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An Interview

INTERVIEW

## INTERVIEW

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PATRICIA ÁLVAREZ SÁNCHEZ  
*Universidad de Málaga*

# *An Interview with Hermann Wittenberg*

This interview is part of a research project funded by the Universidad de Málaga, whose support is gratefully acknowledged.

**H**ermann Wittenberg was born in Cape Town, South Africa. He studied English at the University of Stellenbosch and at the University of Cape Town and is an Associate Professor in the English Department at the University of Western Cape. His research focuses on South African literary history, colonial and postcolonial travel writing, theories of spatiality, and ecocriticism. He has published several archival studies of the writings of J.M. Coetzee and Alan Paton, and edited J.M. Coetzee's screenplay adaptations of his novels *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (published as *Two Screenplays*, 2014). He is responsible for having introduced the idea of intermediality, that is the use of different media —especially film and photography—, to the study of Coetzee's fiction. In 2018 Wittenberg and Farzanah Badsha have curated the exhibition "Photographs from *Boyhood*", which shows the images Coetzee captured when he was a schoolboy.

**Patricia Álvarez Sánchez (PAS):** Coetzee is probably one of the most respected and decorated living authors in the English language. He is obviously better known and praised for his fiction, but he is also a literary critic, a linguist and a translator. Your research has situated his fiction in relation to photography and cinema and also, somehow, prepared the path for this unique exhibition. It seems a wonderful coincidence that you were the one who received Coetzee's photographic material and photographs. How did that happen? And how did you feel about it?

Hermann Wittenberg (HW): When Coetzee moved from Cape Town to Adelaide, Australia, in 2002, he still retained his apartment in Rondebosch, which was then rented out to students. In 2014, he decided to sell the property, and some stored personal effects had to be disposed of. I had worked with John Coetzee on the publication of his film scripts at the same time (the book was published as *Two Screenplays*), and had worked on cinematic and photographic aspects of his fictions, and was asked if I had any interest in the old enlarger and assorted photographic and darkroom equipment. When the boxes arrived and I unpacked them, I found, to my surprise, a number of old spools of photographic negative film. There were also a number of photographic prints, which the young Coetzee had made in his own darkroom.

I had the old negatives digitised, and was astonished when the CD arrived: photographs dating from 60 years ago, giving us an intimate sense of Coetzee's world as a schoolboy, aged about 15 or 16. It is also the world of the memoir *Boyhood* (1997): the photographs were literally "scenes of provincial life" – the subtitle of the book.

I contacted Coetzee about the material, suggesting that the photographs might have been given to me inadvertently, and suggesting that they might be used for an exhibition, before handing them over to the Harry Ransom Centre (Texas) where all his other manuscripts and personal papers are housed. Coetzee wrote to me,

quite sceptical that anyone would be interested in the photographs (they are after all *amateur* pictures, taken by a school boy), but during a conference visit to Adelaide where I showed some of the images to a very interested academic audience —an occasion at which Coetzee was also present— he may have realised that there was some scholarly, even public interest. Together with my co-curator, Farzanah Badsha, I then put together an exhibition concept, and Coetzee subsequently agreed to support the idea —and also collaborated by supplying some captions, as well as conducting an interview.

**PAS:** In one of your articles on the publication of *Dusklands* (1974), Coetzee's first piece of fiction, you mention that Coetzee's first publisher, Peter Randall from Ravan Press, asked him to supply some personal information for his first book. Coetzee, unwilling to provide him with much personal information, answered in a letter: "among the things I am interested in in a non-professional way are: crowd sports; other people's ailments; apes and humanoid machines; images, particularly photographs, and their power over the human heart and the politics of assent" (2011, 78). Do you think Coetzee has always been interested in photography?

HW: Yes, the idea that photographs have "power over the human heart", in other words an emotive force, is discernible in many of his fictions, from *Dusklands* (1974) right up to *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), if we recall Dmitri's reaction to seeing the photograph of Ana Magdalena on the front page of a newspaper. It is not surprising then to find this responsiveness to photography emerge early in life, even before he started to take pictures himself. If we can trust the semi-fictionalised memoir *Boyhood*, the young John is repeatedly fascinated by photographs and pictures. "He loves to page through the [his mother's] albums" (Coetzee 1997, 39) we read early on. Referring to one of the three books he owns, *Scott of the Antarctic*, he writes of himself in the characteristic third person: "He often looks at the photographs, but he does not get far with reading the book: it is boring, it is not a story" (46). And in his other book, a children's encyclopaedia, he dislikes the prose, but "pores over the pictures" (107). Early in life, images appear to have taken precedence over words: they have power to stimulate the imagination.

**PAS:** The title of your exhibition, "*Photographs from Boyhood*", is also very similar to the title of Coetzee's first fictionalized memoir. Is there a relationship between the two of them?

HW: Yes, the title, "Photographs from *Boyhood*" is a deliberate reference to the memoir, but we also need to remember that the memoir, as all autobiographical writing, is partly fictionalised. In his third memoir, *Summertime* (2009), there is a cautionary note: "What Coetzee writes there cannot be trusted, not as a factual record — not because he was a liar, but because he was a fictioneer" (225). He also famously said that "all autobiography is

storytelling, all writing is autobiography: everything you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it” (1992, 17). So, the photographs complicate the “fictioneering” since, to some extent, they record what was really once there, at least what was once there for a split second before the lens of the camera. Photographs are of course not simply true records of what happened—they are also, like writing, representations or constructions of the real. But the images allow us to re-read the memoir in a different, perhaps more nuanced, way, drawing our attention to the complex interweaving of memory, truth and invention. Some of the images *do* authenticate the memoir: they show actual people, and depict scenes that appeared to have really happened. What has been particularly intriguing was to read *Boyhood* again against the background of the photographs, and there are indeed numerous points of overlap and congruence. There is, for example in *Boyhood* the description of “the picture of Jesus opening his chest to reveal a glowing ruby heart” (1997, 149) on the wall of the classroom at St Joseph’s, a picture which is actually visible in several photographs. So is the decaying heap of books, newspapers and magazines in Tant Annie’s flat. The description of the beloved Karoo farm in the memoir is also corroborated by several photographs, for example one which shows the “labyrinth of stone-walled kraals that belong to the old days when the sheep in their thousands had to be brought from the veld to be counted or shorn or dipped.” (1997, 91). On the other hand, the photographs also show scenes that were not written about. It is possible to regard some of these images as “deleted scenes” that were not included in the memoir. One such scene is the episode when the two Karoo farm workers, Ros and Freek, were brought down to Strandfontein, to see the sea for the first time. As the photographs show, Coetzee was clearly fascinated by this occasion, snapping a number of documentary shots of the two men on the beach.

**PAS: At the time when the photos were taken (1955-1956), Coetzee obviously developed a passion for photography. What made this artistic means of expression so attractive for him?**

HW: That is a question only he would be able to answer. In his interview, he says that photography carried a considerable cultural cachet in the 1950s, as it was considered to be a more masculine activity than writing poetry or playing the piano (two of Coetzee’s other creative pursuits at the time). This was the golden age of photography, exemplified by *Life Magazine*, and photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson whose practice of documentary street photography Coetzee appears to have emulated. Photography had considerable prestige at this time—we can see this exemplified in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* with its hero-protagonist who is a professional photographer. The film came out in 1954, shortly before Coetzee embarked on photography himself.

**PAS: How did he take his photographs? Was he also interested in the process of developing negative film?**

HW: The photographs document a period in which he first encountered the medium, attempting to master the technique of taking photographs and developing and printing them in his darkroom. There was a lot of experimentation, trying to learn the craft, so many photographs are less than perfect, yet also fascinating as they document a boy exploring the parameters of what was possible to achieve with a camera. The photograph we have used for the poster is a good example of this experimentation: it is shot into the mirror with a flash, creating a technically flawed, blurry image, but which is nevertheless absorbing in its expressionist aesthetics. At its centre is the camera, an Italian made Wega 35mm (a cheaper copy of the Leica II). He still owns the camera.

**PAS: Was there a specific person that taught him?**

HW: He credits his mother’s example, but also mentions paying attention to photographs he encountered in magazines at the time. He was member of a photographic club at school.

**PAS: What function did the process of taking photographs have? Do you think he was simply experimenting with the camera or was it part of a self-discovery process?**

HW: I would not really be able to answer this question as to what his motives might have been. What is interesting, though, about this archive is that it shows that photography was the first creative medium in which he became proficient. In his youth, he also dabbled with writing poetry, and took up playing the piano for a while, but eventually, in his late 20s, took up prose writing seriously. It is in writing fictions that he achieved worldwide recognition, culminating in the Nobel Prize for Literature, as well as two Booker prizes. The early photographic work, though, alerts us to the pervasive influence of photography in most of his fictions: not only do photographs frequently feature in the many novels, but there is also often a photographic aesthetic that is discernible in the prose—attentiveness to lighting, framing, point of view.

**PAS: Looking at the pictures, one can see that Coetzee was making photographs in order to capture certain moments that were important to him and that he focused on several subjects and compositions: members of his family, his school life, Voëlfontein [the farm where he spent parts of his childhood], and even, as you have mentioned, the books that he read and the sheet music he was probably interested in. Do you think some subjects were already more important than others at the time?**

HW: Photographs always reveal at least two different “sides”. They show us what was in front of the lens, or what was photographed, but they also tell us something about the person behind the camera: ways of seeing the world, interests and obsessions, an approach or attitude. Just thinking quantitatively, the number of images of Vera show that he was clearly strongly focused on his mother,



a complex interest—and disavowal of interest—that is also evident in *Boyhood*. The photographs give us an intimate look into a childhood which was perhaps typical for provincial life in Cape Town in the 1950s. The young Coetzee comes across as a serious boy, if we for example look at a remarkable photograph of his bookshelf and see titles such as Plato, Rousseau, Hobbes and Kant that the sixteen year old was reading. But we also see a playful side of Coetzee, getting up to mischievous behaviour at school—for example secretly taking photographs of teachers in class—. We also see a deep absorption in sport, especially cricket and rugby. The photographs show a deeply personal, intimate side of the author as adolescent.

We also should note that the images are overwhelmingly of people rather than landscapes or still lives: he was clearly fascinated with people's lives and the relationships between them. You cannot, I suppose, write novels if you are not deeply interested in people and what they do and think. So, in this sense, the photographs can be read as an early preview of the kind of writing that would later emerge. The photographs also complicate the image of the author as a reserved, cool and austere man. One can perhaps speculate that in his detached role as a photographer, as an observer standing outside and looking in, without being too closely involved, he found a model—or point of view—that later became habitual.

**PAS: There are also a number of photographs of photographs...**

HW: Yes, I think one can make the argument that in Coetzee's photography, just as in his writing, there is an interest in the medium itself, a self-reflectiveness and self-consciousness. There are several photographs where he documents the act of photography itself. As Derrida noted "this abyssal inclusion of photographs within photographs takes something away from looking, it calls for discourse, demands a reading" (1998). Already at an early age then, Coetzee's creative work posed questions about representation.

**PAS: Photographs appear in several of his novels and seem to carry meaning as well. The most obvious interpretation would be to say that they reflect the structures of power in which the powerless are embedded and marginalised, as we read in "The Vietnam Project" (1974), where its main character, Eugene Dawn, carries around and is fascinated by a handful of images that depicts the atrocities of the Vietnam war. Do you think that the photographs that appear in his fiction have other meanings as well?**

HW: This is a large question which one could write a whole book on. Photographs in Coetzee's fictions are clearly often significant, but their meaning and function differs from text to text. What I think they all have in common, though, is that they represent some moment of truth, or at least a gesturing towards revealing a truth. In the case of *Dusklands*, the photographs do not so much reveal an objective truth about what the war was really

like in Vietnam, but rather give us insight into the tortured subjectivity of Eugene Dawn. What truths these photographs reveal differs from novel to novel: the act of taking the photograph in *Age of Iron* (1990) is imagined as the moment death enters the body of Elizabeth Curren; in *Master of Petersburg* (1994) it is a daguerreotype that makes loss and mourning tangible; the photograph taken of David Lurie in *Disgrace* (1999) reveals him to be a fool, and, of course, photographs feature strongly in novels such as *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) and *Slow Man* (2005).

**PAS: In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee comments (1992, 59) on the importance of cinema and photography in his second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*. You have written on how this interest illuminates "the origins of Coetzee's cinematic style and its effects in his prose" (2014, 5). Could you please explain how?**

HW: Coetzee often sets up his scenes in the novels in a similar way to how a photographer would set up a shot. There is very often, for example, an attentiveness to lighting. Iona Gilbert has looked with much detail at the presence of a photographic aesthetic in her doctoral thesis ["Cinematic and Photographic Aesthetics in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee"]. The argument I pursued with regard to *In the Heart of the Country* and film is somewhat different: the novel utilises a form of montage through which separate sections of prose are put together in a way that dispenses with realist continuity editing. The models Coetzee found here are discussed with Attwell in *Doubling the Point*, and it is interesting to note that both these films [*La Jetée* and *Passengers*] are not conventional films—moving pictures—but constructed through an assemblage of photographs—edited together in a way that simulated a fast-paced narrative flow. This technique, together with voice-over, became catalytic for the narrative construction of *In the Heart*. The jump-cut editing that Godard used in films such as *Alphaville* was also formative.

**PAS: Considering the many options that you surely had to host such a unique exhibition, why did you choose the Irma Stern Museum?**

HW: One of the reasons Farzanah Badsha and I wanted to hold this exhibition at the Irma Stern Museum, is not just that this is a museum that houses some of the most beautiful and significant art works in South Africa, but that this is also the area of Cape Town, the Southern Suburbs, that is depicted in the photographs. It is also an urban landscape that is deeply associated with John Coetzee's life. He was born very close to here, at the Mowbray Maternity hospital just beyond the railway line; his first home as a student, was in Jefflyn Court, next to the Mowbray bus and taxi rank. Just 100 meters or so away, off Main Road in Upper Liesbeek Road, is the house with the oak tree, the house as we read in *Boyhood*, where he was happy. His schooling starting out in Rosebank Primary, and he matriculated at St Jo-

seph's Marist College, where many of the photographs were taken. Then there is the University of Cape Town (UCT), an institution which the museum is a part of, where he studied and subsequently had an illustrious academic career spanning almost 30 years. And not very far is the house in Toll Road, just off Belmont Road, Rondebosch, where most of the great novels were written, books that brought him world-wide acclaim and the Nobel prize. In this sense, it is very fitting that these photographs, taken by a youth more than 60 years ago, were exhibited at the Irma Stern, a place that is connected, in intimate and multiple ways, with the extraordinary writer that Coetzee has become.

**PAS: Where is the exhibition going next and when?**

HW: The exhibition will be hosted in the J.M. Coetzee Center for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide next November.

**PAS: What projects are you working on at the moment?**

HW: Over the years I have become more interested in ecocriticism, on the one hand, and on the influence of film and photography in Coetzee's fiction on the other. I am now doing research on how photographs helped Coetzee develop the argument of his novels, particularly *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and its main character, whose depiction was very much influenced by the photographs of Jan Pieriga, the murderer of two farmers in Olienpoot.



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