

# (Dis)placed: Place and Identity in the Film *Disgrace*

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Lucy: This place being what it is.

Lurie: This place being what?

Lucy: This place being South Africa.

## South Africa and (trans)nationalism

I first saw *Disgrace* (2008, Steve Jacobs) in the same week that I had the opportunity to watch two other films with South African settings: *District 9* (2009), Neill Blomkamp's Afro-futurist blockbuster, and *Shirley Adams* (2009), Oliver Hermanus's precocious low-budget attempt to bring a new aesthetic and narrative sensibility to South African film. *Disgrace*, perhaps unfortunately, found itself on South African screens at the moment that *District 9* crash-landed on the global box office. While *District 9* lit up discussion boards on the Internet and sparked, at times, heated debate amongst critics all over the world, *Disgrace* met with muted discussion and an international box office equating to only 1% of *District 9*'s.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, seeing three new 'South African' films in one week is something of a rarity, and my initial reaction concerned what I perceived to be a new transnationalism in South African film.

Taken together, the three films presented an optimistic view of South Africa's screen potential, ranging from a small, independent art-house film through a star-lead literary adaptation to a full-blown, big-budget sci-fi action film.

<sup>1</sup> *District 9* raked in over \$210 million internationally from a \$30 million budget, while *Disgrace* cost approximately \$10 million and earned back just over \$2 million at the box office. Of interest is that 55% of *District 9*'s take came from the US with 45% from the rest of the world, while *Disgrace* earned 97% of its money from the rest of the world and only 3% from the US. The Australian box office for *Disgrace* was almost the same as that of the US. This speaks to (a) the significance of a good performance in the US, and (b) the promotion of 'local' film in territories outside of the US (in this case Australia). All figures from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com>

South African cinema appeared to have entered a new transnational phase.

South African stories are inextricably bound into a complex of fractured, volatile identity, a conflicted sense of local and global audiences, and uncertainty over how to represent contemporary realities while bearing the country's apartheid and colonial past in mind. As these stories increasingly played out on a global stage after the end of apartheid – from Oprah Winfrey's selection of Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* for her rejuvenated Book Club<sup>2</sup> to Oscar night recognition for *Yesterday* (2004, Darrell Roodt), *Tsotsi* (2005, Gavin Hood), *District 9* and *Invictus* (2009, Clint Eastwood)<sup>3</sup> – transnationalism seemed to be the most useful context within which to address our discarded 'nationalist' past and the outmoded Rainbow Nationhood of the mid-1990s.

None of this prepared me, however, for the comments I discovered when I returned to *Disgrace* and its critical reception. "Despite the South African background and setting," declared Wade Major, "*Disgrace* is an unmistakably Australian film."<sup>4</sup> Major's qualifying comment that since Coetzee's immigration to Australia he has become "more an Australian icon than a South African one" is the first step in a rickety rope-bridge that joins Coetzee's critical writing and origins as a writer in South Africa to the peculiarly Australian character of the film adaptation's aesthetics and narrative. Major completes the journey thus:

No surprise, then, that his literary voice should meld so seamlessly with the kind of blunt and unsentimental truth-telling that has defined Australia's unique brand of poetic realism since it first emerged during the Australian New Wave of the 70s and 80s. While neither Jacobs nor his wife, screenwriter Anna Maria Monticelli, are necessarily New Wave figures, both came of age during the era and, like fellow Aussie Ray Lawrence, remain firmly entrenched in its stylistic and thematic conceits.

The dizzying conflation of Coetzee the novelist with a perceived mode of Australian cinematic poetic realism (a far remove from Coetzee's style ideologically), and to which the writer and

- 2 See Rita Barnard's excellent essay 'Oprah's Paton, or South Africa and the Globalisation of Suffering,' in *Print, Text and Book Cultures in South Africa*, edited by Andrew van der Vliet. Johannesburg: Wits University Press (2012), 140-163.
- 3 *Yesterday* was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film in 2005, *Tsotsi* won for Best Foreign Language Film in 2006 and in 2010 *District 9* was nominated for four awards (including Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay) while *Invictus* was nominated for two acting awards.
- 4 Major, Wade. *Disgrace* [review], *Box Office*, (18 September 2009) <http://boxoffice.com/reviews/theatrical/2009-09-disgrace>

director might not actually belong, culminates triumphantly in the assertion of “stylistic and thematic conceits” which are never explained.

In more sober terms, David O’Connell notes: “Evoking the contrast, the neglected divide between black and white, Coetzee’s more meaningful political and social metaphors have survived the transition to screen well and this compelling Australian film, co-produced with South African interests, is another strong entry into the list of this year’s local output.”<sup>5</sup>

Both Major and O’Connell are commenting from the perspective of the film trade and in this context *Disgrace* is most certainly Australian. However, for Major to describe the film – set and shot in South Africa<sup>6</sup> with a specifically South African subject matter – as “unmistakably Australian” seems absurd. I will argue that Major and O’Connell are in fact correct, but in ways that they do not perhaps intend.

Before looking at the film adaptation of *Disgrace* (written by Anna Maria Monticelli and directed by Steve Jacobs), I want to discuss two elements of Coetzee’s writing which impact on the adaptation itself as well as the ways in which one might interpret it. Firstly, I want to consider briefly Coetzee’s own relationship to the film medium, and secondly the more complex relationship between landscape, visualisation and national identity.

### J.M. Coetzee on film

Current research into the relationship between Coetzee, his novels, and the medium of film is illuminating what has been a tantalising but scarcely explored critical engagement.<sup>7</sup> In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee delivers an interesting reply that supplements Attwell’s complex inquiry into the “tension between [Coetzee’s] respect for the linguistic-structural conditions of fiction, and the existential-historical dramas being played out within them”. The more “fundamental influence” on *In the Heart of the Country*, notes Coetzee directly, is “film and/or photography”, whereafter he disparages *Dust* (Marion Hänsel’s 1985 adaptation of the novel) and argues for the value of the voiceover in film.<sup>8</sup> In their critique of *Dust*, Dovey and Dovey remark that “The physical setting is wrong, although this was not entirely the fault of Hänsel: sanctions against South

5 O’Connell, David. *Disgrace* [review], In *Film* (Australia) (27 June, 2009) <http://www.infilm.com.au/?p=1017>

6 Certain interior scenes in the early sections were shot in Sydney.

7 Dovey, Lindiwe and Teresa Dovey. ‘Coetzee on Film,’ in *J.M. Coetzee’s Austerities*, edited by Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill. Surrey: Ashgate (2010), 57-78.

8 Coetzee, J.M. ‘Interview,’ in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1992), 59-60.

9 Dovey and Dovey, 'Coetzee on Film,' 61.

10 Coetzee, J.M. 'Arthur Miller, *The Misfits*,' in *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000–2005*. London: Harvill Secker (2007), 222.

11 Coetzee, J.M. 'The Burden of Consciousness in Africa,' in *Doubling the Point*, 115–120.

Africa by European countries led to the film being shot in Spain, and the landscape, architecture and furnishings of the house are unplaceable, but are quite obviously not that of a farm in the Karoo.<sup>9</sup> As is the case with the film of *Disgrace*, economic and political factors have pronounced effects on the production of films, but what interests me here is the Doveys' notion of '(un)placeability'. In their formulation, unplaceability is acceptable insofar as it carries no connotations of the locations used (the film does not look like it was shot in Spain), but is unacceptable because the narrative requires a strong sense of place, even if that place is subjected to reflexive critique by Coetzee in the novel. Placeability, as I will show, is central to the debate over the film adaptation of *Disgrace* as well.

In his more recent essay 'Arthur Miller, *The Misfits*', Coetzee emphasises the art of the screenplay and its literary nature (Miller "operating at the tail end of a long literary tradition of reflecting on the closing of America's western frontier"<sup>10</sup>) and appears more interested in the processes of the film's production (Monroe's psychological implosion, her relationship with Miller, the filming of the mustangs) than he is about film qua film. The result is a curiously isolated piece of criticism with no sense of what brings him to write about *The Misfits* (1961, John Huston) in the first place, and of what film as a medium might mean for him so many years after his earlier musings.

By contrast, the most interesting piece of film criticism by Coetzee is an essay on Ross Devenish's film *The Guest* (1977), which merges Coetzee's deep knowledge and understanding of South Africa's literary culture with his curiosity about film.<sup>11</sup> The film examines an episode in the turbulent life of Afrikaans poet Eugene Marais in which he attempted to overcome a drug habit on an isolated highveld farm. Not happy just to 'review' the film, Coetzee makes recourse to the screenplay in its written form in this dense analysis that interlaces the screenplay as literary (and pre-production) text with pro-filmic performance of the actors and the post-production elements of voice-over, editing and writing on the screen.

Marais speaks: "Stop the car." "Why?" "I want to say grace." While Visser watches, Marais walks into the tall grass, struggles up a ridge, and vanishes slowly down the

other side. Africa swallows him up. Over the scene we hear Marais (Athol Fugard) reciting a verse; a subtitle tells us it is Marais's "Lied van Suid-Afrika". Visser looks on. The screenplay says: "His face expresses for us in these final moments our sense of the enigma of Eugène Marais." The poem comes to an end. We see only the empty veld. Text on screen: "Ten years later, on the farm Pelindaba in the Pretoria district of the Transvaal, Eugène Marais, suffering acutely again from withdrawal symptoms, shot himself."<sup>12</sup>

12 *ibid.*, 116.

This double interpretation leads to a conclusion where Coetzee schools both Devenish the director and Fugard the actor/writer: "On its own terms, are there not ways in which *The Guest* could have been made into a better film? Are there ways, for example, of preventing the falling-off of interest and tension in the film as Marais begins to recover?"<sup>13</sup> Coetzee critiques not just film as the final artistic product but also the *process* of its production. His curiosity about the filmic visualisation of literature is evident in the form of *In the Heart of the Country* – an explicit experiment in visual storytelling that is strongly influenced by avant-garde film – despite his declaration that it "is not a novel on the model of a screenplay".<sup>14</sup>

13 *ibid.*, 120.

Coetzee has also written two screen adaptations of his own work: *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, both of which have experienced faltering, unsatisfactory developments from page to screen.<sup>15</sup> Overall (and this includes *Disgrace*) Coetzee's novels have not been successfully adapted to the screen or, at least, adapted in a way that takes his own views on film and writing into account. That said, it is arguable whether his own adaptations would ever have been successful as films because he certainly was not going to direct them himself. In Coetzee's chiding of Devenish and criticism of Hänsel, I see a rather spare understanding of the director's art (or role) in the creative process, and in his writing on film, he does not appear to consider a fully experimental approach to his work: Godard and Chris Marker are about as alternative as he gets.

14 Coetzee, 'Interview,' 59.

15 See Kannemeyer, J.C. *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball (2012), 312-319. *Waiting for the Barbarians* has come close to being filmed on several occasions. In 2014, UCT Press is publishing two screenplays Coetzee adapted from his own novels (edited and with an introductory essay by Hermann Wittenberg) drawn from the extensive Coetzee Collection at the Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas (Austin).

With more archival research being undertaken currently on Coetzee's film collaborations and his thoughts about films, a fuller picture of his understanding of film as well as the influence of film on his writing will emerge. What one can

see is that Coetzee is a writer interested in the medium of film in terms of both the adaptation of literary texts into film, and as an influence on his own writing. However, his novels prove difficult to adapt to the screen, either because his own efforts at collaboration falter, or because the eventual conditions of production marginalise his own involvement to the point where his approval is sought only at the level of script.

### Landscape: representation and 'envisioning'

In her essay 'Reponses to Space and Spaces of Response in J.M. Coetzee', Carrol Clarkson discusses "the ways in which language, rather than landscape, draws the limit between notions of 'native' and 'foreign'" in Coetzee's work.<sup>16</sup> It is the way in which land is understood, interpreted and communicated through language and artistic convention that produces landscape, and it is the predominantly colonial (and vexed) construction of South African landscape that not only forms the basis of Coetzee's seminal critical work, *White Writing*, but also informs many of his novels. Even in *Waiting for the Barbarians* – a novel set in an unnamed land – Coetzee's construction of place has South Africa's problematic tradition of landscape in mind:

[W]hat is described in *Barbarians* is a landscape I have never seen ... So the landscape of *Barbarians* represented a challenge to my power of envisioning, while the Karoo threatened only the tedium of reproduction, reproduction of a phraseology in which the Karoo has been done to death in a century of writing and overwriting.<sup>17</sup>

While Coetzee is drawn to the dry and 'inhospitable' interior of South Africa in narratives such as *The Life and Times of Michael K*, *In the Heart of the Country* and *Disgrace*, these environments are never simply settings – aesthetic contexts for action. Coetzee's landscapes connote control over the land through naming, representation and narration; they are indissoluble from the characters' histories and emplacement in society. *Disgrace* draws together themes that run through Coetzee's previous novels: the migration between the metropole and rural areas, the violence in, and of, these desert regions,

<sup>16</sup> Clarkson, Carrol. 'Reponses to Space and Spaces of Response in J.M. Coetzee,' *J.M. Coetzee's Austerities*, edited by Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill. Surrey: Ashgate (2010), 44.

<sup>17</sup> Coetzee, 'Interview,' 142.

the dynamics of race and gender in the contest over land and landscape, territory and place.

In his 1990 essay 'Censorship in Africa', Coetzee investigates the philosophical and psychological elements underpinning the legal language of censorship under apartheid. Through a series of displacements, he argues, the detached censor is able to rationalise offence, thus masking the true paranoia of the state. "Reason cannot explain paranoia to itself," Coetzee concludes. "In paranoia, reason meets its match."<sup>18</sup> Drawing on a Freudian understanding of paranoia as (in part), "a general detachment of libido from the world", Coetzee describes the malaise of white South Africa at the end of apartheid:

The form that this general detachment of libido from the world has taken in the psychohistory of the white South African in the twentieth century has been an inability to imagine a future for himself, a relinquishing of an imaginative grasp of his future; it manifests itself in an end-of-the-world phantasy whose expression in political discourse has been in a phantasy of a 'total onslaught' of hostile powers against the South African state, an onslaught in which no means go unused, even the most unsuspected.<sup>19</sup>

In the novel *Disgrace*, published five years after the first democratic elections, one can see in David Lurie such an "inability to imagine a future for himself", at least under the conditions in which he finds himself professionally (as a teacher), creatively (as a writer), psychologically (as a husband and father) and politically (as a white male). In the wake of the attack Lurie has "a taste of what it will be like to be an old man, tired to the bone, without hopes, without desires, indifferent to the future ... [H]e feels his interest in the world draining from him drop by drop. It may take weeks, it may take months before he is bled dry, but he is bleeding."<sup>20</sup> Does this enervation, this desiccation into a "fly-casing in a spiderweb ... ready to float away," translate to Coetzee himself, soon to leave for Australia in the wake of criticism from the authorities (the new regime) over his portrayal of South Africa's race relations? Not necessarily, because while *Disgrace* can be (and has been) read as a manifestation of the South African socio-

18 Coetzee, J.M. 'Censorship in South Africa,' *English in Africa* 17:1 (1990), 17.

19 *ibid.*, 13.

20 Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. London: Secker & Warburg (1999), 107.

- 21 Clarkson, Carrol. 'Reponses to Space and Spaces of Response in J.M. Coetzee,' *J.M. Coetzee's Austerities*, edited by Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill. Surrey: Ashgate (2010), 44.

political zeitgeist it also, as Ian Glenn writes, "sits squarely in a tradition that is pessimistic about the possibility for the white coloniser of finding a true home in the colonised space or of coming to a full integration of settler with colonised through happy hybridity".<sup>21</sup>

It is this fundamental and complex understanding of landscape in Coetzee's writing that troubles the filmed adaptation of *Disgrace*, for what is at stake in the film is not just the translocation of the action – from one part of South Africa to another – in aesthetic terms, but the ways in which this translocation distances the film from the novel's concerns and contributes to an alternative reading of the narrative which considers South Africa physically and culturally from a distinctly non-South African perspective. The problem here is neither parochialism, a 'hands-off' from South African critics to Australian filmmakers, nor the academic snobbery of literary critics registering their dismay (once again) at the liberties taken by filmmakers at the expense of a novel's complexity.

The result of decisions taken over the film's production by the filmmakers is that a tension develops in the film between the universality of the story (its allegorical weight) and the specifics of place, its South African setting (historical, social and spatial). On the surface, attempts made by the filmmakers at authenticity and readings of inauthenticity from viewers signify its problematic (in)authenticity. In films made about South Africa, the most common of these readings of (in)authenticity is the failure of non-South African actors to 'get the accent right'. Nevertheless, a more sustained analysis of this tension in *Disgrace* reveals further deliberate and unwitting (mis)readings, symptoms of an 'outsider' reading of text, character, landscape and national discourse.

Most reviews (particularly those in Australia) read the film in terms of its comment on contemporary South Africa, the plight of its two white protagonists masking the gradual deterioration of the Rainbow Nation and a pronounced failure of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in transforming the psychological and political landscape of the newly democratic country. But what makes *Disgrace* such a difficult literary text to adapt to film is that Coetzee the South African writer and Coetzee the author of *Disgrace* enjoy a complicated

and at times paradoxical relationship with South Africa's post-apartheid discourse.

In the following sections I want to consider three elements of the film's construction of place that create an ideological and narrative tension between the quest for optimism and the quest for authenticity: the locations chosen for the film, the geography of the farm, and the fade to blue that concludes the film.

### **Location, location, location**

From its very beginnings film has had tremendous power in representing physical environments – often in ways that incorporate and transcend other media. Film gave motion to the frozen tableaux of photography, and it gave scale and depth to the dramatic art of landscape painting (a genre that, certainly in mid to late 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, experienced unprecedented popularity). From subtle to violent climatological phenomena (seen in the fascination with stormy seas in some very early films) to characters' travels through foreign lands or exploration of wildernesses, early film not only had the capacity to induce awe in its spectators visually, but through the use of movement and, later, sound it could produce extraordinary verisimilitude which helped to immerse the viewer in the world of the story.

While the idea that all elements of the filmmaking process are put in service to narrative developed as a component of the classical narrative model familiar to us today, the filming of landscapes (whether urban or rural) has developed its own conventions and iconography. The establishing shot, the cavalry charge, the featureless terror of wide deserts and open seas, the diminishment of human scale – all these are less about the narrative than they are a part of the grammar of setting, and also the grammar of place, by which I mean the attempt by the filmmaker to create a *believably authentic* setting. Edward Buscombe notes, for example, that the cacti favoured by John Ford in the dramatic Monument Valley settings in several of his westerns were not, in fact, indigenous to the area but were either transplanted from their native habitat or prefabricated.<sup>22</sup> Thus the 'authentic' movie western iconography associated with Ford is, in one key sense, an invention that has become a convention.

Whether found or constructed, all landscapes in film are a construction by filmmaker, affecting the viewer through the

<sup>22</sup> Buscombe, Edward. 'Inventing Monument Valley: Nineteenth-century Landscape Photography and the Western Film,' in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, edited by Patrice Petro. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1995), 106.

- manipulations of colour, angle, scale and duration. And that is before the complementary arts of diegetic or non-diegetic sound or voice-over have been added. Moreover, the ideology of that landscape is never neutral: the landscape is always doing ideological work for the narrative – conventionally in support of the narrative but sometimes in order to destabilise it. In spite of the sharp intake of breath or subconscious expression of amazement the viewer might make when being treated to a dramatic landscape on the screen, these views are never innocent. As Simon Schama writes: “before it can be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind ... The wilderness, after all, does not locate itself, does not name itself.”<sup>23</sup>
- In the case of *Disgrace*, the choice of landscape had as much to do with the industrial and commercial nature of the filmmaking process as the ideological shift in the visual setting of the film. The simple truth is that Australians wanted to make the film, put up the money and believed in the project enough to bring it to fruition. Furthermore, though South African locations are central to the story and South African actors are prominent, South African financial support for the project appears to have been lacking.<sup>24</sup> As a result, a major reason for the film being shot in the Cederberg instead of the Eastern Cape was the demand for locations within easy driving distance of Cape Town and its film services. Basic economics played a significant role, leaving the nuances of place in Coetzee’s *Disgrace* negated by the centripetal force of Cape Town’s film service industries, and casting the real and the virtual rural off from the concerns of the urban metropole. As Robert Fish notes: “[I]f cinema functions as both product and instrument of geographical experience, then such experience, it would seem, is of a decisively metropolitan cast.”<sup>25</sup>
- Be that as it may, the filmmakers were disenchanted with the locations of the novel in any case. Though considered “drab and flat and boring” Jacobs also says: “I didn’t even bother going there.”<sup>26</sup> Instead, he wanted something “epic ... a beautiful landscape [that] made more sense of her decision to stay there, despite the awful things that happen to her in that place”.<sup>27</sup> Jacobs’ language echoes an observation Coetzee makes in *White Writing* about the difficulty Europeans have in seeing the sublime in South Africa’s horizontal plateaus, veld
- 23 Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. London: Harper Collins (1995), 6-7.
- 24 Producer/writer Anna Maria Monticelli says in an interview: “We were hoping to get money from South Africa and we just weren’t able to. Nobody would put a cent into it. There were some people who wanted it and would fund the film, but they would take over and have creative control. And that was something I just couldn’t do.” (in Siemienowicz, Rochell. ‘Adapting *Disgrace*: an interview with screenwriter and producer Anna Maria Monticelli.’ Australian Film Institute. (2009) [http://www.afi.org.au/AM/ContentManagerNet/HTMLDisplay.aspx?ContentID=7699&Section=Adapting\\_Disgrace](http://www.afi.org.au/AM/ContentManagerNet/HTMLDisplay.aspx?ContentID=7699&Section=Adapting_Disgrace)
- 25 Fish, Robert. ‘What are these cinematic countrysides?’ In *Cinematic Countrysides*, edited by Robert Fish. Manchester University Press (2007), 2.
- 26 Coetzee is spare in his descriptions of the farm’s environs. Though there has been good rain, David thinks: “Poor land, poor soil ... Exhausted. Good only for goats.” (*Disgrace*, 64). It is also very cold, so cold at one point that David cannot tie the bunches of flowers being prepared for the market. (*Disgrace*, 68, 70).
- 27 De Waal, Shaun. ‘Fallen from Grace: Shaun de Waal speaks to Australian director Steve Jacobs about adapting *Disgrace* to film.’ *Weekly Mail and Guardian* (14 August, 2009). <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-08-14-fallen-from-grace>. It should be noted that De Waal’s article is not in a Q&A format, so words attributed to Jacobs are often in paraphrase.

and semi-desert compared to the more traditional sublime subject of mountains whose “verticality – heights and depths – [becomes] the locus of important ... feelings such as despair and ecstasy, and values such as transcendence and unattainability”.<sup>28</sup> Subconsciously or not, this quest on the part of the producers for something epic and redemptive in the landscape – evoking timelessness and national belonging as well as the potential for the land to reconcile the strife between those who control it – is reflected in the critical reception of the film. Thomas Caldwell writes: “The cinematography also captures the locations perfectly and the incredible use of natural light in this film creates an amazingly evocative sense of the South African countryside.”<sup>29</sup> Cinematographic skill guarantees authenticity of place which then signifies national identity, supplanting the South African iconography of game reserves, deserts and veld.

Theo Tait understands Jacobs’ intentions perfectly and then spectacularly misidentifies the location in the film: “But the switch [at the end of the film] does emphasise the movie’s one undoubted advantage over the book: the shots of farm’s setting, in the bleakly picturesque area of the Eastern Cape – a place that partially justifies Lucy’s powerful love of the land.”<sup>30</sup> His comment, along with Jacobs’, nevertheless reveals the real tension in the adaptation: Why does Lucy stay? Especially if, as in the novel, the land is a godforsaken dustbowl outside some backwards rural town. It does make one wonder why Jacobs did not just set the film in the Western Cape, why he stuck with the pretense that the action takes place in the Eastern Cape, a region he didn’t even bother to visit.

Nicolas Rapold correctly acknowledges the actual location in the film – the “majestic ... rugged citrus-growing backcountry northeast of Cape Town” – but, like Tait, feels that this landscape “underscores the pull of the land in a way not possible in the book”.<sup>31</sup> Sandra Hall, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, makes a general but no less interesting comment on the film’s representation of landscape: “Jacobs shot much of the film in South Africa and the beauty of its vast expanses reflects a threatening ambivalence. Lurie is fearful of these wide open spaces, seeing the potential dangers they hold for a solitary woman like his daughter.”<sup>32</sup> For Hall, the countryside (or ‘backcountry’ for many American critics)

28 Coetzee, J.M. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. Yale University Press (1988), Johannesburg: Pentz Publishers (2007), 54.

29 Caldwell, Thomas. *Disgrace* [review] <http://blog.cinemaautopsy.com/2009/06/18/film-review-disgrace-2008/>

30 Tait, Theo. ‘Is the film of JM Coetzee’s Booker-winner *Disgrace* a success?’ *The Guardian*, (28 November, 2009). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2009/nov/28/disgrace-coetzee-film-malkovich-review>

31 Rapold, Nicolas. ‘Tough Terrain to Document: South Africa,’ *New York Times* (3 September, 2009). [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/movies/06rapo.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/movies/06rapo.html?_r=0) This contest over the ‘right’ setting is seen clearly in the comment by Brigid Olen of South African company of DO Production: “We chose the Cedarberg and Citrusdale[sic] areas, which were really incredibly beautiful locations that really mimicked the Eastern Cape scenery of the novel. It’s a magnificent landscape ... In a way the setting was a character in itself.” (Fink, Sally. ‘*Disgrace*,’ *The Callsheet* (August 2009) [http://www.thecallsheet.co.za/daily\\_news/view/957](http://www.thecallsheet.co.za/daily_news/view/957)

32 Hall, Sandra. *Disgrace* [review], *Sydney Morning Herald* (20 June, 2009). <http://www.smh.com.au/news/entertainment/film/filmreviews/disgrace/2009/06/19/1244918176572.html?page=2>

33 Fish, 'What are these cinematic countrysides?' 1.

34 Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 60.

35 Mondello, Bob. 'Disgrace exposes a divided country's despair,' *NPR Review* (17 September, 2009). <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112641580>

36 Rainer, Peter. *Disgrace* [review], *Christian Science Monitor*, (9 October, 2009). <http://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Movies/2009/1009/p17s02-almo.html>

37 Dovey and Dovey read this bland endorsement in cryptic terms: approval that masks his "disaffiliation from the role of landscape in the film." 'Coetzee on Film,' 77.

38 Glenn, Ian. 'Betraying and Delivering: Filming *Disgrace*,' *Ihla do Desterro* 61 (2011), 280.

is both the pastoral ideal and violent frontier, in Fish's terms, "affirmative engagements with nature and the non-human, and nightmare encounters with a monstrous and de-natured in-human".<sup>33</sup> The mountains of the Cederberg again come to represent South Africa, but if one reads the racial politics of the violent attack into Hall's understanding of Lurie's fears for his daughter, then the ambiguity of beauty and peril becomes specifically South African. In the novel, Lurie is unambiguous: when he finds out that Lucy is on her own on the farm, his first comment is, "You didn't tell me that. Aren't you nervous by yourself?"<sup>34</sup> The danger is not that Lucy might have an accident, get bitten by a snake. The danger is that Lucy might be attacked. Implicitly understanding her father's fear, she replies: "There are the dogs. Dogs still mean something." [To whom? one might ask.] "The more dogs, the more deterrence."

The difference between South African perspectives of the film, and the perspectives of viewers in Australia and the United Kingdom, for example, is that South Africans make the threat of racial violence against whites the point of the book and the film (whether they are being critical or not), whereas critics abroad imply or suggest this threat, as if to avoid undermining the optimism that Jacobs (and Monticelli) work so hard to produce. The "breathtakingly clear skies and a parched landscape",<sup>35</sup> the "vast, panoramic countryside",<sup>36</sup> are all beauty of a sort, forms of aesthetic relief when the narrative going gets tough. In this light, can we take Coetzee seriously when he says (in a prepared statement in support of the film), "Steve Jacobs has succeeded beautifully in integrating the story into the grand landscape of South Africa"?<sup>37</sup>

Glenn, somewhat mischievously, suggests that "the move of the action from the Eastern Cape in the novel to the far more picturesque Cederberg in the film no doubt betrays the original in terms of the feel of the landscape, but in key ways the physical irreality of the film mirrors that of the novel. Where, one wonders, do the party-goers in the film come from, given the film's insistence on the splendid isolation of the farm?"<sup>38</sup> While this forms part of Glenn's greater argument that the film "[does] not betray some ideal version of the novel, but [comes] up against the limitations, social and imaginative, of the novel itself", one wonders whether his observation is not an allusion

to Coetzee's critique of Devenish's *The Guest*: "where do the African farm labourers who materialise out of nowhere for a single fifteen-second sequence live?"<sup>39</sup> For Glenn, the failure of both book and film to establish a history of ownership of the land, or to establish the proximity of the neighbours and the guests at Petrus's party, produces abstraction of landscape, a space upon which the characters act rather than a place in which characters live.

In one of the most wide-ranging and negative reviews of the film, Andries du Toit picks up on this "irreality" by recognising that the landscape is much more than just the land. "The Eastern Cape is South Africa's Sertão, its Red River Valley, its remote and distant moral centre," he opines. "All the stories of what happens there are indissolubly entangled with the outlines of its densely populated, desperately beautiful bare eroded hills."<sup>40</sup> But the real inauthenticity concerns those who live in that place, those consigned to the margins of the story:

As best as I can recall, there is with one exception, not a single mobile phone in the entire movie. For anyone who has hung around in the rural Eastern Cape, where Chinese traders hawk consumer electronics on the pavement of every rural *dorpie*, and where every livelihood depends on something that is happening a thousand kilometres away, this is just baffling ... It's rather as if everyone has been transported bodily into another era, a South Africa untouched by the profane, demotic commercialism of present day consumer culture.<sup>41</sup>

What is inauthentic is not the translocation of place (as a visualised space) so much as its dislocation – the removal of that place into a historically and socially parallel sphere. To this critic, it seems, an authentic translocation might have been more palatable than what is perceived as a dislocation, which is by its nature inauthentic.

Ultimately, while cost and the contingencies of film production cannot be ignored, it is also true that very deliberate choices influenced the setting of the film, from the choice of location (there are plenty of flatter, less dramatic areas within driving distance of Cape Town) to the construction of Lucy's

39 Coetzee, 'The Burden of Consciousness in Africa,' 118.

40 Dovey and Dovey make the same point. 'Coetzee on Film,' 77.

41 Du Toit, Andries. 'Lost in Africa: *Disgrace*, whiteness and the fear of desire' (17 September 2009). <http://asubtleknife.wordpress.com/2009/09/17/lost-in-africa-disgrace-whiteness-and-the-fear-of-desire/> Du Toit, it must be said, is as disenchanted with the novel as he is with the film.

farmhouse. The results are not incidental. The decision to render the landscape in epic terms reflects a subtext for Lurie's profound alienation; to Lucy's difference from Lurie, to the trauma that throws them into disarray, and to the reconciliation that Jacobs establishes at the end. However, another, less desirable subtext hitches a ride: in order for Lucy's decision to stay on the farm to make sense, the hope it encourages must overcome the ominous sense that the terrible violence she and Lurie are subjected to is an unchanging South African reality. This is difficult for critics abroad, who want to cheer the film's optimism while not appearing naïve about South Africa's post-apartheid problems, or sounding like reactionary doomsayers. Rapold finds himself in the middle of this conundrum, as does Jacobs, in this passage:

Though the savage violence in *Disgrace* may seem worlds away to some Americans, it remains a fact of life for at least some South Africans, for whom the growing pains of the post-apartheid era run deep. "They're in the situations of decision making that Lucy has in the film," Mr. Jacobs said. "They face that every day, and there's not a logical reason for staying. It's spiritual, and emotional."<sup>42</sup>

42 Rapold, 'Tough terrain to document'.

Though violent crime affects black South Africans far more than it does white South Africans, given the context of the film there is little doubt that the South Africans to whom Rapold and Jacobs refer are white. Implied in Jacobs' statement is the exodus of mostly white South Africans to Australia and New Zealand since 1994, very few of whom, I expect, were confronted with the prospect of giving birth to their black rapist's child. Again, the language of evasion is clear: who dares challenge the spirit and actions of reconciliation when the alternative is the atrophied interiority and resignation of Lurie and the so-called 'liberal afro-pessimism' that stalks warily behind?

### **Two houses**

*Disgrace* (the film) presents not just a displaced topography but also a particular filmic register for seeing that topography. Consider Lurie's approach to the farm in the novel:

A stopover in Oudtshoorn, a crack-of-dawn departure: by mid-morning he is nearing his destination, the town of Salem on the Grahamstown-Kenton road in the Eastern Cape.

His daughter's smallholding is at the end of a winding dirt track some miles outside of town: five hectares of land, most of it arable with a wind-pump, stables and outbuildings, and a low sprawling farmhouse painted yellow, with a galvanised-iron roof and a covered stoep.<sup>43</sup>

43 Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 59.

There is nothing in the film that seems antagonistic to this description, but there is something truly majestic and fully cinematic about the shots that bring Lurie from the solemn and spare interiors of Cape Town to Lucy's farm, shots which exceed Coetzee's succinct prose. A series of extreme long shots reveal whole towns dwarfed by the rugged mountains, the road snaking in sympathy with the contours of the slopes, finally becoming a dirt road that clings to the side of the mountain. Lucy's farmhouse is truly isolated, set against rocky slopes and pine forests. On the downslope, Petrus's house under construction is barely visible. The extreme long-shots that track Lurie's journey to the farm as well as many of the film's establishing shots are taken from a high angle, emphasising not only the farm's isolation but also an extra-diegetic perspective. Like the Torrance family in *The Shining* (1980, Stanley Kubrick), Lurie is on a journey into dramatic and ominous isolation.

The interior of the farmhouse is also portrayed differently in the film to how it is evoked in the novel, albeit in subtle ways. In the novel Lurie describes the house as "large, dark, and even at midday, chilly," and though in the film the interior is somewhat gloomy, the main rooms are exposed to natural light by wide expanses of windows, suggesting that the characters' lives inside are constantly on display to those outside. The house in the film is also interesting in the context of the Doveys' critique of *Dust*: where Hänsel could not shoot in South Africa, the Australian production of *Disgrace* not only had access to South African locations but also chose to build Lucy's seemingly decades-old farmhouse from scratch. Everything about its interior, aspect and situation is a product of imaginative and physical construction.

The particular orientation of Lucy's house in relation to the outbuildings occupied by Petrus and his family sets up a spatial tension with high-angle shots looking down at the outbuildings – mostly from Lurie's point of view – and low-angle shots looking back up at the main house. These reinforce the spatial orientation of colonial power. Towards the end of the film, two shots demonstrate the profound shift in power that has taken place in the film.

As Lurie confronts Lucy about Petrus's marriage proposal, the camera racks focus to the background where Petrus's new house takes shape. Lucy says: "I'll become a tenant on his land", a sharp reversal of an earlier exchange where Petrus introduces his wife to Lucy and Lurie, saying "Lucy is our benefactor". The shot exploits the slope up and down which Lurie has tramped through the film and confirms that the dominance of the house (re-established compositionally several times in the film) is about to be displaced.

If the mountain terrain orientates the dynamic between Lucy and Petrus, it also contextualises the change in Lucy's relationship with her father. After the attack we see Lurie shot from a low angle against the mountainside, but the heroic possibilities of the composition are thoroughly undermined by the bandages around his head and over his eye. The landscape dominates him; he looks lost and pathetic. However, in the closing scenes when Lurie walks down the mountain to the house, we see Lucy framed in a similar shot. She is radiant, triumphant against the same mountain backdrop in a shot that is pure classical Hollywood.

These examples show how Jacobs has consciously used his chosen landscape to underpin the narrative, complementing Lucy's journey from the trauma of the attack to her full reconciliation with her destiny as a mother and a partner, her belonging on, and to, the land. Though the precariousness of her situation does not seem to have changed (what will be the nature of her protection under Petrus's patronage?), the landscape shots encourage us to see her not only as the "forward-looking lady" Petrus describes in the novel but also as the "solid existence" Lurie comes to terms with in the novel's penultimate scene.<sup>44</sup> Significantly, Jacobs' direction in terms of camera and mise-en-scène pulls the narrative towards a

44 Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 136, 217.

conclusion that, while still sombre, expresses symbolic hope in place of intellectual and emotional resignation.

### **Fade to blue**

The most noted departure from the novel made in the film is the decision to switch around the final two scenes in the book. Where the novel ends with the “giving up” of the dog, in the film Lurie euthanises the dog and then, after stopping his vehicle on the road above Lucy’s farm, walks down for a conciliatory cup of tea. It is clear that, despite a concerted (and largely successful) effort to follow the narrative action of the novel, concluding the film with Lurie giving up the three-legged dog for euthanasia would have drained any redemptive quality to the story and would certainly have killed the film’s chances of being made at all. In an interview with Shaun de Waal, director Steve Jacobs says: “Was it a film about a man and his dog? No. It was about many other things and many other people. It doesn’t change what happens in the novel, but it switches the final moments. In film, you have to acknowledge the journey you’ve been on. So the ending included some kind of reconciliation, some kind of contrition from the David Lurie character.”<sup>45</sup> Though Coetzee gave his blessing to Monticelli’s script, I wonder what he would say about the novel’s final scene amounting to “a man and his dog”.

<sup>45</sup> De Waal, ‘Fallen from Grace’.

There is no doubt that the film’s conclusion is neater, more conventional and more hopeful; however, the decision is more complex than merely switching depression for optimism. As is true of many adaptations from novel to screen, film can represent action and visual setting in striking and dynamic ways, but often struggles to convey the interiority of character. Frequently in the novel, the action of a scene is complicated by Lurie’s description of the action. For example, Glenn notes the effect during the attack in the film of losing Lurie’s “sardonic” consideration of the failure of the missionary project in Africa<sup>46</sup> – “He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Glenn, ‘Betraying and Delivering,’ 281.

<sup>47</sup> Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 95.

Similarly, the scene in the film where Lurie leaves the truck on the road and walks down to Lucy’s farm loses the introspection

in the novel that helps set up the dispiriting final act. Looking at Lucy, the literary Lurie muses over her development from a “tadpole in her mother’s body” into her “solid existence” which will, in turn, produce “a line of existences in which his share, his gift, will grow inexorably less and less, till it may as well be forgotten”.<sup>48</sup> In the film, the final scene is not only a tentative reconciliation between father and daughter, one in which she leads and he follows, but, in the closing shots, it is a symbolic reconciliation with the present as a condition of the past.

48 Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 217.

There has been virtually no mention in the reviews and essays I have read of the unusual fade to blue that ends the film, apart from that of Glenn, who suggests that the blue fade might represent “the passage of time”. He adds:

The intention of this scenic finale is presumably to show not only the beauty of the Cederberg, but also a state of co-existence in which Lucy’s house is now complemented by Petrus’s house and in which the tension Lurie felt at seeing the building going up next door is now alleviated, taken into a larger sweep of history, seen *sub specie aeternitatis*.<sup>49</sup>

49 Glenn, ‘Betraying and Delivering,’ 281.

Given Jacobs and Monticelli’s optimistically reconciliatory take on the narrative, such a transcendent interpretation is fair, but it is nevertheless striking to observe that the blue fade seems to take its hue not from the sky or the blue-grey rock of the mountains, but from the roof of Petrus’s house. This will be the new arrangement, we are told. As the series of tracking shots pulls back from the valley in a conventional deployment of landscape as cinematic closure, Lucy’s house becomes less visible against Petrus’s blue roof, suggesting not only its permanence but also a confirmation of the shift in the balance of power on the land.

### Conclusion

For director Steve Jacobs, and indeed several commentators, the film’s strength is its universality rather than its representation of a particular place. *Disgrace*, “like all great pieces of literature ... has a universal quality to it”,<sup>50</sup> Jacobs says, explaining his desire (along with that of Anna Maria Monticelli) to adapt Coetzee’s novel to the screen. However, as the Doveys despair: “The novel

50 Wotzke, Anders. ‘Interview with *Disgrace* director Steve Jacobs,’ (14 June, 2009). <http://movieindex.com/interviews/interview-steve-jacobs-disgrace/>

is about South Africa.”<sup>51</sup> It is about South Africa’s history, places, subjugations, and displacements. Is there a tension here between discarding the categories of ‘national’ cinema in a new world of transnational film production and storytelling, and the insistence on a kind of nationalist authenticity of place? Put another way, is there a tendency in non-South African productions of South African stories to transform their local chewiness into a more palatable experience for a global audience? An audience that registers distaste – a few critics talk of the film leaving them with an unpleasant taste in their mouths – but offers a tonic of optimism and ideological closure to cleanse the palate?

One of the book and the film’s central conversations occurs when Lurie asks Lucy why she won’t report the attack. Lucy says:

‘The reason is that, as far as I’m concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.’

‘This place being what?’

‘This place being South Africa.’<sup>52</sup>

Lurie rejects her argument, and at the end of the exchange he is left “shaken”: “Never yet have they been so far and so bitterly apart.” If the film starts out with Lurie in control of the narrative perspective, from here on Lucy takes over. In screenwriting terms, it is not only a narrative turning point but also sets the course for the concluding reconciliation between Lurie and Lucy or, more properly, Lurie and Lucy’s decision.

However, when Lucy says “This place being South Africa” in the film, there is an uncomfortable echo of Danny Archer’s world-weary line “T.I.A. – this is Africa” in *Blood Diamond* (2006). Coetzee’s novel predates that film, but given the dispiriting procession of major movies ‘about Africa’ in the past ten years,<sup>53</sup> *Disgrace* is in danger of confirming a prevailing pessimism for global audiences while the filmmakers argue for a light in the dark.

And this is where, despite being a book about South Africa, *Disgrace* the film is Australian, at least more so than

51 Dovey and Dovey, ‘Coetzee on Film,’ 77.

52 Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 112.

53 See Evans, Martha and Ian Glenn. ‘TIA – This is Africa: Afropessimism in Twenty-First-Century Narrative Film,’ *Black Camera* 2:1 (2010), 14-35.

54 Wotzke, Anders. 'Interview with *Disgrace* director Steve Jacobs'.

it is South African. The motivation for telling a story with “universal appeal” whose central conflicts are the same as those of “Palestine, Northern Ireland or the Balkans”<sup>54</sup> and the casting of an internationally renowned Hollywood actor makes clear that from the outset, this was a project aiming to translate South African complexities and particularities in unambiguous and morally comprehensible terms to a global audience. Where the novel terminates in resignation and opaque interiority, the decisions over location and landscape fully complement a vision of *Disgrace* as heroic and transcendent, culminating in a sweeping mountain panorama beneath a clear blue African sky.