

Tom McCarthy's *C*, Wyndham Lewis, and new technology

Alan Munton

C by Tom McCarthy. London: Jonathan Cape, 2010. 312pp. £16.99

This is a novel about modernity by a writer and artist who is rapidly becoming the modernist to watch. Tom McCarthy was recently allowed to write an essay in the *Guardian's Saturday Review* which quoted extensively from Marinetti, was illustrated by a Futurist work, and praised Joyce and others for their interest in new media – whilst gently introducing the reader to his own novel *C*, which (as the author helpfully tells us) is shaped by just these modernist innovations. For Claire Armitstead, the *Guardian Review's* editor, McCarthy is evidently a man of the future. Others think so too, for Zadie Smith has said his earlier novel *Remainder* is 'one of the great English novels of the past ten years'. *C* has been widely reviewed, and is on the 2010 Man Booker longlist.

Tom McCarthy is also an installation artist who in 1999 founded the International Necronautical Society, and he has exhibited in London and New York. Some of the art, and some of the fiction, can be seen and heard in an online lecture he gave recently at the Architectural Association. The art was dull, even though it concerned blowing up the Greenwich Observatory (straight out of Conrad), whilst as a lecturer McCarthy is this side of charismatic. Nevertheless, as novelist, artist and critic he demands our attention, if only because he seems to have overcome the literary establishment's antipathy towards modernism. And surely he will have taken some notice of Lewis, and might even be a contemporary analogue of him?

C is set between 1898 and 1922, and runs from the early days of radio to the marvellous year that saw the publication of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, as well as the founding of what was to become the BBC. Those years are the lifespan of Serge Carrefax, whose life and death are marked by the letter C: ‘Caul’ shows him born with one (it keeps returning in various guises, including a woman’s tights). He goes to war in the Royal Flying Corps and is shot down (‘Chute’), turns over a car, just as Marinetti did (‘Crash’), and finally dies, homophonically, returning from Egypt (‘Call’). And C, we are ostentatiously told, is the sign for carbon, the basic element of life. Readers of Lewis will notice that Carrefax is an observer in an aircraft that brings down fire upon enemy gun batteries, just as Lewis was an observer for a howitzer battery that did precisely that kind of firing.

Serge Carrefax is obsessed by all the new media technologies of his time, and especially by radio. His father introduces him to the early RX stations run by enterprising individuals from their homes, then to the international activity that sweeps across the world before the First World War, telling of cricket scores and disasters at sea. There is even an example of Morse abbreviation that foreshadows texting: “als0 I cn turn pian0 wire in2 tuning coil” (64). The reader learns of Marconi’s activities, the arrival of voices on the radio, and valve transmission. The origins of the BBC are shown to lie in fears for Empire, even as the Empire begins to close down: ““which is why they’re setting up, back home, a national Broadcasting Corporation, to pump a mix of propaganda, music and weather reports all around Britain and, eventually, to every corner of the Empire””, a communications expert tells Serge. (There is too much telling of this insistent kind.) As well as radio the novel mentions daguerreotypes, early sound cylinders, shellac records, photographs,

trunk-calls, pylons, films projected at the wrong speed, records played to tourists at a museum, map co-ordinates sent from an aircraft, and – strangest of all – a supposed wartime effort to turn the sound of a battery firing into film. Even a proleptic version of television is described: ‘a remote, instant kinematoscope’ (110). Above all, there is the sound of static, and there are signals, always signals.

Film is often mentioned, and the children watch Méliès at home, and as adults go to the early sound films. A false note occurs when Abigail (a girlfriend) tells Serge that for her the act of photographing the Pyramids – the final section of the novel is set in Egypt – is ““like a pornographic film”” because the Pyramids are ““dirty entertainment”” (262). The term sounds wrong for the time, the rejection is excessive, and one wonders how a young woman, in 1922, would get to see film pornography. A few pages later Serge is made to speculate on the rightness of Abigail’s remark: ‘What if the whole of Egypt were one big, endlessly repeating pornographic film, *Love’s Madness* on a loop?’ (271). An entire country re-conceived as a film loop! Here, the relationship between the transgressive product made possible by technological innovation, and Serge’s total mediatization of his environment, begin to show the weaknesses of this ‘new modernist’ fiction.

First, it’s all about Serge. He is made the centre of modernist consciousness, and to him all technology refers. He has moments of awakening, ‘a setting into motion’ when he intuits technology as others cannot. McCarthy is ecstatic on his behalf: ‘Serge is like the Eiffel Tower, a pylon animating the whole world, calling the zero hour of a new age of metal and explosive, geometry and connectedness’. This occurs during the war, hence the metal and explosives. The rest of Serge’s thought is almost sinister: ‘—and calling it over and over again, so that its birth can be played

out in votive repetition through these elaborate and ecstatic acts of sacrifice . . . ’ (159, dots in the original). This comes close to justifying war because it permits new technologies to take hold. That is probably not McCarthy’s final meaning, however.

As the sun sinks feebly, so Serge rises, feeling better than ever before:

As space runs out backwards like a strip of film from his [aircraft’s] tail, the world seems to anoint him, through its very presence, as the gate, the bulb, aperture and general projection point that’s brought it about: a new tar-coated orb around which all things turn. (160)

The model for human consciousness is the film projector -- and Serge himself is the projector. (Serge, it should be mentioned, has a tendency to get covered in tar.)

‘Connectedness’ here refers to the way radio makes links, but the terminology that Lewis used produces different results. Lewis, radicalized by the First World War, as Serge seems not to be – “‘But I liked the war’” (214) – conceived connection by technology as beneficial in its effects; it meant relationship, even mutuality, and it had content: this was ‘the global village’, Lewis’s conception from the 1940s taken up by McLuhan (who is not McCarthy’s model, though he is a ghostly presence). For Serge, connectedness makes killing possible, as wireless helps to bring down shellfire upon the enemy. And that is the whole of what it does.

In the post-war years, McCarthy settles upon drugs, sex and séances as important (Lewis, Eliot, Joyce and Woolf had rather more serious things to say about the 1920s). In a climactic episode, Serge attends a séance and realizes that the deception is being worked by a transmitter. So he brings a machine, sends his own rude messages, and exposes the man sending the signals. It’s great fun, but hardly a significant use for the new technology.

Lewis always conceived technological relationships as having content. New technology meant new ways of influencing other minds. The close-up in film (see *The Childermass*) has a function for meaning. Film technology, and the way it is used, is purposive for others, and consequently *ideological*. In McCarthy's novel, technology is effective only for Serge. He is its only subject, its only practitioner, 'animating the whole world'. In *C*, indeed, all the technologies are without content. After pointless séances there is a lot of ineffectual spying in Egypt. Then Serge dies from an infection got while having sex in an underground tomb, and that's it. Dying, he's hit by static. The technology will not go away, but it does nothing meaningful.

A film may represent something or other – rockets to the moon, a romance – but here it has no shareable public meaning. This is because only Serge understands what is going on; he is always ahead of the game. In this respect, he channels the book's author, whose predominant purpose, as I have implied, is to tell the reader about things, to show how enormous were the developments in media technology between 1898 and the magical modernist year of 1922. 'Did you know about *that*?'

Perhaps the moment when Serge fails to respond to the death of his sister Sophie tells more about the book's ideas than its author intended: 'Both death and she are elsewhere: like a signal, dispersed' (83). The relationship between signals and human experience reaches its lowest point when Serge is about to make love to a woman called Tania, and licks wine from her face: 'Her neck, beside his ear, emits a low, guttural sound, of the same character and pitch as low-frequency radio waves' (113). This is too much. (Remarkably, McCarthy allows Serge a one hundred per cent success rate with women; and Serge always enters – heterosexually – from

behind. There seem to be no technological reasons for his arriving from this direction.)

At one point, Serge explains signals to his father (an inventor):

““Transmissions *travel*. They go somewhere else, and then they’re not here anymore”” (197). It is on this question of space that McCarthy and Lewis meet.

Signals necessarily pass through space, and convey information that has consequences at a distance. After the war, Serge enrolls at the Architectural Association; he is made to be there in 1920, the year after Lewis published *The Caliph’s Design: Architects! Where is your Vortex?* At the AA, Serge spends whole afternoons ‘drawing plan sketches of imaginary spaces’ (201), but there is no sense that McCarthy has read Lewis, or is in any way aware of his ideas on architectural space, or indeed on any matter concerning modernism at all. Yet Lewis, of all the modernists, was the one most interested in the new technologies. McCarthy has done a great deal of research, but has missed the essential figure.

Serge has a peculiar visual weakness: he cannot draw in perspective, and that is why he draws ‘plan sketches’, and why the plan view of a battlefield seen from the air suits him so well. One might have expected McCarthy, in his role as an artist, to have made something of this predilection for the flat, which was a characteristic of the Cubist revolution to which the Vorticists collectively, and Lewis specifically, owed so much. Again, there is nothing. All that can be found is a peculiar episode in which Serge meets near the battlefield a War Artist called Carlisle, who trained at the Slade, and who (like Edward Wadsworth) did work on camouflage. Carlisle is presented as foolish and excitable about his inability to paint landscapes in wartime, particularly from the air. He then remarks that the war is the fault of “Fry and his buddies”.

Asked to explain, he says that ““Soon as the cork popped at the Grafton and the poison genie seeped out, this war was a foregone conclusion. Just a matter of time”” (147). Many conservative painters objected to Roger Fry’s second post-impressionist exhibition of 1912 at the Grafton Galleries, and – such was the furore – somebody might later have thought that modern art caused the war. But why does McCarthy introduce this character, with these views? It is an example of ideological thought by which ideas alter the world, and precisely the kind of thinking that McCarthy doesn’t need if a content-free technology is to be admired. So this way of thinking is given an hysterical artist, and discredited. As to relevance, would not Lewis’s eerily predictive painting from 1913, *Plan of War*, have made a better example?

McCarthy does like certain modernists, as he told us in the *Guardian* article already mentioned (24 July 2010). When Serge’s car crashes on top of him, he declares to his rescuers: ““It’s my carapace.”” This is crude Futurism, pure Marinetti, who similarly crashed in a ditch. McCarthy also lifts from Joyce, taking the moment in *Ulysses* when Bloom imagines a gramophone being buried in a coffin to allow the dead to send back messages. When Serge’s sister is buried, her grief-stricken father cannot imagine that she is really dead, and distractedly suggests that a Morse key be put in the coffin so she can transmit when she comes alive. It is significant that McCarthy’s conservative modernism should embrace the obvious Marinetti, and the loveable Joyce, the safe alternatives to the ideologically critical Lewis. No wonder the literary establishment should be so fond of the fiction of Tom McCarthy, which is at once too full of information, and largely free of significant meaning. Too much noise, not enough signal.

