

"Cabaret": Utilizing the Film Medium to Create a Unique Adaptation

Author(s): Arlene Rodda

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Cabaret:

Utilizing the Film Medium to Create a Unique Adaptation

In the opening of Christopher Isherwood's book *Goodbye to Berlin*, which records his observations of the city in the early 1930s, the narrator states:

I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. . . .
Someday all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.¹

In analyzing director Bob Fosse's *Cabaret*, which is based upon this book, these words take on a prophetic quality. With this film, the camera metaphor has a more literal significance as the themes set forth by Isherwood are interpreted and developed in a new way through the motion picture camera. Unlike the passive recording mechanism to which Isherwood compares his writing style, Fosse actively employs various techniques exclusive to the motion picture medium which are very effective in conveying the themes of *Goodbye to Berlin*. Such themes as the growing influence of Nazism, the decadence and subsequent deterioration of Berlin, and the evil of anti-Semitism are reinforced in *Cabaret* through the use of creative editing, lighting, and camera techniques. As a result, this film, which was the last in a string of theatrical and film adaptations, offers quite an interesting interpretation of Isherwood's material.

In order to appreciate the significance of the film *Cabaret*, it is helpful to understand

the development of the sources from which it came. Christopher Isherwood was a writer who lived in Berlin from 1930 until 1933 when the Nazis came to power. His writings contain observations of Berlin society at this time and possess an autobiographical element. The character of Sally Bowles dates back to a novella by Isherwood published in 1937. In 1939, this story and some thematically related pieces were collected in *Goodbye to Berlin*, which was itself eventually included in *Berlin Stories*.² These writings reflect the themes of Berlin's decadence in an atmosphere of deterioration and political turmoil.

In 1955, Isherwood's stories were adapted into a stage play by John van Druten titled *I Am a Camera*. According to the *New York Times Theatre Reviews*, the play focused mainly upon the impetuous character of Sally Bowles and was more of an amusing comedy than a serious adaptation of *Goodbye to Berlin*.³ This play was itself adapted into a film of the same name, which met with some negative criticism. One reviewer writes that although the play "did make some passing pretense of drawing from the *Berlin Stories* of Christopher Isherwood, a haunting sense of degeneration and impending doom in the German Capital," this film "barely recognizes that the Nazi hoodlums were then abroad."⁴ In 1966, Isherwood's stories once again provided the basis for a theatrical adaptation—this time in musical form. *Cabaret*, with music and lyrics by John Kander and Fred Ebb, was an innovative and radical departure from the type of shows that had dominated the American musical theatre since Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma* premiered in the mid-1940s. It was "an uncompromising hard-nosed look at life consistent with the coming of age of America in the 1960s."⁵

Finally, in 1972, came the film musical *Cabaret* which, although it shared its title, a few characters, and some songs with the Broadway musical, as well as similar themes, was quite a different thing altogether. Bob Fosse thought that the stage version was weak except for the cabaret numbers and atmosphere, and so returned to the original Isherwood stories as well as the play *I Am a Camera* for source materials.⁶ Joel Grey, who played the role of the M.C. both on Broadway and in the film, "had to realize one starts from scratch on a movie. You don't recreate, you start over."⁷ Those involved in making this film seem to have been concerned with being faithful to the thematic content of Isherwood's writing, while at the same time creating something new.⁸ One critic asserts that by "remorselessly discarding everything from their stage source . . . that would have weakened their theme of decadence giving way to barbarism, not only have they improved on the original, they have brilliantly transformed it."⁹ It has "the look of a work created expressly for the screen."¹⁰

Unlike the stage version, the musical numbers in the film *Cabaret* are almost exclusively limited to within the Kit Kat Klub itself. In doing this, the function which the cabaret serves becomes clearer. There are two very distinctive worlds in the film—the night club, which through various film techniques is depicted as a distorted underworld, and the naturalistic setting of the outside "real" world. Pauline Kael observes that "the floor show at the Kit Kat Klub is used as a prism through which we see the characters' lives."¹¹ The songs comment on the characters and interpret the historical period.

Fosse establishes the role of the Kit Kat Klub performers, especially the M.C., in a very effective manner by means of the editing techniques that are used in the film. One critic noted that "Fosse has a fondness for intercutting the violent reality of the outside . . . with the smoky unreality of the cafe."¹² Another reviewer explains, "Since everything has to do with everything else and the cabaret is always commenting on the life outside it, the film sometimes looks like an essay in significant cross-cutting, or associative montage."¹³ There are many examples of his use of cross-cutting. Rather than suggesting the idea of parallel time, however, the editing produces a thematic montage that is extremely effective in conveying the main ideas of the film.

The first instance of cross-cutting is during the opening number at the cabaret—"Wilkommen"—which is alternated with shots of Brian (the fictional Isherwood) arriving

in Berlin. These events are obviously unrelated in time since Brian is arriving during the daytime and the show is presumably at night; as a result, a thematic connection is drawn between them, linking the M.C.'s welcoming of the audience with Brian's arrival in the city. The M.C. bids his audience, "Leave your troubles outside. So, life is disappointing—forget it! In here life is beautiful. . . ." A contrast is hereby drawn between the outside world and the cabaret, as the shots jump between the two, thus establishing a dichotomy from the very beginning.

The most jolting instance of cross-cutting is the scene in which the cabaret manager is being beaten up by the Nazis, while back at the club, a lighthearted number is being performed. In the cabaret no one is aware of what is going on outside at this particular moment. In a broader sense, they are never really aware of what is happening outside of their world of pleasure; they wish to remain ignorant. In his review, Brooks Atkinson expresses this theme, which is common to adaptations of Isherwood's writing, as he observes that "at a monstrosity critical moment in the world's history, people were thoroughly immersed in their own pleasures, problems, and affairs and unaware of the big forces all around them."¹⁴ This scene is quite effective in conveying the idea that Berlin's decadent society paved the way for the Nazis.

In a similar scene involving cross-cutting, the Kit Kat Klub performers are mimicking soldiers, parodying the Nazi presence in Berlin. This number, which the audience finds so amusing, is cross-cut with shots of the Landauer mansion as Natalia finds a dead dog on the front stoop—a prank which demonstrates hatred for the Jews. This juxtaposition reinforces the anti-Semitic theme. One critic notes, "Through a very effective but very specious use of cross-cutting . . . the film makes it seem as if the decadent atmosphere of Berlin is not merely a symptom of social disorder and disillusionment but somehow directly responsible for the rise of Nazism."¹⁵

Another interesting example of editing is the scene in which Sally meets Max for the first time. There is a brief shot of Max's luxurious automobile. Immediately there is a jump-cut to the cabaret where Sally and the M.C. perform the "Money" number. This juxtaposition clearly reveals Sally's attitude toward wealth—an attitude which seems prevalent in the decadent society in which money takes on a very seductive quality. Later, when Sally and Brian are having dinner at Max's mansion, a close-up of Sally's face, obviously in awe of the riches surrounding her, is suddenly intercut by the image of the M.C. whose demonic expression is disturbing as he slowly and silently reiterates the word "money."

There are several instances in which a similar jump-cut to the M.C. seems to make a comment upon the action. Throughout the film, he is a detached character who, although appearing to be quite a degenerate, is the all-knowing force behind the action. The M.C. symbolizes "the decadence and decay which helped the Nazi menace gain momentum while no one bothered to be concerned."¹⁶ After he and Sally sing "Money," his close-up image is intercut for a moment backstage as he sticks his tongue out at Sally. Indirectly, he comments upon her conversation with Brian concerning Max's wealth and his promise to make her a movie star. After the "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" scene in the beer garden, there is a cut to a shot of the M.C. wearing an evil grin and nodding. He seems to know all, and alone among the characters understands what is going on. But he remains detached from the action, merely commenting upon it through his expressions and his performances on the cabaret stage. He embodies what is wrong with the society of Berlin as he "personifies the indifference of any nation that can close its eyes and ears to persistent horrors and agonies."¹⁷

Throughout all of the scenes mentioned, the editing techniques employed involve the juxtaposition of conflicting shots creating a jolting effect. The entire film reflects the influence of Eisenstein in this respect. Perhaps in no scene is this more evident than in the series of images presented when Sally, Max, and Brian are on their way to the mansion in the country. This scene begins with a jolting jump-cut from the scene in the restaurant where the very giddy Max and Sally meet Brian. Sally, dressed

in a fur coat, proceeds to order caviar as Max expresses the feeling that it is his duty to corrupt them all. Suddenly there is a jump to images of the Nazis on the road, standing perfectly motionless over a dead body. It appears that a Communist demonstration has been violently broken up by the Nazis. A series of still images portraying this horror is cross-cut with a shot of the frolicsome threesome driving past, separated from the reality of the scene in the street. This montage reflects the growing reality of the Nazi presence—a reality which Berlin chooses to ignore.

These images are accompanied by the voice-over of the conversation inside the car. They are somewhat aware of what has happened, but unwilling to let it ruin their good time. Max brushes off the threat, dismissing the Nazis as “just a bunch of stupid hooligans.” These words are heard as images are seen of the dead body in a pool of blood surrounded by a still, silent crowd. This juxtaposition is very disturbing. Max obviously is ignoring the imminent dangers ahead as foreshadowed by this incident. There are many other examples of this voice-over technique, which results in a clash between sound and images. This is clear in a scene already mentioned in which the cabaret manager is being beaten up by the Nazis. We hear the music of the cabaret, reflecting the lighthearted mood of the club, in direct contrast to the fighting outside. In the scene in which Natalia finds the dead dog placed on her stoop, we hear the festive sounds of the cabaret in the background. Such juxtapositions convey the idea that the people of Berlin refuse to hear the truth of what is really happening in their society.

Aside from the editing, other film techniques are effectively used to convey the themes of the movie. The way in which camera angles are utilized to reflect the depravity of society is very interesting. In the beginning of the film, images are seen in a mirror. The face of the M.C. is distorted by this effect, symbolizing the distorted nature of the cabaret. Walter Kerr’s comment on the Broadway musical seems applicable; he writes, “the garish images of Kit Kat Klub kittens and a pushy, lipsticked, sinuous M.C. become the distorting mirror through which we peer at an actual world.”¹⁸ In the film, camera angles are used in such a way as to reinforce this sense of distortion. In such numbers as “Mein Herr” and the mud-wrestling match, the action is seen from odd angles as the viewer is constantly looking up at the action from weird perspectives. As a result, the performers seem removed and detached—they inhabit a different world.

The same angle is used at the end of the movie as in the beginning. The camera pans the mirror and in it can be seen the distorted reflection of the audience, which now includes quite a few Nazis. Thus, a transformation has occurred over the course of the film. Also, in this final scene, the distorted quality of the cabaret is brought to a climax as the M.C. repeats his opening lines (“In here life is beautiful. . .”). But his sarcastic tone, accompanied by the weird and disorienting camera angles, suggests that he does not really mean this.

What also adds to the sense of distortion in the cabaret is the use of close-up shots. The Kit Kat girls, as well as the M.C., are covered with gaudy, thick make-up which is accentuated when we see their faces close up. Their somewhat demonic, evil expressions become more obvious, demonstrating the advantage that film has over the theatrical medium. The close-up is also effective in the brief intercut shots of the M.C. as he communicates his silent commentary, as well as in highlighting particular people in the cabaret audience who reflect the prevailing mood in Berlin at the time. Extreme close-ups of the audience members laughing during the mud-wrestling scene, for example, are quite grotesque.

The power of the close-up shot is also clearly demonstrated in the beer garden scene. At first there is a peaceful yet festive mood; amidst this sunny atmosphere a seemingly innocent Aryan youth begins to sing the melodic tune “Tomorrow Belongs to Me.” At first the close-ups of various people in the crowd reveal pleasant expressions, but gradually the sweet song becomes more militant. A series of shots of individuals standing up to join in the song conveys the growing support of the people for the

Nazis as we see the subtle transformations in expression of the individual faces in the crowd. As a critic observed, "The refrain becomes fervent; more and more people join with Nazi fervor, and what started out as schmalz ends as scare."¹⁹ A close-up of an old man remaining seated and shaking his head in dismay reveals that not everyone is happy about recent political developments. Together, the montage of images reveals the true meaning of the song, which is disguised in its poetic lyrics and pretty melody.

The meaning of this scene is also conveyed through a subtle use of camera movement. Only when the camera lowers to reveal the swastika armband on the boy singing does it become evident that he is a member of Hitler's Youth. Although "there is nothing overtly political in the lyrics . . . it is his uniform that infuses the otherwise hopeful song with its menacing dimension."²⁰

Different methods of camera movement are utilized in other scenes to convey a disconcerting mood. The dizzying and violent camera motion of the scene in which the manager is beaten up is effective in conveying a sense of disorder and chaos. A similar sense is created in the mud-wrestling scene as the camera moves around rapidly between the fight and the audience members. In contrast to these scenes is the incident on the street involving the dead body, in which the camera remains motionless. This lack of movement provides an extreme contrast to the world of the cabaret, which is in constant motion. The individual shots almost seem like photographs reflecting the somber reality of the outside world and reinforcing Isherwood's camera metaphor.

Lighting techniques are also important in conveying these ideas, reinforcing the distorted atmosphere of the cabaret, an artificially lit place full of smoke and shadows and garish stage lights. This is in contrast to the bright outside world. In the naturalistic indoor settings away from the club, such as the boarding house, Max's mansion, and the Landauer estate, the lighting is natural and the colors are more muted. A jump-cut to the cabaret provides a jolt, reminding us of the dichotomy of the two worlds. Although they are superficially different, the cabaret reflects the corruption of the outside world, which is disguised by the light of day. This is reminiscent of Isherwood's own words:

To-day the sun is brilliantly shining; it is quite mild and warm. . . . The sun shines, and Hitler is master of this city. The sun shines, and dozens of my friends . . . are in prison, possibly dead. . . .²¹

The film effectively conveys this theme through the contrasts between natural and artificial light. As the characters bicycle through the park, picnic in the woods, or drive through the countryside, it is difficult to see the corruption and disintegration of society; but then a jump-cut to the world of the cabaret reminds us of the true reality that Nazism has wrought. This reflects Isherwood's original writings, in which he records "the spiritual death of a city smiling beneath the spring sun, outwardly warm and inviting, but inwardly cold and cruel."²²

In analyzing the various film techniques utilized in *Cabaret*, it becomes apparent that this version is a unique dramatic adaptation of Isherwood's writing. The film demonstrates many of the advantages of the film medium and how they can be utilized for maximum effectiveness in conveying thematic material. When Isherwood wrote, "I am a camera . . .," he probably did not foresee how applicable this metaphor would be in the future as the motion picture camera became the interpreter of his observations.

Arlene Rodda
Boston College
Simmons College

Notes

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- 3 Brooks Atkinson, rev. of "I Am a Camera," *New York Times Theatre Reviews* 6 Dec. 1951.
- 4 Bosley Crowther, rev. of "I Am a Camera," *New York Times Film Reviews* 9 Aug. 1955.
- 5 Walter Kerr, rev. of "Cabaret," *New York Times Theatre Reviews* 4 Dec. 1966.
- 6 William Bayer, *The Great Movies* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1973) 96.
- 7 Robert Osborne, *Academy Awards Oscar Annual* (La Habra: ESE California, 1973).
- 8 Osborne.
- 9 Hollis Alpert, rev. of "Cabaret," *Saturday Review* 4 March 1972: 66.
- 10 Stanley Green, *Encyclopedia of the Musical Film* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 46.
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- 13 Roger Greenspun, rev. of "Cabaret," *The New York Times Film Reviews* 14 Feb. 1972: 222.
- 14 Atkinson.
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- 18 Kerr.
- 19 Stanley Kauffman, *Living Images* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) 97-99.
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- 21 Isherwood 207.
- 22 Oldsey 211.