

“What Used to Lie Outside the Frame”: Boundaries of Photography, Subjectivity and Fiction in Three Novels by J.M. Coetzee

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Summary

The concept of frame and its inherent tensions, as addressed by contemporary thinking, is the theoretical focus of this article, which examines representations of photography in three of J.M. Coetzee's novels (*Dusklands* ([1974]1983), *Age of Iron* (1990) and *Slow Man* (2005)). Photography is treated as a site where Coetzee explores the issues that preoccupy him throughout his work: subjectivity, its boundaries and the possibility of intersubjectivity in relation to the very act of storytelling. The article offers a metaphorical reading of such elements of photography as the blow-up, the negative and digital photography in order to reflect upon Coetzee's engagement with the possibility of openness to transformation, otherness and futurity implied by both the photographic frame and intersubjectivity in life as well as in fiction.

Opsomming

Die konsep van raamwerk en sy inherente spanning, soos saamgevat deur kontemporêre denkwyses, is die teoretiese fokus van hierdie artikel wat voorstellings van fotografie ondersoek in drie van J.M. Coetzee se romans (*Dusklands* (1974, 1983); *Age of Iron* (1990) en *Slow Man* (2005)). Fotografie word gesien as 'n terrein waar Coetzee kwessies ondersoek wat sy aandag dwarsdeur sy werk in beslag neem: subjektiwiteit, die beperkinge daarvan en die moontlikheid van intersubjektiviteit ten opsigte van die wesenlike daad van storievertelling. Hierdie artikel bied 'n metaforiese lesing van sodanige elemente van fotografie, soos die vergroting, die negatief en digitale fotografie ten einde te besin oor Coetzee se betrokkenheid by die moontlikheid van die openheid tot transformasie, andersheid en toekomstigheid soos geïmpliseer deur beide die fotografiese raamwerk en intersubjektiviteit in sowel die lewe as in fiksie.

1

J.M. Coetzee's last novel, *Summertime* (2009), has a peculiar form, as do his other novels. In *Summertime*, six characters tell of an author – Coetzee

himself, or a person who bears his name and most of his features. This intricate form makes for a rich work, including a portrayal of South Africa’s white society in the 1970s. One of the speakers, who knew Coetzee at that time, describes a certain quality which she found in South African men like her husband’s colleagues:

There was some quality they had in common that I found it hard to put a finger on, but that I somehow connected with the evasive flicker I caught in the eyes of Mark’s colleagues when they spoke about the future of the country – as if there were some conspiracy they all belonged to that was going to create a fake *tromp-l’oeil* future where no future had seemed possible before. Like a camera shutter opening up for an instant to reveal the falseness at their core.

(Coetzee 2009: 53)

This description combines the conception of the eye as a window to the soul and other eye-related expressions (flicker in the eye, *tromp-l’oeil*) with a photographic image. The camera’s pupil, the shutter, which regulates the entrance of light, opens and allows for that moment of truth which reveals the falseness of pre-apartheid South Africa’s illusion of a future. What is the image of this falsity? What does one see when the shutter opens? The text does not specify. Perhaps because the essence of this falsity is emptiness. This emptiness takes the form of plenitude, and presents the absence of the future under the guise of a future.

The shutter image is not accurate in terms of its mechanism. In the camera, the shutter opens to expose the film to an image from *outside*, while Coetzee’s eye-shutter exposes what lies *inside*. Still, the image does capitalise on the traditional connection between photography and truth. Since its early days, photography was presumed to reveal and validate the truth. However, as Martin Jay suggests (1995: 344-360), photography played a crucial role in challenging the very possibility of obtaining a truthful vision of reality. This effect of photography is treated in Coetzee’s *Slow Man*, discussed in the third part of this article. There, figures from a historical photograph are replaced with family portraits, bringing into question the value of truth in photography in general and historical photography in particular. Thus, Zoë Wicomb suggests, the photographic theme pertains to Coetzee’s notion of substitution that “insists on engagement with the real, which is, however, shown to be heterogeneous, shifting, elusive and illusionary” (2009: 10).

The ambivalent connection to the truth is but one of several aspects of photography that Coetzee uses, and the shutter image is part of a group of photographic images scattered through his work. Some, such as the shutter, are presented as metaphors and others are integrated in the plot as real objects. I have chosen from these images three ekphrastic representations of photographs, taken from *Dusklands* ([1974]1983), *Age of Iron* (1990) and

Slow Man (2005). By analysing these literary photographs and the act of looking at them, I wish to single out some aspects of photography that serve Coetzee in his work. I examine the way they are developed as well as their connection to his recurring themes. My intention is for this discussion to contribute to the understanding of both Coetzee's work and the connection between fiction and photography – a much-discussed topic in current research.¹ The manifestations of photography that I discuss are arenas for the ethical and political concerns that haunt Coetzee throughout his writing. Through photography, Coetzee continues to explore the role of literature in relation to these concerns. Indeed, the special qualities of photography have revolutionised the conception of truth, knowledge and vision in our time, and made photography a site where both ethical and aesthetical issues are reflected upon and re-examined.

The issue of truth, as presented in *Summertime's* shutter image, is related to another topic which is the focus of my discussion, i.e., the issue of frame or boundaries. I would like to suggest that the unique qualities of photography – its ambivalent relation to truth, the complexity of its temporal structure, and mostly its frame – make photography a site for the exploration of subjectivity, its boundaries and the possibility of intersubjectivity. The relation between photography and subjectivity has yielded several thorough works of research. The most fruitful, for my purposes, is Mieke Bal's visual reading of Proust (Bal 1997). Bal connects Proust's photographic concern to the visual formation of subjectivity as well as to the visual-epistemological challenges brought about by the encounter with the other. In my reading of Coetzee, I wish to keep tracing the connection between subjectivity-intersubjectivity and photography through the relationship (both analogical and concrete) between the photograph's unique frame and the boundaries of the self, as they expand and contract when confronting the other – a matter that has engaged Coetzee since his first novel.

2

Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands*, presents an image which, in my view, embodies the issue of boundaries of the self. To understand this image, we should first consider its context: the philosophy of killing issued by Jacobus Coetzee during his expedition into South Africa's interior. Jacobus Coetzee, a pseudo-historical figure introduced as one of J.M. Coetzee's ancestors, is an eighteenth-century hunter in the service of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the narrator of the second part of this "duo-novel", comprising two separate narratives. His conception provides, as it were, the

1. See, for example *Poetics Today* 29(1) (2008) – an issue devoted to the connection between fiction and photography.

rationale for the explorer’s acts of killing – first of animals, then of people. It originated in the journey through the wild, which, for this representative of the white race, is uninhabitable space, devoid of any human presence and offering no stimulation for the senses, a place where “only the eyes have power” (Coetzee [1974]1983: 80):

I become a spherical reflecting eye moving through the wilderness and ingesting it. Destroyer of the wilderness, I move through the land cutting a devouring path from horizon to horizon. There is nothing from which my eye turns, I am all that I see. Such loneliness! Not a stone, not a bush, not a wretched provident ant that is not comprehended in this traveling sphere. What is there that is not me?

(Coetzee [1974]1983: 79)

It is in the wild then, where one loses a sense of boundaries, where the eye devours everything one sees, leaving no space for anything but the self. Nothing eludes the gaze of the explorer, who therefore comes to question the existence of the world around him. And what saves him from this narcissistic fantasy and the anxiety it produces? The gun:

The gun stands for the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself The gun saves us from the fear that all life is within us. It does so by laying at our feet all the evidence we need of a dying and therefore a living world. I move through the wilderness with my gun at the shoulder of my eye and slay elephants, hippopotami, rhinoceros, buffalo, lions, leopards, dogs, giraffes, antelope and bucks of all description I leave behind me a mountain of skin, bones, inedible gristle, and excrement. All this is my dispersed pyramid to life. It is my life’s work, my incessant proclamation of the otherness of the dead and therefore the otherness of life The hare dies to keep my soul from merging with the world.

(Coetzee [1974]1983: 79, 80)

This is one conception of the self as it is presented in this novel – a self who fails to achieve differentiation from the world, unless the other is dead. The colonist’s desire for expansion manifests itself in a boundless extension of one’s boundaries, where the world and the non-self are pushed away and prove their existence only by their very extinction. However, this omnipotent capacity of extension is bidirectional, and paradoxically can be manifested in an act of contraction. When power relations change and Jacobus Coetzee is captured by the Hottentots, he devises a way of protecting himself from annihilation – another potent fantasy, in which the boundaries of the self are again expanded but this time inward instead of outward. This is where the image, essential to Coetzee’s conception of the self, emerges. Jacobus Coetzee compares himself to a beetle he heard of, which can maintain its vitality even when all its limbs, except for the head, are severed. This is due to the beetle’s capacity to constrict itself against any

external threat of invasion and annihilation. Jacobus explains this capacity by using Zeno's paradox of dividing the space to infinity:

[I]n a formal sense he [the beetle] is a true creature of Zeno. "Now I am only half-way dead. Now I am only three-fourths dead. The secret of my life regresses infinitely before your probing finger. You and I could spend eternity splitting fractions. If I keep still long enough you will go away. Now I am only fifteen-sixteenths dead".

(Coetzee [1974]1983: 96)

With this defence mechanism, the self becomes a labyrinth of a sort – a straight-line labyrinth (as Borges sees Zeno's paradox); "In the blindest alley of the labyrinth of my self I had hidden myself away, abandoning mile after mile of defenses" (p. 96).

The will, or capacity, for self-constriction can be grounded in a psychoanalytic frame of reference, such as R.D. Laing's description of the schizoid labyrinthal defence mechanism or Winnicott's concept of the false self, which can be connected to Coetzee's work in general.² However, this theoretical perspective is beyond the scope of this article.

In *Dusklands*, the process whereby one contracts into a "tiny I" and becomes a non-self seems to be the opposite of the infinite inflation of the self that Jacobus experienced at the beginning of his journey: a boundless expansion of the I, where the other can be recognised only through its extension versus an I that regresses infinitely in response to the other's expansion. But in fact, these two opposite reactions – of expansion and constriction – share a similar conception of the self as an elastic surface capable of an infinite stretching (outward or inward), and the elasticity is synonymous with impenetrability: the self does not contain any sort of otherness. Moreover, the same mechanism of regressing and being impenetrable to a probing object is used by the other as well. In the process of proving the otherness of death from life, the gun – a "probe of reality" (p. 17)³ – has turned the interiority of Jacobus's enemies into an opaque exterior, and he finds himself wandering, frustrated, over unyielding

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2. According to Laing (1960), the schizoid person, who fears the invasion by the other's gaze, regresses to an internal fortress, abandoning whole sections of his/her personality and body. The constricting of a true self in favour of a false one is also the focus of Winnicott's thinking (e.g. Winnicott 1960), who links it to the invasion of the mother and her demands. A psychoanalytic reading can indeed prove fruitful in understanding Coetzee's varied manifestations of a false self, especially in his pseudo-biographical, or auto-fictional writing (*Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*), where the sense of a false self can be accounted for by the failed connection with the mother.
 3. As it is called in the first part of the book by Jacobus Coetzee's American counterpart.

territories. He thus foreshadows other characters in Coetzee’s fiction facing impenetrable others who have “no interior, only a surface across which” they “hunt back and forth seeking entry” (Coetzee 1980: 43).⁴

A description of a photograph in the first part of *Dusklands* – set in the United States during the Vietnam War – seems to reflect the same dynamics. The mutual regression of self and other and their impenetrability are connected here to the special features of photography. The scholar Eugene Dawn, who studies Vietnamese myths in the service of the US war machine, looks at a photograph of a Vietnamese prisoner:

I have a 12x12 blowup of the prisoner. He has raised himself on one elbow, lifting his face toward the blurred grid of the wire. Dazzled by the sky, he sees as yet only the looming outlines of his spectators. His face is thin. From one eye glints a point of light; the other is in the dark of the cage.

I have also a second print, of the face alone in greater magnification. The glint in the right eye has become a diffuse white patch; shades of dark gray mark the temple, the right eyebrow, the hollow of the cheek.

I close my eyes and pass my fingertips over the cool, odorless surface of the print. Evenings are quiet here in the suburbs. I concentrate myself. Everywhere its surface is the same. The glint in the eye, which in a moment luckily never to arrive will through the camera look into my eyes, is bland and opaque under my fingers, yielding no passage into the interior of this obscure but indubitable man. I keep exploring. Under the persistent pressure of my imagination, acute and morbid in the night, it may yet yield.

(Coetzee [1974]1983: 16-17)

Dawn’s perception of the photograph manifests his failure to penetrate the Vietnamese culture. It begins with a certain promise for a connection. The viewer seems to adopt the prisoner’s point of view (“Dazzled by the sky, he sees as yet only the looming outlines of his spectators”), and the glint in the eye is a vital sign suggesting a possible encounter with the viewer’s eye. However, another blow-up of the picture leaves no hope for a connection between the viewer and his object except for an imaginative one. The photograph and its object shut themselves off to the senses – odourless, unyielding to touch, and too blurred to see through. The glint in the eye has become a diffuse patch, the eye encounter will never occur, as the blow-up enlargement of details stretches the surface within its boundaries, allowing no passage for the viewer’s gaze. Close-up vision – as Mieke Bal has noted – “far from closing the gap between the image and the focalizer’s subjectivity, has rather the effect of widening it” (Bal 1997: 202).⁵ For

4. In the words of the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* with regards to the barbarian girl he makes love to.

5. Following Bachelard, Bal suggests that in the domain of vision “there is a rift between minute detail and clarity” (Bal 1997: 6).

Roland Barthes, it is the definite “that-has-been” of the photograph (in *Dusklands*, the man in the picture is likewise “indubitable”) that originates the unfulfilled desire to break through its surface and reach for its object, feeling instead its depthless materiality.⁶ “I decompose, I enlarge, and, so to speak, I *retard*,” says Barthes, “in order to have time to *know* at last. The Photograph justifies this desire, even if it does not satisfy it” (Barthes 1981: 99; Barthes’s emphases). The encounter with the photograph involves an epistemological desire (“to *know* at last”) that also informs the encounter with the other (all the more, if he/she is the photograph’s object). The deferral of this desire in *Dusklands* is reflected in the endless regression of boundaries on both levels. The infinite enlargement of the photograph and its boundaries inward, as the regression-division inward of the “tiny I” of Jacobus’s/Zeno’s beetle, frustrates any attempt of intersubjectivity; the other’s subjectivity remains impassable. The finger that probes the beetle, like the finger that feels the photograph’s surface encounters mere exteriority, or more precisely, an interior that defends itself by becoming exterior.

3

The finger trying to pierce the picture’s surface, like the finger that forces itself into the beetle’s body, are both versions of the gun – the main actor in that early novel, where Coetzee explores the psyche and the rationale of the colonialist. Depending on another culture for his own definition, yet the cause of that culture’s destruction, he thus embodies the slave-master dialectics. However, as many readers have noted, it is the consciousness of the bystander, the intellectual or the enlightened person forced to become a witness that occupies Coetzee in his later novels. This is the role of Elizabeth Curren in Coetzee’s first novel about South Africa of the apartheid era, *Age of Iron*. This is how Curren reacts to a childhood photograph taken in the garden of her grandfather’s house. Noticing the burgeoning flowers and vegetables in the background of the picture, “blessing us with their profuse presence” (Coetzee 1990: 102), she now wonders:

But by whose love tended? Who clipped the hollyhocks? Who laid the melon-seeds in their warm, moist bed? Was it my grandfather who got up at four in the icy morning to open the sluice and lead water into the garden? If not he, then whose was the garden rightfully? Who are the ghosts and who are the presences? Who, outside the picture, leaning on their rakes, leaning on their spades, waiting to get back to work, lean also against the edge of the rectangle, bending it, bursting it in?

6. For a reading of the photography scenes in *Dusklands* using Barthes’s terms (especially Barthes’s *punctum*), see Castillo 1990: 1113-1115.

Dies irae, dies illa when the absent shall be present and the present absent. No longer does the picture show who were in the garden frame that day, but who were not. Lying all these years in places of safekeeping across the country, in albums, in desk drawers, this picture and thousands like it have subtly matured, metamorphosed. The fixing did not hold or the developing went further than one would ever have dreamed – who can know how it happened? – but they have become negative again, a new kind of negative in which we begin to see what used to lie outside the frame, occulted.

Is that why my brow is furrowed, is that why I struggle to reach the camera: do I obscurely know that the camera is the enemy, that the camera will not lie about us but uncover what we truly are: doll folk?

(Coetzee [1974]1983: 102-103)

As in *Summertime*, photography is connected to truth and has the power to expose the tromp-l'oeil existence of the whites in South Africa, the basic emptiness and blindness that looms within that existence, which has to do with time: both past and future. In *Summertime*, the photographic device used is the shutter, and in *Dusklands*, the blow-up. In *Age of Iron*, it is the negative. Technically, the negative is an object subjected to the chemical reaction of two mixes: the developer and the fixer. Symbolically, it stands for the opposite of ordinary sight: the white turns black, the absent becomes present. Curren reflects that the hidden layers and processes that were latent in the photograph and suppressed during the development process are bound to emerge were the negative to continue to develop without being fixed. Thus, the photograph has an apocalyptic quality directed to the future. The subject matter of the 13th Latin hymn, from which *Dies irae, dies illa* is quoted, is the last judgment and the *dies irae* (day of wrath) is the day when, according to the hymn, “whatever lay hidden will appear”.

The reference emphasises the hidden knowledge that lies in the negative with regard to the future, and this may be the future of the picture, the future of the story in which it is embedded and the future of the time *Age of Iron* was written – a few years before the end of apartheid. In addition to its apocalyptic power, the negative is also subversive; it is “a new kind of negative in which we begin to see what used to lie outside the frame, occulted” (p. 103). The viewer wonders “who, outside the picture, leaning on their rakes, leaning on their spades, waiting to get back to work, lean also against the edge of the rectangle, bending it, bursting it in” (p. 102). The force of the new negative lies not only in its capacity to uncover the photograph’s opposite, hidden side, but also in the way it bends the picture’s frame, breaks it and introduces whatever was excluded from it.

Consciously or unconsciously, here Coetzee seems to echo contemporary conceptions of the frame, of thinkers who discuss the frame as such (Derrida), or in the contexts of recent media, such as photography and cinema (Cavell, Deleuze, Peretz, Azoulay) – media which have challenged the assumption of closure involved in the framing process. The

philosophical context and reasoning of each of these conceptions is beyond the scope of this article; however, they all share the doubt of the capacity of the frame to enclose the work of art and its object and separate it from its surroundings. The surroundings can be its historical-political context, as Derrida's discussion of the *parergon* suggests ([1978]1987: 15-147), or what Gilles Deleuze calls "the Open", or the absolute outside: an active dimension of time and thought that "crosses" the field of vision and opens it to a broader field ([1983]1988: 17-18). This dimension of opening involves anxiety or a threat, which haunts the inside, as suggested by Eyal Peretz, who draws on the visual concepts of Derrida, Cavell, Deleuze and Lacan to formulate his own hypothesis of the cinematic frame:

[C]an we not say ... that this anxiety provoking opening, the outside of the frame that, as Cavell says, is implicitly present in the image, is therefore inscribed at the very heart of the frame, disturbing the inside, as something not present in it and thus strange and incomprehensible? We might thus describe the way in which the world's opening is strangely inscribed at the heart of the frame, I claim, as a ghostly and absent disturbance, or as an enigmatic haunting, of that which the frame *does not contain* The cinematic frame, I therefore suggest, would thus seem to simultaneously expose us to the anxiety of the world's opening inscribed in it, and to attempt to cover up and repress, defend against this opening and *reject it*, in its negotiations of the inside and the outside. It would thus seem that the cinematic frame becomes the locus of tension between the actual things present in it, the *content* of a slice of the world, and the very dimension of the world's opening that is *inscribed* in it as a ghostly enigma.

(Peretz 2008: 54)

Peretz analyses the cinematic frame, which constantly opens itself to subsequent frames. However, he implies that the cinematic frame foregrounds and reveals the double nature of the frame as such. It is not only the frame of a photograph which simultaneously maintains the continuous presence of the world from which it was torn *and* rejects it – other frames do this as well. The notion of "rejection" is inspired by Cavell, who differentiates a photograph which is "*of* the world" from a painting which *is* the world (Cavell 1971: 24). However, for Peretz, "rejection" "actually suggests the possibility of rethinking the similarities, rather than only the differences, between painting and film" (Peretz 2008: 180, n.6). Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari, in their discussion of the frame, suggest that the act of demarcation is the beginning of *any* work of art, which is always informed by the contradictory drives of closure and opening. The work of art, they maintain, contains "lines of flights" (*lignes de fuite*), and the process of framing involves deframing (*décadrage*), which connects what seems to be an

autonomous, self-contained compound to a wider field and to the universe.⁷ This wider Open, Peretz elucidates, is futurity as such – not an unreachable essence beyond, but an active uncertainty within; the presence of the outside in the inside is the presence of blindness and ignorance with regard to the future inherent in our temporal existence. It is the presence of the world as subjected to transformation. “What haunts our senses, what obstructs but also opens them, is the beyond that is the world’s openness to transformation” (Peretz 2008: 14).

The openness of the world to transformation, a ghostly presence of the outside inside, a sense of threat, a hidden layer that reveals the image’s past, yet contains the future as a disturbing uncertainty – all of these are implied in the “new kind of negative” envisioned by Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* (Coetzee 1990). However, these qualities are not part of the photograph itself. True, the viewer suggests that “lying all these years in places of safekeeping across the country, in albums, in desk drawers, this picture and thousands like it have subtly matured, metamorphosed” (pp. 102-103). But, in fact, the “maturing” of the photograph, the breakage of its frame, the emergence of the ghosts looming in it, and its apocalyptic transformation do not take place in drawers and albums, but in the interaction with a specific viewer. As Ariella Azoulay suggests (2010: 17-30), a photograph keeps waiting for the extra gaze, which will illuminate it and bring to light that which has escaped the initial look that created it. It is, in Azoulay’s words, the “civil” responsibility of the viewer, who is invited not to be satisfied with the given (or, in the terms of the photograph in *Age of Iron* – that which has been framed). Through the “civil gaze”, the viewer acknowledges the presence of the absent. In reconstructing the event depicted in photography, he/she responds to the uncontrolled, unintentional, mechanical dimension of photography, addressed by thinkers of photography such as Talbot, Benjamin, Barthes and Banfield.⁸ This dimension allows the photograph not to be sealed by its initiator – to remain “an unresolved encounter between people, which the photograph does not seal, but rather allows it to be present as an open event that summons others to participate in” (p. 219; my translation). Thus, the truth of the photograph cannot be

7. Deleuze and Guattari refer to the double nature of the frame in their *What Is Philosophy?* Deleuze elaborates on this dialectics in his discussion of the cinematic frame in the earlier *Cinema 1* ([1983]1988: 12-28).

8. Azoulay analyses the unintentional dimension of photography mostly in Talbot’s *The Pencil of Nature* (1844) and Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935). However, a similar approach can be traced in Benjamin’s notion of the “optical unconsciousness” in “A Short History of Photography” (1931); in Barthes’s *punctum* in *Camera Lucida* (1980), as well as in Ann Banfield’s linguistic analysis of the photographic stance (1990).

accessed by perforating its flat surface (this is the drive behind the blown-up detail) but rather by breaking outward through its frame toward that which has been excluded from it.

Moreover, In *Age of Iron*, as in *Dusklands*, the specific event of looking at the photograph reflects the way the issue of subjectivity and intersubjectivity is treated in the entire novel, and marks another phase in Coetzee's continuous exploration of otherness and its various manifestations. The day Elizabeth Curren learns of her fatal illness and encounters the unimaginable future of her death in a country gripped by uncertainty, is the day she encounters the unsummoned other – the homeless Vercueil. This man is also described as the kind of person who escapes the frame of the photograph: “disappearing over the edge of the picture, leaving behind in the shutter-trap an arm or leg or the back of a head” (p. 177). In the spirit of Levinas, Blanchot, and drawing on Derrida's notion of the *arrivant*, Derek Attridge conceives the encounter with Vercueil as “a kind of heightened staging of the very issue of otherness” (2004: 103). Accepting “without calculation, without forethought” the responsibility “to and for the other may indeed be to trust the other, since this is to put the relationship to the other under the rubric of the future” (pp. 103-104). This kind of trust and future, Attridge clarifies is equal to total uncertainty.⁹ This is how Curren describes her feelings for the stranger, to whom she entrusts the letter to her daughter, the man whose embrace, from which “there was no warmth to be had” (p. 181), ends her life and the story:

I give my life to Vercueil to carry over. I trust Vercueil because I do not trust Vercueil.

I love him because I do not love him. Because he is the weak reed I lean upon him.

(Coetzee 1990 130)

To this, Attridge responds: “There is only one trust that deserves the name: trust in the other” (2004: 98). Indeed, only when Curren accepts the unpredictability of the other, the fragility of their connection, and the way he embodies uncertainty and a future which is totally open, only then does she exhaust her connection to him, which paves the way to accepting the otherness of her own death. In terms of the self, this is a stance opposite to that of Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands*, where the other can only be experienced through rejection: the horror in the boundless expansion of the self emphasises the dependence on the other, yet demands, paradoxically, the other's extinction. On the other hand, in order to defend oneself against him, an endless constriction is needed – a boundless regression of boundaries. In each of these forms of existence – expansion and constriction – the self is

9. Cf. Marais's reading of *Age of Iron* and *Slow Man*, inspired by Levinas and Derrida's notion of hospitality.

not structured to contain the other, and the other, in his turn, recoils at any touch. The photograph of the Vietnamese prisoner illustrates this dynamic: the more the viewer expands the object on view and stretches from within the picture's boundaries in the attempt to reach him, the more inaccessible the other becomes. He remains an impassable exterior and practically disappears from view. In opposition to this metaphoric use of the magnifying device in *Dusklands*, is the metaphor of the negative in *Age of Iron*. The special gaze of the viewer of this text's photograph allows it to keep developing. The viewer thus brings to light the ghostly presence of the others by deframing the frame and letting them in, in a gesture that encapsulates the process she undergoes throughout this novel.

4

The “new kind of negative”, suggested by Coetzee in *Age of Iron*, which matures in time and retains its openness to the transformative forces of the past and the future, does not remain hypothetical. In a later novel, *Slow Man* (2005), Coetzee responds to recent technological innovations, and this option becomes reality. *Slow Man*'s protagonist, the photographer Paul Rayment, has his leg amputated after a bicycle accident and consequently meets Marijana, a Croatian nurse with whom he falls in love. Paul takes responsibility for Marijana's 16-year-old son, Drago, allows him to live in his house, and even shows him his collection of rare photographs from the early days of white settlement in Australia, where the story takes place. However, Paul's attempt at custodianship runs aground when he learns that the boy, adept at the use of technological devices with the skills of every child of his generation, takes one of his original photographs and replaces it with a copy. In the copy, the faces of his relatives – both dead and alive – are grafted into the figures of Irish miners whose picture was taken by a nineteenth-century Australian photographer. Moreover, the appalled Paul discovers that Drago uploaded the doctored pictures to his web page.

As in *Dusklands*, and unlike *Age of Iron*, the viewer of the original picture does not participate in the event of the taking of the photograph, yet the device of photomontage allows him to participate in it, or to allow his relatives do so. No latent truth is being revealed here, as was the case in the empathetic viewing of *Age of Iron*, but rather an alternative truth¹⁰ – another way of looking at new and long-time immigrants in the history of the country and its official citizens. This truth needs no maturing during which the past is transformed, and in the process of such maturing reveals the openness of the future. In this photo of the digital age, past and future, the events of taking the photograph *and* of viewing it coexist simultaneously

10. Cf. Wicomb 2009: 10-11.

and at the same level. In *Dusklands*, no encounter is possible between the viewer of the photograph and its object, and eventually the object disappears from view. In *Age of Iron*, a whole life had passed, so that only at death's threshold does the viewer acknowledge the presence of those who were present at the time the photograph was taken. In *Slow Man*, on the other hand, the active viewer is free to decide at any given moment who is to be present in the photograph and who is to be removed, and what kind of encounters will take place in it. The moment of viewing is the moment of the picture's recreation. The frame of the photographs, entirely hermetic in *Dusklands*, is shattered in *Age of Iron*, while in *Slow Man* it is wide open to the boundless alternatives lying in the past, the present and the future.

However, the story of the photograph and Drago's prank is only one of several foci in this story. Like the other novels addressed here, it weaves the photographic theme into a complex net of aesthetical and existential issues. I will begin with the aesthetic issue of storytelling. Its analogy to photography is strongly implied in Paul's reference to himself as a photographer of the old school:

He tends to trust pictures more than he trusts words. Not because pictures cannot lie but because, once they leave the darkroom, they are fixed, immutable. Whereas stories – the story of the needle in the bloodstream, for instance, or the story of how he and Wayne Blight came to meet on Magill Road – seem to change shape all the time.

The camera, with its power of taking in light and turning it into substance, has always seemed to him more a metaphysical than a mechanical device. His first real job was always in darkroom work. As the ghostly image emerged beneath the surface of the liquid, as veins of darkness on the paper began to knit together and grow visible, he would sometimes experience a little shiver of ecstasy, as though he were present at the day of creation.

That was why, later on, he began to lose interest in photography: first when colour took over, then when it became plain that the old magic of light-sensitive emulsions was waning, that to the rising generation the enchantment lay in a *techne* of images without substance, images that could flash through the ether without residing anywhere, that could be sucked into a machine and emerge from it doctored, untrue. He gave up recording the world in photographs then, and transferred his energies to saving the past.

(Coetzee 2005: 65-66)

The text draws a dual opposition: between old photography (fixed, exposing the given) and digital photography (unfixed, placeless, recreated) and between the old, fixed photography and the ever-changing story. These oppositions suggest the similarity between digital photography and storytelling: both are liable to change once they are created. The analogy is empowered by the plot that suddenly erupts in chapter 13, when Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist of Coetzee's earlier novel, appears at Paul's apartment and enters his life. At once, Costello's dramatic entrance transforms

the story from a realistic one into a metafictional fantasy in which Costello recites to Paul the words “the blow catches him from the right, sharp and surprising and painful ...” (p. 81) – the lines that open the very story we read. Later, Paul discovers that Costello has a pre-knowledge of all his actions – both internal and external – and becomes aware of his external boundaries and of his ephemeral existence in a bigger story still unknown to him. He expresses this awareness after the literal blind date with the blind Marianna, arranged by Costello with the hope of curing Paul from his hopeless love for the nurse Marijana:

[W]ere their two encounters, the first in the lift, the second on the sofa, episodes in the life-story not of Paul Rayment but of Marianna Popova? Of course there is a sense in which he is a passing character in the life of this Marianna or of anyone else whose path he crosses, just as Marianna and everyone else are passing characters in his. But is he a passing character in a more fundamental sense too: someone on whom the light falls all too briefly before it passes on?

(Coetzee 2005: 118)

In being a story, Paul realises, one is liable to be a minor, ephemeral figure: a short exposure to light before he “passes on”. The similarity to the passing, changeable images of the digital era is striking. In both domains – in (digital) photography and storytelling – temporariness and changeability rule; in both there is openness to the future and changeability of the past, as the exchange of the Irish-Australian miners and the Croatian immigrants has aptly shown.

The correlation between the metafictional plot of the novel and the photographic one, especially in terms of temporality, is amplified by the allusion to Don Quixote, drawn when Costello suggests that she and Paul would launch a journey in which she would be Sancho Panza. Don Quixote is the paradigm of a novel that combines realism and metafictionality. Among other metafictional devices is the narrator’s sudden entrance into his own story when he loses the thread of his narrative and finds it scribbled in Arabic in notebooks found in the marketplace in Toledo. As Robert Alter has shown in his excellent reading of the novel (1978: 1-29), Cervantes’s book is tightly connected to the revolution of printing, which vulgarised the book and turned the whole world into an audience of readers and writers. *Slow Man*, on the other hand, was written by a writer whose career is contemporaneous with a revolution comparable to the revolution of printing. Indeed, photomontage is not an invention of the digital age, yet it was digital photography which made photomontage accessible to everyone and allowed for distribution of pictures into which viewers can insert pictures of themselves and their families. Walter Benjamin’s lamentation about the loss of the halo in the age of mechanical reproduction – suggests Azoulay

(2006)¹¹ – might be at the same time a celebration of the freedom it allowed. The photograph holds the opportunity for every viewer to take part in its recreation in every act of viewing, since the meaning of the photograph is never fixed. The digital photomontage, one may add, enlarges this freedom by allowing the viewer to enter the photographic situation and change it from within. This offers more than the photograph's superimposition of present and past, as suggested by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. It is the enforcement of the present of viewing onto the past of the photographic situation.

Another version of this temporal infringement, involved in the viewer's freedom to become the object of the photograph *as well as* its creator, is manifested in the narrator-character relationship. The story of the narrator who steps into her character's house and life and helplessly watches the character's independent actions can be interpreted as a parodic fable of the age of real-time stories. In this age, every effort is made to minimise the gap between storytelling and the event. The story may be recreated at any given moment, while its narrator is the last to know where it is heading. Thus, it may be compared to the digital photograph that has its boundaries broken: the past it records is the present of its creation.

However, one should not conclude from this analogy that *Slow Man* is merely a metafictional meditation fortified by the analogy to photography. The connection between fiction and photography goes deeper, as these two domains are connected to the story's main theme, thus making this book a profound reflection on the topics and their ethical resonance that occupy Coetzee throughout his work. This is the theme that arises from the plot of Paul's encounter with Wayne Blight, the young driver who threw him off his bicycle. This is, in fact, the plot of Paul's encounter with his possible death, beginning at the moment he flew into the air and – as he later confesses – came to consider the worthlessness of his life. More than an encounter, it is an invasion. As in *Age of Iron*, where Elizabeth Curren discovers the cancer in her body, death becomes a presence in life rather than outside it. This shift in the boundaries between life and death is tightly connected to the shift in the story's boundaries and Elizabeth Costello's invasion into Paul's life. In fact, the link between the existential and the metafictional level, and the link between the encounter with death and the encounter with Elizabeth Costello, is explicitly stated in the text, in the scene where Paul traces his own existence in the writer's notes. He realises that he is not "his own master" as he thought he was, since Costello, "the infernal woman", records his every move. This makes him reflect in horror:

Is this what it is like to be translated to what at present he can only call *the other side*? Is that what has happened to him; is that what happens to everyone?

11. Throughout the book, and especially on page 116.

.... The greatest of all secrets may just have unveiled itself to him. There is a second world that exists side by side with the first, unsuspected. One chugs along in the first for a certain length of time, then the angel of death arrives in the person of Wayne Blight or someone like him. For an instant, for an aeon, time stops; one tumbles down a dark hole. Then, hey presto, one emerges into a second world, *incidental with the first*, where time resumes and the action proceeds – flying through the air like a cat, the throng of curious onlookers, the ambulance, the hospital, Dr Hansen, et cetera – except that one now has Elizabeth Costello around one’s neck, or someone like her.

(Coetzee 2005: 122)

Is it just an amateur’s attempt at the fantasy known as parallel universe, which one enters through a black hole, in a kind of second birth? Indeed, Costello alludes to birth when she urges Paul to supply her with materials for her story; “‘Push!’ she urges”, which is “what you say to a woman in labour ... ‘Push the mortal envelope’ ...” (p. 83). Paul’s hypothesis of a second birth into a parallel universe is raised amusingly in a tone compatible with the option of a comic reading that the story suggests, especially from the perspective of Elizabeth Costello, who sees the loss of a leg as a comic, rather than a tragic, matter. However, amusement, as Cervantes, Fielding and Stern showed in their comic masterpieces, is part of the metafictional experiment, and does not lessen its power in rendering the very essence of storytelling and its relation to living in time. Indeed, Paul suggests, his parallel existence is his existence as a story with an external narrator. Paul is born into the story, through which he becomes acquainted with his outer boundaries and with himself as an ephemeral character, who, like the passing images of digital photography, passes through other lives. By realising his existence as story in Elizabeth Costello’s book, he confronts his death, into which he is “born”. This is the “other side” of his existence – the otherness of his death, which, at the same time, is the otherness of himself as a story.

The otherness of the self within a story is not a new topic for Coetzee and has strong political implications.¹² However, even outside the postcolonial context, in which the other is deprived of the tools for telling his/her story, the story is conceived as a threat. One aspect of this threat is that the story makes one subject to the external agency of language and narrative structure. This aspect is implied in Paul’s experience of being “hollow at the core” (p. 198), which has to do with his use of English, as an immigrant. He thus becomes one of several Coetzeeian characters who experience inner hollowness or false interiority. Those characters are situated on all sides of

12. The refusal to be narrated is central in *Life & Times of Michael K*, where Michael’s silence, as well as his refusal to eat, are ways in which he refuses the “life sentence” (Dovey 1988: 305) of the story (*and* of history), imposed by the oppressor or by the empathetic bystander.

the political structure, and their experience is connected to their very use of language (a feature that inspired the Lacanian reading of Coetzee).¹³

The predetermined structure of narrative and the foreignness of language anticipate, as it were, the external, impersonal and contingent dimension of death.¹⁴ Indeed, the second threat of narrative lies in its embodiment of living in time, within change and toward death. In terms of *Slow Man*: once the story is out of the dark room (or once Paul's narrative self is born from the black hole into a new world), it is liable to change. Even its post-factum creator, Elizabeth Costello, has to face the unpredictability of the story and its uncooperative character. Thus, the story not only tells of life in time but also epitomises the essence of time as constant change. The movement between the two forms of narrative – its containment within an omniscient, external consciousness and its openness to change from within – is embodied in the character of Elizabeth Costello. She is the “omniscient” narrator who traverses the boundaries of the story and becomes subjected to the same uncertainty to which her characters are subject.

In accordance with this double nature of storytelling, two versions of living in time are presented in the novel. One – suggested by Paul, who dreads the impermanence of the digital age – is of time as a cumulative, overwhelming mass, manifested in his physical surroundings. When Drago wonders at Paul's insistence on living in his old flat, with the same old, dark furniture it had when he bought it, Paul answers:

I'll give you an honest answer, Drago, but not at the cost of being laughed at. I have been overtaken by time, by history. This flat, and everything in it, has been overtaken by time. There is nothing strange in that – in being overtaken by time. It will happen to you too, if you live long enough.

(Coetzee 2005: 179)

The concept of time as static, cumulative and overtaking mass, correlates with the static quality of the external narrator, who has control of his/her characters, keeps hold of the story from beginning to end and creates a preordained story aspiring to a purpose. This sense of time can explain Paul's unconscious desire for an external author, suggested by Costello, who insists that *he* searched for her. However, it is Costello who brings up another understanding of time, which one obtains by becoming a parent and

13. Such as in Dovey's study. David Attwell (2010), on the other hand, interprets Paul's “estrangement” in terms of the historical context in which this novel – as well as Coetzee's oeuvre and life in general – is situated.

14. The connection of narrative to death, and especially narrative as language, history and society have dictated it, is suggested by Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero*: “The Novel is a death; it transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an oriented and meaningful time” (Barthes 1967: 39).

encountering the otherness of one's child, as experienced by Paul in his attempt at “parenting” Drago. Parenthood, says Costello – even if it is acquired – is a lesson in love and service. Through our children, she adds, we become “the servants of time” (p. 182), doubting Paul's aptness for this mission. Costello's lecturing – annoying and self-righteous as it may sound to Paul – is a meaningful statement on time as futurity, time as change and openness to transformation that no frame can hold – an awareness one acquires through the labour of love called parenthood.¹⁵

One may be overtaken by time, or be its servant. Time may be experienced as a static mass accumulating in space and inhibiting change or it may be experienced as submission to a dynamic uncertainty brought on by the encounter with the other who personifies futurity – that is, the child. These are the possibilities that build the progression in *Slow Man*'s narrative conception. The narrative first seems to be a sealed story, contained by an omniscient narrator, who is aware of the character's moves and fate. It becomes an ever-changing, open story, whose drift is unknown even to its author. This shift is manifested in the two options of photography that the novel presents: the old one, whose development fixates the image that was coded into it, and the new, digital one, in which figures are liable to change, and are transient and unreal: a sealed frame which fixates a finished situation versus an elastic frame that allows the alternatives beyond the time space of the situation to be realised within it.

5

Thus, the concept of frame, or boundaries, combines the three dimensions of *Slow Man* discussed here: the theme of photography (the frame of the picture), the existential level (the boundaries of life and death), and the metafictional one (the boundaries of the story). “Meta” denotes “beyond”. Metafictionality – which goes back to the birth of the novel, yet has acquired a special place in postmodern fiction – imports the beyond into the story and its immanency, without it losing its “beyond” status in the process. The inherent tension of a beyond that lies within is central in contemporary thinking, which – as Eyal Peretz suggests – has not given up, as it seems, on the beyond, but rather rethinks it:

15. Cf. Levinas's conception of the child as futurity in his chapter on fecundity (Levinas 1991: 267-269).

The new alternative of contemporary thinking defines a beyond which is different than the Platonic beyond, one which is not a separate realm of substances but is immanent to the world, a beyond internal to the world's very constitution, a beyond that is *part* of the very being of the world as an openness to transformation.

(Peretz 2008: 14; emphasis in original)

Peretz finds similarities between different concepts, such as Lacan's gaze, Deleuze's time image and Levinas's "face". In all of these concepts, he traces the presence of the beyond within the inner scope of the frame or the field of vision. It is an element of otherness that disturbs and disrupts the homogeneity of the field that the subject considered as subjected to, as well as contained by, him/her. The horror it stimulates results from the fact that it is not a separate domain with its own substance, a future outside of the present, but rather futurity – the very openness of the world to transformation within the image of the present. This is, in fact, the future that the South African men deny – in the paragraph quoted from *Summertime* – when they blindly speak of the future in terms of the tranquil present they live in, creating a "fake tromp-l'oeil future". This is the future that only "the new kind of negative" in *Age of Iron* is able to reveal and make room for. In both cases, the denial of the future, its otherness and its challenge to the present's certainties and homogeneity involve falseness and hollowness inside one's being: "falseness at their core" in *Summertime*, or being "doll-folk" in *Age of Iron*.

I began this article with the connection of photography to truth and falsity expressed by the shutter image. The photograph reveals the truth, validates it, yet – as digital photography has made clear – is also capable of producing an alternative truth. This quality is connected to other features of photography, such as its special frame, which offers a gesture toward the invisible parts of the photographic situation, beyond the photographer's control and the participants' awareness – the parts that the viewer is summoned to reconstruct (or even recreate). This expansion of the picture's frame (inward, outward, toward other time dimensions, toward other options of the event) reflects the issue of boundaries in other dimensions of Coetzee's world. The most prominent of these is the boundary between self and other, in the many senses with which Coetzee has endowed it. The opening (or unopening) of the picture to what lies outside it is its opening (or its unopening) to the time space of the other within it. Returning to the expansion-constriction axis, one might discern a progression from an expansion, which, in fact, is a constriction – the narcissistic extension of the self's boundaries outward or inward (represented by the blow-up device in *Dusklands*) – to the expansion beyond the boundaries of the self towards the other (as represented by the "new kind of negative" in *Age of Iron*) and finally to the blurring of boundaries and interchangeability of self and other (represented by the digital photomontage in *Slow Man*).

This current of opening is explored by Coetzee throughout his work, and has to do with the other boundaries I discussed here: the boundaries of fiction which Coetzee, in the spirit of the metafictional tradition, keeps disturbing and breaking. Note that the connection between the boundaries of a story and the boundaries of subjectivity is bound up with the act of storytelling, which allows for a unique encounter of consciousnesses. In terms of the object of the narrative, presence within a story is containment in another consciousness and becoming aware of one's outer boundaries. In terms of the consciousness behind the story, the story form allows for a unique opportunity to enter the inner boundaries of another consciousness. This is an opportunity which Coetzee thoroughly explores in the novel he devoted to Elizabeth Costello. In the postscript to *Elizabeth Costello*, a letter by the fictional Lady Chandos (Coetzee's variation on Hugo von Hofmannsthal's modernist manifesto), the writer, a similitude of Costello, addresses the hardship in the existence “where we interpenetrate and are interpenetrated by fellow creatures by the thousands” (Coetzee 2003: 229). In my view, she thus expresses the drastic solution to the dilemma that Coetzee has been preoccupied with since his first novel: how to give room and voice to the other (in life *and* in fiction), without reproducing the gun's invasiveness.¹⁶ However, the solution of a self disarmed of defence mechanisms with boundaries wide open (a “revelation”, as Coetzee and Hofmannsthal call it), is as excruciating as any other.

The nexus between various boundaries – of subjectivity, photography, and fiction – is a potential nexus of theoretical fields. The issue of boundaries is addressed by psychoanalysis, with its exploration of the self's borders and possible elasticity: a self which either contains the other in different ways (Kohut, Mitchell, Loewlad) or withdraws from his/her boundaries in the form of a false, empty or tiny I (Winnicott, Laing). The potential contribution of these thinkers to the understanding of Coetzee could be a subject for future research. Another angle from which to discuss this issue is the ethical one, such as Levinas's view of the other's face as disrupting the self-contained, closed-off tranquility of the I, opening it to infinity. Scholars such as Derek Attridge and Michael Marais have thoroughly and systematically considered Coetzee's work in Levinas's terms. The concept of the frame and its various meanings – literal, metaphorical, drawn from the visual arts or from literature and enriched by contemporary thinking – links these psychological and ethical dimensions of boundaries to the act of demarcation that underlies any work of art and its inherent tensions.

16. For a good formulation of this dilemma and possible solution, see Durrant (2004), throughout the book.

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