

I Want to be on the Side of the Messy Orange

Interview with Tom McCarthy

Von: Jan Wilm

Tom McCarthy's fifth novel, *The Making of Incarnation*, delves into the field of time-and-motion studies, and it begins by focusing on one of its chief proponents, Lillian Gilbreth. McCarthy fictionalizes the American psychologist's life and work by arranging a global chase around an artefact from Gilbreth's personal archive: "Box 808", a doll-house-sized motion model that would, according to Gilbreth's notes, "change everything" in her field and beyond.

A fascinating cast of characters goes on the hunt for Box 808, which several interested parties, from industry to shady secret services, are eager to get their hands on. Quickly cutting between several characters and settings, McCarthy's novel follows professionals in the contemporary motion capture industry, as they pursue the potentials and pitfalls of their trade. One of them, Mark Phocan, is busy performing all sorts of motion capture tasks for Pantarey, the company that employs him. In one of the most meaningful – and most sublime – scenes of the novel, he visits a wind tunnel in the Netherlands and witnesses a simulation of an Austrian bob sleigh run. Phocan will ultimately do most of the detective work to uncover the mysteries of Box 808.

While the novel surveys and deconstructs the captivating technological, social, emotional, and political dimensions of motion capture and how it seemingly reaches into every aspect of contemporary life, the book also explores the dealings of a fictional film studio that enlists motion capture engineers to aid with the special effects for their blockbuster space opera *Incarnation*.

In our conversation in April 2023, we delved into the history of time-and-motion studies, the theoretical underpinnings of McCarthy's work, as well as the capabilities and prospects of the contemporary novel.

JAN WILM: How did you become interest in motion capture and in Lillian Gilbreth?

TOM MCCARTHY: The artist Ruth MacLennan, who's a friend of mine, gave a talk in London many years ago, and showed an image of a woman running her hands along a three-dimensional motion circuit model from the early 20th century. I asked Ruth where she found it, and as I explored the archives that Ruth pointed me to, I encountered

Lillian Gilbreth and the industry of time-and-motion studies she helped pioneer. I found out that Gilbreth went to school with Isadora Duncan and Gertrude Stein in Oakland, California. So, you have this concentration of psychology, choreography, and aesthetics, and in a way the whole of the 20th century seems to have exploded from this conjunction, and from these three women. If you think of Gertrude Stein's prose, of course, it's also very repetitious, very machinic.

I was fascinated that Gilbreth studied literature, and loved Dante, and that she brought poetic ideas such as cadence and metre and choreographic ideas such as rhythm to the rationalization of the workplace. Gilbreth thought the factory should be like a ballet, and that was very beautiful to me. Later of course, I discovered that Soviet Taylorism was indebted to Gilbreth's work too. And of course it's not hard to see how it also informs our very dystopian present moment of the Amazon warehouse.

In a broader sense, I've always been fascinated by ideas of choreography and repetition and re-enactment, of how an action or an event, a passage of motion in time, can be isolated and replayed again and again.

JW: You have explored motifs of repetition and translation throughout your oeuvre, and these are essential to Gilbreth's character. She takes something from one medium, dance or choreography, and repeats it in translated form elsewhere. This is very related to your own interests in the cross-fertilization of different media and discourses, isn't it?

TM: Yes, the transferability between different fields fascinates me. I wangled my way into motion capture studios and wind tunnels, and I was able to interview drone pilots and explore motion capture in professional football. Chelsea and Liverpool are paying millions of pounds for high-end motion capture and pattern analysis. The analytic data of a 90-minute football game is broken down into a structure, a sequence of recurring events each assigned a letter, the letters repeating in certain rhythms, ABBA or ABAB, or AABA etc, and it really resembles the critical analysis of a villanelle or a sonnet.

But what's so fascinating is how the same techniques of motion capture are being transferred between entertainment, human rights advocacy, the health industry, and war. It's always the same people with the same software and hardware. On Monday, they're helping cure cerebral palsy by studying the rhythm of a marker-studded patient's gait; on Tuesday, they're working with an NGO to advocate for human rights by extrapolating the trajectories of bullets from police guns in iPhone footage of demonstrations; and on Wednesday, they're helping the military kill people more efficiently by improving ground-movement analytics from surveillance drones. There's a chapter in the novel where in one week an intern runs through the full spectrum of applications and realizes how totally interrelated they all are. But at the heart of it all is this kind of Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis, this very poetic study of rhythm, metre, cadence, and repetition. And how these incredibly complex analytical tools are applied to discern patterns of order in what seems like chaos.

JW: This reminds me of how across your work, capitalist structures are also applying radical tools to discipline – ‘order’ – social, professional, and emotional spheres. Frequently, your novels feature highly trained scientists or academics who are sucked into capitalist machines. A capitalist system is also performing a perverse form of repetition and remixing in that it tries to swallow the greatest minds of every generation. So, *what* you’re staging in your novels is also related to *how* it is staged, through various figurations of usurpation, repetition, and remixing.

TM: In a way, all of my protagonists are artisans. They’re craftspeople. And what they’re doing is about representation. This novel begins in a wave tank in Berlin, in the *Versuchsanstalt für Wasserbau und Schiffbau*, where waves are generated to crash over model cities and oil-rig installations. That’s basically a big metaphor for the novel. You’ve got the technician with his MacBook controlling this machine for producing events, making disasters happen. He can sink ships and flood cities with tsunamis: it’s an allegory for the act of writing. In my last book, *Satin Island*, the corporate anthropologist is also a kind of writer: he’s supposed to be compiling a Great Report on our era, although he fails at this task. So, in a way, these instances are meta-allegories for what’s at stake in writing and for the fact that the writer, like the scientist, is not some angel floating above everything and merely observing, and not even a half-attached flâneur; rather, like the scientist, the writer is completely implicated, they’re enmeshed within the systems of power that they analyse. There is no outside of the machine.

JW: There are a number of metaphors or allegories for the novel in this book: archives and computers; Gilbreth’s boxes of motion circuit models; the black box of the missing plane that engineers intentionally crashed in an experiment, maybe even the plane itself; the *Sidereal* spaceship in the fictional film; and, of course, the central scene in a wind tunnel.

TM: The wind tunnel is the first scene I wrote. It’s the core of the novel. Like the wave tank, the wind tunnel is a machine for simulation. In the scene we see, the Dutch wind tunnel is used for an artificial simulation of an Austrian bob sleigh run, to help improve aerodynamic efficiency. But again, it’s also an allegory for the novel. The scene is operating in a Deleuzian way. It’s one huge assemblage. So we move from the history of Olympic bob sleighs to the history of how the wind has shaped Dutch landscapes, to the ancestral trauma of the technicians who are descendants of Dutch flood victims, all the way back to the Dutch stock market crash, tulipomania (they called it ‘Windhandel’, trading in the wind), prices plummeting downwards like an out-of-control bobsleigh – all these histories are present, mixing together in the air. At one point in the chapter, the narrative voice intercedes and asks what machine, operating at what scale, could *represent* all of this. It’s effectively a rhetorical question, because the answer could only be: the novel. The only machine that can really manage the entirety of those assemblages, raising them to the threshold of articulation, is not in fact a wind tunnel; it’s the novel. In the past, I’ve been described as an anti-novelist, that I was assaulting the

novel. But I'm not at all. I'm a passionate advocate and believer in the power of the novel as a form. It's just that I see the potential of the form realized in figures like James Joyce or Ingeborg Bachmann, not in contemporary middlebrow fiction.

JW: What I loved about *The Making of Incarnation* was how you explore the poetry of technological vocabulary. You assemble a kind of breviary of the language of technology, which is often disregarded in the contemporary novel.

TM: I completely agree. I mean, these terms are just gorgeous. When I was researching glitches encountered during drone aerial surveillance, I discovered terms like "scumbling", "mosaic blurring", "bidirectional refraction", and "chromatic aberration" – these are absolutely gorgeous terms and they're completely aesthetic, painterly, visual. In fact, the very term they use in the trade for glitch is "artefact" – like the aesthetic object. I think there's an enormous poetry to these scientific terms, and they have rich political, economic, and even theological overtones.

JW: You infuse your work with several other discourses and contexts in a way that is boldly and beautifully erudite and therefore makes for a pleasurable complexity in reading. What interests you in turning to the contexts of theory, for example, for your work?

TM: What I'm doing is certainly not unprecedented. Joyce is completely plugged into Aquinas and Nietzsche, for example. I think novelists have always drawn their source feeds as much from philosophy as from fiction. And conversely, if we think about figures like Jacques Derrida or Georges Bataille or Claude Lévi-Strauss, it's very hard to say where theory ends and where fiction begins. I read something like *The Postcard* by Derrida as a great epistolary novel alongside Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* or something. I came of age in a time when that generation of French theorists – Derrida, Deleuze, Kristeva, Irigaray, Barthes – were really getting big playtime, and this had a huge effect on me. More recently, visual arts have been important for my writing. I'm living in Berlin, and there are all these fascinating artists here, like Hito Steyerl and Trevor Paglen and Omer Fast, with all of whom to some degree or other I've been in dialogue. These are people who do some of the most fascinating work in terms of mapping sets of relationships between technologies and narratives and violence and power, and this is the very stuff of literature too. I take great inspiration from people who are operating more as visual artists. Although in their case, you can even deconstruct that category. When you look at Hito Steyerl's work, you can say it's theory. Lots of it is discursive analysis. Or look at someone like Harun Farocki, who is no longer with us, but whose work I've spent a lot of time with. His films are artworks, but they're also analytical-poetic essays in the vein of someone like Chris Marker. So, I think these categories are all very porous. They all bleed into each other.

JW: In his acceptance speech for the Büchner Prize in 2015, the German writer Rainald Goetz raised the idea that literature is a medium coming forcefully from the margins and that it needs constantly to reinvigorate itself with whatever it brings from the edge. In

other words, the “other” discourses that infuse the novel must be refuelled all the time; you can’t simply rely on an established repertoire of theory, for example, but you need to feed off the new.

TM: I’m certainly feeding off new as much as older stuff. In the last decade, I got into Giorgio Agamben, for example. He was a huge influence on this book – his work on the use of bodies was extremely important to me. I know he’s gone a bit off the rails recently; he’s had his crazy Heidegger moment. Nonetheless, he was hugely influential on this book. And someone like Jussi Parikka, the Finnish media theorist, is important to me. He’s writing about regimes of vision and machine vision, as it moves from war to sport and business management to avant-garde cinema. This is very invigorating. But I guess, when you’re 21 and you read Derrida it hits you in a different way – it’s like listening to the Velvet Underground for the first time. And even though you recognize brilliance later, it’s not quite as monumental and life-changing.

JW: I wonder if you could speak about another life-changing streak of your work: the way you stage destruction? The title of *The Making of Incarnation* positions the novel as a positively productive enterprise – ‘the making of the making of flesh’ – but then a large part of it is to do with destruction also.

TM: It’s both, it’s a dual movement. The embedded science fiction movie in the novel, which is called *Incarnation*, is a kind of *Tristan and Isolde/Star Wars* space myth, and in the end, as the film nears completion in post-production, the spaceship is shown disintegrating in spectacular visual detail. The novel ends with a scene where the footage from the film is being rendered, which takes hours and hours. And even though the spaceship is endlessly disintegrating, there’s still some kind of emergence, some kind of creation. Something is becoming visible, hovering on the edge of some monumental epiphany, even at that moment. I mean, it’s a gnostic, Romantic, Kierkegaardian moment, since the characters in the film are stepping into the void and grasping eternity. So, you have this dual movement of destruction and something coming to be realized.

It’s very much about the making-of rather than the thing itself. And this is a feature of the novel, not a glitch – certainly of the modern novel. I mean, *Don Quixote* is not about traversing the surface of events smoothly, it’s about a continual failing, about stuttering attempts to produce a smooth narrative surface, or experiential surface, via building these kind of film sets *avant la lettre*: ‘Now I’m going to stage this moment, or now I’m going to re-enact this bit from such-and-such a knight-errant adventure’, which never quite works. It’s always about the making-of. And again, it’s a feature not a glitch that literature has always been about the conditions of the possibility or impossibility of something. Even in a supposedly ‘realist’ novel by Balzac, the author draws the curtain away from the theatre of Parisian high society to show the squalid engine room that’s producing it all. It’s about looking at the man behind the curtain and not being duped by the wizard. Wizard-focussed fiction would be mere entertainment, but I think literature, as a meaningful term or mode, begins when you look behind the curtain.

JW: The ending to *The Making of Incarnation* looks behind the curtain because it shows a marginal character, a computer technician supervising the rendering of the footage, and puts him center stage. Everything is ending, but something is quite literally rendered into being, translated into something else, and in the novel, it becomes this sublime and meaningful moment. It relates to all the other moments in the wind tunnel and the water tank and the vanishing plane.

tm: The film-within-the-book does come to an end. We watch the final scenes of the film. This is the bit that is being rendered in a glitching, looping way, but we see what's happening. We witness a transcendent apotheosis of the main characters, but we experience it in delayed form, since the footage is just being rendered. That final scene is a kind of fugue in which everything comes together, although the rendering isn't finished. The final line from the film we hear is the line "It's waiting for us" – and because the way a film is rendered, the technician, Soren, and we, the readers, hear this second and a half of the film over and over again, on a loop or like a stuck record: "swaitingf ... swaitingf ... swaitingf..." So, we're in this moment of abeyance, of withholding. For someone like Alain Badiou this withholding contains the very possibility of the event. The very possibility of an event resides in an abeyance, a caesura. It's that kind of pause I wanted to inhabit.

JW: Of course, the word "rendering" also has a corporeal – an incarnate – dimension, such as in the idea of "rendering", or melting down fat, for example.

TM: That's right. The character of Soren remembers a moment when he told his grandmother that his job at the post-production studio is rendering, and she thinks it's to do with meat, pressing the carcasses of chickens just to get that last of the fat or tallow. That's carnation, incarnation at its most Batailleian, which is a strand in the book as well: the base-material level of flesh. There is a scene that *Incarnation's* director has imagined – and, with the aid of computer graphics, plotted – as a sublime sex scene in zero gravity; but when they film it with real actors, of course, their bodies don't follow the right trajectories, and flop about like sagging meat in a butcher's shop window, or like chicken skin. So, there's this continual sense that flesh won't do what the algorithm wants.

JW: The moment reminded me of the floating scene in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, even if the reality looks less sublime than the concept. Is the novel making an argument for anything as simplistic as artifice being superior to the real?

TM: No, no. I mean that's part of the picture. I remember reading *Against Nature* by Joris-Karl Huysmans when I was young. And the whole premise of the book is that he recreates the whole world artificially, because the recreation trumps reality: a stage-set of a forest is better than a forest and so on. That project is undone by a kind of material resistance as well: jewel-encrusted tortoises die and rot; cross grafted hybrid flowers ditto. I'm really into the poet Francis Ponge, whose work is all about this – the attempt to abstract the world into its representations, but the world always keeps coming unstuck; the sheer facticity or the materiality of objects are getting in the way. An orange that

won't be properly "expressed", for example – it's just messy, it gets sticky juice all over the expresser. So, I think there's an anti-idealistic strand running through *The Making of Incarnation*, in that the material world is a site of resistance to any form of idealism, whether that's an artistic one or a data-analytical one, like translating the workers' bodies, or athlete's bodies or natives' bodies in occupied territories into data points that can be controlled. I think the materiality of what is there pushes back against this. And this is a good thing. I think to me as a writer I want to align myself with that tendency of pushing back. I want to be on the side of the messy orange, not the kind of idealized orange.

JW: Something I found particularly fascinating about *The Making of Incarnation* was that the novel is able to spoof the kinds of space movies similar to *Incarnation*, while simultaneously acknowledging that these films are pushing for something genuinely new in terms of the image.

TM: Absolutely right. I did watch quite a few of these films, like *Gravity* and those big Christopher Nolan blockbusters. I must say that I found I got much more out of them when I turned the sound off, because the dialogue is so cheesy. But the imagery is quite incredible. They really have the best contemporary artisans – and, of course, funds – at their disposal, and some of it is quite astounding, for example what they're doing with distortions of the visual field and with the complexities of making stuff blow up and slowing motion down. It can be very hypnotic, especially if you just loop a bit of the film and play it without sound over and over again. And even if there's a level of irony to the way I frame *Incarnation* the movie within this book, there's also a real sincerity to it, which is why I sometimes go deep into the lovers Tsvetan and Tild's interior consciousness. I'm not mocking them. The desire of the space princess Tild, as she opens herself to infinity and death in this Kierkegaardian way, is something I find beautiful. I want to render that sincerely, even if I then come out and show the making of *Incarnation* again, how the post-production guy is struggling to make the zigzags of her hair align with the contours of the space ship, because the pixels are going in the wrong place. In the novel, you can always have both.

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