Motion pictures, one of the plastic arts, have recently become more plastic than ever. Since the 1980s, archivists and studios have rearranged scenes in *Lawrence of Arabia*, deleted last-minute, potentially ill-chosen additions in *Blade Runner*, and, in the case of features like *Spartacus*, *Nights of Cabiria*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, restored what the censors had years ago barred. Applause for such film restorations has been hearty, except in essays by Greg Solman, in *Film Comment*, and Russell Merritt, in *Film History*. Solman finds so-called director’s cuts “both futile and wrongheaded.” Footage added to *Spartacus*, for instance, restores “a bad scene in a generally uninteresting attempted epic,” while footage added to *Lawrence of Arabia* “ruptures some of the better editing rhythms.” As Solman concludes, the new eventually destroys the old. “Original versions soon will exist only in the fragments of our collective memory. Then, to quote the authority, ‘All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain.’” Focusing on *Intolerance*, restored by the Museum of Modern Art, Merritt echoes Solman’s point. Over time, he says, the Museum’s incongruous version of Griffith’s work will, thanks to the MoMA imprimatur, become the standard version of the film.

Merritt and Solman wrote their essays before the rerelease of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the 1993 version...
that restores four scattered minutes of footage that Catholic censors in the Legion of Decency ordered cut from the picture before its original 1951 release. The two historians might well prefer 1951 to 1993, even as others among their peers, one suspects, prefer 1993 to 1951. The mere notion of preferences, however, evokes Hitchcock’s story of the junkyard goats chewing on old film canisters: You know, one goat says to the other, the book was better than the picture, or, per *Streetcar,* the 1993 version was better than the 1951. Praising one version over the other misses an important point. What follows shows why.1

The story of the censorship of *A Streetcar Named Desire* has been told by director Elia Kazan, playwright Tennessee Williams, and assorted film historians. In light of publicity surrounding the 1993 rerelease, though, it merits retelling. After all, the 1993 rerelease is less the “Original Director’s Version” (as it has been advertised) than the Production Code Administration cut, the one approved after negotiations between Warner Bros. and the industry’s own censors. The Production Code Administration (PCA) had fretted over *Streetcar* early on, even in screenplay form. Had the only controversial issue been the homosexuality of Blanche DuBois’s husband, Kazan might have fought for—and won—a concession on it. Instead, hoping to soften the agency’s resistance to the film, especially its treatment of the rape, he added a plot turn “which would effectively establish that [Blanche’s] problem was not one of homosexuality.” (The 1993 version does not restore this thread. Note, too, that slipcases of the Warner Bros. laserdisc and DVD flag some—but not all—chapters that have new footage.) The Production Code office subsequently approved the rape—if done “by suggestion and delicacy” and if Stella abandoned Stanley rather than (as in the play) let him fiddle with her blouse and woo her anew. Stanley’s “punishment”—the “loss of his wife’s love”—answered Production Code director Joseph Breen’s standard demand for what he called “compensating moral values.”2

The press, having scolded Breen for denying *The Bicycle Thief* the Production Code seal, may have affected his treatment of *Streetcar.* He ordered cuts, certainly. They were tiny, however, and futile: Tennessee Williams had woven an erotic aura into the very fabric of the text. Kazan subsequently told Jack Warner and the press that the Production Code Administration “[let] us down very easy as far as the [Production Code] seal requirements went.” Whatever the case, the cost of the PCA’s forbearance was the arousal of local and Catholic censors. Memphis censor Lloyd Binford, for example, found “too much gambling” in *Streetcar.* Warner executive A. S. Howson was studio liaison to the municipal Board of Theatrical Censors, and by October 1951, when he thought he had finished his work on *Streetcar,* he learned that Binford wanted cuts. “I have gone over the picture thoroughly,” Howson wrote to Warners’ representative in Memphis, “(for the 1000th time, more or less) and find that it is impossible to reduce the gambling sequences.”3

While Binford was a whisper in the Southern wilderness, the Legion of Decency was a church choir in full cry. “The Legion may have been willing to accept the view, as it had in the *Beyond the Forest* prologue, that ‘it is salutary . . . to view . . . naked ugliness once in a while,’ but it was unwilling to make a habit of it,” Frank Walsh notes in *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry.* “From the moment the word ‘DESIRE’ is seen on the streetcar,” said a Legion official on screening the *Streetcar* that Breen had approved, “the entire tone of the picture is ‘desire’ (physical desire).”4 It hardly helped that Vivien Leigh (Blanche), in pronouncing the word *desire,* turned its two syllables into three: *de-sire-uh.*

The Legion told Warner Bros. that the Production Code cut of *Streetcar* would be rated “C” (for “Condemned”), which, as the studio understood, could block bookings in major theaters, especially in cities with heavy Catholic populations. On the other hand, the Legion added, if Warners made selected cuts and promised to release only the recut print throughout the world, the “C” would be exchanged for the more acceptable “B.” Jack Warner ordered editor David Weisbart to recut the picture.

According to Michael Arick, who launched the 1993 rerelease of *Streetcar,* Weisbart anticipated an eventual restoration of the cuts; he took out the trims (Arick says) “in a way that made it easy for them to be put back in again.” The delicacy of that operation notwithstanding, Kazan was incensed, or so he appeared in the column he wrote for the *New York Times* in 1951. In correspondence that surfaced in the Production Code files, however, he boasted to Jack Warner that any censorship, though bothersome, would also be “excellent publicity.” More than 40 years later, as part of the promotion of the rerelease, the censorship of *Streetcar* remained excellent publicity.5

Most reviews of the rerelease (what Kenneth Turan called “the *Streetcar* for the ages”) celebrated the no-
tion that an original should be tamper-proof, and that the truer the film to its director’s vision, the better. The rerelease, in other words, was a praiseworthy restoration of the author’s (or here, auteur’s, meaning Kazan’s) intentions. The rerelease, however, was a two-hour film of a three-hour play, the latter, one might assume, the real Streetcar for the ages. Not so, according to Laurence Olivier. When he staged the premiere of Streetcar in London, he cobbled together a script drawn from, he wrote Williams, “3 different scripts, or rather 2 scripts and a book.” His version, almost an hour shorter than the three-hour Broadway “original,” remained the standard British performance text until the 1970s. Defining an American standard, for performance and reading, has also posed problems. The Acting Edition of the play, published by Dramatists Play Service in 1953, differs in dialogue and scene descriptions from the New Directions “literary” editions, which differ not only from one another (Williams tinkered with the text over several editions) but also from the British editions. Meanwhile, the search for the authorial intentions of “Tennessee Williams” in these various printings has an air of nostalgia, even decay: the author (according to Barthes) has died, and his work (according to Foucault) constitutes not literature but an “ideological product,” nowhere better represented, one could argue, than in texts touched by censorship agencies.

It may be true, as Jerome S. McGann notes, that every text “enters the world under determinate socio-historical conditions,” meaning that (note the passive voice) “texts are produced under specific social and institutional conditions.” It may also be true that the proper study of texts, say Shakespeare’s, concentrates on textual collaborators—on scribes and playhouse managers no less than literary conventions and printing-house practices—in order to recover and explore the cultural conditions of “his” works’ production and publication. Consumers nonetheless desire the text. Look, for instance, at reactions to the printed reconstruction of The Magnificent Ambersons. Few readers of Robert Carringer’s gracefully edited 12 March 1942 cutting continuity can resist making odorous comparisons of it (Orson Welles’s so-called master plan) and the truncated release print. In his review of Carringer’s book, Robert Fyne quips that general audiences were ignorant of the longer version. “After all, what do audiences expect after plopping down the price of admission—some good old-fashioned Hollywood entertainment or a convoluted primer in post-production history?” He’s no doubt right. The rhetoric of either/or (as here) rather than both/and nonetheless obscures a crucial point about restorations and reconstructions. Apropos Ambersons, the rhetoric denies the fact that “unrestored” or “unreconstructed” works constitute an extraordinary X-ray of perceived audience tastes and studio fiscal and aesthetic policy in the period of their initial release. Perhaps more important, in a culture that equates “newer” and “better,” it helps explain why restored versions of films like A Streetcar Named Desire tend to supplant, rather than enrich, the versions they succeed.

Literary scholars have challenged the notion of a hierarchy of texts; indeed, Paul Werstine, a proponent of texts in in-process works, maintains that editors have the responsibility to “display in book form for a wide audience the indeterminacy that characterizes Shakespearean textuality.” Publishers have been cooperative. The 1997 Norton edition of Shakespeare, for example, prints three versions of King Lear—quarto, folio, and a composite—a practice that Donald Reiman calls “versioning” and that, in film studies, could reorient our perception of cinematic texts.

“Versioning,” or, to use W. W. Greg’s phrase, the study of “rival substantive editions,” invites us to see the two Streetcars, 1951 and 1993, as mediated variations on source texts that are themselves (per the discussion of editions above) variations on the play. Placed side by side—and for the moment, Streetcars “foul” and “original” still exist—these two texts not only speak to contemporary mores and censorship practices of the 1950s, they also shed new light on key aspects of the work’s history as well as its interpretation as film, play, or literature. In short, to paraphrase Blanche DuBois, these paired Streetcars, are “a little piece of Eternity dropped in [our] hands.”

Between the New Haven and Boston tryouts of Streetcar (the play) in November 1947, Williams told Kazan, “I know you’re used to clearly stated themes, but this play should not be loaded one way or the other. Don’t try to simplify things.” Reviews suggest that the director preserved the complexity of the drama and its characters.

On Broadway, for instance, some (like the Daily News) found Blanche “a generous, loving accommodator [sic] of any yearning stranger who has been driven out.” Others (like Variety) called her “a nymphomaniac, the explanation for her disintegration being that she had been married to a degenerate who committed suicide.” Life added that her nymphomania brought on her rape. One photo of Jessica Tandy and Marlon
Brando showed her bent back over his arm. The caption read:

“We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning,” says Stanley to Blanche. For weeks she has been insulting and trying to attract him. When his wife is in the hospital having a baby, Blanche hysterically attacks him with the top of a broken bottle. In a half-drunken fury, Stanley rapes her.

According to Life, Blanche got what she deserved. Blanche may be both the “generous accommodator” and the “nymphomaniac.” Jessica Tandy, though, was more the former than the latter. Her letter to Williams in November 1948 noted that theatergoers, affected by press accounts of the play along with its promotion as “sex in the raw,” were turning Blanche into something she was not.

Eight times a week and to progressively less sensitive audiences I have to try to make clear Blanche’s intricate and complicated character – her background – her pathetic elegance – her indomitable will to survive – her innate tenderness and honesty – her untruthfulness or manipulation of the truth – her inevitable tragedy.

Kazan himself found Tandy’s Blanche the “‘womanly woman,’ fragile and with a quality of helplessness, but underlying the feminine pliability, you sense her essential integrity.” Robert Coleman, echoing Kazan’s assessment, found Tandy “more British than Southern.” Theater historian David Richard Jones says that her great type was “the high-toned Christian woman.” The refinement and reticence no doubt appealed to the playwright, whose script says that Blanche was lonely and “suggests a moth.” The elasticity of the text, however, allows an actress to oscillate along a continuum and hint at the “womanly woman” here, the debauchee there. In 1949, in London’s West End, Vivien Leigh accentuated the carnal Blanche. (“The purpose of this play,” the first sentence of the review in The Times read, “is to reveal a prostitute’s past in her present.”)

And now, the two versions of the Warner Bros. Streetcar not only contain traces of each interpretation but also remind us of the mutability of Williams’ (or any dramatist’s) play.

The 1951 cut mirrors what Kazan and Joe Breen had agreed to in principle, a more “high-toned” Blanche, whose desire would be a search “for romance and security, and not for gross sex.” In one scene, for instance, she’s alone in the Kowalskis’ flat, slumped in a chair, when the young collector for the Evening Star appears. Attracted to his innocence, perhaps even his virginity, she says, “You make my mouth water!” She knows, too, she says, the sort of fountain drink he likes: “A cherry coke!” “Come here,” she says. “I want to kiss you, just once, softly and sweetly.” She does so, then says, “Run away now, quickly! Adios.”

The 1993 version of the scene opens on a dissolve to Blanche. (The 1951 straight cut fails to adumbrate and reinforce the languor that follows.) She wipes her face, sighs, and moans, and then she arches her body and shifts her leg, actions that the 1951 version trims. Legion staffers knew masturbation when they saw it—even if Joe Breen had nodded, or was content to attribute Blanche’s stirring to the discomfort of cheap furniture. Then the young collector appears. “I want to kiss you, just once, softly and sweetly on your mouth,”
she says. (The restored dialogue appears here and henceforth in italics.) “Run away now, quickly! It
would’ve been nice to keep you, but I’ve got to be
good—and keep my hands off children. Adios.”

The 1951 scene reduces the taint of pedophilia and
thus heightens the contrast between Blanche’s gen-
tility and Stanley’s cruel destruction of it. The 1993 cut
makes her less moth than flame. Her pelvic writhing in
the chair, her confession that she wants the collector’s
mouth, and her admonition to herself—said with more
irony than rue—evince her sexual adventurism. In one
manuscript of the drama, she had made a naked play
for the collector. “Well, well!” she cooed when he en-
tered. “What can I do for you?”13 The scene was even-
tually more subtle, though in its 1993 screen version
Blanche yearns not “for romance and security” but for
“cherry” young boys. She also shows more of the
predator that Stanley sees in her. The invocation of the
sexual and the neurotic, in other words, could lead
some to reason that, as Life says, she participates in
the rape.

The 1951 and 1993 texts, considered in tandem,
hold a range of Blanches, and what was true for
Blanche was equally true for Stella and Stanley. After
the Kowalskis fight, Stella flees to her neighbor’s flat
until Stanley plants himself at the foot of the stairs and
bellows for her. Descending the stairs in 1951, she re-
sponds to her husband’s aching need for her, a point
the music—and the cutting—appear to support. The
strings play, poignantly, a long and ingratiating melody
line that evokes tenderness and reconciliation. Kazan
had wanted more ambivalence, which the Legion fore-
closed when it removed the carefully orchestrated al-
ternation of close and medium shots that, the director
wrote in the New York Times, indicated “Stella’s con-
flicting revulsion and attraction to her husband.”14 The

Kim Hunter and Marlon Brando as Stella and Stanley Kowalski
close-ups on her, red hot in 1951, do show her attraction. Though they now look theatrical, more like a *performance* of arousal than a spontaneous evocation of it, they nonetheless demonstrate that she too knows how to start those “colored lights going again.” The music reinforces the point; in 1993 a slender reed, apparently a clarinet, plays sinuously and flirts with the sort of bump-and-grind more closely associated with Bourbon Street than the residential enclave of Elysian Fields. Thus the two versions, paired, extend one’s awareness of the richly ambiguous characterization: Stella responds in 1951 to her husband’s need, and in 1993 she fosters that need.

The two versions also change Stanley. “My, but you have an impressive judicial air!” Blanche says during his interrogation of her. She sprays herself with her atomizer, then playfully sprays him with it. He holds his ground, and refuses, in 1951, to respond to her flirting, “All right,” she says. “Cards on the table. I know I fib a good deal. . . . I keep my papers mostly in this tin box.” Stanley sees Blanche more as interloper than as sexual object. His manner is brusque and his motive readable: he wants what’s his, which an audience in 1951 could understand.

A photograph of Master Sergeant Kowalski (“decorated four times,” Stella says) appears in the background of several shots. (Kazan’s interest in “things” accorded the photograph a prominent role in the staged version.) The uniform connotes not only an aggression licensed by the state but also the past glory of a man now on the periphery of the postwar economic expansion. The working-class aura of the Quarter, the cramped space of the Kowalskis’ flat (not to mention the cracks in the ceiling), and the fact that Stella has “glossed over” their living conditions in letters to Blanche all suggest that money’s tight. Stella may believe (as she tells her sister) that Stanley’s “the only one of his crowd that’s likely to get anywhere.” He has
not gotten there yet, though, and in the 1951 version of the film, to 1951 audiences, his hounding Blanche over money helps anchor the character and the work in the period.

During his interrogation of Blanche in 1993, Stanley seizes her atomizer and slams it down on the dresser; she throws back her head (as later she will do during the rape) and laughs, and then, only in 1993, they speak the italicized lines that follow:

**STANLEY:** You know, if I didn't know that you was my wife's sister, I would get ideas about you.

**BLANCHE:** Such as what?

**STANLEY:** Don't play so dumb. You know what.

**BLANCHE:** All right. Cards on the table. I know I fib a good deal... I keep my papers mostly in this tin box.

Stanley’s invocation of the incest taboo (“If I didn’t know that you was my wife’s sister”) beckons the sexual urges it pretends to renounce. Blanche’s response (“Such as what?”) fuels the fire. A final clash becomes inevitable.

After Stella has gone to the hospital to deliver her baby, Stanley returns home and once more confronts his sister-in-law. He shuts the door to block her exit from the room but does not say in 1951, as he will in 1993, “Well, maybe you wouldn’t be bad to interfere with...” Absent that line (which the Legion deleted), the rape appears more spontaneous—brutal to be sure, though less the product of prior calculation than alcohol and opportunity. The restoration of the line makes Stanley’s assault premeditated and thus especially violent.

The two Stanleys (one more untamed than the other) hark back to a fundamental aspect of Brando’s theatrical performance: its refusal (rather like the play) to be “fixed.” “I had seen [Brando’s Stanley Kowalski] twice in the theater in 1947,” Stanley Kauffmann wrote in 1993 on release of the restored picture, “and when the film first appeared, I rushed to make sure that it was there. It was; it is.”

Brando preferred theatrical impulse over rote performance; toward the end of the run, not unexpectedly, he got “horribly stagnated” (his phrase, in an interview with Howard Thompson). By the time he left the Broadway production in May 1949, he had been the “early” Stanley in 1947, the “late” Stanley in spring 1949, and probably many other Stanleys in between. And taken together, noting the differences between them rather than the superiority of one over another, the 1951 and 1993 Streetcars not only represent the spirit of Brando and his portrayal of Stanley, but also offer us a salutary reminder of the instability of dramatic texts and (an allied point not explored herein) the fact that social and institutional forces affect actors no less than authors.

One last point. In preproduction of the play, Kazan and Williams had worked and reworked the ending—the needs of Stanley and Stella, the dependence, the resentment, the loss, and withal the hope of a future together. The discussions of author and director laid bare Williams’ ambivalence about the characters; more interesting here, that ambivalence finds expression in the (paired) 1951 and 1993 versions. Both cross-fade from Stanley attacking Blanche to water gushing from a hose, a startling image that anticipates the obligatory shot in a pornographic film. Also in both versions the Doctor and the Matron carry Blanche away. At the final curtain of the play, when Stanley kneels beside Stella and “his fingers find the opening of her blouse,” it’s at once an atonement, a reassertion of sexual energy, and, given what he has done, a second form of rape. In both versions of the film, however, Stella and her baby fly up the stairs, just as she had done when Stanley had
hit her. Once before he had bellowed for her and she had come to him. Now, arguably, will be no different. Thanks to the absence or presence of the “ideas” and “interferes” lines, though, her returning to Stanley reads one way in 1951, another in 1993. She has, metaphorically, fewer steps to descend in 1951: Stanley raped Blanche because Stanley was Stanley, a human animal driven by instinct, exactly what Stella loves in her husband. In 1993, he contemplated the rape in reel one, and Stella’s returning to him makes her betrayal of her sister even crueler.

“As soon as an author utters or writes down his work, even for the first time,” notes Jerome McGann, “‘a mediation has to some degree come between or ‘interferes with’ the original, unmediated text.”20 Streetcar, like Blanche, was interfered with, and some would argue that the 1951 version, the last hurrah of a dying American institution, the Legion of Decency, should be allowed to fade away like an old snapshot. In fact, that has already begun to happen. Supposedly weak demand for Streetcar has led Warner Bros. to let 16mm prints of the 1951 version go out of circulation: no new negative (costing at least $25,000) and no more replacement prints (each $1,000) will be produced. By striking only 35mm prints for the restored Streetcar, the studio also placed it beyond the reach of the non-theatrical (16mm) market.

Continued enhancements of video projection and the video image may make the loss of the 16mm Streetcar appear less acute; meanwhile, however, Streetcar on video has its own problems. According to Bill Terry of Warner Bros. Video Business Affairs, Streetcar has never sold well, so, despite the low cost of video masters, the studio has kept only the 1993 “in print.” (Warner Bros. sells the 1993, not the 1951, on DVD.) Once the 1951 laserdisc and VHS copies sell out, as they probably already have, the “old” Streetcar will be available only on Internet auction sites, film professors’ shelves, and the racks of some video stores; once the machines that play them become obsolete, the 1951 discs and tapes will become coasters and paperweights.21

Like the disappearance of the “old” Blade Runner or the “old” Wild Bunch, the disappearance of the “old” Streetcar constitutes an erasure of history (and more) that in an ideal world of multiple textual editions would not occur: Streetcar 1951 would appear on commercial video alongside Streetcar 1993. In fact, some popular films have been released with an inadvertent attention to “versioning.” Certain DVDs, like Picnic, include the widescreen version of the film on one side, the “flat” on the other; a rare case, comparable to the Norton King Lear, occurs on the DVD of Hitchcock’s Strangers on a Train: on one side the American release print, on the other the British. (Bill Desowitz tracks some of the differences in “Strangers on Which Train?” Film Comment, May-June 1992, pp. 4-5.) The storage capacity and relatively low cost of DVD and CD-ROM software could make multiple hypertext “editions” economically viable. How far “down” or “across” should these exercises in studio archaeology go? Preview prints? Municipal censors’ prints? Foreign prints? Yes, to these and more, for the value of multiple editions seems almost self-evident.

Multiple editions destabilize texts; they expose the myriad forces and collaborations that lie behind their production, and encourage readers to “create” their own versions. The Streetcars show the way. Streetcar 1951 and Streetcar 1993, when paired, raise important questions about authorial intention and the cultural apparatus, in film, theater, and literature, that supports it. They also offer an entree into the workings of style, censorship practices, and the tensile strength and curious tensions of an enduring American drama. Recalling the death of her husband, Blanche says, “And then the searchlight that had been turned on the world was turned off again.” The loss of the 1951 Streetcar may prove no less momentous.

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Notes

Thanks to Edward Jones and Philip Kolin for their comments on early drafts of this piece.


2. The Production Code Administration to Warner Bros., 28 April 1950, and Kazan to Warner, 19 October 1950,

3. Kazan to Warner, 7 December 1950, and Howson to Frank Carter, 15 October 1951, A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE file, Warner Bros. Archive, Special Collections, University Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles. The Memphis censor, born in 1866 and active until eight months before his death in 1956, was notorious in Hollywood and the South; in Sanctuary (New York: Modern Library, 1932), William Faulkner named a ferocious dog “Mr. Binford” (p. 175).


12. Rudy Behlmer, p. 323.

13. Script fragment. A Streetcar Named Desire, n. d., Tennessee Williams Collection (44.5, pp. 5-72 – 5-75), Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.


