

# I am a camera : the development of Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* across stage, screen and time

Autor(en): **Quendler, Christian**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **26 (2011)**

PDF erstellt am: **25.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-283965>

## **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

## **Haftungsausschluss**

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

# *I Am a Camera*: The Development of Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* across Stage, Screen and Time

Christian Quendler

Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) is often cited as a modernist work that introduces a cinematic idiom to literary fiction. His invocation of the camera as a metaphor for a literary narrative stance has become a well-known example of modernist intermedial exchanges that gauge the limits of verbal and visual regimes. This essay revisits such exchanges from the perspective of historical theories of adaptation. I will begin by situating the novel within an intertextual chain of feedback looping between literature and film that has contributed to innovative forms of literary and filmic writing. The remainder of the article examines two adaptations of Isherwood's novel. The stage play *I Am a Camera* (1951) and its subsequent cinematic adaptation (1955) complete what may be called a transmedial circle of artistic interpretation. They serve as explications of what becomes synthesized in the intermedial figure of the camera eye. Since these adaptations were produced over a decade after the novel's publication, they also present new sets of media-specific assumptions concerning literature and film. Thus the novel's history of versions helps to trace a historical narrative of the further development of word-and-image relations in late modernism.<sup>1</sup>

In his portrait of the German-American artist Georg Grosz, John Dos Passos observes a paradigmatic change in the visual habits among Americans of his generation: "From being a wordminded [*sic*] people we

---

<sup>1</sup> The research for this article was supported by the project of the Austrian Science Fund "Framing Media: The Periphery of Fiction and Film." I would also like to thank Robin Peery for his helpful comments and suggestions.

are becoming an eyeminded [*sic*] people” (Dos Passos, “Satire as a Way of Seeing” 10). His parents, Dos Passos claims, were still likely to “enjoy a view from a hill” within a literary frame “remembering a line of verse or a passage from Sir Walter Scott, before they got any real impulse from the optic nerve” (10). In the first decade of the twentieth century, Dos Passos argues, this began to change with the paintings of Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso and Juan Gris as well as display advertising and movies. He corroborates his reading of high and low-culture phenomena as symptoms of this epistemic change by drawing upon common tenets in theories of vision and behaviorist assumptions of developmental psychology. However, his account is above all a personal testimony based on what he calls “reminiscences of one pair of eyes” (9). Georg Grosz played a decisive role in his visual literacy. When he first encountered Grosz’s satirical drawings after World War I, Dos Passos found them “a brilliant new weapon”: “Looking at his work was a release from hatred, like hearing a well imagined and properly balanced string of cusswords.” (15). Dos Passos’ comparison to sound rather than sense underscores the effect of visual purity the images had on him: “Their impression is not verbal; (you don’t look at the picture and have it suggest a title and then have the title give you feeling) but through the eye direct, by the invention of ways of seeing” (16).

How do these new and immediate ways of seeing arise? For Dos Passos the answer is almost tautological. They come from or, rather, are experiments in the visual arts. In order “to perceive new aspects and arrangements of evolving consciousness,” he points out, it is necessary to break up the processes and patterns that are ingrained in the heavy apparatus of the mind (19). We may still ask, what are the mechanisms at work in such experimental designs? How do we attain such pure visual regimes? This essay will approach these questions by taking up the lead Dos Passos has parenthesized in the previous quotation: the feedback loops between visual and verbal configurations in the processing of pictures, words and feelings. I will do so in consideration of two adaptations of Christopher Isherwood’s novel *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939): Van Drueten’s stage play *I Am a Camera* (1951) and John Collier’s film adaptation of this play, directed by Henry Cornelius in 1955.<sup>2</sup>

Isherwood’s portrayal of social decadence in 1930s Berlin not only represents a literary equivalent to Grosz’s drawings of the time; the novel also became famous for an autobiographical style of fiction that –

---

<sup>2</sup> In her insightful book *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, Kamilla Elliot outlines an approach to adaptations that considers visual and verbal dichotomies in their specific historical conceptions.

like Dos Passos' trilogy *U.S.A.* (1930-1936) – introduces the metaphor of the camera eye:<sup>3</sup>

I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed. (*Goodbye to Berlin* 9)

We can place *Goodbye to Berlin* and *U.S.A.* in an intertextual chain that successfully illustrates modernist feedback loops between literature and film. Isherwood's and Dos Passos' literary notions of the camera eye were both influenced by the film-aesthetic program of the kino-eye, which the Soviet avant-garde filmmaker Dziga Vertov developed and propagated in a number of manifestoes and films throughout the 1920s. In his best-known film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Vertov explored the kino-eye as "a truly international absolute language of the cinema based on its total separation from the language of theater and literature" (opening credits). Significantly, Vertov framed his movie as "excerpts from the diary of a camera man." Thus, his radical emancipatory claims for cinema notwithstanding, his invention of an absolute film language bears the trace of another contemporary literary innovation: the revival of the diary and the memoir as a literary form, which Viktor Shklovsky both practiced (in his memoirs *A Sentimental Journey*, 1923) and theorized (in *Theory of Prose*, 1929). A literary model for Vertov's use of the diary can be found in Vasily Rozanov's experimental journals *Solitaria* (1912) and the two volumes of *Fallen Leaves* (1913 and 1915), which seek out a new form of writing through a clash of a variety of genres (see Crone).<sup>4</sup>

We can think of this transpositional loop from literature to film and back to literature as projecting a diegetic notion of the camera eye, which invokes the camera as a means of writing and telling. We can contrast this with a mimetic model of the camera eye that foregrounds the mode of showing as a "more immediate" representation of experience (see Quendler "The Conceptual Integration of Intermediality" and Rajewski 80-113). The classic example is Robert Montgomery's filmic transposition of literary first-person perspective in *Lady in the Lake* (1947) which, in turn, had a great impact on experiments by the *nouveau*

<sup>3</sup> The connections between Isherwood and Grosz are showcased in Frank Whitford's edition of *Goodbye to Berlin* (1975) illustrated with selected drawings by Grosz. On Grosz's influence on Dos Passos' camera-eye conception see Ludington and also Spindler.

<sup>4</sup> On the importance of the diary in Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* see my essay "Re-thinking the Camera-Eye."

*roman* authors such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor. The “new thing” about their uses of a literary camera eye combined the depersonalized literary narrative perspective found in hardboiled detective novels and filmic experiments with a subjective camera. As a result, the camera becomes a metaphor of subjectivity that stands in for all kinds of peculiar affective attitudes, such as the cold emotional involvement of the jealous husband in Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie* (1957) who, like a voyeur, is at once involved in and detached from the scene he observes.

Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin* perfectly illustrates how feedback loops between literature and film have contributed to formal innovations in filmic and literary writing; the subsequent adaptations of the book for the stage and the screen also shed light on the historicity of media-specific differences between film, theater and fiction. In other words, the novel’s history of versions helps to trace a historical narrative of the development of modernist conceptions of word-and-image relations in late modernism.

Van Druten’s play premiered in New York on 28 November 1951. In attendance were both the playwright and the novelist who, during the play, were pacing backstage in opposite directions (Isherwood, “A Writer and the Theater” 88). It nevertheless remains unclear exactly how much Isherwood contributed to the play. In an interview he stated that “[t]he play was entirely conceived and written by Van Druten, but I did have a chance to say my opinion of it later” (Breit 217). Notably, the one line that Isherwood confirmed as having contributed addresses the camera trope at the end of the play: “The camera’s taken all its pictures, and now it’s going away to develop them” (Van Druten, *I Am a Camera* 84).

Though a prolific screenwriter, Isherwood was not involved in the film’s production. He met with Cornelius and expressed an interest in developing a script but was tied to other film commitments at that time (Watts). The evolution of *Goodbye to Berlin* on stage and screen seemed to move further away from its author’s control. Yet within each developmental stage, in the transition from one medium to the other, there are moments of creative negotiation and opportunities for authoritative interventions. Just as Isherwood was happy to discuss the play with van Druten before it went into production, the latter prefaced the publication of the stage play with his experience and advice before leaving “the CAMERA to the new director as its film developer” (*I Am A Camera* 8). With the film’s release some three years later, Isherwood’s metaphor of the camera came full circle; it also completed what may be described as a transmedial process of artistic interpretation, bringing about new sets of media-specific assumptions concerning literature and film. In the following three parts, I will trace these assumptions in the

respective dramatic and cinematic versions and conclude by historically reviewing them.

### *Stage*

Van Druten characterizes the play as somewhere between literary fiction and narrative feature film. He begins his preface by defending the play against critics who missed a classical dramatic arc in the play. Van Druten found the lack of neat dramatic resolutions in the literary base an irresistible challenge. Isherwood's autobiographical fiction constitutes a form of writing that, like a diary, is caught up with and against life; it awaits or refuses development. This appealed to Van Druten's modernist vision of a theater that attempts to transgress the boundaries of life and stage:

To finish any story, other than by death, is to lie about life. A marriage is a temporary curtain, at best, promising another play about what it was like for those people to be married to each other. And even death, unless all the major characters are killed, as in *Hamlet*, is an ending only for the character who dies. (Van Druten, *I Am A Camera* 5).<sup>5</sup>

While this alignment with the diary form partly accounts for the seeming pointlessness of the story, van Druten views this as also "one of the blessings that the movies and television have done for the stage" (5).

The city symphony films of the 1920s that inspired Isherwood's *Berlin Stories* provide an extreme model where the dimensions of space, time and perspective resist subordination to a story telos. While Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* programmatically created a new cinematic cityspace by blending Moscow, Riga and Kiev, Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (1926) blatantly states in an introductory insert: "Toute les villes seraient pareilles si leurs monuments ne les distinguaient pas." ("All cities would be the same if their monuments didn't distinguish them.") This also applies to movies that aim to capture the exemplary character of a specific city such as Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphonie einer Großstadt* (1927) or Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* (1921). Rather than structuring temporal units along a storyline, these films draw on cycles of natural and social life (e.g. intervals of night and day or work and leisure). In a similar way, the perspective of the presentation deviates from the experiential

---

<sup>5</sup> See Isherwood's ideas on modern theater in "A Writer and the Theater."

parameters of a narrator. In Joris Ivens' *Regen* (1929), as the camera moves through Amsterdam, the rain becomes the focalizer of the city's changing moods. Although Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* remains closer to the visual parameters of the human eye, he opposes the single and individual views that painters have captured of the city, with the multiplicity of perspectives encompassed in the film's successive images. Motion pictures multiply the artist's eye, which for Cavalcanti means both an aesthetic and social advancement of art that captures not only the worldly and elegant but also Paris' lower-class life.

By shifting the focus from action to the particularities of character and setting, television and cinema became influential sources for this theatrical trend. Both van Druten and Isherwood highlighted this point in reference to the unanimous praise Julie Harris received for her performance as Sally Bowles. To further complement Sally's characterization, we encounter the personage of Christopher, who van Druten calls "almost a feed part" that should be played unselfishly and "with a true valuation of it as a commentator and observer" (*I Am A Camera* 7).

In contrast to the first person narrator of the novel, the theatrical Christopher is a character amongst others. Still his role as mediator and surveyor of Sally's plotline proves crucial. The opening scene illustrates this function as he reads aloud and edits his own text:

CHRISTOPHER. (*Reading aloud.*) "In the last few days, there has been a lot of Nazi in the streets, her in Berlin. They are getting bolder, more arrogant." (*He stops.*) No, that's all wrong. (*He crumples the page and throws it aside.*) That's not the right way to start. It is sheer journalism. I must explain who it is who is telling all this – a typical beachcomber of the big city. He comes to Berlin for the week-end, stays on, runs out of money, starts giving English lessons. Now he sits in a rented room, waiting for something to happen – something that will help him understand what his life is all about. (*Rises, pouring beer into a glass, and sits on end of table.*) When Lord Tennyson wanted to write a poem, they say he used to put himself into a mystic trance by just repeating his own name. Alfred Tennyson. Christopher Isherwood. Christopher Isherwood. Christopher Isherwood. I like the sound of my name. "Alone among the writers of his generation, Christopher Isherwood can be said to have achieved greatness." (*Drinks.*) Shut up, idiot. The only book I ever published got five reviews, all bad, and sold two hundred and thirty-three copies to date. And I haven't even started this new one, though I've been here six months already. (*Sits at the table again.*) Well, you're going to start now, this minute. You are not leaving this chair until you do. Write "Chapter One." (*Does so.*) Good. Now begin. Create something. Anything. (*He writes, then reads*) "I am a camera, with its shutter open, quite passive. Some day all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed." (*The lights come up on the room. There is a knock on the door.*) Who's that?

SCHNEIDER. (*Off.*) It is I, Herr Issyvoo.

CHRISTOPHER. Come in, Fräulein (*Schneider comes in, she is a large, bosomy, German woman, and carries a lace tea-cloth. [. . .]*)

(Van Druten, *I Am a Camera* 9-10)

Whether we go so far as to perceive Christopher as a variation upon the traditional literary narrator depends upon whether we are willing to regard Fräulein Schneider's entry as a flashback representing an embedded level of reality. It is perhaps more rewarding to contemplate Christopher's mediating function within a theatrical model that resolves such a hierarchical order of story levels as adjacent relations. Christopher's comments on his own text prefigure his roles as observer and commentator that he assumes throughout the play. In a sense, his "dialogic" relationship with his writing is almost like the relationship he has with the other characters in the play.

The opening soliloquy recalls a theatrical space that Isherwood likened to a box: "a place of imprisonment in which the audience is shut up with the actors. The effects are created by means of claustrophobia: you can't get out" ("A Writer and the Theater" 91). Acting out the roles of the author and the critic, as well as writer and reader, in a conversation with himself, Christopher creates a necessarily claustrophobic atmosphere. We are privy to a conversation in which we do not belong and bear witness to what we perhaps never cared to know about a writer's workmanship. More importantly, we identify Christopher not only in different roles but also *as* a role on a par with our own as audience.

For Isherwood the theatrical situation, with its basis in a common physical reality across the stage and auditorium, is an essential feature that distinguishes the theater from cinema. His shorthand description for this difference is: "the theater is a box; the cinema is a window" ("Lecture Notes" 229). While the image of the "box" stresses a sense of confinement, heightened tension and excitement that result from the co-presence of actors and spectators, the metaphor of the window foregrounds the effect of detachment that its telemechanism produces:

The cinema to me is a window – a magic window which you look out of. You may look into the far world and see events enormously distant in time and place, and you may look over vast areas of landscape, as in extreme long shots, or again you may enjoy a closeness of observation which is quite impossible on the stage. ("A Writer and the Films" 100).

Isherwood's description of the cinema as a window draws upon the traditional notion of film as a medium of display. Its main virtue lies in its presentational mode, which seems to eliminate spatial and temporal gaps between the event and its representation. The camera as projector is what moves the viewer closer to the characters.

In the opening scene of the stage play, Christopher himself performs this function. He begins with a report of the past few days, but immediately rejects it as too journalistic. He then tries to conjure up literary magic by using Tennyson's trick of putting himself into a "mystic trance." Chanting his own name he becomes a medium of something else or, as it were, another medium. The invocation of his agency as a published author paradoxically dissolves the same way. In speaking the magic words "I am a camera," Christopher overcomes his writer's block and moves the play from the present to the past. According to the theater model of the box this means that the past enters the stage. When quoting the famous opening passage from the book, the stage version notably omits the reference to the vision through the window. By performing as an actor-as-camera, his recordings unfold successively. In contrast to the narrator-as-camera in *Goodbye Berlin*, whose snapshots gradually develop throughout the book, the actor-as-camera in *I Am a Camera* re-creates this process in a framing expository scene (see Wilde).

### *Screen*

The dynamic involved in this transposition becomes particularly evident when the play is compared with the film version. In the critical reception of the movie, this question was marred by the censorship debate. Although Collier attenuated some of the predictably problematic passages of the play, the movie had to be released without a code seal from the Motion Picture Association.<sup>6</sup> In the heat of this moral dispute, critics who saw the film as an improvement upon the play tended to be those who had already condemned the latter. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* considered the film to be superior to the "the shallow and affected play" but still "consistently overdone" (Mae Tinee). For critics who loathed

---

<sup>6</sup> Originally planned as a Hollywood production, the film was eventually produced in England and released in the USA through the Distributors Cooperation of America. The MPA denied the film a code seal on the charge that it contained "racy dialogue, a discussion of abortion and portrayed promiscuity without punishment" (cited in "'Camera' Appeal Fails," *New York Times*, 16 August 1955, 18).

the movie, the comparison between play and film was often beside the point:

Whatever it was – if anything – that John van Druten was attempting to say in his stage play ‘I Am a Camera’ is not apparent in the film [. . .] The movie version is no more than a series of snapshots of an amoral and eccentric dame, flinging about in a frenzied, farcical fashion in the gloom of pre-Hitler Berlin. (Crowther, “Screen” 29)

For this *New York Times* critic the film was merely a “Bohemian bedroom farce” that downplayed the story’s historical relevance. The charge of depoliticizing the historical situation was also generally shared by more sympathetic reviewers and confirmed the sense of an overall tendency towards comedy that had already been criticized in the play. While one reviewer argued that the film had “in some aspects an edge on the original through the camera’s mobility,” he criticized omissions in Collier’s play that would have placed the eccentric behavior of the heroine against a richer background (Coe 28).

While still in production, Cornelius promised to recreate uncensored the notoriously licentious Berlin of 1930s. To create this atmosphere of social decadence and political corruption he commissioned Grosz for the set and costume design of the film (“Grosz Is a ‘Camera’”). His designs, however, fell short of expectations and lacked the vivacity of his earlier work.<sup>7</sup> Cornelius’ efforts to reconstruct this critical perspective of the 1930s – at once subjective and satirically detached – were lost on his reviewers who found the setting and minor characters shallow and burlesque. For example, consider a party scene in which a hung-over Christopher is being tossed around by a crazy bunch of physical culturalists. Some critics celebrated this scene as a fantastic and comic set piece while others rejected it as a cause for a hangover itself (see Gardner and Tinee). Yet none of the critics related the surreal atmosphere of this scene to the conspicuous double-framing of Christopher’s perspective at the beginning of the film. Curiously enough, Cornelius’ search for a cinematic equivalent of Isherwood’s literary camera eye seems to clash with the author’s ideas about film as an art form where—in contrast to the stage—image and movement take primacy over language and speech (Isherwood, “A Writer and the Films” 100-101).

---

<sup>7</sup> Grosz took on this work on his return to Germany, after he had been living in the USA for more than twenty years. By that time he had not radically distanced himself from his earlier political work and grown considerably pessimistic about the social function of art.

The tension results from a rather straightforward or “literalist” transposition that, in order to illustrate the double function of the camera as memory device and a means of critical detachment, adds another framing narrative to van Druten’s play. The film begins with a hand-held camera shot that, panning from feet to head, closes in on the character of Christopher Isherwood as he is walking down a sidewalk towards the camera. The movement of camera and actor are in perfect synchronicity with the first-person voice-over. When he completes his first sentence “My name is Christopher Isherwood,” the camera panning upwards centers on him as he stops before crossing the street. We then follow Christopher to a party hosted by his publisher where, as he will find out later, Sally Bowle’s memoirs are presented. Meanwhile, the voice-over continues his introduction:

I’d like to think that I need say no more. But perhaps I’d better add: I am a novelist, comfortably off, set in my ways, a confirmed bachelor. Sentimental melodies have a profound and moving effect on me. They seem to go to my stomach. They make me feel that maybe I have missed something in life. Unfortunately, I can’t always miss the literary cocktail parties to which I am invited by my publisher. They always stave these things when they are trying to promote the more dubious items on their list. A gaggle of female journalist was an evidence from which I gathered that some lady’s murky memoirs was being foisted on the public. The more worthless the book, the more they need noise and alcohol to launch it. However it’s only civil on such occasions to know at least the name of the unfortunate author. I could hardly believe my eyes . . . [on-screen voice] Sally Bowles.

The shots accompanying the voice-over are replete with the kind of word-and-image relationships that have displeased critics. Christopher’s sober self-characterization as a modern man with a low tolerance for sentimentality is illustrated by showing a street musician playing the piano that is mounted on a drawbar trailer. His tune evidently makes Christopher take a stomach pill. When the voice-over mentions his obligation to attend his publisher’s literary event, we see Christopher putting on his glasses to inspect the display case at the entrance of the publishing house. Inside, at the party, his discovery that Sally Bowles is the author of the featured memoir is followed by a close-up of the book.

The beginning of the film stands in crass contrast to Isherwood’s own theory of film, which owes much to Soviet montage theory and the critical interventions that, in the wake of sound film, favored a dialectical (or even antithetical) relationship between word and image. Contrasting the differences in the use of language on stage and screen, Isherwood reiterated this position in his lectures at the University of

California, Santa Barbara. The example he gives to illustrate to his point comes rather close to the voice-over narration in *I Am a Camera*:

The sound in film should always be, as it were, balanced against the image and not go with it. For one thing, the fact that you can see everything on the screen makes it only about one-quarter necessary to let the audience know what is happening. . . . It takes very little, a gesture, a certain relation between two scenes, two shots, the introduction in a rather prominent way of some prop which has already acquired a dramatic significance in the story. . . . On the stage, it's really quite difficult – and for people in the back almost impossible – to see the finer niceties of gestures and business between two people, and these often have to be backed up by dialogue. On the screen this kind of thing becomes absolutely ludicrous, and never more so than when, as if becoming very fashionable nowadays, a stretch of silent film is backed by a spoken narration. "I felt blue this morning. I didn't know what was the matter with me. I took a tram, I went to a park, I looked at the ducks. Stupid creatures, I thought. Their life is as dull as mine." Every bit of this narration is absolutely unnecessary. And yet we see film after film in which, by God, the hero gets out of bed, looks blue, looks like he doesn't know what's the matter with him, goes downstairs, takes the trolley car and rides out to the park, sits down, sees the ducks. The whole thing is photographed, and yet this voice goes yakking on as though contributing to the situation, and of course it isn't in the least. This is one of the things that you have to learn when you write for film – you have to try to somehow oppose the words and the image.

(“A Writer and the Films” 106-7)

Isherwood's criticism revolves around the common notion that maps the difference between word and image on to the modes of showing and telling. Accordingly, the image must resist being simply an illustration of the word. Techniques of cinematography (e.g. the telescopic function of the close-up) and montage (e.g. the meaning generated by combining shots), on the one hand, and the audience's long training in interpreting such techniques, on the other, have made it superfluous to explain through language what images can convey more effectively. The aim of this contrapuntal use of sound and image seeks not only to create an aesthetic surplus of meaning but also to defy the dominance of the verbal over the visual.

*Time*

Does this mean that the movie adaptation of Isherwood's own work is an example of such "ludicrous" and "absolutely unnecessary" approaches to voice-over narration that became "fashionable" in the late 1950s? Such accusations merit a closer look at the "ludicrous" and "absolutely unnecessary" elements of the film in relation to Isherwood's notion of the literary camera eye as well as his ideas about theater and cinema. And given the significant period of time that passed between the publication of *Goodbye to Berlin* and its adaptations for stage and screen, it is also useful to re-evaluate what "fashionable" means in the context of film history.

To be sure, Cornelius' opening does not exactly match Isherwood's example. In both cases, voice-over narration dominates the filmic images. In both examples, the voices shift tense and modulate their relations to the story-world. In Isherwood's imagined film, the voice-over shifts from reported action and thought to a direct representation of thought which, given this snippet of a scenario, may still be read as non-diegetic. (It could also be the beginning of an interior monologue.) What we are supposed to see on the screen are the protagonist's actions and emotions correlating with the singular states and events depicted in the narration. In *I Am a Camera*, too, a shift in the representation of speech and thought occurs when the off-screen voice is continued on-screen and Christopher reads Sally's name aloud from the book cover.

The main difference between the two examples lies in the way aspects of tense interact between visual and verbal planes. In Isherwood's caricature of a redundant voice-over, the tense aspect of narration coincides with the time of the events depicted on the screen. Put differently, every verbal representation of a singular state or event corresponds to a visual representation of that state or event. By contrast, the voice-over narration in *I Am a Camera* relates almost exclusively to general states and habitual events: the protagonist's name, his profession and marital status, his emotional disposition to sentimental melodies, his regular attendance at literary parties, and his experiential rule of assessing the quality of books at such parties. Strictly speaking, the narrativity of this passage is rather low or covert. We can assume from sentences like "Unfortunately, I can't always miss the literary cocktail parties to which I am invited by my publisher" that he is attending one or is about to do so. Thus, given the expositional character of the opening voice-over, it is in fact quite remarkable how the images manage to configure much of the verbal information into a short and continuous string of action – even if this entails the carting of a piano into the street. The well-placed street musician is certainly the

most ludicrous gimmick in the opening scene, if “ludicrous” is meant to describe a self-reflexive jest. The pianist is an almost surreal figure. With a stoic mime he turns to Christopher and watches him taking the pill as if he could read his mind. Or is the pianist himself a figment of Christopher’s thoughts, a visual stunt of the voice-over narrator? This narrative play also resonates on the sound level. Not only could he pass as a cinema pianist of the silent era, his tune, which on the verbal cue “sentimental melodies” fades in well before the pianist comes into the frame, may initially be perceived as non-diegetic (or hypodiegetic) music. In a sense, the pianist’s “intrusion” into the frame can be compared to the verbal obtrusion of a redundant voice-over on “a stretch of a silent film” that Isherwood lamented in his lecture.

If *I Am a Camera* is illustrative of those unnecessary voice-over narrations that had become so fashionable, then this fad for obtrusive voice-overs needs to be seen as an ironic and playful approach to this convention, which provides a new twist on well-rehearsed debates between the verbal and the visual towards the end of the classical Hollywood era. In the opening sequence, the traditional pairing of the visual with the descriptive, on the one hand, and the verbal with the narrative on the other hand, is reversed. At the same time, boundaries between an external objective reality and internal mental realities are blurred; or rather, they are reconfigured into a relationship of adjacency. The pianist as a conspicuous symbol of Christopher’s troubled relationship with canned sentimentality has a sonic counterpart in the use of sound as a means of focalization at the end of the expositional voice-over. When Christopher looks at Sally’s book her unmistakable laughter fades in. Since she is celebrating with journalists in the other room, we may process her laughter as part of Christopher’s perceptual focus or interpret it as his sonic memory triggered by reading her name.

This ambiguous use of sounds and the montage or juxtaposition of voices that belong to different levels is characteristic of the film’s obsession with interlocking narrative levels. When Christopher arrives at the party and is welcomed by his friends, we hear both the voice-over of Christopher as narrator and – albeit muted – the conversation in which, as a character, he is engaged. Rather than viewing “a stretch of silent film backed up with narration,” we become aware of different diegetic levels of sound and are invited to interpret images belonging to different realms of reality. In the stage play, the different communicative frames (the author’s search for a voice and perspective, the narrator’s stance towards his story and his engagement as character) all seem to be written into one scene and space. The film version disentangles and rearranges these levels in a serial fashion that allows for a greater spatio-temporal mobility. While the (extra-diegetic) voice-over introducing

Christopher gives way to Christopher's (diegetic) voice talking with his friend at the party, the communicative exchanges are neatly separated. His conversation at the party, in turn, frames another storytelling situation. Asked about his acquaintance with Sally, Christopher walks to a window and begins his story about her. A cross-dissolve takes us back to Berlin in the year 1931 and we see the young Isherwood standing by a window with a glass of beer.

This scene not only matches the previous storytelling frame, it also re-inserts the image of the window, which orchestrates the perceptual metaphor of Christopher's camera vision. As in the previous framing scene, the voice-over is succeeded by direct speech. Introducing the metaphor of the camera as an ethical refuge from the political reality, the voice-over reports, "I said I to myself" and his on-screen voice continues: "I" am a camera. The remainder of this famous passage is then integrated into a didactic dialogue with Fräulein Schneider, who overhears Christopher as she enters with Fritz. It illustrates once more the director's overall attempt to assimilate different levels of experience without conflating them.

The matching frames of Christopher staring out of the window at the cocktail party and in his room in Berlin align with two different narrative frames respectively. In the first scene, he gazes off into a remote and empty space. This window provides a storytelling frame for his remembered vision. In the second case, the window serves as a frame of focalization. As he witnesses Nazis harassing a Jewish man, the window screen becomes a device of emotional detachment. Both frames are combined as stylistic registers throughout the film. Rather than viewing Christopher's story as a conventional flashback, the double window-frame draws attention to the active and passive dimensions of perception and memory. Things present or past are at once found and construed. As in Isherwood's novel, the film's approach to the metaphor of the camera revolves around this passive-active dichotomy.

Similarly, the doubling of visual and auditory information is geared towards an aesthetic that teases out differences in what seems similar. In the film this creates something of a paradox. While Isherwood's novel aspires to be photographic from the moment of its creative conception, its development and projection on the film screen not only involves two stages of adaptation but also ends up framed twice. The film contains a record of its own history of media versions. This palimpsestuous layering of versions is not an unusual transmedial phenomenon in adaptation practices. In the film *I Am a Camera* it contributes to the exploration of the cinematic in Isherwood's literary use of the camera eye, foregrounding differences between modes of representation that – within a specific historical and aesthetic framework – are considered

analogous. This aesthetic of intermedial difference comes close to what André Bazin describes as a “dialectic between creation and fidelity,” which in the case of Bresson’s *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) can be reduced to a “dialectic between literature and cinema” that crosses the conventions of translation and adaptation with “the most insidious kind of fidelity” (Bazin 142, 126).

The double framing and the twofold windowing in *I Am a Camera* are like explications or paraphrases of what is contained in synthetic intermedial figures such as the literary camera eye or its filmic equivalent the camera pen (as conceived of by the French critic and filmmaker Alexander Astruc). *I Am a Camera* shows the obverse side of the camera-eye narration. Since Christopher’s window of narration and his window of focalization have not yet fully dissolved into another the scope of the camera eye as a form of representation, where experience and mediation fuse, remains to be imagined by the viewer. This does not mean that *I Am a Camera* is bound to an outdated literalist paradigm. On the contrary, it re-addresses established conventions of adaptation in the wider context of word-and-image relations. It brings together many discursive threads that inform the modernist camera-eye vision concerning relations between self and other, real and imaginary, inside and outside, past and present (see Casetti and North). Yet, the film also reconstructs this vision from a late modernist perspective and, as such, offers an instructive link to a mimetic conception of the camera-eye, where the simulation of a “camera experience” becomes the predominant challenge for literary experiments in cinematic fiction.

*References*

- Bazin, André. "Le Journal D'un Curé De Campagne and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson." Trans. Hugh Gray. *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 1. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967. 125-43.
- Breit, Harvey. "Talk with Mr. Isherwood." *New York Times*, 16 December 1951. 217.
- "'Camera' Appeal Fails." *New York Times*, 16 August 1955. 18
- Casetti, Francesco. *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- Cavalcanti, Alberto. *Rien que les heures*. Paris: Néofilm, 1926.
- Coe, Richard L. "A Perky Pup; a Deft Julie." *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, 28 September 1955. 28.
- Cornelius, Henry. *I Am a Camera*. Motion Picture. Romulus Films, 1955.
- Crone, Anna Lisa. *Rožanov and the End of Literature: Polyphony and the Dissolution of Genre in Solitaria and Fallen Leaves*. Würzburg: Jal Verlag, 1978.
- Crowther, Bosley. "Screen: 'I Am a Camera.'" *New York Times*, 9 August 1955. 29.
- Dos Passos, John. "Satire as a Way of Seeing: Reminiscences of One Pair of Eyes." Georg Grosz, *Interregnum*. New York: The Black Sun Press, 1936. 9-19.
- Elliott, Kamilla. *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Gardner, R. H. "Of Stage And Screen." *The Sun*, 21 November 1955. 10.
- "Grosz Is a 'Camera.'" *New York Times*, 24 July 1955. SM 12.
- Isherwood, Christopher. *Goodbye to Berlin*. London: Random House, 2004.
- . "Lecture Notes: A Writer and the Film." *Isherwood on Writing*, ed. James J. Berg. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. 232-233.
- . "A Writer and the Films." *Isherwood on Writing*, ed. James J. Berg. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. 99-113.
- . "A Writer and the Theater." *Isherwood on Writing*, ed. James J. Berg. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. 84-98.
- Ludington, Townsend. "John Dos Passos, 1896-1970: Modernist Recorder of the American Scene." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 72.4 (1996): 565-72.
- North, Michael. *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

- Quendler, Christian. "The Conceptual Integration of Intermediality: Literary and Cinematic Camera-Eye Narratives." *Blending and the Study of Narrative*, ed. Ralf Schneider and Marcus Hartner. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011.
- . "Rethinking the Camera Eye: *Dispositif* and Subjectivity." *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 9.4 (2011), forthcoming.
- Rajewsky, Irina O. *Intermedialität*. Tübingen: Francke, 2002.
- Scheuer, Philip K. "Julie Has a Field Day but Film Stirs Furor." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 August 1955. D1.
- Spindler, Michael. "John Dos Passos and the Visual Arts." *Journal of American Studies* 15.3 (1981): 391-405.
- Tinee, Mae. "Film of 'I Am a Camera' Is a Bit Overdone." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 November 1955. B7.
- Van Druten, John and Christopher Isherwood. *I Am a Camera: A Play in Three Acts*. New York: Random House, 1952.
- Watts, Stephen. "On Shooting a 'Camera.'" *New York Times*, 23 January 1955. X5.
- Westerhoven, James N. "Autobiographical Elements in the Camera Eye." *American Literature* 48.3 (1976): 340-64.
- Wilde, Alan. "Language and Surface: Isherwood and the Thirties." *Contemporary Literature* 16.4 (1975): 478-91.

