

Existential Ground Zero

Though today considered a minor classic (not least by Zadie Smith), Tom McCarthy's 2005 novel *Remainder* was rejected by the mainstream before finding Parisian art-house publishers Metronome Press. It is a novel about authenticity, about failed transcendence, about death, themes McCarthy continues to explore both in his novels (*Men in Space*, the Booker shortlisted *C*) and with his 'semi-fictitious' art organisation the INS. It is a brilliant piece of literary sampling, a "commodius vicus of recirculation" that takes in Joyce, Beckett, Pynchon, Ballard, a brilliant Borgesian labyrinth of re-constructions.

Remainder is narrated by a young man, an everyman, awarded 8.5 million pounds for an unnamed accident ("About the accident itself I can say very little. Almost nothing. It involved something falling from the sky. Technology. Parts, bits. That's it, really: all I can divulge") who spends his money re-creating his apartment building in a warehouse in Brixton, re-staging and re-enacting quotidian scenes of everyday life in order feel 'authentic'. *gorse's* interest in repetition draws us back to 2006, to re-visit an interview originally conducted for the *South London Press*. Tom McCarthy and David Gavan met in Brixton, at the Photofusion Gallery on Electric Avenue and make their way to Shannon Grove, re-tracing the settings, re-constructing the set pieces McCarthy uses in the book.

David Gavan: What were your formative links with Brixton?

Tom McCarthy: Well, I grew up in Greenwich, which was socially a long way from Brixton and went to school in Dulwich, which was socially a million miles away. I lived in Brixton in the mid-nineties, where the hero of the novel lives – just by Loughborough Junction.

DG: Tell me about the genesis of *Remainder*.

TMcC: I was in France over Christmas—at some party—and I was sitting in the bathroom looking at this crack in the wall and that was the “fissure moment”, exactly like it happened to the guy in the book. I was just sort of looking at this crack in the wall and had a moment of *déjà vu*, remembering being in a similar building with a similar crack, and remembered there being cats on the facing roof and a piano playing... But it was somewhere between a memory and reverie and, like Proust says, you can remember a house that never existed because you make a montage in your mind

from other houses. But you can still remember it as if it really existed.

So then I thought: ‘Wow! Wouldn’t it be interesting to sort of make that place and look at it.’ And then I thought, ‘Wow! If you had loads of money you could really do that—you could have cats and a piano playing—and what would be the logistics of that?’ So it got really interesting, and I thought: ‘That’s a novel right there’. And it just seemed natural to set it where I lived—in Brixton—although, by the time I’d started writing it, I’d moved to a flat by the Barbican. So I came back to Brixton with a dictaphone and a camera to sort of capture everything.

[We’re currently in Shannon Grove.
DG]

I based Madlyn Mansions on a building in Ferndale Road, the building the hero buys. I was literally walking around Brixton, like the guy does in the book, with a Dictaphone going: ‘OK, there’s a sports pitch, and the ball smashes against the railings’—and

taking the odd picture. And I didn't have a building in mind before to be the re-enactment site, but this just seemed right. Even though, actually, it probably doesn't actually look like this in the book, because my guy's on the seventh floor, and this one's only got about five, but—do you know what I mean?—it was something to work from. By the way, calling it Madlyn Mansions is a very Proust-like thing; the scene where he eats the madeleine and his memories come. I mean, I haven't read all of Proust 'cause it's really long and quite boring in parts, but I think that bit's brilliant. Also, in *Vertigo*, the girl is called Madeleine as well. I think that's a reference to Proust.

DG: When you first came to Brixton—as a middle class boy from Greenwich—how did you respond the place?

TMcC: It was quite exciting. It's the typical thing: white middle class boy comes to cool black area. That's what the whole of the Velvet Underground is about, isn't

it? It's what De Quincey's work is all about: slumming it somewhere off Oxford Street. It fact half of literary and musical history is about bourgeois white people slumming it and then going somewhere nice to write the book. I mean, Burroughs is a good example of that.

[We're still on Shannon Grove. DG]

Here, the sports pitch was quite interesting 'cause it was all quite dilapidated and, um, there's a cage around it. My guy spends a lot of time looking at the cage, and when he was in his comas he had these visions of some sort of sports stadium, and he had to give a commentary otherwise he felt he would die. That was the logic of his between life and death state. His spiritual interzone consisted of having some sort of events space that he needed to occupy and that events space was life. In a way, that's what the whole book's about: it's a sort of purgatory, where he's trying to make an events space that's consistent—and continually failing.

DG: What was the significance of the sports pitch?

TMcC: I love looking at inner city sports pitches. There's all these different markings for different games because they haven't got separate courts. It's sort of mystical as well: it's almost like the Nazca lines—runways for aliens. All these markings determine what will happen on the pitch and yet they run together into some vague hieroglyphics that aren't really legible any more. I love it when they're empty: an empty events space.

DG: They have a lot of residual energy. I used to go to a swimming pool in Beckenham—you know, when you go as a kid—and it's very scary when you've just learned to swim, all these bigger boys splashing you. And then you look at it when it's empty, and it's like seeing a dragon sleeping. You see it in repose and it's very resonant.

TMcC: Yeah, potential. In a way, that's exactly what the guy in *Remainder* is trying to do: he's

trying to keep the potential of an events space without having to actually engage. I mean, he doesn't want the result. He doesn't want to eat liver [the scent of cooking liver features quite strongly in the novel]: he just wants to be in the continual moment of potentially eating. Also, with the pianist in the book, the protagonist doesn't want to hear a symphony performed for him: he wants to hear the repetition of the rehearsal. You know, he wants to hear practising, and making a mistake, and going over the same ground again, and again, and again. Infinite potential, without the conclusion.

DG: It's similar to Salvador Dalí: apparently, he didn't want sex with his lovers, but just wanted to masturbate in their presence. Or, perhaps, have them masturbate.

TMcC: Well, yeah, in the book, there's a sex scene that's an anti-sex scene: he doesn't actually want sex. He wants the fantasy rather than the reality.

DG: Which is an echo of the whole

consumerist thing. You see men going into shops and buying posh trainers—presumably in order to look attractive. And often he’s buying them from a very desirable girl, but sometimes he’s so busy consuming that he can’t clock the fact that he has a chance not to consume and make a real human connection.

TMcC: That’s the logic of capitalism.

DG: Deferred gratification.

TMcC: Deferred gratification. It’s all about continually creating desire. It’s all in the *Merchant of Venice*, that whole thing of speculation. When you have money you send it across the ocean because you want more.

DG: It’s in *Batman* too, isn’t it? When the Riddler’s running a garage that’s really a front for an international money laundering concern. Which is similar to that whole thing of office politics: you soon realise that it’s all a put-up job. That, actually, everyone is actively not really doing what they’re apparently doing.

It’s...

TMcC: [laughing] It’s a front.

DG: It’s a front for an international money laundering concern.

TMcC: In *Remainder* the protagonist has almost rumbled this. He’s very subversive, like Christie Malry in BS Johnson’s novel, *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry*. He’s sort of worked out how it all works instinctively. He understands that it’s not about having the thing—it’s about wanting it and repeating that moment of wanting. In a way my guy is the true face of capitalism and of contemporary society. That’s why he doesn’t have a name because he’s everyone.

DG: When your anti-hero goes to the coffee place at Heathrow airport it feels like a satire of the today’s Starbucks coffee-swilling corporatism. But it’s more than that, isn’t it?

TMcC: Yes. They had this whole thing in the early days of the Seattle coffee invasion about: ‘This is a

Seattle experience. This is what happens in Seattle.’ And they had these British Asian guys from Hounslow or somewhere, who are, like, working in Heathrow airport, who have been trained to do this whole Seattle thing. They had all this publicity—you know, like: ‘In Seattle, we go ‘Heyy, how ya doing? Short cap.’ So you’ve got these British Asians impersonating white guys from Seattle. It just seems so incongruous and weird. They must have had a corporate training day and been told: ‘Whenever a customer comes, you go “Heyy!” for your £4.20 an hour before tax.’ And this repetition loop they’re on of doing this completely inauthentic thing. And the idea is that you’re being given a real Seattle experience.¹ It’s just so very strange.

DG: Their dealings with customers are inauthentic interactive loops. The idea of the loop is akin to

1 There’s a notable literary ley line here, if we recall that Starbuck is a character from *Moby-Dick*—an intellectual, introspective individual; a Quaker who hails from Nantucket.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and that seems to be the house illness of this epoch. You know how people say “like” all the time because of the postmodern one remove thing—I wasn’t walking down the street, I was, “like”, walking down the street. Perhaps OCD repetition loops really encapsulate the age inasmuch as people can’t have the real, virgin experience in the postmodern world, so they actually...

TMcC: Just repeat the moment.

DG: Yes, repeat a preliminary moment that isn’t really the moment: or rehash an old, decaying moment.

TMcC: Yeah, while writing *Remainder*, I was thinking if the protagonist built this building, and had the cats and the piano and everything, he wouldn’t just wanna do it once, he’d want to do it again. I mean, it’s a childish thing. I don’t know, you’d say: ‘Look at that goal I scored; let’s do it again. You be me, I’ll be you’. Or: ‘Look at the way Batman hit him.’ And you keep

repeating it. And now let's do it like this, and now let's do it like that. More intellectually, if you look at Beckett's work, it's all about these repetition loops, which are quite interesting, 'cause they're not exact repetition loops. Like in *Happy Days* she does the same thing every day—getting the lipstick and the gun out of her bag—but she's everyday saying: 'This is what I did yesterday. I took the thing out and I'm doing it again now', which means it's not the same. Her constant reviewing of the past makes it constantly different. I mean, if we come here tomorrow and repeat this conversation it's not the same as now; we're in a secondary space of re-enactment, rather just being, like we are now. And I find that really interesting: that everything is a repetition of something that's already happened, or not, or could have, and then you just infinitely regret it. D'you want to walk around to the front of the building? We can go around and pass Naz's building.

DG: Where does the factotum character, Naz, spring from?

TMcC: Well, I realised my anti-hero would need a sort of stage manager for his re-enactments. And then... In *Moby-Dick*, Captain Ahab has a similar obsession to my guy; of course, his obsession is getting the whale. He's got this lieutenant called Fedallah, who's a swarthy, turbaned—it's very racist—Hindu guy who represents, in his darkness, the romantic, bubbling under side of the rational ego. The desire, the obsessiveness. And there's a brilliant bit where, at one point, Ahab's crew say to him: 'Listen, we've got wives; we've got kids; forget the whale; what about life?; smell the trees; let's go home.' And Ahab goes: 'Oh yeah, maybe I am being a bit heavy'. They've almost persuaded him to give up, and he looks away from the crew, down into the water and his eyes meet with the eyes of Fedallah, and then he goes: 'No! The whale, the whale!' So Fedallah's the embodiment of Ahab's obsession in a nineteenth century, romantic, somewhat racist way. So *Moby-Dick* put the idea of Naz into my head. But nowadays the Fedallah

character would be all about data centres; now that Asia is so much about information management, and data entry, and call centres. So all of the imagery associated with Naz is of processing information and data. Nazrul means ‘prince’: it’s a royal name.

Actually, on the subject of race, *Remainder* is very racially loaded. The protagonist is a white guy, the bourgeois, the consumer. Then, half of England’s information is actually managed on the sub-continent of India, with people like Naz in call centres. Then, the black guys in Brixton represent authenticity to my guy. That’s what happens in cultures: you get people like Tim Westwood reinventing themselves. The children of more privileged people adopt the mannerisms, fashion and subculture of the under-privileged because that represents authenticity to them. It’s Lou Reed going up to Lexington 125—into the black part of town—to find what’s real. A kind of cultural appropriation.

DG: I remember that Jean Luc-

Godard film, *Sympathy for the Devil (1+1)*, which features a scene where a black militant reads aloud from a book about the history of the Blues. A memorable line is where he says: “Any group of middle class white boys who need a haircut and male hormones can be a pop group.”

TMcC: [laughing] When discussing the film version of *Remainder*, people were saying: “It doesn’t have to be set in Brixton; it could be set in any city in the world.” But maybe it should be set in Brixton; because it is very much about Brixton; because what I depict is what’s going on in Brixton. You’ve got white professionals moving in ’cause it’s hip and cool, and offers the authenticity that’s [beginning to laugh impishly] lacking in Beckenham or Greenwich.

Just even, like, the cars and stuff. There’s lots of dilapidatedness and shabbiness in Brixton. I dunno, it’s like all these layers are decaying, and sedimenting, and then the new is coming over it. I mean, my guy gets obsessed with surfaces; the surfaces

of the street and where traffic lines have been repainted, and it's like an archaeology of the city surfaces that he's looking at. If you went to Chelsea, it would all be spick and span, but here you've got all these layers.

Shall we carry on? The front of the re-enactment building is on Ferndale Road, and Naz's building is around the corner. It's much more sixties—sort of glass. It looks like a central control building 'cause Naz is running the reality studio. And, um, there it is—the blue building with all the aerials on it. If we were in East Germany, it would be the Stasi place. It looks official, like the...

DG: Orwell's Ministry of Truth.

TMcC: Yes, exactly that. So imagine Naz would have an office on the top of there, where he could see Madlyn Mansions, and control the re-enactments from there. But he needs an off-site space to do it. And I love the fact that it's got all these communication masts on it. So much of *Remainder's* about transmission

and communication—all the people with radios going: 'Okay, you've got to phone him, and tell him to phone him, and then you signal to the cat people'. It's about keeping a certain level of organisation. It's very Burroughsian: the reality is controlled by some sort of act of transmission. Those aerials on Naz's building just made me think of that. I'm really into transmission. The next book I'm writing [*Men In Space*] actually involves a Czech police agent, who just listens to bugs and loses the signal at the end, and it's like losing God. He loses the frequency. He says, 'This bug doesn't work anymore', and becomes humanity abandoned by the signal.

DG: It's like a spiritual version of that film, *The Conversation*.

TMcC: Yes, exactly that! Which is already spiritual: he's looking for the bug in the Virgin Mary. Anyway, that's Naz's building.

DG: What is Naz's motivation? I get the impression that he doesn't really need to be employed.

TMcC: He's obsessed by information management. He doesn't need to facilitate the re-enactments to such an obsessive extent. In fact, it's completely self-destructive to do it, 'cause he's going to go to prison for robbing a bank. But he does it because he's just become obsessed with the escalating levels of information management. It's beyond doing a complex project, it's actually managing reality itself. If you can re-enact a bank heist, and it sort of becomes real, but it's not; if you can pull that off and stop all the information leaking, then killing people just becomes a detail. It's an allegory of Fascism or, to be more precise, Stalinism: he needs to kill everyone he's worked with in order to take the process to its end. I just like that sort of narrative, when a process starts running, and starts from something as trivial as a crack in the wall and a memory of liver, and you just escalate it to the point where you have to murder the entire world. That whole Stalinist thing permeates the book. The logical extension of information management is totalitarianism. When

numbers become the most important thing, you need to balance the books, so you move half your population to Siberia, where they're gonna die.

DG: Yes, philosophically anaemic management types often enact a sort of fun-size Stalinism, without realising it. Does your main protagonist know that Naz is obsessed, and that an inexorable psychological circuit inside him has flicked on?

TMcC: He does. There's a passage in the book where my hero says: 'Why is Naz doing this? I realised that he is as obsessed as me. But not about the more abstract idea of authenticity, but with data management'. And my guy says he looks across from his building and can see Naz's window and the light's always on—even at about 4am. He says Naz is like a gnostic monk toiling away at scripture, but Naz is toiling away at charts and figures. At the end, when Naz has his breakdown, it's like a computer crashing.

DG: If your anti-hero is the id...

TMcC: And Naz would be the ego!

DG: Yeah, so who would be the super-ego?

TMcC: Well that's a tricky one, isn't it? 'Cause, in a way, my guy is constantly negotiating the reality principle itself. I mean, he doesn't have any parents, right? He doesn't have any family, and that's very deliberate, 'cause the accident is what gave birth to him, and there's all this natal imagery. When the lawyer phones to say he getting the money, he pulls the phone out of the wall and says: 'Urgh, that's disgusting, like an afterbirth'. It's almost as if the disaster gives birth to him. I read Maurice Blanchot's *Writing of the Disaster*, and it's absolutely brilliant. [Laughing] I haven't got a clue what it means, but he just writes these beautiful phrases like: 'The disaster is everything.'

DG: It's almost like 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' by Gil Scott-Heron...

TMcC: Yes, it really does read like

that. Blanchot says: 'The disaster can never be named; it can't even be situated in time; it's always already happened, and yet it's forever yet to come...'. Then he says: 'When everything has been said, what remains to be said is the disaster'. So the disaster is like the remainder, the thing that is...the extra cup of coffee. The half and the eight-and-a-half – the bit that's outside the whole system, but somehow governs the system. So, talking about the super-ego: it's like in those Hollywood movies where the main guy is actually the villain. The reality principle is actually the disaster! Which, again, is like the world we live in, isn't it? I keep coming back to politics, but then we've got madmen dragging the world to destruction, and making the law at the same time.

DG: The book's ideas seem very French, but it's also steeped in a very London atmosphere.

TMcC: Even though I had the idea for it in this party in France, it very much emerged from walking

around Brixton. It is not like you have the whole story and you go and find places that correspond to it. It's more that the landscape of Brixton prompted the events in the book.

DG: Given the writers that have influenced you—Blanchot, Bataille, Barthes and so on—it's fitting that the idea for the book hit you in France.

TMcC: Yeah, it's nice 'cause it's sort of a French book. Some journalist said 'It's the best French book written by an Englishman', and I thought 'Yeah, I'll take that!' It might be the only English/French novel: it might be the worst as well. But J.G. Ballard is a big influence. Vaughan, in *Crash*, is very like my guy—he re-stages car crashes. He has the same compulsion for repetition.

DG: What about *Fight Club*? Where did it factor in? Or did it factor in?

TMcC: It did factor in, yeah. I'd already started the book when I saw the film, and I thought they had

loads in common. They even live in this house and these characters seem increasingly at odds with mainstream society. But, on the other hand, they embody its true face. Then there's the escalation and the violence. It's weird 'cause it ends with two towers exploding and falling to the ground as the Pixies start playing. And this was, like, pre-September 11th. It was very prescient.

DG: Cinematic synchronicity.

TMcC: Yeah, absolutely. Also, with *Fight Club*, what they're after is authenticity: they're alienated by the modern world. They can only get authenticity through violence, and that's what happens to my guy. His re-enactments become increasingly violent.

DG: *Remainder* also seems like a near cousin of Ballard's *Millennium People*.

TMcC: Yeah, I haven't read it.

DG: It's similar in that the characters seek authenticity through acts of

violence. But they're middle class people who end up bombing places like the National Film Theatre.

TMcC: Really?!

DG: Yeah, in order to get back in touch with this primal authenticity that they think they have lost—even if they haven't.

TMcC: Okay, that's really interesting. And it's cultural places they target?

DG: Yes, anywhere that has middle class, cultural connotations.

TMcC: I mean, in *Remainder* I had to cut culture completely out of it. The only bit when culture comes in is when an auditioning re-enactment actor wants to quote Beckett for his audition, and the anti-hero says: 'No, we're not interested in that.' Because, if you bring culture in the whole thing would just collapse. *Remainder* is taking someone who's basically an artist or philosopher and putting him in the body of some bloke who's got no relation to culture or anything. Also, if he'd gone to see a psychiatrist, he'd have

said immediately: 'You've got post traumatic stress.'

DG: That whole re-enactment thing is similar to the foyer of the National Theatre when you have ersatz jazz bands studiously aping the moves of the jazz greats, but it's a complete re-enactment. That kind of thing shows how prescient Guy Debord was in *Society of the Spectacle*.

TMcC: Yeah, the past is more and more being made into something consumable, but it's an inauthentic past. It's like fake food. It's a cannibalistic thing: nostalgia becomes an industry but it's unsatisfying. Let's go to the shoot-out scene.

[We are currently in Coldharbour Lane. DG]

That used to be The Dogstar pub—doesn't it exist anymore? Oh no, it does. That's where they have their meeting with Catherine and his friend Greg, and they discuss what to do with the money.

DG: Where's the café with the giant tin of beans on top of it?

TMcC: That's over here. [In Wellfit Street.]

DG: Great.

TMcC: And the sign that spins around. Usually, you have signs spinning 'round saying, like, 'cheap/tyres'. But on this one it just says 'tyres/tyres'. Repetition where it's different but the same thing. Brilliant! Absolute fucking genius.

DG: Also, it tires you.

TMcC: Yeah, it's true, it tires you. When you get things like that, you don't need art.

DG: You couldn't make it up.

TMcC: You couldn't make it up. Also, we're walking in what used to be called 'The Frontline', in some in some romantic, gritty urban way [Tom has to pause because of a blaring siren]. My girlfriend was saying it would be really funny if I got shot going around the place where the shooting happened in the book. It would be aesthetically fitting. The things about Frontline is that my hero is on the bourgeois

side of the frontline, and he wants to stand on the line itself, on a degree zero of complete authenticity...

DG: An existential ground zero.

TMcC: Yes, that's exactly what he wants, an 'existential ground zero'. [Whispering] Wow! I wrote this book before September the eleventh, by the way.

DG: Who would be your ideal person to play the anti-hero in a *Remainder* film?

TMcC: I quite like Brad [Pitt]. His company were going to buy the film rights to *Remainder* at the end of last year, but at the last minute it was thought to be an inappropriate project for him. And then he went and did what my character in the novel does: he bought a place in Africa and started running it on his own terms. He even took over the air ministry: amazing. Look at that 'shooting incident' sign! Nothing much has changed.

DG: Tell me a bit more about what you felt, emotionally, when you first

came to Brixton?

TMcC: I can remember it really clearly. I went with a friend into what's now The Dogstar to buy some dope. We went in, and of course were the only white people there. And, um, there was some altercation and one of the guys took out a knife and slightly cut my friend's wrist. He was just playing. We just sort of walked out and I went: 'That was fucking brilliant!'

DG: It sounds almost like a film take.

TMcC: A take? Yeah! It was. If you put that in a movie it would seem like an awful cliché, but that was it—my first encounter with Brixton.

DG: But you weren't frightened, you were exhil...

TMcC: Exhilarated, yeah. And in a way, everything about *Remainder* is in that little exchange there. That it's already a replay of generic situation in any number of movies.

DG: And it goes right back to Lou Reed's nameless speaker buying

heroin in Lexington 125 in 'I'm Waiting for the Man'.

TMcC: Yeah, exactly. By the way, I love the names around here. I didn't point out Plato Road [which is where a character in *Remainder*, David Simpson, holds the party in the flat with the crack in the wall]. Plato is about the absolute, ideal true; the absolute authentic. Then you've got Shakespeare Road and Ruskin Park.

This is the bit, right, where the hero comes into and the road's blocked off, and there's a cop going 'You can't come here.' This is why he becomes obsessed with the stretch that we're about to enter, by the Green Man pub [on the corner of Coldharbour Lane and Hinton Road], because it's where he can't go, so he associates this place in his mind with authenticity—with the remainder.² The one you can't have.

² It strikes me at this point that, as McCarthy relives events from *Remainder* with me, he becomes animated in the way that someone obsessional might. It makes wonder to what extent McCarthy's re-enactment man is based upon himself.

That's automatically what he wants.

Hang on, this is where The Green Man pub was, yeah. This is Belinda Road: where the shooting happens. Exactly here. There used to be a pub here. In the shooting, the guy's in the telephone box here, and the stencilled messenger logo is still there. And he comes out of the phone box and he walks along here. Then the car comes and he tries to ride away on his bike, but the two guys get out and shoot him. And when I lived here, that place that's all boarded up was called Movement Cars, and it said outside: 'airports; stations; light removals, any distance', but the words that jumped out were: 'airport', 'stations', 'light'. It was beautiful. The opening of spaces, the word 'light', there's something divine about it.

DG: It's that accidental poetry of cities. Something similar to those trains that hurtle through London stations with the words, 'Empty—return to depot' flashing above the driver's head. It sounds like an album track by Wire.

TMcC: Oh, man! I came here with a dictaphone, 'cause I knew I wanted to set the shooting here, and when I lived here there were two shootings here. And, when you look at the ground, it's just incredible. All these things, 'open MBW' [on a manhole], this whole space is actually full of ciphers and of information. So I thought: 'What if you've just been shot, and you're lying on the floor?' That's your cosmology. That little vent has got an arrow, and that represents life and death at that point. On Movement Cars' window, there used to be a grid, right? Like the Cartesian grid, the grid that tells you where you are in space. And it's like when painters grid a space up. So there was a grid, and the legend 'Movement Cabs' and 'airport', 'stations' and 'light' were on that grid. And the day I came with my dictaphone, there was a puddle, where the guy dies. And some of the letters from Movement Cabs were reflected in the puddle, but of course they were reversed, so they they looked like Russian or Greek cipher. I imagined this guy lying

in this puddle, and he's got these ciphers in front of him. It's like the Egyptian journey into the afterlife with some sort of hieroglyphics, and the shot guy is trying to decode the cipher. Then he realises that it's not a cipher; it's the 'R' of 'airport' reversed.

And you just talked about the random poetry of things. There was a pub over there called The Junction, they had these signs on two doors which read: 'Fire Escape—Keep Clear', and the dying guy would see the word 'escape' repeated on each door, and he's been trying to escape being shot. But the only escape that's actually going to happen is his soul from his body. Then on the day I was there with my dictaphone there was this supermarket bag that just said 'Got Yours?' on it, and I just thought: 'Yeah, he's just got his'. Do you know what I mean? The way that everything becomes significant. And the surfaces... When my guy comes to do a re-enactment, he describes the layering of the paint, and the destruction of the surfaces

as being like the beautiful painting of a Dutch grand master. I mean, if someone is shot here, the site is sort of sacred. For all that he's a fascist and really exploitative, my hero does have an empathy for others and really wants to imagine himself into this guy's death. He's deeply moved by it in a perverse way. He's psychotic in a Christ-like way. He thinks he's crucifying himself in order to save the world because he's the same as everyone else, but more so. Everyone wants to be authentic, everyone wants to be lifted out of inauthenticity. The book is like *Fight Club*, which is why so many people join. In order to save everyone, he must kill them all, but that's quite Christ-like, isn't it? You must die in order to be saved. When you think about it, it's completely psychotic.

DG: Your protagonist seems to find it hard to empathise with the people around him. He isn't nurturingly compassionate in his dealings with others.

TMcC: In the philosophical sense, he starts off by enacting the ideas of

Hegel—that the world must die to become an object of pure cognition. So you name the flower, and actually kill it in order to understand it. Hegel's a Christian theologian, and his ideas are the basis of lots of twentieth century philosophy. But by the end of the book, he's more like Bataille, philosophically. Hegel believed everything must go up and become sublime, but Bataille talked about things crashing down and spillage and mess. And my guy's re-enactments are about trying to get to the sublime, the perfect, but he actually ends up celebrating mess, even down to the coffee stain on his sleeve. He says it's okay for things to leak: mess is what makes us alive. *Remainder* is a deeply human, 'feel good' book. My guy's project [towards perfectionism] fails and he realises, finally, that embracing mess is the real success...The café's just up here, by the way. It's all been redeveloped; it's all changed. We'll go past the flat, where my guy lives, in a minute.

DG: So, do you think it's unfair when people describe your protagonist

in terms of his being 'glacial' and 'controlling'?

TMcC: Yeah. It's interesting, he doesn't get off with Catherine, but he does put her childhood memory of swings into his memory; that's his way of registering his compassion for her. When they're about to have sex, she talks about swings, and so he just puts swings into the re-enactment zone. So there is an engagement with others.

Before writing the book, I did research into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I read all these really good books that were written in the wake of the Vietnam War, when you had a whole generation of traumatised people just running around. And one thing that keeps emerging is this emotionless; emotions and relations no longer mean anything because they're not as real as the trauma. There's a Hemingway story where the protagonist has returned from World War I, and his mum says: 'Let's pray', and he goes: 'Fuck that, there's no God.' Then she goes: 'Well, at least tell me

you love me', and he goes: 'Well, I don't.' And, actually, I think he goes and fries liver! But maybe I'm just imagining that.

Actually, one of the former Vietnam War guys I read about had lost all his friends in some massive battle, and it was so bad that he blanked it out. Then he became a bank robber when he got back to America. And the robberies would always go wrong; there would always be a shoot-out afterwards, and the shoot-outs would have formally really similar qualities. He's always be behind a wall and the cops would be in front of him, and the crew would be around him. And the psychologist did a bit of homework, and found out what had happened in the battle: it was similar configuration to his serial shoot-outs, so he was repeating the traumatic passage he hadn't retained as memory.

You get it in *Tristram Shandy*. Uncle Toby's had one of his testicles shot off at the Siege of Namur, and he spends the whole time in his

garden just arranging flowers. Then someone says: 'God, this is like the battle!' All the red flowers are like the French, and all the Blue are like the English, and there's this phalanx of blue cavalry, and he's replaying his trauma.

That whole question of compassion and ethics does really go to the heart of *Remainder* 'cause, as I keep saying, the book is an allegory of fascism. He's not a nice guy, he's a fascist and a control freak, yet he's engaging profoundly with the whole question of 'what do you do with personal trauma, and with other people's trauma?'

DG: Your character reminds me of Larkin's "shit in the shuttered chateau", he reminds me of an emotionally fascistic novelist. The type who empathises with humanity in the abstract, but behaves like an utter shit in his workaday dealings.

TMcC: [Laughing] There is that. But, when you think there's been a shoot-out here: most people don't wanna know. One response is to just turn away: clear the blood up

and get the space operational again. Wipe out all traces. But my guy is a bit like Michel Houellebecq in that he's brutally refusing to let that happen. As with Blanchot, the question he's really dealing with—although he never names it—is the Holocaust. Do you try to forget it and move on? In a way, the trauma victim's response is the most honest one. It's, like: 'No! This happened.' And it can never be explained or contained in thought or language, but it's like Beckett says: 'I can't. I must. I can't even write this, but I will'. And that's what my guy keeps doing: it's like the record needle that catches on that one unreadable moment. Which is why all the streets become texts, in a way. There is a lot of text here. If we copied down all the information here, we'd have about ten thousand words.

It's a pity, it's all changed. Movement Cars has gone, the Green Man has gone: it's all been redeveloped. It's gonna become luxury flats. I walked around with the camera and dictaphone in 2000. I used to go to the Green Man a lot, 'cause it was

when there was still eleven o' clock licensing laws, and with the Green Man, you could just knock on the door, and go in there whatever time of night it was. The thing about Brixton, there's all these little places which are garages or workshops. My guy's obsessed with, like, people who make things work. So car mechanics are noble; he's a reverse snob, in a way. They're like the high priests. Celine describes walking from Greenwich to Deptford, and he says Greenwich is like the theatrical scenery of *Empire*, then you come to Deptford and it's like backstage—the engine room. It's crap—it's not pretty—but you see how it all works. It's the same with Brixton—all these shabby, crappy bits of machines, with half of them broken.

[We're on Wellfit Street.]

This is the tyre replacement place and the cafe's still got the giant Heinz baked beans. See? Look at that, it's brilliant: 'British baked beans'.³ The tyre place has become a van rental

3 A relish of Warhol and Campbell soup cans, here.

business. So I lived just down there, in Herne Hill Road, and I used to come here all the time, 'cause I had a Beetle and the tyres kept breaking and I'd get them fixed here. Over there is where the workmen are watching my hero when he does the figure of eight, and he says he's dithering like a jerkily-paused video still. Then he goes through the act of making a decision. Look! There's all the tyres. It's bizarre! It's called 'Wellfit Street' and they fit tyres: I don't know if they named it after the tyre place. I think the tyre place was called 'Wellfit Tyres'. This is where the whole scene where the young boys change the hero's tyre happens, and the blue gunk [windscreen wiper fluid] explodes through the dashboard. That happened to me. He describes the children who attend to his car as "artisans", and that's an allegory for art. They're like nineteenth century craftsmen/artists, and he's like a twentieth century conceptual artist. And his longing for them is like: 'I wish I had some skill.' Because a twentieth century artist no longer has skill, it's

all about staging ideas, and that's what my guy's doing. He looks at the simple, nude craftsmanship of the boy—how he knows what to do with his hands—and feels an almost sexual longing. It's like that scene in *Death in Venice*, when the man sees the young boy. Here is the street that my guy keeps walking down. I lived in these houses here, so this is where my guy's flat is: it was number 31B Herne Hill Road. I'll show you. I love that—Wanless Road—such a great name!

And Ruskin, the Ruskin Pub. John Ruskin was the nineteenth century art critic. He had this whole aesthetic theory about beauty worked out, and on his wedding night, when he was about to have sex with his wife, he found that she had pubic hair and it didn't fit in with his theories, so they never did it and the marriage was annulled.⁴ Here's my protagonist's flat. The only thing he does from here is go out, do his

⁴ Robert Brownell's *Marriage of Inconvenience* overturns the myths that have grown up around Effie Gray and John Ruskin's annulment.

figure of eight and come back, and not have sex with Catherine.

DG: A la Ruskin.

TMcC: ‘A la Ruskin’. Yeah, I didn’t think of that, but it’s really true.

DG: It goes right back to that rumour about Dalí masturbating but not having sex. Your book’s all...

TMcC: [Laughing] It’s all about sex: it’s a big wankfest.

DG: Your novel is, basically, an allegory for masturbation.

TMcC: [Bridling slightly] Yeeesss.

DG: Freudians would possibly argue that Obsessive Compulsive Disorder stems from repressed sexual longing.

TMcC: Yeah, I’m sure they would. But it is important that my guy does get the orgasm at the end, and I was very consciously using a sexual register. He says: ‘I felt a massive surge go through me’ when he shoots the guy; when the re-enactment guy says the words ‘it’s

real’; when this re-enactment guy realises the other people don’t know that it’s a re-enactment; therefore they have actually shot someone, and they’re actually robbing a bank. Basically, my anti-hero has a very poetic ‘orgasm’. When he goes outside, the sun was ‘bleeding’: basically, the sun is coming—the whole universe is. I was thinking of that bit in Bataille’s *The Story of the Eye*: with the sun, the testicle of the bull, and then Simona has an orgasm. That cosmic sexual eruption. So my guy does get the hit—finally. [Laughing] He gets what he’s striving for.

DG: How do you feel about Naz’s fate?

TMcC: Poor Naz. My guy’s quite cruel [he says that Naz had his breakdown coming to him], but Naz did have it coming, ’cause he didn’t accommodate mess and leakage, and the materiality of the world. The French poet, Francis Ponge, wrote anti-Hegelian poetry. In other words, he writes about cigarettes, oranges, oysters and sponges—but not in

order to conceptualise them. He says: 'Look, a sponge is just a sponge, and when you squeeze it, it just leaks dirty water on your sleeve, and then it goes back to its original shape. When you've written about it, it will still be a sponge, in its sponginess.' It's about how good writing or art should just let the world be. Let matter matter. He writes this one about an orange which says when you express an orange, it makes all this mess on your hands, and there's this eruption from its surface, like the sun. But there's also a sense of bitterness, like a premature ejaculation of seed. As if you've failed in front of it, and this poem's become a record of respect for the material world. Naz doesn't have that respect—he wants to systematise nature so he has perfect control. The hero recognises that stains are great, so you should just let the coffee roll around on the aeroplane seat.

DG: The loop shape of your character's indecisive, figure eight walk is obviously a concrete representation of his obsessively repetitive behaviour. But would you

agree that there's a self-similarity about the book—after the manner of a Mandelbrot fractal shape—whereby the re-enactment episodes echo the novel's ultimate circularity?

TMcC: Yes. Going back to Beckett, the novel is circular. Even though we don't know what the disaster that struck the hero was, he says it involves something falling from the sky, it involves technology, bits and fragments. He ends up causing that: he's gone through the purgatory loop and re-arrived at the same point, or at a higher point of the same spring. So now he's the perpetrator of the event that he was the victim of before. When he's on the plane that's stuck in a loop between two directions, he says: 'Maybe it will fall on someone—maybe it will leave me an heir.' What you inherit is the remainder: that's it, the mark, the extra. Another important phrase in the novel is: 'Everything must leave a mark'. When the police swoop on a house and create a crime scene, and it turns out the suspects aren't there, so then the crime scene's gone, it really troubles the hero. He says: 'It's

got to leave a mark'. It comes back to those French people in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Marguerite Duras talks about the horror of forgetting. In a way, the horror of reliving the trauma of the Holocaust again and again is less terrifying than the thought of forgetting it. What did all those people die for if it's been erased? So trauma and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder become the ethical response to the world's realities. *Don Quixote* shares its themes (of re-enactment) with my novel and *Crash* by J.G. Ballard. I met Ballard and said to him: 'You rewrote *Don Quixote*.' And he said: 'I've never read *Don Quixote*, but your theory is right.'⁵

5 When the interview ended, it occurred to me that I should have suggested to Tom McCarthy that, at one level, *Remainder* is a rewrite of *Great Expectations*, with the re-enactment man echoing the character of Pip, and his lawyer, Marc Daubenay, equivalent to Dickens' Mr Jaggers. Just as Pip's life project is to become "a gentleman" who is worthy of Estella's love, McCarthy's anti-hero seeks psychic wholeness through the re-enactment of real scenes. It is arguable that this is what McCarthy, and all other artists, are attempting to do—with varying degrees of self-knowledge.

Existential Ground Zero

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Introduction / Susan Tomaselli

With thanks to Esther Galfalvi

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