

The Ford Effect: How Tom Ford's *A Single Man* Legitimises Queer Culture

Introduction

"My will is to live according to my nature, and to find a place where I can be what I am . . . But I'll admit this—even if my nature were like theirs, I should still have to fight them, in one way or another. If boys didn't exist, I should have to invent them."
– Christopher Isherwood¹

Focusing on a day in the life of an English professor that turns out to be his last, Christopher Isherwood's 1964 novel *A Single Man* meditates on alienation and the transience of life and beauty against the backdrop of Sixties American suburbia and the looming possibility of nuclear annihilation. Hailed "the founding text of modern gay literature"² by Edmund White, it is also a frank portrait of the homosexual subculture, and Isherwood explores the discrimination against this invisible minority through the quiet devastation felt by the protagonist George, whose lover Jim recently died in a car crash. The reader sees George navigating his day through the eyes of a deadpan and sometimes blackly humorous third person narrator³ as he encounters different people who colour his senses and illuminate the possibilities of being alive and human in the world.

Described by Anthony Burgess as "delicate, elusive and allusive, unbrutal...a fine piece of plain writing which haunts the memory,"⁴ the novel also reflects Isherwood's penchant for a populist, accessible style rather than a more experimental one that his British modernist contemporaries favoured. Indeed, Isherwood was a writer whose political and literary interests intersected with key moments in twentieth-century history and aesthetics and made his work a hybrid of both high and low brow culture, a fact that was underscored by his love of film and his work as a Hollywood screenwriter. He also openly admitted his artistic debt to various literary predecessors, and addressed this diversity in one of his

¹ See *Christopher and His Kind*, 17.

² See *Isherwood on Writing*, 27.

³ See Parker, 741.

⁴ See Burgess, 36.

college lectures in the Sixties:

I was asked by one of you who was kind enough to write to me why, if I liked Forster, had I, on other occasions, expressed a preference for melodrama of another kind and, in fact, rather like Dickens, rather like Balzac. Of course, the answer is that one is not bound to any one way of doing things. And though one's admiration goes out in many directions, when it comes to trying in a small way to be an imitator or disciple, one chooses one master rather than another. One owes a great deal to many masters.⁵

Given Isherwood's virtuosity as a writer and his penchant for popular culture, it is apt that his novel was adapted into a film by fashion designer Tom Ford, another master at combining both high and low culture. A Texan who took the fashion world by storm for his designs for luxury houses Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche in the Nineties, the openly homosexual Ford left the fashion industry in 2004 after a controversial and acrimonious break with the labels' management company, PPR.⁶ Renowned for his perfectionism and for creating highly glamorous designs backed by advertising campaigns that focused brazenly on the sexual and the body beautiful,⁷ Ford was credited for reviving the fortunes of the then-ailing brands and giving them a populist appeal with his audacious designs and provocatively sexual aesthetic. In his film adaptation of *A Single Man*—which marked his first foray into film—Ford plumbed his talent for combining high and low culture again, breathing new life into Isherwood's text and bringing it to a wider audience via lush visuals, intertextuality and a world-famous cast of actors that includes Colin Firth, Julianne Moore, Matthew Goode and Nicholas Hoult.

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu asserts that taste and cultural competence are fought across social classes not only as a means to attain social mobility but also to establish cultural hegemony.⁸ Thus, creative works and products that boast high cultural and artistic value provide their creators with the power to assert themselves socially. This paper contends that in delivering a hybridised and aesthetically legitimate product that also enunciates queer culture and its aesthetic, Ford's adaptation of Christopher

⁵ See *Isherwood On Writing*, 69.

⁶ Pinault-Printemps-Redoute, now known as Kering.

⁷ See Annex A.

⁸ See Bourdieu, 14.

Isherwood's *A Single Man* reifies the status of queer culture from its position in the peripheral while moving it closer to mainstream consciousness.

A Love That Speaks Its Name: Isherwood's Presentation of Homosexuality in *A Single Man*

"With me, everything starts with autobiography." – Christopher Isherwood⁹

Written when he was having a domestic crisis with Don Bachardy, his lover of ten years, *A Single Man* was based on Isherwood's feelings of loss and turmoil.¹⁰ Indeed, according to literary critics, it is this penchant for drawing something that he has either experienced or observed at close quarters, a writing that is poised half way between fact and fiction, and which also serves as self-discovery, that distinguishes Isherwood's writing.¹¹ Isherwood was also too honest to adopt the usual homosexual novelists' device of substituting girl for boy, even though during the period he was writing it was extremely difficult and even dangerous to tell the truth.¹² As Isherwood remarked: "I think art is absolutely inseparable from truth. Any sort of concealments that you're putting up about your life injure you as an artist just as they injure you as a person."¹³

It is not surprising then, that *A Single Man* embodies Isherwood's strong advocacy of gay rights, queer modernism and his interest in evolving theories of gay identity,¹⁴ and is one of Isherwood's most overt statements on the fear that fuels the discrimination against homosexuals by the majority. Indeed, the novel's centerpiece is George's diatribe during a lesson about being a part of the minority. He declares: "...a minority is only thought of as a minority when it constitutes some kind of a threat to the majority, real or imaginary. And no threat is ever quite

⁹ See King, 3.

¹⁰ Bachardy told *Angeleno Magazine* in their December 2009 issue: "Chris got the idea for that book when he and I were having a domestic crisis. We'd been together 10 years. I was making a lot of trouble and wondering if I shouldn't be on my own. Chris was going through a very difficult period (as well). So he killed off my character, Jim, in the book and imagined what his life would be without me."

¹¹ See King, 4. King claims that Isherwood "belongs essentially to what might be called the 'suppose-if' category of novelists," possessing "an insight into character, an incisiveness of style and an architectural sense all far superior to his powers of invention."

¹² See King, 9.

¹³ Qtd from Schwerdt, 12.

¹⁴ See *Isherwood on Writing*, 9. Isherwood was a frequent speaker at rallies and meetings on behalf of gay rights. But his greatest impact on the movement for gay and lesbian rights was as a writer, through his novels and memoirs, and secondarily as a public figure.

imaginary.”¹⁵ He is particularly riled by its injustice, and lashes out in an uncharacteristic rant that reveals what Isherwood described as “the boiling rage beneath [George’s] nicey-nice exterior.”¹⁶ George says:

...Well, now, suppose this minority does get persecuted, never mind why—political, economic, psychological reasons. There always is a reason, no matter how wrong it is—that’s my point. And, of course, persecution itself is always wrong; I’m sure we all agree there...¹⁷

However, despite this overt articulation of anger over injustice, the rest of Isherwood’s novel presents his ideas on homosexuality and gay self-representation via George’s complex inner monologue, through which we see the resentment and grief that he feels in response to his lost love. There is also an emphasis on the body and corporeal that is reflected through the overt innuendoes that arise from his preoccupation with sex. This is especially apparent in the sexual attraction that he feels towards various characters he encounters, such as his student Kenny and two tennis players he comes across:

They are passing the tennis courts at this moment. Only one court is occupied, by two young men playing singles. The sun has come out with sudden fierce heat through the smog-haze, and the two are stripped nearly naked. They have nothing on their bodies but gym shoes and thick sweat socks and knit shorts of the kind cyclists wear, very short and close-fitting, molding themselves to the buttocks and the loins. They are absolutely unaware of the passers-by, isolated in the intentness of their game. You would think there was no net between them. Their nakedness makes them seem close to each other and directly opposed, body to body, like fighters. If this were a fight, though, it would be one-sided, for the boy on the left is much the smaller. He is Mexican, maybe, black-haired, handsome, catlike, cruel, compact, lithe, muscular, quick and graceful on his feet. His body is a natural dark gold-brown; there is a fuzz of curly black hair on his chest and belly and thighs. ¹⁸

Other than its erotic descriptions of male bodies engaged in physical exertion, the fact that the game stirs “George into hot excitement” and that “[f]rom his heart, he thanks these young animals for their beauty,”¹⁹ also reflects the novel’s theme of homosexuality. Indeed, this emphasis on male beauty and the body reflects

¹⁵ See *A Single Man*, 53.

¹⁶ See Parker, 834.

¹⁷ See *A Single Man*, 54.

¹⁸ See *A Single Man*, 38.

¹⁹ See *A Single Man*, 38.

Isherwood's aestheticising of the gay identity, making highly visible the sites—with their “abnormal” and “unnatural” affinities and desires—that are considered a threat to respectable, bourgeois society. Notably, Isherwood insisted on using the term “queer” to describe his own sexuality, embracing the pejorative to emphasise his own distance and dissent from mainstream culture.²⁰

Nonetheless, despite the loaded subject of homosexuality in *A Single Man*, it is tempered by an understated, pared down style that presents, as David Bergman asserts, “an intelligent character whose homosexuality [is] presented in a natural and life-affirming way.”²¹ Bergman further argues that Isherwood is central to gay American fiction because he “provided a calm, sane, productive counterexample whose work was imaginatively rich, stylistically challenging, and politically and spiritually engaged.”²² Indeed, this is exemplified primarily through the technique of “tea-tabling” that he admired in E.M. Forster, where important and even emotional information is revealed without necessarily doing so in a traditionally histrionic tragic scene.²³ However, Francis King also asserts that while Isherwood has a marvelous ability to produce one startling yet illuminating image after another and a gift for lucidity, simplicity and an almost conversational relaxation, “[Isherwood] is not notable for poetic grandeur.”²⁴

A Preoccupation With Surfaces: Ford's Presentation of Homosexuality in *A Single Man*

“Style for me means nothing without substance.” –Tom Ford²⁵

This poetic grandeur is provided by Tom Ford in his film adaptation of the novel, and it is a key force in establishing the film's aesthetic legitimacy. Indeed, Ford's main contribution to the film is arguably his glamorous and polished images, and film critic Wendy Ide of the Times of London hailed the film as “a thing of heart-

²⁰ On the term “queer”, Isherwood said: “Homosexual is too cumbersome. ‘Gay’ is fine as a slogan, a watchword, a term to describe our philosophy, our attitude towards life. But I do not think as a title for a movement. I prefer the words used by our enemies. I used to call myself a bugger when I was young. Now I feel at home with ‘queer’ or ‘fag’ when I am feeling hostile. It makes heterosexuals wince when you refer to yourself by these words if they've been using them behind your back, as you generally have” (Qtd from Parker, 799).

²¹ See Garnes, 198.

²² Qtd from *Isherwood on Writing*, 26-27.

²³ See Izzo, 49.

²⁴ See King 22-23.

²⁵ See Weintraub.

stopping beauty,”²⁶ while Stephen Rebello of *Playboy* called it “a movie of beauty, mystery, visual dazzle and emotional resonance.”²⁷

Ford’s powerful visual poetry is seen from the beginning of the film, which features a series of scenes depicting George’s fraught emotional landscape, but also references Isherwood’s foregrounding of the male body in his novel. The film opens with a sensual scene of George writhing naked underwater—as if drowning—as a metaphor for his internal struggle. It then segues into a bleakly beautiful scene of the car crash that kills Jim, before abruptly cutting to a scene of George waking up from his nightmare, his fountain pen having left a black stain on the sheets.²⁸ Ford’s stylish aesthetic also permeates the rest of the film through the use of stunning colours, slow motion and close-ups—lips turning visibly brighter as a woman smiles,²⁹ lingering shots of cigarette smoke,³⁰ a flashback of an intimate talk rendered in elegant black and white.³¹ Other than their obvious beauty, the film’s meticulously calculated visuals have much to do with underscoring life’s transience, which is heightened by the addition of the suicide plot to the screenplay written by Ford and David Scarce. Ford explains that when “George decides to take his own life all of a sudden the beauty of the world starts to pull at him.”³²

The visual beauty in Ford’s film is also enhanced by Ford’s fashion sensibility. Aside from the fact that the film’s costumes were designed by heavyweight Hollywood stylist Arianne Phillips³³, which not only ensured beautiful costumes that channeled the Sixties—a watershed era in fashion³⁴—the film’s lush *mise-en-scène* resembles visual codes conventionally used in the fashion industry. Indeed, other than featuring actors who resemble and are styled

²⁶ See Soares.

²⁷ See “*A Single Man*—Trailer.”

²⁸ See *A Single Man*, 0:38.

²⁹ See *A Single Man*, 18:37.

³⁰ See *A Single Man*, 43:31.

³¹ See *A Single Man*, 35:36.

³² See Rydman.

³³ Arianne Phillips worked as Madonna’s stylist and has designed and styled her last four concert tours. She has also worked with singers Lenny Kravitz, Courtney Love, No Doubt and Justin Timberlake. She received two Oscar nominations for *Walk The Line* and *W.E.*, and a BAFTA nomination for *A Single Man*.

³⁴ The Sixties saw Western fashion reject the conventions and niceties of previous eras. Clothing broke with social traditions that dictated what could be worn when and by whom. The era saw the emergence of unisex clothing such as denim jeans, rising hemlines and Mod fashion, which was centred around London’s thriving pop music, art and fashion scene and focused on innovation and the ‘new’. Fashion icons such as Twiggy, Mary Quant and Penelope Tree came to the fore as well.

like fashion models, the film also comprises carefully crafted and calculated scenes that are similar to images out of fashion magazines with their choreographed poses and well-placed fashion and luxury goods—such as a close-up of a woman’s heavily lined eyes, a shot of artfully arranged bottles of cologne and a slow panning shot of a girl’s dress.³⁵

The fact that fashion is integral to the film is also apparent in the sartorial flourishes that were not originally in the novel. This is clear from the start of the film when George dresses himself for the day. We follow him as he opens his drawer, unpacks a fresh white shirt, brushes his leather shoes, puts on his cologne and straightens his tie, the sequence resembling a fashion commercial.³⁶ Similarly, the process of preparing his suicide, which involves checking a revolver, is also accompanied—somewhat incongruously—by George putting together a burial look comprising of suit, shirt, shoes and tie, along with the written instructions for a Windsor knot,³⁷ an addition that was incorporated into the film by Ford.

Similarly, Julianne Moore’s character, Charley, is styled as a glamorous Sixties “dolly bird,” whereas her novel counterpart is described in unflattering terms and shows no flair for fashion:

Her poor cheeks are swollen and inflamed now, and her hair, which must once have made a charming blur around her face, is merely untidy. Nevertheless, she hasn't given up. Her dress shows a grotesque kind of gallantry, ill-advised but endearing: an embroidered peasant blouse in bold colors, red, yellow and violet, with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows; a gipsyish Mexican skirt which looks as if she had girded it on like a blanket, with a silver-studded cowboy belt—it only emphasises her lack of shape. Oh, and if she must wear sandals with bare feet, why won't she make up her toenails? (Maybe a lingering middle-class Midlands puritanism is in operation here.) Jim once said to her kiddingly about a similar outfit, "I see you've adopted our native costume, Charley." She laughed, not at all offended, but she didn't get the point. She hasn't gotten it yet. This is her idea of informal Californian playwear, and she honestly cannot see that she dresses any differently from Mrs. Peabody next door.³⁸

³⁵ See Annex B.

³⁶ See *A Single Man*, 4:36.

³⁷ See *A Single Man*, 50:57.

³⁸ See *A Single Man*, 96-97.

Likewise, while George's students in the novel wear clothes that convey an "aggressively virile informality" and consist mostly of ordinary attire like "sneakers and garterless white wool socks, jeans in cold weather, and in warm weather shorts,"³⁹ they are impeccably dressed in the film, with Kenny donning a luxurious mohair sweater, while his girlfriend—Lois Yamaguchi in the novel as a representative of the Japanese minority in post-war America—is transformed into a chain-smoking Brigitte Bardot look-a-like in the film.

Certainly, the glamorous veneer that Ford gives the story seems to run counter to the serious themes in the book. Likewise, fashion has always been an important part of filmmaking in terms of characterisation or creating a stylish *mise-en-scène*, which can be seen in films such as Wong Kar Wai's *In the Mood for Love*, Blake Edwards' *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Luis Buñuel's *Belle Du Jour*, Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* and Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums*. However, other than being visually impactful and alluring, fashion lends itself perfectly to the themes and the assertion of queer culture in Ford's *A Single Man* because of what it represents as a genre.

Firstly, fashion operates on powerful narratives akin to fiction, a theatre that communicates a euphoric, novelised utopia filled with fantasies of the most improbable luxuries through specific signifiers. It is, as Roland Barthes argues, a reality experienced fantastically, just like the unreal reality of the novel, emphatic in proportion to its reality.⁴⁰ This is nowhere as true as in the fashion photograph—referenced so liberally throughout the film—which Barthes asserts "is not just any photograph...it has its own units and rules; within photographic communication, it forms a specific language which no doubt has its own lexicon and syntax, its own banned or approved "turns of phrase."⁴¹ He further explains that the thematic nature of fashion photography is such that an idea is varied through a series of examples and analogies, and therefore can aim at the "poetic" insofar as the "poetic" is an association of ideas, presenting associations of substances to establish plastic or coenesthetic equivalences.⁴² More pertinently,

³⁹ See *A Single Man*, 41.

⁴⁰ See Barthes, 266.

⁴¹ See Barthes, 41.

⁴² See Barthes, 301.

by an accumulation of minute and particular details, fashion accredits the truth of the thing represented better than a simple sketch, a highly-wrought picture allegedly being “truer” than a cursorily drawn one,⁴³ and gives the appearance of pure reason and of the natural.⁴⁴ Thus, in intertwining this visual text with Isherwood’s story, film and fashion become mutually reinforcing forces in the film, with fashion imbuing the story’s characterisation and themes with added poetic resonance, presenting them as natural and compelling.

Moreover, given that fashion is by its very nature focused on attaining exacting standards of beauty and also on fleeting trends, amplifying its glamour in the film ultimately underscores the point that it makes about the transience of life and beauty in the face of our certain death. Indeed, glamour moves and inspires us, and it becomes especially poignant when it is lost, and this is reinforced by journalist Virginia Postrel⁴⁵, who argues in *The Power of Glamour: Longing and the Art of Visual Persuasion* that glamour intensifies longing, fosters hope and stokes ambition.⁴⁶ Therefore, even as we admire and are pulled in by George’s stylish fashion statement as he puts himself together at the beginning of the film, his superficial perfection is nonetheless ironic, given the very real pain of losing Jim lurking beneath the persona he has fashioned for himself. Ford admitted that this emphasis on the sartorial in relation to George, who is associated throughout the film with a dark—albeit classy—palette of browns and beige, was to bring out the contrast between his external control and inner devastation. Ford says:

George, who is very much my own character grafted onto the character, obsessively puts himself together because that is the way he holds himself together...his inner world and his outer world are connected, and the only thing holding them together is the polishing of his shoes, the scrubbing of his fingernails, the perfect white shirt. If he let go of that, he would collapse. There is an enormous part of myself that is like that.⁴⁷

Furthermore, George’s immaculate and metrosexual sense of style also reflects a

⁴³ See Barthes, 266.

⁴⁴ See Barthes, 263 and 267.

⁴⁵ Virginia Postrel is a columnist for *Bloomberg View* and has been a regular contributor to *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, and *Forbes*. Formerly the editor of *Reason* magazine, she is the author of *The Substance of Style* and *The Future and Its Enemies*. She teaches a special seminar on glamour in the Branding program at the School of Visual Arts in New York.

⁴⁶ See Postrel, 5.

⁴⁷ See Foley.

visual code of culturally intelligible gay performativity that further enhances the film's articulation of homosexuality.⁴⁸ As Rob Cover argues, hair, clothing, grooming, accessories and self-presentation are as much elements of the body as are organs, skin, nerves, muscles and flesh, and these contribute to a system of masquerade and a consciously adopted identity signified through systems of fashion and accessories.⁴⁹ Cover builds on Judith Butler's notion of speech as homosexual conduct⁵⁰ by applying it to image presentation, arguing that the presentation of a body in terms of homosexual codes connotations is similarly 'homosexual conduct'. Therefore, in presenting George thus, the film contributes to the reiterative performativity of homosexuality by flaunting the closet literally and figuratively.

Moreover, Ford's glamorous portrayal of the film's cast—and especially George—for the majority of the film ultimately throws George's meditation on life and its meaning into sharp relief. This is apparent in his naked midnight swim with Kenny after a drunken Platonic meeting of minds, which links him to a great unity by comparing his consciousness to the waters that fill and empty from tide pools on the Californian coastline. In the film, the scene exudes energy and joy, implying a full circle in terms of George's spiritual development.⁵¹ Indeed, fashion's glamour and synonymy with the material inadvertently highlights its own insubstantiality in the bigger scheme of things, thus imbuing the film with a spiritual weight and emotional resonance that reflects the Vedantic philosophies⁵² that Isherwood subscribed to, which focused on detachment from the material, the emphasis on oneness with the universe as well as the notion that the everyday conception of the self is an illusion.⁵³ Here, it can be observed how the foregrounding of fashion and its preoccupation with surfaces in the film matches Isherwood biographer Peter Parker's description of the novel. He asserts that it

⁴⁸ ⁴⁸ Metrosexual style is not exclusive only to gay men, but here, George's metrosexual style and its relation to gay men in the popular consciousness serves as a visual code for his homosexuality.

⁴⁹ See Cover, 87.

⁵⁰ See Cover, 86. Butler claims the words, 'I am homosexual,' do not merely describe; they are figured as performing what they describe, not only in the sense that they constitute the speaker as a homosexual, but that they constitute the speech as homosexual conduct.

⁵¹ See *A Single Man*, 1:19:15.

⁵² Vedanta assumes that the goal of man's earthly life is "to identify himself with his eternal Self and so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground" (Qtd from Schwerdt, 166).

⁵³ Qtd. From Finney, 251.

“seems to be all surface, but is properly engaged with that most important of subjects: what it is to be alive.”⁵⁴

In all, the film’s heavy emphasis on the glossy and superficial to bring out deeper issues in the novel also aligns it with camp, which is closely associated with the queer aesthetic and flourished in the visual arts, literature, television and film at the time Isherwood was writing in the Sixties. Grounded in gay New York culture—the drag balls, cruising, the replenishing supply of beautiful young boys and exaggerated public behaviour—and manifested as a knowing impertinence that is deliberately unsophisticated, ironic and artificial,⁵⁵ camp was essential to Isherwood’s sexual identity and aesthetic, especially in *The World in the Evening*, although he emphasised its underlying seriousness and referred to it as High Camp.⁵⁶ Cécile Whiting describes it as an aesthetic that claims, aggressively, to be only about surface, while through multiple layers, it subverts conventional images and ideologies,⁵⁷ and this is what Ford achieves in *A Single Man* via his aggressive foregrounding of visual beauty while addressing George’s grief and anger at being persecuted as part of the homosexual minority. Indeed, Ford’s visuals essentially contribute to the performance of homosexuality and reify it, but this outward veneer only calls attention to the serious issues about discrimination, alienation and transience that the novel addresses.

More importantly, Ford’s luxuriant visuals, while paying tribute to camp, elevate the queer aesthetic beyond its associations with the trite, and in doing so, Ford carefully crafts an artistic and compelling portrait and representation of homosexuality that further legitimises it. Certainly, the film is still a visual spectacle, but without the luridness that the general public tends to associate with the homosexual lifestyle or the irreverence and coarseness that is often associated with camp. Instead, it is a rigorously controlled and highly sophisticated one.

⁵⁴ See Parker, 727.

⁵⁵ See Harker, 115.

⁵⁶ See *The World In the Evening*, 110. Through the homosexual character of Charles, Isherwood defined High Camp as something “with an underlying seriousness. You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance.”

⁵⁷ See Harker, 83.

A Single Man as A Self-Conscious Art Object

This notion of the film as a highly sophisticated cultural product is further reinforced through its hybridity, which Ford accomplishes by mixing in references to iconic films, music and literature, much like how Isherwood combined high and low culture in his work.

For instance, he aligns *A Single Man* with famous films by referencing Wong Kar Wai's penchant for protracted takes featuring wordless exchanges between characters and that are accompanied by string music in *In the Mood for Love*. He also pays tribute to Alfred Hitchcock via a massive backdrop of Janet Leigh's eyes in *Psycho*,⁵⁸ while the film's score also references Bernard Herrmann's score for *Vertigo*. In addition, other than styling one of George's students like Brigitte Bardot, George also has a frisson-filled interlude with a James Dean look-a-like. A pop culture reference to critically-acclaimed and stylish television series *Mad Men*—which portrays ad men in the Sixties—is also made via a voice cameo by the series' lead actor Jon Hamm, who plays the relative informing George of Jim's death.⁵⁹ The film's aesthetic cachet is further increased via the use of The Schaffer Residence as the house George and Jim live in. Made of glass, steel and oakwood, it is one of American architect John Lautner's most iconic postmodern designs, and embodies obvious connotations of fragility while also underscoring the irony of the couple's defiance in living in a fish bowl yet being invisible in society. In a nod to literature, George is also seen reading Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* in one scene as a sign not only of his impending transformation upon Jim's death, but as a demonstration of cultural literacy. Thus, the film's intertextuality not only makes it a rich cultural product but also a self-consciously artistic one that establishes the film within the milieu of established cultural works.

Furthermore, Ford also enhances the aesthetic and artistic legitimacy of the film by portraying the idea of Isherwood and himself as artistic doubles and "collaborators." He does so by melding fiction and real life in the film, just as

⁵⁸ See *A Single Man*, 44:48.

⁵⁹ See *A Single Man*, 7:42.

Isherwood blended elements of his life into his novels as well.⁶⁰ In fact, Ford—who met Isherwood in his youth—plays up similarities and connections between the writer and himself as much as possible. Other than admitting that the onscreen George bears imprints of himself, Ford also featured Bachardy as a professor in the teacher's lounge in a fleeting scene with George. Just before Don says hello to George—who is based on Isherwood the camera pans past another man who turns out to be Ford's own real life lover Richard Buckley.⁶¹ He also gave George a last name, Falconer, in the film—after his first lover and the name of a brand of sunglasses Ford's company makes—even though there was none provided in the novel.⁶²

This idea of Ford and Isherwood as co-creators of the film and creative doubles is further emphasised by the inclusion of additional scenes not originally in Isherwood's novel in the film, which allows Ford to add his own voice to the novel's critique of discrimination towards homosexuals. The first of these scenes takes place in a bank,⁶³ where George encounters his neighbour's daughter, Jennifer, who introduces the theme of homosexuality into her conversation with him without realising it:

Daddy says he wants to throw *you* into the Colosseum...well, he says you're light in your loafers⁶⁴...I think my brother Tom is light in his loafers, too, but he wears Keds. He made me do a hair conditioning treatment on my hair, with eggs. Does it look shiny?⁶⁵

The second of the scenes added by Ford is a romantic interlude that alludes to the gay culture of cruising, where Carlos, a fledgling actor, tries to engage George in a liaison but is rejected.⁶⁶ Similarly, Ford also attacks the conventional view of homosexuality via an angry outburst by George not originally in the novel after

⁶⁰ Isherwood's novels exemplify a melding of private and public issues, and he chose the novel as his means to examine his beliefs dramatically and emotionally while considering and reflecting on them as a private individual (Schwerdt, 5).

⁶¹ See *A Single Man*, 19:01.

⁶² See "A Single Man," IMDb.com.

⁶³ See *A Single Man*, 39:25.

⁶⁴ A slightly derogatory euphemism for being gay.

⁶⁵ The film has added resonance because of its relation to Ford. Ford has explained that when Jennifer speaks to George in the bank, some of what she says is based on Ford's own childhood. For instance, she has a pet scorpion because Ford and his sister also had a pet scorpion when they were little; her older brother is named "Tom" because Ford's own first name is Tom; she speaks of her brother Tom giving her hair treatments with eggs because that was something Ford did for his own sister many times; and she obviously says that her brother Tom is "light in his loafers" because Ford is himself gay ("A Single Man," IMDb.com).

⁶⁶ See *A Single Man*, 42:39.

Charley questions the authenticity of his relationship with Jim and dismisses it as a substitute for a heterosexual relationship.⁶⁷

In fact, Ford's creative bond and enmeshment with Isherwood goes beyond the book. Other than adapting the novel into a film, Ford also wrote the preface to a new Vintage Classics edition of *A Single Man*, where he confesses his admiration for Isherwood and how *A Single Man* had influenced him, especially when he was mourning the loss of his "voice in contemporary culture [when he left Gucci], and of my identity, which was so wrapped up in that."⁶⁸ He writes:

When I picked up *A Single Man* again in my late forties, it affected me on a much deeper level than it had when I was nineteen. I had been suffering an inner crisis of my own, and I had lost sight of my future the way the character George has lost sight of his, The book, in which Isherwood said 'I spoke the truth' (in his diary entry for September 7, 1964) and which is widely considered to be his masterpiece, spoke to me profoundly and personally. I knew this was the story I'd been seeking for my first feature film.⁶⁹

Of course, by highlighting his similarity to Isherwood, Ford writes himself into literary and film history simultaneously, which gives him credibility as an artist who is also homosexual. Furthermore, in using literature to sell fashion and combining art with commerce, *A Single Man* gives fashion an unparalleled artistic legitimacy and cultural authority. In doing so, Ford becomes an outlier much like Isherwood himself, embracing cultural insubordination and embodying the intersection of political and literary interests with key moments in twenty-first century history and aesthetics in the same way that Isherwood embodied that in the previous century.

On a more pragmatic level, Ford gained much out of this project, as the film became an advertisement for Ford's talent as a fashion designer as much as it demonstrated his gifts as a film director. Indeed, the film has helped him to drum up attention for his eponymous fashion label, which he started in 2005 after leaving Gucci. In fact, Ford's film can very much be read as a vehicle for his own

⁶⁷ See *A Single Man*, 1:04:37.

⁶⁸ See Caplan.

⁶⁹ See Isherwood, xi.

risqué and immaculate aesthetic and a canny strategy for self advertising, seeing that advertising campaigns he produced for his label since the release of the film resemble its rich sensibility—and even feature the film’s actors, Nicholas Hoult and Jon Kortajarena, in them.⁷⁰ This thus ensures that the film, his clothing designs and his sensibility continue to circulate and resonate in popular culture as an additional articulation of the queer aesthetic. All things considered, Ford’s directorial effort is an undeniably powerful statement of defiance both to social and artistic conventions, which is pure Isherwood. Also, in what can be interpreted as a development in his creative bond with Isherwood, Ford recently married Buckley after twenty seven years together, fulfilling an important aspect of the dream of equality for homosexuals that Isherwood stood and fought for.

However, what remains most important in Ford underscoring his similarity to Isherwood is that it creates a doubly resonant assertion of the queer aesthetic in the film, which is enhanced by the fact that the film unites both the art and fashion worlds, which are traditionally domains where homosexuality is accepted and thrives. Indeed, it contains both Isherwood and Ford’s assertions of homosexuality, first through the performative force of Isherwood’s prose and enhanced through Ford’s aesthetic sensibility. Also, by taking what Isherwood called “the best thing I’ve ever written”⁷¹ and giving his own glamorously visceral and intertextual take on it, Ford delivers a highly hybridised and visible product combining both high and low culture that is not only a tribute to Isherwood’s style but also emphasises the vibrance of the homosexual aesthetic, how it stands in opposition to convention and cannot be contained or rendered invisible by society. Of course, Ford could very well be criticised for promoting a stereotypical perception and presentation of homosexuality through his heavy emphasis on glamour and fashion. Nonetheless, in using beauty and cultural literacy as instruments to assert homosexual culture, this film gives voice to the suppressed aggression that George claims that the minority feels towards the majority.⁷² Moreover, in articulating this through a masterful grasp of art, culture and beauty

⁷⁰ See Annex D.

⁷¹ See Garnes, 202.

⁷² See *A Single Man*, 54. George says: “...And I’ll tell you something else. A minority has its own kind of aggression. It absolutely dares the majority to attack it. It hates the majority—not without a cause, I grant you. It even hates the other minorities, because all minorities are in competition: each one proclaims that its sufferings are the worst and its wrongs are the blackest. And the more they all hate, and the more they’re all persecuted, the nastier they become!”

rather than the outright expression of hostility and hate, the effect is greater, and arguably more subversive.

Conclusion: The Disclosure and Expression of the Self

"What I know is what I am."—George.⁷³

In conclusion, by turning Isherwood's novel into a visual text, Ford achieves a number of goals. Firstly, he pays tribute to Isherwood—who loved film and even wrote about a story about it in his satirical 1945 novel *Prater Violet*—and has revived interest in Isherwood's work and his ideas. Next, the film makes the queer experience intelligible and sympathetic. It also generates greater visibility for and accessibility to the queer culture and its talents, garnering a wide mainstream audience courtesy of both film and fashion's popularity across the globe and also Ford's fame as a fashion authority. This is especially so given the unconventional nature of his comeback as an accomplished film director and the film's critical acclaim.⁷⁴ As Ide remarked in her review: "...what is a little more unexpected, certainly for those who were suspicious of Ford's background in the ephemeral world of fashion, is that this is no frothy, throwaway piece of pretty silliness. Rather it's a work of emotional honesty and authenticity which announces the arrival of a serious filmmaking talent."⁷⁵

Most importantly, in drawing attention to both the conventionally homosexual domains of art and fashion with its highly sophisticated yet human portrait of a man dealing with his grief, the film asserts the artistic and aesthetic primacy of homosexuality despite the peripheral position of homosexuals in society. Therefore, boasting such high cultural and artistic literacy in its performance of homosexuality, the film—which Bourdieu claims is essential for

⁷³ *A Single Man*, 55.

⁷⁴ Premiering on September 11, 2009, at the 66th Venice International Film Festival and was nominated for a Golden Lion. Colin Firth, who plays the protagonist George, was awarded the Volpi Cup as Best Actor for his performance and was also nominated for an Academy Award, Golden Globe, Independent Spirit Award and Screen Actors Guild Award. He won the BAFTA Award for Best Actor in a Leading role. Julianne Moore was nominated for Best Supporting Actress, and Abel Korzeniewski for Best Original Score at the Golden Globes. Tom Ford was nominated for two Independent Spirit Awards in 2009, including Best First Feature and Best First Screenplay. Ford, along with David Scarce, also received a nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay at the Broadcast Film Critics Association Awards.

⁷⁵ See Soares.

social mobility and to establish cultural hegemony—becomes a means to differentiate both Isherwood and Ford as aesthetes, and asserts their social relevance and superior cultural literacy even though homosexuality remains in the social periphery.

Indeed, the film elevates the homosexual voice and embodies an empowering movement from feelings of fear and persecution to an assured articulation of self and one's sexual orientation, presenting a way that the homosexual community can make its voice heard in the absence of social acceptance. Lastly, in immortalising the beauty and emphasis on universality and connection of Isherwood's novel on film, Ford ensures Isherwood's creative legacy and message of integration, love and acceptance endure.

References

Primary Texts

A Single Man. Dir. Tom Ford. Perf. Colin Firth, Julianne Moore, Matthew Goode, Nicholas Hoult. Sony Pictures, 2010. DVD.

Isherwood, Christopher. *A Single Man*. London: Vintage Random House, 2010. Print.

Secondary Texts

"2. Tom Ford's Men's Fragrance Campaign and Sexuality." *Racheldavidson*. Wordpress.com, 24 Jan. 2013. 24 Apr. 2014.
<<http://racheldavidson.wordpress.com/2013/01/24/tomford/>>

"A Single Man." *The Internet Movie Database*. IMDb.com, Inc, n.d. Web. 5 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.imdb.com/>>

"A Single Man—Now Playing In Select Theatres—Gallery." The Weinstein Company, 2009. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.
<<http://www.asingleman-movie.com/>>

"A Single Man - Trailer." YouTube. n.d. Web. 22 Apr. 2014
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sC9Zm1UJ7zs>>

Barthes, Roland. *The Fashion System*. Trans. Michael Ward and Richard Howard. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990. Print.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1984. 11-63. Print.

Burgess, Anthony. *99 Novels: The Best in English Since 1939*. Simon & Schuster, 1985. Print.

Caplan, Nina. "Can Tom Ford Cut It As A Director?" *Time Out London*. Time Out. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.
<<http://www.timeout.com/london/film/can-tom-ford-cut-it-as-a-director-1>>

Cover, Rob. "Bodies, Movements and Desires: Lesbian/Gay Subjectivity and the Stereotype." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*. Vol.18, No.1, March 2004: 81-97. *Taylor & Francis Online*. Web. 24 Apr. 2014.

Finney, Brian. *Christopher Isherwood: A Critical Biography by Brian Finney*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1979. Print.

- Foley, Bridget. "Ford's Theatre." *W*. 38.12 (Dec. 2009): p144. Conde Nast Publications, Inc. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.
<http://www.wmagazine.com/people/celebrities/2009/12/tom_ford>
- Garnes, David. "A Single Man, Then and Now." *The Isherwood Century: Essays on the Life and Work of Christopher Isherwood*. Eds. James J. Berg, Chris Freeman. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001. Print.
- "Gibson Knott." *Pinterest*. Pinterest, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2014.
<<http://www.pinterest.com/bobbydenobrega/gibson-knott/>>
- "Gucci's Golden Years." *Who We Are*. Blogger. 1 Dec. 2001. 24 Apr. 2014.
<<http://whoareweintheend.blogspot.sg/2011/12/guccis-golden-years.html>>
- Harker, Jaime. *Middlebrow Queer: Christopher Isherwood In America*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013. *Project MUSE*. Web. 8 Apr. 2014.
<<http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9781452939216?auth=0>>
- Isherwood, Christopher. *Christopher and His Kind: 1929-1939*. London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1977. Print.
- . *Isherwood on Writing*. Ed. James J. Berg. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. Print.
- . *The World in the Evening*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Print.
- Izzo, David. *Christopher Isherwood: His Era, His Gang, and the Legacy of the Truly Strong Man*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001. Print.
- King, Francis. *Christopher Isherwood*. Ed. Ian Scott-Kilvert. Harlow, Essex: Longman Group, 1976. Print.
- "Tom Ford Did It Again!" *MAZE*. Wordpress.com, 12 Jul. 2008. Web. 24 Apr. 2014.
<<http://mazeofthoughts.wordpress.com/2008/07/12/tom-ford-did-it-again/>>
- "Tom Ford For Men: Fragrance Review." *Now Smell This*. Now Smell This, 25 Sep. 2007. 24 Apr. 2014.
<<http://www.nstperfume.com/2007/09/25/tom-ford-for-men-fragrance-review/>>
- Parker, Peter. *Isherwood: A Life*. London: Picador, 2004. Print.
- Postrel, Virginia. *The Power of Glamour: Longing and the Art of Visual Persuasion*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013. Print.

- Rydman, Stephen. "Isherwood through Ford's Lens: 'A Single Man' 40 Years Later." *Lambda Literary*, Lambda Literary. 23. Feb. 2010. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.
<<http://www.lambdaliterary.org/reviews/film/02/23/isherwood-through-fords-lens-a-single-man-40-years-later/#sthash.qu5p8mAv.dpuf>>
- Schwerdt, Lisa M. *Isherwood's Fiction*. Basingtoke, Hampshire: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1989. Print.
- Soares, Andre. "A Single Man Photos." *Alt Film Guide*. n.d. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.
<<http://www.altfg.com/blog/gay/a-single-man-colin-firth-photos/>>
- Sowray, Bibi. "YSL Opium Advert is Eighth Most Complained About." *Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group Limited, 30 May 2012. Web. 24 Apr. 2014.
<<http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/news-features/TMG9299894/YSL-Opium-advert-is-eighth-most-complained-about.html>>
- Weintraub, Steve 'Frosty'. "Director Tom Ford Interview *A Single Man*." *Collider*. n.d. topLingo. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.
<<http://collider.com/director-tom-ford-interview-a-single-man/>>