

## Of post-modern pre-performances: Williams's late characters and "plastic acting"



### Sobre pré-performances pós-modernas: os personagens tardios de Williams e a "atuação plástica"

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#### Abstract

In the "Production notes" of *The glass menagerie* Tennessee Williams calls for a "plastic" theater that would use all theatrical means to make it a visual and total performative art. However, the theatrical productions that contributed to make Williams one of the greatest American playwrights staged the plays in a realistic style which also appears in the actors' style of acting. Most of the actors, indeed, were trained in a modern and realistic American technique. The tradition of realistic acting invites actors to build their character from a psychological basis that helps to *explain* and *identify* the character. To what extent did the realistic style of acting help establish Williams's theater in the category of psychological and naturalist theater and contribute to misunderstanding his later and more subversive plays? How can acting help prepare actors and spectators to the total and "plastic" theater Williams imagined? Williams's late work radically subverts the realistic order and brings into play unrealistic, elusive, even grotesque characters that require the actor to approach them in a new way. This article proposes to reflect on the responsibility of the actor and the possibility of rehabilitating the late texts of Williams in practice. The aim is to study the texts' new and post-modern imaginary and to study their practical implications. The late plays' subversive and anti-psychological body, the unfathomable characters call for new bodies on stage that incorporate post-modern reflections into their very practice.

**Keywords:** Tennessee Williams; Technique; Performance; Body.

#### Resumo

Nas "Notas de produção" de *The glass menagerie*, Tennessee Williams propõe um teatro "plástico" que utilizaria todos os meios teatrais para transformá-lo em uma arte visual e performativa completa. No entanto, as produções teatrais que contribuíram para tornar Williams um dos maiores dramaturgos estadunidenses encenaram as peças em um estilo realista, que também se refletiu no estilo de atuação dos atores. De fato, a maioria dos atores foi treinada com uma técnica estadunidense moderna e realista. A tradição da atuação realista convida os atores a construírem seus personagens a partir de uma base psicológica que ajuda a explicar e identificar o personagem. Até que ponto o estilo realista de atuação ajudou a estabelecer o teatro de Williams na categoria de teatro psicológico e naturalista, e contribuiu para a incompreensão de suas peças posteriores e mais

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subversivas? Como a atuação pode ajudar a preparar atores e espectadores para o teatro total e “plástico” que Williams imaginou? As obras finais de Williams subvertem radicalmente a ordem realista e introduzem personagens irrealis, fugidios e até grotescos, que exigem que o ator os aborde de uma maneira nova. Este artigo propõe uma reflexão sobre a responsabilidade do ator e a possibilidade de reabilitar os textos da fase final de Williams na prática. O objetivo é estudar o imaginário novo e pós-moderno dos textos e examinar suas implicações práticas. O corpo subversivo e antipsicológico das peças tardias, os personagens insondáveis, demandam novos corpos em cena que incorporem reflexões pós-modernas em sua própria prática.

**Palavras-chave:** Tennessee Williams; Técnica; Performance; Corpo.

## Introduction

In *Psychophysical acting*, Phillip B. Zarrilli, actor, director, and American researcher, exposes the issues that drive our proposal to consider a *plastic* acting technique that would broaden the score of the contemporary actor and allow them to work from the aesthetic logic of non-realistic alternative dramaturgies:

However important psychology has been to shaping the dramaturgy of realist and naturalist plays from the late nineteenth through the twentieth centuries, conventional realist approaches to acting and/or textual analysis may be inadequate or even inappropriate to the realization of the dramaturgy and acting tasks that constitute an actor's performance score in a post-dramatic text or performance [...] the 'psychological' is no longer - if it ever was - a paradigm with sufficient explanatory and/or practical power and flexibility to fully inform the complexities of the work of the contemporary actor (Zarrilli, 2009, p. 7-8).

Zarrilli underlines the limits of a realistic acting technique and a character's psychological construction. From 1961, when Tennessee Williams radically sets himself on the fringes of a realistic and psychological theater by creating characters with an unstable identity and outside an identifiable context, he pushes to reconsider the practice of artists who *embody* his texts. Moreover, long locked in a realistic and psychological theater, how can we, in practice, free Williams from realistic and modern performances? What would then be the responsibility of the *contemporary actor* who faces a non-realistic and non-Aristotelian dramaturgy?

The academic and theoretical rehabilitation of Williams's late work underlines the appearance of characters no longer taken in an identifiable context but of a plural, elusive

and often taboo subject. In *Communists, cowboys and queers*, David Savran points to the need for a postmodern revision of Williams's characters:

[C]onstantly decentered and dispossessed, stumbling through a dramatic structure that is similarly decentered and unstable. This structure, like a surrealist text, is adamantly plural, strewn with multivalent symbols, and reluctant to provide the interpreter with a master perspective or code. Rather than granting the reader or spectator a single locus of empathic identification, it offers multiple, and sometimes contradictory, points of interpellation (Savran, 1992, p. 98).

The late texts indeed complete a stylistic break and venture into the grotesque and excess. Williams's late characters come out of a psychological logic and no longer allow actors to *build* their character; no longer verbally fixed and identifiable, they contribute to giving flesh to a *plastic* theater that aims to be visual, organic, and mythical. They are characterized by their physical being, no longer depend on a clear and linear narrative, and embody symbols more than complex beings.<sup>2</sup> These post-modern novelties invite to examine acting as another element that would contribute to the playwright's *plastic* vision.

The stylistic bifurcation of Williams's late work engendered bitter, even abusive reactions in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s from critics and audiences, which damaged the career of one of America's most well-known playwrights. *The night of the iguana* (1961) marks Williams's last critical and commercial success. The later texts, which span the period from 1961 to 1983 belong to the *late* work of Williams which radically subverted and revolted against the theatrical norms of the time; Williams engages, indeed, in a grotesque, violent theater populated by crippled and deviant characters, revealing a desire to put on stage societal and sexual taboos of the time.

The elusive and indefinable post-1961 theater disturbs while confirming a long-expressed desire; that of breaking the shackles of a psychological realism adored by the public. A myriad of reactions at the time expressed a desire to see Williams return to a "realistic" style loved by audiences and critics alike, lamenting his departure from writing that had spawned popular and critical acclaim. In *The politics of reputation*, Annette J. Saddik explains that the reception of *Camino Real*, Williams's first play that radically deviates from realistic conventions, is partly due to the play's lack of a traditional narrative. She also emphasizes a reception that betrays the current of the time, nostalgic

<sup>2</sup> "[...] and its people are mostly archetypes [of certain basic attitudes and qualities with those mutations that would occur if they had continued along the road to this hypothetical point in it]" (Williams, 2009, p. 68).

for a realistic style and refusing to attend a dramaturgical revival:

The failure of *Camino Real* with audiences and reviewers is crucial in the context of Williams' later reception, since it indicates that once William began to blatantly move away from the essentially realistic dramaturgy which had made him famous, his following turned against him. [...] This standard seems to have been shared by reviewers in general whenever Williams departed from realistic form. Bruce Smith writes that *Camino Real* was 'so different from Tennessee's almost perfectly Aristotelian creations that audiences had a hard time appreciating it... America seemed to want him firmly in the Aristotelian mode (Saddik, 1999, p. 36).

The public would go to the theater to see realistic, psychological plays, in accordance with the Aristotelian theater called *logical*, which maintains a causality and a linearity in its narration. When Williams turned away from a so-called *psychological realism* and tackled controversial and polemical issues through a seemingly chaotic form, audiences fled, and critics overwhelmed him. Most of the late plays produced on Broadway were critical failures.

The reception of Williams's post-1961 plays can also be explained by the interpretation critics had made of his pre-1961 plays and the theatrical realism they saw in them. On this subject, Williams wrote in 1977:

The plays by which I was known in the middle 40's through the first year or two of the 60's were categorized as works of 'poetic naturalism.' [...] Once his critics, his audience and the academic communities in which his work is studied have found what they consider a convenient and suitable term for the style of a playwright, it seems to be very difficult for them to concede to him the privilege and necessity of turning to other ways (Williams, 2009, p. 184).

He notes the impossibility, for a playwright, of leaving the categories in which theatrical criticism would have placed him and underlines a reception of his pre-1961 plays which would have been evaluated and confined according to certain standards. Earlier, in the "Production notes" of *The glass menagerie* Williams had expressed the desire to write a *plastic* and visual theater which would offer a theatrical experience superior to what realistic art can offer. To what extent were the actors able to install, through their method of realistic acting, the theater of Williams in the category of psychological and realistic theater? To what extent have they been able to contribute to narrowing and reducing Williams's *plastic* vision and his desire to go beyond photographic and mimetic

art?

## Elia Kazan and The Method

Elia Kazan directed many of Williams's plays on stage and on the screen; an effort that made them both famous and respected by the public and by American critics. Most of the time, Kazan used actors who had been trained at the Actors Studio where Lee Strasberg, among others, taught his Method, an American interpretation of the technique created by Constantin Stanislavski. Lee Strasberg but also Stella Adler, Uta Hagen or Stanford Meisner, through the acting training they offered, delivered modern and realistic acting techniques that allowed actors to identify with the characters using their own personal and emotional experiences. Kazan's work reflects his contemporaries' view of acting and dramaturgical text. For him, the staging and acting must highlight what is personal in the text. These considerations lead to question how considering the plays in a personal and autobiographical light could reduce or impoverish a work and lock it in the meshes of a reductive psychological realism. Driven to relive personal experiences and integrate their emotional life into acting, the modern American actor focuses on themselves; the inner state of the actor replaces the inner state of the text.

The modern American acting style is limited to a particular human experience taken in a specific context. In *Kazan and Williams, a collaboration in the theatre*, Brenda Murphy emphasizes the extent to which Kazan contributed in practice to reducing the performative possibilities of certain works: "The consummate Method director, he [Kazan] treated the character as a psychologically complete entity, providing human explanations and motives for [Blanche's] behavior wherever he could" (Murphy, 1992, p. 46). Kazan thus participated, through his practice, in considering the character as graspable and as a *psychological entity*, making it possible to explain their behavior according to the social context in which they live therefore reducing the characters' complexity.

The example of the production of *Camino Real* in 1953, an unorthodox play for the time, embodies the aesthetic challenge that can exist between the original script and its performative rendering. Elia Kazan urged Williams to make changes to Kilroy's character: "The production may also have failed to achieve this balance because it was important to Kazan, trained in *The Method*, to see a clear arc or 'spine' to the play's action, something that was not evident in the series of scenes or 'blocks' that Williams wrote for *Camino*

*Real*" (Murphy, 1992, p. 98, author's highlights). Kazan expressed the desire to see a *protagonist* exist on stage, whose misadventures the spectators would follow and with whom they could identify. In this sense, he opposed Williams's non-traditional vision of the script and his intention to write a modern theatrical poem that intentionally deviates from traditional rules of plot and theatrical character.

The technique of the actors chosen for the play also leads them to interpret the subjective fantasy of the play through the prism of the psychological and naturalistic realism of the Method, reducing the pantomimic potential specific to American comics, both comic and grotesque, from the play originally designed by Williams. Kazan, concerned about the non-linear structure of the original script, requests changes to obtain an Aristotelian dramatic structure. Murphy adds:

In good Method style, Kazan told the actors to read simply, talking directly to the actor to whom the lines were addressed, and not to try to give a performance. [...] his largely Method-trained cast, unfamiliar as they were with the acting demands of non-realistic plays. [...] The Stanislavskian background that Kazan shared with most of the actors made for a unique interpretation of Williams's poetic play. In the tradition of the Group Theatre, he developed a style for the play that would help to integrate their efforts. [...] In a similarly delicate balance with the stylized fantasy of the crowd scenes and the carefully choreographed movement of all the actors was a psychologically realistic approach to the acting of the roles, based on the orthodox Method principles of identification with the role, the honest expression of emotions derived from the actor's own experience, and communication among the actors on stage. [...] He helped them develop their roles just as he would in any realistic play (Murphy, 1992, p. 86-88).

The technique of the actors composing the cast becomes unsuitable when faced with a non-realistic play such as *Camino Real* and handicaps the original text of Williams imbued with a *chaotic* and non-Aristotelian logic. Kazan asks the actors to read the script by bringing it back to a realistic, psychological, and representational theater therefore reducing its *plastic* possibilities. Set in a modern, realistic theater, Williams's more experimental plays would later be scaled down and aesthetically conformed to the realistic style that dominated theater and film productions of the time:

What makes Williams's 1945 expression remarkable is that, first, he is not often regarded in such terms even though he wanted to be and, second, he was writing at a time when straightforward realism was the dominant style on American stages, and the Actors Studio [...] was the paradigm for American acting and production (Kramer, 2002, p. 4).

The cinematographic style of acting also participates in enthroning on the screen a realistic norm reducing the words of Williams who ventures more and more into experimentation. A traditional acting method thus turns out to be unsuitable for subversive, tragicomic and non-realistic texts. In the conclusion of *Tennessee Williams and the theater of excess*, Annette Saddik writes:

[...] in *Streetcar*, for example, the power lies primarily in the language, characters, and plot. In the late works, this is often not the case, and the spectacle has to be managed carefully in order to negotiate the play's excesses. The late plays therefore need to be approached differently in order to reveal what can be determined only on the stage (Saddik, 2015, p. 162).

The convention of realistic drama delivers, indeed, the motivations and actions of individual characters within a narrative structure that guides the audience towards a particular interpretation or a specific meaning: when the playwright goes beyond this convention, he offers a more important place to the imagination of both the spectator and the actor within a subversive narrative structure. To what extent Williams's late plays, "meant to be seen" (Saddik, 2015, p. 47), possess a genuine performative intent and require the actors to adopt a performative language that would contribute to the experience of these *deviant* texts? As Saddik writes about *Clothes for a summer hotel*: "Zelda's excess cannot be contained in traditional roles, not in rational language, and Williams is aware of this. Much of what she communicates is through physical performance - through gesture and her eyes" (Saddik, 2015, p. 82). It would be a question of freeing, by practice and in repetition, the texts from the shackles of realistic language and imagining a *plastic* and non-traditional language of the contemporary actor to encounter on stage the subversive body of the text.

### **From theoretical rehabilitation to practical rehabilitation**

The efforts of academic rehabilitations of Williams's late work proposed, among others, by Ruby Cohn (2006), Linda Dorff (2000), Philip Kolin (2002), David Savran (1992), or Annette J. Saddik (2015) allow to take a new look at the entire work of Williams:

Tennessee Williams is the greatest unknown playwright America has produced. [...] for the length of his career, Williams was a writer less of

lyrical realism, than the grotesque. His later works [...] are thus not aesthetic failures but richly imagined, experimental plays written for an experimental theatre (Savran, 2015, back cover).

The different textual analyzes of the texts encourage to seek, in practice, a new way of performing Williams's late texts and of rethinking the pre-performative work of the actor. In this regard, Richard Hornby published *The end of acting* in 1992, an essay in which he offered a critique of realistic and modern American acting: "a theoretical work and a call for action [...] an unashamed attack on the American acting establishment", before adding: "There has not been any serious theoretical discussion of acting in the United States for a long time" (Hornby, 1992, p. 1). The author believes that the American style of play has not evolved since the 1930s:

Entrenched today at American acting conservatories and university theatre departments (with a few significant exceptions), it is a mimetic theory, reflecting the influence of the realism that prevailed in the theatre during Stanislavski's early years, but has been adapted to suit the needs of a highly individualistic, capitalist society. [...] Theatre imitates life, the more closely and directly the better. The good actor therefore repeats on stage what he does in everyday life, drawing on his personal experiences, but, more important, reliving his emotional traumas (Hornby, 1992, p. 5-6).

To the social and political problems that Hornby raises is added the problem of identification specific to modern and realistic acting techniques. The actor indeed uses their own psyche (their memory, emotions, and desires) implying that the personal identity contains the inner truth:

What this approach does not consider, however, is the possibility that the personal experience and behavior of each individual human being may *not* contain within itself the entire range of human experience and behavior. This is a weakness in American Method acting that has often been cited by its critics (Hornby, 1992, p. 5-6).

The proposal of the Method refers to the principle of the individual as being graspable and it is necessary to detect the emotions that run through the characters to be able to play them.

The psychic experience takes place in an understandable and decipherable domain, ruling out the possibility of the mystery of the intimate, its inexpressibility and mutability: "This kind of acting coercively contains subjectivity by shaping interiority into legible expressions" (Enelow, 2015, p. 34). Shonni Enelow remarks that this style of acting is *coercive* because it presupposes that interiority can be deciphered. According to her, the



Method represents the apotheosis of individualism and an authoritarian performance regime since it fixes identity and denies mimetic mobility, thereby reinforcing the psychic constraints imposed by society and which, on the other hand, limits the imaginative possibilities of the spectator and the actor. The individualism inherent in modern acting techniques as well as the confinement of identity question: the dominant aesthetic that Strasberg transmits becomes responsible for a standardization of a psychological and psychic life. While he takes up the gestures and behavior of everyday life, the actor shows the superficial life of the individual and not their depth and complexity.

Williams's late and anti-realist theater offers characters with often unusual and inexplicable behaviors who wander in an unfathomable context; by reversing the *realist* order, the late work disrupts theatrical norms. Furthermore, the characters do not have a *fixed* and stable identity; no psychological reference is provided: the actor must create a different reference grid that allows them to draw the outlines of characters who no longer fit within a realistic standard. He creates, for example, certain interchangeable duets, characters that no longer correspond to recognizable individuals. In *The gnädiges Fräulein* Molly and Polly exchange lines that do not seem to belong to either of them. Besides, the names underline the absence of a personal and particular psychology. The clownish relationship that is established within the duo, the non-binary characters/creatures (humans/animals) who launch creature-like onomatopoeias, contribute to the creation of the play's unusual and anti-realistic atmosphere:

POLLY: *Gouged?*

MOLLY: Yes, *out!*

POLLY: Oh-oh, oh-*Ho!* [*She scribbles notes.*]

[...]

COCALOONY [*stamping and flapping*]: Awk, awkward, awkward, awkward, awkward, awkward, awkward, AWK!!!

INDIAN JOE: *Ugh!*

COCALOONY: AWK!

INDIAN JOE: UGH!

POLLY: Reminds me of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Don't it remind you of the Lincoln-Douglas debates?

MOLLY: No.

POLLY: What's it remind you of then?

MOLLY: Nothing reminds me of nothing (Williams, 1981, p. 239-240, author's highlights).

As they watch Indian Joe and the Cocaloony exchange sounds, Molly and Polly, undisturbed by the incongruous dialogue, fit in with the savage, animalistic and *loony* environment. Besides, “nothing reminds [her] of nothing” emphasizes the fact that the characters have no memory or specific emotional and personal experiences of their own. They lack a psychological life that would help the modern actor define and interpret them. The sound and verbal repetitions combined with a disturbed grammar and words written in italics contribute to the enigma of an anti-realistic language which does not allow to draw the arc of characters who would belong to a psychological reality.

Furthermore, it is also a question of considering the criticisms that feminist and queer theories have made about realist theater and performances to grasp the feminist issue of the present project, which consists in proposing a freeing and informed acting technique for actors who are in charge of embodying non-realistic texts. In *An actress prepares*, published in 2012, Rosemary Malague dwells particularly on the problem represented by the training and repetition of certain roles for women. According to her, realistic theater invites to adopt a *realistic* acting style inherited from the American interpretation of the Stanislavski System. The feminist reassessment of modern acting methods shows how these reinforce, in repetition and performance, the patriarchal view of texts and the society in which they were created:

[T]he sexist assumptions that are deeply embedded in the methods they have inherited [...] most feminist critiques of Method acting have interrogated the usefulness of Stanislavskian techniques for the creation of theatrical projects with a specifically feminist purpose (Malague, 2012, p. 3).

How does the modern and realistic acting method prevent feminist identity from being expressed? In what ways does it confine women to a specific and determined representation and prevent actresses from emancipating themselves from a predominantly patriarchal vision? And, finally, how to liberate and empower the actress?

The feminist perspective underlines how modern acting techniques endorse and implicitly consecrate the legitimacy of standard American cultural behavior. Malague’s study particularly highlights the sexist elements of Strasberg’s pedagogy, which she defines as a patriarchal practice:

Strasberg’s paternalistic teaching style is filled with gender biases [whether he intended them or not]. His approach to actor training was largely

diagnostic and, as many critics have pointed out, often resembled psychotherapy, with Strasberg in the role of unlicensed analyst, delving into the actor's psyche. When Strasberg examines what he calls 'the actor's problem', the diagnosis he makes often seems to be 'female trouble'. [...] If actresses rely on the teacher's approval to validate their work, a troubling consequence is that they rely on him to validate – or invalidate – their very *selves* (Malague, 2012, p. 33, author's highlights).

The teacher, indeed, demands a sincere commitment on stage. Malague underlines the fact that it was he who decided if the interpretation was true, thus becoming the arbiter of a certain truth: "Strasberg is teaching the actress to behave as he believes a woman should behave" (Malague, 2012, p. 62). Malague directs her work towards the specific problems that realistic theater and acting pose to the actress. She underlines the installation of a patriarchal discourse and a biased and masculine norm in the classrooms where the actor learns to act according to certain normative standards:

In patriarchal discourse, the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male. [...] What is perhaps unique to acting class is that it is a setting in which lessons about what men and women 'should be' – about how they *should* behave – are so explicitly repeated and reinforced. [...] In the study of Method acting, then, which privileges 'truthful' behavior, the standards for believability are inevitably gender-biased. One begins to wonder: Is there a genealogy of gender biases built into the patriarchal structure of the theory and practice of Method actor training? (Malague, 2012, p. 8, author's highlights).

The fact of rehearsing a role that would itself come from a biased and normative perspective necessarily reinforces a representation of the woman that the actress no longer controls: "apparently neutral training process can become very gender-specific" (Malague, 2012, p. 164). Malague believes that the behavior is fixed according to the gender of the student, and this in such a tacit way that it becomes difficult for the actor to detect the normative codes and laws underneath the practice. The realistic texts and acting invite the actress to act in a way that will not allow her to emancipate herself from the male gaze. Her experience appears to be dictated by a biased law, itself stemming from a patriarchal structure. Playing *real* amounts to transposing on stage the way in which women are perceived in patriarchal societies; the standard of truth is measured, according to feminist criticism, by the yardstick of the heteronormative standard of society. The reinforced behavioral norm and standard in actor training would therefore prevent the actress from developing a creative autonomy.

The acting techniques of Strasberg, Adler, Hagen or Meisner, which, as Malague points out, perpetuate Freudian psychology in practice and which are based on the dominant cultural traditions, must be updated according to post-psychological research. Modern actors are, according to modern acting theory, trained to act out and perpetuate traditional and gendered roles. Williams's late plays, however, overturn such data and offer realities where both the chaos of androgyny and queer sexuality reign. A queer norm is taking hold; a standard not dictated by the dictates of heteronormative or sexist thought. It becomes necessary to rethink a practice to *act* the texts' subversive intentions. A post-Method acting technique will make it possible to update and open in performance the reinterpretation, considering feminist reflection, of the texts in question.

On the other hand, Sue-Ellen Case in *Feminism and theater* argues that ancient and modern texts exclude bodily representation of female sexuality and the female body. She explains the extent to which sexist and patriarchal thought slips in and weaves texts and theatrical practices that, for the feminist reader and performer, it is a question of deconstructing. The author then imagines the new theoretical project that would respond to feminist thought:

New feminist theory would abandon the traditional patriarchal values embedded in prior notions of form, practice and audience response in order to construct new critical models and methodologies for the drama that would accommodate the presence of women in the art, support their liberation from the cultural fictions of the female gender and deconstruct the valorization of the male gender. [...] This 'new poetics' would deconstruct the traditional systems of representation and perception of women and posit women in the position of the subject (Case, 1988, p. 114-115, author's highlights).

The *new poetics* of which Case speaks and its deconstruction of "traditional systems of representation" would abolish the notion of woman as object. Williams creates a space that values, among other things, the presence of the female character and her desire and therefore gives the possibility to actors to assert themselves and to rehearse and *repeat* characters that break the codes of a patriarchal and heteronormative society.

To grasp Williams's late work as a complex site of moral and sexual transgression, it is necessary to move away from a known parameter and adopt a feminist reading that places the texts above patriarchal and heteronormative laws. The female and male characters emancipate themselves by departing from the established order, from

coercion, from moral and sexual rigidities. Williams rewrites gender stereotypes and in this sense goes beyond the cultural constructions that oppress the female body. The entropic and feminine imaginary forces to reconsider their performance in view of the issues that are at the very center of modern acting techniques. The stylistic break and the textual and physical mutilation of the texts and the characters require from actors a physical flexibility rather than a psychological construction; the body of both texts and characters must therefore inform actors' work and significant practice.

Whereas feminist theory attacks accepted sexual structures, the plays' textual structure will be seen as a revolt of an accepted dramatic structure. Challenging the established order and gender norms, the marginal characters also contribute to the creation of an irrational universe. The truth is rediscovered through subversive bodies and their transgressive sexuality that break the meshes of a logic long taken for granted. By breaking heterosexual connotations, Williams breaks up the body, diffracts it and turns it into an entire erotic zone. His late characters thus participate in the playwright's queer vision of reality. However, modern acting techniques, contaminated by sexist principles, reflect on the structural and formative level, a heteronormative and sexist thought which prevents actors from reaching the truth of such characters. An exit out of acting's modern, realistic logic structure must occur to represent and reach the queer flesh of Williams's later plays. How does the textual morphology of the late texts go beyond masculine and *realistic* morphology, and how does their entropic structure call for post-dramatic and post-Stanislavsky performances that integrate the female imaginary?

### **The late plays' entropic & feminine imaginary**

Williams's new representation of women anticipates the one that would develop from the rise of feminist theory in the 1980s: "Artists created new roles for women to play in the laboratory of theatre, where the stage offered opportunities for women's narratives and dialogues largely denied in the history of the dominant culture" (Case, 1988, p. 113). Before the 1980s, Williams creates roles for actresses that allowed them to break out of a patriarchal artistic structure through the character's body and its language. These late characters, indeed, go beyond a representation structured by the dominant culture. Feminist deconstruction opens the possibility of rethinking the representation of women and thinking about ways to reverse their role of object for that of subject, to find a new

position so that they control the point of view:

[T]he potential for women to emerge as subjects rather than objects opens up a field of new possibilities for women in theatre and its system of representation. Constructing woman as subject is the future, liberating work of a feminist new poetics (Case, 1988, p. 113).

Theatrical works that free women from the male gaze no longer feature male protagonists who represent the universal subject with which male and female spectators must identify. Williams's late and avant-garde plays create subversive female roles and open new points of view. They destroy a kind of cultural performance and trace the path of a new performance; new performances that enjoin to underline the difference and the multiplicity of truths.

Williams magnifies the distorted appearance of female characters, turning them into grotesque, monstrous figures in whom irrationality and desire overflow physically. They display unbridled and excessive behavior and desires, physically transgress the Law of the Father and lead to the redefinition of the Lacanian symbolic, which, for feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray (1974) or Judith Butler (1993), locks the woman in a patriarchal context with gendered standards. Mrs. Goforth from *The milk train doesn't stop here anymore* "a sort of grotesque beauty" (Williams, 1976, p. 43), or Mme. Le Monde, "a large and rather globular woman with a fiery red mop of hair that suggests a nuclear explosion, as does her voice" (Williams, 2008, p. 103) manifest a "grotesque beauty", excessive, monstrous and that goes beyond a binary norm. Transgressing the accepted femininity of the normative context, the female characters *threaten* the hegemonic order, bear witness to a bodily subversion that is also displayed through outrageous language:

BEA: Why, you dirty old man! He has on makeup, a full *maquillage*, and the perfume of a desperate bitch in heat.

[...]

Imagine, the insolence of it, a prancing, dancing old fag reprimanding me publicly for not concealing my sex as he flaunts the absence of his (Williams, 1970, p. 311-312).

The characters speak a crude and excessive language that reinforces their grotesque nature. Normative monstrosity can also be seen in secondary female characters such as the waitress in *Now the cats with jeweled claws*; "in a rather advanced state of pregnancy and with a black eye that cosmetics can't effectively disguise" (Williams, 1970,

p. 302); the physical deformity and the unusual facial feature serve as first indications of the character and help make it a *coherent* element of the subversive whole. The female late characters created by Williams allow actresses, in practice, to free themselves bodily and linguistically from a binary and gendered norm as they rehearse – *repeat* – such characters.

Not only does Williams create many roles for actresses, but also gives female characters a sexual dynamic different from the Freudian model. A transgressive sexuality was already present in plays like *Not about nightingales*, *Candles to the sun*, *The night of the iguana*, that culminates in sadomasochism in *Camino Real* or *Suddenly last summer*. Williams's major characters all deviate from oppressive societal pressures and struggle with their sexual identity. Late female characters subvert sexual oppression and install a new norm, affirming themselves through the body: by directly seeking sexual pleasure, they reclaim their bodies from patriarchal colonization. They radically deviate from the definition of *woman* imposed by the patriarchal system. After making Mae in *Cat on a hot tin roof* a *monster of fertility* emphasizing the patriarchal conception of the link that unites the female body to a biological and natural function, Williams presents and magnifies in a grotesque way the libidinal energy, the sexuality and the feminine desire to better visualize its predatory and autonomous nature; feminine desire is no longer situated in a single biological project or in a desire that would respond to the heteronormative system. The late, imperfect, chaotic – and so human – anti-heroines are part of a new typology of female characters, excessive and conquering, who emancipate themselves from an assigned identity.

While the desire of Blanche DuBois or Alma Winemiller is repressed, it overflows and transgresses here the framework of conventions. Nance's desire in *A cavalier for milady*, is, for example, grotesque, "obscene" (Williams, 2008, p. 74) and her sexuality is not subordinated to that of male characters:

JOSIE: [...] I wasn't told that I was engaged to sit with a grown woman disguised as a little girl. I noticed at once she wasn't readin' no book but was starin' at that naked man's statue in the hall and her hand is – look at her fingers, she's – (Williams, 2008, p. 78).

Nance takes control of her desire, openly affirms her sexual fantasies while caressing the apparition of the ghost of Vaslav Nijinsky. The poetic and spectacular encounter between Nance and Vaslav allows Williams to offer a writing of the feminine

intimate, where feminine desire only asks to be exalted and concretized. ]

A feminine perspective also appears through the character of Zelda Fitzgerald from *Clothes for a summer hotel* who continues her effort of liberation from social and patriarchal norms:

SCOTT [*throwing the bottle away*]: Your work is the work that all young Southern ladies dream of performing some day. Living well with a devoted husband and a beautiful child.

ZELDA: Are you certain, Scott, that I fit the classification of dreamy young Southern lady? Damn it, Scott. Sorry, wrong size, it pinches! – Can't wear that shoe, too confining (Williams, 1992, p. 240).

By imagining a meeting between the two spouses in the psychiatric hospital where Zelda will end her days, Williams empowers her while situating the play in a place where deviance and chaos (psychic and temporal) are the norm. This stratagem also allows Zelda to be identified as a force that opposes the controlled rationality that is embodied in the character of Scott:

Dr. ZELLER: [...] I like to read important writing, and I feel that your wife's novel *Save Me the Waltz* – I'm sure you won't mind my saying that there are passages in it that have a lyrical imagery that moves me, sometimes, more than your own.

SCOTT: My publishers and I edited that book! – Tried to make it coherent.

Dr. ZELLER: I'm not deprecating your work; I wouldn't think of deprecating your work, but I stand by my belief that –

SCOTT: That none of my – desperately – well-ordered – understood writing is equal to the –

Dr. ZELLER: More desperately – somehow controlled – in spite of the –

SCOTT: Madness...

Dr. ZELLER: All right. – Mr. Fitzgerald, I think you suspect as well as I know that Zelda has sometimes struck a sort of fire in her work that – I'm sorry to say this to you, but I never quite found anything in yours, even yours, that was – equal to it... (Williams, 1992, p. 259).

In search of *coherence*, Scott opposes Zelda in the sense that she embodies a chaotic force which, in her novel filled with "lyrical imagery", "kindles a kind of fire." The chaos contained in her writing becomes, for Dr. Zeller, a new order of power that surpasses Scott's work. While he tried to "make coherent" his wife's book, the fire that galvanizes the imagination of Zelda remains alive inside the text. Zelda, in this sense, represents the *semiotic*, or according to the philosopher Julia Kristeva (1985), the irrational and incoherent dimension of language. It represents the poetic language which subverts the patriarchal law, that of the Father, which structures the Symbolic, the site of rational



discourse. The rational discourse specific to Lacanian theory is exceeded thanks to the integration of an irrational, chaotic and feminine logic. The feminine is not reduced to silence but overflows both physically and imaginatively and becomes the site of a chaotic plurality and a subversion of the masculine order.

A traditional modern method of acting encourages actors to explain their character's reactions and actions by studying their psychological - and linear - life. However, as Saddik claims, "[t]he late plays can only be fully appreciated when given informed and imaginative productions that fully realize their theatrical potential and capture the subtleties that operate beyond language" (Saddik, 2015, p. 162). The actor is no longer dealing with a character taken in an identifiable context but with characters who have a different spatiotemporal relationship, leading a life that cannot be explained by a temporality characterized by its chronological and linear causality. The focus is on a postmodern view of the world that proposes to consider reality from different perspectives, therefore challenging the idea that it can be explained by a monocular chronology. Williams's late and nonrealistic theater denies the "linear order of naturalism" (Demastes, 1998, p. xv) and embraces a chaotic, unstable worldview, revealing the organic principles of nature itself and escaping the static laws that govern society.

In *Kingdom of Earth* or *The chalky white substance* a chaos coming from nature, imminent and threatening, arises. The play *The Red Devil Battery sign*, on the other hand, signals a "chaotic intensity" that Robert F. Gross describes as one of the "boldest experiments" given its "catastrophic form" (Gross, 2002, p. 131). Williams reinvents a new dramaturgical system ordered in its chaos. It is therefore necessary to leave the ontological, epistemological, and societal frameworks when trying to grasp a subversive theater that installs irrationality as reality and to reach the chaotic body of dreams and the unconscious:

[...] acknowledging and embracing an abject world of irrationality and chaos that we must deny in order to maintain our illusions of security and order. Along these lines, Williams' darkest plays can be seen as similarly exposing the failure of rationality he witnessed in the chaos of late twentieth-century culture - a period characterized by war, drastic social upheavals, and political betrayals - marked by a destruction of the very institutions that were supposed to make us secure (Saddik, 2015, p. 143).

With the aim of integrating a post-absurdist vision of existence which manifests itself most radically in Williams's late texts, the "plastic", visual and organic theater, and

its non-realistic devices, aims to reflect what is not visible, and to visualize the chaos of existence through excess and the grotesque. In this perspective, how can the actor contribute to revealing a postmodern vision of existence? “[A] play with a clearly nonrealist premise, acting style, and set – as an absurdist playwright might present – would better prepare an audience to expect a vision of randomness” (Demastes, 1998, p. 105); the traditional and realistic acting style fits perfectly with a dramatic text derived from theatrical realism since such a technique makes it possible to describe the experience of reality in an exact manner; it nevertheless becomes necessary to deviate from such techniques as they prove unsatisfactory when it comes to representing texts that visually seek to embody and incorporate the complexity of chaos and the uncertainty of existence.

In *Kingdom of Earth*, the natural chaos of the impending flood also serves as a mirror to Myrtle’s chaotic, transgressive and natural sexual desire: “I’m a warm-natured woman. You might say passionate, even. A Memphis doctor prescribed me a bottle of pills to keep down the heat of my nature, but those pills are worthless” (Williams, 1976, p. 201). Faced with her sexual desire, the doctor prescribes drugs to reduce it as it represents a *threat*, suppressing the natural and chaotic order of her sexuality and the ardor of female desire. Chicken, a hybrid character, both human and animal, allows her to access an experience “of exceptional nature and magnitude” (Williams, 1976, p. 203). Upon contact with Chicken, Myrtle’s body trembles with life and desire.

Besides, Myrtle recounts the memory of a former colleague which resonates strongly if we compare it to the reducing effect of the external patriarchal culture on female desire: “This tall redhead called the Statuesque Beauty. [...] – Her mutilated corpse was found under a trestle. [*Chicken grunts again.*] Some pervert had cut her up with a knife. She was full of vim, vigor, and vitality. The Statuesque Beauty was a continual circus” (Williams, 1976, p. 145). The carnival disproportionate world where beauty is “statuesque” and nature full of “vitality”, where individuals disguise themselves with “the ecstasy of a transvestite” (Williams, 1976, p. 212) is opposed to the castrating exterior; the chaotic, non-binary reality of the circus provides access to another kind of experience that does not *reduce* but *expands* the body of desire. The disguise, the carnivalesque environment refer to amplified and deformed images and bodies, to a transposed reality and not to a photographic and naturalistic reproduction. The expressionist magnification of things, the distorted and non-binary reality is opposed to a naturalism that both reduces and castrates

female desire.

The late characters are also located outside the internal dynamics of a patriarchal sexuality linked to the castrating law of the Father. The logic of deviant and dual sexuality and morality, outside of reason, becomes the norm. In *The gnädiges Fräulein*, Molly and Polly enjoy seeing the Fräulein being mutilated by the Cocaloonies while she must bring back food in exchange for a place to live. To this trivialized perversion is added the normalization of forbidden sexual behaviors such as incest: the children of *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* (*An outrage for the stage*) obey the orders of their parents which consist in having incestuous sexual relations to make profit. Williams reverses a rational and reassuring *normality* and focuses on the irrational reality, the one we daily deny. The chaotic environment created by Williams presents these behaviors in the most realistic and familiar way normalizing the non-patriarchal society governed by another logic which, among other things, trivializes perversion and subverts the *rational* symbolic.

Moreover, some late characters such as Nance or Clare Devoto in *The two-character play* are sometimes described as little girls and come very close to the state of childhood, life's non-psychological moment, the state where there is no fixed identity and where coherence lies in irrationality. Inhabiting the irrational world of childhood, they go beyond the linear and causal logic of a rational reality. They have no conscious objectives but are constructed in the absence of a causal relationship. Nance or Zelda dialogue with ghosts and, like children, invent a reality where psychology is absent and where the imagination, unrepressed, without constraint or grammatical structures, is freed; their words no longer copy reality but reveal its chaos and complexity.

Chaotic, non-chronological temporality also breaks the boundaries of so-called *logical* and rational space-time; Scott Fitzgerald, indeed, is a ghostly apparition who dialogues with Zelda on the eve of her death. Zelda, for her part, emancipates herself from a narrative linearity by traveling through her memories, with Edouard whom she imagines at several stages of their relationship. The text also upsets a rational linearity when Hemingway enters in an unusual way, upsetting the time of the play. Here the influence of cinema on Williams' theatrical work is obvious: the 7th art, indeed, since it benefits from editing, abandons the requirements of a human temporal logic, and handles time as it pleases. Williams twists time, puts it on hold and abolishes the usual laws of time to situate his characters in a setting where dramatic simultaneity is possible. Time

dissolves and normative temporality is jostled and replaced by the chaotic time of childhood and memory. In *Clothes for a summer hotel* or *Something cloudy, something clear*<sup>3</sup>, it is indeed the time of memory that Williams writes, the present and the past are both simultaneous and superimposed and the events do not follow one another by obeying a narrative logic but occur in successive waves. This process is made possible thanks to queer spaces, or as George Crandell proposes, to the “aesthetic spaces” (Crandell, 2002, p. 170) that Williams creates; the same space invites several actions of different temporalities. Both plays present spaces of inherent chaos where temporal and spatial boundaries are crossed and where social and moral norms are constantly destabilized.

The characters spatially and temporally inhabit the world of out-of-time, of “savant chaos” and its “radical strangeness” (Pontalis, 2013, p. 80, our translation),<sup>4</sup> which helps emphasize their unstable and non-fixed nature and their capacity of transcending the temporal order. Prosser points out how Williams indeed departs from Aristotelian and realist logic:

Just as Williams ends up departing from the logic of Aristotelian tragedy, rejecting an economy of truth and recognition for a system of repetition and recurrence, he abandons the comforts of explanation to make sense of chaos [...] (Enelow, 2015, p. 60).

Williams indeed integrates a logic of chaos; using repetitions and recurrences, he writes the refusal of the passing of time by giving it thickness and by not imposing any narrative direction on it. The play *In the bar of a Tokyo hotel* is characteristic of such a manipulation of language which emerges from a purely linear and Aristotelian logic:

MIRIAM: I would like you to get me a cablegram blank from the concierge with the unfortunate face.

BARMAN: I will get you a cablegram and place it on the green table. [*He goes out through the arch at right. She goes to the arch. The Barman returns.*] Pardon me. You are instructing my way.

MIRIAM: Do you mean obstructing?

BARMAN: Thank you. I mean obstructing. To deliver the cablegrams to you, I must request that you return to your table.

MIRIAM: If I return to my table, will you bring the cablegram to me?

BARMAN: I will place it in reach of.

MIRIAM: You must place it on my table.

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Dorff (2000), names such technique “double exposure”, and continues: “[...] *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* is a postmodern presentation that creates a simultaneous past and present through the metaphor of photographic superimposition”.

<sup>4</sup> “Savant chaos”; “radicale étrangeté”.

BARMAN: I will place the cablegram where you can reach it – You are still obstructing my way. [*She lets him pass.*]  
 [...]  
 MIRIAM: - Oh. Could you give me a pencil?  
 BARMAN: Only one pencil?  
 MIRIAM: Only one pencil will do at the present moment. [*She speaks aloud as she writes.*] [...] Give the cablegram to the concierge. It has to go out at once.  
 BARMAN: I am instructed to stay in my position at the bar at this time of (Williams, 1981, p. 11).

Time turns in circles and only brings confusion to the characters who both find themselves, either physically or psychically slowed down in their movement. In this passage, the two characters avoid each other physically and the accentuated repetition of certain words, taken up by one then by the other, freezes the characters in an unrealistic picture and in an attempt at a verbal embrace. Time expands, and the precise movements of the characters refer to a circular and cyclical geometry reminiscent of female desire.

The fixed present places the characters in a timeless reality, moving them away from a historical and dated *here and now*. Crossing the borders of time, the late characters are transformed into *types* who reach the status of myth rather than that of particular and identifiable individuals. The social and political context then becomes irrelevant to the artistic construction of Williams's late characters who are caught not in an identifiable context but in an unfathomable reality. Faced with the insufficiency or rather the dissatisfaction of realistic and psychological language, language here does not follow an Aristotelian order; the characters inhabit an *out-of-language* where the plurality of truth opposes the realistic language that describes a logically and chronologically articulable reality. Like the chaotic speech of the child and the entropic language of memory, the order of speech falters, the language is mutilated and clashed and contributes to situating the characters in a non-rational reality.

Accompanied by a non-linear dramatic structure made up of interruptions, the late plays therefore create a total world, structurally and aesthetically, where the imaginary is dramatically and aesthetically feminine. The non-linearity of the plays can also be found in the impossibility of the characters to make the plot progress, interrupting the scene that is unfolding. As Felice and Clare join in recounting a childhood memory of spending a vacation at the beach with their parents, Clare suddenly interrupts the narration and breaks the fourth wall:

CLARE [*pointing out toward the audience*]: Felice – someone’s talking out there with his back to the stage as if he were giving a lecture.  
FELICIE: That’s the interpreter.  
CLARE: Oh, my God, he’s telling them what we’re saying!?  
FELICE: Naturally, yes, and explaining our method. That’s what he’s here for.  
CLARE [*half sobbing*]: I don’t know what to do next – I...  
FELICE – I know what to do.  
CLARE: Oh, do you? What is it? To sit there all day at a threadbare rose in a carpet until it withers?  
FELICE: Oh, and what do you do? What splendid activity are you engaged in, besides destroying the play? (Williams, 1976, p. 334).

Clare brakes and abruptly stops the narration and the play they are performing repeatedly. She therefore imposes her own structure on the play, which is characterized by its lack of linearity. Clearly confused by the idea of a performer “explaining” their “method,” Felice pursues and accuses her of “destroying” the play; the fact of slowing down action in the Aristotelian sense is for him a sign of failure. Clare, meanwhile, moves the play forward in her own way.

The almost pathological and symptomatic confusion of the characters presents itself textually with sentences abruptly mutilated. The pain that is language, the frustration that it carries within it is inscribed in the very morphology of the body of the text:

MIRIAM: Mark, your hands are.  
MARK: I know, I know – I Know.  
MIRIAM: Your condition has to be diagnosed by a good neuropathologist, soon as. Immediately.  
MARK: Miriam, I swear it’s the intensity of. Why did you say a neuropathologist?  
MIRIAM: I had an uncle that had a brain tumor and the symptoms were identical.  
MARK: I’m not going to interrupt my (Williams, 1981, p. 23).

The stage becomes the space for the representation of sexuality and female desire; the body of desire is not excluded but achieves the goal of an erotic, holed and suggestive language. Made up of interruptions and ellipses, the pierced form of the texts moves away from clear and illustrative traditional discourse, from explanatory language; words do not illustrate, they carry and reveal a textual eroticism that exhibits female sexual experience and female *jouissance*.

In *Feminism and theatre*, Case had already considered the theatrical and phallogentric structures of plays that reflect male sexuality. Here, the cyclic structure of the dialogues, the words that reappear as if they were going around in circles, the absence of certain words that would allow the meaning to culminate definitively, does not allow the reaching of a paroxysmal point, and is structurally and textually separated from a male *jouissance*:

[S]ome feminist critics have described the form of tragedy as a replication of the male sexual experience. [...] The broader organization of plot – complication, crisis and resolution – is also tied to this phallic experience. The central focus in male forms is labelled phallogentric, reflecting the nature of the male's sexual physiology. A female form might embody her sexual mode, aligned with multiple orgasms, with no dramatic focus on ejaculation or necessity to build to a single climax (Case, 1988, p. 129).

The relationship between textuality and femininity inhabits Williams's late texts and opens a space of representation haunted by a subversive desire not governed by Lacanian and patriarchal law. The work on language that Williams does underlines the need, as both an outsider and an artist, to take language and take it out of its everyday life because he cannot make his late characters exist in a linear and rational language. The formal and graphic originality reinforces this new language which allows him to invent a new point of view. These considerations invite the actor to come out of a normative, masculine, and patriarchal imaginary, to bring these texts to life; to embody the characters without trying to *explain* them as individuals but to consider their post-modernity and the way they subvert a linear and modern truth.

The textual morphology, the cyclical and circular form indeed reflects a feminine textual organization that reverses the traditional and masculine form and the patriarchal and traditional valorization of realism. Writing is therefore no longer subject to dramatic objectives but becomes autonomous, offering great freedom to actors whose job it is to interpret such language. Texts give actors the means to overthrow a cultural norm. Rehearsing such roles then requires another non-psychological acting method that re-envisions the behavior of the character away from the meshes and the straitjacket Freudian and Lacanian perspective: a technique that allows actors to free themselves from a heteronormative and patriarchal framework. Feminist theory continues its dialectical relationship with the practice of an alternative technique in the theater classroom that would overturn the traditional mode of representation.

Williams's late work invites new post-Lacanian performances; the characters invent themselves linguistically, outside the norm and as desiring subjects. Unlike the symbolic and discursive language of the Father, phallogentric and masculine, causal and rational, the language here reflects the entropic and feminine imaginary, the semiotic and the irrational, where the simultaneity and multiplicity of truths, the absence of linear intrigue, the incompleteness of the holed text feed both coherent and chaotic texts and which attempt the renegotiation of the truth. This feminist reading and approach places identity in an unstable relationship and process that leads to rethinking the theatrical process of identification as an excessively subjective practice locked in a heteronormative context.

### **Final considerations**

The dramaturgy of Williams's late plays reverses a normative dramaturgy which requires, in order to represent the texts and the reality they propose, to articulate a new dramaturgy of the body through the gesture of the actor who now has to deal with reality and truth of grotesque and queer bodies; bodies that are beyond a traditional and realistic logic. The actors must build the character from their body since it plasticizes the psyche and makes it visual.

The alternative, entropic and feminine imaginary of the late texts invites the actor to step out of a normative acting style that contributes to the anchoring of heteronormative codes. The late characters call for a post-modern and post-dramatic awareness of the actor who, in the renewal of their gesture, will be able to embody their plastic truth. The need for a post-Stanislawsky technique is further justified by the consideration of queer theory. Indeed, if gender is, as Judith Butler proposes, installed through the repetition of acts, then modern actor training maintains gender and heterosexuality as normative principles. In this regard, Rosemary Malague writes in *An actress prepares: women and the Method*:

What is perhaps unique to acting class is that it is a setting in which lessons about what men and women 'should be' – about how they *should* behave – are so explicitly repeated and reinforced. Where else might one find so complete and literal an embodiment of Judith Butler's oft-quoted depiction of gender as a '*stylized repetition of acts*'? (Malague, 2012, p. 8, author's highlights).



The Method's model of psychological identification expresses a liberal universalism and a normalized American identity that erases all possibility of difference and silences the deviant and the marginalized. Here, as the actors physically embody a text, they play out the possibility of a different conception of identity. By inscribing the possibility of re-signifying and upsetting heterosexist structures long accepted through reiteration, Butler opens a door to the possibility of re-signifying through the repetition of subversive texts and characters:

The 'structure' by which the phallus signifies the penis as its privileged occasion exists only through being instituted and reiterated, and, by virtue of that temporalization, is unstable and open to subversive repetition. [...] to promote an alternative *imaginary* to a hegemonic imaginary and to show, through that assertion, the ways in which the hegemonic imaginary constitutes itself through the naturalization of an exclusionary heterosexual morphology. In this sense, it is important to note that it is the lesbian phallus and not the penis that is considered here. For what is needed is not a new body part, as it were, but a displacement of the hegemonic symbolic of (heterosexist) sexual difference and the critical release of alternative imaginary schemas for constituting sites of erotogenic pleasure (Butler, 1993, p. 56-57, author's highlights).

Butler's perspective invites to imagine a new form of representation that would have its source in the reiteration, the "subversive repetition" of another structure. The textual morphology accompanied by the "deviant" morphology of the characters creates a work whose alternative imaginary displaces the "hegemonic symbolic" and "heterosexist" and subverts patriarchal patterns by trivializing and naturalizing a queer reality. Reiterating, that is to say for the actress and the actor, repeating non-hegemonic norms allows to consider it as a practice of re-signification and rearticulation of the symbolic. The artists, in performance, reincarnate and embody a new law.

The *abject* and *illegitimate* bodies that defy norms thus become, for Williams, the place of a possibility of *acting*. The body-subject destabilizes the Freudian notion of the body as finite and is embodied in a discursive and performative construction, with multiple possibilities, freeing the notion of the body from the Law. By bringing bodies excluded from the norm into play, Williams reintegrates the "contesting possibilities" (Butler, 1993, p. 72) in the face of the heterosexual norm. Identity, as a form of discourse, here becomes fluid and constantly redefined. Texts legitimize queer bodies in that they resist the force of normalization and normativity and engender a queer re-signification of

the symbolic, transforming and displacing its normative conditions. Williams frees the body of both the characters and the actors interpreting them from the constraints of Lacanian discourse and reconstructs the marginal individual as a universal subject; in his texts, queer subjectivity, both *other* and *strange*, is representative of another reality.

The late characters call for another technique as Williams empowers actors through them to move beyond the tenets of a patriarchal culture and gender inequality, allowing them to rehearse and construct characters that embrace their identity and queer sexuality. In this sense, the late texts perform feminist and queer theory and are inscribed as post-Lacanian plays; sexuality and desire go beyond the traditional framework and allow, among other things, the female character to fulfill herself as a *subject*. We no longer have to do with psychological situations but with a dynamic that subverts the patriarchal order of Freudian desire and the male gaze. The theory of *plastic acting* (which is the subject of a thesis in progress) proposes to consider the *plastic* actor as invested and detached, informed and psychologically disembodied, and able to carry and embody Williams's late plays and characters.

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