Existentialism and Camp in Joseph Losey's *Boom!*

Hysni Kafazi

Abstract: Tennessee Williams's *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1963) is a notable example in the playwright's oeuvre that depicts existential concerns regarding themes like one's attitude towards death, authenticity, and bad faith. Joseph Losey's adaptation of this play, *Boom!* (1968), is unique in its treatment of the existentialist subject matter through atypical modes of representation. Criticism towards the play, and especially its filmic adaptation, has been mostly negative, with offstage problems, issues of stardom concerning the casting of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in the lead roles, as well as an obsessive focus with their off-screen personas overshadowing the film's philosophical subject matter and cinematic techniques. This paper gives an overview of the characteristics of this misaligned assessment of *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* and *Boom!,* together with its contributing factors. Afterwards, it suggests to redirect critical attention towards the form-content relationship of various aspects of the movie by proposing two alternative analytical perspectives: approaching the movie from an existentialist standpoint, as well as from the framework of camp aesthetics. Finally, the paper concludes by converging both these novel approaches to demonstrate that, contrary to previous critical and public reception, *Boom!* succeeds in combining its serious existentialist themes and campy representation in a meaningful and coherent manner.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, existentialism, camp, Joseph Losey, *Boom!*

Hysni Kafazi is a PhD student at the University of Szeged, Department of Comparative Literature. He obtained his BA and MSc in English Language and Literature from Beder University College, Albania. His major field of interest is 20th century drama, and his current research focuses on the existentialist aspects of the drama of American playwright Tennessee Williams and Turkish writer Necip Fazıl Kısakürek. E-mail: hysnikafazi@gmail.com

AMERICANA – E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary, Vol. XX., No. 1., 2024
ISSN 1787-4637

DOI: https://doi.org/10.14232/americana.2024.1.75-92

Existentialism and Camp in Joseph Losey's *Boom!*

Hysni Kafazi

Tennessee Williams and the Existentialist Context

This essay discusses the existentialist transformation of Tennessee Williams's *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1963, hence mentioned as *Milk Train*) into *Boom!*, Joseph Losey's filmic adaptation of the play. Firstly, it analyses the play from an existentialist perspective, focusing on the depiction of themes like crisis, anguish, fear and especially bad faith and afterwards gives an overview of the existing approaches to the play and its filmic adaptation by delineating the factors that have led to predominantly negative critical and public reception, detracting attention away from the intended philosophical treatment of the abovementioned themes. This clash between the work and its reception, together with a multidimensional atmosphere of crisis related to aspects external to the play itself, would follow up in the filmic adaptation of the play as well. From this point, the paper touches upon the issues that contributed to the continuation of this misaligned critical attention, particularly the casting of major stars like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. After this analysis of the reception and existing approaches to the movie, it suggests to redirect critical attention towards a novel alternative viewing of *Boom!* from an existentialist lens, where cinematic techniques prove positively effective in translating the philosophical concerns of the drama for the screen. Moreover, it proposes a consideration of the movie from the perspective of camp, to conclude with a converging interpretation of these two suggested approaches. Finally, it demonstrates that, in contrast with earlier receptions of the movie merely as ludicrous and unsuitable to the subject matter, it is indeed this campy presentation in form that makes *Boom!* a unique and successful treatment of its existentialist content.

Tennessee Williams's oeuvre, particularly his drama, demonstrates significant connections to the existentialist philosophy. In fact, the author declared in several occasions his interest in existentialism and a special affinity with Jean-Paul Sartre's formulations and interpretations of various concepts related to this philosophy. Williams's reading list, published in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, included titles like Sartre's *No Exit* and *The Flies* (1948, 26). Almost thirty years later, Williams would restate in his *Memoirs* his interest in Sartre, "whose existential philosophy appealed to [him] strongly" (Williams 1975, 149). Upon close examination of Williams's works, existentialism becomes a vehicle to explore notions such as the authenticity of one's life and the inevitability of death, themes that appear frequently in the playwright's oeuvre throughout his entire literary career and therefore I aim, in the following, to map its context.

Martin Heidegger delineates being-towards-death as one of the primary states of existence and claims that "death is the utmost testimonial for being" (1999, 163). For him, it is necessary to face death as an inevitable event that is exclusively one's own. However, it is crucial to see it authentically for one to make sense of his life and existence. According to Heidegger, "*authentic* Being-towards-death can not evade its own most non-relational possibility, or cover up this possibility by thus fleeing from it." (Heidegger 1962, 304-305). This sense of authenticity in one's attitude towards life and death is further commented on by J. P. Sartre, who states that authenticity "consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of [any] situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it" (1948, 65). It is in this act of facing the reality of life and that of the death, and one's responsibility ensuing therefrom to act and decide

deliberately, that a situation of crisis and anxiety emerges. In complete possession of the freedom to choose, the individual is simultaneously burdened by the consequences of his choices and the meaning he creates out of his existence and the world. Succumbing to the idea that not to choose is also a choice, one ends up acting in bad faith, a manner of existence where one deludedly rejects his freedom of choice. With this conscious choice, the individual falls into a paradoxical position where he lies to himself while being aware of doing so, assuming the roles of deceiver and the deceived at the same time. This paper will return to these existentialist notions in its analysis on the ways in which they are represented in Williams's *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1963) and its cinematic adaptation *Boom!* (1968).

One of Williams's interviews with John Gruen made in 1965 reveals that his interest in existentialism is more artistic rather than purely philosophical. Speaking of authors that deal with themes related to this philosophy, Williams argues that "perhaps we all understood existentialism before Sartre did" (Williams and Devlin 1986, 121). Pitting a playwright against a main proponent of existentialist philosophy would be certainly futile and nonsensical; however, there is something significant to take from Williams's bold claim. The American playwright had been experimenting with existential themes way before he explicitly stated his interest in this philosophy, and even before many of Sartre's seminal works on existentialism had emerged (especially the1943 *Being and Nothingness*), but also his dramas that had been of interest to Williams. Themes like anxiety, fear of responsibility towards the freedom of decision-making, fear of aging and death, as well as bad faith in reaction to such forms of anxiety had already appeared in Williams's earlier work. *Battle of Angels* (1940) serves as the earliest example, particularly through the character of Myra, who finds a renewed will to live as she finds a new meaning to her life. Moreover, Vee Talbot, the Christian housewife that finds solace in her paintings, claims that existence did not make sense to her before she found her artistic purpose. Whether it is Myra's resolution to live her life by her own rules, or Vee's self-found meaning in life through her art, Williams suggests that individuals can embrace the authenticity of their lives only if they construct their own meaning, in a much similar vein to Sartre's Roquentin in *Nausea*.

Similar types of characters continue to appear passim in Williams's oeuvre. Robert Haller described Williams's characters as "almost invariably captive creatures in a moment of crisis" (Phillips 1980, 310). These "sad, alienated, rootless malcontents" that appear in Williams's drama, as well as the movies adapted therefrom, "in failure somehow manage to find something of what they are looking for" (Palmer and Bray 2009, 272). Often what these characters find is not exactly or fully what they wished for. There is always some residual consequence, a bittersweetness, but nevertheless a resolution for them, it seems, and becomes more apparent starting from *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), Williams's first great success in the American theatre.

The Glass Menagerie (henceforth mentioned as *Menagerie*) revolves around the crisis looming upon the Windfield family, and most prominently on the internal crisis of Tom Wingfield, who struggles in between two responsibilities: one towards his family, and the latter towards himself and his own idea of authentic living as a traveler and aspiring poet. The immediacy of this decision creates an additional pressure imposed paradoxically by his own freedom. From an existentialist point of view, freedom entails responsibility, because, detached from any value system and external influence, individuals have to create their own meaning to life, taking each step with the complete consciousness that that step is a deliberate decision on their part. This is what Sartre means when stating that man is "condemned to be free, … responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being" (Sartre 1978, 553). This responsibility is "overwhelming since he is the one by whom it happens that there is a world; since he is also the one who makes himself be" (553). Looking at Tom from this perspective, the difficulty of taking the decision of leaving his family becomes obvious. It is as difficult as taking upon an act of sacrifice: he has to give up the

responsibility towards his family for the sake of his responsibility to himself, that is, towards his freedom and the necessity to create his own world, or his meaning in the world.

Although, *The Glass Menagerie* is not an explicit example of existentialist theatre, there are certainly strong thematic similarities to this dramatic subgenre. The three characters are isolated in their own personal worlds, insecurities and crises, all of which are consequences of events that have happened prior to the action of the play. As Péter Szondi states in his *Theory of Modern Drama*, existentialism "radicalizes the alienation" of characters (1987, 60). Nevertheless, existentialist drama executes these notions in its form as well, something that plays like *The Glass Menagerie* lack. A typical example would be *No Exit* (1944), where Sartre emphasizes and complements the theme of thrownness with a setting that is abstract, accidental, bizarre and entirely detached from reality. This drama depicts what Szondi describes as an artificiality "rooted in the pretextual, dramaturgic displacement of characters in a situation of constraint," (Szondi 1987, 61) where the situation of the characters mirrors the human condition in a world that has no fixed meaning or explanation.

Williams's early work does not typically follow this manner of human condition in form. In plays such as *Menagerie*, the setting is almost completely realistic. However, this strategy changes in his later plays, where a detachment from realism and an affinity to the form of existentialist theatre is much more perceptible. Notable examples in this sense are *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980), a ghost play set in the dream-like courtyard of an asylum, or the much more extreme *The Two-Character Play* (1973), set in a theatre building in the middle of nowhere, at an unknown space and time, where the anguish of its characters unfolds. Also, the experimental *Camino Real* (1953) is set in an unknown and isolated city, surrounded by a wall, where escape is possible only through a stairway that leads to "Terra Incognita," literally the unknown land (Williams 1953, 5). Byron, the only character in the play who finds the courage to climb the stairway, echoing a Sartrean understanding of the importance of deliberate decision-making, states in his exit line that the only possibility is to move, to go forth, "even when there's no certain place to go" (59). This statement resonates with Williams's personal motto, *En Avant,* a phrase through which he would sign much of his personal correspondence and notebook entries. Interestingly, this motto finds its way in the name of Mrs. Goforth, the aging lady of *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*.

Existentialism in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*

Adapted from one of Williams's earlier short stories titled "Man Bring This Up Road" (1953), a story the author considers one of his best (Williams 1975, 195), *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* follows a similar pattern to the aforementioned plays. It is rooted in problems that concern much of the existentialist thought, most importantly one's attitude towards death and bad faith. Flora Goforth, the main character of the play, is a woman in her sixties facing her imminent death; however, she rejects this idea in bad faith, pretending and attempting to deceive herself that she is in good health. Unable and unwilling to face the reality of her situation, she distracts herself within the luxury and exaggeration of her villa on top of an island, fittingly named after her. She is the ruler of everything in her domain, from the lands around the villa, the people she admits to her island, as well as the workers that she abuses constantly. The complication of her situation arises with the arrival of Christopher Flanders, a poet in his thirties, who appears unexpectedly in Mrs. Goforth's island with the sole intention of communicating with her. Notoriously nicknamed as the "Angel of Death," Chris is there to help Mrs. Goforth in facing the reality of her death and give her the comfort she needs in her last moments. This mission is never made clear to be entirely true. The ambiguity of Chris is emphasized by his appearance resembling a mystic with deeper knowledge on life and the sexual tension emerging between him and Mrs. Goforth.

The setting of the play is closer to a typically existentialist one, taking place entirely at different locations of the isolated island. As Mrs. Goforth explains to Chris at some point, her reason for buying the entire island and the villas on top of it, is that the place is "inaccessible" (Williams 1963, 58). Williams states in the production notes that the play can be more effective in its purpose "the further it is removed from conventional theatre," where the setting and the separations between the sections of the stage "should not be clearly defined," and should be represented instead "in a semi-abstract style" (5). This detachment from realism helps in conveying the philosophical aspect of the dramatic text and theatrical performance, imbuing the latter with a sense of surrealism in a space isolated from the real world and its realistic representation, drawing attention to the dialogue rather than the action. The inclusion of two characters, named One and Two, who serve as stage assistants, but also function as some sort of chorus that gives additional information, further emphasizes the thematic and structural detachment in terms of character representation. Although they are part of the cast, they "represent invisibility to other players" (5), and do not interact with them except in situations where they undertake an additional role.

An atmosphere of crisis would expand beyond its existential context in the play itself. Indeed, Williams recalls that the history of *Milk Train* "was more dramatic off-stage" (Williams 1975, 187), and unfortunately, this became the focal point of critical and public reception of the play. First of all, Williams was experiencing his own literary and critical crisis, with his reputation diminishing quickly during this period, as his new experimental approach failed to find an audience. As R. Barton Palmer and William Robert Bray note, Williams's plays of the 1960s were "aesthetically experimental, short … and preoccupied, in the European manner, with philosophical and cultural themes that only the literati were likely to appreciate" (2009, 242). They were largely considered failures, by critics and audiences alike. *Milk Train* was written and produced exactly in this time of continuous critical attacks. The harshest of them was a review by Richard Gilman in *Commonweal* titled "Mistuh Williams, He Dead," an article that would pave the way for an almost unanimously negative critical reception of the playwright's works in the 1960s and forward.

The play did not do well, despite its many revisions. After the premiere of its first version in Spoleto, Italy in 1962, for example, it was described as "unfocused and undramatic, … like a page of diary jottings" (Spoto 1985, 251). Nevertheless, after seeing the excellent leading performance of Hermione Baddeley, Audrey Wood, Williams's agent at the time, was able to set *Milk Train* for a Broadway production the following year. The process was not promising in any sense. During production, Williams was deep in his own personal crisis. His life had become increasingly problematic, mainly because of a troubling dependence on drugs, as well as the illness of his long-time lover, Frank Merlo. Many have interpreted *Milk Train* as the author's coping mechanism for Merlo's illness and eventual death. However, although "deceptively tempting" this reading is not entirely correct, because "news of Merlo's illness reached Williams in Europe shortly after the play's premiere, and Merlo finally died after the play's first Broadway production" (Prosser 2009, 15). To make things worse, the performance opened during a newspaper strike in January 1963, causing a lack of promotion for the play. Nevertheless, the few reviews that managed to get published were mainly negative, although some positive reviews surfaced as well. William Glover called *Milk* Train a "plus for Broadway," a performance where "Williams displays fresh wizardry with theatrical fireworks" (1963, 2). Despite criticizing the play as "most puzzling" and "unevenly fulfilled," Glover lauded the acting performances and described *Milk Train* as "a potent fury" (1963, 2). Williams noted in his *Memoirs* that the premiere was "somewhat disastrous … [and] the audience was far from sympathetic to the play" (1975, 196). On the other hand, Jack Gaver gave a harsh critique, supposedly echoing the audience's interest, stating that "the whole thing is a pointless bore," and if they keep writing material like this, "the 'sick' playwrights can't complain that they didn't get a Broadway hearing" (1963, 38). Consequently, due to major critical and public

disinterest, *Milk Train* closed after only sixty-nine performances, despite the intention of the producers to keep the play on Broadway for the longest extent possible (Spoto 1985, 256). Prosser argues that one of the main factors of negative reception and criticism of this extent was the fact that the play opened soon after Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which was a much better example of a play that was simultaneously serious in content, unconventional in terms of the American tradition that mostly meandered around "the strictures of realism," and ultimately commercially successful as well (2009, 14). Therefore, with the impression of Albee's play still fresh, the bar was set too high for *Milk Train* to be able to surpass it.

Nevertheless, Williams was insistent in further revising the play. He attributed the previous failure to the fact that audiences were "afraid" of plays that are "deeply concerned with human mortality" (1975, 201). He had echoed this impression in an interview with William Glover prior to the first Broadway opening of *Milk Train*, saying:

> Someone once said to me 'I'm not interested in a play that doesn't have a hot light on it at the end,' meaning some sort of uplift. I don't think the mission of the serious writer is to provide uplift in that sense of 'hot light.' I think the function is to discover areas of truth and of human experience, and to present them in a form that is meaningful to an audience. (1963, 50)

After the Broadway failure of 1963, Williams continued working on another revised version of the play, a period that coincided with Merlo's death. People close to him were quick to draw resemblances between these revisions and Williams's personal life, including his relationship with Merlo. This new version opened on January 1, 1964, but closed only after three performances. This time, even critics that had been previously sympathetic attained a negative position. William Glover wrote that the revival of *Milk* Train "wasn't a very good idea," mostly because the performance "never gets to dramatic destination" (1964, 14). Walter Kerr noted that "in nearly all respects [the play] is now worse than it was before," particularly in the resolution of the play, where despite the playwright's intention, the answer provided is "not an astonishing, or even very interesting, answer" (1964, 33). As such, consisting of a deeply existentialist theme treated with experimental theatrical staging (including Kabuki figures) that the American audiences were unaccustomed to, the play failed to convey the playwright's intention to the public.

In order to see the thematic concerns of existentialism in *Milk Train*, it is necessary to redirect critical attention away from biographical approaches and the offstage crises that surrounded its productions, and instead towards the subject matter and the characters of the play itself. When read through existentialist lens, no character or other element of *Milk Train* represents a more obvious existential anguish better its main character, Mrs. Flora Goforth. The entire play revolves around her, falling in line with the trend of Williams's later plays, that, as Gene D. Phillips notes,

> preoccupied less and less with action and more and more with character analysis: a crisis situation develops in which the characters reveal themselves to each other and, more importantly, to themselves; and with this new self-knowledge they are better prepared to endure if not necessarily to prevail over their problems. (1980, 284-285)

However, the latter part of this remark does not really apply to Mrs. Goforth, as her endurance or prevailing over her crisis is quite questionable.

Mrs. Goforth enters the scene dictating her memoir, talking about her dead husbands and her inherited riches. Her doctor announces that she is suffering from an unknown illness. It is in

this very first scene where Flora's bad faith comes to light. As the doctor brings an X-ray machine to can check up on her from the comfort of her villa, Flora pushes the machine "violently" off the cliff (Williams 1963, 12). She admits to Blackie, her assistant, that she is "*scared!* … Possibly, maybe, [of] *dying* this summer!" (12). However, instead of embracing this fear and the reality of her imminent death, Flora denies her sickness in bad faith, rushing to finish her memoir during a summer where "everything's *urgentissimo*" (32), getting busy drinking and eating "nothing but pills" (25), and abusing her servants. In Blackie's words, this is Flora's response to the fact that she has "apparently never thought that her – legendary – existence – could go on less than forever" (25). However, the arrival of Christopher Flanders disturbs this sense of bad faith in her. Interestingly, Chris arrives right as Flora dictates that "the love of true understanding isn't something a man brings up the road to you;" however, she admits that one time this love and understanding had actually reached her in the form of her last husband, a poet, who made Flora realize that "the hard shell of [her] heart, the calcium deposits grown around it, could still be cracked" (13). Chris is a young poet with "a good bit of experience with old dying ladies, scared to death of dying (25). The parallelism between Flora's dictation and the arrival of Chris foreshadow that her illusory peace will be shaken again, that the walls of her heart will be cracked, and maybe even broken altogether by Chris's continuous chanting of "BOOM" (14).

In the play, Flora is forced to face her death upon learning of Chris's nickname as the "Angel of Death" (40). The night when she learns this fact, she relives in a nightmare the tragic circumstances when her first husband – much older than her – died on her while having sex. Flora's fear of death makes her get away from his dying body "as if escaping from quicksand," running to the terrace to "leave him alone with *his* death" (my emphasis, 47). By dictating these traumatic memories, Flora loses her sense of reality, walking unconsciously to the edge of the cliff. At this moment, as Blackie runs to save her from falling, Flora admits two important facts that she has rejected up to this instant: she accepts that she is "*lost, blind, dying*," and also acknowledges her loneliness and need of company in this difficult period, begging "*Blackie, don't leave me alone!*" (47). After this episode, Flora gets more serious in her remarks, starting the next morning with a dictation on "the meaning of life, because, y'know, sooner or later, a person's obliged to face it." (48). Moreover, she acknowledges her bad faith, because according to Flora, "everything we do is a way of – *not* thinking about it. Meaning of life, and meaning of death, too" (49). It will be under Chris's protection from "Unreality! – *lostness*" (59) that Flora will get a glimpse of the answers to the questions that bother her. Eventually, As Chris remarks later on the same scene, she has reached "the point of no more pretences." (58) she will also let go of her self-created persona of "a bitch, a swamp bitch, … a female devil." (67) She opens up to him, admitting "I don't think I'm immortal" (69), while also making her advances toward Chris more explicit, saying "you're attractive to me" (70). The power balance shifts as he commands her to sit down and she does so obediently and immediately (71). Yet, she misunderstands his offer of "*companionship*" (73), mistaking it for sexual interest and waiting for him in her room entirely naked (85). What he intends to give her, as he confesses to have done to many others before, is "acceptance" (91), a cure to her bad faith, comfort in acknowledging "how to live and how to die… acceptance of not knowing anything but the moment of still existing until we stop existing, and acceptance of that moment, too" (91). However, her crisis is never fully resolved. Even in her last moments, Flora consciously resembles the tissue reddened by the blood that she has been coughing to "a paper rose," (92). Her last words, "be here, when I wake up" (93), show that Mrs. Goforth was not able to completely 'go forth' until her last breath.

The *Milk Train* Goes *Boom!*

Flora Goforth's crisis and anguish in facing her decline are interestingly mirrored into the production of the film adaptation of *Milk Train* as well. Elizabeth Taylor, thirty-six at the time, would be cast in the role of Mrs. Goforth. Taylor was living her own artistic and professional decline. She was being regarded as "the cinema's quintessential shrew, cursing and castrating her way across the screen in a series of unsuccessful movies" (Porter 2012, 557). In spite of earlier successes, Taylor was being referred to as "a hideous parody of herself – a fat, sloppy, yelling, screaming banshee" in the 1960s (557). Richard Burton's – her husband at the time – reputation was facing a similar crisis. As Ellis Cashmore remarks, "the parabola of Taylor and Burton's film careers changed after *The Comedians,* steeply curving downwards" (2016, 172). More importantly, their fame made it possible for them to choose the scripts they wanted, although their decisions seemed "grotesquely flawed, or informed by ulterior imperatives," including a "yearning for even more novelty, change, and excitement" (172).

Boom!, the film adaptation of *Milk Train,* would be one of such decisions. Taylor had asked John Heyman, one of her and Burton's earlier agents and eventually producer of *Boom!*, "Get me something by Tennessee Williams. I adore playing Williams and I have always had luck with his plays on the screen" (Phillips 1980, 303). She was right. Such a role could probably get her out of the crisis of her late 1960s career. Taylor had previously earned Academy Awards nominations for two of Williams's cinematic adaptations, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Suddenly Last Summer*, her second and third such nominations respectively in 1958 and 1960, for roles that had changed the general audience perception of Taylor from a solely beautiful actress to a 'serious' one. However, nobody had ever considered her for the role of Mrs. Goforth, mainly because she was about thirty years too young to play the dying, aging character. Although director Joseph Losey saw some appeal to the idea that "it might be even more interesting if [the movie] were about a relatively young woman about to die" (303), there were other more significant and practical factors that led to Taylor's – and eventually Burton's – casting, that unfortunately overshadowed the film itself. First of all, Losey's and Williams's first choices rejected the offer. The list included names like Sean Connery and Ingrid Bergman, with the former having reached the peak of his career in the role of James Bond, and the latter finding the role of Mrs. Goforth "too tough and vulgar for her" (Caute 1994, 218). More importantly, despite the obvious incompatibility of Taylor and Burton with Flora Goforth and Chris Flanders, their casting secured financing. The movie was supposed to be "an art-film that will also be commercial" (Palmer and Bray 2009, 264), therefore, both Williams and Losey, the sole decision-makers in terms of all aspects of the movie, were aware of the need to cast well-established stars (204-205). Indeed, the $1.4 million budget required to make the movie was achieved and significantly surpassed, reaching an astonishing $4.5 million after their casting, making it one of the most expensive film productions of the time (Caute 1994, 218).

Taylor and Burton had already starred separately in successful Williams adaptations: Taylor in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), and Burton in *The Night of the Iguana* (1964), movies that achieved both critical success and positive financial returns. Moreover, they had co-starred in five movies prior to *Boom!*. While none of their movies together had reached the critical acclaim of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966), where they also played together, Taylor and Burton generated popular fascination and commercial success. Their romance and marriage had caught public interest by storm and they seemed to be selling everything with their off-screen lives as well. As Burton writes in his diaries, as soon as they appeared on location to shoot for *Boom!*, they were "surrounded by publicity and paparazzi … in a blaze of flash lights all day long" (Burton 2013, 171). On the one hand, while Taylor's career as a serious actress kept declining,

> [she] fired imaginations with her romance, electrified people's lives with her extravagance and recklessness, and piqued their curiosities to the point where they pored over every detail of her private life. Her films were no longer as interesting as her life" (Cashmore 2016, 173).

On the other hand, the American cinema was experiencing its own evolution. There was already in place a "decisive turn away from a cinema of sentiment towards a cinema of sensation" (Palmer and Bray 2009, 243). Williams had already had an important role in this turn, because his material satisfied both the blockbuster and artistic requirements. Palmer and Bray rightly argue that "his properties were sensational as well as literary" (245). Marlon Brando's performance in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), the sensuality oozing from of *Baby Doll* (1956), the sexual tension in *Rose Tattoo* (1955) were enough proof that it was indeed possible to make sensational films with a highly literary script. *Boom!* seemed to offer a similar opportunity. It conformed to the art cinema model, because such films "focus more on character than plot, rely on ambiguous rather than straightforwardly 'happy' endings, … disregarding the simple formulae characteristic of Hollywood" (261), but at the same time, they included widely recognizable stars and retain the visually appealing elements of the blockbuster. On principle, this adaptation of *Milk Train* promised to proceed smoothly.

On a deeper level, Taylor's casting falls under the pattern of the earlier theatrical productions of *Milk Train* in it being a play that relied primarily on the lead actress, as well as Williams's mode of centering his existential concerns around a single character. Williams would describe the play as "a marvelous vehicle for [a] marvelous female star" (Williams 1975, 201). The reviews of the play had been enough proof that a star could shine in the role of Mrs. Goforth despite the negative reception of the play as a whole. Even Tallullah Bankhead was at times lauded for her performance of Mrs. Goforth in the last unsuccessful Broadway production of the play, and *Time* would describe her acting as "blinding, blistering brilliance" (Phillips 1980, 300) despite the audiences being "severely disconcerted" by this particular play, where they were asked "to contemplate the state of their souls at the moment of impending death" (301). Interestingly, Bankhead had also recommended Taylor for the role, suggesting "Who better to play Flora Goforth, the richest woman in the world, a promiscuous, pillravaged, drunken slut who is the world's biggest joke than Elizabeth Taylor? She need only play herself." (Porter 2012, 557-558). While the remark is a harsh blow at Taylor's chops as an actress, it sheds light on the problem that the movie would eventually face involving the difficulties that arise when the actor and its role become indistinguishable. Typically, the idea of stardom involves "a duality between the off-screen person of the actor and the filmic person or the filmic character the actor embodied" (Cristian 2008, 79), the borders of such duality almost disappear in Taylor's Flora Goforth.

As Mrs. Goforth opens up to Chris Flanders, she says:

> A legend in my own lifetime, yes, I reckon I am. Well, I had certain advantages, endowments to start with, a face people naturally noticed and a figure that was not just sensational, but very durable too. … Hit show-biz at fifteen… I breezed through show-biz like a tornado. (Williams 1963, 53-54)

It is easy to apply these statements to Taylor's own life and cinematic persona, an actress with a legendary and recognizable beauty, with a career that started from a very early age. Taylor's first role would have been that of Scarlett O'Hara's daughter in *Gone with the Wind* had it not been for her father's dismissal of the idea. Eventually, her first acting role would be in *There's One Born Every*

Minute at the age of ten, and her employment in Metro Goldwyn Mayer would start the following year (Vermilye and Ricci 1976, 18-19). It is equally easy to see Taylor's decline of the late 1960s mirrored in the role of Mrs. Goforth. Yet, she embodied qualities that guaranteed public interest, in spite of her artistic failures. Yacowar remarks that:

> three myths interweave through the casting of Burton and Taylor. First, she is The Girl Who Had Everything (including a film of that title), whose adult persona is a woman under remarkable stress. Second, there is the Burton myth. He brings to the film a sense of wasted talent that the first choice for the role, Sean Connery, with his persona of James Bond success, would have lacked. Third, there is the legendary romance of Burton and Taylor together, which makes the romantic involvement between Flanders and Goforth seem inevitable and larger than life. … Moreover, the audience knows them to be tempestuous even in their harmonies, larger than law and convention, from their private lives as well as from their movies together. … At least one of the movie advertisements centered upon this aspect of the stars, with angry headshots that might have come from any of their movies together. (1977, 126)

The controversial casting of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton thus created a consequential crisis in the reception of Joseph Losey's filmic adaptation, pulling public and critical attention away from the philosophical concerns of the movie, and instead towards assessments rooted in the issues of stardom. Eventually *Boom!* seemed to transform into a Burton-Taylor vehicle, rather than them playing characters. Williams would admit the miscasting in several occasions, calling it "a dreadful mistake" (1975, 200). With Elizabeth Taylor being "too young and too beautiful for the role of Flora," and Richard Burton "too old and overweight" for Chris Flanders, Williams would state that their miscasting "brought on the heaviest of disasters" (Phillips 1980, 309). He would even declare that Liz Taylor was "no actress" but rather "a personality" (Williams and Devlin 1986, 275). Indeed, her beauty, stardom and social reputation preceded her actress persona, becoming the sole attention point for critics and public in their assessments of *Boom!* as well.

Taylor's life of excess overtook the production process of the film as well. Burton remarks that Taylor was difficult to work with, because of her diva-like persona and her dislike of Losey as a director (Burton 2013, 173). Moreover, costumes and jewelry were acquired specifically for *Boom!* at the two actors' request, including dresses by Tiziani, a headpiece of pearls by Alexander, and a big diamond ring by Bulgari (Maddox 1977, 206). With their personal relationship overtaking the dialogues of Flora and Chris, Losey was aware that in acting together "they were involved with each other in all sorts of subconscious ways; and hence he never knew which way their feelings were going to bounce in a given scene" (Phillips 1980, 306). The boundaries between actor and role were being obfuscated to the extent that their acting was perceived as an appearance, rather than performance.

With Taylor's and Burton's off-screen personas becoming the center of attention, *Boom!* faced almost unanimous negative reception. One of the harshest commentaries appears in *The Motion Picture Guide*, where it is stated that

> BOOM! was intended to be a shot-in-the-arm for the sagging careers of Mr. and Mrs. Burton, but turned out to be yet another example of their self-indulgent, egocentric, pretentious 'star' vehicles.' … BOOM! is probably the perfect film in which to analyze the ability of two actors capable of brilliance who instead chose to make utter fools of themselves. (Nash and Ross 1985, 262)

Although Losey described the reviews as "scurrilous, [and] ignorant" (Caute 1994, 221), he would also admit that he was as confused as the critics regarding the meaning of the movie, remarking that "I would be hard put to it to say what it's about" (Palmer and Bray 2009, 266). He had thought together with Williams that audiences of the time were "craving for something else" (267), but *Boom!* did not seem to be the "something" that they had envisioned. The ambiguous and philosophical subject matter, coupled with the stardom of its cast and the excessive non-Hollywood-like cinematic execution, put off audiences as much as it had done critics. Despite its extravagant costs, the movie was a commercial disaster, causing a loss of almost four million dollars, failing particularly in Britain, where it secured a very modest gross of $20,719 (Caute 1994, 221).

This failure was a result of the disappointment of two main categories of audience. On one hand, there were the Taylor-Burton fans, who knew that they would not be able to find in *Boom!* the excitement of previous blockbusters of the couple, due to Losey's reputation as a director with an artsy approach to filmmaking. On the other hand, there were the Losey admirers, who had a prejudicial attitude towards the movie, even without watching it, simply for the fact that Taylor and Burton were cast. Losey was aware of this possible outcome, and truly, as Phillips notes,

> Burton-Taylor fans were totally bewildered by the movie while more serious moviegoers who would have appreciated the though-provoking ambiguities of the picture stayed away because they assumed that *Boom!* was merely another commercial vehicle for the Burtons. (1980, 309)

However, despite its cynical tone, one of Burton's diary entries points towards a different perspective. Although he accepts that *Boom!* "went BOOM," and it was one of his and Taylor's "flops au cinema," he acknowledges that the movie was a work of passion, handpicked by the couple not because of any financial promise, considering they were "both rich enough for ever," but because it had artistic value, an aspect that should encourage viewers and critics towards "rewarding films in terms of the films themselves and not their financial returns" (Burton 2013, 499). Indeed, when detached from the crises created by its star-power and the eventual commercial failure, *Boom!* holds significant value.

In order to redirect attention towards what *Boom!* positively achieves, I propose two alternative analytical approaches below. Firstly, I will point at a close viewing of the movie that makes possible to assess how cinematic features and techniques, such as set construction, camera shots and scene compositions accentuate existentialist concerns of the dramatic source material instead of overshadowing them. Secondly, an analysis of the movie under the framework of camp provides a new perspective of looking at the much-attacked acting of the cast of the movie. Lastly, I will propose a convergence of these two approaches to demonstrate how the exaggerated and artificial nature of camp adds to the existentialist notion of bad faith, offering an additional aspect to the way that the filmic adaptation aptly complements the philosophic subject matter.

Boom! Through Existentialist Lens

Williams was perhaps the first and greatest admirer of *Boom!*, a sentiment that he would reiterate in several occasions. Reminiscing on the long process of writing and revising *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, Williams would describe the play as "a work of art manqué," that had failed in all its versions and had been "really only successful, scriptwise, as the movie BOOM" (1975, 198). Regretting his obsession with revising the play, with each version becoming worse than its previous one, the playwright would admit that the script "only got better when [he] made it into a film,

Boom!" (Phillips 1980, 303). Palmer and Bray reproduce Williams's wire to Losey upon viewing the movie for the first time, where he stated that he was "totally delighted with it," and that "this is the best film ever made of [his] work" (2009, 266).

In his monograph on Williams's movies, Maurice Yacowar would describe the movie as a successful adaptation, because besides the "fine literary script," it was the cinematic resources that imbued the movie with additional value, including "time, light, sound, color, the physical world of the settings, and the mythical world of the cast" (1977, 130). To follow up with the points made earlier on this paper, *Boom!* can be considered a successful adaptation when approached from an existentialist standpoint, particularly because the cinematic features greatly complement and emphasize the existentialist aspects of the play. Cinematography and camera shots play a crucial role producing "a disorienting effect," and giving the disorder and anxieties of the script "direct, visceral expression" (124). This way, cinematic techniques and features disturb realistic representation, focusing instead on the characters and the philosophical themes of the subject matter, complementing content with formal execution.

One of the most striking features of the movie is the setting. Having a strong grasp on the script, Losey had suggested to Williams that the movie should be shot "in a place not immediately identifiable, and quite eerie, unfamiliar and vaguely frightening" (Palmer and Bray, 262). Apart from rejecting the Hollywood tradition of realism and realistic representation, such setting also puts the story in an abstract context, entirely detached from the reality of life, in a much similar way to existentialist theatre. As such, the set was constructed "from scratch" (Caute 1994, 220), with villas and set pieces specifically designed to fit the subject matter. The main villa is in a striking white color, with mostly barren walls, and quite sepulchral in its structure. Losey described the villa as "a rather sterile house," "an expensive fortress," "a tomb," and a "grotesque mausoleum, meant more to be looked at than to be lived in" (Phillips 1980, 306). Each of these descriptions mirrors different aspects of Mrs. Goforth. The sterility of the space represents her loneliness and the current emptiness of her life. Her place resembles a fortress, because Mrs. Goforth is deceptively and desperately guarding herself from the realities of the world, life, and death, sheltering herself in a space where no danger can approach her. It is also her tomb, because death will find her right there, but it is a magnificent one, surrounded with relics, treasures, expensive sculptures and paintings, a tomb that will bury its owner in the semblance of a pharaoh. Indeed, her tomb has to be as majestic and exaggerated as her life. This quality of the villa becomes evident when Chris recites Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and the camera pans around different spaces of the building, Mrs. Goforth's "pleasure dome" (Losey 1968, 01:14:53- 01:15:07). Yacowar interprets the addition of the poem to the script, in addition to its accompanying shots, as an emphasis on "human failures at decreeing pleasure and permanence" (1977, 128). As much as Flora might try to preserve herself, immortality is something unattainable by human possessions.

The villa is decorated with several griffin sculptures and wall engravings, both in its interior and exterior spaces, emphasizing the symbolic value of the mythological figure. In the play, the griffin is the banner of the Goforth Island, described by the characters One and Two as "a mythological monster, half lion and half eagle," that is simultaneously "wholly and completely human" (Williams 1963, 7). The film employs the image with stronger connotations and opens with a single shot of more than two minutes in length of waves crashing against rocks, as the name of Elizabeth Taylor appears strikingly in bold yellow. The camera pans back, entering the interior of the villa from a very narrow window, where gradually nothing else is seen other than a thin column with a griffin at the bottom. These contrasting views of nature and the man-built stone villa connect closely to the imagery of the griffin in the corner. Being half lion, the creature is bound to earth, to stone, but its eagle half yearns for freedom, for the infinite sky. This construction is not only an analogy to the situation of Mrs. Goforth between her self-constructed shelter and the world

she has to face, but also a visual representation of the human condition, stuck between the constrictions of facticity – and the bad faith that entails therefrom – and the transcendence that it has to reach.

Similar contrasts between nature and man appear frequently through scene compositions and camera shots. A large griffin engraving appears on the other wall of the villa with its head towards the sky. Later, there is a long zooming shot on Flora's diamond ring that transitions to a shot of the sun (Losey 1968, 00:04:01-00:04:01). As Flora reveals her attraction to Chris they stand on a large floor mosaic, with a golden sun in the middle surrounded by four sworded men in black in each corner (01:13:47-01:14:11). This intermedial position of man is further emphasized towards the end of the movie. Upon inviting Chris to her bedroom, Flora stands close to the edge of the window, with the light permeating her semitransparent white dress while she remains in total darkness (01:35:25). The outer brightness of the world attacks her self-created shelter, despite how much she remains attached to it for her own self-preservation. This conflict is ultimately won by nature and the final shot of the movie transitions from Flora's lifeless body on her bed, to an image of the crashing waves, as Chris utters a last "Boom!" (01:51:04-01:51:22). While human life is finite, nature will always prevail in the end. Man is ultimately restrained to his position as being-toward-death. The tragedy stands in Flora's denial to face this position authentically, blind to the idea that finitude, when embraced, also means release and transcendence.

Boom! focuses significantly on the notion of time as well. The first time that Flora's body appears fully about eight minutes into the movie, she stands between a stone relief of female figure, dressed almost identically as her, and a clock (00:08:45). As such, on her left is a symbol of permanence, an indestructible and unchangeable image of a woman, that is exactly what Flora yearns for. However, on her other side, the clock redirects our attention towards the impermanence of human life and Flora's inevitable death. The contrasting notions of permanence and finitude appear in the bedroom of Flora's pink villa as well: the painting on the ceiling resembles Marc Chagall's "Song of Songs" series, with a striking red color of life and passion, that adds to the understanding of the poem of the same title as an "erotic song" (Andruska 2022, 201); right in the middle is a naked form of a young woman in the sky, falling upside down towards the city in the bottom (00:20:10). On her side there is a clock, with two arms emerging from it, directed towards the female figure as if trying to embrace her. Moreover, the parrot that Flora has in a cage repeatedly utters "hurry, hurry," in various scenes, particularly as Flora rushes to dictate her memories and her opinions on the meaning of life (00:51:08). Taken together, all these elements contribute to an elevated emphasis on the immediacy of time.

Several scene compositions complement Flora's bad faith and fear of death. As she walks with Chris among the natural areas of the island, she urges him to go no further and they rest in a small sphere-like space made of the same white stone as her villa, furnished with several colorful pillows (00:59:35-01:00:07). Such scenes demonstrate that she does not feel safe in nature, and prefers the shelter of the buildings of her island. Similarly, as they walk along a balustrade in the outer section of her villa in a later scene, she screams "No further!" (01:26:26), settling for the strong support of the white artificial structure against the natural setting. Yet, since the human being is in some way consciously aware of its own bad faith, this sense of consciousness is also revealed in multiple scenes. Most notably, as Flora goes to her dressing room to find an outfit for Chris upon his arrival, she dismisses the strikingly colorful outfits that are hanging in her wardrobe. Instead, she opts for a black kimono with a sword, which Chris wears throughout the entire movie. The unusual outfit becomes a visual representation of his reputation as the Angel of Death, with the sword becoming an alternate version of grim reaper's scythe. As she reveals to Chris that she wants him to stay close to the end of the movie, she consciously acknowledges that "We all of us invite death, Mr. Flanders" (01:23:18).

Lastly, Christopher's ambiguity also benefits from the cinematography. His character has been typically commented as Christ-like. Phillips resembles his climbing of the hill to Christ's ascent to Calvary (Phillips 1980, 306), and argues that the film is full of "a great deal of the religious imagery" of the play (308). However, his last scene is masterfully composed to create a sense of doubt towards his mission. As Flora prepares to die on her bed, he removes her jewelry slowly, looking at each piece attentively, as if assessing their value. Finally, he removes her large diamond ring from her finger and takes it with him. While confusion about Chris's position as a savior or an opportunistic freeloader is already present in the dramatic source material, the film prolongs this confusion up to its last moments. After Flora's death, he performs the ritual of passing, putting the diamond ring in a chalice-like cup of wine he throws into the sea. At this moment it becomes clear that his intentions were misperceived insofar and that he was actually sincere all the way in his offer of comfort in one's last moments of life. This way, he throws the diamond away "to maintain the purity of his mission … and has received no material remuneration in return" (308). In a way, he is repaying the sea that "gave him his vocation" (Yacowar 1977, 128), when he had first comforted an old man as he drowned.

Williams despised Chris's final scene, calling it a "foolish act," claiming it was not in the script he had written (Williams and Devlin 1986, 288). Although Losey described the scene as "technically one of the best things [he had] ever done," (Phillips 1980, 308), Williams felt that the rewriting of the last lines took away from the ambiguity loomed over Chris's character. However, despite Williams's sentiments on this point, the sense of ambiguity still manages to survives in the movie. For example, after dropping the diamond ring, Chris still remains in the villa with Blackie for future intentions unknown. This last moment becomes even more significant when considering that he had seduced and kissed Blackie earlier in the movie, something that does not happen in the play. Most importantly, he does not communicate any explicit message or teaching throughout the film and his lines are as almost all very ambiguous, as the "Boom" he utters continually, and which is the word the movie ends with. Instead of having a clear meaning, "Boom" as a phrase remains open for interpretation, with the viewer lead to give it a meaning in the same way that man constructs a meaning to its life from an existentialist standpoint.

Camping Up Existentialism in *Boom!*

A second way to approach *Boom!* is by assessing its camp value. The exaggerated acting, Taylor's screeching delivery of Flora, the lack of realism and naturalism in terms of setting and characters, as well as grandiose costumes, were just some items critically perceived as ridiculous and even unserious compared to the film's morbid subject matter. For these elements, it is only the approach of the camp that can provide a truly practical framework. Taken from this perspective, *Boom!* seems indeed to respond to Susan Sontag's remarks on camp sensibility, on which she notes that "the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (1964, 515).

Pure camp is unintentional, it is "a seriousness that fails," (522) and several aspects of *Boom!* seem to fall under this category. Despite the serious themes of the movie, intradiegetic acting can be considered camp because of external factors, such as Taylor and Burton life-imitating impersonating drunkards, their personal relationship overtaking the dialogue of their characters, and their grandiose star charisma preceding their subsequent roles in the film. Taylor's acting was particularly problematic for critics; Palmer and Bray write that she "manages very well to be a petulant bitch goddess, ordering servants around with a voice like fingernails scratching a blackboard" (2009, 265). It is indeed ridiculous to hear Taylor croak "What?!" after Burton recites Coleridge in a solemn tone (Losey 1968, 01:15:08) and it is equally ludicrous to listen to the long exaggeratedly long "Yooo-hooo" greetings between her and the Witch of Capri (00:26:18-

00:26:30). This manner of delivery seems out of place in relation to the serious subject matter, and that can only make sense if it is seen as deliberately camp.

Yet, there are several elements in the film that are intentionally envisioned as campy and among them the most apparent are the costumes, designed under the supervision of Douglas Hayward and Annalisa Nasalli-Rocca. It is not difficult to apply Sontag's description of camp being "a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers" (1964, 522) to Taylor's kabuki costume, particularly her large headpiece adorned with countless pearls and flowers, while a white daisy is glued in the middle of her forehead. It is an unusually extravagant costume to wear for a simple dinner, and this costume set falls under campy exaggeration. Chris's samurai-like costume is equally ridiculous and flamboyant, making it difficult to take his speeches seriously while he is walking around without ever taking off the sword in his belt. Nevertheless, these costumes were also part of the play and, obviously, belong to William's sometimes quite campy approach to life. Another consciously campy choice was the casting of the Witch of Capri. Her description is already more than campy in the play:

> She looks like a creature out of a sophisticated fairy tale, her costume like something that might have been designed for Fata Morgana. Her dress is grey chiffon, panelled, and on her blue-tinted head she wears a cone-shaped hat studded with pearls, the peak of it draped with the material of her dress, her expressive, claw-like hand a-glitter with gems. (Williams 1963, 35)

While such an appearance would have definitely upstaged any of Taylor's costumes in its ridiculousness and exaggeration, Losey took the role in an unexpected direction, by casting Noël Coward in the role of the Witch. The gender challenge excited Williams to such a degree that he even suggested to call the filmic character "Cher" instead, after the way drag queens called each other at the time (Caute 1994, 219). Losey recalled that the idea of casting a man had been presented to him as a joke by his agent, an idea that fascinated as he heard of it (Phillips 1980, 303). However, other than transposing the Witch into a male character, Coward's acting imbues the role with the "corny flamboyant" features and mannerisms characteristic of camp (Sontag 1964, 519) and makes it one of the most obvious campy figures of the film.

However, the conscious or unintentional campy items that are apparent in *Boom!*, did not improve the film's world as it was expected. As Sontag notes, "[C]amp doesn't reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different – a supplementary – set of standards" (525), with these alternative standards rooted in "the idea of style, theatricality," and they are often followed as some time passes (527). While a piece of art may be considered horrid, inadequate or ludicrous at the time of its production, an approach from the perspective of camp may offer a new interpretation, or even a reassessment of the said artistic work. Interestingly a piece entitled "Lessons in Camp Aesthetics from *Boom!*" mentions that as the film has aged, it "has become known as a camp classic and a lesson in applying the eye of fine art to American cinema," particularly in terms of fashion and style (2022). The statement echoes Sontag's notes, as she suggests that

> [W]hen the theme is important, and contemporary, the failure of a work may make us indignant. Time can change that. Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility. (1964, 524)

Yet there is a last point that needs clarification, otherwise it would remain an ambiguous paradox. If Williams was so intent in revising the script of *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* for so many years, "fanatically obsessed with trying to say certain things," (Williams 1975, 198), how is it

that the resulting campy filmic representation of the existentialist subject matter was the best version of the script in his estimation? In what aspects would it be possible for camp and existentialism coexist? These questions require a return to the points made above regarding the notion of Sartre's bad faith. An individual in bad faith is typically "identified with falsehood… lies to himself" (Sartre 1978, 48). However, to lie, or to hide a truth, one must be conscious of said truth. Therefore, according to Sartre, bad faith "has in appearance the structure of falsehood" (49) and so, the deceiver and the deceived can be, as a result, one and a single person. From this vantage point, bad faith is a conscious attitude, a mode of attempting to escape the truth in vain, or in other words, the state of an individual who is playing a certain role, different from what he really is. Therefore, bad faith becomes "a certain art of forming contradictory concepts which unite in themselves both an idea and the negation of that idea," (Sartre 1978, 56). This form of art is a sort of acting, an antithesis to authenticity and sincerity, where one rejects to be for himself what he really is. As for Mrs. Goforth, she is approaching the inevitable and completely serious dread of death. However, she keeps deliberately playing the role of a much younger, healthier, livelier and extravagant version of herself, to deceive her own self rather than others, although she is simultaneously conscious of both the reality and her self-deception. She keeps acting her role, smoking another cigarette as her lungs are coughing blood, making outrageous demands for her breakfast, or donning over-the-top costumes even for the most ordinary tasks and situations. Yet, this exaggeration in Flora's appearance and behavior does not detract from the philosophical concept of bad faith; instead, it becomes an extreme representation of it, transforming this notion into the centerpiece of the entire movie.

Thus, the framework of camp serves as a suitable perspective to explain Flora's understanding of life as playing a certain role. Sontag describes camp as a love for "things-being-what-they-are-not" (1964, 518). While this statement can be applied to any piece of campy artwork, from kitschy flower-shaped lamps to any other artificial object, the matter is more specific in regards to people. To understand camp in a person, it is necessary "to understand Being as Playing a Role," which is in consequence "the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater" (519). This is not dissimilar from Sartre's example of the waiter (1978, 59-60), who cannot really be defined by his job, because he is a full-fledged person instead. The waiter waits tables and serves to people, but "waiter" is not his being, it is a role that he has to fulfil under certain circumstances, and consciously does so. Therefore, camp becomes an appropriate style of representing the bad faith that permeates *Milk Train* and *Boom!*, especially through the character of Mrs. Goforth or of those who are indeed very close to her or similar to her. It is certainly an unusual manner of treating this philosophical concept, but nevertheless, as the film proves it, sufficiently effective. If reconsidered from this perspective, *Boom!* can be released from its typical reception as a collage of artifices, both in acting and cinematic production, and can be reassessed as a challenging piece of artistic filmmaking, where the unconventional treatment actually fits the subject matter appropriately.

Existentialism and Camp

Joseph Losey's adaptation of Tennessee Williams's *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, presents a challenging opportunity to analyze the treatment of existentialist themes in the playwright's work. Themes like authenticity, the burden of freedom and individual responsibility, bad faith, fear and anguish appear frequently in several of Williams's plays, together with their respective cinematic adaptations. However, differently from successful films like *A Streetcar Named Desire* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1953), *Suddenly Last Summer*, (dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1959) or *The Night*

of the Iguana (dir. John Houston, 1964) Losey's *Boom!* holds a unique position in that it is widely considered a bad movie with a ridiculous treatment of an extremely serious subject matter.
The development of the dramatic plot from its theatrical productions, as *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* to this final cinematic version, demonstrates that the elements of anguish, crisis and bad faith William employs in the play are retained in the film adaptations and significantly present in the subject matter in the cinematic world. What makes *Boom!* a more complicated case is that these elements intermingle with issues of stardom ensuing from the controversial casting of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in the leading roles, an aspect that generated extremely little critical, public and financial success. Yet, Williams always felt that "*Boom* was an artistic success and eventually it will be received with acclaim," (1975, 200), hoping it will once be "recognized as an important film (Williams and Devlin 1986, 288).

To achieve this recognition, it was crucial to detach the film from the approaches of previously dominating critical reviews that were centered on the off-screen personas of its leading cast, and dismantle the misjudged relationship between form and content. Instead, a redirection of the focus towards the contribution of cinematic techniques makes possible a reevaluation of the cohesive combination of form and content in terms of the treatment of existentialist themes that closely translates the qualities of existentialist theatre for the screen. Sen in this context thus the *Boom!* succeeds especially in terms of the set construction, costume and cinematography. The isolated sepulchral setting, the artificial bare set pieces, symbolic paintings and sculptures, as well as various scene compositions, highlight and complement the thematic concern of their attitude towards life and death, reflecting a true existentialist understanding and depiction of these notions.

Moreover, while generally considered a rather unusual way of representing the serious and philosophical concerns of the thematic content of *Boom!*, camp aesthetics provides an alternative framework to approach and assess the movie in order to perceive an added, yet unexpected, layer of the harmony between form and content, with special regard to the existential themes. The artificial theatricality of camp becomes thus an appropriate means to express the complicated existentialist notion of bad faith. The casting of Elizabeth Taylor, who already had a reputation for excess and exaggeration both in her acting and personal lifestyle, instead of a miscast of the ageing Mrs. Goforth, becomes an added layer of camp that depicts the bad faith of its character in a surprisingly suitable way. Similarly, the decorative excess surrounding the characters and their extravagant costumes illustrate a sense of artifice that is closely and simultaneously connected to camp and bad faith. The lack of realism and the inauthenticity depicted in all the aspects of *Boom!* may come off as ridiculous at first sight, but this is exactly the point, especially from the perspective of existentialism. And the camp aesthetics of *Boom!* is here the perfect complement to put this idea across the necessity to find and embrace an artistically more tangible attitude on life and existence.

Works Cited

"Lessons in Camp Aesthetics from Boom! (1968)." 2022. *Elizabeth Taylor*. Web: https://elizabethtaylor.com/elizabeth-taylor-boom-1968-fashion/ Accessed 2024.04.13.

Andruska, Jennifer L. 2022. "The Song of Songs." In *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Wisdom Literature*, edited by Katharine J. Dell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200-218.

Burton, Richard. 2013. *The Richard Burton Diaries*. Edited by Chris Williams. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.

Cashmore, Ellis. 2016. *Elizabeth Taylor: A Private Life for Public Consumption*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Caute, David. 1994. *Joseph Losey: A Revenge on Life*. London: Faber and Faber.
Cristian, Réka M. 2008. "Cinema and Its Discontents: Auteur, Studio, Star." In Réka M. Cristian and Zoltán Dragon, *Encounters of the Filmic Kind: Guidebook to Film Theories*, Szeged: JATE Press, 63-82.
Gaver, Jack. 1963. "'Sick' Playwrights Cannot Complain." *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*. February 24, 1963: 38.
Glover, William. 1963. "Opening This Week for 11th Tennessee Williams Show." *St. Joseph Gazette*. January 13, 1963: 50.
---. 1963. "Says 'The Milk Train' Is Plus for Broadway." *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*. January 17, 1963: 2.
---. 1964. "Williams' 'Milk Train' Never Gets to Dramatic Destination." *Telegraph-Herald*. January 2, 1964: 14.
Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
---. 1999. *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*. Translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Kerr, Walter. "Williams' Play Revamp 'Worse Than Original." *Ottawa Citizen*. January 2, 1964, 33.
Losey, Joseph, dir. 1968. *Boom!*. Universal Pictures. DVD.
Maddox, Brenda. 1977. *Who's Afraid of Elizabeth Taylor?: A Myth of Our Time*. London: Hart-Davis MacGibbon.
Nash, Jay Robert, and Stanley Ralph Ross. 1985. *The Motion Picture Guide, Vol. I.* Chicago: Cinebooks, Inc.
Palmer, James, and Michael Riley. 1993. *The Films of Joseph Losey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Palmer, R. Barton, and William Robert Bray. 2009. *Hollywood's Tennessee: The Williams Films and Postwar America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
Phillips, Gene D. 1980. *The Films of Tennessee Williams*. Philadelphia: Art Alliance Press.
Porter, Darwin. 2012. *Elizabeth Taylor: There Is Nothing Like a Dame.* New York: Blood Moon Productions.
Prosser, William. 2009. *The Late Plays of Tennessee Williams.* Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc.
Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1948. *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Translated by George J. Becker. New York: Schocken Books.
---. 1978. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Pocket Books.
Sontag, Susan. 1964. "Notes on 'Camp'," *Partisan Review*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 515-530.
Spoto, Donald. 1985. *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
Szondi, Peter. 1987. *Theory of Modern Drama*. Translated by Michael Hays. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Vermilye, Jerry, and Mark Ricci. 1976. *The Films of Elizabeth Taylor*. Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press.
Williams, Tennessee, and Albert J. Devlin. 1986. *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
Williams, Tennessee. 1948. "My Current Reading." *Saturday Review of Literature*, March 6, 1948.
---. 1953. *Camino Real*. New York: New Directions Books.
---. 1975. *Memoirs*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc.
---. 1963. *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. London: Secker & Warburg.
Yacowar, Maurice. 1977. *Tennessee Williams and Film*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.