

# THE OFFENCE OF MATTER

*A conversation with Tom McCarthy*

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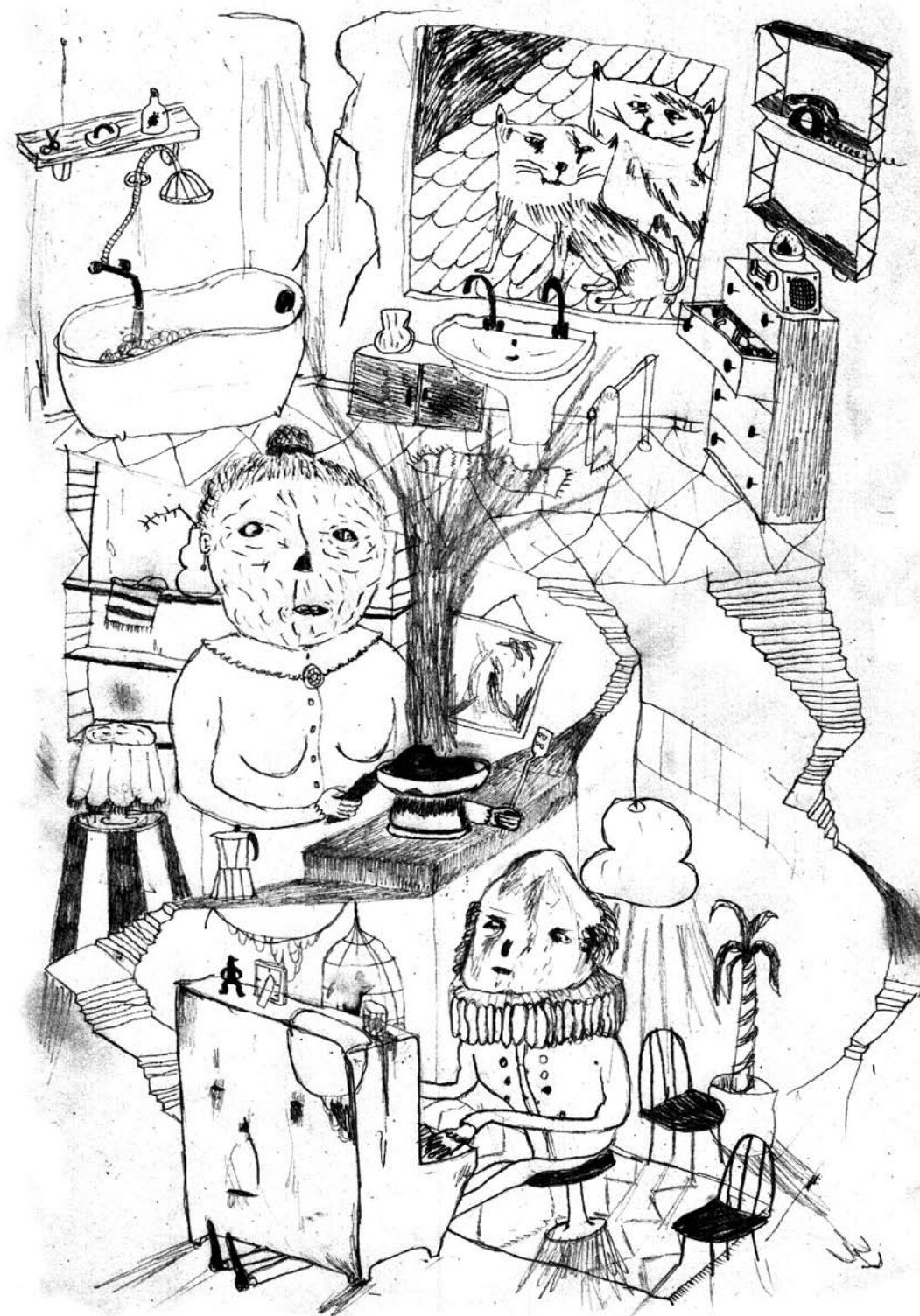
*illustration* MATTEO GUALANDRIS

The International Necronautical Society is an organisation that may or may not actually exist. It produces manifestos, conducts committee meetings and organises re-stagings of violent crimes. In its attempt to explore a Blanchotian belief that death is a space that can be mapped, explored, the INS is one-part parody of the avant-garde movements of the early Twentieth century; one-part contemporary art; and one-part nod to the Situationists. It should come as no surprise, then, that the chairman of the INS is Tom McCarthy, author of *Remainder*. The recent winner of the Believer Book Award is a mind-bending exploration of the concept of authenticity and reality through the story of a nameless man who is obsessed with re-

enacting his memories in the real world.

At the start of the novel, the narrator reaches a post-accident settlement that leaves him with 8.5 million pounds. After experiencing a powerful vision during a moment of déjà-vu while watching a crack in the wall at a party, he decides to invest all his money into the real-life re-enactment of that vision. He hires a crew. He buys a building, tears out its insides and has it rebuilt as a sort of philosophical film-set where the movie is his own memory. Everything has to match, from the black-and-white tiled stairway to the black cats lounging on the roof of the building across the window, from the sound of a piano teacher practicing Rachmaninoff to the smell of an old neighbour cooking liver in the flat below. Soon, the narrator is engulfed in a re-enactment addiction, going to the point of re-enacting moments from his own re-enactments.

And yes, it is a mindfuck. But it's a very rewarding one. Along the way, the novel touches on many of the central issues that good literature has explored for centuries (memory, reality, time, art, aestheticism), but it manages to do so in a completely unexpected way. It's kind of like being sucker-punched into being interested in stuff you've always been into but had forgotten why. Ironically enough, the book itself is about to be re-enacted in the form of a movie, as Filmfour have recently obtained the adaptation rights. Before this explosion of phenomenological irony, we called Tom in his London home and asked him a few questions.



When they awarded you with their 2007 Book Award, the editors of *The Believer* called your novel “an art installation in book form”. Do you agree with that statement?

When it first came out, an English critic described it as a parable about what it is to create art, or to create a world. That’s kind of true, but it’s really important that the hero is *not* an artist. What he’s doing doesn’t have a name. I mean, yes, it’s close to art, but it’s also close to psychoanalysis, and also close to fascism. You could see a lot of different analogies.

I read that you defined yourself as someone who’s half in the art world and half in the literary world.

Ever since I was a child I presumed I was going to be a writer, but in my early twenties I discovered contemporary art and since then most of my friends have been visual artists rather than writers. Then, when I wrote *Remainder* it was completely blanked by the English publishing world, nobody wanted to do it, and it was an art press that first published it. But a literary background has always existed in my art projects: I did one at the ICA where I had a transmission centre with people cutting up text from newspapers and broadcasting the lines out. I was thinking of William Burroughs and Derrida and Nabokov, but its only in art that you can do something like that, something that has no function other than to exist. I didn’t want a simulation, or a fiction. I wanted to actually send messages, not to pretend to send these messages, or tell a story of people who send messages. Even though it was soaked in various fictions and cultural histories, it was actually *doing* the thing that mattered, rather than simulating it.

So books exist in a private space, and art in a public one?

Yes, kind of. On the other hand, these figures who read books and then go and do acts of violence really interest me. Like that Parisian woman who went on a rampage after reading George Bataille. They’re frightening figures, but the *passage à l’acte*, like the French say— the movement from a passive to an active space — that’s very intriguing. Like Don Quixote. This division is central to *Remainder*, the taking a set of simulations into the world and making them real. But if I had applied that logic to the idea of *Remainder* I’d have had to actually get the millions of pounds and actually do the re-enactments myself.

Is that how it began? You actually thought about re-staging memories in the real world?

Yes, that’s really the origin of the book. I had a moment of déjà vu, just like the hero. I went to a party, looked at a crack in the wall, and my first thought wasn’t to write a novel, it was, “Oh, I’d like to do this, I’d like to reconstruct this moment”. But after five minutes of thinking about it I realised you’d need about eight and a half million pounds and forty people to help you. That’s when I realised it was a novel. But this is not to belittle the form, I think the novel is absolutely amazing: it can produce any kind of symbolic configuration, something that no other artwork can do. Only internal logic dictates what’s possible and what’s not. And in a way, *Remainder* is an almost mathematical working through of the logical developments of one very simple idea.

Talking about logical development, the novel is very peculiar in that so much of

it is taken up by the actual organisation of his re-enactments. Why did you make that choice?

What interested me from the outset wasn’t the natural moments in the heart of the narrator, but rather the logistics behind his vision: that in order to create this moment of passing the lady on the staircase, with the liver and the rubbish bag, he would need to have ten people cooking the liver, so much so that they then have to unclog the air-vents from the encrusted, burnt fat. That’s the offence of matter, the anti-hero of the book. All these material accretions that build up and up— they’re the exact opposite of the protagonist’s idealist fantasy —this smelly, offensive black matter.

Ever since his accident, the protagonist is in a constant post-traumatic state. Did you want to explore trauma and psychosis when you started, or was it a trick to allow your narrator to explore re-enactments?

The latter. I was looking for my protagonist to be able to do these re-enactments, but he had to have a lot of money. I didn’t want him to win the lottery, or have an uncle who dies, or some cliché like that. So I thought of compensations from accidents. Then I looked into the psychological side of accidents and it was just perfect. You see, most psychologists seem to believe that trauma bequeathes a propensity for repetition, so that the trauma moment is never retained in memory *as memory*. The trauma is a kind of blank that keeps coming back and producing these looping, repetitive, neurotic behaviour patterns. It was absolutely perfect for me. I also found out that there is a sense of inauthenticity after a traumatic event, which was also perfectly suited. Andy Warhol

said, “After I was shot I felt like I was just watching TV for the rest of my life”. After a trauma, everything becomes a simulacrum of the world. So it all mapped perfectly on my idea of repetition and authenticity. And also, it gave the book a bigger thematic structure, of disaster, calamity, and time.

The secondary character in the novel is Naz, the facilitator who makes the protagonist’s sensuous memories become reality. He’s a bureaucrat at heart, but he also gets swallowed up in the rapturous moment of recreation. Why did you bring the two characters together?

The protagonist is an aesthete: he’s obsessed with the way dust hovers above a staircase, with the way that blood forms a pattern in the carpet. He’s very poetic in a way. On the other hand, as you say, Naz is absolutely a bureaucrat, but they both get hooked, they’re both junkies, even if their hits are different. Naz’s drugs are the statistics, the logistics, the systems. But the two of them are completely interdependent, because behind the aesthetic moment is a huge army of logicians and facilitators. I think that’s very important. In a way, you could say *Remainder* is a Marxian critique of the Aesthetic, in the sense that behind every kind of abstract aesthetic moment, there’s a very real set of necessary exchanges and events.

Like Marx’s refutation of Feuerbach. Is *Remainder* a parable about aestheticism versus materialism, then?

*Remainder* is a synthesis of the two into a third state: poetic materialism. Materialism itself becomes aesthetic. By the end, the hero’s picturing all his logistics people, his back-up staff, as being like saints in stained glass windows, frozen in art as they eternally

perform their facilitating duties. And matter itself— concrete, stains and smudges —becomes the most beautiful and vibrant thing imaginable. If you want to see it in formal philosophical terms, I wouldn’t call it Marx versus Feuerbach, but rather Hegel versus Bataille, with Bataille the hands-down winner.

Your references are quite continental, and the book was first picked up by a French publishing house. Coincidence?

I don’t think so. It was published by Metronome Press, which is, ironically, somewhat of a re-enactment of Maurice Girodias’ Olympia Press from the ‘50s and ‘60s. They were the first people to publish Nabokov, Burroughs, Trocchi and Beckett. And like Olympia, also Metronome Press brings together soft-porn imagery with the extracts of their novels. So, yeah, it kind of makes sense. A lot of the my influences are French, like Bataille, and Blanchot, and of course Proust. But there’s a few English things behind it. Ballard, a very British novelist, was a huge influence. Especially *Crash*. In Ballard there’s the theme of repetition. And also this almost mathematical procedure, as if his novels present sets of possibilities that can be run through.

And, like you, he’s an easily readable philosophical novelist. Where you ever concerned with making your book accessible?

With *Remainder* it was more than just a question of readability. It was actually very important to me that the hero wasn’t an intellectual. I didn’t want him to go, “Oh, this is like Jacques Lacan”, or, “This is Proustian”, and analyze what he was doing. The book would just fall in on itself. The

first trick I do in that book is to have what is a quite conceptual, literary process, play out through someone who doesn’t have that vocabulary. He has to be there describing the texture of the floor, or the hair of the liver lady. In her specific case, I was thinking of the Medusa when writing it, about how her hair would freeze you in time, but it was fundamental that the protagonist didn’t know who the Medusa was.

The publishing history of the book is quite fascinating. It started off being completely rejected in the UK, then it was picked up years later by a small French publishing house, and then after that it was picked up again in the UK, and then the world. Was it frustrating?

Actually, the real breakthrough came when the head of Vintage America read it while it was still in the Metronome Press edition and announced he was going to do it. But when I was having so much trouble having it published, I started looking into the publication history of my favorite writers and I found out it’s always the same. They all had problems getting published. Nobody wanted to publish Joyce! And Burroughs had to be published by a Parisian pornographer who made money from porn and published literature at a loss. Alexander Trocchi, too. So, actually, I’m very happy to be in the company of writers who had problems getting published. Even if I didn’t appreciate it at the time.