Goodbye to Berlin: Different Angles on Isherwood’s Camera

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Abstract

In spite of the efforts to elucidate the famous four-word statement, Isherwood’s I am a camera remains subject of debate. Although it has been regarded both as a statement of narrative method and exposure of the writer’s personality, I am a camera continues to be considered as famous as misleading. The writer’s ambiguity and reluctance to acknowledge the autobiographical element in his work add mystery and appeal to the Berlin stories. This paper focuses on Isherwood’s cinematic approach to Goodbye to Berlin (1939), analyzing the significant role that his camera performs and providing textual and biographical evidence to support it. Particular attention is given to the historical setting as a powerful influence in choosing a visual-literary perspective to represent the writer’s experience in Berlin in the thirties.

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. (Isherwood, 1939: 1)

As Norman Page (1998: 191) puts it, “writers tend to become impatient with such of their own dicta as are turned into clichés.” This is definitely the case of Christopher Isherwood, who, having been asked about the autobiographical element in I am a camera, repeatedly underestimated the importance given to the four-word statement, insisting that he was only trying to “describe [his] mood at that particular moment” (Page, 1998: 191). Years later he admitted that “[the narrator] wasn’t [him] at all. He was only a device used to tell the story in the first person” (Page, 1998: 191).

However, what Isherwood-writer claims does not suit the presence of Isherwood-character-narrator in most part of the Berlin stories. Berg and Freeman (2001: 5) refer to Isherwood’s experiment of using the first person in narrative as “a new form of documentary fiction, one that mixes autobiographical recording and introspection”. Similarly, Bucknell (2001: 13) addresses the Berlin stories as “a group of loosely associated pieces of semiautobiographical short fiction, based on Isherwood’s life in Berlin during 1930 and 1931, as the Nazis were rising to power”. Yet, Bucknell (2001: 14) adds “[…] the author makes changes for one or more various reasons, such as: wish to improve the truth; a reluctance to reveal the truth; or a conviction that in order to convey the truth of `real life,´ the author has to change it, has to get a particular essential quality which might not be expressed by a simple reporting of facts”.

It is evident that Goodbye to Berlin (1939) is autobiographical to a significant extent. “The Christopher figure […] as a younger upper-class English-man, with a public education, who is teaching English in Berlin and has published a book called All the Conspirators” (Page, 1998: 192) is certainly a portrait of the artist in his fictional world. However, the mystery surrounding Isherwood is due, in part, to his artful blend of art and self-advertising, but mostly, to his regarding his own life as a picture, a film. Whether he believed he was a camera or not, he kept a respectful distance from his autobiographical snapshots playing both actor and director in a particular kind of cinematic text.
Therefore, that “wasn’t me at all” from above, as well as any other incongruence in the treatment of Isherwood character-narrator, can only be interpreted as part of the *ambiguity, reticence* and *suppression* which have always been aesthetically justified and inherently present in most of Isherwood’s work as both source of artistic strength and inevitable consequence of his choice of narrative method. As the writer tells his mother in one of his letters: “I have got an essay on ‘omission is the beginning of all Art’ which it may amuse you to see” (qtd. in Bucknell, 2001: 22). Perhaps both Isherwood’s *omission* and *eager helplessness* are the key to understanding not only his vision of Berlin but also the reason why the second paragraph of *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) remains subject of debate.

Among the various efforts to elucidate the author’s intention behind the famous quote is that of Bucknell (2001: 14), who understands the four-word statement as a misleading metaphor in the description of narrative. In her view, the author past training as a historian, his habit of keeping diaries and the idea of observing and collecting information through accurate recording, may have suggested a turning towards historical realism, ignoring, the “shaping imagination of the artist” (Bucknell, 2001: 14).

 [...] Even photography is interpretative. Isherwood as a writer was incapable of ‘being passive’ of ‘not thinking’ and he knew full well that the mere act of recording his experience, of writing it down, changed it. This is why he so often appears in his stories as a character and narrator. Such a literary device makes an implied philosophical statement: that it is not possible for a writer to be entirely objective. [...] He puts himself at the edge of the picture in order to remind us that he is filtering reality, not just recording it. (Bucknell, 2001: 14-15)

The famous *I am a camera* then, is as renowned as misleading, but it stands for Isherwood in Berlin in the thirties, caught between Nazis and Communists, millionaires and mobs. The moment requires individual decision, but Isherwood’s camera dodges commitment.

David Thomas (1972; 45-47), on the other hand, regards the famous quote neither as “a declaration of authorial method [nor as an] exposition of theory.” In fact, he provides a Freudian explanation for the four-word statement. In his view, *I am a camera* is a “revelation of personality” (Thomas, 1972: 47). Thus, the camera is used as “a defensive mask [not only to hide] the pseudo-impersonality of a young man, ‘alone, far from home,’ [but also] to abstract and project these qualities he had observed in himself in the fictional type of the ‘neurotic hero’ ” (Thomas, 1972: 48-49). That is why the writer can talk about *Christopher* as if he were just another of his many characters. Behind the camera lies the dramatic association between “neurotic withdrawal [and] open confession and forms of personal dependence” (Thomas, 1972: 48).

The above can also be related to the Morsbergers’ analysis of *the artist as a monster* in “Frankenstein: The True Story” (2001). Isherwood’s perceptions, not only add “vitality and insight into the Creature, [but also] a powerful symbol of the ‘outsider’-whether artist, woman, or homosexual- the Creature is also, significantly, a symbol of human weakness and feelings of rejection shared by everyone” (Morsberger, 2001: 109).
Isherwood’s camera plays hide-and-seek with readers by revealing bits of the artist’s inner self but at the same time hiding the weaker and even heartbreaking aspects of it behind a decadent portray of Berlin and its people. The question remains whether Isherwood is a blunt looking glass on Berlin, or just a writer in a dangerous time, afraid of becoming too personally involved in his work, yet obsessed with the life on his screen and his own helplessness in exposing its brutality.

Antony Shuttleworth’s in “In a Populous City: Isherwood in the Thirties” (2001) reveals the essential connection between I am a camera and Isherwood’s cinematic approach to reality. The writer is, in fact, a movie camera, but what matters to him is, in Shuttleworth’s (2001: 175) view, “his decision to observe in a certain way”:

His shutter is open, and what is narrated are accumulated instances of observation made before the shutter closes, which might extend over time and space indefinitely... [The narrator] rejects comment and judgment and quite explicitly avoids the idea of objectivity as an overarching “view from nowhere.” What we are offered instead is a situated objectivity (“from my window”), a small piece of truth [a narrow frame, a single Berlin street]. More than anything else the narrator seeks, by receiving data like a camera, to be free of interpretation. (Shuttleworth, 2001: 157-158)

But he is not. It is true that cameras cannot select or interpret information. However, film directors do, and that is the role Isherwood’s narrator performs by presenting us with a world that seems real, though it is, in fact, only an illusion of fatality and decadence. “For in offering a seemingly ‘objective’ presentation of a Berlin street that turns out not to be objective, [the narrator] actually mimics the cultural role that cameras can fulfill” (Shuttleworth, 2001: 157).

This way, readers become film audience, following closely what lies before the narrator’s eyes, watching images which are falsely objective, as they are charged with the director-narrator’s vision behind the camera. By making his readers believe he does without interpretation, Isherwood turns them into uneasy voyeurs and puts them in charge of finding the truth behind appearances.

“The man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair” (Isherwood, 1939: 1) are nothing more than a sequence of snapshots on an imaginary screening, a repetitive pattern of reality bits superimposed on a fictional plot to give the impression of photographic collage. What is more, public events are added to the montage, but as impersonal external elements which in the end are assimilated into Isherwood’s character-narrator’s world as well. The funeral of Herman Muller is taking place beneath the window of Christopher’s hotel, and the narrator acknowledges it from a distance: “We had nothing to do with those Germans down there, marching, or with the dead man in the coffin, or with the words on the banners” (Isherwood, 1939: 49).

As many other artists, Isherwood is influenced by a visually oriented perception of art, which stems from what Walter Benjamin calls mechanical reproduction of pictures, sounds and writing. So the collage of images used in Goodbye to Berlin not only generates the motion of photography but also “brings out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye, yet accessible to the lens [and puts] the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself” (Benjamin, 1936: section 2). The photographic idea of
an object seen from different angles is present in the treatment of characters like Sally Bowles and Otto, who are introduced in different stories from different perspectives. Sally Bowles in “Sally Bowles” and in “The Landauers,” and Otto in “On Ruegen Island” and “the Nowaks”.

In fact, it is the artist himself who emerges in a photographic collage of viewpoints. There is much of Isherwood in the character of Peter but “the [author’s] actual characteristics may be seen as being divided between the innocuous Christopher (more readily identified, of course, with the author) and the weaker, more problematic Peter (Page, 1998: 196). The same happens with the character of Bernhard in “The Landauers,” who embodies Isherwood’s own homosexuality and sarcastic wit. In fact the overlapping presentation of different stories and characters brings about a profusion of voices which in the end results in an unstable, yet ironic I.

In “The Other Camera - Aspects of the Weimar Cinema,” Page refers to Isherwood’s “lifelong affair with the cinema, [and his] “enormous passion for films”:

In Berlin he was in the right place, at the right time to witness some of the most exciting contemporary developments in that medium. He would have had access there to a cinematic art both more experimental and more outspoken than its British or American counterparts and it would have been strange if his profound interest in a non-literary narrative medium had no had some influence on his writing. (Page, 1998: 146)

The writer’s attraction to the new medium is supported by biographical information as well. “During the Berlin years, references to cinema visits in the company of Auden and Spender are on record” (Page, 1998: 148). It is also true that his excitement at film making would increase after working as a screenwriter in 1933 for director Berthold Viertel.

In contrast to many other writers who felt that writing for film was a waste of talent, Isherwood looked at script writing as a viable genre, as it demanded a far more visual approach than other literary forms. Consequently, “this made it as natural for [him] to refer to a cinematic as to literary text in [his] everyday discourse” (Page, 1998: 149). “It is not surprising, then, that photographic and cinematic terms offer themselves naturally when Isherwood’s writing is being discussed - a tendency encouraged by Isherwood himself” (Page, 1998: 147), just as it is not surprising either that the writer would think of Berlin as “a very good photograph” (Isherwood, 1939: 207), portray his characters as cinema goers and talk about his novel as an album of snapshots.

This cinematic approach to fiction is further supported by the writer’s voyeuristic stance and his fascination not only with “the outward appearance of people, [but also with] the visible details of ‘everyday’” (Page, 1998: 147). A parallel can be drawn between the camera-actor interaction in film-making and that of the “bland, obtuse narrator [in Isherwood’s fiction], intensely focused on the other figure in the tale,” (Bucknell, 2001: 22), who is also a “performing identity, [falling] into delusion” (Shuttleworth, 2001: 159).

Yet apart from the writer’s fascination with film making and the powerful development of German cinema, there are other reasons to think of the use of a camera-narrator, -“quite passive, recording, not thinking” (Isherwood, 1939: 1)- as necessary and unavoidable in the context of Berlin in the thirties. The longer you
ponder over Isherwood’s famous words the more clearly they become both inspired and puzzling, but at the same time sheer pointers on a pessimistic outlook of society.

How does an artist convey reality when events are so powerful and at the same time illusory? When private life is overwhelmed not only by a dramatically developing history, but also by creative forces and indescribable gloom? Isherwood character-narrator is part of a world where nothing seems true, where art cannot be separated from reality, where “Nazi reliance on spectacle and theatricality” (Shuttleworth, 2001: 151) mixes with every day life’s performances.

At the end of Goodbye to Berlin the narrator says: “No. Even now I can’t altogether believe that any of this has really happened…” (Isherwood, 1939: 207). It seems that only a camera, not as guarantee of truth or objectivity, but as an artistic tool, can be capable of mixing facts and illusion, and creating in literature, the illusion of films.

References


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