

Part III

Mediations

11. OTHER ARTS AND ADAPTATIONS

Michelle Kelly

References to and descriptions of visual and performing arts have been a consistent feature of J. M. Coetzee's fiction from the photographic prints poured over by Eugene Dawn in 'The Vietnam Project' section of *Dusklands* to the mystical dancing of David in his most recent novel *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Aesthetic experiences of film, dance, and photography enjoy prominence across the fictional autobiographies of *Scenes from Provincial Life* and in essays and interviews. Music, especially, is a recurring source of aesthetic pleasure across the Coetzee corpus, particularly the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. In *Diary of a Bad Year* the protagonist JC singles out the work of the German composer as 'The best proof we have that life is good' (*DBY*, 221). More recent biographical and archive-based accounts of Coetzee's life and work reveal an author whose first artistic medium was photography and who has expended much creative energy in translating his prose fiction into other art forms: producing screenplays of his early novels and opera libretti of his later ones, pursuing possible adaptations with enthusiasm, and collaborating in some cases with artists, composers, and filmmakers.¹

What then does this evidence of Coetzee's interest in 'other arts' contribute to our understanding of his work? While Coetzee scholarship has been attentive to the vast range of literary intertexts invoked across an almost fifty-year writing career, few have concentrated on other art forms or questions of medium. Yet the prominence of visual and performing arts in Coetzee's work and their framing within and against exclusively written forms suggests that

much is to be gained from more sustained analysis. Across the entire corpus there is a consistent alertness to the distinct aesthetic power of particular art forms and media, and a succession of characters susceptible to them.

Descriptions of particular art *works*, therefore, occur alongside, and are often superseded by, descriptions of the aesthetic, emotional, and ethical responses that they elicit. We also find a rigorous attention to the materiality of different aesthetic media: prints of film stills in *Dusklands*, musical recordings in *Summertime*, the Everyman cinema in Hampstead where John first saw Monica Vitti in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Eclipse*.

Visual and performing arts in Coetzee's work are repeatedly endowed with expressive powers that distinguish them from prose fiction. Film and photography, for example, tend to be invested with a privileged access to the real, while music possesses the power to transcend difference and speak directly to the heart. These capacities are tied both implicitly and explicitly to the nonverbal forms of signification involved, and are frequently placed in opposition to the mediated nature of linguistic expression. The *otherness* of other arts in Coetzee's work owes much to this apparent opposition. But what authority should we attribute to these ideas about the distinctive aesthetic experience of visual and performing arts, and how do they relate to Coetzee's own chosen artistic medium of *writing*? W. J. T. Mitchell suggests that ekphrasis, the verbal description of visual art, is distinguished less by a disturbance at the level of sign or medium and more by the thematizing of such dissonance, which in Mitchell's account is related to various forms of difference or otherness in a text.² In Coetzee's work references to other arts similarly gesture towards the limits of prose fiction and the possibilities of other forms and media, and often

intersect with a given text's concern with particular forms of difference or otherness. While ideas that circulate about the difference of other art forms might be traced back to Roland Barthes's writings on photography, or to Romantic thinking on music, accounts of aesthetic experience and the distinctive powers of particular art forms are spoken in a range of voices in Coetzee's work, in both the fiction and nonfiction, and can frequently be identified with a particular character or worldview. They therefore provoke questions about narration, point of view, authorial voice, autobiography, and self-reflexivity that feature centrally in considerations of other aspects of his work.

Moreover, to the extent that music, dance, film, and photography all proceed at least in part through nonverbal forms of signification, they also intensify our attention to the *written* texts in which they appear; their otherness is poised between their presumed difference from writing and, in the context of Coetzee's fiction, their reliance on writing. In other words, if references to visual and performing arts in Coetzee's work frequently gesture towards the availability of forms of expression, meaning, aesthetic experience, and connection *beyond* the printed text, they are all the while encoded within it. A focus on other arts is therefore closely tied to what Peter McDonald has termed Coetzee's 'critique of language' and the desire or fantasy to transcend one's own language, or indeed, language as such.³ Coetzee's interest in other art forms is therefore continuous with his interest in nonverbal modes of expression and physical embodiment, albeit in aestheticized form. As a result, among the 'other arts' that I include are the patently literary – or semi-literary – forms of theatre, opera, and film, in which the balance between embodied performance and text is constantly in question.

In what follows I will explore a selection of references to visual and performing arts from across the Coetzee corpus, focusing in particular on the representation of aesthetic experience, claims about the distinctive capacities of what I am loosely terming ‘other arts’, and their relationship to writing, self-reflexivity, and the body. I will conclude with a brief account of adaptations of the fiction. If visual and performing arts are constructed as other to and encoded within writing in Coetzee’s work, how do artists committed to the aesthetic conventions and histories of their own forms negotiate the expectations of *fidelity* that so often overshadow literary adaptations?

Aesthetic Experience

The encounter with Beckett’s *Watt* described in *Youth* marks a turning point in John’s engagement with literature, but in an autobiographical anecdote in the 1993 essay ‘What is a Classic?’ Coetzee narrates an even earlier transformative aesthetic experience: hearing the music of Bach as it drifted from a record player at a neighbouring house in suburban Cape Town. He is fifteen years old, bored, in ‘an historical dead end’, ‘And then the afternoon in the garden, and the music of Bach, after which everything changed’: ‘As long as the music lasted, I was frozen, I dared not breathe. I was being spoken to by the music as music had never spoken to me before’ (*SS*, 9-11). The encounters with Bach and Beckett differ greatly insofar as the would-be writer of *Youth*, a graduate in English and mathematics, is drawn to the ‘chunky little book with a violet cover’ based on his reading of other works by Beckett and his contemporaries and the reputation of Olympia Press for avant-garde publishing (*Y*, 155). ‘What is a Classic?’ on the other hand, describes an encounter with music that the young Coetzee – and

even the older Coetzee, retrospectively – experiences as transcending his relative ignorance of classical music and his historical circumstances. For all the essay's elaborate scene-setting, the description of the young Coetzee, 'frozen', not daring to 'breathe', 'spoken to by the music', suggests an unmediated encounter with art, and a model of the aesthetic close to its Greek etymology as the *sensible*. His relative inexperience in part explains the dramatic nature of the encounter with Bach. For the young provincial or colonial, the adult Coetzee speculates, 'the high culture of the metropolis may arrive in the form of powerful experiences which cannot, however, be embedded in their lives in any obvious way, and which seem therefore to have their existence in some transcendent realm' (*SS*, 7). The essay's framing around T. S. Eliot offers a more clear-headed explanation: just as Eliot's idiosyncratic construction of the classic shows 'a writer attempting to *make* a new identity', he too has engaged in an act of self-making through the *classical*, selecting European high culture as a gateway out of colonial Cape Town (*SS*, 7. *Italics original*). The essay, however, refuses to privilege the materialist explanation over the experience of transcendence prompted by that first encounter with Bach. That the aesthetic might be experienced as transcendent *and* demand reflection on individual material interests pervades Coetzee's work.

The essay format of 'What is a Classic?' makes explicit the seemingly paradoxical positions that music is transcendent *and* a means through which culturally specific or material interests are expressed. But in the fiction, including the fictionalized autobiographies, varieties of aesthetic experience are refracted through narrative point of view, irony, tone, and the broader context of the work. Reflections on other art forms therefore frequently follow the same logic as other representations in Coetzee's work, identifiable with a particular

narrating consciousness and worldview, thus allowing for the experience of a transcendent encounter with art *and* situating it within a particular material context.

The kind of self-making through aesthetic experience that we find in 'What is a Classic?' is a prominent theme of the *Scenes from Provincial Life* trilogy, notably in *Youth* where the earnest John's determination to become an artist is treated with considerable irony and humour. A student in Cape Town and a lover of music frustrated by his slow progress with the piano, John develops a technique to enable him to play, one day, a work by Beethoven and Bach. His method involves playing only these two pieces 'unremittingly', learning the notes slowly, then gradually increasing the pace until he masters them. The halting pace of his playing leads him to fly 'into a rage' as he 'hammers his fists on the keys, and storms off in despair' (*Y*, 16). Here John's commitment to music and pretentious investment in a narrow definition of the classical is the stuff of comedy, generating frustration and rage rather than transcendence.

John's plodding, mechanical approach to the piano is echoed in Adriana's description of John Coetzee's dancing in *Summertime* ('*he could not dance to save his life*'), which prompts her to call him '*The Wooden Man*', and gives rise to an explicitly Bergsonian comedy grounded in the mechanical rigidity of the marionette (*Sum*, 198, 200).⁴ A similar comedy informs Julia's account of her relationship with John Coetzee and his suggestion that they should coordinate their love-making to a cassette-recording of Schubert's string quintet. The trilogy's comedy is largely self-directed as the older Coetzee gently mocks an earnest younger self, but it also often emerges in the context of lessons or practice in a particular art, including poetry, in which the mechanical repetition

of the beginner or amateur falls far short of the fluency required for mastery. If we read *Youth* as a *Künstlerroman*, a fictional account of the emergence of an artist, we find an additional irony in John's apparent amateurism. But the irony and the comedy never fully eclipse the commitment to aesthetic education across a range of art forms, the seriousness of which, especially in the face of technical inadequacy, shows an unflinching determination and enormous privileging of art and its mysteries.

In contrast to provincial Cape Town, metropolitan London is a gateway to world culture in *Youth*. John's 'eyes are opened' at the Everyman cinema in Hampstead (Y, 48). He is transfixed by the distinctively European anguish of Monica Vitti in Antonioni's *Eclipse* and later, wearing his new spectacles, is moved to tears by the joyous resurrection of Pasolini's *Gospel According to Matthew*: 'his own heart wants to burst; tears of an exultation he does not understand stream down his cheeks, tears that he has surreptitiously to wipe away before he can emerge into the world again' (Y, 154). While he sympathizes with the realist 'pale, bony' Jesus of Pasolini's film, his intensely emotional response is prompted by its soundtrack, the *Missa Luba* Gloria sung by Congolese choir *Les Troubadours du Roi Baudouin*, a setting of the Latin mass sung in the style of traditional Congolese song. Similarly, it is the soundtrack of Satyajit Ray's *Apu* trilogy that makes the biggest impression on him: 'he encounters something that is not in Bach, though there are intimations of it: a joyous yielding of the reasoning, comprehending mind to the dance of the fingers' (Y, 93). He is inspired to buy an LP of Ustad Vilayat Khan: 'It is all there: the hovering exploration of tone-sequences, the quivering emotion, the ecstatic

rushes. He cannot believe his good fortune. A new continent, and all for a mere nine shillings!' (Y, 93-94).

Coetzee's immersion in avant-garde cinema in this period would have a far-reaching influence, but music is the emotional connection to different worlds. Music as a vehicle for a specific emotional range that transcends time and cultural difference, already evident in 'What is a Classic?', recurs across Coetzee's work. That music might enable feelings to 'speak across the ages' reemerges later in *Diary of a Bad Year*, as JC speculates that the history of music is the history of the 'feeling soul', allowing the twenty-first century listener access to the same modes of feeling elicited by the music's earliest performances (DBY, 131). The prevalence of these ideas suggests that they are treated with some seriousness, but they are also frequently undermined by the framing or tone of the passage in which they appear. JC's unusually affirmative comments on the swell of pride stirred by early performances of Sibelius in Finland, that '*one of us* could put together such sounds', are framed within a piece on the US-led war on terror titled 'On National Shame', reinforcing the connection between nineteenth-century Romanticism and toxic forms of nationalism (DBY, 45. Italics original). Shared aesthetic and emotional experience also marks the limits of reciprocity and mutual understanding between characters in *Summertime*. As we have seen, John's injunction to Julia to 'feel through the music' as they attempt to have sex is met with her irritation and bemusement. The failure of mutual understanding is evident too in the tense relationship between John and his father, which is reinforced through their different appreciation of music, notably John's strong identification with Bach in opposition to his father's taste for opera. It is this fault-line that John attempts to repair with his aging father in the closing pages of

the text, only to discover that his father no longer shows any interest in music. Channelled through John's diary entries, the significance of music to their relationship – within the logic of the text – is now apparent to John alone.

The limits of music's ability to transcend difference feature too in *Age of Iron*, as Mrs Curren imagines Verceuil listening to her halting recital of Bach:

So I played Bach for him, as well as I could. When the last bar was played I closed the music and sat with my hands in my lap contemplating the oval portrait on the cover with its heavy jowls, its sleek smile, its puffy eyes. Pure spirit, I thought, yet in how unlikely a temple! Where does that spirit find itself now? In the echoes of my fumbling performance receding through the ether? In my heart, where the music still dances? Has it made its way into the heart too of the man in the sagging trousers eavesdropping at the window? Have our two hearts, our organs of love, been tied for this brief while by a cord of sound? (*AI*, 24).

Mrs Curren and Verceuil are joined as performer and listener in their shared experience of the music, the 'cord of sound' that binds them. This is complicated by narrative point of view, however. Focalized through Mrs Curren's consciousness, we know nothing of Verceuil's experience of Bach, nor indeed whether he hears the music at all. Based in an understanding of music as transcending difference (Bach's 'pure spirit'), her fantasy of the 'two hearts [...] tied [...] by a cord of sound' is a wishful projection onto Verceuil. An interest in Bach, and even an understanding of music as transcendent, is therefore part of her characterization, her commitment to the *classical*. Like other aspects of the novel, it communicates her desire for a connection with Verceuil, but cannot offer insight into his experience.

The terms in which Mrs Curren describes – or fails to describe – the music are also significant. Her physical description of the portrait of Bach contrasts with the figurative language associated with the music – ‘pure spirit’, the music that ‘dances’ in her ‘heart’, the ‘organ’ of love, the ‘cord of sound’ – which refers to the effect rather than to the sound of the music. The description of the portrait might be understood as ekphrastic, but it serves less to enhance our understanding of Bach than to draw attention to the challenge of representing music itself within prose narrative. Coetzee’s use of the word *cord* is also significant; it has a Greek etymology meaning the string of an instrument made from the gut. It is also the term used by Coetzee to figure the relationship between Michael K and the land on which he grows pumpkins, ‘a cord of tenderness’ (*LT*, 66). In *Age of Iron* the ‘cord of sound’ joins the hearts, the ‘organs of love’, of Mrs Curren and Verceuil. Kathryn Lachman notes the relationship of cord to the Latin *cor*, heart, in her reading of music in Coetzee.⁵ As with John’s response to Pasolini in *Youth* (‘his own heart wants to burst’), other art forms, and especially music, are figured as speaking directly to the heart in Coetzee’s work.

This idea is expressed too by David Lurie in *Disgrace*, in opposition to the instrumental view of language employed by his institution’s Department of Communications: ‘His own opinion, which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul’ (*Dis*, 4). Both Lachman and McDonald note the Romantic genesis of David’s statement, which Lachman identifies with Rousseau and McDonald relates to Coetzee’s interest in von Humboldt and the linguistic relativity thesis.⁶ For Lachman this fits with David’s romantic

assumptions about music and his conviction that writing an opera will be an easy endeavour for an untrained literary scholar, something she contrasts with the 'surprisingly mute quality' of his *Byron in Italy* opera. She aligns the opera with the novel's emphasis on nonverbal signification, gesture, and animals, as opera's 'otherness' to novelistic discourse opens 'a space of opacity and unreadability in the narrative'.⁷

The emphasis on nonverbal signification takes more and less explicitly aestheticized forms in *Disgrace*, among them its preoccupation with performance. If *Byron in Italy* is the other art form of the novel's second part, Melanie Isaacs's performance in *Sunset at the Globe Salon* dominates its first. Michael Holland describes them as the novel's twin *mise-en-abymes*, the term used to describe an art form repeated in miniature within itself (the play within a play, or a picture within a picture), which acts both as a commentary on the themes of the work itself and a meta-reflection on its aesthetic procedures.⁸ In the case of *Disgrace*, the use of a play and an opera in an ostensibly realist novel offers an interesting twist on the usual repetition of the *mise-en-abyme*, however, fracturing the potentially endless metafictional reflection that the device typically enables. Rather than limiting the self-reflexivity prompted by the *mise-en-abyme*, the shift in form redirects our attention to the shared and differing modes of expression available across prose fiction, theatre, and opera (and opera libretto): linguistic, musical, nonverbal gesture, and embodied performance.

A similar logic is evident when David shows Melanie a Norman McLaren film as part of his efforts to seduce her.

Sitting side by side they watch. Two dancers on a bare stage move through their steps. Recorded by a stroboscopic camera, their images, ghosts of their movements, fan out behind them like wingbeats. It is a film he first saw a quarter of a century ago but is still captivated by: the instant of the present and the past of that instant, evanescent, caught in the same space.

He wills the girl to be captivated too. But he senses she is not. (*Dis*, 14-15)

Here the failure of shared aesthetic experience interrupts, temporarily, David's seduction of his student. It is a symptom of his inability to read her desires and further evidence of the generational and cultural differences between them.

Although not named in the novel, David and Melanie are watching McLaren's *Pas de deux* (1968), a short film featuring first one and then two dancers, a woman and a man, whose real life performance is given an animated and stroboscopic effect through McLaren's use of back lighting and animation, creating the 'evanescent' and ghostly effect that David describes.⁹ The *pas de deux* historically formed the opening act of an opera or ballet, but is now a fundamental component of ballet, taking more and less structured forms. In McLaren's film the arrival of first the female and then the male dancer creates the effect of an elaborate seduction, as he coaxes her into the partnering that forms the core of the *pas de deux*. The dance film, in the novel's opening act, therefore echoes the seduction taking place in Lurie's living room – another *mise en abyme* that proceeds through a shift in medium.

Introducing the film to Melanie, David heavy-handedly distinguishes the *dance* of McLaren's film from *dancing* (*Dis*, 14). But another, later example of

dancing in the novel echoes the structure of McLaren's film without being explicitly framed as an aesthetic object. When David and Lucy attend a party to celebrate the transfer of land from Lucy to Petrus, the guests are dancing to 'old-fashioned African jazz' (*Dis*, 128). Extracting herself from an awkward conversation with Petrus, Lucy goes to dance. In David's account of his daughter's movements 'she dances by herself in the solipsistic way that now seems to be the mode' and is soon joined by a 'tall, loose-limbed, nattily dressed' young man, who 'dances opposite her, snapping his fingers, flashing her smiles, courting her' (*Dis*, 130). Lucy's dancing and the young man's 'courting' echo the *pas de deux* of McLaren's film, as the woman's dancing is interrupted by the attentions of the male dancer. But Lucy's dancing comes to an abrupt end when she sees Pollux, the youngest of her rapists, and insists on leaving the party, at which point the dancing is interrupted by David's confrontation with the young man.

The novel's two instances of dance, in other words, are stalked by the shadow of rape: David's seduction and rape of Melanie and the gang rape of Lucy at her farm. Both dance scenes act out seemingly innocuous forms of courtship or seduction. In *Youth*, John is dismissive of dancing as a mere substitute for 'the real thing', the real thing being sex. David intends McLaren's *Pas de deux* to be a prelude to 'the real thing', whereas the public courtship of Lucy by the young man at the party stands in stark contrast to the preceding rape, which remains unrepresented in the novel. We might contrast this with the work of Royal Ballet choreographer Kenneth Macmillan who notoriously staged detailed and realistic representations of rape onstage, including the rape of an adolescent girl by an older man in *The Invitation* (1960) and a gang rape in *The Judas Tree* (1992).

The form of Coetzee's novel, strictly focalized through Lurie, allows no scope for the spectacle of rape that haunts it. This absence is sharpened by the scenes of dance that act as aesthetic doubles of the novel's dark events. The pattern is reinforced by the light comedy of *Sunset at the Globe Salon* and *Byron in Italy*, whose generic conventions likewise demand the exclusion of acts of violence.

Dance may be a substitute for 'the real thing' that takes place in the realist novel, but the photographic or filmic image is frequently associated with a privileged access to the real in Coetzee's work. In an essay on John Huston's film adaptation of Arthur Miller's *The Misfits*, first published in 2000 and therefore more or less contemporaneous with *Disgrace*, Coetzee argues that 'there remains something irreducibly different about the photographic image, namely that it bears in or with itself the trace of a real historical past' (*IW*, 226). Coetzee's focus in the essay is on the wild horses who are being rounded up by the film's main characters: 'The horses used in the filming of *The Misfits* were wild horses; the exhaustion and pain and terror one sees on the screen are real exhaustion and pain and terror. The horses are not acting' (*IW*, 225). For Coetzee, the aesthetic and ethical challenge posed by the presence of the horses brings us to 'the heart of film as a representational medium', that is, its status as 'the visual record of something that once really happened'. Writing, in contrast, is more abstract; it relies not on 'a real hand' but 'the idea of a hand' (*IW*, 225-26). Coetzee's account of film is closely tied to its relationship to the photographic image, and his reading of the photographic image is implicitly deeply informed by Barthes' assertion in *Camera Lucida* that the essence of the photograph lies in the fact that 'I can never deny that *the thing has been there*', which Barthes too contrasts with writing, which cannot 'authenticate itself'.¹⁰

But Coetzee's investment in the real of film in the case of *The Misfits* is also particularly motivated by the injury suffered by the film's real horses, and the medium's ability to replay and therefore repeat the injury, which seems to cause genuine distress to Coetzee as a viewer: 'Who would dare to say it is just a story?' (*IW*, 227). Coetzee links the status of the photograph as 'something that once really happened' with debates about visual pornography. This is the territory that he elaborates in his essay on Catherine MacKinnon in *Giving Offense*, published four years earlier, in which he disagrees with MacKinnon's stance on censorship but comes surprisingly close to endorsing what he terms the 'special ontological status' that she claims for pornographic films: 'the status not of the realistic (that is, the successfully illusionistic) but of the real', which in Coetzee's account is tied to what he imagines as the 'numinous' and 'emotionally complex' experience of bodily penetration (*GO*, 77-79). Coetzee's reflections on pornographic films come noticeably closer to engaging with a woman's experience of sex and sexual assault than anything available through David's consciousness in *Disgrace*. We find in *Disgrace* and Coetzee's nonfiction of the period a repeated testing of the ethics of representing the body and especially violence against the body across the technologies and ontologies of multiple performative and embodied art forms. This occurs alongside and within the ostensibly *realist* fiction of *Disgrace*, whose 'idea' of the body is implicitly contrasted with the 'real' bodies of photography, film, and dance.

So far it is clear that Coetzee's representation of the aesthetic experience of visual and performing arts in his work is shaped to a significant extent by narrative point of view, and acts therefore to amplify our understanding of the narrative's focalizing consciousness. This is also the context in which we must

read the apparent *otherness* of other arts in Coetzee's work. While there is ample archival evidence of Coetzee's deep knowledge of, for example, the music of Bach, the techniques and history of photography, and avant-garde cinema of the 1960s, music, photography and film appear for the most part in his work not through the lens of the creator but of the listener or viewer. The aesthetic experiences that are recounted are frequently those of the student, the amateur, the novice, or the enthusiast, and not those of the expert or master. This might partly explain the consistent framing of aesthetic experience in terms of its emotional and physical effects. It is also a notable contrast with explicit references to the literary in Coetzee's works, which are often focalized through writers or scholars.

The possibility of and limits to shared aesthetic experience between characters, or across time or cultures, are closely related to ideas about music especially, but also visual and performing arts, as transcending the mediation and abstraction of language in their emotional immediacy and access to a historic real. Notwithstanding their prominence across the Coetzee corpus, these ideas are frequently exposed as fantasies, identified with the amateur's wonder at mastery of a particular art form, or revealing the ideological investments and worldview of the characters who hold them. The presumed otherness to language of visual and performing arts also tests and revises the limits of novelistic discourse. McDonald argues that Coetzee's early work was concerned with the 'philosophical question' deriving from the Humboldtian linguistic relativity thesis – 'is it possible to transcend the language you take to be your own?' – and suggests, via the writings of Fritz Mauthner, that this might go as far as the fantasy of transcending language as such.¹¹ McDonald ties this to the

emphasis on nonlinguistic forms of expression in *Disgrace*, specifically the idea of the look. As I have shown, this also takes more explicitly aestheticized forms in the novel's preoccupation with theatre, opera, film, and dance, as well as their various forms of spectatorship. Indeed, I would suggest that the fantasy of transcending language frequently manifests itself through other art forms in Coetzee's work, even as these fantasies are undermined. I have also shown how the ethics of representing the body and bodily violence, so central to Coetzee's work, are tested in relation to the technologies and ontologies of such art forms. All of this helps to explain why the metafictional *mise en abyme* that has been ever-present in Coetzee's work increasingly pushes at the limits of the printed text. The shift in medium has the effect of disrupting the potentially recursive logic of such self-reflexivity, opening up questions about the limits of the novel and its shared and differing representational modes vis à vis other arts.

Many of these issues have been keenly debated in relation to *Foe*, as Susan Barton's fascination with the apparently silent Friday marks the limits of her ability to tell the full story of 'Cruso's island'. In a novel that relentlessly probes the constraints and possibilities of linguistic expression in speech and writing, it is through Friday's mysterious dancing that she claims his truth is revealed to her: 'What had been hidden from me was revealed. I saw; or, I should say, my eyes were open to what was present to them' (*F*, 119). Friday's dancing bears comparison with the representation of the other art forms that I have discussed in Coetzee's work insofar as it is focalized through Barton, and therefore shaped to an extent by her fantasies and desires. In engaging questions around the history of slavery, colonialism, and race, the novel also foregrounds the extent to which fantasies of transcendent nonlinguistic art forms run the risk

of a certain kind of exoticism or primitivism. And as an expressive mode of the silent Friday, the dancing anticipates the novel's closing section in which 'bodies are their own signs' and the solid stream emanating from Friday is experienced by the unidentified narrator as a rhythmic physical sensation (*F*, 157).

Friday's dancing is both implicitly and explicitly aligned with writing. Not only does it fuel Barton's narrative ('there is never a lack of things to write of' (*F*, 93)), she also repeatedly insists on the link between Friday's dancing and his adoption of the robes and wig of Foe, suggesting that Friday is performing the role of author through the expressive mode of dance. The archive too encourages us to look beyond the dance as exotic content for Susan's narrative. The *Foe* notebooks from late 1984 to March 1985 suggest that Coetzee was inspired by dance and reflections on the aesthetics of movement, and also exploring the distinctive challenge of translating physical movement into narrative prose. Meditations on Friday's dance and its relationship to language occur alongside references to Heinrich von Kleist's 'Essay on the Marionette Theatre', Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, and poet Charles Olson, all of whom share an interest in dance. The notebook suggests that Coetzee initially sees Friday's dance as an alternative to language and a means of communication. The entry for January 16, 1985, the day before he mentions Kleist, reads: 'The answer to the question of how you talk with Friday is of course that you and he dance.'¹² But it is also clear from the *Foe* notebook that writing about dance presented a formal and ontological challenge for Coetzee. An entry on March 20, 1985 in which Coetzee writes 'End of the project in sight – project becomes possible,' is followed immediately by a reference to another dance film by Norman McLaren, this time his 1983 film *Narcissus*: 'Saw Norman Maclaren's [sic] Narcissus last

night. Flurries of motion on the canvas. Can it ever be written? How is it done (technically)?'¹³ Similar concerns are evident in the notebooks to *Life & Times of Michael K*. He imagines a kind of unselfconscious dance for Michael K, suggesting that he 'dances when alone (eg in the flat)', but this is immediately qualified by the challenge of writing about dance: 'though I shouldn't make the mistake of trying to describe it too fully.'¹⁴

Adaptation

Dance features in *Slow Man* as one of the many therapies thrust on Paul Rayment after he has lost a leg in a bicycle accident. He attends a dance workshop that aims to 're-program the body's memories' (*SM*, 60). The movements of his fellow participants with prostheses recall Kleist's marionettes, whereas Paul 'sways in time with the music', hypnotized (*SM*, 60-61). References to dance in the novel persist through the figure of the puppet. In the immediate aftermath of his accident Paul describes himself as '*unstrung*': 'that is the word that comes back to him from Homer. The spear shatters the breastbone, blood spurts, the limbs are unstrung, the body topples like a wooden puppet. Well, his limbs have been unstrung and now his spirit is unstrung too. His spirit is ready to topple' (*SM*, 27). But as the novel develops, Paul's identification with the puppet acquires new force directly related to the metafictional world opened up by the arrival of Elizabeth Costello. He complains about being manipulated by Costello: 'You treat me like a puppet [...]. You treat everyone like a puppet. You make up stories and bully us into playing them out for you. You should open a puppet theatre, or a zoo' (*SM*, 117).

Slow Man was adapted for opera by composer Nicholas Lens with Coetzee writing the libretto, and first performed in Poznan, Poland, in 2012. The opera focuses on a single episode from the novel: the encounter between Paul Rayment and the blind Marianna contrived by Elizabeth Costello, and which provokes Paul's complaints about being treated like a puppet. In its translation to the stage, the role of dance becomes ever more central. The cast of the opera features not only the characters of Paul, Marijanna, and Elizabeth Costello, but doubles the characters of Paul and Marijanna so that they appear both as singers and dancers. Puppet master Elizabeth Costello, on the other hand, is simply a sung part, reinforcing the metafictional role of dance in the opera. As in the novel, Paul berates Elizabeth Costello for treating him like a puppet, but in Coetzee's libretto his words are betrayed by the movement of his dancer alter-ego Rayment, who, we are told in the stage directions, listens, and moves his arms in gestures that might be those of a puppet. The doubling of the characters as dancers and singers introduces a kind of Cartesian split between mind and body, or voice and body.

Although the staging by Opera Poznan incorporates vivid screen images by Wojciech Puś which also act as doubles of the singers, the centrality of photography to the plot of the novel is sidelined in the adaptation. Instead the novel's few references to dance and puppetry are amplified by the opera's staging, and its metafictional concerns, channelled through the writing of Costello and the deviant creative activities of Drago, are reframed in the adaptation around dance and theatre. In this regard, the selection of this particular episode for the opera adaptation is significant. The encounter between Paul and the blind Marianna already sits uneasily within the novel, the most

contrived of Costello's efforts as author and creator. The episode is difficult to accommodate within an account of the novel as a realist fiction in part because it is explicitly framed as a piece of theatre or opera being performed by Paul and Marianna. This explains some of the more extravagant details of the episode: the emphasis on costume, masks, and performance. Paul invites Marianna to sing, aware of the staginess of the encounter, but also conscious of being observed:

'If you would sing, that would be best of all,' he says. 'We are on stage, in a certain sense, even if we are not being watched.'

Even if we are not being watched. But in a certain sense they are being watched, he is sure of that, on the back of his neck he can feel it. (*SM*, 103. Italics original)

The metafictional dimensions of the novel are here figured as a literal staging of the action of Costello's fiction, while she is the ghostly observer of the scene. Paul insists that they are not reading from a script: 'There is no need', he begins again, 'for us to adhere to any script. No need to do anything we do not wish. We are free agents' (*SM*, 105). His assertion that they are 'free agents' flies in the face of Costello's apparent control of the entire encounter. The references to theatre, singing, and ornate costume point to an operatic interlude within the novel. Elizabeth Costello, in other words, like David Lurie in *Disgrace*, is writing an opera or a libretto, or at least briefly experimenting with the opera form. Indeed, Marianna's articulation of desire in the *Slow Man* libretto has echoes of the passion and longing of David Lurie's Teresa Guiccioli.

The opera adaptation and libretto expand on the concerns of Coetzee's novel in a manner specific to the form of contemporary opera and the expressive modes available to it. But the adaptation also alerts us to the theatricality of

Coetzee's novel. In an interview Nicholas Lens describes a long-standing correspondence with Coetzee about the possibility of working together on an opera that pre-dates the writing of *Slow Man*, and raises interesting questions about the extent of their collaborative endeavours. Lens heard from Coetzee in 2005 'that he was busy writing a book [*Slow Man*] and one of the scenes [the meeting of Paul and Marianna] could be our starting point.'¹⁵ Lens's account, together with the operatic nature of the episode from the novel, raises the possibility that the theatricality of Coetzee's novel in part emerges from the collaborative dialogue with Lens. This adds an additional layer to the relationship between an original art work and a copy or a forgery which drives the plot surrounding Drago Jokic's playful reworking of Rayment's Fauchery photograph in the novel, complicating the presumed single direction of influence between original and copy – or adaption. It adds a new dimension too to the expectations of fidelity owed by the adaptation to the original.

The *Slow Man* libretto is not Coetzee's first attempt to adapt his work for another medium, but it is undoubtedly the most successful and the result of a fruitful and ongoing collaboration with Lens that extends at least to another adaptation, this time of *Elizabeth Costello* under the title *Costello: This Body That I Am*, which is written but yet to be produced. There have been numerous adaptations of Coetzee's work for stage and film over the years, and his involvement has ranged from the full collaboration with another artist, as with Lens, to granting permission for his work to be adapted. One of the most high profile examples of the latter was Philip Glass's adaptation of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, produced in 2006 by Teater Erfurt and staged in Amsterdam, which set a libretto by Christopher Hampton to a typically minimalist Glass score. The

production was notable for a staging that evoked the contemporary concerns about torture and detention in the war on terror through illuminated orange figures suspended above the action, occasionally descending to occupy the full stage. The earliest attempt to adapt Coetzee's work for opera, however, emerges from the archive and remains unheard. Among the documents relating to *In the Heart of the Country* at the Harry Ransom Center is a short, undated libretto titled 'Lament from the Heart of the Country: for Soprano and Chamber Ensemble,' written by Coetzee.¹⁶ It is not difficult to imagine Magda's passion, like that of Teresa Guiccioli or Marianna, expressed through the opera form.

There have also been numerous adaptations of Coetzee's work for the stage, but so far none that has attracted his direct involvement.¹⁷ He has, however, especially encouraged and collaborated with filmmakers interested in adapting his work, and for a range of reasons. His immersion in avant-garde cinema in London in the early 1960s and the impact of film on the *nouveau roman* clearly left him with a strong sense of the creative and narrative possibilities of the medium. In an interview in *Doubling the Point* he describes being drawn to the use of montage, stills, and voice over in avant-garde cinema of the 1960s and suggests that this style 'imprints' itself on *In the Heart of the Country* through the numbered sections and pace of narration (*DP*, 60). These observations have shaped critical commentary on the novel and on adaptations of his work for film, frequently focusing on the reciprocal influence between fiction and film. Forthcoming work by Iona Gilbert takes us beyond Coetzee's own self-commentary to show the influence of photographic and cinematographic techniques on the novels including and beyond *In the Heart of the Country*.¹⁸ An essay by Teresa Dovey and Lindiwe Dovey and a series of

essays by Hermann Wittenberg emphasize the influence of film on Coetzee's fiction, against which adaptations, completed and imagined, are measured.¹⁹

Wittenberg's archival and editorial work offers the fullest picture of Coetzee's efforts to balance the potential for creative experimentation, exposure to new audiences, and commercial gain that film as a medium makes available.²⁰ Coetzee completed screenplay adaptations of *In the Heart of the Country* (1981) and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1995), which have yet to be produced but have been edited for publication by Wittenberg (2014), as well as an incomplete and undated screenplay of *Life & Times of Michael K*.²¹ As Wittenberg documents, this creative activity occurred in the context of extensive communication with filmmakers, some of which produced completed films but more of which resulted in various dead ends and creative impasses. To date there have been four adaptations for the screen: Marion Hänsel's adaptation of *In the Heart of the Country, Dust* (1985), Alex Harvey's *The Lives of Animals* (2002), which was produced for television by the BBC, Steve Jacobs's *Disgrace* (2008), and Ben van Lieshout's *The Muse* (2009), with the promise of a forthcoming adaptation of *Waiting for the Barbarians* by Ciro Aguerre starring Mark Rylance and Johnny Depp, as well as a feature documentary by South African filmmaker Francois Verster titled *The Last Days of Elizabeth Costello*. So far, Coetzee's closest involvement has been with Marion Hänsel's *Dust*, but notwithstanding this, she eschewed Coetzee's own screenplay and guidance on the significance of the novel's Karoo setting, as well as his taste for stills and voiceover, and ignored the novel's section breaks. The film 'loses a lot of vitality thereby', according to Coetzee (*DP*, 60). In keeping with this reading, the Doveys offer a devastating account of the myriad ways in which Hänsel's film was 'wrong' – culturally,

geographically, and formally. They describe a profound ‘ambivalence’ at the heart of Coetzee’s interactions with filmmakers: a deep interest in film and a willingness to have his work adapted by other artists, but equally a desire to retain some control over the screenplay.²²

Wittenberg’s work details this ambivalence in accounts of numerous failed collaborations, sensitive to the various factors shaping the optioning and adaptation of novels for cinema. He draws on extensive archival sources to document Coetzee’s enthusiasm for the potential of film and his awareness of and resistance to the priorities of commercial cinema, and argues persuasively that the interest in film grows with Coetzee’s reputation, and that the author saw the potential for a major film adaptation of *Barbarians* in particular to transform his writing career. But the protracted efforts to adapt *Barbarians* also capture the clear conflict between the requirements of commercial cinema and Coetzee’s desire to protect the creative vision of the novel (which ultimately is *his* vision). In a letter to British television producer Eric Paice, he writes ‘I must make it clear from the start that the main responsibility I feel is towards the book. I don’t want to conclude a deal which results one day in a film that leaves me feeling sick’.²³ Some sources of conflict are also particularly telling: while Coetzee went to great lengths to encourage Hänsel to be faithful to *In the Heart of the Country*’s South African location, he insisted that a clause be inserted in the contract to option *Waiting for the Barbarians* preventing it from being filmed in a South African location.

In the case of Steve Jacobs and Anna Maria Monticelli’s adaptation of *Disgrace*, the problem of fidelity to the location of the novel presents different challenges. An Australian production to all intents and purposes, *Disgrace* was

nonetheless filmed on location in South Africa, with international actors in two of the main roles, John Malkovich as David Lurie and Eriq Ebouaney as Petrus. The Cape Town scenes are largely filmed at the University of Cape Town, where Coetzee studied and worked for most of his career. Lucy's farm, however, is relocated to the dramatic natural environment of the Cederberg, north of Cape Town, thus forgoing the precision of the novel's depiction of the politics of land and language in the Eastern Cape. The film also controversially reverses the order of the novel's closing scenes, concluding not with Lurie's sacrifice of his favourite dog, but with the pregnant Lucy, played by Jessica Haines, located in the landscape of the Cederberg mountains, therefore associating her seemingly intractable commitment to remaining on the farm with the beauty of the landscape. The film thus loses the irony of Lurie's almost instinctive positioning of his daughter within his anachronistic romantic worldview as '*das ewig Weibliche*', figured in the novel in relation to the paintings of Constable and Bonnard, instead framing her within just such a romantic aesthetic (*Dis*, 218. *Italics original*).

Coetzee's wide-ranging engagement with other art forms opens up a set of questions about intertextuality, medium, writing, and language. These are related to the existing terms in which his work is read, but also offer new ways of thinking about aestheticized forms of embodiment and nonverbal expression that test and revise our understanding of the limits of prose fiction and its relationship to other art forms. Adaptations might not liberate Coetzee's characters from the languages in which they frequently feel imprisoned, but the best may at least offer them the grammars of new media in which to express themselves. Within the framework of adaptation, Coetzee's engagement with

other art forms has the potential to generate collaborative works that complicate and exceed the conventional terms of fidelity against which adaptations are frequently measured. This can be seen in the opera adaptation of *Slow Man*. But his willingness to incorporate and test the conventions of other arts in his fiction also presents challenges to artists whose commitment is to their own forms, who must therefore move beyond the terms determined by the original, and whose adaptations should be untethered from the understandable ambivalence of Coetzee himself.

¹ *Photographs from Boyhood*, a recent exhibition of Coetzee's own photographs at the Irma Stern Gallery in Cape Town curated by Hermann Wittenberg and Farzanah Badsha, shows the young Coetzee's technical mastery of photography.

² W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 158.

³ Peter D. McDonald, *Artefacts of Writing: Ideas of the State and Communities of Letters from Matthew Arnold to Xu Bing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 196. See also his discussion of Coetzee's relationship to the linguistic relativity thesis in 'Coetzee's Critique of Language' in *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Coetzee and Philosophy*, Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm, (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 161-180.

⁴ See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, translated by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), p. 35.

- ⁵ Kathryn Lachman, *Borrowed Forms: The Music and Ethics of Transnational Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), p. 122.
- ⁶ Lachman, *Borrowed Forms*, p. 116; and McDonald, 'Coetzee's Critique of Language', p. 170.
- ⁷ Lachman, *Borrowed Forms*, p. 132.
- ⁸ Michael Holland, "'Plink-Plunk': Unforgetting the Present in Coetzee's *Disgrace*", *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 4.3 (2002), 400-403.
- ⁹ Norman McLaren, *Pas de deux* (National Film Board of Canada, 1968):
https://www.nfb.ca/film/pas_de_deux_en/
- ¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard (trans.) (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 76, 85.
- ¹¹ McDonald, *Artefacts of Writing*, p. 196. For Coetzee and Mauthner see McDonald, 'Coetzee's Critique of Language'.
- ¹² J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*, green casebound notebook with gilt edges (1982-1985), CP 33.6, 16 January 1985
- ¹³ Ibid., 20 March 20 1985
- ¹⁴ J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*, gray casebound notebook (1972-1982), CP 33.5.
- ¹⁵ Nicholas Lens and Dorota Semenowicz, 'An Ordinary Man: An Interview with Nicholas Lens by Dorota Semenowicz', *Werkwinkel*, 7.2 (2012), 49.
- ¹⁶ J. M. Coetzee, 'Lament from the Heart of the Country: for Soprano and Chamber Ensemble', CP 59.6.
- ¹⁷ The more high profile stage adaptations include: two of *Foe*, one by Complicité (West Yorkshire Playhouse, 1996), adapted by Mark Wheatley and directed by Annie Castledine and Marcello Magni, and the other adapted and directed by

Peter Glazer (Zellerbach Playhouse, University of California, Berkeley, 2003); *Waiting for the Barbarians* directed by Alexander Marine (Baxter Theatre, Cape Town, 2012); the 'Eros' section of *Elizabeth Costello*, by Krzysztof Warlikowski as part of his *Phaedre(s)* (The Barbican, London, 2016), with Isabelle Huppert as Elizabeth Costello.

¹⁸ See Iona Gilbert, 'Cinematographic and Photographic Aesthetics in the Work of J. M. Coetzee', unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape (2017).

¹⁹ Teresa Dovey and Lindiwe Dovey, 'Coetzee on Film' in Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill (eds.) *J. M. Coetzee's Austerities* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 57-78.

²⁰ See Hermann Wittenberg, 'Coetzee in California: Adaptation, Authorship, and the Filming of *Waiting for the Barbarians*', *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 16.2 (2015), 115-135 and Hermann Wittenberg, 'Film and Photography in J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 58.4 (2016), 473-492.

²¹ J. M. Coetzee, *Two Screenplays: Waiting for the Barbarians and In the Heart of the Country*, Hermann Wittenberg (ed.) (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2014). See Wittenberg 'Film and Photography' for an account of the latter screenplay.

²² Dovey and Dovey, 'Coetzee on Film', pp. 61, 77-78.

²³ Wittenberg, 'Coetzee in California', p. 121.