

J. M. Coetzee and Modernist Cinema:
Viewing the legacy of modernism through film

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Abstract

This thesis considers the purpose of film in the works of South African author, J.M. Coetzee. Specifically, it aims to illustrate the influence of the films and practices synonymous with modernist cinema for Coetzee's writing practice. Using *Youth* (2002), *The Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), and the 1981 screenplay adaptation of *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), this thesis argues that film helped Coetzee grapple with, and reinterpret the legacy of modernism in his own writing. It focuses on Coetzee's admiration for cinematic modernism, especially in the films of Jean-Luc Godard, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Alain Robbe-Grillet, and considers the effect of Coetzee's South African context on the way he re-interprets cinematic modernism in his writing. In doing so, this thesis will argue that Coetzee's relationship with cinematic modernism extends our understanding of the tension that exists between his writing practices and the realist modes of practice valued by apartheid-era South Africa. It consequently also highlights the importance of considering the continuing exchange between cinematic and literary modernism in theorising the legacy of modernism.

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INTRODUCTION

J. M. Coetzee and Modernist Film

In 1974, Peter Temple drew attention to a ‘cinematic quality’ in J. M. Coetzee’s first published novel, *Dusklands* (1974). Twenty-three years later, South African filmmaker Michael Oblowitz highlighted a similar quality in Coetzee’s work when he described his novels as ‘very cinematic’ (Snyman 16). Throughout his writing career, J. M. Coetzee has engaged with film in various ways, and this engagement continues to interest directors and scholars. This thesis identifies where this cinematic influence can be seen in Coetzee’s writing, and explores how it has impacted his writing practice. Specifically, it asks: why does J. M. Coetzee interact with film and what can this interaction tell us about Coetzee’s relationship with modernism?

It is my argument that Coetzee’s relationship with film influenced his investigation of modernism. Specifically, I will argue that his engagement with, and continuing interest in, modernist cinema affected his interpretation of the legacies of modernism. The influence of modernist cinema will be identified through a close-reading of three of his novels: *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Youth* (2002). In conjunction, I will draw on Coetzee’s screenplay adaptation of *In the Heart of the Country*, and an early draft of *Life & Times of Michael K* that imagines the novel as a screenplay. These texts have been chosen because they include implicit, and at times explicit, references to modernist film, and to cinematic modes of representation that recall modernist cinema. As a result, they offer an important glimpse into Coetzee’s writing process, and the influence of cinematic modes of representation therein.

In the chapters that follow I will identify this influence in specific stylistic and discursive choices that are made, and grappled with, by J. M. Coetzee in his writing. In conjunction, I will also argue that modernist cinema facilitates, but also challenges, Coetzee's investigation of modernist strategies. In particular, it prompts Coetzee to reflect on—and at times re-evaluate—modernist modes of representation in light of his context. Each text chosen for this thesis engages with the ideological concerns apparent in apartheid-era South Africa in different ways. The place of film in each text will consequently speak to these contextual concerns, as well as the difficulty Coetzee finds in navigating them. In particular, this thesis will draw attention to the importance of realism in South Africa during apartheid, and the influence that this has on Coetzee's engagement with modernism. Coetzee's engagement with modernism during this period has interested scholars for decades. This thesis will contribute to this scholarship by showing the influence of modernist cinema on Coetzee's writing and in relation to these debates. It will consequently expand on our understanding of his relationship with the legacies of modernism, and in connection, with realism.

Modernist cinema has been of particular interest to J. M. Coetzee. Fictionalised in his semi-autobiographical novel, *Youth* (2002), this interest seems to begin when he moves to London in 1962 (Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* 12). It is here, Coetzee writes, that he (or at least a fictional version of himself) finds refuge; it is in the cinema that 'his eyes are opened to films from all over the world' (*Youth* 48). Specifically, he experiences films most commonly identified with the modernist cinema of the 1960s, films like Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* (1962) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Bande à part* (1964). Although the reliability of this account is intentionally problematised by Coetzee, he has spoken elsewhere of his reverence for practitioners of modernist film. Most noticeably in *Doubling the Point* (1992) we see Coetzee speak fondly of Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, Andrzej Munk (60),

and the *nouveau roman*'s 'equivalent in film' (6). In 'Homage' (1993), he cites 'the dominating presence [of] Ingmar Bergman; Jean-Luc Godard and the French nouvelle vague' as key influencers 'appearing on the horizon' (5) in his early-twenties; and even earlier in his career, he would admit to Stephen Watson that 'film has had a lot of influence' (1978) on his writing.

To Hermann Wittenberg, it is 'by now known that Coetzee showed a keen interest in the medium of film' ('Film and Photography' 473). Despite the awareness that Wittenberg alludes to, scholarship dedicated to examining Coetzee's interest in film remains sparse. Teresa and Lindiwe Dovey were the first to examine Coetzee in relation to film in their chapter: 'Coetzee on Film' (2010). Hermann Wittenberg has contributed two articles on Coetzee's engagement with film, and helped publish the two screenplays Coetzee wrote for *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). As such, Wittenberg is particularly important for this thesis. In particular, this thesis will contribute to the work begun by Wittenberg, and Dovey and Dovey by making explicit reference to the modernist legacies that we can identify in modernist cinema. These modernist legacies, I will argue, create a unique dialectic in modernist cinema between realist and modernist modes of representation. In turn, this dialectic has clear repercussions for Coetzee, who engages, and struggles with the relationship between realist and modernist modes of representation throughout his writing practice.

Both terms—modernism and realism—are undercurrents in the work of Dovey and Dovey and Wittenberg but never form the focus of their discussions. Wittenberg's 'Godard in the Karoo: J. M. Coetzee's screenplay adaptation of *In the Heart of the Country*' (2014) opens by connecting 'the emergence of European modernist fiction' (13) to the practices put forward by early cinema. Dovey and Dovey also acknowledge the influence of film on the

literary practices ‘of high modernism’ (68). Both publications are responding to the cross-pollination between early film and high modernism that Coetzee proposes in *Doubling the Point* (1992):

There was a moment in high modernism when first poets, then novelists, realized how rapidly narration could be carried out: films that used montage effectively were connecting short narrative sequences into longer narratives much more swiftly and deftly than the nineteenth-century novelist had thought possible, and they were educating their younger audience too into following rapid transitions, an audience that then carried this skill back into the reading of printed text. (59)

Here, Coetzee aligns with contemporary scholarship that has understood early film and high modernism as ‘sibling cultural phenomena’ (Shail 3). In effect, this scholarly trend has sought to further David Trotter's proposal in ‘Cinema and Modernism’ (2007) that early film and high modernism should be ‘understood as constituting and constituted by parallel histories’ (11). There is a wealth of publications concerned with this relationship and its importance for modernist studies ((McCabe and Edd 2005; Shail 2012; McParland 2014; Hanaway-Oakley 2017). While Wittenberg, and Dovey and Dovey, both acknowledge the importance of these ideas for Coetzee’s interaction with film, they do not position this importance in relation to his relationship with modernism. This thesis looks to bring out their arguments in relation to Coetzee’s relationship with modernism explicitly. In doing so, I will make use of the wealth of contemporary scholarship that has expanded on modernism’s continuing legacies.

In this way, I will make use of a framework proposed by David James and Ursula Seshagiri in ‘Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution’ (2014). Here, they introduce the term ‘metamodernist’ to describe the ways in which modernism continues to

influence contemporary authors. Specifically, they argue that contemporary literature engages with the legacy of the modernist movement by referencing modernist works explicitly, and by incorporating its ‘aspirational energies’ (James and Seshagiri 93) in complex ways.

According to James and Seshagiri, it is the way that literature ‘incorporates and adapts, reactivates and complicates the aesthetic prerogatives’ (James and Seshagiri 93) of modernism, that speaks to its enduring influence on authors.

In the novels chosen for this thesis, J. M. Coetzee shows that he continues to revere modernist authors, and modernism in the ways outlined by James and Seshagiri. In *Youth*, he references key modernist figures explicitly; in *In the Heart of the Country* and *The Life and Times of Michael K* he grapples with a distinctly modernist crisis of meaning more implicitly. In fact, in all of the texts central to this thesis, Coetzee shows that he has grappled with what he has inherited from modernism. Or more specifically, Coetzee interrogates the theoretical, formal, and theoretical energies synonymous with modernism.

While the theoretical energies associated with modernism are diverse, what is key to Coetzee’s interrogation of its legacies is its fraught relationship with realist modes of representation. The relationship between modernism and realism has a diverse scholarly history. Coetzee would ‘never completely make peace with realism’ (62) according to David Attwell. In *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (2014), Attwell describes Coetzee’s career as one ‘in which suspicion of realism’s pretensions would remain a distinguishing feature’ (63). This suspicion is linked to Coetzee’s continued engagement with modernism, which cannot be disconnected from the place of realism in both high modernism, and in apartheid-era South Africa.

In 1963, while Coetzee had his first experience of modernist cinema, Georg Lukács published his renowned *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. In what would become one

of his most famous critiques, Lukács berated modernism for its self-proclaimed opposition to realism. The ‘dogmas of modernist anti-realism’ (Lukács 17) were not only unfounded in Lukács’ opinion, but represented a formalistic decadence that would lead ‘to the destruction of traditional literary forms...[and] to the destruction of literature as such’ (Lukács 45). Lukács’ social realism, and by association his critique of modernism, would prove incredibly influential to the writings of J. M. Coetzee. The argument put forward by Lukács here will frame this thesis project. Namely, this thesis will reimagine Lukács’ critique of ‘the antithesis between realism and modernism’ (Lukács 15) in light of filmic modernism, which reinterprets this opposition in ways that prove useful for Coetzee.

Stephen Ross introduces his work *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate* (2009) by identifying the misreading of the past necessary for modernism to establish itself as ‘distinct and new’: ‘it is a fundamental means by which cultural moments narrate their own sense of singularity’ (Ross 3). Modernism’s ‘sense of singularity’ continues to be connected to an anti-realist rhetoric. In ‘The Epistemology of Metaphor’ (1978), Paul de Man writes of literary modernism as the ‘true Enlightenment’, revealing what ‘remained hidden from us by a nineteenth century Romantic and realist epistemology’ (29). ‘We want to be rid of realism’ declares Virginia Woolf in a review published in 1918 (McNeillie). Modernism consequently has been associated with a break from the restrictive tradition that ‘realist epistemology’ (de Man 29) created.

The extent of modernism’s opposition to realism has been re-examined in contemporary modernist studies. If the metamodernist framework proposed by David James and Ursula Seshagiri identifies a writing practice that ‘incorporates and adapts, reactivates and complicates the aesthetic prerogatives’ (93) of modernism, then realism’s antithetical opposition to modernism has been re-examined as a result. Contemporary modernist studies has consequently sought to redefine realism’s connection to high modernist practices,

attending to ‘versions of this antithesis as it adapts to the shifting boundaries and margins of new peripheries and new centers’ (Jameson 485). Metamodernist writers, including J. M. Coetzee (James, Seshagiri 93), inherit this renewed perception of realism as they investigate modernism’s legacies. In *The Wounded Animal* (2008) Stephen Mulhall acknowledges the place of realism with specific reference to J. M. Coetzee. For Mulhall, Coetzee’s writing can be seen as a kind of ‘modernist realism’ (206). This thesis will use Coetzee’s interaction with modernist cinema to extend Mulhall’s claim. While I do not intend to employ Mulhall’s claim as an absolute label for Coetzee’s work, his assertion will extend our understanding of the realist and modernist practices used, and grappled with, by Coetzee in his interaction with modernist cinema.

Modernist film was uniquely tied to realist modes of representation. In ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’ (1936), Walter Benjamin writes of cinema’s detachment from the ‘sphere of tradition’ (14). To Benjamin, film is characterised by an ability to resist the ‘weight of classical tradition’ (24). Gilles Deleuze, in *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (1983), also identifies film by ‘the fact of it being born without a previous tradition to suffocate it’ (211). Film consequently boasted a newness that would influence high modernist practitioners (McCabe 111): providing a framework for some—Woolf, Joyce, Stein—and an antipode to others—Eliot, Pound. However, following World War II, film-makers started to construct an idea of traditional practice in cinema, a retrospective naming of a ‘classical tradition in cinema’ (Kovacs 13) from which they could position their innovations. Alexandre Astruc, in what has become a manifesto of sorts for this upheaval, ‘The Birth of a New Avant Garde: Cinema Stylo’ (1948), reprimanded film-makers for ‘looking back over the past and chewing over the nostalgic memories of an age gone by’ (144). Instead, he encouraged practitioners to look ‘to the future’ (144). It is consequently

clear that film started to grapple with its own break from an aesthetic past following World War II.

A key part of modernist film's construction of tradition was realism and realist modes of representation. I have used realism rather than what Lukács considers the predecessor to high modernism, naturalism, because it is Lukács' critical realism that 'Coetzee would never completely make peace with' (Attwell, *Life of Writing* 62). Moreover, critical realism has interesting, and enduring associations with cinema. Andre Bazin in *What Is Cinema* (1967) summarised the history of cinema as 'the story of the relations between expressionism and realism' (139). Alexandre Astruc acknowledges this history when he critiques cinematic practices 'that cannot go on for ever ploughing the same field of realism' (144). In effect, Astruc aims to prompt innovation in film by positioning this innovation in opposition to the exhausted 'field of realism'. Unlike high modernism however, Astruc's insistence on formal innovation did not create a legacy by which modernist film is thought to oppose realism altogether. Instead, as Bazin goes on to write, innovative practices in film can be encompassed as 'an immediate part of the continued development of realism' (139) rather than a departure from it. The complex relationship between expressionism and realism put forward by Bazin and, obliquely, by Astruc here, can be seen in the engagement with cinema staged by Coetzee throughout his writing career. Modernist cinema's relationship with tradition is less antagonistic than high modernism's treatment of tradition. In light of the importance of realism for Bazin's conception of cinema, modernist film's continuity with traditional practices should also be imagined as a continuity with realism. As a result, film, will help us investigate the realist tensions grappled with by Coetzee, and position these tensions in relation to modernism's enduring legacy.

Each chapter in this thesis will draw attention to the modernist practices of a specific practitioner to identify modernist cinema's distinct relationship with realist modes of representation. Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Robbe-Grillet, will be analysed with an eye to what is unique about their practices as modernist filmmakers. In this way, this thesis will reflect contemporary scholarship on high modernism which has become more attentive to the different versions of modernism within its assumed boundaries. Likewise, this thesis will show the benefits of attending to the various interpretations of modernist practices evident in modernist film and put forward by these modernist filmmakers.

Chapter One looks to prove that modernist cinema has a unique relationship with modernist modes of practice, one that is acknowledged by Coetzee. This relationship appears in *Youth* (2002) to challenge the relationship with modernism that its central character grapples with. This chapter consequently seeks to shift the way we imagine Coetzee's relationship with modernism. It shows that our understanding of Coetzee's writing benefits from acknowledging the numerous legacies of modernism that he engages with. While these legacies include high modernism, they should also be inclusive of the late modernist practices synonymous with modernist cinema. This chapter will consequently illustrate the advantages of reading Coetzee's work with respect to modernism's *expansion* (Mao and Walkowitz 737), highlighting its many forms—of which modernist cinema is one—as a myriad of interconnected continuities (James, Seshagiri 6).

The second chapter will show how Coetzee re-reads his own text, in this case *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), through screenwriting. This chapter will also trace how Coetzee reflects on modernist continuities through the close-reading prompted by the screenwriting process. In conjunction, I will argue that this reflection is influenced by the cinematic

frameworks he takes from modernist cinema—in this case from the practices of Jean-Luc Godard. If this chapter has shifted anything in Coetzeean scholarship, it is by proving the benefits of using adaptations of Coetzee's work to extend our knowledge of the source text, and of Coetzee's experience of writing.

Finally, by analysing *The Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), I will prove that the theoretical frameworks associated with modernist cinema influenced the characterisation of Michael K. In this chapter I will make particular reference to Alain Robbe-Grillet and to Coetzee's early drafts of the novel. Using genetic criticism to analyse these drafts, I will argue that Coetzee's engagement with the *nouveau roman* should include its associations with modernist cinema. Moreover, I will argue that Michael K's characterisation engages with the subjectivism and objectivism at the heart of this relationship with modernist cinema, more specifically in the practices of Alain Robbe-Grillet.

Using the unique tensions between realism and modernism within modernist film will consequently be shown to facilitate Coetzee's interrogation of his allegiances to both high modernism, and realism in light of a South African context wherein both are politicised. If we view Coetzee's writing through its relationship to the modernist filmmaking of the 1960s specifically, we come to a greater understanding of South Africa's literary field during apartheid, and its continued influence on Coetzee's continued investigation of modernism. When he returned to Cape Town from London in 1963 (Attwell *Life of Writing* 12), Coetzee was confronted by a nation in crisis. The 1960s, according to David Attwell, represented a moment in South African history 'when a generation of black writers in South Africa [were] forced into silence' (Coetzee *Doubling* 300). The African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress both launched a campaign against pass laws in 1960. And on the 21st of March 1960, sixty-nine protesters were killed by police at Sharpeville. In *Youth*, Coetzee

writes that ‘after the carnage of Sharpeville nothing is as it was before’ (37). In response to these events, South Africa’s already strong advocacy for realist representation at the time adopted greater cultural, and moral significance.

More than thirty years later in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee would acknowledge this value for realism when he described ‘one’s first duty as a writer’ in South Africa as powerfully tied to ‘what [Lukacs] calls realism against modernist decadence’. The modernist ‘decadence’ which Coetzee goes on to identify – equally tongue-in-cheek – relates to its formalist values, its inward-facing orientation toward the text itself to draw ‘the procedures of representation into question’. This was a project labelled as ‘a time-waster; and so forth’ (202) by the literary field in South Africa. It is this contextual pressure which underpins Coetzee’s engagement with modernist cinema, and the modernist legacies it engages with, and re-interprets.

In his autobiography, Roland Barthes writes that the experience of writing ‘possesses the major effect: falling back’ (*Roland Barthes* 41). In his analysis, David Attwell interprets this comment as Barthes’ attempt to draw attention to ‘writing’s ability to unfold luxuriously, and also to double back and reflect upon itself’ (*Life of Writing* 30). Coetzee’s approach, and experience of writing is a clear example of this inward-facing reflection. Writing is, for Coetzee, ‘dialogic: a matter of awakening countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them’ (Coetzee *Doubling* 65). In the chapters to follow, I will argue that it is in Coetzee’s relationship with modernist film that we can see Coetzee engage with various countervoices that ultimately force him to ‘double back and reflect upon’ the modernist legacies that he engages with in his writing, and the shifting place of realism therein.

CHAPTER ONE

Reading High Modernism through Modernist cinema in *Youth* (2002)

This happens to whoever studies cinema. Since cinema reproduces reality, it ends up bringing us back to the study of reality. But in a new special way, as if reality had been discovered through its reproduction, and as if certain of its expressive mechanisms had been revealed only through this new “reflected” situation.

—Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, pp. 228

There are four films that are explicitly referenced in J. M. Coetzee’s *Youth* (2002). They are: Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’Eclisse* (1962), Satyajit Ray’s *Apu Trilogy* (1955, 1957, 1959), Jean-Luc Godard’s *Bande à part* (1964) and Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964). Listed in order of their appearance in the novel, these films are all synonymous with various New Wave movements in cinema during the 1960s. In this chapter, I will identify the influence of these films on the central protagonist of the novel: John Coetzee. Specifically, I will examine the way modernist film simultaneously challenges, and facilitates his attempt to revisit the practices and ideologies of high modernism. Throughout the novel, John grapples with his reading of high modernism. In particular, he grapples with the antagonism to realism associated with a high modernist break with tradition. Modernist cinema consequently prompts him to reflect on the relationship between realism and modernism he sees in high modernism. Specifically, it prompts him to attend to the unique interpretation of tradition—and realism—put forward by the modernist filmmakers of the 1960s. In this chapter I will argue that John’s experience of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St Matthew* encompasses many of the tensions between

realism and modernism that serve to distort his perception of his surroundings, and in particular, distorts his connection to South Africa.

In my introduction I drew attention to the realism associated with cinema by Andre Bazin in *What Is Cinema* (1967). Importantly, Coetzee has read through Andre Bazin's account (Coetzee, *Record of Reading 1970 - 1980*) of cinema; and in *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000–2005* (2007) he writes of film's connection to realism in a way that recalls Bazin. Analysing John Huston's *The Misfits* (1961), Coetzee writes of film as 'a record of something that really happened...The horses are real, the stuntmen are real, the actors are real' (226). He also speaks of film's inevitable connection to context in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (1992). For Coetzee, 'cinema has always tended to work within the myths of the dominant culture' (Coetzee, *Doubling* 119). Together, these comments by Coetzee speak to a connection to context, and to realist representation, that, in *Youth*, becomes a source of conflict for John.

In a literal sense, John distances himself from his surroundings so that he can emulate his interpretation of modernism. It is John's wrongful interpretation of a high modernist opposition to realism that frames his experiences of modernist film. His experience of modernist cinema eventually forces him to re-evaluate his detachment from context and, by association, his wrongful perception of high modernism. For John, high modernism carries with it the promise of self-transformation. Specifically, he positions his reading of modernism—restricted to an entirely male practice in London during the early 20th century—as an ontological framework through which he can filter his experiences and form his identity. As he moves from Cape Town to London, 'where life can be lived at its fullest intensity' (Coetzee, *Youth* 41), he undertakes a modernist pilgrimage (Sheehan) to London, inspired by the similar journey made by the key modernists he admires: T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and D.H. Lawrence. While he attempts to mimic the writing practice of these canonical figures—in his

poems, he must reflect ‘his discipleship to Pound’ (Coetzee, *Youth* 20)—the inspiration he draws from them, and their influence on his writing, is connected to a distinctly biographical reading of their lives. This reading, or more accurately mis-reading, of high modernism instills John with a self-consciousness that speaks to the fraught legacies associated with modernism.

Throughout the novel, John measures his experiences in relation to the experiences of high modernists: ‘Ezra Pound and Ford Madox Ford and Ernest Hemingway and all the other great artists who lived in Paris in those years...What is *he* going to do once he is in Paris or London?’ (Coetzee, *Youth* 29). Specifically, John uses the experiences of these modernist authors to justify his dogged pursuit of sexual encounters. For John, Ezra Pound’s dismissal from Wabash College (19) and Pablo Picasso’s mistresses (11) connect artistic creation with sexual passion (Sheehan 25). He aims to make his life ‘so closely parallel’ to high modernist practitioners ‘that they might as well be the same thing’ (Coetzee, *Youth* 166). When he refers to T.S. Eliot disguising himself as J. Alfred Prufrock, he declares that this deception is ‘part of the necessary cunning of the artist in the modern age’ (117). Even as John attempts to mimic modernist writing, he repeatedly qualifies his practice with reference to high modernism. He attempts to follow ‘Pound’s recommendations’ (24), and positions Pound and Eliot’s modernist ideals with the immediacy of present-continuous verbs: ‘Pound and Eliot are trying to revitalize Anglo-American poetry’ (21). The novel consequently puts forward a kind of aesthetic self-consciousness as John compares his experiences to that of high modernist practitioners.

John’s association with South Africa enhances the aesthetic self-consciousness that he grapples with. For John, modernism will help him ‘rise above mere nationality’ (Coetzee, *Youth* 64). Throughout the novel, John views his connection to South Africa as an impediment to his pursuit of high modernist practices. In *Signs Taken for Wonders* (1985), Homi K. Bhabha describes the ‘formation of colonial subjectivities’ (Azim 239) that occurs

when a colonial subject interacts with the Western literary canon. In Bhabha's view, the post-colonial subject occupies a space that is '*neither the one nor the other*', neither their nationality or the nationality of the text they are reading, when they read a text from this canon. Put another way, this split subjectivity could also be described as a position of 'in-betweenness' (Wilm 74).

The 'in-betweenness' (Wilm 74) proposed by Bhabha helps us consider the way John interacts with the totems of European modernism (Coetzee, *Youth* 148). For Bhabha, John's reverence for the practices and experiences of high modernists can be thought of as an example of 'colonial mimicry' (Bhabha 162). Throughout the novel, John instils South Africa, and his South African national identity, with almost antagonist influence on him. South Africa is a 'wound within him' (Coetzee, *Youth* 116) that, by going to London (the site of high modernism), he attempts to heal from. Moreover, escaping from South Africa is connected to John's practice as a writer. He reprimands himself for writing about South Africa and 'would prefer to leave his South African self behind as he has left South Africa itself behind' (62). For John, this separation is necessary for him to successfully mimic the Eurocentric ideas of high modernism. Clearly, John's aesthetic self-consciousness is linked to a dichotomy he constructs that separates South Africa from high modernism.

It is this colonial anxiety that consequently frames John's experience of the cinema in important ways. Ultimately, the cinema becomes an interstitial space through which John can investigate the 'in-betweenness' that he inhabits as a colonial subject who is separated from the high modernist moment. As I mentioned previously, John denies his separation from high modernism, or avoids it, throughout the novel. In conjunction, he dissociates himself from South Africa's political and literary landscape. Specifically, John denies the influence of his national identity and his contemporary context on the way he perceives and experiences his immediate surroundings. He consequently positions his identity in a complex state of flux, of

‘in-betweenness’ (Wilm 74) that creates the key tension in the *Künstlerroman* at the core of the novel. In *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), Coetzee defines writing by white African writers as something ‘generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African’ (11). In *Doubling the Point* (1992) he uses a similar rhetoric to declare that ‘[t]he white, as writer and South African, does not know his place’ (385). The position of in-betweenness implied by Coetzee here—between African and European literary influences—represents the intermediary position grappled with by John. More significantly, it shows us that John’s inability to situate himself in his context is linked to colonial anxieties, or the complexities of ‘colonial mimicry’ (Bhabha 162).

Modernist film is a means by which John can engage with these anxieties. Before he views Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964), John sees modernist film as a compliment to his reading of high modernism. For John, the cinema is removed from the antagonism to high modernist practices that he begins to see in London. It is a space that offers a kind of escapism linked heavily to the sexual fantasies he has associated with high modernist aesthetics (Sheehan 27). As I’ve mentioned previously, John uses film to instigate sexual liaisons throughout the novel: ‘He is on the point of asking her out, perhaps to a film’ (Coetzee, *Youth* 54). Later on in the novel, he critiques his date for the way she watches Jean-Luc Godard’s *Bande à part* (1964) because ‘he can sense her fidgeting beside him. When he steals a glance, she is picking her fingernails, not watching the screen’ (128). Even showings that John attends by himself are framed by a libidinal gaze that aligns film with his sexual fantasies. In a showing of Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’Eclisse* (1962), John is haunted by the ‘sensual lips and abstracted look’ (Coetzee, *Youth* 48) of Monica Vitti. He even admits to watching Godard’s *Bande à part* ‘many times’ because ‘it stars Anna Karina, with whom he is as much in love now as he was with Monica Vitti’ (128). Ingmar Bergman is also

considered with an eye to the characters who star in it: 'Bergman's people' (49). In this way, John projects the sexual fantasies he associates with high modernism onto modernist film.

Additionally, modernist film epitomises many of the colonial anxieties associated with John's engagement with high modernism. In film, John finds an anti-realism and apoliticism that aligns with his high modernist ideals. We see this when John opposes the conclusion that the films of Ingmar Bergman and Michelangelo Antonioni attest to the influence of context. The 'fear of nuclear annihilation...from uncertainty following the death of God' he reads in an article in the *Observer*, is the reason for 'the Angst of the European cinema'. John is 'not convinced' of this reading. In fact, it leads him to critique both the *Guardian* and the *Observer* for what he sees is a hostility to 'the life of the mind' in their reviews. It is telling that this critique occurs early on in the novel, when John remains firmly committed to his reverence for high modernism. This hostility to 'the life of the mind' is, to John, a 'disturbingly philistine' opposition to high modernist practices. He overtly connects this opposition to high modernism when he associates it with what Ezra Pound was similarly 'fulminating against in 1912' (Coetzee, *Youth* 49). John's critique of the *Guardian* and the *Observer* consequently appears to be a result of its context-oriented reading of film, a reading that conflicts with the apoliticism which has motivated John's pursuit of high modernism.

Or, more specifically, John disavows the analysis put forward by the *Guardian* and the *Observer* because it connects modernist cinema with realist representation. John cannot 'believe that what sends Monica Vitti out into the streets of Palermo...is the hydrogen bomb or a failure on God's part to speak to her'. In other words, John does not believe that the film could be intended to represent the concerns of the time. He would rather attribute the appeal of the film to something more ambiguous, like 'a taste of Angst', as 'it must be more complicated' than contextual influence. John, who repeatedly draws on the experiences of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot to influence his authorship, would rather deny the experiences of

‘long Nordic winters’ (Coetzee, *Youth* 49) on the work of Ingmar Bergman. In this way, John projects onto film his desire to separate his own writing from any association with South Africa. John engages with Pound, Eliot, Antonioni, and Bergman because he can separate their practices from any strict national associations. Eliot and Pound’s personal histories inspire him because they do not carry overt connections to national, or cultural pressures; Joyce, in contrast, ‘is too bound up with Ireland and Irish affairs to be in his pantheon’ (Coetzee, *Youth* 67). Antonioni and Bergman are also similarly disconnected from specific national practices. Instead, John identifies an ambivalent ‘Angst’ (Coetzee, *Youth* 49) in their practice which, upon further analysis, refers to an aestheticism John encounters in their films.

As I mentioned previously, John is particularly struck by Monica Vitti in Antonioni’s *L’Eclisse*. For John, she appears anguished by something ‘he cannot quite define; her face reveals nothing’ (48). In effect, John is struck by the fact that Vitti’s inner consciousness is inaccessible to him. He consequently seems to encounter the limits of his viewership. While John continues his voyeuristic objectification of Vitti’s ‘perfect legs and sensual lips’, he is fascinated more so by what he cannot see: her inner thoughts and feelings. In effect, John is subject to the methods Antonioni uses to prioritise surface representation (Kovacs 256) in his films. No other medium ‘can represent the physical surface of reality as meticulously as cinema’ (Kovacs 96), and Antonioni capitalises on this by positioning the viewer frustratingly outside of the subjectivity of his characters. In this way Antonioni continues the neorealist practice of ‘using exterior determinations in character construction’ (256). John is confronted by this focus on exteriority, and this leads him to propose the term ‘Angst’ (49) to describe his experience. This term consequently emerges from John’s encounter with a viewing experience that speaks to the modes of representation available to film. Specifically, he is made aware of the limits of observation that frame the representation of Monica Vitti’s character. As a result, he is subject to, and even haunted by (48), the formal strategies distinct

to cinema. The ambiguous 'Angst' he employs represents his inability to identify the formalist strategies which have ensured that the 'anguish with which Monica Vitti and other of Antonioni's characters are burdened' (48 - 49) evades his understanding. In light of this reading, his critique of the analysis put forward by the *Guardian* and the *Observer* represents his desire to highlight cinematic form, its 'Angst', rather than its socio-cultural affiliations. In this way, John opposes the conclusion that form could be representative of 'social and historical processes' (Coetzee, *Doubling* 202); and modernist cinema consequently adopts an apoliticism and an opposition to Lukasian realism that reflects his reading of high modernism.

This perception of modernist film is challenged when John watches Pier-Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St Matthew*. Watching this film 'is an unsettling experience' for John. Confronted by 'the pale, bony Jesus of the film', John feels 'tears of an exultation he does not understand stream down his cheeks' (Coetzee, *Youth* 154). This emotional response is the first overt use of pathos in the novel. It also occurs near the end of the novel, framing this viewing experience, and John's emotional response, as a possible end to the novel as a *Künstlerroman*. Pasolini's film consequently adopts an important place in John's development. The importance allotted to Pasolini's film is significant when we consider the relationship between modernism and realism evident in his theoretical approach to cinema.

Realist modes of representation are intrinsic to Pier Paolo Pasolini's film practice. In 1960, Pasolini published a poem entitled 'On the Death of Realism' (Pasolini, *La Religione*). In it, he writes of his 'worries for the future of realism' in a literary climate that he believed to be antagonistic to realist modes of representation. He reveals that 'he could not just say that realism was better dead and had to start anew' (Viano 58). His reverence for realism comes up again in an interview he does in 1965 to promote *The Gospel According to St*

Matthew (1964). In the interview he admits that '[i]n my writing there are deliberate elements of a naturalistic type of realism and therefore the love for real things' (Pasolini, 'Film Comment'). But this connection to realism is not restricted to his writing. At the heart of his approach to cinema, he admits: 'lies my love for reality...I am brought to assert that cinema is a language that never leaves reality (it is its reproduction!)' (Pasolini, *Heretical* 226). The presence of realism in Pasolini's writing, and then in his approach to cinema, has interesting repercussions for his connections to modernism, and modernist cinema. Specifically, it reimagines high modernism's treatment of tradition, and the binary established between realism and modernism therein.

For Pasolini, the formalism at the heart of modernist practice is not inherently antagonistic to the context-oriented methods of realism. In 'On the Death of Realism', he opposes the assumption that literature associated with formalism is in opposition to the "“vulgar” concerns with reality' (Viano 58) prioritised by realist practices. When he translated this critique into cinema, Pasolini found that he was not alone in his weariness of 'the modernist paradigm, which still supposes a sharp opposition between art and reality' (Kovacs 347). Cinema appeared particularly unsuited to this paradigm for Pasolini, and for many modernist filmmakers. The naturalism 'which runs in [the] veins' of cinema would inevitably deny, or at least neutralize, any attempt to revisit this opposition. For Pasolini, formalist practices reach 'an unsurpassable and awkward naturalistic fate' (Pasolini, *Heretical* 227) in cinema. As a result, as Michelangelo Antonioni concluded: a 'blanket refusal to engage with the world...cannot be maintained for very long' (Kovacs 347) in modernist film. In this way, it can be said that Pasolini acknowledges a tradition in cinema, 'the archetypal notion of cinema as pure reproduction of reality' (Pasolini, *Heretical* 227), but does not position his modernist practices in opposition to this tradition.

In *The passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini* (1995), Sam Rohdie highlights the difference between Pasolini's views of tradition, and the views held by auteurs of the French New Wave. The 'homage/appreciation, in the manner of the French New Wave, to cinematic fathers', he says, is reimagined by Pasolini 'as a declaration against fathers altogether' (9). To Rohdie, the French New Wave denied the opposition inherent in the character of a break with the past by using, and acknowledging, classical influence through 'homage/appreciation'. They consequently constructed a cinematic tradition not by rebelling against it, but by innovating it further. '*Tradition was not an enemy*' (Kovacs 31) to New Wave practitioners, and modernist film was preoccupied more with ideas of commercial cinema which did not necessarily relate to traditional, or past practices of cinema (but did intersect with them). Extending this accommodating view of tradition, Pasolini declared a break 'against fathers altogether' (Rohdie 9). This break should not be interpreted as an upheaval of the past but rather an acknowledgement that identifying a traditional past as a patriarch should be opposed altogether. Put simply, Pasolini did not believe in the contrast between the old and the new (Rohdie 10) implied by imagining tradition as a father, to be usurped by a younger, newer mode of practice. Instead, Pasolini appears in favour of a more open dialectic with the past and with the continuing impact of tradition:

Tradition is not an obligation, or path...we must understand this term in an anti-traditional sense, namely as a continuous and infinite transformation, that is anti-tradition, marked by an immobile line similar to historicity for history...A tradition passed through the filter of an anti-tradition, a tradition studied through the new generation of poets. (Pasolini, *Italian Culture* 8–9)

The open dialectic with tradition that Pasolini proposes here enables an equally open exchange with realist modes of representation. In *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, this open dialectic is a key part of the modernist character of the film. *The Gospel According to St*

Matthew is a retelling of the story of Christ. In this retelling, Pasolini uses unknown actors, music from the 1960s, and a script that is faithful to the Bible to position ‘everything—the characters and the ambiance—in reality’ (Pasolini, ‘Film Comment’). Initially, it seems that Pasolini’s film assumes a naturalism that contrasts to the more overtly modernist experimentations of other New Wave films. The black and white colour scheme and the documentarian style, using long shots and clear scene cuts, construct the ‘classical severity’ (Greene 74) of the film. But in contrast, the reliance on close-up and quick successive jump cuts combines this classicism with ‘moments that are almost Godardian’ (74), and thus more, in an aesthetic sense, modernist.

In fact, the film represents a renewed engagement with cinematic modes of representation associated with modernist cinema for Pasolini. In filming, he ‘threw over all my technical preconceptions. I started using the zoom, I used new camera movements, new frames’ (Greene 75). *The Gospel According to St Matthew* consequently represents a distinct turn to formalism for Pasolini that would signal his departure from ‘post neorealism for good’ (Kovacs 339). Pasolini’s loyalty to the source material draws the viewer’s attention to the influence of these cinematic practices on the story. Put simply, Pasolini does not look to change the story, but rather looks to explore the methods by which this story is represented. Pasolini consequently uses ‘the early codes of cinema in order to cite those codes’ (Rohdie 9). Or, put another way, he uses the practices of early cinema and ensures that we are aware of the fact that he is using them, of the ‘felt presence of the camera’ (Sontag 78). In addition to his renewed formalist focus, Pasolini describes the film as ‘almost documentary...with almost documentary movements’ (Greene 75). For Pasolini, ‘it was as if I had done a documentary on the life of Christ’ (Pasolini, ‘Film Comment’). The realism associated with the documentary form does not, for Pasolini, conflict with his formalist priorities, and as a result, Pasolini puts forward a perception of modernist cinema that does not need to

overemphasise anti-realist practices to appear modernist. As P. Adams Sitney wrote in *The Cinema of Poetry* (2015): ‘Pasolini thereby broke down the conventional distinction between the self-conscious, montage-oriented, avant-garde cinema and the European realist cinema, as Andre Bazin theorized it’ (6).

This anti-reactionary perception of realism in *The Gospel According to St Matthew* translates into a unique experience for the viewer. Specifically, it creates a viewing experience that benefits from the character of both modernist and realist forms of practice and can be easily associated with either. In a 2010 interview for the *Guardian*, director Derek Cianfrance recounts his experience of Pasolini’s film in a way that draws attention to its connection to realism:

But *The Gospel According to St Matthew* is essentially a documentary about Jesus. It made me aware of how real life and personal experience can create more breathtaking, sensitive cinema than more sophisticated techniques. It has made humanity crucial. (Cianfrance)

In *Youth*, John’s experience of *The Gospel According to St Matthew* resembles this account. Pasolini’s film is the ‘first film [John] sees with his new glasses’. After visiting an ophthalmologist, John discovers ‘the deterioration of his eyesight’. Interestingly, the extent of this deterioration is revealed with reference to his experience of film. We discover that John had to ‘screw up his eyes and strain’ to see the films he referenced earlier in the novel, that he had to ‘sit in the front row to be able to read the subtitles’ (Coetzee, *Youth* 154). Admitting his distorted eyesight consequently makes John’s previous experience of cinema, wherein ironically ‘his eyes [were] opened to films from all over the world’ seem unreliable. Previously, John had commented on Monica Vitti’s inexplicable facial expressions in Antonioni’s *L’Eclisse*. Her anguished expression had, for John, represented ‘the Angst of

European cinema' (49), which also in turn represented his opposition to contextual influence. Knowing that John's eyesight was inevitably distorted, that 'trees have been a blur of green ever since he can remember' (154), his reading of these films becomes unreliable. The high modernist values which influenced this experience are consequently also associated with a distorted vision. As a result, John's distorted vision becomes a clear metaphor for his misreading, or more accurately his misperception, of high modernism.

With his eye-sight restored, John can see Pasolini's film with a clarity he did not have before. There is a sense that this film is more 'real' than the other films John watched previously; or, more accurately, that his account of the film can be trusted. It is consequently important that, in contrast to the films he has watched previously, John associates this one with his childhood in South Africa. Watching *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, he is reminded of the 'five years of Catholic schooling' (154) he had as a child. John 'had thought he was forever beyond' the influence of this schooling and 'the appeal of the Christian message' therein. John consequently confronts the influence of his upbringing on his experience of Pasolini's film. This confrontation is important in light of John's previously upheld antagonism toward South Africa, and South African influences. In fact, before this confrontation, John had already begun to interrogate his aversion to South Africa.

Before coming across Pasolini's film, John adopts a renewed interest in South African literature. Specifically, he draws on a history of realist literature in South Africa. From the 'memoirs of visitors to [South Africa] like Dapper and Kolve and Sparrman and Barrow and Burchell' John becomes interested in representing the real, or more accurately, in representing South Africa realistically. Like William Burchell who 'writes what really happened' John becomes enamoured with the literature of 'real oxen...real stars' As he continues to read, John reflects on his personal connection to South Africa, and the effect that this connection has on his reading practice. Reading the realist accounts of these

authors, 'It is his country', he says, 'the country of his heart, that he is reading about' (Coetzee, *Youth* 137). John's interest in realism is thus connected to a developing patriotism that makes him attentive to what he describes as 'the whole aura...the aura of truth' (138).

It is consequently important that, in watching Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, John is struck by 'the pale, bony Jesus of the film' because he 'is real in a way that Jesus of the bleeding heart never was' (Coetzee, *Youth* 154). In the film, John finds a form of realist representation that resembles what he admires in Burchell. Unlike Burchell however, the film prompts him to reflect on his childhood in South Africa indirectly. While Burchell writes with the intent to represent South Africa, Pasolini's film is contrastingly situated in a distinctly rural Italian landscape (Gandy 294). Despite this contrasting setting, Pasolini's film still appeals to John's interest in both realism and South Africa. In fact, it elicits an emotional reaction in John that is absent in his reading of Burchell. Moreover, this reaction is deeply personal, it recalls John's childhood specifically. In contrast, Burchell is detached from John's personal experience and speaks instead to 'that of Burchell's time, the 1820s' (Coetzee, *Youth* 138).

As a result, it appears the 'aura of truth' (Coetzee, *Youth* 138) which John looked for in the novel, is found in film. In light of this reading, such an 'aura' could be said to reference Walter Benjamin, who uses this term to describe cinema in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (1936). For Benjamin, something is missing in cinematic representation. The 'aura' not only describes the originality, and authenticity of art practice that is questioned by film (McParland 105), but also film's detachment 'from the sphere of tradition' (Benjamin 22). For Coetzee, Benjamin's interest in cinema is prompted by '[h]is sense of the potential of cinema to extend experience' (Coetzee, *Inner Workings* 48). Building on his analysis further, Coetzee writes of cinema's ability to capture 'an instant excised from the continuity of the sitter's life' (49). It is, ironically, because of the

reasons put forward by Benjamin, and summarised by Coetzee, that *The Gospel According to St Matthew* is so important for John.

Previously in this chapter, I argued that modernist cinema has a distinct relationship with tradition, and in turn, with realism. In particular, Pasolini's film encapsulates the accommodating perception of realism that modernist film put forward. In this way, modernist film benefits from its detachment from Benjamin's 'sphere of tradition' (Benjamin 22); or more accurately, from the antagonistic perception of tradition that John associates with high modernist traditions. Pasolini's film enables John to see—with his 'new glasses' (Coetzee, *Youth* 154)—that modernist practices are not necessarily antagonistic to realism, or to the South African influence that he associates with realism. It is consequently telling that, following Pasolini's film, John comes across Samuel Beckett's *Watt* (1953). Beckett is strongly associated with late modernism (Miller 11), and is the author Coetzee would eventually complete his dissertation on (Attwell, *Life of Writing* 12). Beckett is consequently considered one of 'Coetzee's most important precursors' (Attridge, *Ethics of Reading* 33). His appearance in the novel, following John's revelatory experience of *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, has clear symbolic value. This symbolism is all but admitted by Coetzee when he describes the novel as 'printed in the same fullbodied serif type as Pound's *Selected Poems*, a type that evokes for him intimacy, solidity' (Coetzee, *Youth* 155).

Throughout the novel, John engages with both realism and modernism. More accurately, he explores the relationship between them both, and the impact this relationship has on practitioners who look to extend or recall them. In this way, *Youth*, as David James and Ursula Seshagiri writes, is a 'fiction that aggressively examines the very idea and ethos of modernist artistry' (93). More specifically, the novel examines, through John, the fraught legacies of modernism, legacies that modernist film engages with in a way that is inclusive

of realist modes of representation. The question that underpins this interaction with modernist film as I have outlined is: to what extent do the tensions described in *Youth* represent the influence of modernist cinema on Coetzee's writing? In the next two chapters, this question will become more explicitly central to my analysis, as I relate the arguments made here to Coetzee's personal experience of writing.

CHAPTER TWO

From Novel to Screenplay: Translating modernist cinema *In The Heart of the Country* (1977)

I see no difference between reality and an image of reality. For me they're the same. I always say, 'A picture is life and life is a picture'.

—Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*.

In 2014, Hermann Wittenberg helped bring two previously archived screenplays penned by J. M. Coetzee to publication with *J. M. Coetzee: Two Screenplays* (2014). While both screenplays have not been adapted into film, they offer an unparalleled look into Coetzee's creative process. Specifically, by using the screenplay of *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), I will identify the impact of screen-writing on Coetzee's interrogation of modernist legacies, particularly as a writer in apartheid South Africa. As he grapples with the formal stipulations of cinema while writing the screenplay, Coetzee is forced to reflect on the realist and modernist modes of practice evident in the novel. In turn, Coetzee re-evaluates his writing in relation to the perception of modernist legacies in apartheid-era South Africa.

Realism was an important mode of literary practice for many South African artists. It was the place of authors to 'bear witness to *real* events and, in doing so, expose and oppose the *truth* of the apartheid state' (Worthington 113). In 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa' (1986), Njabulo S. Ndebele expands on the significance of realism for South African authors. To Ndebele, writing in South Africa during apartheid was characterised by an 'expository intention' (149). With reference to Alex La Guma, Ndebele argues that South African writers at the time sought to keep 'the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought' (149–150). Or, put

another way that expands on Ndebele's argument: writers valued the objective realism, the truth of events external to the text, over the aestheticism which would be prioritised by experiments of form. Instead, the value attributed to realism spurred a preference for literature that prioritised South Africa's 'larger issues' (149) and used the 'conventional tropes' (148) of form to reflect these issues. There was consequently an implication that modes of discourse that prioritised a more overt formalist turn toward questions of representation, would not keep 'the larger issues of society in our mind' (149). J. M. Coetzee's characteristically oblique writing style seemed in opposition to this literary culture wherein 'no interpretation...is necessary, seeing is meaning' (148).

In fact, J. M. Coetzee was often criticised for his 'failure to write realist representations of apartheid South Africa'. The 'literary gamesmanship' (Worthington 114) identified in his writing lead to a critical backlash that cast him and his novels as politically evasive, and that 'often chided or attacked him for playing games that...question the relation between language and reality (and "realism") instead of demonstrating some less complicated, more overtly political "solidarity"' (Bradshaw 2). Coetzee's formalist tendencies, his dedication to a kind of textual play, positioned his writing in opposition to the Lukásian realism valued by South Africa, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. In 'The Novel Today' (1988), Coetzee writes of his commitment to testing the limits of representation, advocating for a novel that operates 'in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions...a novel that is prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict...' (3). Throughout his career, Coetzee has responded to the call for greater political engagement in South Africa's literary climate by exploring the interior structures of the novel and of language.

In *The Art of Hunger: Aesthetic Autonomy and the Afterlives of Modernism* (2018), Alys Moody argues that Coetzee's writing is emblematic of a 'tension between aesthetic autonomy and political responsibility' (172). We can consequently see a dichotomy implied here in light of Ndebele's comments: between the outward-facing, and politically engaged priorities of realism and the inwardness of modernist 'literary gamesmanship' (Worthington 114). Or, more accurately, between a realist approach that looks to represent the external from within art practice, and the modernist approach that gives preference to the interior structures of the novel. This dichotomy is important for our analysis of Coetzee's screenplay adaptation of *In the Heart of the Country* (1977). In particular, it represents the conflict between realism and modernism that Coetzee presents in the novel, and then reinvestigates in the screenplay.

In Coetzee's bibliography, *In the Heart of the Country* is most closely associated with film. Influenced by Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), Andrzej Munk's *Passenger* (1963) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Petit Soldat* (1963) (Coetzee, *Doubling* 60), the novel is punctuated by 'the aesthetic vocabulary of the French avant-garde' (Wittenberg, 'Godard in the Karoo' 14). Jean-Luc Godard would be particularly influential to Coetzee. Along with *Le Petit Soldat* (1963), he writes in a diary entry in 1975 that he was, 'Fascinated by the counterpoint of light, image, sound, sense in Godard's *Alphaville*' (qtd. in Wittenberg, 'Godard in the Karoo' 16). Separated into 266 numbered sections, the novel recalls the techniques of montage most commonly attributed to Godard's filmmaking (Coetzee, *Doubling* 59), techniques that are evident in *Alphaville* (1965) and *Le Petit Soldat*. The Nouvelle Vague, and in particular Godard, provided Coetzee with a model for a unique narrative structure, one that satisfied the value he placed on formal inventiveness in his writing. This cinematic influence inspired Coetzee to pursue what can be viewed as a distinctly modernist structure in

the novel: 'a mode of writing modelled on the effect achieved by rapidly and sequentially displayed still images projected onto a screen' (Wittenberg, 'Godard in the Karoo' 17).

It is important to note that Coetzee's motivation to innovate form is also founded on an opposition to the slow pacing of realist prose, of 'Schreiner's nineteenth-century realism' (Wittenberg, 'Godard in the Karoo' 17). Film consequently facilitates both Coetzee's desire to innovate literary form, and his coinciding opposition to the literary 'realism that takes pride in copying the real world' (Coetzee, 'Two Interviews' 455). In this way we can also say that, because of its influence on the novel, film offered Coetzee a framework through which he could resist the external pressures from South African literary culture to conform to realism, to 'those demands from without' (Hewson 58). This resistance was reinvestigated by Coetzee when he adapted *In the Heart of the Country* into a screenplay. In the process of adaptation, Coetzee rethinks the anti-realist tendencies associated with the novel. He consequently adopts a more open dialectic with realist modes and practices that in turn speaks to the way they are interpreted by modernist cinema.

In the Heart of the Country is centred on Magda, the daughter of a widowed father, as she grapples with life on a desolate farmland. From the outset of the novel we are made aware of Magda's unreliability as a narrator. The novel opens by telling us of Magda's father who 'brought home his new bride...across the flats in a dog-cart drawn by a horse'. This account is subsequently revealed to be one of many descriptions that could be true as Magda 'was not watching' and therefore cannot give 'more detail'. This section then ends with Magda's high modal declaration that '[t]hose are the antagonists' (Coetzee, *In the Heart* 1) in reference to her father and his bride. In this way, Magda assumes a metafictional awareness of the role assumed by her father and his new wife in the novel. She metaphorically breaks from the narrative world she inhabits as a character in a story to assert her metafictional awareness.

Throughout the novel, Magda pushes against the constraints of language. Specifically, she opposes the way in which the text represents and therefore limits her. She consequently assumes an aesthetic self-consciousness as she critiques her own representation and therefore highlights the limits of textual form. There is a reason that I feel obligated to refer directly to Magda in these choices, and not Coetzee as author: Magda assumes an agency that places her paradoxically outside of, while within, the text. She insists that ‘I create myself in the words that create me,’ (9) while simultaneously positioning herself outside of the possibilities of representation, ‘I, the true deep down I beyond words’ (20). As these metafictional descriptions reoccur throughout the novel, Magda begins to move outside of the linguistic limits of text, into an external space from which she looks upon the novel, and us as readers.

For Ben Macaskill, Magda’s metafictional opposition to her own representation is ‘an act of agency that seems to speak between incommensurable imperatives’ (Macaskill 80). These ‘incommensurable imperatives’ refer to the “‘internal” characteristics of Magda’s voice [which] reflect the “external” situation whereby she is made to speak—by a writer’ (73). Magda’s metafictional awareness of authorship outlined here is ‘simultaneously configured from inside and outside her inside’ (Macaskill 72); she is both a representation inside a text, and inside the mind of a character in a novel—the ‘confines of Magda’s consciousness’ (Wittenberg, ‘Godard in the Karoo’ 23)—and a narrator outside of the confines of the text. Magda admits that she is ‘simply a ghost or a vapour floating at the intersection...suspended here’ (Coetzee, *In the Heart* 21). ‘Here’ is an incommensurable space, a space from which Magda is beyond the constraints of her character, ‘beyond the why and wherefore of myself’ (28). Here, she can assume various literary impossibilities and so push against the limits of textuality. Here, she can assume authorial agency and ‘bring to life the bleak windswept hill’ (21); or she can make her thoughts auditory, ‘I have uttered my life in my own voice throughout’ (172); or prioritise a distinctly visual and embodied experience

by asking us to ‘see the tears roll down the slopes of my nose, only metaphysics keeps them from falling on the page...’ (22). It seems, based on Magda’s appeal to the auditory, the visual, and to the embodied, that the textual limits she draws attention to, the space that she will inevitably fail to inhabit, is a cinematic one. Specifically, what makes this space cinematic is the way in which it draws on distinctly cinematic modes of representation.

In the novel, Magda acknowledges, and at times conforms to, the constraints of cinematic form. We see this in the way her actions appear to be influenced by the constraints of a camera’s viewpoint. Throughout the text, Magda ensures that her internal thoughts are exteriorised. If she cries, she does so attending to how she looks from an external viewpoint. In fact, she commands us to ‘see the tears’ (22) as they fall. She does not ask us to understand the internal thought processes behind her tears. Instead, she simply asks us to ‘see’ them ‘roll down the slopes of my nose’ (22). As a result, Magda appeals to the external viewpoint of a camera that inevitably prioritises surface representation (Kovacs 256). Moreover, by marking the novel as a collection of monologues that have been ‘uttered...in my own voice throughout’ (172), Magda ensures that her inner monologues can be likened to the use of voice-over in film. She sees herself as ‘a torrent of sound streaming into the universe’ (11), and so appeals to the aural capabilities of cinema. Throughout the novel, Magda insists that she is ‘beyond words’ (20). Instead of words then, Magda appeals to cinematic representation so that she can ‘deal in signs merely’ (33).

Magda’s interest in the cinematic is a result of her metafictional pursuit of agency. Throughout the novel, Magda assumes various levels of authorial power. If her father is speaking, she is the one who ‘render[s] his words’ (Coetzee, *In the Heart* 24). At the beginning of the novel, this kind of metafictional statement serves to identify Magda as the author of the novel; and the rest of the text traces the paradoxes that this role implies.

However, as the novel continues, this assumption is increasingly problematised. Our assumption that Magda's metafiction refers to her effect on the novel is eventually disrupted by Magda. Looking back on the text at the novel's conclusion, she repeatedly draws attention to her inability, and unwillingness, to write. To her, 'there is a whole literature waiting to tell her what she has 'been doing on this barbarous frontier?'. 'There are poems', she says, that she could've written to answer this question herself but did not want to. The novel ends effectively admitting that she 'could've written' her own story but chose not to. In effect, Magda appears to dissociate herself from the authorial power that her use of metafiction seemed to grapple with. However, Magda's confession does not subsequently represent her surrender to the presence and influence of Coetzee's authorship. Instead, she insists that she has not been subject to the whims of an author, that she has 'chosen at every moment my own destiny' (172). Similarly, she declares that her life has been uttered in her 'own voice' rather than Coetzee's. In this way she asserts a sense of agency with a confidence previously absent in the novel. In light of the authorial power she dissociates herself from, the reader wonders: how can she assume this agency without being the author of the novel? The answer is once again found in the influence of cinema on the novel.

Discussing the novel in *Doubling the Point*, J. M. Coetzee is quick to insist that it 'is not a novel on the model of a screenplay' (59). For Teresa and Lindwe Dovey, Coetzee's comments here imply that the novel 'is *closer* to film than the screenplay's verbal mapping of dialogue and setting which then have to be translated into the audio-visual medium' (64). There is a sense, to continue on from Dovey and Dovey's reading, that the novel exists in-between the initial stages of film production—the screenplay—and its final form as a completed film. Building on this, Hermann Wittenberg views the divided sections of the novel as 'analogous to the multiple takes a film director might shoot of a particular scene and eventually discard in favour of the preferred version' (Wittenberg, 'Godard in the Karoo' 15).

The novel consequently appears to exist in the editing stage of the filmmaking process. In this interim state, Magda can effectively choose and ‘discard’ (Wittenberg, ‘Godard in the Karoo’ 15) the multiple takes that represent her in the novel. In effect, she can adopt a sense of agency that explains why she concludes the novel by dissociating herself from authorship.

Throughout the novel, Magda engages in a process of doubling. There is an ‘I, the true deep down I beyond words’ (Coetzee, *In the Heart* 20) that Magda repeatedly refers to, a version of herself that lies outside of the text. As Macaskill argued, she is ‘simultaneously configured from inside and outside her inside’ (72). If, as I’ve said, the novel can be positioned in the editing room of an imagined film, then we can imagine the configuration presented by Macaskill in a distinctly cinematic sense. Throughout the novel there are instances of metafiction that are noticeably cinematic. Magda comments on ‘[h]ow satisfying, the flow of this dialogue’ (Coetzee, *In the Heart* 25) is to her when she overhears a conversation. She tells us that ‘this is one of my faculties, I can bring to life the bleak windswept hill’ (20), almost as if she has the ability to construct the mise-en-scène of a film. If there is a cinematic space that Magda struggles to inhabit, there is also a role she toys with that enables her to influence and affect this space.

We see Magda toy with a cinematic sense of agency when she recalls her childhood. In her recollection, she sees ‘herself with such dispassionate clarity’ that she becomes immediately suspicious. As she interrogates her suspicions, she proposes that perhaps she ‘was transported out of myself for an instant and had a vision of myself as I really was’. In effect, Magda assumes an external viewpoint as if she was a camera and associates this viewpoint with the ability to see her as she ‘really was’ (Coetzee, *In the Heart* 49). She then goes on to characterise this viewpoint as a ‘double’ (50) of herself, an ‘angel of reality’ (49) that watches over her. This ‘little watcher’ (50), in light of the novel’s unique cinematic form,

appears to toy with the agency Magda can assume as editor of a film, a film that she is simultaneously also in. In this role, she can configure herself ‘from inside’ the film as a character, and ‘outside her inside’ (Macaskill 72) as an observer. In light of this reading, her final declaration that ‘I have chosen at every moment my own destiny’ (Coetzee, *In the Heart* 172) refers to the agency she can assume as an editor of her own film: ‘If for one moment I were to lose my grip on the world, it would fall apart’ (90). In effect, Magda did not have to write the novel, even though ‘I could have’, because she has instead chosen to film it. As a result, she concludes the novel assuming an agency that transcends its formal confines, or more accurately: ‘question[s] the assumptions of [the] medium’ (Gilburt 37).

This metafictional power is reimagined, with interesting results, in the screenplay that J. M. Coetzee writes for the novel. *In the Heart of the Country* is, out of all of Coetzee’s novels, most clearly engaged in a clear dialectic with film and film practices. When this dialectic is flipped, when the flow of influence is inverted and the novel which was inspired by cinema is ‘in turn reshaped in a film script’ (Wittenberg, *Two Screenplays* 20), Coetzee is forced to interrogate the metafictional ‘play’ (Worthington 113) at the heart of the novel, as well as Magda’s complex pursuit of agency. It is the nature of this interrogation, and Coetzee’s attempt to translate his novel for cinema, that speaks to the legacy of a modernist tradition for Coetzee and apartheid South Africa. As Herman Wittenberg observes in his introduction to *J.M. Coetzee: Two Screenplays*, the novel reflects the ‘anti-realist editing of a modernist film’ (12). As we have mentioned previously, cinema, especially the French New Wave, allowed Coetzee to dispense with ‘the paraphernalia of realism’ (Wittenberg, ‘Godard in the Karoo’ 9) upheld by South African literary culture. The pursuit of the cinematic consequently inspired the novel’s structure, and the metafictional tensions grappled with by Magda. In light of this influence, it is important to note the way in which Coetzee’s screenplay adaptation of the novel departs from, and grapples with the modernist practices assumed by the text.

In his admiration for the works of Jean-Luc Godard, Coetzee is particularly struck by the way Godard managed to ‘liberate the soundtrack from the image’. This comment informs Coetzee’s esteem for Godard’s *Alphaville*. Specifically, it represents the importance Coetzee gives to voice-over. *Alphaville* is, for Coetzee, emblematic of what Godard ‘achieve[s] through stills with voice-over commentary’ (Coetzee, *Doubling* 60), using ‘still images, edited together and overlaid with voice-over and music to produce the illusion of a continuous film’ (Wittenberg, ‘Film and Photography’ 476–7). It is consequently the innovative use of voice-over in *Alphaville* that would prove particularly influential for Coetzee’s screenwriting.

Alphaville is ‘something of an originary text in the dystopian cinematic tradition’ (Morrey et al. 129). It follows the journey of Lemmy Caution, an American private eye who travels to the city of Alphaville, a futuristic dystopia ruled by a computer named Alpha 60. Throughout the film, Alpha 60’s disembodied voice is positioned within and outside of the film’s diegesis. At different points in the film, characters hear, and are subject to, this voice. In one scene, Lemmy Caution engages in an interview with the voice, and is even reprimanded by it. However, at other times in the film, the characters are noticeably unaware that Alpha 60 is speaking and narrating their actions. The voice consequently appears omnipresent, it assumes a mobility within the film that allows it to exist both within and outside of it. In this sense, it is imbued with a kind of agency that bears a similarity to Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*. Godard’s characteristically abrupt editing serves to develop this agency further. His characteristically abrupt jump cuts are interspersed with still images of ‘recurring images of scientific formulas’ and diagrams that imply a kind of ‘machine logic’ (Morrey et al. 129) to the film’s editing. It consequently implies that Alpha 60, as well as being able to move within the film’s soundscape, asserts an influence over its construction. Alpha 60 is thus characterised as a ‘narrator-presence who must ultimately be held

responsible for selection and combination of the sounds and images of the film' (Hedges 289). Again, this metafictional agency has clear parallels to Magda's characterisation in *In the Heart of the Country*.

When Coetzee translates the novel into a screenplay, he reflects on Magda's distinct voice as well as the connection this voice has to Godard's film. As a result, Coetzee introduces, and then grapples with the place of voice-over in the screenplay in a way that recalls the extra-homodiegetic voice-over used in *Alphaville*. In his initial approach to the screenplay, Coetzee admits the continuing presence of Godard's film when he tells Clive Levinson, a director based in Johannesburg, that '[t]he models I have at the back of my mind are Godard's *Petit Soldat* and *Alphaville*' (qtd. in Wittenberg, 'Godard in the Karoo' 20). Initially, Coetzee relied heavily on voice-over to translate Magda's monologic narration. When Coetzee sent Clive Levinson a draft screenplay of the novel in early 1980, Levinson critiqued his overreliance on voice over. He wanted this voice-over 'drastically reduced, demanding especially that the overlong, "poetic" speeches had to go' (Wittenberg, *Two Screenplays* 12).

Marion Hansel, who would eventually adapt the novel into the film *Dust* (1985), held similar misgivings about the use of voice-over, especially as used by Coetzee. She 'thought [his screenplay] featured too much talking' (Wittenberg, *Two Screenplays* 15), and viewed voice-over as 'a weakness of the construction of the story' which she believed would be better served by the visual, 'to show' rather than to tell (qtd. in Wittenberg, *Two Screenplays* 15). Moreover, Hansel read the novel as situated within Magda's psyche. She consequently framed the metafictional nuance in Coetzee's novel as conventional of a realist representation of 'a mind that is breaking down', rather than a distinctly modernist interrogation of form. Ultimately, Hansel's film 'keeps us within the bounds of the realist tradition' (Attridge, 'In

the Heart' 58) by showing a 'a clear demarcation...between the "real" and the "fantastical"' (Dovey and Dovey 62) in *Magda*. While Coetzee's screenplay does not subscribe to this realist interpretation, it does struggle with the formalism of the novel in a way that brings it closer to realist modes of practice.

Aware of his inexperience in the field, Coetzee took the critiques levelled against him regarding voice-over seriously, cutting it down from 1800 words in an earlier draft of the screenplay to 840, and 'from twenty-eight to twenty sequences' (Wittenberg, 'Godard in the Karoo' 24). The voice-over that remains in the screenplay is used to represent and problematise Magda's focalisation. Throughout the text, voice-over is predominantly used in a conventional manner, to represent Magda's inner thoughts and so offer the viewer access into her psyche. Using first-person passages taken directly from the novel, voice-over is restricted to monologues that are spurred by Magda's actions and, seemingly, by what she observes of her surroundings. Watching her Father, the voice-over ruminates on his 'first wife, my mother' (Coetzee, *Two Screenplays* 41), or in observing her reflection the voice-over declares that 'I'm not going to spend my life keeping the copperware shining' (42). In this way, voice-over represents Magda's consciousness, and she appears to have control over it. However, Coetzee attempts to problematise this voice-over in subtle ways throughout the text.

In a more restrained manner, Coetzee problematises the connection we make between the voice-over and Magda as a character, our assumption that this voice represents her subjective experience. At key points in the screenplay, the voice-over appears to inhabit a space of its own that is entirely separate from Magda. As Magda leads Old Anna through the house, the voice-over interrupts the scene by reflecting on Magda's mother who was 'a frail, gentle, loving woman' (*Two Screenplays* 39); a declaration that is curiously disconnected

from the subject of the scene. In fact, following this scene, voice-over again interrupts a character's dialogue, or as Coetzee describes, 'replaces' their voice (41) completely.

Following this interruption, the voice-over admits their own subjectivity, characterising their narration with an unreliability by acknowledging 'That is anyhow how I see it' (41). These instances all serve to push the narrator outside of Magda's interiority. This effect comes to a head at the conclusion of the text wherein Magda and the voice-over speak to one another. Recounting what 'the voices said', the narrator uses high modality to tell Magda that 'you have no choice but to turn yourself into an adventure'. Magda consequently replies: 'Pah! They miss the point. But they never listen to me' (92). While Magda is '*Talking to herself*', the conversation constructed here moves internal thoughts (the extradiegetic voice-over) into the diegesis of the film (Magda's voice). It consequently characterises the voice-over with an agency of its own, one that is external to Magda; and as a result, Magda can interact with this voice-over as if it is another character in the text. This complex voice-over resembles the paradoxical separation of Magda in the novel that was mentioned previously: from within and outside its parameters. While the screenplay adopts less of the metafiction that belies this dual position in the novel, it appears to reinterpret the reason for this metafiction for Magda.

In the novel, Magda fights against the constraints of textual form. In her opposition, the reader is secondary to the 'structural determinism' (Macaskill 77) that she perceives in the novel's form. As Magda struggles metafictionally with form, she highlights the oppressive repercussions of authorship, and eventually, transcends them. While the reader may be a complicit contributor to this tension, they are secondary to the more obvious contribution of the author, or implied author. In fact, if the montage structure of the novel 'requires the reader to fill in the gaps, to introduce his/her own "I" into the narrative as a means of bridging the gaps' (Dovey, Dovey 68), then the reader is actually also subject to the form of the novel. In contrast, the screenplay draws attention to the viewer, and characterises them

with an oppressive influence that parallels the oppressive authorship in the novel. Magda's declaration in the screenplay that 'you have no choice but to turn yourself into an adventure' (Coetzee, *Two Screenplays* 92) contrasts to the novel which ends by highlighting Magda's ability to choose 'at every moment my own destiny' (172). There is a sense that, in film, Magda cannot escape our viewership. She is reliant on us as viewers and auditors. She needs 'people to talk to' (89), she says, right after looking 'into the camera' (88). She has 'no choice' but to turn herself 'into an adventure' (92) in response to our viewership because she is 'a crazy woman who only wants notice taken of her' (55). In contrast to the novel, Magda does not attempt to move outside the constraints of the film. She does not toy with authorial power and agency to the extent that she does in the novel. The reason for this contrasting passivity is, it seems, the viewer. Or more accurately, the reason for Magda's lack of metafiction is the formal stipulations of film, and Coetzee's reading of these stipulations.

In his 1997 collection of essays *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (1997), Coetzee argues that 'the social reach of the image is greater and its impact more immediate than that of the word' (37). While Coetzee was speaking here of the impact of pornography, his statement has clear relevance for our discussion of film. If Herman Wittenberg's conclusion in *Godard in the Karoo* (2014) that Coetzee's screenplay shows him 'grappling with the demands of cinema, and thinking through the relationship between text and image' (30) is true, then the conclusion he comes to in *Essays on Censorship* can be seen as a result of this investigation. *In the Heart of the Country* uses self-contained narrative 'scenes' that bear resemblance to the cinematic, to the 'rapidly and sequentially displayed still images projected onto a screen' (Wittenberg, 'Godard in the Karoo' 17). However, it is the image of South Africa in the novel that, by adapting it into a screenplay, Coetzee was forced to grapple with. A specific setting is never identified in the novel. In contrast, Coetzee was overt in his desire to firmly situate any film adaptation in the Karoo.

From the outset, the screenplay is firmly situated in a South African setting. It uses a '[l]ong tracking shot across the flat, barren countryside' (Coetzee, *Two Screenplays* 33) to, in the tradition of the *plaasroman*, make the South African environment, in this case a farmstead in the Karoo, a central part of the narrative. Magda's interiority, her 'interior consciousness', is consequently made secondary to 'a visually rich evocation of the farm and its Karoo setting' (Wittenberg, 'Godard in the Karoo' 479). This setting became a subject of contention between him and Marion Hansel, who used the Spanish countryside and European actors for her film adaptation over any South African alternative. The film's aesthetic distance from South Africa 'disturbed and disappointed' Coetzee, who in a letter to Hansel expressed an incredulous disapproval that a film 'about South African reality' would 'plan to shoot in Spain' and use a 'lead actress from England' (qtd. in Wittenberg, *Two Screenplays* 22). It is important, in light of the tension we have identified between realism and modernism in Coetzee's writing, that he would have a desire to portray a South African reality here.

In light of the influence of modernist film on the novel, we would expect Coetzee to create a film with more overt modernist energies. The result is evidently quite different. Instead, he diminishes much of the formalism that spurred the innovative structure of the novel, and its association with a distinctly anti-realist textuality (Attwell, *Life of Writing* 47). Twelve years after Coetzee attempted to write this screenplay, he would refer to his early writing practice in *Doubling the Point* (1992) as evidence that 'he does not engage with his situation at a philosophical level' (392). His first novels, inclusive of *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), are identified by Dana Dragunoiu 'as part of a larger epoch during which he tried to escape from the political reality of South Africa' (Dragunoiu 310). In this way, Coetzee's comments in *Doubling the Point* seem to concede to the political evasiveness that he has been repeatedly critiqued for. His attempt at screenwriting consequently represents this critique and his engagement with it.

If Coetzee's screenplay had been chosen for the eventual film adaptation of *In the Heart of the Country*, the resultant film would have not only been explicitly situated in South Africa, but would have made use of, rather than critiqued, the formal properties available to film. It seems, as a result of the distinctly South African environment and lessened formalist focus evident in his screenplay adaptation, that Coetzee had begun to identify and grapple with the critiques that he speaks of in *Doubling the Point*. Moreover, it shows that he engaged with modernist films, like the films of Jean-Luc Godard, as ideological and aesthetic inspirations that he felt could be still be reinterpreted in a way that would distance him from their modernist practices. In other words, Coetzee's screenplay, and its connection to modernist cinema, enabled Coetzee to pursue a less prescriptively 'anti-realist' (Zimbler 91) authorship that helped him engage more overtly with South Africa. The screenplay consequently 'reiterated the dangers attendant both upon an outmoded realism and a too radical or celebratory anti-realism' (Zimbler 77) that *In the Heart of the Country*, and its subsequent screenplay treatment, appear to straddle.

CHAPTER THREE

'It is, that's all.': Representing Michael K through film

Listen to me, listen how easily I fill this room with words. I know people who can talk all day...who can fill up whole worlds talking...Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life unnoticed.

— J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 140

I am incomplete, I am a being with a hole inside me, I signify something, I do not know what, I am dumb, I stare out through a sheet of glass into a darkness that is complete, that lives in itself, bats, bushes, predators and all, that does not regard me, that is blind, that does not signify but merely is.

— J. M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country*, p. 11

The life cycle of a frog may sound allegorical, but to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing.

— J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, p. 217

The title of this chapter is taken from Alain Robbe-Grillet's *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (1965). In the text, Robbe-Grillet writes of the future of the novel, wherein a 'traditional hero' (22) will be '*there* before being *something*' (21). In effect, Robbe-Grillet imagines a future wherein a text can say of its contents: '[i]t is, that's all' (164). J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) interrogates the linguistic, formal, and political conditions that problematise what Robbe-Grillet proposes. Specifically, it is Coetzee's representation of 'the eponymous "hero"' (Coetzee, Barnett 295) Michael K that draws attention to the tensions that arise when a character looks to be '*there* before being *something*' (Robbe-Grillet *For a New Novel* 21). In this chapter, I will argue that the cinematic practices of Alain Robbe-Grillet influenced the way J. M. Coetzee would represent Michael K in the novel.

Michael K is ‘the misfit, the opter-out, the maverick’ (*Ethics of Reading* 49) according to David Attridge. He is a ‘son of silence’ (Chesney 182) that continues to evade our understanding. It is ‘what lies developing inside Michael, unsaid’ (Gordimer ‘Idea of Gardening’ 142) that frustrates any attempt to place him within a larger model of signification. For John Bolin, and indeed for Nadine Gordimer’s well-known critique of the novel, K ‘will never satisfy the scoring systems used by history or allegory’ (Bolin 362); any attempt to subsume K into such a framework is intentionally frustrated by the novel and by a character ‘with a deeply private, and constantly shifting meaning, an outsider to any single meaning’ (Bolin 353). To characterise K in this way, I will argue that Coetzee draws on the cinematic practices of Alain Robbe-Grillet and his associated theories of representation. It is my contention that K’s distinct ‘partly interiorized third-person voice’ (Wittenberg, ‘Film and Photography 473) is influenced by the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity evident in Robbe-Grillet’s engagement with modernist cinema. To identify this influence, I will draw on Coetzee’s early drafts of *Michael K*. In particular, I will analyse the screenplay version of the novel that Coetzee attempted in these drafts to identify the influence of cinematic practices on K’s characterisation. In light of the realist and modernist energies that Robbe-Grillet interrogates as a filmmaker, his influence on Michael K’s characterisation speaks to the importance of modernist cinema on Coetzee’s writing and his continuing interest in ‘modernism after modernism’ (Attridge, *Ethics of Reading* 5).

In *J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style* (2014), Jarad Zimbler identifies the influence of Alain Robbe-Grillet’s practice on J. M. Coetzee’s conception of realism. Reading Robbe-Grillet ‘alongside Beckett’, Coetzee comes across, according to Zimbler, an author with ‘very different allegiances’—one who puts forward a conception of realism as an author’s consideration of reality, their desire ‘to create the “real”’ (44). For Coetzee, Robbe-Grillet ‘has certainly been an example...of a certain kind of fluid complexity’ (Coetzee,

Speaking 24). Jarad Zimble sees this statement as evidence that Coetzee found ‘a lesson about putting narrative together’ in Robbe-Grillet’s writing. More specifically, Zimble argues that Robbe-Grillet’s writing represented a formalism that could be ‘wedded to liberal-humanist subjectivity’ (118) for Coetzee. The importance of subjectivity, and realism, in relation to Robbe-Grillet is particularly relevant in light of the ‘ambiguity that hovers around Michael K’s subjectivity’ (Poyner 78). K’s silence in the novel, along with his withdrawal from his surroundings, ensures that his subjectivity alludes us. In effect, K retreats from any attempts to ‘read him as symbolic of something, even as a figure of non-meaning’ (Coetzee, Barnett 298). K thinks of himself ‘not as something heavy that [leaves] tracks behind it, but if anything, as a speck upon the surface of an earth too deeply asleep to notice’ (Coetzee *Life & Times* 97). He consequently appears to desire an impenetrability that removes him, and his subjectivity, from our understanding.

In the initial stages of writing the novel, Michael K’s evasiveness is central to Coetzee’s writing process. Throughout the drafting process, Coetzee plays with Michael K’s proximity to the reader and to his surroundings by trialling different forms of narration. In one of the novel’s first drafts, Michael K—or ‘Albert’ as he is initially named—is noticeably silent. We are made aware of Albert only through the perspective of ‘a woman by the name of Anna K’ who speaks to Albert and replies to his questions. In effect, Albert is a silent figure who remains noticeably separate from the textual confines of the novel. A later draft also positions Michael K outside of the text in favour of an intimate first-person narration delivered by ‘the son of...Michael K’. Michael K’s son addresses an implied reader that he believes seeks to connect to him as a character, who ‘want[s] to know who I am who speak to you’ (Coetzee, “Michael K, version 3,” 1), while Michael K is noticeably silent in the text once again. In these examples, characters ensure that the reader is made aware of the presence of K, while denying us access into his subjectivity completely.

Michael K's detachment from the text prompts Coetzee to reflect on the unique anxieties that surround his writing in South Africa during the 1980s. Early in the drafting process, Coetzee comes across two problems that he cannot resolve: 'one spiritual, one technical'. For Coetzee, the spiritual problem is spurred by his privileged position within 'the present conflict' of growing anti-apartheid sentiment in South Africa during the 1980s. Specifically, Coetzee appears anxious about the 'fundamental flaw in all [his] novels', that, as a white writer, he is inevitably 'unable to move from the side of the oppressors to the side of the oppressed' (Coetzee, "Grey Notebook," 6). Authors in South Africa during the 1980s were, as I have discussed in previous chapters, pressured to prioritise realist modes of representation in their writing practices. For many white writers, the pressure to represent South African reality using realism placed their writing in a unique paradox. In *Pen And Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and Andre Brink* (1994), Sue Kossew describes this paradox succinctly:

White writing is necessarily caught in a double-inscription between the binary oppositions set up by an apartheid society and the attempt to breach or dismantle those divisions through words which inevitably reinscribe them. (Kossew 2)

For many writers, including Nadine Gordimer, realism was the answer to this paradox, the genre most suited to avoid reinscribing oppressive structures through language. Even members of the Sestigers—the group most commonly associated with South African modernism—prioritised realist modes of representation during the 1970s to 'take arms...against the socio-political realities of South Africa' (Brink 27). In fact, when Coetzee began writing *Life & Times of Michael K* in 1981, there was increased activism among black consciousness movements in the wake of the Soweto Uprising in 1976. The renewed presence of anti-apartheid activism increased the need for politically committed literary practices; and Lukásian realism was seen to ensure this commitment.

The other problem Coetzee faced in his initial drafts of *Life & Times of Michael K* was ‘technical’ (Coetzee, “Grey Notebooks,” 6). For Coetzee, there needs to be ‘some inventiveness in form’ (4) in the novel. Coetzee consequently trials the use of a collection of annotated photographs ‘with extended descriptions of frozen stills’ (6), a musical text (12) and a compilation of letters (13) for the novel. Throughout the writing process, Coetzee is acutely anxious of replicating the formal experiments of his previous novels, of ‘writing the same story a fourth time’, and ‘particularly against rewriting *In the Heart [of the Country]*’ (11). It is important that *In the Heart of the Country*, a novel ‘renowned for anti-realism’ (Attwell, *Life of Writing* 47) as a result of its unique structure, would cast such a considerable shadow over Coetzee’s writing for *Michael K*. In his anxieties surrounding the novel, we see the effect of his position—and his desire to position himself—in a productive tension between realist and modernist modes of representation. Specifically, *Life and Times of Michael K* shows Coetzee using a form of realism that is inclusive of, and in fact a catalyst for, a distinctly modernist deconstruction of meaning-making. This relationship with realist modes of representation draws on the modernist filmography of Alain Robbe-Grillet and his associated theories of representation.

Firstly, it is important to identify the differences between *In the Heart of the Country* and *Life and Times of Michael K* to illustrate the influence of Robbe-Grillet’s modernist practices on Michael K’s characterisation. In *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), Magda actively opposes the constraints placed on her by the text. She creates a productive tension in the novel by assuming a metafictional awareness of form, and consequently attempting to reposition herself from within the novel. In this sense, Magda is the key actant in constructing this tension, and as readers we are challenged to consider the implications of this tension as she creates it. In contrast, *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) features a character who does not assume an active role in constructing this tension. Michael K seems to adopt a passivity

when compared to Magda. While both characters highlight the constraints of textual form, Magda reacts antagonistically against these constraints and so attempts to push out of the novel from within, and K uses interiority to evade the text; he becomes a seemingly ‘passive figure’ (Coetzee, Barnett 295), a ‘figure of otherness to the reader’ (Attridge, *Ethics of Reading* 3) that eludes our understanding by prioritising introspection, silence, and a strategy of withdrawal.

The difference between Magda and K is linked to the extent in which K appears to value literal representation and perception. He is fuelled by a desire ‘for immersion in solitary being’; and this immersion prizes—and tests the limits of—what is required for one to exist in a novel, and in the world. In contrast, Magda ultimately attempts to transcend the novel from within the narrative. This transcendence has been interpreted as a distinctly ‘anti-realist’ drive, a drive that searches for a disembodied existence and fragments the trappings of narrative as a result (Zimble 91). While K also assumes a similar desire to transcend the confines of narrative and the requirements of his own existence in the world, this desire is distinctly inward-facing, meaning that it prioritises his interiority, and is therefore unyielding to the constraints of form (Coetzee, Easton 592) rather than antagonistic to them.

It is in the way Coetzee constructed, and grappled with, K’s interiority during the drafting process that we see the influence of a modernist practice synonymous with Alain Robbe-Grillet. Specifically, it is the relationship between ‘subjective and objective stylistics’ (Finn 108) associated with Robbe-Grillet’s modernist filmmaking that will contribute to our understanding of the process by which Coetzee developed Michael K’s characterisation. A key member of the *nouveau roman*, Robbe-Grillet’s writing practice has been repeatedly viewed with reference to ‘the objective/subjective dichotomy’ (Armes 14). In *For A New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, he wrote of a ‘future universe of the novel, [wherein] gestures and objects will be *there* before being *something*’ (21). Robbe-Grillet consequently advocated for

the literal representation of objects as they are, as opposed to what they could signify. Many critics, and Robbe-Grillet himself, positioned this approach in relation to realist modes of representation. It seemed that Robbe-Grillet was proposing a ‘new kind of realism’ (Barthes, *Critical Essays* 15; Stoltzfus 499) that prioritised an objective representation of reality that would be opaque to any reading that would imbue this representation with wider significance (Alter, “Cinematographic Style” 365). Instead, he prioritised objectivity as a means by which a novel could look on the world and ask: ‘are things indicators of meaning, or are they, on the contrary, opaque?’ (Barthes, *Novels of Robbe-Grillet* 10).

One of the clearest examples of Robbe-Grillet’s objectivism appears in his 1953 novel *The Erasers*. In one of the most oft-quoted sections of the novel, Robbe-Grillet describes a ‘quarter of tomato that is quite faultless, cut up by the machine into a perfectly symmetrical fruit’. He goes on to describe, in detail ‘[t]he peripheral flesh, compact, homogenous, and a splendid chemical red, is of an even thickness between a strip of gleaming skin and the hollow where the yellow, graduated seeds appear in a row, kept in place by a thin layer of greenish jelly along a swelling in the heart’ (112). Michael K would adopt a similarly objective style to describe the first ripe pumpkin he grows in his garden: ‘the firstborn. The shell was soft, the knife sank in without a struggle. The flesh, though still rimmed with green, was a deep orange’ (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 113). To Roland Barthes, Alain Robbe-Grillet’s description represents ‘a stubborn object rigorously enclosed within the order of its particles, suggestive of nothing but itself, and not involving its reader in a functional or substantial *elsewhere*’ (*Critical Essays* 15). In other words, Robbe-Grillet’s writing is a ‘mode of still-life’ that ‘aspire[s] to be the object-in-itself’ (Gordimer, ‘Essential Gesture’ 15). Or, as Elizabeth Costello says in the epigraph to this chapter: ‘it is the thing itself, the only thing’ (J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 217).

Important to Robbe-Grillet's use of objectivity is, paradoxically, subjectivity. His writing does not, 'despite this apparent "objectivity" sacrifice subjectivity' (Kennedy 30). Specifically, Robbe-Grillet manipulates the subjectivity that can be read into extreme objective descriptions. The question is: 'was the objective "scientistic" stylistics of the narration actually at the service of a pathological subjectivity of character, narrator or author?' (Finn 108). Or, as Bruce Morrisette writes in reference to the description of the tomato quoted above: 'Is this not rather a description of [the character's] perception of the tomato?' (113). In these readings, the extreme objectivity put forward by Robbe-Grillet is instead used to represent a character's subjective perception. In a nod to psychological realism, the character's insistent objectivity serves to characterise someone who is 'so obsessive that it often distorts his vision and subjects him to fantasies bordering on delirium' (Robbe-Grillet, *For A New Novel* 138).

Importantly, it is Alain Robbe-Grillet's experience with modernist cinema that would prompt him to interrogate the instability between the 'subjectivism/objectivism divide' (Finn 107) further. Robbe-Grillet wrote and directed nine films in his career as a filmmaker. His first foray into filmmaking would come in 1961 when he wrote the screenplay for Alain Resnais' *Last Year in Marienbad*. The experience would prompt a 'shift to subjectivism' (Finn 114) in his artistic practice. Specifically, Robbe-Grillet would be struck by the dually objective and subjective associations that he attributed to the camera's viewpoint. Film had already been used to represent the way Robbe-Grillet's writing 'remains on the surface of the object and inspects it impartially' (Barthes, *Critical Essays* 14). Roland Barthes would repeatedly associate Robbe-Grillet's writing with 'the same revolution which the cinema has worked upon our visual reflexes' (Barthes, *Critical Essays* 18). Robbe-Grillet was attracted to the assumptions of naturalism associated with cinematic representation, wherein 'one *sees* the chair, the movement of the hand, the shape of the bars...the image has suddenly (and

unintentionally) restored their *reality*' (Robbe-Grillet, *A New Novel* 20). In fact, to Susan Sontag, it is the nature of cinema 'to confer on all events...an equivalent degree of reality: everything shown on the screen is *there*, present' ('Bergman's *Persona*' 67).

In his filmmaking, Robbe-Grillet would intentionally manipulate film's association with naturalism, and the objective viewpoint of the camera implied therein. Specifically, he would problematise any assumption of 'camera-like objective realism' (Smith 44) to ensure that the viewer is made aware of how cinematic form influences how they interpret what they see in a film. In the hands of Alain Robbe-Grillet, the camera is positioned both externally to a character—looking on them objectively—and within them—seeing what they see. In *Trans-Europ-Express* (1967) the camera jumps between a character's perception of their surroundings, and a director (played by Alain Robbe-Grillet himself) who watches this perception and appears to control it. The film then problematises the reliability of the director's gaze and influence, meaning that we don't 'have any guarantee of the accuracy of the images which we see with our own eyes' (Duffy 64). As a result, 'the question as to whether we are outside in the world or inside the perceiving consciousness can scarcely be answered' (Barnes 42). The viewer is unable to assign allegorical, or metaphorical significance to what the film represents, at least not with any certainty. If 'one *sees* the chair' (Robbe-Grillet, *A New Novel* 20) in one of Robbe-Grillet's films, the simultaneously subjective and objective viewpoint of the camera ensures that this perception is problematised (Finn 115). 'In short', Pier Paolo Pasolini says, 'cinema...has a double nature: it is both extremely subjective and extremely objective (to such an extent that it reaches an unsurpassable and awkward naturalistic fate)' (*Heretical*, 173). If one reads meaning into what they see in a Robbe-Grillet film, this 'meaning [is] immediately denied by a neighbouring meaning; if meaning is no longer abolished, it nevertheless remains in suspense' (17).

The viewer is consequently forced to reflect on their ‘own activity as spectators’ (Duffy 63). The result of this reflection, or more accurately the result desired by Alain Robbe-Grillet, is a critical-awareness of the influence of form on the process of meaning-making. As Howard Finn puts it in ‘Objects of Modernist Description’ (2002): ‘The reader does not see the object but is blinded to it, seeing instead the act of description’ (115). Robbe-Grillet adopts an aestheticism in his practice as a filmmaker, aiming to create a film that is ‘suggestive of nothing but itself’ (Barthes, *Critical Essays* 15). His attempt to ‘merge the subjective and the objective’ (Fragola et al. 6) in film is consequently intended to draw attention to the influence of form.

In light of Robbe-Grillet’s theories of representation, it is consequently interesting that, mid-way through the drafting process for *Life & Times of Michael K*, J. M. Coetzee would abandon his experimentations with form because he saw in them ‘much [of] the coldness of Robbe-Grillet’s, and probably stylistically reminiscent of him as well’ (Coetzee, “Grey Notebook,” 12). With this statement, Coetzee would move away from any overt formalism. One of the key formal experiments abandoned was Coetzee’s attempt to reimagine the novel as a screenplay.

When he started writing *Life & Times of Michael K* in 1981, Coetzee was simultaneously adapting his previous novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, into a screenplay (Wittenberg, ‘Film and Photography’ 473). The influence of this parallel project can be seen when, in response to problems he perceived in the developing novel, Coetzee attempted to revise the novel and imagine it as a screenplay. For Coetzee, this cinematic experiment seemed to resolve many of the problems he perceived in his writing. In effect, Coetzee expands upon the ‘technical’ and ‘spiritual’ problems he saw by identifying the problem of ‘naturalism’, the problem ‘that there is no plot’, and the problem of ‘introduc[ing] consciousness into’ (Coetzee, “Grey Notebook,” 14) the story. All three problems touch on

key tensions that we have seen throughout Coetzee's writing practice: with realism, modernism, and Coetzee's position in relation to them. Using the screenplay medium, Coetzee is forced to interrogate the tensions between these different aspects, tensions that can be said to arise from the complex ideological, theoretical, and political repercussions of a character, Michael K, who attempts to simply be '*there*' (Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel* 22). For Coetzee, the screenplay form instils in him a sense of 'elation...for the first time re: this project' ("Grey Notebooks," 34). Initially, it is the conventions of the screenplay form that renew Coetzee's confidence in the novel. Specifically, this form offers Coetzee different methods through which he can represent Michael K's voice: through voice-over, dialogue, and narrative description.

In the novel, K is characterised by 'his suggestive silences' (Coetzee, Easton 592). Scholarship on the novel has continued to grapple with the purpose, and impact, of this silence, of 'his status as son of silence' (Chesney 309). In Coetzee's screenplay experiment however, K's voice is clear, and loud. In response to the conventions of the screenplay form, Coetzee introduces, and extends K's spoken interactions with other people, interactions that would eventually be deleted or cut down in the final version of the novel. The relevance, and nuance, of his voice in the screenplay is most clearly represented by an interaction in the screenplay that would remain in the novel: between Michael K and 'a man younger than himself wearing a green and gold tracksuit'. In an interaction that spans less than a page in the novel, K adopts his characteristic aloofness and retreats from the absolutism put forward by this man who believes '[p]eople must help each other' (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 47). K responds to the man's declaration by invoking a metaphor that encapsulates his withdrawal and the interiority he pursues—as 'I am the stony ground, he thought' (48). Despite the intimacy of the first person, K assumes his 'strategy of withdrawal' (Attridge, *Ethics of Otherness* 3) and retreats from the reader, and the man, by adopting a silence that

problematizes interpretability. This is not necessarily K's intention, nor does he appear aware of the withdrawal that comes with adopting the silence, and apathy, of a 'stony ground'. K simply—almost literally—cannot bring forth 'the right words' even when 'the urge again [comes] over him to speak' (48). Coetzee consequently avoids characterising him with a metacognitive awareness that would make his silence appear intentional, and so problematizes 'the temptation [in readers] to make Michael speak, to read him as symbolic of something, even as a figure of non-meaning' (Coetzee, Barnett 298). In the novel, K retreats from strategies of signification that would place him in a wider system of meaning. If he spoke, K would be immediately subject to a process of meaning-making that would deny him his desire to be, simply, 'a speck upon the surface' (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 97). Or, as Robbe-Grillet would put it: his desire to be "real" (*For A New Novel* 131).

However, when this interaction appeared first as screenplay, Michael K's opposition to interpretation is challenged by the nature of the screenplay form. Not only is K more vocal in his interaction with both the man and his family in the screenplay, but his silence does not represent an opposition to signification to the extent that it does in the novel. Instead, Coetzee relies more on the formal properties of screenplay to construct Michael K's uniquely aloof character. In fact, by experimenting with the screenplay form, Coetzee is forced to consider the repercussions of K's characterisation in light of both textual, and contextual constraints.

As he interacts with the man and his family in the screenplay experiment, K does not retreat inward as he does in the novel. He is more vocal, and voices his gratitude to the family, saying 'Thank you' (Coetzee, "Michael K version 6," 51)—something he is unable to do in the novel. While silence is similarly repeated throughout the scene, it is filled by voice-over. Defined as K's voice (44), voice-over appears to offer us access into the thoughts of Michael K. Within stretches of silence, we are told that K 'wanted to speak' (51). Using the first person, the voice-over adopts an intimate tone that seems to contrast with the detached third-

person of the novel. The voice-over is explicit in its descriptions of K's emotions. Using voice-over he can admit that 'this was the happiest I had ever been in my life' (61), he can speak 'from his heart' (Coetzee, "Michael K version 4," 3). It consequently appears, initially, to represent 'K from the "inside"' (Coetzee, "Grey Notebook," 16), representing his subjective experience of events.

However, by using the past tense, this voice-over assumes a retrospective position. Coetzee acknowledged that the 'voice over [is] spoken by K— from his hospital bed to the narrator: only when we get to the hospital sequence do we understand the vantage point' (Coetzee, "Grey Notebook", 34). As a result, K adopts an external viewpoint from which he can view himself, almost as if he were watching a film. From this position, he can add a commentary that, in its personal nature, can be seen as a response to the demand the Doctor makes in the novel for Michael K to 'make your voice heard, tell your story! We are listening!' (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 140).

In effect, it is Michael K who, as voice-over, tells the story of his own life. He then looks upon his past and declares, suddenly, that '[i]t's not a life worth talking about'. In this way, he opposes any attempt to read significance into his experiences and looks to a time when he 'lived below the level of all the talk, below the newspapers and the pictures, down below where they could not see me' (Coetzee, "Michael K version 6," 64). But there is something below the text, or rather 'a hypothetical novel behind it' (Coetzee, "Grey Notebook," 34) that draws attention to the formal constraints of the screenplay. As a result, it becomes a medium through which Coetzee can position Michael K paradoxically between speech and silence, and between meaning and an opposition to meaning.

At sudden points in the screenplay, there are sections of text that are difficult to classify. The first one is poetic in nature:

A great desert, where one may march all
day without the sight of a fellow man.
Where great herds of antelope roam from
water to water (Coetzee, “Michael K version 6,” 47–48)

The second text appears later in the screenplay and assumes the conventions of a different genre of text. Using astronomical jargon, it identifies ‘the upper pointer’, ‘The / lower pointer’ and the ‘Southern Cross’ (48), and so adopts the naturalism characteristic of scientific writings. The novel at this stage consequently adopts a multi-modal form that is exacerbated by the screenplay.

Together, these fragmented sections force the reader to reconsider their reading practice. It is clear that these sections are literary in nature. They are not identified as voice-over, as dialogue, or as anything else that would successfully subsume them into the screenplay genre. They consequently cause the reader to question the assumptions they have made thus far about the text’s filmic, or literary qualities, and their readership in relation to these assumptions. The screenplay form already ‘occupies a middle position’ (Price 235) between the literary and the cinematic. For Pier Paolo Pasolini, it requires readers ‘to think in images’ (Pasolini, *Heretical* 59), to read ‘with the notion that the transposition process from the written to the filmed text is already inherent in the script pages’ (Sternberg 52). Reading a screenplay is consequently oriented toward the literary, the cinematic, and then, to what is conventional of the screenplay itself. Coetzee draws attention to this inherently unstable (Price xi) character by using the screenplay form within a literary framework, and by then using fragments of poetry to ensure the reader is made aware of its intermedial position. It is within this intermedial position that Coetzee also attempts to position Michael K. By doing so, he experiments with the paradoxical character that K would come to assume in the novel.

If we concede, as mentioned previously, that K's voice-over can be viewed as an answer to what the Doctor demands of him in the novel: 'to make your voice heard, tell your story!' (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 140), then Coetzee uses the screenplay form to ensure that this story is problematised. K's strong diegetic presence in the screenplay is accentuated if we view the text as a blueprint for an imagined film wherein his voice would be heard. In an imagined film, K's opinion that his is 'not a life worth talking about. I never wanted anyone to talk about me' (Coetzee, "Michael K version 6," 64) adopts an aesthetic self-consciousness. In other words, there is a sense of irony in this statement when we consider it with an eye to its appearance as voice-over in a film. But Coetzee ensures that the reader is unable to comfortably place the text within the literary or cinematic frameworks that it seems to conform in examples like this one. In the screenplay, Coetzee creates a 'space for Michael K to live in the gaps' (Head 55), a position within which he can exist in-between an imagined film, and the constraints of a novel. In this space, K can 'talk' about himself without textual constraints to deny him, and cinematic conventions which would inevitably represent this 'talk' literally. In other words, he can speak without—in a literal sense—speaking. For Coetzee, who grapples with the colonizing effect of his authorship, made central by anti-apartheid sentiment, this paradoxical diegesis allows him to represent K 'without 'speaking "for" the silenced voices [which] could be seen as merely imposing another kind of imperial authority upon them' (Kossew 127). Instead, Coetzee adopts a confidence, a sense 'of elation' (Coetzee, "Grey Notebook," 34), in representing K's voice in the screenplay form.

The 'partly interiorized third-person voice' (Wittenberg, 'Film and Photography' 473) Coetzee would end up using in the novel is a result of his experimentation with voice in the screenplay experiment. In the screenplay, K exists within the imagined film's diegesis, and outside it; he watches and listens to himself 'from his hospital bed' (Coetzee, "Grey Notebook", 34). It is important to note that Coetzee intended to reveal the retrospective

distance of K's voice-over closer to the end of the imagined screenplay. Before this retrospective position is revealed, the screenplay adopts a conventional cinematic representation of K: his actions are objectively perceived by the external viewpoint of an implied camera, and his subjective thoughts are vocalised by voice-over. Once K is revealed to be watching himself and speaking from the vantage point of his hospital bed, this external viewpoint is instead aligned with his subjectivity. There is a sense that what is represented is K's recollection of what happened, rather than an objective representation. As a result, our viewership is positioned 'inside the perceiving consciousness' (Barnes 42) of K. Coetzee consequently experiments with a process of doubling K that resembles the use of doubling synonymous with Alain-Robbe Grillet, most noticeably in *The Erasers* (1953). Translated into film, or rather an imagined film, this doubling of K also recalls Alain Robbe-Grillet's cinematic practice in that it 'merges the subjective and the objective' (Fragola, Smith 6).

There is no way of knowing whether the voice-over, and the access into K's subjectivity which it offers, is an accurate reflection of what K was thinking at that time. The voice-over is, to an extent, detached from K because it is looking back on these events rather than experiencing them first-hand. Michael K's subjective experience during the time before the hospital bed still remains somewhat inaccessible to us; and K's perception of these experiences consequently seems unable to penetrate the interiority of a Michael K.

Herman Wittenberg summarises the importance of Michael K's position in the screenplay when he says that the experience showed Coetzee that 'Michael K could be written from the outside looking in and the inside looking out' ('Film and Photography' 485). Many scholars have commented on the distinct plural narration that exists in the *Life & Times of Michael K*. To David Attridge, 'the rendering of K's thoughts involves a method that 'constantly distances the narrative voice from the inner consciousness of the character' (*Ethics of Reading* 51). David Attwell similarly writes of 'the fact that the narration shifts

between K himself and an observer, puzzlingly located inside K's consciousness' (*Life of Writing* 140). In the novel, K's 'hybrid point of view' (Wittenberg, 'Film and Photography' 485) is used repeatedly. K has a 'vision of himself riding the ewe to death' (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 55); he sings 'to himself' (58) and looks on his life and declares that '[t]he story of his life had never been an interesting one' (67) with a shifting free indirect discourse. In effect, K 'trie[s] to 'explain himself to himself' (110) and so 'combines the voice of narrator and character' (Dovey 282) in the novel. In light of the screenplay experiment we can say that he toys with an external viewpoint that is still positioned in his interiority. Coetzee's intentional manipulation of subjective and objective perception in the screenplay experiment is consequently 'a key formal breakthrough' (Wittenberg, 'Film and Photography' 483) that helped him develop K's voice for the novel. In turn, K represents the simultaneously objective, and subjective viewpoint that Robbe-Grillet made central to his modernist cinematic practice.

Coetzee's declaration that the screenplay experiment creates a novel with 'much [of] the coldness of Robbe-Grillet' (Coetzee, "Grey Notebook," 12) consequently identifies what is unique about Robbe-Grillet's practice, and Coetzee's characterisation of K in response to this practice. Robert Alter describes Robbe-Grillet's writing as having 'a certain aridness'. To Alter, this aridness comes as a result of its 'reliance on technical experiment' (Alter, 'Self-conscious Moment' 212) to construct its characteristic interplay between subjective and objective perception. In the screenplay, K's 'hybrid point of view' (Wittenberg, 'Film and Photography' 485) is also constructed by the subversive use of form. Coetzee, as previously mentioned, seems to prioritise formal experimentation by including various fragments from different, multi-modal texts in the screenplay. While the screenplay seems to alleviate some of Coetzee's anxieties about writing the novel, it adopts a hyper-formalism that places

Coetzee firmly within a modernist tradition, one that he appears to associate with Alain Robbe-Grillet.

In his writing, Coetzee has ‘reiterated the dangers attendant both upon an outmoded realism and a too radical or celebratory anti-realism’ (Zimbler 77). In ‘Living in the Interregnum’ (1983) and again in ‘The Essential Gesture: Writers and Responsibility’ (1984), Nadine Gordimer identifies ‘the difficulty of carving out a space in which art can operate under its own internal laws’ (Moody 9) within apartheid South Africa. It can consequently be argued that the hyper formalism created by the screenplay represents a high modernist practice that, to Coetzee, clashes with this responsibility. Or, more accurately, the text conflicts with this responsibility in a way that is too hyper-formalist for Coetzee. Instead, he adopts a ‘literary gamesmanship’ (Worthington 114) that translates, and grapples with Alain Robbe-Grillet’s cinematic practices, but ensures that this textual play is not used purely to draw attention to form. In effect, what Coetzee takes from Robbe-Grillet is a modernism that is also a form of realism. Just as John Coetzee in *Youth* (2002) finds a form of realism in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s work that does not conflict with modernism, so to does Coetzee find a way to, as Zimbler writes, ‘create the “real”’ (44) through Robbe-Grillet’s cinematic modernism. If Robbe-Grillet looked to a ‘future hero [who] will remain, on the contrary, *there*’ (Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel* 22), Coetzee’s Michael K deals with the textual, and political repercussions that come with what being ‘*there*’ means in apartheid-era South Africa. In effect, Coetzee interrogates ‘what is required’ for a character like Michael K, as well as a text that represents him, ‘to stand in the world’ (Zimbler 165).

CONCLUSION

Sometimes in Coetzee, I want to say, “Yeah, I get it. What would you like to say here? Why don't you say it?” In some of his work, that's a constant. In a film, you have to make choices. You have to say certain things very clearly.

— John Malkovich, *Interview for SalonTV: 'John Malkovich faces Disgrace'*

It has been almost sixty years since John Coetzee entered the ‘Everyman theatre in Hampstead’ and had his eyes ‘opened to films from all over the world’ (Coetzee, *Youth* 48). Since then, the modernist films he was introduced to there have continued to inform J. M. Coetzee’s writing practice. It has been the aim of this thesis to identify this influence with reference to J. M. Coetzee’s engagement with modernism, and modernist legacies. It is my contention that the modernist ideologies used, and reinterpreted, by modernist cinema helped Coetzee navigate the complex legacies that surround modernist practice. In particular, I have drawn attention to the relationship between modernist film and realism. It is the nature of this relationship which, I have argued, influenced Coetzee’s engagement with realist modes of representation in the context of apartheid-era South Africa. If, as Attwell argues, Coetzee would ‘never completely make peace with realism’ (62), then modernist film has been shown to facilitate Coetzee’s navigation of this enduring relationship.

Each chapter in this thesis has highlighted the practices of a specific filmmaker associated with modernist cinema and identified their influence on Coetzee. In Chapter One, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s open exchange with realist modes of practice was shown to be influential to John Coetzee’s interpretation of high modernism in *Youth* (2002). In Chapter Two, Jean-Luc Godard’s formal experimentation with voice-over was shown to be influential to Magda’s characterisation in *In the Heart of the Country* (1977). And in Chapter Two, Alain Robbe-Grillet’s complex objectivism was identified in Michael K’s characterisation in *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983). It has been my contention that these filmmakers have

influenced both Coetzee's writing practice and his investigation of the political, linguistic, and ideological repercussions of this practice.

Scholarship on J. M. Coetzee is quick to acknowledge—and grapple with—the aesthetic and theoretical influence of literary figures like Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka and T.S. Eliot on his writing. In other words, the influence of authors is identified in Coetzee's formal strategies and the theoretical debates that these formal strategies navigate. By identifying the influence of these specific filmmakers, I have argued for the benefits of viewing the influence of modernist film in a similar way. While cinematic aesthetics influence Coetzee's writing, this influence needs to be considered in light of the way this aesthetic is interpreted by specific practitioners like the ones I have included here. As with Coetzee's relationship with various literary figures, Coetzee's relationship with film must consider the formal strategies used by the filmmakers he engages with, while attending to the theoretical ideas and debates that these strategies, and these filmmakers, engage with. In fact, this thesis has shown that identifying what is distinct about a filmmaker's practice will inevitably, and productively, encounter the theoretical legacies that these practices engage with. Specifically, this thesis has shown the realist energies at the heart of modernist cinema. The relationship between modernism and realism evident in the cinema of Pasolini, Godard, and Robbe-Grillet became a scaffold for Coetzee's writing. It enabled him to stage a continuing negotiation between both modes of practice in his early novels; and this usually fraught negotiation would be revisited in different ways throughout his writing.

There are numerous other filmmakers that Coetzee has engaged with—Terrence Malick (Wittenberg, *Two Screenplays* 11), Ingmar Bergman (Coetzee, *Homage* 5), John Huston (Coetzee, *Inner Workings* 226) to name a few—who would extend our understanding of Coetzee's interrogation of realism and modernism. As a result of the importance of modernist

cinema for Coetzee, the various other films and filmmakers of influence to him should be viewed in the way they interact with, build on, or conflict with, modernist film practices. In a longer study of Coetzee's relationship with film, I expect that approaching film's continuing influence on Coetzee in relation to his reverence for modernist film would yield a greater understanding of his engagement with realist modes of representation and modernist legacies.

It is clear from this thesis that film played a key role in the way Coetzee navigated contextual pressures and a modernist inheritance—of which modernist film is a part. What has also been identified, is the importance of screenwriting in Coetzee's interrogation of distinct interpretations of modernist practices. By drawing attention to the unique properties of the screenplay form in my argument, I have shown that Coetzee reinvestigates his own practices when he engages with different forms of creative practice. Moreover, I have shown that his engagement is never limited to this one particular form. In fact, Coetzee's writing, and his various other creative pursuits, actively draw on different media. In other words, it is no longer the inheritance of a high modernist practice that is grappled with by authors like Coetzee, but rather a plurality of many different modernist practices across many different modes and geographies: 'a myriad of interconnected continuities' (James, Seshagiri 6). As a result of this plurality, we see not only a fruitful exchange across different interpretations of modernism, but also, the opportunity for future studies on Coetzee and film to attend to the dynamics of this exchange; or in other words, to the local, and global power structures that may have influenced the type of modernist film seen by Coetzee, and the strength of its influence on him. Like the reclamation of the Sestigers, and South African modernism within Coetzeean scholarship by Jarad Zimbler, a future study that attends to South African film practices more precisely promises to extend the arguments put forward by this thesis project and broaden our understanding of the legacies of modernism in film. In a similar vein, the arguments made in this thesis would benefit from a more thorough consideration of the

different modes of creative practice that intersect with modernist film, and with Coetzee's engagement with modernist film. In particular, his interest in photography and radio would extend the multi-modal modernism highlighted here.

What has resulted from this thesis overall is an image of 'modernism after modernism' that is critical of the repercussions that arise when one attempts to subsume, reimagine, and recreate the aesthetics, and ideological energies of modernism. It is inevitable that practitioners faced with the prospect of continuing 'modernism after modernism' (Attridge, *Ethics of Reading*) will grapple with the theoretical and aesthetic energies of the modernisms that precede them, inclusive of modernist cinema. Coetzee's writing consequently incorporates the 'temporal, spatial, and vertical' (Mao, Walkowitz 737) expansions in modernism and uses the complex interconnections between these expansions to advance the critical energies at the heart of his novels. Moreover, these interconnections, and Coetzee's experience of this metamodernist (James, Seshagiri 97) practice, are influenced by a context that was particularly attentive to the failings of high modernism; 'an age', Nadine Gordimer says, wherein the fascist ideology connected to high modernism is 'still pandemic' ('The Essential Gesture' 9). In a time that was actively antagonistic to the ideological, and aesthetic traits synonymous with high modernism, Coetzee's continued pursuit of, and relationship with, modernist cinema speaks to a modernist inheritance that is critically engaged with different interpretations of modernism. This continuing effort is fraught with countless theoretical, aesthetic, and political tensions that prove productive for his writing.

In May 2018 it was confirmed that Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) would be the next novel of his to be adapted for the screen. Helmed by Colombian director Ciro Guerra, and rumoured to star Mark Rylance as The Magistrate (Clement), the film is slated to premier at the end of 2019. Ciro Guerra, who combined social critique and formal innovation with

Embrace of the Serpent (2015), will be one of the most established directors to tackle Coetzee's work thus far. In light of this thesis, it will be interesting to observe what the adaptation will reflect about the source novel. And more importantly, if Coetzee is chosen to edit or re-write a screenplay for it, how he will reflect on his own novel, now published twenty-eight years ago in the midst of apartheid South Africa.

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