‘Only Connect’: Textual Space as Coherer in Tom McCarthy’s C

L’imaginaire de l’espace textuel radioconducteur: C de Tom McCarthy

Catherine Lanone
Tom McCarthy is a chameleon writer who works as an artist, runs the Necronautical society, has written a critical study of Hergé’s Tintin (duly quoting Shakespeare, Barthes, Derrida, Freud and Abraham and Torok), as well as provocative novels, from *Remainder*, which was originally published in France, to *C*, which was short-listed for the Booker Prize. In his versatile production, McCarthy explores space, not natural landscapes but modernity as an abstract system enmeshing the human and the technological. Frequencies, signals, reception, repeated words, circulation and dissemination, turn *C* into a switchboard (dis)connecting and re-enacting texts and history. Denying coherent perspective and projecting flat landscapes, McCarthy maps modern space as a crypt crackling with transmissions and codes. Bearing in mind Lyotard’s theory of network selves, Abraham and Torok’s crypts, but also Michel Serres’s concept of parasites, we shall see how McCarthy’s textual practice engages with his work as a visual artist seeking to navigate inauthenticity. His black box or Greenwich installations cast light on *C*, a text that embeds references like a radio system thriving on static, interference, noise. We shall study *C*’s models of interference, including the return to Alexandria via E.M. Forster’s travelogue, to suggest that not only does the text become (like Isis or Serge, the protagonist, himself) a coherer, but that for all its gleeful derivation and anti-humanist stance, the novel engages with a melancholy that is not all play, creating in-between landscapes haunted by the technological death-drive.

**McCarthy as a visual artist**

McCarthy’s work ghosts transmissions, as is exemplified by his 2008 black box installation in Stockholm. The performance drew inspiration from Cocteau’s *Orphée*, in which Jean Marais, cast as Orphée, sits in his car listening to clipped, cryptic radio messages sent
from the dead as if they were the essence of poetry (modelled on the World War Two coded radio messages delivering information to the French Résistance). Loosely based on the theme of eclipse, the installation turned a bright orange (the eponymous ‘black box’ of a plane) into a transmitter broadcasting a jumble of clipped messages taken from poetry, weather forecasts, scientific accounts (of eclipses, umbra and penumbra, or visual disturbances such as glaucoma), and newspaper items. A parody of today’s infinite web of radio transmissions, TV accounts and telephone calls, the collage plays on repetition and re-enactment, subverts meaning and turns the gallery’s visual space into echo-location, a random radar recording nothing but noise. Communication is disturbed, while the black box also acts as a crypt burying as well as transmitting messages.

Re-enactment thus investigates an alternative space, a para-site or parasite in the sense of Michel Serres, that is to say both a parasitic organism (transmissions cannibalize previous texts or transmissions) and a communication system which needs or even reverts to pure noise, static (Serres puns on ‘parasite’, which also means noise or static in French). The parasite redirects repetition, it steers reproduction in new directions. Hence McCarthy’s specific take on city space in the 2012 exhibition on ‘The City & the City: Artwork by London Writers’, an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery Project Space that also featured, among others, Iain Sinclair. This exhibition sought to bring together visual artworks, experimental texts and poems depicting the modern city, along the lines of Guy Debord’s psychogeography (exploring the city as linked to memory and culture as much as geography and urban environment). The exhibition included McCarthy’s ‘Greenwich Degree Zero’, conceived in 2006 in collaboration with Rod Dickinson. McCarthy grew up near Greenwich, but unlike Sinclair he does not seek to map the experience of walking in London. Rather, he draws attention to Greenwich as a construct, both in terms of space and time. McCarthy and Dickinson’s installation returned to February 15, 1894, when a French anarchist named Martial Bourdin attempted to blow up the Observatory of Greenwich, the symbol of Time Zero.

Today, the episode is mostly remembered because Joseph Conrad, in his preface to The Secret Agent (which was inspired by the bombing attempt), harps on Bourdin’s deed and death as

[…] a blood-stained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought. For perverse unreason has its own logical processes. But that outrage could not be laid hold of mentally in any sort of way, so that one remained faced by the fact of a man blown to bits for nothing even most remotely resembling an idea, anarchistic or other.

(Conrad 228)

McCarthy and Dickinson set up a display including contemporary newspaper articles and brief film footage—a one-minute view of the burning observatory, with billowing smoke in the background, a man in a top hat seen from the back in the foreground, helplessly shifting from foot to foot, hands dangling clumsily, and a policeman running into the frame then changing course and cutting across the lawn in front of the stander-by.

Showing this so-called recently retrieved film drew attention to the media’s ability to endlessly reproduce an event with readily available images, images which, to recall Baudrillard, run the risk of becoming their own simulacra, as with the Kennedy assassination or the collapsing New York Twin Towers—the cycle of repetitions nullifies the image, cancels, as it were, the traumatic nature of an event which created a faultline because it was, to begin with, unthinkable.
But when we watch this 1894 footage, we cannot but feel that there is something eerie about the foreground character with dangling hands or the irrational course of the policeman—the images cannot quite stand, as the clumsy witness mirrors our own positions as spectators placed just outside the frame of the bombing. So that the gallery’s visitor is led to guess that the film is a hoax. Indeed, just as the newspaper articles have been doctored, the footage is a fake shot with a Victorian hand-cranked camera, speeding up images, creating mock authenticity. We shift from early documentary film-footage to parasitic re-enactment.

The film thus creates an eclipse of reality, an area of penumbra displaying what might have happened, had the bomb carried by Bourdin not misfired and killed him before he could blow up the nearby Observatory. Even as we become fully aware that this cannot be, instinctive associations confirm what we see, such as the lingering collective fears of London burning, collapsing traces of the 1666 Great Fire, the Blitz or the accidental burning of Paxton displaced Crystal Palace (it was partly destroyed in 1866 by fire, rebuilt, and then destroyed in 1936, again by fire, which for Winston Churchill sealed the end of an age).

So that the film dwells in the in-between space of neither true nor false, the optional, alternative what-might-have-been. Within London, we inhabit the space of inauthenticity, of the non-event, which is not the contrary of an event, but a virtual bypass. Posited as the mathematical heart of Empire, Greenwich embodies the politics of space: ‘Lying on the First Meridian, at exactly 0° longitude, the Observatory was a prominent public building, the place from which all time throughout the British Empire and the world was measured and regulated.’ Challenging space and history as a construct, the cinematic assemblage also draws attention to the politics of images and the spectral dissemination of newsreels. For Dean Kenning, Dickinson and McCarthy ‘seem to view Bourdin’s curious self-annihilation next to the meridian as an irresistible metaphor for the loss of historical reality in an age of mediated events’.

The flatness of landscapes

In a radio interview, Tom McCarthy explains that ‘the kind of Eureka moment’ when he had the idea of his novel came when he realised that ‘all these other concerns’ that he had been ‘playing out’ ‘as a visual arts project that involved radio and transmissions and so on’ could be tied ‘to a very clear parabola of a very conventional narrative arc from birth to death’. The novel thus returns to the frame of the nineteenth-century novel (the delivery of copper which coincides with the baby’s birth in the opening scene also signals the link with David Copper-field and his cauld, for instance), but McCarthy only returns to the English novel, English house and Dickensian legacy as a ‘a Trojan horse’, to explore the network of transmissions from another angle. Mark Davies suggests that McCarthy plays with pastiche, genre expectations, and ‘onomastics as comical artifice.’

To begin with, although C revisits the Bildungsroman (we follow the protagonist, Serge, from birth to death), and History (the novel toys with the discovery of telegraphy, radio, the cinema, aviation), the text also signals an essential lack of depth, presenting deliberately flat landscapes which act as symptoms of inauthenticity. ‘He sees things flat, he paints things flat’ (C 39): Serge continually fails to grasp perspective, as a child, as a
student studying architecture, as a pilot, as a surveyor in Egypt looking for the right place for a communication pylon.

11 Even in childhood, Serge, the protagonist, is enticed by one-dimensional images, such as the flat figures painted on his early childhood’s building blocks, the Méliès films, the shadow of a couple copulating behind a sheet, like shadows on a blank screen. Serge and his sister Sophie use the garden to map an abstract game of Monopoly, projecting streets, houses and hotels on specific areas, then end up projecting them mentally rather than walking through them.

12 In the end the novel simply widens its one-dimensional map. In Egypt, the land of the flat painted figures and hieroglyphs that so appeal to Serge, the landscape ‘seems utterly synthetic,’ ‘tearing the mist into gauzy shreds,’ the soil resembles a painting, the Nile looks ‘synthetic too: grained and oily, like a film’ (282). To the film metaphor is added the Victorian model of the panorama: ‘settlements and stretches of the desert beyond them look mechanical as well, alternating and repeating like a flat panorama that’s wound round and round by a dull clockwork motor.’ (283)

13 As a World War One observer on a plane, Serge takes photographs with a ‘gun-camera’ that activates the dual meaning of shooting, blending artillery and photography. In the sky, depth rather than gravity is ditched. Carlisle, the artist assigned to the front as an artist, who proves unable to comply: ‘Got to have a damn horizon if you’re going to paint a landscape!’ (146) Serge, on the contrary, is elated: with its ‘flattened progression of greens, browns and yellows, patches of light and shade,’ ‘the fallen landscape prints itself in Serge’s mind by dint of his repeated passages over it’ (125). Flying gives access to an unbearable flatness of being, a textual and literally erotic climax. Serge relishes the living map below, ‘a mandala of roads and pathways, at least half of them unusable, criss-crossing and looping over the open ground; then rows of empty trenches—last month’s, or last year’s, the year before’s’ (139). The ground becomes a pattern of criss-crossing lines, while, ironically, frontiers vanish—there is not even the ribbon of a line differentiating German trenches from French ones.

14 Exhilaration is linked to the fact that Serge is a keen observer of soundscapes rather than landscapes. Only through sound-transmissions may he contribute to war mapping: his ‘K.K.’ transmissions are relayed by wires and mysteriously translated into ‘filming sound’ by underground operators, then turned into dark lines on maps to calculate enemy positions. The synaesthetic text enmeshes sight and sound, up and down, creating a network of lines that recall the mad, mysterious map drawn by Sophie before she commits suicide.

15 The network challenges traditional definitions of the human. The novel begins in a school for the deaf, a metaphor for a world in which we are all deaf to the multiplicity of messages sent through the air. The text harps on the mating moths’ ‘kind of clicking sound that pervades the air’ (29), the hum of machines at Versoie (turning larvae into silk) or the buzz of the telegraphic system built by the father, not to mention the myriad of radio transmissions criss-crossing the text, including Serge’s eavesdropping on ships’ signals with his homemade receiver as a child, the ship’s radio on his last voyage, and his clicking system of transmission on board his plane. Serge occupies all positions of the communication system, from transmitter (as observer on board a plane) to radio carrier (when he takes the broken but crackling radio receiver from the plane after the crash, paying more attention to it than to the body of his fellow pilot) to parasitic listener (not vacating the air as requested after a ship’s CQD or distress call) to receiver/transmitter—
he is jokingly referred to as the ‘pylon man,’ and dies claiming that he has been called, as if his body had become the radio registering the call from the beyond; the puzzled ship attendant checks that no actual message has been sent via the on board radio, but by then Serge is his own delirious, complete radio system.

For McCarthy, radio transmission is a metatextual image of the text itself. For him, the technological model is only an upgrading of the Shakespearian voices vibrating in the air in *The Tempest*: ‘and it seems to me that, with modern technology, this becomes true. It’s not a fantasy.’ Modern telecommunication ‘turns the air into a psychic space’; the modern artist simply tunes into these message: it ‘is an interesting model of what the artist might be, instead of the person who originates the message, someone who tunes in and picks up and remixes stuff, other messages, that are already out there.’

### The text as a network of repetitions

Thus, like the black box project, *C* explores what Holly Pester calls ‘transmission in all its necropoetical aspects and hailing effect through sound media dispersal’.

The reader is thus asked to pay attention to the ‘coordinates that click their way in, . . . then flash out again’ (C 65). Serge’s father seeks to invent a telegraph which already exists (and his version makes spelling mistakes), calling attention to repetition. Motifs recur, mapping the last section onto the first one, as SOMA designates both the School of Military Aeronautics and Alexander’s Tomb (and symptoms of trauma), the Egyptian tombs and obelisks recall and enlarge the crypt at Versoie. The most obvious signal is the eponymous letter ‘C’ (sometimes mutated into ‘K’) that keeps crackling and calling throughout the novel. ‘C’ is the key to a novel that reverses George Perec’s formula: instead of a letter missing (the famous ‘e’) the letter ‘C’ spawns a staggering paradigm of combinations. To use Menke’s words, the eponymous letter ‘C’ comes to us in no one’s voice, wirelessly, ‘[a letter] pulled out of the air’ (Menke 241) when the tale opens, then stretched into stuttering repetitions when it ends (the protagonist’s last words dwindle into what Jane Lewty calls ‘the sibilant hiss of static’).

The novel is on a loop. ‘C’ calls for vision (to see), and journeys (the sea), as a metatextual dialogue points out, but mostly for crossing, cross-breeding and criss-crossing. Indeed, Jane Lewty reeds ‘CQ’ as ‘seek you’. Mostly, ‘C’ breeds words; the protagonist is called Carrefax, the novel deals with crypts, communication, crackling (white noise or static), Mela Chole (the black bile of melancholy) Carbon, ‘the basic element of life’ (292), chemicals, copper, codes and encryption. The four sections are aptly named ‘Cawl,’ ‘Chute,’ ‘Crash,’ ‘Call’ (the novel comes full circle with a play on homophony, leading from cawl, the membrane covering the baby’s head at birth, to ‘call,’ the voice from the beyond). ‘C’ also triggers alliterative echoes, harping on mechanics, scarabs or insects, not to mention the switch from K4 to a Kafkaian metamorphosis into a cockroach or cafard, ‘a blatant plugging into the Metamorphosis.’

Repeatedly, throughout the novel, documents are CCed or carbon-copied (120), until the character nears death and seems sucked by static into the void, carbonisé (145): ‘Like time itself, he’s flattening, turning into carbon paper: the black smear between the sheets, the surface through which things repeat, CC themselves, but in what will always remain black, and blank.’ (308) The character is both repetition and blank, always already a copy, a mere double, an understudy, ‘doublure’ or lining. ‘C’ becomes a coded message, a password, a cryptonym in Abraham and Torok’s sense of the term.
18 If Serge is posited as a flat character, it not quite in E.M. Forster’s sense of the word nor entirely in a cartoon-like fashion, in the manner of Tintin, it is because Serge is, like the book itself, a coherer. Unlike modern radio stations that use continuous audio waves, early radio transmitters relied on Morse code, sending dots and dashes that the receiver converted into sounds. The receiving device was called a detector or coherer. Serge, the pylon-man, is indeed a piece of apparatus encoding and receiving text messages, a patchwork of echoes reconnected and revisited, a switchboard. Tom McCarthy sees literature as ‘a network eternally dispersing and re-dispersing’ and he refers to T.S. Eliot as a perfect example of the way in which literature tunes in to previous texts, switching voices as if turning dials. The novel is a historical and intertextual patchwork, as playfully signalled by secondary characters’ names like Macaulay or Carlisle.

19 Just as the mechanical loom weaves in thread after thread of silk, or the radio transmitter picks up the messages of ships, the text picks up motifs and echoes. Echoing Serres, McCarthy claims that literature is ‘impure,’ ‘it’s always both parasitical on other discourses and modes and itself kind of parasite-ridden by them.’ Serge’s brush with death, as he is about to be shot, recalls Blanchot. Serge owes much to Sergei, Freud’s so-called wolf-man, who felt that a veil was cutting him off from the world, and was traumatised by the early death by suicide of his sister Anna. Among the symptoms were blocked bowel movements and sex from behind. Revisiting Freud’s case, Abraham and Torok dismissed the primal scene (transferred in McCarthy’s novel to copulation glimpsed on the screen of a sheet) to suggest that the wolf-man encrypted his older sister’s death; similarly, Serge feels both sexually aroused and deeply disturbed by his sister’s burial, which also buries itself within his own body: ‘Serge feels a heaviness enter his stomach, as though something foreign were being lodged there’ (83). The literally ‘visceral’ sensation makes him feel like a pregnant woman (83), while he is sent to a sanatorium to be treated for blocked bowels, a sanatorium that is also modelled after Thomas Mann’s Magic Mountain. The war episode, which harps on the rhapsodic becoming-machine of Serge, sitting backwards as an observer, recalls Benjamin’s Angel of History but also draws heavily upon Marinetti, just as the Necronautical society pays tribute to Marinetti’s Manifesto, in which ‘technology just erupts and comes into its own as an aesthetic object in and of itself.’

20 The failed séance that blends spiritism and radio-transmissions recalls the satiric tradition of the likes of Robert Browning’s Mr Sludge the Medium, but also actual séances (see Jane Lewty’s analysis of the text in the light of Victorian spiritism and the model of transmitter and receiver). The novel begins with the switch from telegraph to radio, and adds a touch of Marconi (whose parents met on a silk farm) to the memories of Alexander Bell, whose mother was deaf and who slew the family cat to experiment with its larynx (just as Sophie poisons the cat and stuffs it, then manipulates its wired leg, in a diminutive galvanic, Frankensteinian experiment that makes her laugh at the ‘catastrophe’). Bell also placed a transmitter in the tomb of his brother, to communicate from the beyond (just as Serge’s father puts a telegraphic key in Sophie’s crypt) which is said to have prompted his invention of the telephone. This also recalls the madman’s vision of a radio for the dead in Virginia Woolf’s Kew Gardens, just as the letters spelt by planes and the mention of Glaxo irresistibly recall Mrs Dalloway. Intertextual grafting creates a monstrous patchwork of a text, seething with references from Tintin, Sidney’s Arcadia recited by the deaf children of Versoie to the delayed decoding of explosion with the chemistry experiment in childhood (a diminutive version of Conrad’s Youth) or
Serge’s Kafkaian, fantasmatic transformation into a beetle as he is dying. The novel ends in 1922, the year when Ulysses, The Waste Land, Jacob’s Room were published, the tidal wave of Modernism, but also the year in which the BBC was founded (Serge is meant to locate the best place for a pylon that will allow the broadcast of the new propaganda service to reach the Empire), the year in which, ironically, Britain lost Egypt, and Carter and Lord Carnavon found and entered Tutankhamun’s tomb, triggering the legend of crypt and curse. Incidentally, 1922 is also the year when E.M. Forster’s guidebook Alexandria, a History and a Guide, was published. Forster spent the war years in Alexandria, and the Alexandria section of C, with ‘the salvaged jetsam of [the] city’s patchwork past’ (252) enmeshes echoes of Forster and Cavafy, the Alexandrian poet who fascinated Forster (one secondary character is referred to as Morgane and Petrou, Forster’s and Cavafy’s middle names).

The list seems virtually endless, as the text ghosts other text, ‘a Frankenstein kind of reassembled document,’ to quote McCarthy. For Andrew Gibson, ‘the literary tradition itself becomes a formalism, and a storehouse of formalisms.’ The craft of writing becomes a space of repetition and re-enactment, wiring pieces of fiction and text, so that Serge is denied individual identity, in a gesture which goes against the legacy of the Thatcherite cult of the individual. Among the tropes that create a post-human mechanical identity is the recurrent image of insects. There is a web of insects, from the vers à soie of Versoie to the Egyptian scarabs (not to mention butterflies, lice and ticks, and the mysterious thing that, in the Pharaoh’s tomb, bites Serge on the ankle and kills him, an infected tick or parody of Cleopatra’s snakes). Nicholas Royle sees insects in literature as models of textual telepathy; McCarthy also systematically twists insects and incest, as parasitic paronomasia opening up channels of communication. Incest and insects offer a metaphor for intersection, for the systematic tuning in and out of hypotexts, as if switching dials, a method which owes as much to modernism as to post-modernism. Incestuous desire is spelt out at the end when intercourse with the female archaeologist takes place in the dark tunnel of the tomb’s womb or constricted bowels, under the sign of the pharaonic union of brother and sister; sex becomes a figure for reverse birth in the space of death, the ritual of Isis and Osiris. The radio’s electric coherer is doubled by Isis’s box designed to contain the remains of Osiris, mysteriously wired with loops of copper, which Serge identifies as a coherer too. Insect and incest function as a trope for the novel’s palimpsestuous nature.

**Cassandra’s History: glaucoma and melancholy predictability**

The novel tends to yield to pre-recorded interpretation through its self-reflexive nature and the running commentary offered by McCarthy in interviews. Psychoanalysis becomes less a way of retrieving lost information than an encoded pattern. Secrets (Sophie, Serge’s sister, may be pregnant when she dies, and the identity of the father is unclear) matter less than symptoms. The enmeshing of machine, death and erotic impulse and discharge ties in with crippled mourning and the incorporation of the lost object, as defined both by Freud’s melancholia and Abraham and Torok’s crypt. Archeology and excavation are obvious signals for digging up the unconscious. Laurence Rickels in Aberrations of Mourning, a book quoted by McCarthy, draws attention to Diderot’s connection between the language of the deaf and dumb and hieroglyphs, as well as to ‘the phantom
insemination of sister by brother within Oedipal zones of ambivalence’ (Rickels 125) in the Mummy films and tales of Isis and Osiris. Serge (pronounced as Surge, Sairge or Serge), becomes the living tomb of his sister, before being ecstatically recalled to her; his lack of sensitivity as others die, or even before his sister’s tomb, may be construed as traumatic response, all the more so as Rickels draws attention to neurotic melancholy projections as being always flat, like a film projection, as opposed to hallucinations.

23 But Serge’s lack of empathy actually begins before his sister’s death, when he throws the building blocks he was playing with as a child into a brownish stream, narcissistically bending over till he falls and nearly drowns. The sentimental servant who rescues him is out of place in his world of absent feelings, as if he had been anaesthetized at birth by his mother’s chloroform, long before he injects cocaine in his eyes to see better while flying. The hammered face of his toy soldier foreshadows the broken faces of World War One veterans, and the flow of the novel, like the murky stream of childhood in the park of Versoie, carries its web of dark matter long before the hydroopathic rest cure. Repeatedly the protagonist is blinded by membranes, the cawl, the furry web following the sister’s death, the parachute silk which wraps the crashing plane when it flies into an ejected pilot. This eclipse of vision recalls the Black Box experiment and McCarthy’s interest in glaucoma. Serge is a parasite of modernity, a tick grafted onto a plane thriving on visions of disaster below, a tick bitten by another tick in a crypt. Serge simply embodies the death drive of modern technology. In an article about literature and technology, McCarthy toys with Don Quijote and the windmills, as both a ludicrous madman and a man who is capable of detecting, in the vibration of the mills, the sounds of future technology and machines replacing human beings, the clicks and cogs of industrialization. Serge is a receptor and transmitter of telecommunications gone haywire, the self turned into a machine-self, encrypting the dead. A significant moment occurs when Serge watches a shell flying by, in a neat parallel trajectory to his plane, asking a question in German—‘Kennscht mi noch?’ (173): war and violence mean positive identification for Serge.

24 Similarly, when he takes his exam to become a pilot, he answers a question about train catastrophe, which he realizes is inescapable: as soon as the network is built, the accident *will* happen, it is merely a matter of time and random coincidence. Sophie’s mad map is a wild network of irrelevant disconnected elements which she ties together, as a formidable catalyst foreshadowing World War One: she is both going mad and a Cassandra figure, sensing catastrophe through a flickering web of lines and sounds. The 1922 Egypt episode is perhaps less an echo of Tutenkhamun as a new map weaving itself, through a parody of spy stories, a parody of Durrell’s politics of Alexandria, a set of disembodied signals (the spies imitate each other, the French and the English and the Germans spying on a cargo of butterflies because it may or may not be a code or a decoy or nothing) just as tourists take pictures of each other taking pictures of the pyramids. This is the politics of cartoons, a Tintin joke; it is also the politics of a world lost in hypertechnology, constant transmission, a sea of meaningless dark matter. Reality is a wired dummy chamber, the text an avant-garde game which simply repeats and transmits nothing but the postmodern melancholy of the technological death-drive. Thus the text as coherer refuses humanism and individual emotions (seen as manifestations of grand narratives and capitalism) yet explores networks, revisiting and subverting Forster’s ‘only connect’.

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To conclude, McCarthy’s C revisits World War One, and the British construction of the World Wide BBC service at the very moment when the Empire collapsed and England lost Egypt, latching on to ‘the diffuse and disintegrating movements’ in acoustic space (Labelle xx). Textual space becomes an imaginary soundscape. The text keeps pasting and transmitting texts and echoes, playing upon irony and textual cannibalization, obsession and archival and Derridean deferral, as the parasite becomes the system itself, to use Serres’s concept. The protagonist exists as a revisited psychoanalytic case, as if encapsulating Lyotard’s network self, but to suggest that ‘the processes and avatars of death are active in formalisms, such as radio and the internet in particular.’ As in Jonathan Coe’s What a Carve Up, the plane becomes a metaphor for modernity that only soars to cheat, repeat and crash. So that beyond the gleeful play on models and McCarthy’s emphatic denial of humanism, the metaphors of melancholy also function as black bile seeping into the text, navigating inauthenticity and the borders of death, turning the text into a black box, emitting static, intertextual obsolete fragments, noise re-enacting echoes of catastrophe, ‘melancholia as cultural logic.’

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**Websites**


**NOTES**

1. At the time, it was suggested that Bourdin may have been a double agent, used by the police to make certain that Lord Salisbury’s bill, limiting immigrants’ entry into Britain, should be passed in Parliament, thanks to public outrage.
6. Mark Davies, ‘Screening and the Self in C by Tom McCarthy,’ M2 Thesis, University of Paris 3-Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013, 17. Davies also points out the ‘soi/soie pun’ in Versoie, and McCarthy’s determination to ‘assassinate’ the traditional character. I wish to thank Mark Davies for drawing my attention to Tom McCarthy’s work, and sharing recordings of the ‘Calling All Agents’ Conference.


10. Richard Menke twists upon the actual sentence, applied to Kipling’s Wireless (Menke 241).


17. See the analysis given by Eric Langley at the ‘Calling All Agents’ symposium.


20. In an interview with Claire Armistead, McCarthy says: ‘Forster is the one, he’s the exception for me. He’s the one humanist whom I absolutely love. He’s a brilliant writer, he was kind of in the wrong camp, but he’s a brilliant writer and he’s a big presence in the book.’ He mentions the Guide to Alexandria as an instance of psychogeography: ‘he was already doing what they’re trying to do.’ ‘The Stuff of Creation—books podcasts,’ http://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2013/nov/22/stuff-creation-writers-objects-podcast last accessed on March 20, 2014. Forster reads Alexandria as a palimpsest, a series of snippets of the past, scribbled messages that have become unreadable, and that the city is endlessly transmitting, from its catacombs to the sunken ruins of its Pharos, thus ghosting the city in a way that draws McCarthy’s attention.
ABSTRACTS

This paper deals with the way in which Tom McCarthy engages with the representation of flat landscapes in his recent novel *C*. Serge, the protagonist, sees the world from a plane, without perspective. Landscape turns into soundscape, the dissemination of sound and static, radio signals and telegraphic messages. The text itself becomes a switchboard, a patchwork of quotations and echoes, a crypt. Serge is, like the book itself, a coherer, a radio transmitter. Bearing in mind McCarthy’s experiments as an artist (the recreation of the Greenwich bombing, the Black Box project), we will study the enmeshing of motifs, paradigmatic repetition and variation, as a way of revisiting postmodern melancholy as a form of passage, but also technological death-drive.

Le cohéreur, ou radioconducteur, est un des éléments des premiers récepteurs radio. Le protagoniste du roman de Tom McCarthy *C* ne voit le monde qu’en deux dimensions, irrésistiblement plat, comme toujours vu depuis cet avion depuis lequel il assure une transmission radio durant la Grande Guerre. C’est que l’espace se fait brouillage, parasitage, espace radio métissant les messages. Palimpseste croisant les intertextes jusqu’au vertige, *C* joue sur le cryptage et la crypte, pour explorer la modernité. À la lumière des incursions de McCarthy vers les installations et l’art expérimental, comme le projet Boîte Noire ou le film factice sur l’attentat de Greenwich, nous verrons comment le texte explore la nostalgie postmoderne comme une forme de passage, mais aussi de pulsion de mort technologique.

INDEX

**Mots-clés**: cryptage, crypte, brouillage, Grande Guerre, intertextes, McCarthy, nostalgie, palimpsestes, pulsion de mort

**Keywords**: crypting, crypt, blurring, death drive, Great War, intertexts, nostalgia, palimpsests

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