have walked the same paths, spread the same glitter, came to the same memories, then turned to share them. In a crowded world, I know that I can find him—his work—and he will understand me, accept me, teach me something. We will break bread together.

> No one is a comedian or a classicist or a tragedian: One is either an artist or one isn't. One either shares or one doesn't. One either connects or one doesn't. One moves solidly within your memory or he doesn't. Allen is an artist. He walks beside or along or behind me in chronological terms only: When he presents his work, his art, he is right there with me, sharing a holy tradition of memory, and there is no confusion for me as to what he is or what he's trying to do. We tell our stories. We connect. We throw the memories forward. We are related (Grissom, 2017).

The emphasis on the convergence between memory and comedy, not at all obvious, appears as a recurring theme in the comments. The importance of the first term is evident in the playwright's work, aligning his plays with much of the most advanced modern literature, from Chekhov to Joyce, concerned with the subjective fabrics of non-chronological time, both from the point of view of the characters' subjectivity (the role of censorship, the return of the repressed, the impossibility of overcoming social contradictions), as well as the dramaturgical structure (the disruption of the linearity of bourgeois drama). Still from this perspective, much has already been written about Tennessee Williams' use of the technical resources of cinematographic narratives, from which he took advantage by developing the extreme mobility provided by the possibilities of montage, both in the so-called horizontal level (the abrupt changes in time and space, the mix between dream and reality, the jumps between scenes), as well as the vertical level (the use of music as a commentary). Such compositional principles, which already appear with the force of a vanishing point of dramaturgical construction in plays such as *The glass menagerie* (1944), would find an exemplary realization in the treatment of Blanche Dubois's story in *Streetcar*, with a decisive impact on the development of modern theater. At the same time, these techniques constructed a point of view opposed to the euphoria of post-war American society, intent on leaving behind "pre-modern" formations (mainly those encapsulated in the notorious southern backwardness) in the quest to advance triumphantly and enjoy the benefits of undisputed global hegemony.

The persistence of pre-modern features amidst the modernizing wave – formalized, for example, in the contrast between Blanche's aristocratic ways and her dealings with unemployment and bank debts – did not point to a metaphysical vision of memory, nor did they construct a simple opposition, but made two unacceptable alternatives converge, in order to represent a historical cul-de-sac. The refusal to point to a possible solution in the future of the narrative naturally made the form of conventional drama inadequate to deal with the themes in question. At the same time, Williams's plays helped to broaden

the scope of the "Southern question," imploding the view of the persistence of mere "regional" idiosyncrasies to develop a privileged vantage point for understanding the dilemmas facing the nation as a whole (the emergence of the work of novelists such as William Faulkner would take the issue further).

On the other hand, the use of comic interventions is more controversial. In fact, writing about Williams' last plays, Iná Camargo Costa reflects that "the failure of *Summer and Smoke* on Broadway can be at least in part attributed to the difficulty of deciding in each scene whether to laugh or cry" (Costa, 2001, p. 140). As we saw in the playwright's comments above, Williams refuses in principle to distinguish between "the comedian, the classist or the tragic." In fact, one of the challenges – both critical and practical – in the interpretation of several of Williams' heroines has to do precisely with the status of these characters' supposedly refined ways, or, to put it another way, their attempts at self-valorization, which often lean towards illusion and mythomania (Blanche appears, again, as an exemplary phenomenon). Such obstacles reveal dilemmas that are not merely "technical," but that fundamentally depend on the conceptions and ideological alliances of readers and spectators. For directors, the need for a dialectical approach to directing actors creates a new layer of difficulties. For actors, the challenge of moving between pathos and farce is equally complex. From that perspective, the portrait of Blanche Dubois could be read as a metaphor of a society that had been transformed into one of the "most productive factories of neurotics" (Costa, 2001, p. 140).

This takes us to a comparison between Williams' play and one of Woody Allen's films. This time, *Sleeper* (1973), a science fiction parody in which a Village health food vendor (played by Allen himself) wakes up in the distant future, after having been frozen in a medical experiment. The new world reveals itself to be a fascist dystopia and the jump from the past serves as a mechanism that produces distancing effects, making the present of the film's production (the early 1970s) one of the comedy's critical targets. In fact, the rise of conservative Richard Nixon and the transformation of the gestures of the rebellious youth into spurious "countercultural" fashions appear in the protagonist's recollections about the "past". However, one of the film's most striking sequences deals precisely with the protagonist's breakdown after undergoing treatment in a futuristic version of a psychiatric hospital in which he recalls aspects of his previous life through well-known lines from *Streetcar*, concluding, of course, with the famous ending of the play, when the

heroine declares that she "has always depended on the kindness of strangers". The grotesque aspect of the monologue immediately stands out: going in the completely opposite direction of the dramatic intensities of the great actresses who played the role in the United States (from Jessica Tandy to Vivien Leigh), Allen's caricatural interpretation, which exaggerates clichés and typifying mannerisms, leaning towards intentional charlatanism, emphasizes the pathetic side of the situation.

At the same time, by highlighting the transition from techniques more in tune with the Realistic Method of acting, which had an enormous impact on the history of modern theater, cinema in the United States and on the staging of Tennessee Williams' work specifically, to a comical monologue, Allen makes a nod to another performing tradition that was dear to him and of which he himself was an exponent in the first half of the 60s: the stand-up comedy, one of the spearheads of political humor in the rebellious decade. Nor was the satire of the South innocent, as the racial segregation laws that still prevailed in the region had transformed it into one of the country's hotbeds of conservative ideologies (Allen writes in his autobiography about his active interest in the struggles for civil rights). In short, more than just a random quote or post-modern pastiche, through the extension of William's character to the absurd, Allen reminds us of a side of Blanche's characterization that includes the aspect of comedy, shaped by her delusional dreams of grandeur and sophistication, and which may go unnoticed in less attentive (or more idealistic) readings of *Streetcar*.

IV. *Blue Jasmine*

In order to better understand the ways in which Allen reveals the compelling contemporary relevance of the themes of *Streetcar*, let us return to *Blue Jasmine*. In addition to the explicit inspiration in Tennessee Williams' play, the film also takes contemporary events as its central reference, namely, events from the life of Bernie Madoff, the Wall Street financial wizard, responsible for the biggest fraud scandal in the history of the modern financial market. Madoff's trajectory is an impressive summary of the history of the United States and international finance since the mid-1960s. In fact, the conditions of possibility for his incredible rise are inseparable from the rise of the stock market and its deregulation by economic policies inaugurated by Richard Nixon and intensified by

Ronald Reagan since his election in 1981. His success in the world of finance was also due to his pioneering role in the computerization of transactions on Wall Street, as well as the increase in credit and debt as a neoliberal compensation strategy due to the brutal salary losses of the working classes and the significant decrease of the consumption power of the middle classes in the last decades of the 20th century. Of course, Allen's film also alludes to the 2008 crisis, when Madoff's fraudulent Ponzi investment scheme collapsed, leading to his arrest and the ruin of thousands of investors around the world.

It is also true that Madoff's biographies are full of topics that have constituted the menu of a substantial part of Woody Allen's films: the life of the wealthy Jewish community in New York (both Madoff and several of his investors were Jews); the investment of elites in philanthropic actions that serve both to launder money and to boost the prestige of business (let us remember Judah, the embezzler and murderer in *Crimes and misdemeanors* from 1989); the interest of large investors in the arts market (see the 2005 film *Match point*, for example). *Blue Jasmine* uses episodes from Madoff's life with significant modifications. As we pointed out previously, the emphasis on finance is not foreign to the universe of *Streetcar*, which also deals with the relationships between property (real estate, in this case) and bank loans, the intricacies of which Blanche tries in vain to understand. From this perspective, the procedure of expanding concepts, which we had identified in *Sleeper*, comes into action again. It can be argued that the introduction of new information in the film is largely due to a historical mutation, namely, the growing importance of the financial world in the so-called post-industrial society, as well as the extreme complexity in mapping the mechanisms of such a market. As we will see later, the plot will propose a mutation in the composition of the role that corresponds to that of Stanley Kowalski in the play, as the male characters in the film are no longer workers in the sense attributed to the term in post-war society.

At the same time, the film focuses on the material determinations of the protagonist's psychic degradation, also central to the play. Thus, the scenes in which Blanche struggles with the mysterious bank bureaucracy documents that led to the loss of Belle Reve, the family's former country estate, are enhanced to show Jasmine recalling conversations with her husband about the financial transactions that formed the basis of his wealth and his subsequent bankruptcy. This reinforces the material basis of memory. At the same time, the protagonist's tendency to demonstrate her astonishment in long,

meaningless monologues (one of the film's comic moments has a nephew accusing her of talking to herself), invariably to absent or astonished listeners, develops the play's emphasis on the implosion of the dramatic dialogue, which critics such as Peter Szondi identified as a central element of the crisis of bourgeois drama, reaching important turning points in the monologues disguised as dialogue in Chekhov's plays (in Szondi's words, the use of a "dialogue of the deaf" [Szondi, 2001, p. 53] or "the constant transition from conversation to the lyric of solitude" [Szondi, 2001, p. 50]).

At the same time, by alluding to a series of events widely publicized in the press at the time of the film's production (Bernie Madoff had been arrested and one of his sons had committed suicide), the film incorporates into its structure the dissolution of the suspense that so often moves the dramatic curve of commercial film. In effect, the plot begins at the end, when Jasmine has already gone bankrupt, and the plot develops through the mix between the present and memories of the past. From this point of view, the narrative structure is not built on the premises of conventional drama, as the emphasis falls primarily on the protagonist's degradation process. Moreover, the film also insists on Jasmine's "refinement," but from a new determination, beyond appearance or mere self-illusion. As we argued elsewhere:

> Madoff's biographies spend hundreds of pages describing the world of charity and philanthropic parties, of the ostentatious display of luxury in an endless series of social events, of conspicuous and scandalous consumption. Such events will not only be the places where Madoff's network is built, where most of the wealthiest investors will be hooked, but also the scenarios for displaying an appearance of success and reliability that will serve as a psychological and social basis for people who should distrust Madoff. In fact, the phenomenal success of Madoff's 'pyramid scheme' was 'too good to be true', as it paid an average interest rate far above that paid by the official market, but the investors, encouraged by the appearance of success, decide to believe in the finance wizard's magic numbers, as long as they continue to pay dividends (Soares, 2015, p. 73).

Allen's film insists precisely on Jasmine's apparent sophistication, who is invariably identified by the expensive brands and objects she uses, as she is invariably involved in the hard work of consumption. Much of the film's comic effect will reside precisely in the mismatches between Jasmine's elevated manners and the characters that orbit around her, whom she despises or flatters, depending on the pecuniary interest of the moment. On the other hand, the character of Stanley Kowalski, Blanche's sister's husband and the pivot of

the conflict between the two sisters in the play, is divided into six male characters in the film, three around Jasmine, three around Ginger. This multiplication of male characters completely dissolves the bonds of subjective adherence (or fetishism, in the case of Blanche) that played an important role in Williams' play, to launch Jasmine and Ginger into the vertigo of self-valorization through the constant exchange of partners according to their "market value," taking the financial situation of each character as the basis of every personal relationship. At the same time, the awareness of the process on the part of the characters, who comment with ease on each of their suitors like investors investing money on the stock market, makes obsolete the menu of themes common in conventional drama (love triangles, disappointments). These are characters who act like the individuals turned into enterprises celebrated by neoliberalism in search of the best value available in the market.

V. Conclusion

Through an exercise in comparative dramaturgy, we sought to identify the relevance of central themes in Tennessee Williams' most famous play, demonstrating that several of the problems analyzed by the playwright are still with us, some in a markedly worse way. At the same time, through a case study, our text suggests that the task of adapting literature to cinema can have fruitful results if the artists involved abandon the idea of "fidelity" to the original text, opting to develop themes based on their confrontation with contemporary historical matter.

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