

MEDIA REVIEW

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JOHN M. COETZEE: PASSAGES

Dir. Henion Han. Prod. Cheryl Tuckett. Videocassette. Dizzy Ink Ltd. 1999. (Film ©1997, SABC3, South Africa and J. M. Coetzee). 52 minutes. £37.00 (PAL); £42.00 (NTSC).

The difference between memoir and autobiography is primarily one of selectivity versus fullness. A documentary of a writer can work on either premise, and this fascinating portrait of the internationally renowned South African novelist and double-winner of the Booker Prize, J.M. Coetzee, has wisely chosen the former route. Incomplete, scarcely a comprehensive narration of his life and times, *John M. Coetzee: Passages* is instead a dazzlingly minimalist montage.

Now available from Dizzy Ink Limited on videocassette, *Passages*, directed by Henion Han and produced by Cheryl Tuckett,¹ premiered on South African television (SABC3) in September 1997 — its only broadcast so far — the same year that Coetzee's third-person memoir, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, appeared.

Reading from his work and briefly reminiscing at a few childhood landmarks in Cape Town, Coetzee's elegant narration and unique participation in this project is interspersed with insightful commentary on his work from fellow South African academics Dr Lesley Marx (University of Cape Town); Professor David Attwell (University of Natal – Pietermaritzburg); Professor Rita Barnard (University of Pennsylvania, USA); and writers Dr Lionel Abrahams and Ashraf Jamal.

Filmed entirely on location in South Africa, the documentary, with its emphasis on image, music, text, is an almost Barthesian composition.² The footage is a palimpsest of ethnographic illustrations, a sculpture (Jane

Alexander's 'Stripped ["Oh Yes" Girl]), family photographs provided by the author, and artistically inspired shots of the Cape landscape — Coetzee's home ground. Scenes even include the zigzag journey along the Swartberg Pass on the way to Prince Albert in the Karoo — familiar territory for those who have read Coetzee's previous Booker Prize-winning novel, *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983). With the opening title set against the backdrop of Rondebosch Common in Cape Town (near Coetzee's home and the site of his former school sportsfield, where he won the running backwards race in 1948, he tells us), the hauntingly beautiful score plays a few bars to the 'New' South Africa: listen for the dissonant chords of South Africa's two national anthems, 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika' and 'Die Stem'. Influenced by Bach, Stockhausen and Webern, the music composed for the documentary includes vocals by Juliana Venter.

The core of the film is true to its subject; it is not a celebrity profile and does not make demands on Coetzee's private life, but focuses rather on the series of well chosen passages from his fictional corpus up to *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), and the remarks of his fellow academics and writers. The only regrettable exclusion was a passage from *Boyhood*, considering the fact that it had been published by the time of the broadcast (although was not yet in print by the time of the film's completion); nor are there any landmarks from the intervening years of Coetzee's childhood in Worcester, some ninety miles away from Cape Town, which are the main focus of the memoir.³ On the other hand, the documentary and *Boyhood* are two altogether distinct projects and, as a memoir, *Boyhood* falls into a different generic category to the fictional passages.

Coetzee's latest novel, *Disgrace*, winner of this year's Booker Prize, was published only after this video version of the film was updated in the summer of 1999. It was at this stage, in the video editing room, says the producer, that a small concession was made to those critics who thought

more biographical detail was needed to make the film 'accessible'. Certain particulars about Coetzee were thus added as a kind of 'preface' to the documentary. In simple white type on a black screen, they list Coetzee's date and place of birth, his education, employment, and literary awards. Two key and very apt quotes (with the lines, 'Biography is a kind of storytelling' and 'all writing is autobiography') have been borrowed from Coetzee's intellectual autobiography, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (1992), for the opening and closing sequences of the film. This brings us to the subject of the usual impasse between Coetzee and many of his reviewers, who expect more obvious revelations. Like the plain black screens which infiltrate the passages, the film embraces a certain silence about the author, forcing us to engage with the fiction itself. Attwell's remarks in the documentary put it best:

I think there's a great deal of himself invested in the written word. What he is asking us to do as readers, and this would include journalists, would be to read the work and to see what parts of the self are revealed there, rather than getting him to free-associate, as it were, into a microphone.

Coetzee's final appearance is ironically at the memorial site of a famous British imperialist, but it provides a perfect viewpoint from which to survey his personal history:

We're at the memorial to Cecil John Rhodes on the slopes of Devil's Peak in Cape Town. It points north, as all the statues and memorials to Rhodes do — they point towards Cairo. Looking out over the suburbs here I can see the maternity hospital where I was born, the primary school I went to, the secondary school I went to, behind these trees the university I went to as an undergraduate, which is the same university where I lecture now.

As the above comments reveal, despite a decade of residency overseas in Great Britain and then the United States, the international prizes and the

visiting professorships, the European sensibility of his novels, J.M. Coetzee's connection to his birthplace has been close and sustaining.

John M. Coetzee: Passages is a must for departments of English and university library collections. It is particularly useful for students and teachers of postcolonial literatures, but it is also a remarkable opportunity for a more general audience to see this major literary figure in the landscape which has inspired so much of his writing.

¹ In this review I have drawn from an informal interview with the producer, Cheryl Tuckett, (London, 10 October 1999) for certain details about the making of the film.

² I am borrowing from the title of a book by Roland Barthes: *Image-Music-Text*. Barthes has been a significant influence on Coetzee as a novelist and critic, whose own background is in linguistics.

³ There is, however, a reference to Coetzee's readings of *Boyhood* by David Attwell. According to Tuckett, it was not included because Coetzee decided that Worcester in the late 1990s had no resemblance to the Worcester he knew as a young boy in the early 1950s.