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Eve, Martin Paul (2016) Structures, Signposts, and Plays: Modernist Anxieties & Postmodern Influences in Tom McCarthy's C. In: Duncan, Dennis (ed.) Tom McCarthy: Critical Essays. Glyphi.

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STRUCTURES, SIGNPOSTS AND PLAYS  
 MODERNIST ANXIETIES AND POSTMODERN  
 INFLUENCES IN TOM MCCARTHY'S *C*

Martin Paul Eve

Mid-way through Thomas Pynchon's influential first novel, *V.* (1963), the reader is introduced to Kurt Mondaugen, a wireless radio operator stationed in the colonial German Südwest in 1922. Mondaugen is there to investigate a set of atmospheric disturbances ('sferics') that have been detected and that are resulting in a group of strange messages on his radio receiving device. The most notable of these messages, as decoded by the sinister Lieutenant Weissman, reads 'DIGEWOELDTIMSTEALALENSWTASNDEURFUALRLIKST'. As Weissmann interprets these characters: 'I remove every third letter and obtain: GODMEANTNURRK. This rearranged spells Kurt Mondaugen. [ ... ] The remainder of the message [ ... ] now reads: DIEWELTISTALLESWASDERFALLIST'. With some added spaces this message reads 'die welt ist alles, was der fall ist', widely known as the phrase that opens Wittgenstein's famous work of logical positivist philosophy, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921): 'The world is all that is the case'. Mondaugen replies to Weissman, in a fashion

that sounds as ‘curt’ as his name, that he has ‘heard that somewhere before’ (Pynchon, 1995b: 278).

When it comes to having ‘heard that somewhere before’, much the same could be said when reading the works of Tom McCarthy after Pynchon. For these themes of cryptanalysis, anagrammatic play, modernist (or at least Wittgensteinian) philosophy and radio waves – so prominent across Pynchon’s oeuvre – also find a locus in Tom McCarthy’s 2010 novel, *C*. *C* tells the life story of Serge Carrefax, a figure born at the turn of the technological revolution. A character blessed with analytical rather than emotional intelligence, Carrefax represents the blossoming and abrupt death of technological utopianism. After all, as the text notes with supreme irony, there is a belief in Serge’s lifetime regarding war that ‘the more we can chatter with one another, the less likely that sort of thing becomes’ (*C*, 48). The twentieth century, of course, tells a very different story. McCarthy’s text is also saturated with Pynchonian references that can be seen even by a comparison to the small portion of *V.* that I have quoted above. Indeed, the publisher even notes on the jacket of the first UK edition that *C* is ‘reminiscent of Bolaño, Beckett and Pynchon’. Although the lineage of influence between the writers is never explicit, given McCarthy’s and Pynchon’s shared fascination with literary irony, metafictional reflexivity, single-letter acronymic titles (their ironic hallmarks of technological rationality and the language of applied science), an interest in wireless telegraphy, cryptography and technology, and a model of characterization that is more functional-pragmatic than emotional-empathetic (Eve, 2014: 28–9), it is far from surprising that many reviewers draw comparisons between the writers (see, for just two examples, Burn, 2012; Tayler, 2010).

This affinity between Pynchon and McCarthy stands for more than this specific relation, however. As almost the archetypal post-modernist, it is difficult but to read a writer’s relationship to Pynchon as a metonym for a relationship to postmodernism, in its many guises. While McCarthy has already been diagnosed by Justus Nieland (2012: 570) as a ‘forensic scientist of modernism’, in this chapter I instead situate McCarthy within a broader intertextual scope that stretches into the postmodern frame. Indeed, from this starting point

of a resonance between McCarthy and Pynchon, I suggest that it would make sense to treat seriously the situation of McCarthy within postmodernism, or at least to investigate how his novels interact with this classification.

Such an analysis of McCarthy's postmodernism, I contend, is overdue and can be thought through a threefold series of 'structures', 'signposts' and 'plays' for more reasons than to create my Derridean pun of a title. In the first section, 'Structures', I will examine how the formal elements of McCarthy's writing – at the paragraph, sentence, and novel level – imitate many of the postmodernist experimental and ludic features of temporal disorientation while beginning to explore some of the contradictions in thinking about McCarthy's work as a return to any preceding generic style. In 'Signposts' I will unearth some of the ways in which McCarthy's text points to itself in the metafictional tradition, signalling its historical placement but also thereby warning the reader of the techniques that must be deployed to understand its ludic form. This primarily draws upon the historical ungroundedness of McCarthy's quasi-historical novel. Finally, in 'Plays', I will look at some of the explicit textual resonances with and re-enactments of the postmodern canon, including the works of Don DeLillo and J. G. Ballard.

Through such a progression it is my intention to show that *C* can be read profitably within the generic histories of postmodernism and not just through a modernist filter. Indeed, with its echoes of Pynchon, DeLillo and Ballard I want to argue that, like *Remainder*, *C* is a novel about the classificatory history of twentieth-century literature; that most metafictional of fictions, a text about genre, a literary-historical fiction, concerned with the history of literature.

As a final note before proceeding: I choose not to define the terms 'modernism' or 'postmodernism' *in toto* outright. This is not only because it is tedious to encounter every essay that undertakes this task, but more importantly because it is impossible and always selective. I instead opt here to make clear the aspect of (post)modernism to which I am referring at a given moment, be it epistemology vs. ontology, ludic play, temporal distortion or any of the other characteristics frequently assigned under these taxonomies. That said, it is important

to acknowledge Lyotard's (1984: 79) well-known proposition about cultural postmodernity (even if not specific to postmodern literature) that 'the postmodern is undoubtedly part of the modern'. The boundaries between modernism and postmodernism are neither strictly temporal nor thematic or stylistic. It can seem, when dealing with postmodernism, as though the contemporary reader is caught within the same bind faced by Justice Potter Stewart in defining pornography: 'I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description, and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it' (Supreme Court of the United States of America, 1964). Furthermore, it is important to note that there is a large degree of critical effort at present that is devoted to charting the resurgence of modernist-like literary practices in contemporary writing (perhaps most prominently, James, 2012). What I will begin to suggest here, however, is that although *C* knowingly toys with modernist structures, it can equally be said to deploy postmodernist tropes, through its formalist elements (its structures), through the ontological destabilisation of its histories (its signposts to nowhere), and through its re-enactments of its intertextual affiliations (its plays).

### 1. Structures: McCarthy's Formal Postmodernism

To begin with some remarks on the postmodern form and structure of McCarthy's novel: *C* is, undoubtedly, a disorientating read. Indeed, as the text itself puts it, in one of its metatextual moments, 'the next few scenes are confusing' (*C*, 58). Although not obfuscating in its narrative to the same extent as the modernist *Ulysses* (1922) or the postmodern *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), the reader can feel constantly wrong-footed, several steps behind his or her authorial guide. Evidently, this places the novel in the tradition of experimental work favoured by the high modernists and postmodernists in which difficulty plays a core role. As I will demonstrate in the next section this is partly a result of the text's 'clever clever' game-playing and its relationship to history. However, it is also evident that the novel is extremely

rich in terms of its linguistic and structural signification and it is to the playful elements of the novel's language that I first turn here.

To begin to see evidence of how McCarthy encodes a ludic mode through moments of metafictional reflexivity, usually centred around linguistic games – a trope found in much postmodernist writing – consider, as an example, how the reader is told, early in the text, that:

Serge gets stuck on words like 'antipodean' and 'fortuitous', and even ones like 'tables'. He keeps switching letters around. It's not deliberate, just something that he does. (*C*, 38)

This instance is just the first of many in which McCarthy distils the novel's totality into a microcosmic metonym at the levels of language, of theme, and of authorship. Firstly, in terms of language, when Serge confuses the letters in 'tables', McCarthy asks us to consider whether the character might be the 'ablest' (the most competent to deal with the trials of modernity?), in a 'stable' condition (with his stagnation and focus on blockage, to which I will return), whether he might 'be last' to survive, or whether he is simply playing with a 'lab set', an apparatus that proves so fatal for his sister. Secondly, and as just one example, at the thematic level, this passage connects with the 'tilting' table of the séance later in the novel where Serge rigs a device to interfere with a medium's trickery (*C*, 230). In this sense, Serge's early 'switching letters around' in the word 'tables' parallels the rearrangement of letters that he later conducts on the medium's table. Finally, in terms of authorship, all moments of metafiction suggest an easy (or perhaps lazy) reading in which we might consider whether there is a parallel between McCarthy and Serge; is Serge, in some way, the 'author' of *C*? McCarthy's novel, I would argue, tends to stop just short of such metatextual gimmickry. After all, the linguistic playfulness does not occur consistently throughout the novel. It seems, rather, that the flattening of diegetic levels that is suggested by McCarthy's metatextual play even demonstrates self-awareness of the metafictional tradition and works to signal this.

When this metafictional linguistic playfulness does surface again in *C*, it does so in a way that is derived from much modernist but also postmodern fiction. As an example from a work of high modernism,

this can be seen in the wrecked anagrammatical play of *Ulysses*'s 'annos ludendo hausì' for 'Iohannes Doulandus' pointed out by Don Gifford (1988: 560–1). This ludic mode is continued, however, in Pynchon's *V.* with Kurt Mondaugen's aforementioned message but also in *Gravity's Rainbow* where the phrase 'medoshnicka bleelar medoometnozz in bergamot' appears to contain many of the book's most pertinent phrases, including: Enzian, Blicero, zero, kabbala and doomed (Pynchon, 1995a: 746; Weisenburger, 2006: 373). Anagrammatic play features consistently through *C*: the puns on *insect/incest* run throughout the novel and connect to the text's thematic preoccupations. In this case, the family connotations of *incest* followed shortly by *insect* (a trope connected to death at the end of the novel) seem to relate to Serge's sister, thereby binding the narrative of *C* to Freud's Wolf Man case. Indeed, Freud's patient, Sergei Pankejeff (the 'Wolf Man'), suffered from a variety of nervous conditions in the wake of his sister's suicide, including depression and severe constipation, all of which happen to McCarthy's similarly-named character Serge. Again, the effect of McCarthy's playfulness in the novel is to structurally bind chronologically disparate elements together (family/incest → death/insect) in a way that is linguistically ostentatious, thereby metafictionally highlighting the readerly act of interpretation: a most postmodern trait.

At the microcosmic level, however, the disorientation and aesthetic swirling in the novel is also a result of the text's micro-prolepsis (its brief jumps forwards in time and/or knowledge). By this, I mean the fact that the text makes no concession to the reader's lack of foreknowledge of events only later revealed, in spite of its otherwise overwhelmingly linear, chronological character (on which I will say more shortly). Take, as an example, the instance at the beginning of the novel where Carrefax senior is sending for a doctor to tend to his pregnant wife and the 'F's and 'Q's in his telegraphy system are substituted ('F' [.-.-] and 'Q' [---] being inverse codes in the Morse system) (*C*, 6). The reader is, though, aware at this stage neither that early telegraphy will form a central thematic tenet of the novel nor that such a prototypical system has been developed by the character. Only a few pages later, this is explained in more detail to the reader

(*C*, 12). The length of stretch between mystery and resolution here is not substantial enough to make the work as taxing as many of the high postmodernist fictions, but it does immediately call to mind their 'difficulty' and plays on temporal distortion (say, for example, the mediations on time in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* [1969]).

That said, while epistemic play is a frequent feature of all fiction and may even be intrinsic to its form, particularly within modern and postmodern varieties, *C* is curious in its presentation because it chooses to conceal information from the reader only for brief periods before revealing its hand. It is also an outlier in this respect because the chronological macro-structure of the novel is entirely linear; a mode that does not always lend itself to abrupt retrospective enlightenment (for a counter example, one could compare the temporal leaps of Graham Swift's *Waterland* [1983] and the moment of grim revelation in that text that is facilitated by its final analeptic shock). Although there are portions of Serge's life that are not narrated (i.e. the text's chapters are non-adjacent in chronological terms), *C*'s quadripartite structure of 'Caul', 'Chute', 'Crash', 'Call' moves definitively forward in time through the life of Serge Carrefax. Although this may, at first, sound more like a realist mode than a postmodern styling, this structure actually shows, in terms of literary history, why *C* appears to do something different from the forms of modernist epistemic play to which it pays homage. Indeed, while the dark tone of McCarthy's war-saturated novel might induce a temptation to think that this text is a dystopian historical novel in which the critical force of history is bought to bear on the present – a didactic text that might warn us of the dangers of the past repeating (which depends upon cycles and historical analogy) – *C* does not seem to be wholly convinced by the logic of cycles and repetition. Instead, its structure is aptly *C*-shaped. The homophonic titles of the first and last sections of the text ('Caul'/'Call') imply the loop, the cycle, but eventually shy away from it in a differentiated repetition. Likewise, the cleansing instructions of Serge's doctor at the clinic are to think in terms of change, not cycles: 'things mutate', he notes, 'that is the way of nature – of good nature. [ ... ] You though, [ ... ] have got blockage, [ ... ] instead of transformation, only repetition' (*C*, 105).



To reiterate: through the fact that its first and last section titles sound identical, in conjunction with the above in-text diagnoses of ‘repetition’, *C* hints that the reader should expect to see parallels and cycles. This then extends to the interpretation of the generic structures within which *C* might be read; echoes of and affinities with modernism and postmodernism. However, Serge seems incapable of closing the loop (and such repetition is presented, as above, as a pathology) and so, while his death bears the hallmarks of his childhood, the repetition is imperfect. This changes the focus in the novel’s historiography from an epistemology of similitude (in which we would *know* and recognize elements of the past by their resemblance to the present) to one of a fresh ontology (in which the present is a newly transformed world and way of *being*, evolved out of the past but distinct from it). Such a focus is the classic shift in dominant – from epistemology to ontology – charted by Brian McHale and that he claims defines the postmodern novel, situated at the heart of *C*’s historiography (McHale, 1986).

To demonstrate further this ontological mutation, which is reflected in McCarthy’s language, consider also the textual collocation of *incest* with the name of Serge’s sister, Sophie (imperfectly repeated as Sophia), at the end of the novel that harks back to the familial nearvoyeurism at the village fair scene and his sister’s use of his penis as a telegraph key in the life of young Serge (*C*, 22, 60–1, 253). Yet, at the moment of Serge’s death it is not the term *incest* that appears, which characterizes his childhood and where it ‘all began’ (*C*, 252), but rather it is an *insect* bite (*C*, 304–10). Through such moves and linguistic play, McCarthy’s text invites ‘pattern-making and pattern-interpreting behavior’ from its readers (by implying an affinity between chronologically distant moments in the text) only to frustrate such text-processing (by showing and stating that such affinity is always imperfect in its analogy), a trope of interpretative refusal that, again, McHale famously ascribes as a core feature of the postmodern novel (McHale, 1979: 88).

This attitude towards time and cyclicity – enacted at the micro and macro levels in the text – also brings implications for *C*’s placement as a postmodern historical novel, to which I will now turn. Such

complicated dynamics, where each structural description of text and history seems only partially to fit, or is complicated, resists wholeness and only gives *almosts*. Within such a framework, these, then, are at least some of the structures of C: almost-repetitious, almost-analogous and, as I will now show, almost-historiographic.

## 2. Signposts to Nowhere: McCarthy's Postmodern Historiography

If C is almost many things, there is at least some certainty in the fact that parts of the text are *definitely* metatextual. There are, however, several more direct instances where a metatextual function can be ascribed to this work, but that also contribute to an understanding of the novel's generic placement, primarily in its role as a work of historical fiction. One of the foremost of these aspects is the text's cryptic references to the plane of Lieutenant Paul Friedrich 'Fritz' Kempf, against whom Serge fights in an aerial battle in the later part of the novel and upon which I will now undertake some historical unpicking before returning to its postmodern implications. Kempf, a recipient of the iron cross, famously had the words 'kennscht mi noch' painted on the wings of his plane, a fact that C accurately re-conveys, and which, roughly translated, means 'do you still remember me?' (C, 173). Kempf was a member of squadron Jasta B (which was originally called Jasta 2 [VanWyngarden, 2007: 6]) and, later, Jastaschule I, and was credited with four victories over the course of the First World War, thereby narrowing the potential date for Serge's encounter with him to four specific moments (VanWyngarden, 2007: 90). Two of Kempf's takedowns were of Sopwith Camel aeroplanes (on 20 October 1917 and 8 May 1918 respectively) and one a Sopwith Pup (5 June 1917), both types of single-seater biplane, but a victory is also logged to him on either 29 or 30 April 1917 against a two-seater plane (a BE2e) (Franks et al., 1996: 179; VanWyngarden, 2007: 39). At no point in the war that I have managed to find did Kempf down an RE 8 aircraft (of the type in which Serge flies).

As with all historical fiction, however, it is unwise to mistake the aesthetic use of historical detail for a correlation with reality. At some point in all historical fiction the connection with reality is severed. Indeed, *C*'s dogfight is not based upon any one specific account and there was no figure called 'Serge Carrefax' who was shot down, although the allusion to Kempf rather than the more renowned 'Red Baron' (von Richthofen) could be said to narrow McCarthy's potential sourcings. Pinpointing such data is not, though, the purpose of this historical digression. It is rather to show, by example, that *C*'s aesthetics and content presuppose, or at least insinuate, an archive, regardless of whether one exists. The level of specific historical detail here – that the reader is given the markings of one precise plane as Serge's foe – invites a type of paranoid reading that the text must ultimately frustrate. This is not a difference of type or kind to other historical fiction, which always relies on such a withdrawal from fact, but rather a difference of degree as to where a reading becomes 'paranoid', a difference of placing for where the suspension of disbelief is triggered. This trope resurges in much postmodern writing that intermingles fact and fiction within a metafictional context that explicitly seeks to situate history as merely another form of narrative.

To understand why *C*'s form as a historical novel is postmodern rather than realist, though, it is first necessary to define the classical historical novel. After all, *all* historical fiction mixes fact and fiction. Commonly traced in origin to Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), the subtitle of which is *'Tis Sixty Years Since*, the first and most basic requirement of conventional historical fiction is that it be set at a historical time that is distant enough to exclude the author's direct experience, as a mature adult, of the period in question (see, for example, Lee, 2014). Certainly, this applies to McCarthy and *C*'s chapters on the First World War. Where *C* begins to become more complex as 'historical fiction', however, is when the other criteria of the genre are brought into play. For Sarah Johnson, the aesthetics of writing and parameters of reading in historical fiction are strongly generically codified. As she puts it:

The genre also has unofficial rules that authors are expected to follow. To persuade readers that the story could really have happened (and perhaps some of it did), authors should portray the time period as accurately as possible and avoid obvious anachronisms. The fiction and the history should be well balanced, with neither one overwhelming the other. (Johnson, 2006)

Likewise, while noting that historical fiction is frequently more of a meditation on the present than on the past, Jerome de Groot adds that:

Historical fiction works by presenting something familiar but simultaneously distant from our lives. Its world must have heft and authenticity – it must feel right – but at the same time, the reader knows that the novel is a representation of something that is lost, that cannot be reconstructed but only guessed at. This dissonance, it seems to me, lies at the heart of historical fiction. (de Groot, 2010)

Against these criteria, *C* fares somewhat variably. For one, because the novel is set within four different periods, each characteristically differentiated from the previous, the background history is not so ‘well balanced’ against the fiction. Indeed, even the portions of the text that are most seemingly specific in their historical detail are actually fictional. Perhaps the most specific that we can be about most of the ‘Chute’ section of *C* is to say that it is set during the First World War and ends at its close, which lacks the traditional specificity of verifiable historical events and people that one would expect in realist historical novels such as Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* (2009), even where such realist texts also use authorial license to ‘warp’ such details. Again, this is a difference of degree, not of type.

Secondly, we might query whether *C* is a historical novel that ‘feels right’ in terms of its periodization. Does it have the ‘heft and authenticity’ that de Groot requires? I would contend, in actuality, that the text does not and that very little in *C* ‘feels right’ at all. This comes about, at least in part, because the historical circumstances in the novel are mediated through a sociopathic character whose ‘perceptual apparatuses refuse point-blank to be twisted into the requisite configuration’ for the dissonance of which de Groot writes. Specifically, Serge

is unable to grasp *perspective*: ‘he sees things flat; he paints things flat’ (C, 39). Yet, the type of doubled knowing gesture that is expected from a work of conventional historical fiction can only be achieved through a kind of parallax performance of perspective, one in which the depth and richness of the period is painted from a known and perceived distance. The central character in *C* lacks these prerequisites, even as McCarthy possesses them. Indeed, *C* is a novel that seeks to give a double perspective precisely because of the disjunct between Serge and McCarthy. Serge’s perspective, as related to him by his father, would render historical circumstances as non-discrete, as *flat*, positing that we might imagine that ‘every exciting or painful event in history has discharged waves of similar detectability into the ether – why we could pick up the Battle of Hastings, or observe the distress of the assassinated Caesar. [ ... ] These things could still be *happening*, right now, around us’ (C, 198–9). In Serge’s world, “me” is every name in history; all times have fused into a *now*, negating the particularity of any re-performed, specific historical period (C, 189). On the other hand, McCarthy’s novel is one that encourages the hunt for specificity and uniqueness through the sowing of historical detail and insinuated but obscure facticity into the work. Even when such eventual archival tracing is frustrated and Serge’s worldview seems to win out, this results in a situation in which Serge’s flattened perspective on history contrasts with some of *C*’s remarks on historiography.

Indeed, I argue that *C* should be considered a work of postmodern historiographic metafiction – a term coined by Linda Hutcheon to denote fiction that highlights its own fictionality while dealing with the *nature of history* (Hutcheon, 1988) – rather than as a more conventional historical novel, because of the many meta-narratorial statements within the work that conflate history with narrative. Building on the work of Hayden White, texts such as *C* perform the claim that the predominant difference between history and fiction is the former’s claim to truth (White, 1975: 93–7). Firstly, to make this case, consider that *C*’s historiography is constructivist. In McCarthy’s novel, history in its formal sense is written by the victors and usually consists of privileging ‘great figures’ and wars. This is perhaps most clear when Serge is flipping through the brochure for the Kloděbrady

Baths. We are told, at this point, that 'the accompanying text gives the town's history, which seems to consist of a series of invasions, wars and squabbles over succession' (*C*, 85). Elements of personal narrative and 'secrets of the heart', however, are elsewhere revealed to be omitted from the official historical record in *C* and are referred to as 'clandestine history', a gesture that immediately pluralizes the truth of a singular historical record and summons a paradigm of 'history from below' (*C*, 290). At the same time, however, institutional history as recounted by Laura, a character who 'studied history at St. Hilda's College, Oxford', is shown by McCarthy to be entirely concerned with mythological narratives. Laura's 'history' dissertation was on Osiris and consists of recounting the 'well-known myth' and 'cosmology' of Ancient Egypt from an intra-diegetic perspective that speaks of the ancient gods as though they were factual occurrences: 'The sun itself entered the body of Osiris' (*C*, 280–1). For Laura, who comes from the heart of formal and institutional academic history at Oxford, myth-making and history-making are similar, if not the same.

As Serge's recording officer demands, then, asking for the history of their recent flight in the First World War section of the novel: 'Narrative, Carrefax'. Serge's reply demonstrates how history, in the formal senses that the novel critiques, elides specificity and is based on subjective reconstruction: 'we went up; we saw stuff; it was good' (*C*, 143). The result of this disjuncture between levels in *C* – in which we are shown the initial events but then given a reductive 'history' – is 'to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations', as Hutcheon (1988: 123) puts it. In this way, *C* critiques the historiographic underpinnings of realist historical fiction through a postmodernist approach.

Yet the stylistics of postmodern historiography incorporated by *C* are hardly a new phenomenon and I do not claim that they lead to coherent or useful ends. As Shawn Smith (2005: 2) noted, ten years ago, it is 'no longer new or revolutionary' to point out that 'history is a field of competing rhetorical or narrative strategies'. What makes this interesting, though, is that it is certainly the case that *C* re-performs not only modernist texts and tropes, but also, particularly with respect to its history, postmodernist techniques that came to prominence in the

1970s and 1980s. For comparison, take, for instance, the historico-paranoid phase of DeLillo's oeuvre, exemplified in *Libra*, where the character Ferrie encourages the reader to 'think of two parallel lines', one the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, the other the conspiracy to kill the President; bridging this gap is 'a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognise or understand. But it forces a connection' (DeLillo, 1989: 339). As well as speaking to the nature of conspiracy, destiny and agency, this is also, clearly, a metatextual meditation on the weaving of narrative through history of the kind shared by *C*. After all, writes DeLillo, this third line, like fiction 'comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self'. Such hints of historical specificity encourage the hunt – which is certainly the norm among those who study Pynchon and Borges, but also Joyce – and thereby cast the reader him- or her-self in the role of the postmodern detective; never certain that such efforts will result in epistemological surety and always aware that they are more likely to result in a destabilization of a previous worldview: ontological collapse, regardless of how helpful such a view may be. Through its micro-prolepsis and insinuated facticity, *C* contains the afterlife of this aspect of postmodern fiction. Like many postmodern historical novels, the archival signposts are often devoid of referents; signposts to nowhere.

### 3. Plays: McCarthy's Postmodern Re-Enactments

Finally, then, although one of the key reference points for *C* is Woolf's *Between the Acts* – a work featuring a nested play-within-a-play at its core bound to suggestions of war – I would like to end this piece with two comparisons to the postmodern authors whom McCarthy's novel most clearly invokes, these being J. G. Ballard and Don DeLillo. While I have, already, throughout this piece noted some affinities with Pynchon, it is worth just reiterating that these features include a shared fascination with single-letter, recurring titles, encrypted messages, overlapping points of reference, metafictional tropes, and plays on history.

This is not all, though, for echoes of postmodernity. For we might also consider whether *C* is a text that is riffing on the postmodern fiction of Ballard, a text situated in the 'angle between the walls', to borrow a Ballardian phrase. Consider, for instance, the resonance with the geometric perversions of Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) that are echoed in several of *C*'s passages such as this one:

More than anything, it's what he hears in Petrou's voice, its exiled, hovering cadences – and what he sees in Petrou's face and body, his perpetual slightly sideways stance: a longing for some kind of world, one either disappeared or yet to come, or perhaps even one that's always been there, although only in some other place, in a dimension Euclid never plotted, which is nonetheless reflecting off him at an asymptotic angle. (*C*, 251)

It would be possible to select almost any passage from Ballard's experimental novel and to find much of McCarthy's work as a replication, or, if feeling uncharitable, a parody, of its style. Consider, for instance, Ballard's statement that 'these embraces of Travers's were gestures of displaced affections, a marriage of Freud and Euclid' (Ballard, 1990: 76), the last clause of which not only perfectly embodies the topological and geometric slants to *C*'s curious sexual encounters (along with the previously discussed Wolf Man references that include Serge's sexual preference for rear entry) but also echoes exactly the above passage's mention of 'a dimension Euclid never plotted'.

More specifically, however, *C*'s reference to Ballardian geometric tropes is ensconced within notions of subjunctivity; of a world hiding behind this world – 'a longing for some kind of world, one either disappeared or yet to come' – disallowed from coming into possibility but forever remaining on the cusp of realisation. In Ballard's text, such subjunctivity and ontological instability is engendered through a pluralisation of worlds, as it is in *C*. For *The Atrocity Exhibition* this is framed through notions of inner and outer worlds, with the inner being primarily concerned with the psyche. Indeed, at the core of *The Atrocity Exhibition* Dr. Nathan says that:



Planes intersect: on one level, the tragedies of Cape Kennedy and Vietnam serialized on billboards, random deaths mimetized in the experimental auto disasters of Nader and his co-workers. Their precise role in the unconscious merits closer scrutiny; by the way, they may in fact play very different parts from the ones we assign them. On another level, the immediate personal environment, the volumes of space enclosed by your opposed hands, the geometry of your postures, the time-values contained in this office, the angles between these walls. On a third level, the inner world of the psyche. Where these planes intersect, images are born, some kind of valid reality begins to clarify itself. (Ballard, 1990: 47)

In other words, there is a mediated public sphere; a world of interpersonal relationships; and an inner landscape of the mind. In *C* this plays out slightly differently with a dysfunctionally narrated broad public and historical plane ('I liked the war' [C, 214]), mediated through a character who is incapable of forming meaningful interpersonal relationships in his localized world ("Turn around," he says. "I want to see your back" [C, 114]) and whose interior mental landscape is contoured and rocky (a space 'that seems to have become all noise and signal' [C, 178]). *The Atrocity Exhibition* and, to an extent, *C*, attempt to map the intersection of these spaces in new ways that avoid the sensationalized mediation of the first sphere, the usually sentimentalised depiction of the second, and the conventional Cartesian separation of the inner world from the outer.

Ballard, however, is not the only other point of postmodern anchorage for *C*. Rather, on top of the Pynchonian allusions, one particular moment in the novel feels particularly motivated by a recreation of the themes of Baudrillardian simulation embedded in Don DeLillo's wonderful *White Noise* (1985). Indeed, towards the end of McCarthy's novel, Abigail relates to Serge her experience of watching tourists at the pyramids in Cairo, tourists who

got their cameras out and started photographing them, although I don't know why because their photos won't turn out as nice as the ones in the book and brochures either. And they didn't even photograph the things for very long, because there was a buffet laid out on the deck, [ ... ] but then of course they realised that they had to show

a certain reverence towards the Pyramids, while still not missing out on lunch, so they revered and ate and photographed all at once. (*C*, 262)

This relates to, but is not directly the same as, one of the most celebrated passages of DeLillo's novel, namely the incident with the 'most photographed barn in America':

Several days later Murray asked me about a tourist attraction known as the most photographed barn in America. We drove 22 miles into the country around Farmington. There were meadows and apple orchards. White fences trailed through the rolling fields. Soon the sign started appearing. THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA. We counted five signs before we reached the site. There were 40 cars and a tour bus in the makeshift lot. We walked along a cowpath to the slightly elevated spot set aside for viewing and photographing. All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides – pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot. We stood near a grove of trees and watched the photographers. Murray maintained a prolonged silence, occasionally scrawling some notes in a little book.

'No one sees the barn,' he said finally. (DeLillo, 2011: 11–13)

These two passages, while overlapping, are ever so slightly different in their outcomes. DeLillo's text is concerned with the displacement of reality and the endless proliferation of simulacra engendered by mechanical reproduction in the era of late capital: 'We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura,' he writes (DeLillo, 2011: 14). McCarthy's passage, on the other hand, effects the more pedestrian critique that is surely familiar to anybody who has acted as a flâneur among tourists: that the act of photographing, a form of mimesis, supersedes experiencing.

When McCarthy's statements are coupled with the large number of other postmodern allusions in the work, however, this passage changes in scope and becomes, instead, a re-play of exactly the taxonomic battle that I have been charting throughout this chapter. Indeed, McCarthy's tourists photographing the pyramids represent a three-way pull between the knowledge that their photography is

an act that perpetuates the simulacra (the postmodern); the feeling of duty to return to a more conservative, reality-rooted approach to culture (a modernist epistemological quest where there really is a solid referent to find); and an overwhelming sense of tedium with the whole debate (eating and photographing all at once).

So, what does this all mean for McCarthy's novel? As I have argued in this chapter, despite the 'modernist' feel to and reference points within *C*, there are also a significant number of allusions to postmodern texts throughout McCarthy's work that have to date been overlooked. Elements of metafictional play in the text's structure, a form of historiographic metafiction that insinuates an archive, and a set of direct correlations to postmodern authors all contribute towards such a reading. To conclude, though, with an opening up: it is difficult to set *C* within one single paradigm and what I have sought to do here is to provide evidence against the singular dominance of a modernist reference point for the novel. The text's overarching structure implies that McCarthy does not simply endorse generic repetition, be this modernist or postmodernist. The closed cycle of the *O* is not given; it is, instead, a *C* – a near-miss for analogy and repetition, a quasi-cycle that implies plurality. This latent claim for generic novelty, or at least, for genre-fusion and mutation, can easily lead to claims of pastiche or lesser imitation. However, in its historical structure, *C* is a novel about the future and its differentiated repetition. It is also, in such a way and despite its harkings back to modern and postmodern forebears, a text commenting on the future of experimental literary genre. It is in this way, I contend, that *C* plays out its modernist anxieties and its postmodern influences.

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