

## *The Glass Menagerie* and the Transformation of the Subject

### Granger Babcock

In his *Memoirs*, Tennessee Williams describes a luncheon with Leonard Bernstein shortly after the New York opening of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945. "One day," he writes, "Leonard Bernstein and I were both invited to lunch by a pair of very effete American queens. Bernstein was hard on them and I was embarrassed by the way he insulted them." According to Williams, Bernstein told the men that "When the Revolution comes . . . you will be stood up against a wall and shot." Unlike the homophobic Bernstein, Williams says he was "not interested in shooting piss-elegant queens or anyone else": "I am only interested in the discovery of a new social system."<sup>1</sup>

What seems to concern Williams most about Bernstein's remark is his desire to eradicate a masculinity that opposed the normative American model. Williams, I suspect, wanted Bernstein's identifications to be less fixated on what Williams calls "organized society" and more sympathetic to the "wild gestures" of the marginal culture. For Williams, the anarchy represented by the queens' lunch-time performance is desirable, is art, because it resists the conservatism and conformity Williams associated with the hegemonic version of American masculinity.

Williams makes his position clearer in the introduction to *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*:

Art is only anarchy in juxtaposition with organized society. It runs counter to the sort of orderliness on which organized society apparently must be based. It is a benevolent anarchy: it must be that and if it is true art, it is. It is benevolent in the sense of constructing something which is missing, and what it constructs may be merely criticism of things as they exist.<sup>2</sup>

Williams was commenting on the function of community theater, which he felt had become too "respectable" ("the province of grey-suited corporate law and . . . their wives . . . impeccably lady-like").<sup>3</sup> But he was also commenting on the conformity present in American life in general, which, he argued, was a reaction to European Fascism and Communism—and the opposite of

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“Democratic impulse” as envisioned by Jefferson and Lincoln.<sup>4</sup> For Williams, this enforced conformity resulted from a paranoia that threatened to eliminate the “freaks”:

It seems to me, as it seems to many artists right now, that an effort is being made to put creative work and workers under wraps. Nothing could be more dangerous to Democracy, for the irritating grain of sand which is creative work in a society must be kept inside the shell or the pearl or idealistic progress cannot be made. For God’s sake let us defend ourselves against whatever is hostile to us without imitating the thing we are afraid of.<sup>5</sup>

Williams’s contrast of the orderliness of organized society to the benevolent anarchy of the authentically artistic is more than a call to use art as a form of social protest, or, as in the production notes to *The Glass Menagerie*, a call for a new form of theater. Read historically, the playwright’s ideas represent the initial stages of his sustained critique of anti-democratic tendencies in American culture.<sup>6</sup> In a broader and related context, his ideas also seem to track a transformation in subjectivity brought about by late capitalism. Williams appears to have recognized this change because he uses the dominant form of American subjectivity as a vehicle to reveal the limits of organized society; and, as I will argue later, in revealing the limits of organized society, Williams in the text of *The Glass Menagerie* pointedly links the emergent structures of American capitalism to the hyper-rationalization of Nazi Germany.

Williams’s remarks regarding organized society are not unlike those made by the Frankfurt School in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in that Williams seems to have reached the same conclusions regarding the fate of the “individual” in the post-war era.<sup>7</sup> Like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Williams seems to have understood that the subject was being dominated by “conventionalized modes of behavior”<sup>8</sup> that effectively forced individuals to conform to culturally defined norms. In Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s minds, and I believe Williams would have agreed with them, subjectivity was now dominated by identifications outside the family, and these identifications were created by the Other of the Culture Industry; so, for example, the desire for success—for material wealth, to “get ahead”—which the subject believed was self-generated, was, in fact, his (or her) identification with the rationale of organized society, which had programmed individual consumption as spontaneous thought or reason, or the assertion of individual will.

Tennessee Williams was not an avid reader of the Frankfurt School, nor was he a cultural or political theorist. What I do want to suggest, however,

following a line of argument recently developed by David Savran, is that Williams was an “instinctive” radical, and, as such, his plays, especially those written during the 1940s and ’50s, are far more “revolutionary” than has been previously suggested. As a playwright, notes Savran (quoting Williams in an interview he gave David Frost in 1970), he “Insistently . . . underscored the broadly social foundation for the personal tragedies with which so many of his plays are concerned, pointing out that the individual subject is not an isolated monad but a component of a ‘society’ that insistently ‘rapes the individual’”<sup>9</sup>. Nine years earlier Williams told Studs Terkel the same thing when he argued that society forced individuals to adjust or conform to “that which is basically wrong and unjust.”<sup>10</sup> In the same interview, Williams observed,

I’ve met many people that seemed well-adjusted, but I’m not sure that to be well-adjusted to things as they are is a desideratum . . . that which is to be desired. I’m not sure I would want to be well-adjusted to things as they are. I would prefer to be racked by desire for things better than what they are, even for things which are unattainable, than to be satisfied with things as they are. I don’t think the human race should settle for what it has now achieved at all, any more than I think America must settle for its present state.<sup>11</sup>

Williams’s comments concerning the “adjustment and conformity”<sup>12</sup> produced by organized society suggest a lateral affiliation with the transformation of subjectivity discovered by the Frankfurt School. As I state above, Williams would perhaps have recognized in Horkheimer and Adorno’s thinking about administered society similarities to his own ideas regarding organized society and its effects on the individual. As Lyle Leverich has revealed in *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*, Williams’s political consciousness was of the left. He actively and openly opposed fascist movements in Europe during the 1930s and 40s while simultaneously inveighing against the development of an American version.<sup>13</sup>

Williams’s initial reading of the changing economy, in “The Last of My Solid Gold Watches”<sup>14</sup> suggests that he understood that the surviving autonomous practices of labor were being eradicated as technological innovation and its attendant corporate practices further homogenized the workforce. He was also aware, I believe, that this consolidation and standardization of production forced men into a repressive corporate structure. In “Watches,” this transformation is represented as a conflict between Charlie Colton, “the last of the Delta drummers,” and Bob Harper, a young corporate salesman. In one speech, which I quote at length because of its importance, Colton lectures Harper about the changes in the economy:

The road is changed. The shoe industry is changed . . . You can take it from me—the world that I used to know . . . is slipping and sliding away from under our shoes . . . The ALL LEATHER slogan don't sell shoes anymore. The stuff that a shoe's made of is not what's going to sell it anymore! No! STYLE! SMARTNESS! APPEARANCE! That's what counts with the modern shoe-purchaser . . . Why I remember the time when all I had to do was lay out my samples down there in the lobby . . . A sales-talk was not necessary. A store was a place where people sold merchandise and to sell merchandise the retail-dealer had to obtain it from the wholesale manufacturer . . . Where they get the merchandise now I don't pretend to know. But it don't look like they buy it from wholesale dealers! Out of the air—I guess it materializes! Or maybe stores don't sell stuff any more! Maybe I'm living in a world of illusion!<sup>15</sup>

I believe Colton's speech reflects Williams's understanding of the changes taking place in the American economy during the first four decades of this century. The shift from monopoly capitalism to late capitalism represents itself as the eventual elimination of the "Delta drummer" in the face of the organizational man, Bob Harper, who Williams depicts as a product of the restructuring of the economy. The further rationalization of production, which was intensified by the advent of World War II, made the qualities that Colton values—"initiative," "self-reliance," "independence"—obsolete, at least as these qualities were embodied in the practices of a drummer. Likewise, Colton's complaint about the disappearance of the wholesale manufacturer suggests a consolidation of production and distribution brought about by centralized corporate planning, a practice C. Wright Mills called the "managerial revolution."<sup>16</sup> The standardization of production represented by Harper reduced social relations to "vital statistics" so that men (and women) became interchangeable; and the symbolic apparatus deployed to construct consumers constituted them as generic so that they became indistinguishable from one another. The transubstantiation of meaning represented by the replacement of "ALL-LEATHER" with "STYLE! SMARTNESS! APPEARANCE!" marked the advent of the publicity apparatus, the illusion, the simulacra. Meaning was no longer immanent in the material; it had been detached from the object so that it could be used to program consumption. Desire was thereby transformed, and the subject was now merely a consumer—an abstract projection subject to the same slogans and desires as all consumers, a "vital statistic."

Williams extends his critique of organized society in *The Glass Menagerie*.<sup>17</sup> The play's setting marks the same economic consolidation and resulting crisis of the subject that we see in "Watches":

The Wingfield apartment is in the rear of the building, one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in the overcrowded urban centers of the lower middle-class population and are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist as one interfused mass of automatism . . . . At the rise of the curtain, the audience is faced with the dark, grim rear wall of the Wingfield tenement. This building is flanked on both sides by dark, narrow alleys which run into murky canyons of tangled clotheslines, garbage cans, and the sinister latticework of neighboring fire escapes.<sup>18</sup>

"Symptomatic" of the lower middle class's enslavement, Williams suggests, is its homogenization by the forces of production. Its members are like worker bees, instruments that move to the tempo of the apparatus; thus, they lack "consciousness," "fluidity," and "differentiation." They are also alienated from each other in the "sinister," "murky," "tangled" environment of the tenements, a system of habitation that produces isolation and alterity, even as its hive-like quality gives it the appearance of community.

The homogenization present in the setting is also present in the characterization of Amanda Wingfield and Jim O'Connor. Both embody the prescriptions and values of organized society, and their identities cannot be separated from the conventionalized modes of behavior authorized by the Culture Industry. Amanda Wingfield's and Jim O'Connor's identification with organized society also expresses itself as consumption and surveillance. They consume and digest the narratives of the Culture Industry at the same time they police the identifications and desires of others. In fact, in *The Glass Menagerie*, they act as the instruments of organized society, and this tendency is especially evident in Amanda's and Jim's interactions with the play's two other characters, Laura and Tom Wingfield.

As an instrument of the apparatus, Amanda's nostalgia is co-opted by the Culture Industry. It is no coincidence that Amanda sells subscriptions to *The Homemaker's Companion*. Tom describes the magazine as "the type of journal that features the serialized sublimations of ladies of letters who think in terms of delicate cuplike breasts, slim, tapering waists, rich, creamy thighs, eyes like wood

smoke in autumn, [and] fingers that soothe and caress like strains of music" (37). In her telephone sales pitch to Ida Scott and Ella Cartwright (an early version of telemarketing), Amanda raves about a "new serial" (*Honeymoon for Three*) by Bessie Mae Hopper:

Oh, honey, it's something you can't miss! You remember how *Gone with the Wind* took everybody by storm? You simply couldn't go out if you hadn't read it. All everybody *talked* about was Scarlet O'Hara. Well, this is a book that critics already compare to *Gone with the Wind*. It's the *Gone with the Wind* of the post-World-War generation! (38) It's all about the horsey set on Long Island.<sup>19</sup>

Williams, of course, is making fun of Amanda's literary taste. This is, after all, the same person who refuses to have the novels of D. H. Lawrence in her home. She prefers the virtues of sublimated sex to "That hideous book by that insane Mr. Lawrence [*Lady Chatterly's Lover?*]." <sup>20</sup> Amanda, in fact, resists the type of artistic reduction that her son finds liberating. Further, the "literature" that she reads and that she peddles to her sisters in the DAR represents a homogenization of form that Williams sees as repressive. The standardization of romance represented by Bessie Mae Hopper's novel appropriates Amanda's desire for the "Old South" since Amanda's description of the novel suggests that antebellum Georgia and modern Long Island have become the same thing—exotic locations—that only appear to be different. As *mise en scène*, these locations are emptied of their specificity and become fields in which interchangeable characters act out scenes from interchangeable plots. Romance and desire have been homogenized, and Amanda's consumption of these narratives provides her with, to use Janice Radway's term, a "compensatory" act. As a reader, she engages "in an activity that shores up her own sense of her abilities, but she also creates a simulacrum of her limited social world within a more glamorous fiction. She therefore inadvertently justifies as natural the very conditions and their emotional consequences to which her reading activity is a response."<sup>21</sup> Amanda's reading habits make her surroundings acceptable. They justify her misery by substituting a fantasy for a reality she finds oppressive, and this fantasy, in Williams's mind, represents her identification with organized society.

Amanda also polices her children. She wants them to conform, to be "normal people,"<sup>22</sup> as she puts it. She wants them to become instruments, not "freaks" or "cranks" or cripples. Indeed, Amanda's first words in the play are the words of the Culture Industry; they are meant to police Tom's behavior.

Honey, don't push with your fingers. If you have to push with something, the thing to push with is a crust of bread. And chew—chew! Animals have secretions in their stomachs which enable them to digest food without mastication, but human beings are supposed to chew their food before they swallow it down. Eat food leisurely, son, and really enjoy it. A well-cooked meal has lots of delicate flavors that have to be held in the mouth for appreciation. So chew your food and give your salivary glands a chance to function!<sup>23</sup>

Amanda's knowledge about the body is gleaned from the magazines she reads and sells to others; it is part of the symbolic apparatus of organized society, and, I believe, that it illustrates her identification with the apparatus. Her "constant directions," as Tom calls them, also include advice about health, work, and success. At various points in the play, for example, Amanda tells Tom to eat a good breakfast, drink less coffee, and spend less money on cigarettes, so that he will be a more productive worker. Elsewhere, when Tom informs his mother that he goes to the movies because he "likes adventure," Amanda tells him that "Most young men find adventure in their careers" or "they do without it!"<sup>24</sup> Amanda insists that Tom conform so that he can work his way up the corporate ladder: "Try and you will SUCCEED!" she says.<sup>25</sup>

The lines just quoted are typical of her advice, representing the information of the Culture Industry, or as Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, the heteronomous knowledge of the non-subject. Amanda believes that what she is thinking is hers, that she has arrived at her beliefs through her own thought processes, but most of what she says and thinks is given to her by the Other: magazines, movies, newspapers, the radio. Like Willy Loman, she has been colonized from without, and the subject/object, inside/outside split of identity has collapsed. Her goals are determined externally. As Horkheimer suggested in 1941, "The individual has to do violence to himself and learn that the life of the whole is the necessary precondition of his own,"<sup>26</sup> so that when we analyze Amanda, we recognize, hopefully, that non-subjectivity has been instrumentalized as subjectivity, agency, or character.

Nowhere is this non-subjectivity-in-subjectivity—a reversal that goes unrecognized by the subject—more apparent than in her advice to Tom about success, and in her desire for the gentleman caller. As James Rowland and Rodger Stein stress, Amanda's clichés about success are part of the Horatio Alger/Dale Carnegie narrative of masculinity. According to Stein, for example, "Try and you will SUCCEED!" is "another of Amanda's illusions, [and] it is one shared by her fellow Americans, for 'try and you will succeed' is the traditional motto of the American dream of success, the theme of confident self-reliance canonized in the

romances of Horatio Alger.”<sup>27</sup> Stein might have substituted the word “model” for “motto” in the previous sentence, for hard work and perseverance are the “model” behaviors most often associated with material success by the Culture Industry in its formalized version of American citizenship. To Amanda, as I have been suggesting, the gentleman caller embodies “this image, this specter, this hope”<sup>28</sup>; that is, this model.

As she interrogates Tom about Jim O’Connor, it becomes clear that he is the type of man she wants, not only to “replace” Tom, but also to provide financially for herself and Laura. When Tom tells his mother that O’Connor is a shipping clerk, Amanda says, “Sounds like a fairly responsible job, the sort of job *you* would be in if you just had more *get-up*.” Amanda then asks about his salary and is pleased to learn that he earns “eighty-five dollars a month.”<sup>29</sup> What really pleases her, however, is that O’Connor is the “type that’s up and coming” and that “he goes in for self-improvement”<sup>30</sup>: “Then he has visions of being advanced in the world! Any young man who studies public speaking is aiming to have an executive job some day!”<sup>31</sup>

Jim O’Connor embodies organized society and the instrumentalized reason of the Culture Industry. He is programmed perfectly to fit the body of American capital. He is the hero of the Algerian romance. He desires upward mobility, and he is preparing for this eventuality by going to night school. Nevertheless, what appears in his character to be internal (free will, or the innate desire to better himself) is actually external knowledge, the goals of every other, which have been determined by conventionalized modes of thought. As a “type,” he is necessary for the maintenance of the economy, but he does not necessarily have to be successful; he can simply desire success so long as he works and consumes, as long as he is not a “crank” or a “cripple,” as long as he avoids the sin of inefficiency.

Laura Wingfield, on the other hand, *is* crippled, and because of this, she is “terribly shy.” So shy, in fact, that Amanda is unable to assimilate her into the dominant modes of the apparatus. Laura, for example, is unable to conform to the codes of Rubicam’s Business College. As her mother sarcastically says, “We won’t have a business career—we’ve given that up because it gave us nervous indigestion!”<sup>32</sup> The name “Rubicam,” I suspect, is an allusion to Raymond Rubicam, the owner of one of the nation’s largest advertising agencies in 1945, Young and Rubicam, which helped to develop the now hegemonic practices of the advertising industry.<sup>33</sup> Williams uses Rubicam’s name to figure the machinery deployed to insure conformity. Just as ad agencies view individuals as statistics to be manipulated, so too the Rubicam Business College reduces Laura to the abstract by employing a universal training method. Unable to conform, however, Laura spends her days on the margins of the culture she cannot join. She goes to the “art museum,” the “bird houses at the Zoo,” and the “big glass house where they raise



hothouse flowers.”<sup>34</sup> Yet Laura’s problem—her inability to standardize herself—only arouses feelings of frustration in her mother/manager, whose solution is to marry Laura off to a “normal” man, Jim O’Connor.

The gentleman caller, however, does not bring the happiness that Amanda desires. He is, as Tom Wingfield says, “an emissary from a world of reality,”<sup>35</sup> and as such, he represents the conventions of organized society. Williams stages O’Connor’s normative masculinity to expose its limits and to reveal its social construction. Nancy Tischler argues that “Jim is not an especially effective character study because Williams can feel little sympathy with such a substantial and placid citizen.”<sup>36</sup> “Yet,” she claims, “he is a kindly reminder of the reasonable, normal human pattern . . . clean-living, honest, sweet-natured, materialistic, eager American businessman.”<sup>37</sup> I would argue that Jim is an *ineffectual* character rather than ineffective character study since he does not produce the intended effect, at least not in Amanda’s mind. To call him ineffective as a character study, I believe, is perhaps to miss Williams’s point. That is, O’Connor’s placidness is meant to convey a banality that appears to be kindly or reasonable but, in actuality, represents the repressiveness of standardization. Williams, again, does not find his type either “kindly” or “reasonable,” and to make this judgement is to underestimate O’Connor since Jim is neither reasonable nor kindly. The text of the play suggests just the opposite—that O’Connor’s banality makes him a threat. His banality also causes many critics to overlook or dismiss him. His pursuit of happiness, his desire for success, his “clean-living, honest, sweet-natured, materialistic,” American-businessman eagerness is perceived as the “normal human pattern.” To underestimate Jim is to see him as inevitable, as comic, as a “stumblejohn,” and *not* as socially constructed and therefore resistible.

More important, however, the misrecognition of O’Connor’s instrumentalization can lead to a fatal error since as a type, or a dominant cultural tendency, he is the *uber mensch*. “I’m Superman!” he says.<sup>38</sup> And we would be foolish to ignore Williams’s implicit warning: “Look how big my shadow is when I stretch!”<sup>39</sup>

O’Connor’s desire expresses itself as instrumental reason programmed by the Culture Industry, as an absolute conformity that sees itself as absolute difference. That is, in his desire, Jim is like all others, and this is how he becomes a “somebody,” how he defines his “uniqueness” or success:

Why, man alive, Laura! Just look about you a little. What do you see? A world full of common people! All of ‘em born and all of ‘em going to die. Which of them has one-tenth of your good points! Or mine! Or anyone else’s, as far as that goes—gosh! Everybody excels in some one thing.<sup>40</sup>

The voice that speaks through Jim here is the voice of the Culture Industry. “[A]s a devoted student of the science of self-improvement,” Delma Presley comments, “Jim’s attitude perfectly matches [Dale] Carnegie’s view of the ideal man, as outlined in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, a best-seller since 1936” (60).<sup>41</sup> In his book, Carnegie stressed that “the man who has technical knowledge *plus* the ability to express his ideas, to assume leadership, and to arouse enthusiasm among men—that man is headed for higher earning power.”<sup>42</sup> Jim advises Laura as the Other has advised him: he tells Laura that she “low-rates” herself, that she has an “inferiority complex”: “Yep—that’s what I judge to be your principal trouble. A lack of confidence in yourself as a person. You don’t have the proper amount of faith in yourself.”<sup>43</sup> He “understands” her “case” because he has experienced the same problem, until he takes “up public speaking, developed my voice, and learned that I had an aptitude for science.”<sup>44</sup> Jim has conformed to the goals of organized society. He has also discovered the “one thing” at which he “excels”:

JIM: . . . My interest happens to lie in electro-dynamics. I’m taking a course in radio engineering at night school . . . Because I believe in the future of television . . . I wish to be ready to go right up along with it. Therefore I’m planning to get in on the ground floor. In fact I’ve already made the right connections and all that remains is for the industry itself to get under way! Full steam—(His eyes are starry.) Knowledge—Zzzzzp! Money—Zzzzzp!—Power! That’s the cycle democracy is built on!<sup>45</sup>

Others, of course, also believe in the future of television, and they too will be ready “to get in on the ground floor.” They may also have made “the right connections.” They may even have the same blind faith in “democracy.” Commenting on these lines, James Reynolds notes that “‘Knowledge’ means inventing new technologies and capitalizing on their financial success, which in turn gives the system power over those without technology.”<sup>46</sup> Those who control the system have power over those who are dependent on the technology of the apparatus. This power is disguised by the Culture Industry in the form of the ideology of progress, or what Tennessee Williams calls the “Century of Progress.”<sup>47</sup>

The ideology of progress also represents what Raymond Williams calls “technological determinism,” which, he writes, “is an immensely powerful and now largely orthodox view of the nature of social change.”<sup>48</sup> According to Williams,

New technologies are discovered, by an essentially internal process of research and development, which then sets the conditions for social change and progress. Progress, in particular, is the history of these inventions, which 'created the modern world.' The effects of the technologies, whether direct or indirect, foreseen or unforeseen, are as it were the rest of history. The steam engine, the automobile, television, the atomic bomb, have made modern man and the modern condition.<sup>49</sup>

The "rest of history" is further mystified by the "leveling" process of the Culture Industry, which further marginalizes the effects of technology by reducing knowledge about these processes to exchange value. In this popular narrative, "Wrigley," "Franklin," and "Edison" blend together with "light bulbs," "Mazda lamps," "victrolas," and "chewing gum" to produce knowledge with no use value. These bits of information become things a person might know, a universal cultural capital that can be exchanged for recognition or status. Most often, however, this type of knowledge (what E.D. Hirsch calls "background information" or "cultural literacy") is used to control social relations by making language (and reason) heteronomous. That is, as Horkheimer and Adorno suggest about advertising, "the important individual points, by becoming detachable, interchangeable, and even technically alienated from any connected meaning, lend themselves to ends external to the work."<sup>50</sup> This transformation from usable knowledge to publicity creates dependency rather than freedom. For example, when the lights in her apartment go out, Amanda doesn't know what to do. She can name Ben Franklin as the "discoverer" of electricity and "Mr. Edison" as the inventor of the "Mazda lamp," but she cannot see "the rest of history." Knowledge has become exchange value, universal bits of information that marginalize the real processes of technology and history. "Distant from both the practical and theoretical elements of technology," Reynolds suggests, "[Amanda] is made its servant."<sup>51</sup> Science has not brought progress, just technology and profit for those who control technology, whose history, as Raymond Williams argues, is based on the "assumption" of progress.<sup>52</sup>

As the "emissary" of reality/progress, Jim O'Connor is, as I have already suggested, manufactured to serve the apparatus. He is a product and a (re)producer. His desire is to remake Laura (and Tom) in his own image, and this desire produces one of the central conflicts of the play which is "resolved" only when Laura's unicorn is broken and Tom runs away to Mexico. As an artifact, the unicorn represents the antithesis of Jim's instrumentation. On one level, it symbolizes the hand-made craft of mercantile capital. More important for Tennessee Williams the artist, however, is that the unicorn symbolizes the position

of the art object (and therefore the artist) in an increasingly mechanized world. It is the opposite of the mass-produced shoes, gum, and newspaper sports heroes that are associated with Jim O'Connor. As Fredric Jameson argues that

Modern art . . . drew its power and its possibilities from a backwater and an archaic holdover within a modernizing economy: it glorified, celebrated, and dramatized older forms of individual production which the new mode of production was elsewhere on the point of displacing and blotting out. Aesthetic production then offered the Utopian vision of a more human production generally; and in the world of the monopoly stage of capitalism it exercised a fascination by way of the image it offered of a Utopian transformation of human life.<sup>53</sup>

Laura's collision with Jim is a displacing or blotting out of older forms that do not fit the dictates of the new economy. The unicorn must become "like all the other horses" because, as Jim says, "Unicorns—aren't they extinct in the modern world?"<sup>54</sup> Laura's renunciation of her difference is made complete with the creaking of the horn. Although Jim destroys the horse, Laura will "just imagine he had an operation": "The horn was removed to make him feel less—freakish . . . Now he will feel more at home with the other horses, the ones that don't have any horns."<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, Laura cannot conform to the values of either business or marriage, so she renounces the real world in favor of the couch, where she plays with her glass figures and listens to records. The "operation" that breaks the unicorn's horn, as Thomas Scheye comments, "takes on nightmare proportions" when we remember that Williams's sister Rose, on whom Laura Wingfield's character is based, had a prefrontal lobotomy in order to make her less "freakish."<sup>56</sup>

Jim O'Connor also polices Tom by teaching him how to "fit in," but their collision is less violent. In the end, Tom does not renounce the outside world like his sister, nor does he integrate like his mother. He is in flight. Like Jameson's utopian modernist, Tom attempts to escape the world of late-capitalism by engaging in a form of artistic production that Jameson calls "the aesthetic of sheer autonomy, as the satisfactions of handicraft transfigured."<sup>57</sup> Tom resists the Taylorization of labor and consciousness by closeting himself "in a cabinet of the washroom to work on poems." Tom tells us his "secret practice" made "the other boys in the warehouse [regard] me with suspicious hostility."<sup>58</sup> Jim O'Connor, however, takes a "humorous attitude toward him."<sup>59</sup>

Jim's patronage (and patronizing) of Tom is an effort to win Tom's confidence in order to teach him to conform to the routine of work and the ideology of self-improvement. In the process, Williams reveals Jim as a flawed model by

demonstrating that his pedagogy is a hoax. When Jim warns Tom that “You’re going to be out of a job if you don’t wake up,” Tom tells him that he has already awakened. “I’m planning to change,” he says, which confounds Jim because he can see “no signs” of Tom’s transformation. Jim cannot recognize the signs since, as Tom teases, “The signs are interior.”<sup>60</sup> Jim can only recognize the superficial, standard gestures and motivations that permeate his consciousness and that appear as self-replicating, mass-produced models, and in his advice to Tom, Jim stands for the standard gestures and motivations of the Culture Industry:

JIM: You know, Shakespeare—I’m going to  
sell you a bill of goods!

TOM: What goods?

JIM: A course I’m taking.

TOM: Huh?

JIM: In public speaking! You and me, we’re  
not the warehouse type.

TOM: Thanks—that’s good news. But what  
has public speaking got to do with it?

JIM: It fits you for—executive positions!

TOM: Awww.

JIM: I tell you it’s done a helluva lot for me

.....

TOM: In what respect?

JIM: In every! Ask yourself what is the  
difference between you an’ me and  
men in the office down front?  
Brains?—No!—Ability?—No!  
Then what? Just one little thing—

TOM: What is that one little thing?

JIM: Primarily it amounts to—social poise!  
Being able to square up to people  
and hold your own on any social  
level!<sup>61</sup>

Tom, of course, understands in advance that Jim is selling him “a bill of goods.” Jim’s desire, however, prevents him from seeing “his” advice as collusion or self-deception because, as Andrea Dworkin writes about Stanley Kowalski, he is “untouched by the meaning of any experience because he has no interior life, he is invulnerable to consequences, he has no memory past sensation. He is ordinary.”<sup>62</sup> Jim’s language further indicts “self”-making when he describes his night course as “fitting” him for executive positions—that is, he is being shaped by the Culture

Industry to conform, just as are the others in his class. Williams makes it clear that Jim is participating in his own deception because his efforts at self-improvement have done nothing for him; he has gone nowhere six years after graduating from high school, and Williams gives us every indication that this pattern will continue.

Williams also undermines the ideology of self-improvement by showing that ability and hard work are not rewarded, but rather the artificial, interchangeable practices of late-capitalism. It is more important for Jim to “make the right connections” (he can imagine people only as “social contacts”) and manipulate social appearances (i.e. have “social poise”) than it is for him to have “brains” or “ability.” In practice, he resembles not the valorized autonomous male of the American media, but the standardized mode that the same apparatus produces. As Horkheimer and Adorno argue, “On the faces of private individuals and movie heroes put together according to the patterns on magazine covers vanishes a pretense in which no one now believes; the popularity of the hero models comes partly from a secret satisfaction that the effort to achieve individuation has at last been replaced by the effort to imitate.”<sup>63</sup>

Delma Presley is correct when she sees a correspondence between Jim J’Connor and David Riesman’s “other-directed man”: “Jim splendidly represents Riesman’s other-directed man who operates as though he were controlled by radar, constantly sending out signals and adjusting his movement to conform to his environment.” Presley also argues that Tom rejects “other direction” “in favor of engaging in a quest for adventure.”<sup>64</sup> According to Presley, “[Tom] generally fits the ‘new’ type of personality Riesman sees on the horizon, the autonomous man . . . He obtains sustenance from the inner-directed pattern of existence. He has an internal guidance system . . . and he does not constantly adjust his behavior to fit the expectations of his known and unknown peers.”<sup>65</sup> While Presley’s characterization of Tom’s autonomy may ring true for some readers, I believe her reading is perhaps too optimistic. His autonomy, or freedom, is always limited because he is in flight from the values of organized society. In other words, Tom too bears a disfiguring mark, a mark that makes him suspicious to his co-workers and his mother, or freakish like Laura’s unicorn. As an artist, the closeted poet, he desires Jameson’s utopian transformation of the economic and social forces that control his life, yet his flight from these forces embodies what Peter Burger sees as the central contradiction of modernist art. The “autonomy aesthetic . . . contains a definition of the function of art: it is conceived as a social realm that is set apart from the means-ends rationality of daily bourgeois existence.”<sup>66</sup> At the same time, however, because of the rationalization of the social under late capital, “Only in the isolated form of monad-like works of art can truth still be spoken about this society. This is the function of art that Adorno [refers] to as ‘functionlessness’ because it can no longer be hoped that art will provoke change.”<sup>67</sup> By being “functionless,” Tom’s writing of poetry on company time is a protest against “what is”; however,

his secret act also affirms reality by offering only compensation for repressive social conditions. In this respect, Tom's seclusion in the bathroom is analogous to other bits of atomistic consumption witnessed throughout the play: his movie-going, Amanda's reading of romances, Jim's reading of the newspaper, Laura's listening to records.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams also suggests that the standardization of the economy turns social relations into relations of production. As Tom says about his job, "The warehouse is where I work, not where I know things about people!"<sup>68</sup> Workers move as isolated units suspicious of any part that does not conform to the gestures or values of the apparatus. As Williams himself observes in "The Catastrophe of Success," modernization has not brought progress because technology has not been used to liberate people:

We should do more for ourselves or let the machines do for us, the glorious technology that is supposed to be the light of the new world. We are like a man who has brought a great amount of equipment for a camping trip . . . but who now, when all the preparations and the provisions are piled expertly together, is suddenly too timid to set out on the journey but remains where he was yesterday and the day before and the day before that, looking suspiciously through white lace curtains at the clear sky he distrusts. Our great technology is a God-given chance for adventure and for progress which we are afraid to attempt.<sup>69</sup>

To underscore this point in *The Glass Menagerie*—that technology has not been used to liberate or to light the new world—Williams, I believe, borrows the central image from Picasso's *Guernica*.<sup>70</sup>

At the top and center of Picasso's masterpiece, there is a light bulb, complete with filament, enclosed in a disk-shaped form that seems to illuminate the chaos and death of the bombing. Picasso, I would argue, does not use the electric light to symbolize hope or "enlightenment," as some have suggested.<sup>71</sup> On the contrary, he uses the light bulb to express his profound doubts about technology. In the painting, the light merely illuminates the slaughter of Guernica. It is part of the narrative of progress that has promised salvation but has brought only destruction and death. The light is like the light of the bombs; it produces illumination, not understanding, for it hangs suspended above the slaughter as if by magic. Yet like the lights that illuminate the warehouse where Tom Wingfield works, and which he finds so oppressive, Picasso's light only illuminates brutality, and sheds no light or illumination on the values that structure progress and social relations—"knowledge," "money," "power." The oppressive-ness of the warehouse light is, I believe, Williams's borrowing and transformation of

Picasso's image, as, perhaps, is his use of light imagery throughout the play. In their dominant form, these images represent an ideology at odds with what Williams sees as more humanistic values. As James Reynolds argues, "Those without access to the real power of technology are limited as mere users unable to understand and control it. They remain outside the sphere created by larger cultural forces that place technology not as the servant of humanity but as a venture for capital investment, nationalistic rivalries, and costly toys."<sup>72</sup>

Nowhere is Williams more critical of these values than in the final lines of the play. Here the assumption of progress that informs our cultural institutions—education, the media, science, industry—is deconstructed in a gesture that fuses individual and international history, his sister's lobotomy with the bombardments of World War II. The lightning of Ben Franklin's discovery and the light of Thomas Edison's Mazda lamp are transformed into the bombardments of the Second World War. As Tom says, "nowadays the world is lit by lightning." At the same time, Laura's light is blown out: "Blow out your candles, Laura—and so goodbye."<sup>73</sup> Williams's sister Rose, of course, did not blow out her candles; she was the victim of a technological experiment, just as were the citizens of Guernica. For Williams, both events were symptomatic of a historical crisis in which technology was increasingly being used to subdue or destroy human beings who did not conform to the dominant types, whether those types were American or Nazi. Both systems demanded that subjects conform to the whole, and resistance and difference were viewed with suspicion.

The appearance of *Guernica/Guernica* in the text of *The Glass Menagerie* acts as a link between the type of German nationalism Picasso was protesting against and the type of fascism Williams saw as latent in the dominant version of American subjectivity, or nationalism. Williams's intervention can thus be theorized as an example of what Homi Bhabha calls "the antagonistic perspective of nation," whereby the marginalized intervenes in discourses that "rationalize the authoritarian, 'normalizing' tendencies within cultures in the name of national interest."<sup>74</sup> More importantly, however, Williams's intervention records the power of the Culture Industry to shape consciousness and determine subjectivity. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams contests this subject formation by exposing the national subject as an ideological illusion or effect of the economy. His critique of the standardized modes of subjectivity advocated by the Culture Industry is a cultural inversion—he turns the model inside out to reveal an automaton at the heart of autonomy.



## Notes

1. Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1975) 93.
2. Tennessee Williams, *27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other One-Act Plays* (New York: New Directions, 1966) vii-viii. This essay was originally published in 1945 in the *New York Star*; it was added as part of the introduction to the second edition of *27 Wagons* in 1949 and appears in all subsequent editions.
3. *Wagons* vii.
4. xi.
5. xii.
6. David Savran, for example, asserts that Williams's pre-Stonewall radicalism manifests itself as a type of surrealism antagonistic to the means-ends rationality of state democracy. See his excellent *Communist, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992) especially 76-110.
7. Williams never used the word "late-capitalism," but his description of the conformity produced by organized society is very similar to the Frankfurt School's conceptualization of "instrumental reason," as produced by what it called "administered society" and its symbolic apparatus the "culture industry." By identifying the subject as an effect of the "technological rational" that dominated late-capitalist cultures, Horkheimer and Adorno suggested that models of the liberal subject were being used repressively to reduce subjectivity to a series of "protocols" or, as Marcuse argued, "pre-given external standards." Horkheimer and Adorno argued that this "claiming" of the subject produced "instrumental reason": "Through the countless agencies of mass production and its culture the conventionalized modes of behavior are impressed upon the individual as the only natural respectable, and rational ones. He defines himself as a thing, as a static element, as success or failure"(28). They believed that individual consciousness was being reduced to radio, in the movies and in the then emerging television industry. For Adorno, these standardized models signaled the end of the liberal subject "systematically controlled and absorbed by social mechanisms which are directed from above" (136). See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1972), especially 120-67. See also Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964) 3-10; and Theodor W. Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda" in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1980) 118-37.
8. Horkheimer and Adorno 28.
9. Savran 79-80.
10. Studs Terkel, "Studs Terkel Talks with Tennessee Williams," in Albert J. Devlin, ed., *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986) 93-4. See also David Frost, "Will God Talk Back to a Playwright? Tennessee Williams" 146.
11. Terkel 90.
12. 94.

13. Lyle Leverich, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams* (New York: Crown, 1995) 172, 269-70, 377.
14. Williams wrote "The Last of My Solid Gold Watches" circa 1940; it appears in *27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other One-Act Plays* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 74-85.
15. "Watches" 81-2.
16. See C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1956).
17. Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (New York: New Directions, 1966). All page citations refer to this edition of the play. I have used the "reading edition" of *The Glass Menagerie* because it is the most widely circulated version of the play. For an explanation of the debate surrounding the "reading" and "acting" editions, see James Rowland, "Tennessee's Two Amandas," in R.B. Parker, ed., *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of The Glass Menagerie* (Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983).
18. *The Glass Menagerie* 21.
19. 53.
20. 39.
21. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1983) 214.
22. *The Glass Menagerie* 75.
23. 24.
24. 51-2.
25. 49.
26. Max Horkheimer, "The End of Reason," in Arato and Gebhardt 30 .
27. See Rodger Stein, "The Glass Menagerie Revisited: Catastrophe Without Violence"; and James Rowland, "Tennessee's Two Amandas," in R.B. Parker 137, 69.
28. *The Glass Menagerie* 37.
29. 63.
30. 64.
31. 65.
32. 34.
33. See Roland Marchand, *Advertising and the American Dream* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) 33.
34. *The Glass Menagerie* 33.
35. 23.
36. Nancy Tischler, "The Glass Menagerie: The Revelation of Quiet Truth," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988) 37.
37. Tischler 37.
38. *The Glass Menagerie* 88.
39. 102.
40. 99.

41. Delma Presley, *The Glass Menagerie: An American Memory* (Boston: Twayne, 1990) 60.
42. Quoted in Presley 60.
43. *The Glass Menagerie* 99
44. 99.
45. 99-100.
46. James Reynolds, "The Failure of Technology in *The Glass Menagerie*," *Modern Drama* 34.4 (1991): 525.
47. *The Glass Menagerie* 90.
48. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken, 1975) 13.
49. Williams 13.
50. Horkheimer and Adorno 163.
51. Reynolds 524.
52. Williams 14.
53. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 307.
54. *The Glass Menagerie* 104, 101.
55. 104.
56. On January 13, 1943, Rose Williams was given a bilateral prefrontal lobotomy. According to Williams biographer Lyle Leverich, her doctors performed a "Freeman-Watts standard lobotomy": "the brain was approached from the lateral surface of the skull rather than from the top.' Then 'burr' holes were 'drilled on both sides of the cranium,' after which a '6-inch cannula, the tubing from a heavy-gauge hypodermic needle, is inserted through one hole and aimed toward the hole on the opposite side to the head.' When the cannula was withdrawn, 'a blunt spatula—much like a calibrated butter knife—was inserted about 2 inches into the track left by the cannula.' At length, four quadrants were cut, two on each side of the brain, and the results varied, generally producing a pacifying effect." Rose was being treated for schizophrenia, and Williams felt that his mother had acted too hastily in electing the surgery. By the late 1950s, lobotomies were largely discredited as "mutilating brain surgery." See Leverich 480-2. See also Elliot S. Valenstein, *Great and Desperate Cures: The Rise and Decline of Psychosurgery and Other Radical Treatments for Mental Illness* (New York: Basic Books, 1986) 149.
57. Jameson 307.
58. *The Glass Menagerie* 68.
59. 68-69.
60. 78.
61. 77.
62. Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1987) 41.
63. Horkheimer and Adorno 156.
64. Presley 57.
65. 57-8.

66. Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 10.

67. 11.

68. *The Glass Menagerie* 113.

69. 15.

70. Picasso's painting, as Herschel Chipp notes, "became the most discussed work of art of the time" (166). When the painting arrived in New York in May of 1939, it became a *cause célèbre* for the artistic left and an object of derision for more conservative elements in the artistic community. Its arrival corresponded with the opening of the Modern Museum of Art in New York, which had mounted a forty-year retrospective of Picasso's work to celebrate the occasion. *Guernica* was also exhibited in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago to raise funds for the Spanish Refugee Campaign. The American avant-garde championed the painting as an important example of modernistic art. Defenders of realism, however, ridiculed the painting as "cuckoo art" (163). Williams was certainly aware of the debate surrounding the painting, and it is very probable that he saw *Guernica* since, as Donald Spoto and Lyle Leverich both document, he was in New York during the time the painting was first exhibited there. Picasso's masterwork would have interested Williams because *Guernica's* fragmented imagery represented a type of modernism that Williams was trying to adapt for the stage. See Herschel Chipp, *Picasso's Guernica: History, Transformations, Meaning* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) 156-79. See also Donald Spoto, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams* (New York: Little Brown, 1985) 64-114; and Leverich 325-59. Leverich is especially good at documenting Williams's opposition to fascism.

71. See Chipp 156-79 for a summary of alternate readings.

72. Reynolds 526.

73. *The Glass Menagerie* 115.

74. Homi Bhabha, "Narrating the Nation," *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1991).