

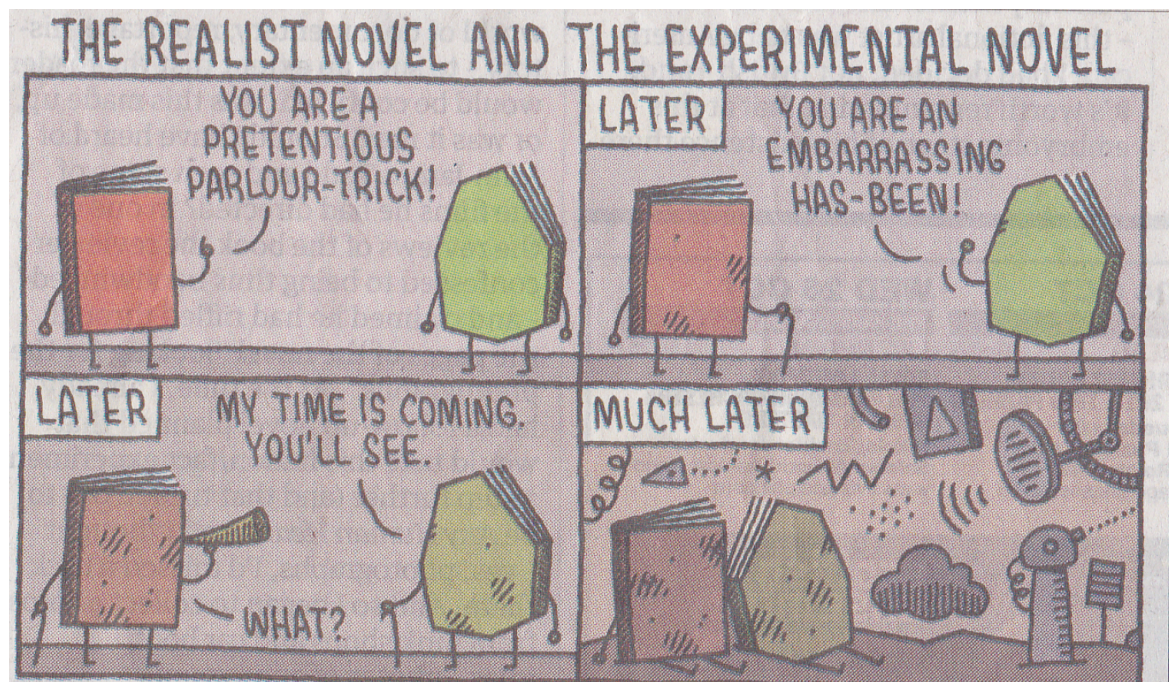
# Tom McCarthy, *C* (2010): The Novel Today

## Outline

- 1) Introduction: The Novel Today?
- 2) An Irritating Text: Tom McCarthy's *C*
- 3) Realism vs. Texture

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## 1) Introduction: The Novel Today?



## The Novel Today?

the persistence of **realism**

vs.

the formal self-consciousness and self-confidence  
of **modernism**



the pluralism, eclecticism and reflexivity  
of **postmodernism**

## → 2) An Irritating Text: Tom McCarthy's *C*

Tom McCarthy (\*1969)

1999	co-founder of International Necronautical Society (INS, with the philosopher Simon Critchley) > art projects
2005; 2006/07	<i>The Remainder</i> (written 2001)
2006	<i>Tintin and the Secret of Literature</i>
2007	<i>Men in Space</i> (written in the 1990s)
2010	<i>C</i>

### Opening (first paragraph):

Dr. Learmont, newly appointed general practitioner for the districts of West Masedown and New Eliry, rocks and jolts on the front seat of a trap as it descends the slightly sloping path of Versoie House. He has sore buttocks: the seat is hard and uncushioned. His companion, Mr. Dean of Hudson and Dean Deliveries (Lydium and Environs Since 1868), doesn't seem to feel any discomfort. His glazed eyes stare vaguely ahead; his leathery hands, reins woven through their fingers, hover just above his knees. The rattle of glass bottles and the fricative rasp of copper wire against more copper wire rise from the trap's back and, mixing with the click and shovel of the horse's hooves on gravel, hang undisturbed about the still September air. Above the vehicle tall conifers rise straight and inert like columns. Higher, much further out, black birds whirr silently beneath a conclave vault of sky.

### **The Conventions of Realism:**

- mundane late-19<sup>th</sup>-century setting
- narrator-mediated internal focalisation (Learmont)  
+ authorial perspective (details + overview)
- ab ovo-beginning ... *Bildungsroman* trappings

### **Deviations?**

- present tense
- too much detail with a phenomenological bent beyond vision (touch, hearing)
- 'copper wire' introduces proliferation of 'c's':  
'click,' 'conifers,' 'columns,' 'concave'

### **Hypothesis:**

Irritation is rooted in the emergent double-coding of the novel which increasingly disappoints 'realist' expectations in terms of

- plot
- character (behavior, psychological 'depth')

and replaces them with a focus on

- texture and mediality

which is both represented (content) and enacted (form)

### **Plot:**

Serge Carrefax, 1898-1922

### **Part I**

(Versoie + Eastern European Spa on the eve of WWI):

- Born to a deaf (and drug-addled) mother who runs a silkworm farm and spinnery and a hectoring and opinionated father who runs a Day School for the Deaf at Versoie on oralist principles and has a keen interest in furthering communication technology (oral) through his inventions (> copper wire!).
- Growing up on Versoie in an uncomfortably sexually charged relationship with his scientifically-minded sister Sophie until her death, which leads to Serge's nervous breakdown.

## Part II:

(WW I)

- Training as an aviator and seeing action as a wireless operator and observer in a spotter plane over enemy lines in France until he crashes and is held as prisoner of war in Germany.

## Part III:

(after the war)

- Drug-saturated (cocaine, heroine) spell studying architecture in London and mingling with actors, show girls, flappers in a melee of sex and drugs and the (fraudulently) paranormal culminating in a car crash.

## Part IV:

(1922)

- Sent out to Egypt as a civil servant overseeing the (halting) progress of the 'Empire Wireless Chain' and writing secret reports to his immediate superior and old family friend Widsun culminating in hot sex in a pyramid burial chamber with a budding young archeologist called Laura shortly before his return. Stung by something while engaged in the act Serge seems to die from blood-poisoning on the ship back.

"To offer plot summary ... is like saying Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is just a book about a woman interested in the postal system."

*Book review by Meehan Crist in the Los Angeles Times, Sep 12 (2010).*

## Character:

"Serge does little emoting and less developing, he is an aerial for the novel's ideas."

*Book review by Leo Robson in the New Statesman, Aug 13, 2010.*

"Serge ... attracts no sympathy or empathy of whatever from his creator: he's a convergence, or rather an area of concentration, where ideas, images, words, preoccupations gather and regroup."

*Book review by Jenny Turner in the London Review of Books, August 2010.*

### Key Passages:

Serge gets stuck on words ... He keeps switching letters round. It's not deliberate, just something that he does. He sees letters streaming through the air, whole blocks of them, borne on currents occupying a zone beneath the threshold of the comprehensible, and tries to pluck them and stick them to the page as best he can, but it's an imprecise science ... (With regard to painting, too,) Serge is wanting. He's a steady brushman, and has a good feel for line and movement, but he just can't do perspective: everything he paints is flat (...) He sees things flat, he paints things flat. Objects, figures, landscapes: flat (...) Serge paints the estate from above: its paths, corridors and avenues all laid out in plan view. Sophie meanwhile takes a leaf or branch with her and copies it in photographic detail. (38f.; see also 147, 213f.)

The static's like the sound of thinking. Not of any single person thinking, nor even a group thinking, collectively. It's bigger than that, wider – and more direct. It's like the sound of thought itself, it's hum and rush. Each night, when Serge drops in on it, it recoils with a wail, then rolls back in crackling waves that carry him away, all rudderless, until his finger, nudging the dial, can get some traction on it all, some sort of leeway. The first stretches are angry, plaintive, sad – and always mute. It's not until, hunched over the potentiometer among fraying cords and soldered wires, his controlled breathing an extension of the frequency of air he's riding on, he gets the first quiet clicks that words start forming (...) (63; see also 263 on surveillance)

### Blurb:

C follows the short, intense life of Serge Carrefax, a man who – as his name suggests – surges into the electric modernity of the early twentieth century, *transfixed by the technologies that will obliterate him*.

Born to the sound of one of the very first experimental wireless stations, Serge finds himself steeped in a weird world of transmissions, whose very air seems *filled with cryptic and poetic signals of all kinds ...*

(my emphasis)

### Texture and Mediality:

Technology fills the space left by introspection. Carrefax's relative mute inner voice has the advantage of leaving him free to focus on phenomenology. The plot is more or less perfunctory – his story is really a portal on to the transformation in *the world's texture* in the first twenty years of the last century.

(my emphasis)

Review by Ben Jeffery in the *Times Literary Supplement*, August 20 & 27 (2010): 19.

### Uses of 'texture' in the novel:

- 147 words vs. painting: "All the depth and texture of a summer countryside steamrolled into a flat page."
- 169 "As he nears the English lines, he notices a change in the texture and colouration of the ground behind them."
- 173f. "The plane hits something, but it's not the ground:  
It feels more like a buffer, a soft boundary beyond which the air has a slower texture. He can feel this texture all around him too – see it as well: it's silken (...) When he wakes up, there's brown fabric covering his vision."  
(parachute vs. Cecile's stocking)
- 176 "The water (...) has a rust-brown texture laced with silver threads of mercury. Pieces of shell casing, ripped and jagged, protrude from its surface."
- 189 "The question of who 'me' is (...) is no longer irksome: the dispersed, exterior *mi* previously held captive by the air, carried within its grain and texture, has joined with the interior one, their union then expanding to become a general condition, until 'me' is every name in history; all times have fused into a *now*. It all makes sense (...) As he waits for the sergeant to give the command to shoot, Serge feels ecstatic.

### Texture vs. Serge's longing for materiality:

"The other accident he doesn't see take place – only its aftermath. Beswick forgets to strap himself into his seat and falls out when his pilot loops the loop. He plunges three thousand feet and lands in a nearby field. A Beswick-shaped mark stays in the grass for weeks; head, torso, legs and outstretched arms.

'The acid from his body,' Stedman says as he and Serge stand above the patch one afternoon. 'Stops new grass growing.'

'It's a good likeness,' Serge says.

'All his memories, and everything he ever thought about or did, reduced to battery chemicals.'

'Why not?' asks Serge. 'It's what we are.'" (129)

### The Materiality of C's Texture:

- Epigraph from Omar Khayyám:  
"Ourselves must we beneath the Couch of Earth  
Descend, ourselves to make a Couch – for whom?"
- 4 Parts entitled 'Caul' (ch. 1-6) – 'Chute' (ch. 7-9) – 'Crash' (ch. 10) – 'Call' (ch. 11-12)
- the proliferation of c-words and motifs culminating in Laura's observation that "the C is everywhere."  
'The sea?' asks Serge.  
'The letter: C.'  
'What's C?'  
'Carbon: basic element of life.'" (292)
- Serge's final sounds: "'c-c-c-c ...'" (310)
- a different kind of realism?

### 3) Realism vs. Texture

#### Modern Literature:

- a) Texts expressing aspects of modern experience (alienation, lack of meaning) or reflecting modern reality (fragmentation, technology, mediation)
  - > focus on subjectivity vs. objectivity, the tradition of realism
  - >> the allure of modern literature
  
- b) Texts reflecting (upon) the media conditions of modernity (writing > print > electronic/digital media)
  - > focus on reflexivity, 'texture' as the interface between intransparency and (seeming) transparency
  - >> the difficulty of modern literature

#### How difficult should literature be (outside of university)?

##### > a recent example from German literature:

- the controversy surrounding the award of the highly renowned Büchner-Preis to Felicitas Hoppe in spring 2012, cf. Richard Kämmerlings und Tilman Krause, "Wie gut ist die Bühnereisträgerin?" *Welt am Sonntag* (20.5.2012)

#### Krause (anti-Hoppe):

Furchtbar lieb, was der guten Felicitas Hoppe jetzt alles bescheinigt wird: befreiende Fantasie, kunstvolles Vexierspiel mit Identitäten, eine originelle, artifizielle Poetik. Aber gerade wenn die Poetik gepriesen wird, ist ja meistens was faul. Da denkt man tunlichst an die Gastronomie. Wird in Frankreich ein Haus in die Kategorie "hotel de charme" geschoben, weiß man gleich: Ist alles sehr hübsch, aber die Heizung funktioniert nicht. Wasserrohrbruch jederzeit möglich.

Übertragen auf die Literatur bedeutet das: Poetik ist das Rezept; entscheidend für die literarische Bedeutung einerseits, den Genuss des Lesers andererseits ist aber etwas anderes, nämlich das Gericht, das aufgrund des Rezepts entsteht und schließlich auf dem Teller liegt und verzehrt werden soll. Und die Gerichte, will sagen Bücher der Felicitas Hoppe mögen alles Mögliche sein: luftig, duftig, traumverloren, gegenwartsabstinent, postmodern, ironisch, was alles man ihnen zum Vorteil (aber natürlich auch zum Nachteil) auslegen kann - entscheidend jedoch will mir scheinen, dass sie nach nichts schmecken. Weil sie nichtssagend sind, und zwar im Wortsinn.

### **Kämmerlings (pro-Hoppe):**

Dass Texte als Texturen zu begreifen sind, war ein Grundprinzip literarischer Avantgarde um 1900, das wieder in Vergessenheit zu gerät, wenn das Erzählen naturwüchsig aus der Ereignishaftigkeit, dem blanken, blutigen "Leben" hervorgehen soll. Die Welt aber kennt keine Handlungsstränge, sondern allenfalls Kausalitäten. Reflektierte und unkonventionelle (was ja nur heißt: nicht öde) literarische Formprinzipien zu fördern und auszuzeichnen gehört aber zur Hauptaufgabe einer "Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung", die weder einen anachronistischen Intellektuellentypus à la Grass und Walser oder Juli Zeh künstlich beatmen muss noch dem Massenkompatiblen Preisgeld und Lorbeer hinterherwerfen sollte. Seit es den auf die Bestsellerliste schielenden Deutschen Buchpreis gibt, ist es noch wichtiger geworden, die echte Literatur vom "guten Buch" zu unterscheiden. Das hat der Büchnerpreis auch immer wieder gemacht, in den letzten Jahren vor allem mit Alexander Kluge, Brigitte Kronauer oder Reinhard Jirgl.



**What kind of literature do we want?**

**What kind of literature do we need?**

**Who is we?**

### **Useful Books on the Novel Today:**

Bode, Christoph, *The Novel*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Eagleton, Robert, *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013.

English, James F., ed., *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.