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Isherwood's Camera. Traces of Cinematic Narrative in *Prater Violet* and *A Single Man*

From the very beginning of its existence, the cinema has attempted to tell stories. With bigger or smaller success, it absorbed material from other arts such as theatre and literature. Particularly novels have become a source of inspirations for the cinema, and therefore the comparative studies of fiction and film usually concentrate on film adaptation. The aim of this paper is to analyze the reverse situation, namely the influence of cinematic aesthetics on literary narration in the 20th century novels on the example of the *oeuvre* of Christopher Isherwood. The analysis will be conducted on the basis of two novels: *Prater Violet* and *A Single Man* and accompanied by selected passages from *Goodbye to Berlin*.

With the emergence and development of the cinema, literature became the natural source of inspirations for the new medium. Along with the theatre, literature nourished films with stories. In her essay *The Cinema* Virginia Woolf writes:

> All the famous novels of the world, with their well-known characters and their famous scenes, only asked, it seemed, to be put on the films. What could be easier and simpler? The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and to the moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim. But the results are disastrous to both. The alliance is unnatural. (1927:2)

However, the ubiquity of cinema in the 20th century led to changing our perception of reality and its artistic presentation.[1] Not only did the cinema devour novels but began to change them as well. Writers started thinking in a cinematic way and blending the discourse of film and fiction. Many writers focused on screenwriting in their careers or at least had a film adaptation in mind while writing their novel. For instance, John Fowles, in his *Notes on an Unfinished Novel* states that cinema *has stamped on his mode of imagination*. Particularly when the novelist analysed his dreams, it was difficult not to think in a cinematic technique. Furthermore, Fowles claims that this phenomenon concerns not only him but his whole generation (1969:144-145).

However, when speaking about the writers influenced by the cinema certain distinctions have to be made. While John Fowles might have been working under the charm of films he had seen, some writers borrowed cinematic techniques to experiment with the form of the novel in order to express what up to the point seemed inexpressible. This phenomenon is described by Keith

[1] In his book *Film and Fiction: the Dynamics of Exchange*, Keith Cohen writes about a certain *mutation* of signs such as word and image and states that the phenomenon has been documented since the early nineteenth century (1979:3). An example of Cohen's observation may be found in the work of the Pre-raphaelite movement. Cinema contributed to the development of this process.

Cohen, who refers to Arnold Hauser's *The Social History of Art* analyzing the cinematic character of modernist prose:

> The discontinuity of the plot and scenic development, the sudden emersion of the thoughts and moods, the relativity and the inconsistency of the time standards, are what remind us in the works of Proust and Joyce, Dos Passos, and Virginia Woolf of the cuttings, dissolves and interpolations of the film. (Cohen 1979:84).

Yet another type of writers whose style may be called cinematic are the so-called novelists-turned-screenwriters. Some of the novelists and playwrights work for the film industry and help adapting their work for the silver screen, or are employed to write original screenplays. The screenplay poetics may be transposed into the literary discourse of these writers' novels. A noticeable development of writing for the cinema may be observed in the first half of the 20th century in America.[2] Among the novelists-turned-screenwriters working for Hollywood we can find such names as William Faulkner, Dashiell Hammet and Aldous Huxley. In some of these cases the transition from paper to celluloid was forced by economic situation and cinema's growing popularity, in others it was curiosity about the new medium.

One of the British writers who wrote for the film studios in America was Christopher Isherwood. He moved to the United States just before the beginning of World War Two, where he worked for the Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios. His work for the film industry resulted in writing *Prater Violet* (1945) which has been labelled by some critics[3] as a film novel, that is a novel which describes the processes operating within the film industry. Isherwood's contribution to the development of cinematic narrative strategies has not been described as thoroughly as that of his predecessors such as the aforementioned Joyce or Woolf. Isherwood's writing is particularly interesting in that matter as he seems to combine the types of "cinematic" writing mentioned before. On the one hand he was an experienced screenwriter, on the other hand his interest in the cinematic aesthetics began before his cooperation with the film studios in America.[4]

It is worth noting that the story not always determines the style of narration. Although *Prater Violet* is related to the film industry, which justifies the use of cinematic narration, *A Single Man* has almost nothing in common with the film industry, maybe apart from the setting in California. The former of the novels tells the story of a man named "Christopher Isherwood" collaborating with a film studio. "Isherwood" is offered to participate in writing a script for a musical called *Prater Violet*. He is to cooperate with a famous Viennese film director Friedrich Bergmann.

[2] In his article "'Eastern Writer' in Hollywood" John Schulteiss writes that there were two significant periods in American film industry with the participation of writers: in the early twenties and then in the thirties and early forties. First, Hollywood needed well written stories and then *snappy* dialogues due to the introduction of sound movies. "During this latter time almost every noteworthy literary figure came West to write for films" (1971:1).

[3] In his book *The Nickel Was for the Movies. Film in the Novel from Pirandello to Puig* Gavriel Moses discusses Isherwood's novel with other examples from British and American literature such as Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*.

[4] Traces of cinematic narrative can be found in Isherwood's most renowned novel *Goodbye to Berlin* which has been turned into a stage performance entitled *I Am a Camera* and followed by the famous film adaptation *Cabaret* directed by Bob Fosse.

The book describes both the process of screenwriting and shooting of the movie. The protagonist of *A Single Man* is George, an academic teacher who came from London to California. We read about one day from George's life. The protagonist suffers from trauma after the loss of his partner. He tries to distance himself from the surrounding reality and each day puts on a mask that allows him to survive the day.

The way "Isherwood" characters perceive the surrounding world is best described in Isherwood's most renowned novel, *Goodbye to Berlin*: "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving in the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed" (1989:1). The narrator here is compared to a camera and its specific way of registering reality. In his article, David P. Thomas collects several critical interpretations of this passage, which see this way of observation as passive and impersonal, similar to the one made by a camera (1972:1). Furthermore, the last quoted sentence suggests the imperfectness of the narration present in the book, which needs *developing, printing and fixing* as if it was just some footage in need for editing. This may suggest the aforementioned mutation of the codes and the strong influence of film on literary fiction. Isherwood's text becomes a sort of an intermediate stage between the film and the novel.

How then are we to recognize the cinematic narration in the novel? What are the characteristics of such a style? The answer has been partly given in the quotation concerning Isherwood's predecessors. The idea concentrates around the time and space issues. In his book *On Art* Umberto Eco defines the spatial-temporal differences between literature and cinema:

> The difference between cinematic and novelistic action seems to be the following: the novel tells us: "this happened, then another thing happened and so on" while film presents us with a sequence: "this + this + this and so on" – it is a sequence of displays of the present, which can be hierarchically ordered only in the editing phase. (2008:209)[5]

Thus according to Eco, the novel, unlike cinema with its various forms of editing, cannot present numerous plots or events at the same time.[6]

The important matter on which Eco focuses his attention is time. He defines film as a sequence of displays of the present. The manifestation of the cinematic narration in the novel is achieved through the present tenses, which give the feeling of things happening *right now* as if projected on the screen. The present tense is also characteristic for the screenplay form as well as stage directions in theatre plays. However, in a screenplay present tense is more frequently used as descriptions and stage directions are more abundant. Let us take a sample from a film script to look at its form. It is an excerpt from *A Serious Man* by Nathan and Joel Coen:

[5] Translation from the Polish edition of Eco's book: „Różnica między akcją filmową a powieściową wydaje się zatem następująca: powieść powiada nam: „Wydarzyło się to, potem wydarzyło się to itd.", podczas gdy film stawia nas wobec sekwencji: „To + to +to itd."-jest to sekwencja przedstawień teraźniejszości, które można hierarchicznie uporządkować dopiero w fazie montażu" (209) .

[6] It should be assumed that in the quoted analysis of film and novel narration, the experimental novel of the 20th century was not taken into consideration. Literary narration from the 20th century cannot be analyzed this way as it was already under the influence of cinema.

> The boy who is listening to the transistor radio-DANNY Gopnik-sits at a hinge-topped desk in a cinderblock classroom whose rows of desks are occupied by other boys and girls of about twelve years of age. It is dusk and the room is fluorescent-lit. At the front of the room a gray-haired man in a worn suit and tie addresses the class. DANNY straightens one leg so that he may dig into a pocket. With an eye on the TEACHER to make sure he isn't being watched, he eases something out: A twenty-dollar bill.

The situation in the passage is described in the present tense. Apart from the actions taking place in the scene, there is also a description of the setting. This kind of writing can be observed also in Isherwood's novels, particularly in *Prater Violet*. For the sake of our interest, the novel may be divided into two sections. The first one concerns the process of screenwriting while the second one the process of shooting on location. These two differ in terms of the tense used. Just when the shooting stage starts, there is a change from narrative to present tenses. In relation to what was said about Eco's distinction, the introductory paragraph in the "shooting sequence" seems significant:

> We started shooting the picture in the final week of January. I give this approximate date because it is almost the last I shall be able to remember. What followed is so confused in my memory, so transposed and foreshortened, that I can only describe it synthetically. My recollection of it has no sequence. It is all of a piece. (1969:72)

What can be inferred from the protagonist's account is that the process of filmmaking is a new experience to him, therefore it cannot be expressed by traditional literary means. Three important words describe Isherwood's "coverage" from the set: *synthesis*, *sequence* and *piece*. The adverb *synthetically* in the quoted passage suggests artificiality but also a certain fusion of elements, in this case discourses. In his book on Graham Greene, Andrzej Weseliński gives a definition of montage "which suggests a building action, working up from raw material, and which denotes then, a process of synthesis" (1979:73). Thus, what the use of the adverb suggests is Isherwood's awareness of the discourse blend he has to make in order to express his experiences from work on the set. Piece and sequence send us back to what Eco says about the language of film, namely that it is a "sequence of the displays of the present." According to Isherwood, the account "has no sequence and is all of a piece." On one hand this may mean that the recollections from the location function as raw footage in need of editing. On the other hand the lack of sequence and uniformity of the material may be simply characteristic for the cinematic narrative.

The quoted passage functions as an introduction to the cinematic sequence in the novel. It is as if Isherwood ended his literary narration here putting a colon. The tense of the following text changes from the narrative (past) to the present. The cinematic part opens with a longish description of the set:

> Within the great barn-like sound-stage, with its high, bare, padded walls, big enough to enclose an airship, there is neither day nor night: only irregular alternations of activity and silence. Beneath a firmament of girders and catwalks, out of which the cowled lamps shine coldly down, like planets, stands the inconsequent, half-dismantled architecture of the sets; archways, sections of houses, wood and canvas hills, huge photographic backdrops,

> the frontages of the streets; a kind of Pompei, but more desolate, more uncanny, because this is, literally, a half-world, a limbo of mirror images, a town which has lost its third dimension. (73)

The very first passage of the cinematic part shows the synthesis of which Isherwood speaks. On the one hand, the description abounds in metaphors and similes typical for literary discourse. On the other hand, this detailed description of the set may be associated with an *establishing shot* in the cinematic discourse, that is a shot which sets up the context for a scene: it shows the relationship between the figures and object, indicates where, and sometimes when the scene takes place.[7] The quoted description goes on for almost a page and gives further details of the set. The focus is moved to one of the sets and then to the characters: "in the middle of the set, patient and anonymous as tailors' dummies, are the actor and actress… Mr Watts, a thin bald man with gold rimmed spectacles, walks recklessly back and forth, regarding them from various angles. A blue glass monocle hangs from a ribbon around his neck" (73). Speaking in a cinematic jargon, the scene begins with an *establishing shot* which gradually narrows the area of our interest, ending in a detail of the character's outfit, which is called a *close-up*. The whole sequence could be characterized as a *lean-in*.

Several pages later Isherwood moves on to describe the shooting of a scene. In its form, the passage resembles a film script. If not for the clearly stated beginning and ending of the shooting sequence, we would never know the difference between the narration in the script part and in the preceding and following pages:

> At last we're ready. The rehearsal begins. Toni is standing alone, looking pensively out of the window. It is the day after her meeting with Rudolf.... She is heartbroken and bewildered. Her eyes are full of tears. (This part of the scene is covered by a close-up.) The door opens. Toni's father comes in.
> Father: 'What's the matter, Toni? Why aren't you at Prater?' (...)
> Toni (with a far-away look in her eyes, which shows that her answer is symbolic); ' I can't sell yesterday's violets. They wither so quickly.'
> She begins to sob, and runs out of the room, banging the door. Her father stands looking after her, in blank surprise. Then he shrugs his shoulders and grimaces, as much as to say that woman's whims are beyond his understanding.
> 'Cut.' Bergmann rises quickly from his chair and goes over to Anita. (77-78)

One of the traceable elements differentiating the script part from the remnant of this passage is the punctuation. The actors' parts are introduced by a colon, while the characters' utterances are commented by the narrator.

Apart from the present tense, the film script form uses elliptical sentences introduced in brackets. Particular attention should be drawn to the bracketed comments. They function here as stage

[7] It is interesting to note that establishing shots were most frequently used during the classical era of filmmaking, which dates roughly between 1910-1960, which would prove that tendencies present in the cinema appealed to writers (using cinematic narrative) as well.

directions, but this is only one of the cinematic functions of the brackets. In both of the analyzed novels, Isherwood uses brackets for digressions, which may indicate problems with organizing the text into a certain sequence. Bracketed text seems less relevant and put into a particular place by a necessity, just as if the text was a draft version. This observation leads us back to the passage from *Goodbye to Berlin* where Isherwood speaks about the need of fixing and printing what the camera has registered.

Brackets[8] are extensively used in both analyzed texts. *A Single Man* abounds in different uses of the technique. Just as in *Prater Violet,* there are cases of bracketed text used for stage directions (18) as well as some additional, "vagabond" commentaries and unspoken thoughts, as Hermione Lee calls them (12). However, the most significant manifestation of this technique pertains to the cinematic montage, which is an editing strategy developed by Soviet directors such as Pudovkin, Vertov and Eisenstein. Several techniques developed by Eisenstein may be found in *A Single Man.* Let us look at one of the initial passages from the book, where we deal with a cinematic *flashback*:

> He fixes himself a plate of poached eggs with bacon and toast and coffee, and sits down to eat them at the kitchen table. And meanwhile, around and around in his head, goes the nursery jingle his Nanny taught him when he was a child in England, all those years ago:
> *Poached eggs on toast are very nice-*
> (He sees her so plainly still, grey-haired with mouse-bright eyes, a plump little body carrying in the nursery tray, short of breath from climbing all those stairs…)
> *Poached eggs on toast are very nice,*
> *If you try them once you'll want them twice!* (2010:5)

The passage gives an impression of an editing technique using the aid of sound. The sentence George hears in his head is a link between the description of his breakfast and his childhood recollections. The protagonist's memories are bracketed, which suggests another layer of discourse. In the cinema it often happens that the sound from one scene overlaps with another scene. In such case the sound is the linking factor. This technique is often used for presenting memories. We see somebody thinking and what takes us to the past in the head of the protagonist is somebody speaking or some sound that occurs still in the scene presenting the protagonist at the moment of thinking. The same happens when George recalls the nursery rhyme.

Another montage technique achieved through brackets which is present in *A Single Man* is the *shot-reverse shot* technique, which is based on two or more shots edited together that alternate characters, typically in a conversation situation. The following passage from the novel resembles this technique: "Sitting on the john, he can look out of the window. (They can see his head and shoulders from across the street, but not what he is doing.) It is a grey lukewarm California morning; the sky is low and soft with Pacific fog" (7). The passage presents what George sees through the window,

[8] The text in brackets seems to be an important device when speaking about a cinematic narrative in the novel. In her introduction to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Hermione Lee explains the need for using brackets: "Since fiction is not music or painting or film or any unspoken thoughts, it requires formal strategies if it is to try and be several things at once. These strategies may be as complicated as a whole section written from the point of view of the passage of time, or a simple as a pair of brackets" (199: xi).

which resembles an *establishing shot*, but the reader also knows what can be seen from the place observed by George. Usually brackets introduce a scene that is inserted into the main stream of narration. In this case, we observe two different points of view, but brackets may also introduce other types of shots such as *close-up*.

In the scene where George drives to work, we read about his views on current political matters. Suddenly his thoughts are interrupted as George corrects his way of thinking:

> And as for the senator, wouldn't it be rather amusing to –
> *No.*
> (At this point, we see the eyebrows contract in a more than usually violent spasm, the mouth thin to knife-blade grimness.)
> No. Amusing is *not* the word. These people are not amusing… (25)

From thoughts on current political affairs in the US we abruptly move to a description of George's facial expression. We do not even see the whole face but rather its parts, which gives an impression of an *extreme close-up*. What is the most important in the fragment though is the blending of discourses just as it was in *Prater Violet*. It may be stated that George's thoughts are described in a literary mode while the inserted description of the face belongs to the cinematic language.[9] Thus, it may be said that cinematic narrative strategies are used to break the storyline and distract the reader, which seems to go along with Isherwood's intentions. David Thomas quotes Isherwood's *Lions and Shadows* where the writer speaks about the role of a novelist as somebody *playing game with his reader;* continually amazing and deceiving him (Thomas 1972:7).

From the examples given above, it may be stated that Isherwood skilfully uses the cinematic and film script language in his narratives, combining these techniques with literary narration. The author's biography confirms that this may be the result of his cooperation with the movie industry. However, his life gives one more justification for the use of cinematic technique in these novels. Often being the odd one out (a novelist working for the cinema, homosexual among hostile heterosexuals) the author developed a style reflecting his distance to the outside world. According to Virginia Woolf, there is only an indirect participation in the events presented in the films we watch.[10] Cinematic sensitivity in Isherwood's writing establishes an imaginary screen between the viewer/reader (or the person behind camera) and the presented reality.

[9] When writing about the descriptions from *The Berlin Stories* Thomas questions the cinematic character of Isherwood's language. It is not fully cinematic, but rather a mixture of prose and film, which is suggested by interweaving linguistic metaphors with the raw language of the camera: "Above all, perhaps, cameras should not use metaphors: "monumental safes", is however metaphorical" (5).

[10] Woolf writes: "We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it. As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence. The horse will not knock us down. The king will not grasp our hands. The wave will not wet our feet..." (1927:1)

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STRESZCZENIE

Esej analizuje powieści Christophera Isherwooda *A Single Man* oraz *Prater Violet* pokazując, że ich narracja w znacznym stopniu naśladuje filmowy sposób opowiadania. Po pierwsze wynika to z szerszego zjawiska kulturowego silnego wpływu kina na wyobraźnię w dwudziestym wieku. Po drugie i ważniejsze, współpraca pisarza z przemysłem filmowym skutkowała przeniesieniem techniki nabytej podczas pracy z filmem do narracji powieściowej. Styl obydwu utworów jest porównany ze stylistyką scenariusza filmowego jak również z technikami operatorskimi i montażowymi.