THE VIEW FROM HERE AND ABROAD: 
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND 1950s HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

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In a classic essay on the connection between the theatre and the cinema, French critic André Bazin observes that “The more the cinema intends to be faithful to the text and to its theatrical requirements, the more of necessity it must delve deeper into its own language”. Such “dialectical progress” means for Bazin that “the cinema will give back to the theater unstintingly what it took from her …”.¹ And so there “are no plays that cannot be brought to the screen”, for some of the greatest contemporary playwrights, “Cinema is only a complementary form of theater …”.² Bazin only mentions the leading lights of French theatre, but among these playwrights was certainly Tennessee Williams, arguably the most cinematically significant of all twentieth-century American writers.

A prophet in spite of himself
The enfant terrible of post-war Broadway, Tennessee Williams made even more of a mark on the commercial film industry of the 1950s through several critically acclaimed and startlingly controversial screen adaptations of his stage successes. In ways that had rarely if ever been seen before on either stage or screen, Williams dramatized the discontents of modern living. And so, at a time when private experience and the values that should guide its conduct were much in flux, it is not surprising that American cultural life was affected deeply by the release and exhibition of A Streetcar Named Desire

² Ibid., 131.
(1951), *The Rose Tattoo* (1955), *Baby Doll* (1956) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958). These films became public events in ways that only very few Hollywood releases ever do. To be sure, they were far from revolutionary, either artistically or in their intense focus on family relations. In fact, Hollywood producers found the Williams properties attractive precisely because they treated time-honored subjects upon whose appeal the film industry had long depended. These included the ravaging effects of time on human destiny; the irregular passages of romantic life, marked by betrayal, loss and compromise; the moral and psychological discontents of sexual desire as lived out in a society with a long history of repressive attitude, the unavoidable tensions of intimate relationships; and – in a more specifically national vein – the exotic, fascinatingly perverse nature of southern culture.

Yet it can hardly be denied that in their treatment of this subject matter the Williams films brought to Hollywood’s audiences a distinct vision of lived experience whose substantial departures from traditional values and styles now seemed to demand representation. As the decade neared its end, the screen versions of Williams’ plays found increasing resonance with the directions in which American life itself was relentlessly moving – and, ironically enough, with an ever-increasing speed such that by the 1960s the playwright became rather *démodé*. By that time, screen versions of properties that Williams had first conceived ten or fifteen years earlier, notably *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* or *Summer and Smoke* (both 1961), seemed very much old hat and met with little favor from audiences and critics alike (notable exceptions were *Sweet Bird of Youth* [1962] and *The Night of the Iguana* [1964]). It was imports from Europe, such as *Blow-Up* (1966), and provocative material from current Broadway, notably *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (film version 1966), that led the final push towards a liberalization of Hollywood that, for a brief radical moment in 1972, witnessed the mainstream exhibition of hardcore (if undoubtedly classy) pornographic films like *Deep Throat* and *The Devil in Miss Jones*.

America was a different place two decades before when the release of the film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* was a controversial sensation. Williams provided ideal source materials for early post-war filmgoers who were eager for the new, yet reluctant to surrender entirely their attachment to the tried and true entertainment Hollywood had been providing since the 1920s. As yet unaffected by