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The Oil-Flower Unfurling its Petals: The Phenomenological Aesthetics of Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*

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The article analyses Tom McCarthy's novel *Satin Island* as giving literary form to the aesthetics of materiality. Acknowledging the work's function as philosophical cognition, the investigation utilises the concept of *Einfühlung* (empathy) as the 'feeling-into' of aesthetic experience, while concomitantly determining that ordinary empathy as fellow-feeling is lacking. Combining that ahuman aspect with Husserlian time constituting flow, underlying time consciousness, as another aspect of the ahuman, this article argues that the novel stages the mattering of matter and the patterning of patterns as surface phenomena that constitute the aesthetics of this particular fictional world. The aesthetics appears as a near-metaphysical phenomenon in manifesting an instantiation of Nietzsche's concept of the human only being eternally justified as an aesthetic phenomenon. As such a phenomenon, the human amalgamates with matter and is dead. However, the world can be said to harbour 'A LIFE' in the sense of the Deleuzian concept of pure immanence. Moreover, as an avant-gardist artwork, the novel may provoke an ethical counter-reaction in the reader, inducing an ecocritically-grounded ethics that would empathise with planet earth as a manifestation of life itself.



It is precisely because photography is both ‘thinking and Being’, i.e. an objectifying process and a material presence, that it is at one and the same time the fullest expression of the logic of representation and the limit beyond which it cannot go. Photography does more than represent reality – it modifies our conception of the real as solid and intransient into a global network of self-replicating nodal points (Rubinstein 2020: 3).

Even though Tom McCarthy’s *Satin Island* as a novel is a different artform, it fits the description of photography in the epigraph; it too succinctly challenges a pre-given reality and the notion of any artform as providing variations of representations of that reality. There is no reality to represent: to call it representation or presentation is just a matter of semantics, first and foremost it is just there. In their article on the ontology of the fragmentary essay-novel, Ansgar Nünning and Alexander Scherr present *Satin Island* as ‘an essay-novel with a fine sense for the subtle ironies with which the unification of knowledge in digital networks comes about as far as the human individual is concerned’ (2018: 493). They claim that the ‘basic principle of reading hypertext translates into the novel’s central aesthetic principle, finding its expression in the essayistic and fragmented form’ (2018: 498). Christoph Reinfandt argues that McCarthy both ‘draws on resources of modernism and [...] tries to move beyond postmodernism by teasing out the limits of the discourse of literary theory as it unfolded from the heyday of Theory in the 1980s and 1990s to more recent developments’ (2017: 570). It is the purpose of this article to build on that work and analyse the implications of McCarthy’s aesthetics. As Nünning and Scherr (2018) suggest, there is an ‘ethical potential’ in *Satin Island* through the ‘act of reading itself’ (502). This article argues that part of this ethical and aesthetic reading introduces a type of provocative literary cognition that may induce a response from the reader; not primarily an affective response—affectivity in terms of a deeply felt moral responsibility is blocked by the aborted empathy—but rather an intellectual reaction to some of the more urgent questions of our posthuman condition. The most pertinent features of this posthuman condition in this investigation are the ecological crisis, the existential emergency, the overall lack of faith and meaning, the lack of empathy and the decentred human who still carries moral responsibility for the ecological situation in the anthropocene era.

Claire Colebrook analyses the status of the image in ‘Images Without Worlds’ on photography, and she touches upon similar concerns that are relevant in *Satin Island*:¹

¹ Throughout the text I use the pronoun ‘we’ as inclusive of *Satin Island* readers and readers of the present analysis.

What is the difference between the end of life and the end of the world, and how might we think about life without the world? The answers to these questions are internal to the institution and definition of art. If we think of art as a universal that includes forms of non-human life (such as birdsong, dances of display, elaborate webs and nests) it would follow that a certain imaging power is essential to life. This was how Henri Bergson at one and the same time included humans within all conscious life, while also setting humans apart. If a body responds immediately to the world it is caught up and determined by the mechanics of matter; if a body perceives the world through memory, with a halo of images of a past or other world, then there is a delay between perception and action. Mind is the temporality of imaging, perceiving the present in terms of a past that surrounds and dilates the image with a range of potentiality (Rubinstein 2020: 11).

Colebrook here foregrounds the image as primordial, which is directly related to *Satin Island*. The protagonist of the novel understands his semi-chaotic reality mainly in terms of images of the patterning of patterns as autonomous processes. Through metaphoricity and synaesthesia, the novel tries to highlight the mattering of matter as the central principle of its ontology. Colebrooke's understanding of photography functions as an apt analogy to *Satin Island*. In the novel we encounter fragments of text that are analogous to the fragmented image in terms of being incomplete. The act of completion is handed over to the reader. However, the process of divergence constantly works against the hermeneutic route of convergence. This phenomenon illustrates the well-established trope of postmodern epistemological failure, but apart from that, the novel also incorporates an attempt—or even more aptly articulated, an 'essay'—at writing the aesthetics of humanity becoming matter or becoming a predictable pattern functioning according to the same principles that all materiality does. In that way, the novel philosophises the aesthetics of materiality beyond the concerns of any ethical dimension. The ethical implications that nevertheless appear to the reader are partly that an acceleration of late capitalism would hasten the self-inflicted extinction of humanity. Colebrook's 'imaging power' is concurrently a power of imagination. In *Satin Island*, the human is not set apart in the Bergsonian sense, but is rather immersed in actant-network patterns. Humanity suffers the onslaught of the blend of natural and man-made processes, but as always this comes together with the frustrating lack of power to control it.

Satin Island contains a number of McCarthy's already established and interrelated characteristics of fictional form. Excessive recycling, intertextual and allusional frenzy, monomaniacal preoccupation with seemingly trivial details, fascination with the

material and technological aspects of human culture, problematisation of traditional dichotomisation of human vs. non-human, detached and unempathic protagonist, a distinctly imaginative and associative narration—which makes itself manifest primarily as cerebral, and last but not least an obsession with patterns and pattern analogies (or formalisms, to follow Andrew Gibson’s argument – Gibson 2016). These features are accompanied by an attempt at uncovering a larger configuration, which is reflected in the anthropological dimension involved in the elusive Koob-Sassen Project the protagonist’s company is carrying out. The main character is rather anonymously named by the letter ‘U’, a reference to Ulrich, the protagonist in Robert Musil’s *Der Mann Ohne Eigenschaften* (1996). U.’s ambition seems to be to capture the *langue* of any phenomenon at hand: ‘An anthropologist’s not interested in singularities, but generics’ (McCarthy 2016: 42). But that is something that is bound to fail—a failure pre-figured in the anthropological work of U.’s academic idol Claude Lévi-Strauss. In the formulation of Mark McGurl, *Satin Island* can be said to be primarily about ideas: ‘Ideas about the experience of postmodernity and about the idea of that experience as an experience about ideas’ (McGurl 2015). In this particular novel, that aspect is revealed through the episodic plot-structure, which elaborates on one idea per entry. The numbered entries are then in turn held together in two interrelated ways: first, the protagonist’s work and life experiences, and secondly, thematic links of the ideas presented.

A tension in McCarthy’s fiction can be discerned here. According to McGurl (2015), McCarthy struggles to distance his fiction from lyrical realism (exemplified by Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*, which obviously is a distinction inherited from Zadie Smith’s influential 2008 article in *The New York Review of Books* – Smith 2008). Still, McGurl argues, McCarthy cannot completely rid himself of some form of realist trait (McGurl 2015: 4). The protagonist processes posthuman and poststructuralist ideas, but the experience is existential and quite conservatively individualistic.² On the level of these ideas, *Satin Island* could be read through the theoretical framework of Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* and/or Bruno Latour’s network-actant ontology (Bennett 2010; Latour 1993). Therefore this article considers the existential/experiential stratum to present Tom McCarthy’s aesthetics in conceptual terms. Ultimately, it argues that autonomous materiality—patterning of patterns and the mattering of matter—function(s) as the ahuman within the human, which the novel cogitates as the aesthetics of surface materiality as repetition in the literary form (see the subsection ‘Repetitive patterning’

² Cynthia Quarrie performs an interesting symptomatic Althusserian reading of this existentialist ‘melancholia’, claiming that ‘Satin Island spatializes and materializes melancholy and makes it readable as shame instead—shame that is best understood within the context of British postcoloniality’ (‘Sinking, Shrinking, *Satin Island*: Tom McCarthy, the British Novel, and the Materiality of Shame.’ *Journal of Modern Literature* 41 (2), 2018: 147–64, 149).

below). Moreover, it suggests that the overall affectivity of the novel is that of aesthetic empathy deprived of a more general empathy, which has ethical and ecocritical consequences, such as the forwarding of a hardcore aesthetic attitude that does not care about the death of the planet and the concomitant extinction of the whole of humanity. On a more speculative plane, such cognition may provoke an opposite response in the reader, thus promoting a more empathic understanding of humanity's place in relation to a global ecology. The phenomenology required for this analysis will be outlined in detail below.

To anchor these preliminary suggestions in *Satin Island*, we need to look more closely at a specific entry:

7.13 Talking of visions: as time went on, my mental picture of the Project, my baroque casting, or elaboration, of it, changed. Out went the towers and palaces—or rather, better to say they flattened, their balconies and arches, corbels, cornices and spires and all such wedding-cakery steamrolled down into a uniform consistency. What these second-generation reveries gave me in their place, compressed and smooth, was a black box. It might have still been standing in the desert; or perhaps up on a plateau, a raised plain—above a city maybe, like the Parthenon, or maybe situated (for strategic reasons) far from any settlement, but nonetheless connected to a city, or a set of cities, over which it exerted influence. Then again, sometimes this black box in which Koob-Sassen had become embodied seemed to be lying on the shelf of some administrative building. More accurate, perhaps, to describe it as resting on a plane, rather than plain: one geometric plane that sat atop another. As to its size: this, too, was far from clear. It was hard, in these visions, to maintain a sense of scale. Sometimes it seemed enormous, like an emperor's mausoleum; at others it appeared no larger than a trunk, or coffin; at others still, the size of a child's toy- or music-box. The only constant or unchanging aspect of it was that it was black: black and inscrutable, opaque (McCarthy 2016: 42).

This passage is a vision that foregrounds the analogy to photography as construed by Colebrooke (2020). It is a reverie showing how certain themes (oil, veil, patterns, materiality) transcend distinct planes of consciousness. The palimpsest of planes is rendered in mathematical terms, which proposes that even though it may be difficult to reveal, the mattering of matter may be the bottom line of it all, presumably hinted at through synaesthesia and metaphoricity, but perhaps more accurately captured by mathematics. The affective detachment that points forward towards *Einführung* (empathy) as a split concept in which feeling into aesthetic processes is possible without a broader empathy as fellow feeling. The black box as a monolith that cannot itself be

understood because of its opacity reveals the idea that everything is shown to us but nothing is explained. This opacity mysteriously affects everything in the posited world. In taking the form of matter it is 'hidden' in the open like all other surface phenomena in the novel.

Phenomenology

In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett (2010) argues it would be possible to re-think 'the default grammar of agency, a grammar that assigns activity to people and passivity to things' (119). She strives to construct a politically viable cognition that potentially would take humanity out of the traditional deadlock in which an archaic notion of human agency prevents any real progress in terms of being able to address the challenges we are confronted with in the age of the anthropocene. This idea of matter itself carrying agency is something that exists on the idea level of *Satin Island*. Bennett (2010) describes experiential chains of phenomena that would clearly resonate with a number of U.'s entries in the novel:

Are there more everyday tactics for cultivating an ability to discern the vitality of matter? One might be to allow oneself, as did Charles Darwin, to anthropomorphize, to relax into resemblances discerned across ontological divides: you (mis)take the wind outside at night for your father's wheezy breathing in the next room; you get up too fast and see stars; a plastic topographical map reminds you of the veins on the back of your hand; the rhythm of the cicada's reminds you of the wailing of an infant; the falling stone seems to express a conative desire to persevere. If a green materialism requires of us a more refined sensitivity to the outside-that-is-inside-too, then maybe a bit of anthropomorphizing will prove valuable. Maybe it is worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a non-human 'environment.' Too often the philosophical rejection of anthropomorphism is bound up with a hubristic demand that only humans and God can bear any traces of creative agency. To qualify and attenuate this desire is to make it possible to discern a kind of life irreducible to the activities of humans or gods. This material vitality is me, it predates me, it exceeds me, it postdates me (119–20).

However, Bennett's hope for a 'green materialism' is in McCarthy's novel turned into a 'black materialist aesthetics', which is made manifest as an aesthetic autonomy that leaves a traditional ecological ethos dangling in the void. This does not mean that the ethical element is eliminated, rather that it is pushed into a radically different discourse. Bennett's outline of anthropomorphizing above has clear connections to the discipline

of phenomenology, which also works against anthropocentrism. The creative agency Bennett alludes to may in more orthodox phenomenology be referred to as ‘intentionality’ or ‘constitution’, something that ‘predates’, ‘exceeds’ and ‘postdates’ anything that we would call human. It is important to define the phenomenology utilised, since it verges both on ecophenomenology and postphenomenology. In terms of ecophenomenology, it is more a question of focus, since intentionality is the pre-requisite for an ethically-grounded ecological consciousness. When it comes to postphenomenology, we just have to clarify what the *ad hoc* dimension of the posthuman *lebenswelt* entails. Don Ihde and Lambros Malafouris define the basic premise of postphenomenology as: ‘humans more than just adapting to their environments are also actively changing them (for better or worse) initiating new complex co-evolutionary paths and biosocial synergies [...] Put it more simply: we make things which in turn make us’ (2019: 196). This notion of co-constitution is fully compatible with intentionality and the analysis of the material aesthetics coming to givenness in *Satin Island*. This is the model that has existed since Edmund Husserl elaborated *noetic-noematic* correlations at the very beginning of the development of the phenomenological science.³ The prefix ‘post’ seems redundant, since whatever appears in the ‘flow’ of experience has to be processed as ‘appearing’ regardless of it being man-made, ‘nature’, or a blend of these. The only thing the anthropocene really adds is the return of the real in terms of the self-strangulation of humanity. The death of humanity is not a semantic game.

One of Husserl’s great contributions to philosophy is his thinking about time-consciousness, which is charted in *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)* (1991). When Husserl thinks through the consciousness of time, he eventually reaches a point which language and cognition cannot pass. In order for the subject to be conscious of a now that recedes into the past, there has to be a ‘previous flow’ that is always already in place before the subject can be aware of it. Husserl calls this ‘time constituting flow’, admitting that it is a metaphorical designation:

Wir können nicht anders sagen als: Dieser Fluß ist etwas, das wir nach dem Konstituerten so nennen, aber es ist nichts zeitlich „Objektives“. Es ist die

³ C.f. for instance Husserl’s reasoning in *Cartesian Meditations*: ‘Let us pick out no matter what type of intentional processes (of perception, retention, recollection, declaration, liking something, striving for it, and so forth) and think of it as explicated and described in respect of its sort of intentional performance – accordingly: in respect of noesis and noema’ (Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, (Nijhoff; Dordrecht: Kluwer, The Hague, 1973), 69–70.). In perception as well as recollection, the noesis has the noema as an object of meaning. Thus, there has to be a noetic-noematic shaping and re-shaping of both poles. That prosthetic objects appear as noemas falls neatly into this model of intentionality. Human-made objects may in turn re-shape the human who made them. In that sense objects have agency.

absolute Subjektivität und hat die absoluten Eigenschaften eines im Bilde als „Fluß“ zu Bezeichnenden, in einem Aktualitätspunkt, Urquellpunkt, „Jetzt“ Entspringenden usw. Im Aktualitätserlebnis haben wir den Urquellpunkt und eine Kontinuität von Nachhallmomenten. Für all das fehlen uns die Namen (1966: 75).

We can say nothing other than the following: This flow is something we speak of *in conformity with what is constituted*, but it is not ‘something in objective time.’ It is *absolute subjectivity* and has the absolute properties of something to be designated *metaphorically* as ‘flow’; of something that originates in a point of actuality, in a primal source-point, ‘the now,’ and so on. In the actuality-experience we have the primal source-point and a continuity of moments of reverberation. For all of this, we lack names (1991: 79).

The absolute subjectivity is also close to something objective (albeit not in terms of clock time) in so far as we share a common world at all. Since ‘the flow’ appears ‘before’ time, it eludes language and can only be accessed as a metaphorical domain: ‘Für all das fehlen uns die Namen’. The time constituting flow exists before the division into subject and object, and the partition into the materiality of reality and the perceiving of that materiality. Time constituting flow is then equivalent to what McCarthy and fellow International Necronautical Society members have referred to as the ‘mattering of matter’ (McCarthy et. al. 2012). In combination with Deleuze’s concept of pure immanence, the time constituting flow establishes that which decentres the human being from being the ‘maker of all things’. This notion is fully compatible with what Daniel Rubinstein refers to as an anti-representational stance within the artform of photography: ‘[T]he new conception of matter that is derived from quantum physics indicates that matter is not solid, independent, and self-contained, but can better be described as an entanglement between bodies and techniques, organic and inorganic, artificial and natural, mind and body’ (Rubinstein 2020: 2). Pure immanence as a plane of immanence is also conceived as ‘a life’, which clearly is not ‘the life’ that somehow belongs to an individual: ‘We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else. It is not immanence to life, but the immanent that is in nothing is itself a life’ (Deleuze 2001: 27). In *Satin Island*, this component does not have any value in itself; it is just the necessary constituent that facilitates the mattering of matter and thereby helps shaping the aesthetics that is cognised in and through the novel.

Aesthetics, Synaesthesia and Metaphoricity

The opacity of the black box referred to above demands an explication of how language may function in relation to something that seems to be always already out of reach. Through its root meaning, aesthetics has a connection to the sensory in it being defined

as ‘the science of sensory perception’ (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v.: Aesthetic). In a novel such as *Satin Island*, one could clearly question how a broad understanding of aesthetics could be applied at all. We are dealing with descriptive prose, strings of signs, mostly about a protagonist who thinks about ideas. First of all, we need to establish the existence of purely intentional objects that ‘belong to the corresponding acts from which they draw their source [...]’ (Ingarden 1973: 118). In stretching the scope of imagination, we could conceive of a literature that ‘cognises’ or ‘thematizes’ a subject, as for instance the topic of aesthetics. The acts involved need not be more complicated than the conceptual operations required when engaging with synaesthesia and metaphoricity. Such a metaphorical space may harbour the expanding thought of a particular work of art. As formulated by Charles P. Bigger:

[I]n this medial matrix, saying is the womb of language within which the diversifying locutionary and illocutionary vectors may gather and, as I struggle to find them, give place (*chora*) to the words suddenly found and said as if already there. By a ‘shock of recognition,’ we are gathered into understanding. This choragraphy makes metaphor. The terms within a ‘living metaphor,’ such as ‘making is finding’ are not naturally neighbors. Metaphor is neither a making nor a finding: it is a making/finding (2005: 360).

In the ‘medial matrix’, which here is the fictional world of *Satin Island*, the conceptualisation of matter produces such making/finding. Establishing that the novel ‘cognises’ its topics means that the fluidity of imagination is taken into account. Given that the protagonist is emotionally detached and not empathic in the ordinary sense, he is nevertheless engaged in the cognition of the aesthetic. Such engagement may be appropriately seen through the concept of *Einfühlung* from late nineteenth-century German aesthetic discourse:

The immediate sensation may remain completely external; but may also go deeper and crystallize in a resting, permanent, empathetic sensation [*Einempfindung*]. The responsive sensation may like-wise remain external, or with the aid of the imagination it might insinuate itself into forms as a kinetic, volitional, empathetic sensation. This is true, as we have seen, even with regard to immobile (subjectively mobile) forms.

We see that the imagination is a hybrid. It is a fluid medium in which contradictions of the world – repose and motion, self and nonself – merge into a mysterious whole (Vischer 1994: 102).

As indicated in this passage, empathic aesthetics is built on the conceptualisation of imagination as a flexibility, incorporating the ‘mysterious whole’ of apparent binaries and contradictions. In addition, through imagination’s rhetorical moves as fiction, it acquires the capacity to cognise the mattering of matter as an aesthetic phenomenon. Through its particular set-up, *Satin Island* displays a posthuman aesthetics that challenges an ethically informed ecocritical stance. *Einführung* as empathy, as ‘feeling-into’, functions as the facilitator of aesthetic engagement but not as an ethical concept feeling into the suffering of fellow humans and the planet earth.⁴ Imagination functions as something that together with language can formulate a problem without solution. It reaches for, or points to, the opacity that will never yield. *Satin Island*’s aesthetic is built on this dilemma.

Oil

Nietzsche’s famous formulation about aesthetics in *The Birth of Tragedy* draws attention to an ecocritically-relevant dilemma. What he actually meant by this statement has been debated. Nietzsche himself questioned the propositional merit of the whole argument in his ‘Attempt at a Self-Criticism’ (2000: 17–27). According to Richard White, Nietzsche ‘condemns the Kantian and Schopenhauerian formulations in which his early ideas had been expressed’ (1988: 61). However, the pragmatic solution to this philosophical issue in the present analysis will be to simply take the semantics of the sentence at face value.

denn nur als aesthetisches Phaenomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig gerechtfertigt
(Gutenberg).⁵

it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*.
(Nietzsche 2000: 52).

The uses of the words ‘ewig’ in German and ‘eternally’ in English open up temporality so that it adds a distinctly metaphysical dimension to the topic of aesthetics. As related to McCarthy’s *Satin Island*, this aesthetic stance encompasses the beauty of material-

⁴ This inherent tension in the concept is acknowledged in scholarship. In her tracing of the genealogy of the concept, Magdalena Nowak states that we ‘can see *Einführung* more dialectically, as a clash between two opposing forces: on the one hand, a human need for immersion and oblivion and, on the other, a distrust of the object and the desire to study it critically. This would be the realization of Friedrich Vischer’s vision of the world and culture as a place of conflicting forces: of the empathic and logical ones’. (‘The Complicated History of *Einführung*.’ *Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal*, no. 2, 2011: 301–25, 323–24). *Satin Island* is clearly leaning towards the ‘logical’ pole.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Project Gutenberg. (n.d.). Accessed April 12, 2019.

natural-human processes as ends in themselves. Potentially, it does not have any ethical considerations in connection to an ecocritical discourse. *Satin Island* touches upon this topic and in doing so it cannot avoid a central ecophenomenological dilemma. The Husserlian *Lebenswelt*, the life-world of immanent experience is also inevitably the realm of aesthetic involvement, no matter on what level of mediation it unfolds. In addition, it is the sphere of ecological awareness and sensitivity (or insensitivity). Timothy Clark formulates it in the following way:

To use one of phenomenology's technical terms, our relation to things is essentially an 'intentional' one, meaning not that they are the object of will or choice but that all living consciousness is 'intentional' in the sense of necessarily relating to something outside itself. For any such intentionality the world is a totality of such relations, a network of significances that our daily practices foreground (for example, the need for shelter, food etc.). Reality is first of all, something 'meaning-ful' in that sense. It is this stress on the primacy of meaning that has made phenomenology a resource for environmental politics (2014).⁶

As life-world, humans live their immanently unfolding reality, which possibly is affected by ecological disturbances that threaten human as well as non-human life. We comprehend that something is wrong when the fruit trees in our garden are dying, but the slow dying of the earth does not reach the *Lebenswelt* in such an immediate way.

In McCarthy's novel, this fissure is fully exploited by a transcendence similar to Nietzsche's suggested 'justification'. There is a lack of empathy in the protagonist that comes to givenness in terms of an avantgardist absence of an *ethos*. Empathy (or *Einfühlung*), works in terms of aesthetics, but not when extended to an ethical dimension—empathic intentionality involving fellow humans and the planet earth as 'a life'. There is a textual stress on the fact that aesthetic experience and contemplation rest on matter itself. In Nietzschean terms, Dionysian individuation—the overall loss of control because of Apollonian failure—is tied to matter, still markedly without any eco-ethical considerations. Human and non-human creativity and agency are on a par, so that potentially a full-blown aesthetics of the Earth overrides life-sustaining conditions. The novel intimates that the fully aestheticised human amalgamates with matter and is from an anthropocentric perspective dead.

A more detailed definition of *Einfühlung* is needed. Robert Vischer made use of the term in 1873 as part of a larger framework of concepts:

⁶ Timothy Clark, in Greg Garrard ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), S.v. 'Phenomenology'.

Fundamental to [Vischer's] theory of empathy is the distinction he makes between sensation and feeling. The former is simply the body's response to outside stimuli; the latter presumes mental or emotional activity. Sensation can also be divided (like feeling) into 'immediate sensation' (*Zuempfindung*) and 'responsive sensation' (*Nachempfindung*). The former is the direct sensory response to external stimuli, while responsive sensation involves the activity of nerves and muscles. Vischer illustrated these two processes with the example of two types of seeing. Simple seeing is a relatively unconscious accommodation of visual stimuli that sets in motion 'nerve vibrations.' Scanning is a more focused level of seeing that takes place when the eyes become active and begin to explore the boundaries of form. A third and 'higher' level of seeing in Vischer's theory engages the representational or imaginative activity of the mind (Mallgrave and Iconomou 1994: 22).

The levels of aesthetic experience that involve emotion are activated in *Satin Island*. The protagonist can even be said to reach the higher level. However, even though the materiality of the 'world' presses on the protagonist, the potentially extended empathy of *Einfühlung* does not appear. The Husserlian *Lebenswelt* is central in the overall narration, but a Nietzschean aesthetics cuts through its immanence and pulls the narrative towards the erotic beauty of all-encompassing death. In *Satin Island* as well as in Nietzsche, eternal justification can never be confirmed, but remains a future-directed intentionality.

The matter specifically in focus here is oil. It constitutes one of the anthropologically pursued threads in the novel. For the protagonist, it takes on a transcendental status, moving through screen perceptions, news features, day dreams and sleep dreams, becoming an agent of matter. In taking on the form of covering material, oil draws attention to texture, text, weaving and screens. The novel also thematically circles around Torino Casell, the airport in Turin, which is the city that harbours the Shroud of Turin and provides the setting for Nietzsche's nervous breakdown in 1889. The drape of oil here fittingly partly appears as PVC, which contains vinyl that mainly is made out of crude oil. In the protagonist's pre-sleep phantasies, the PVC becomes the covering material of an alluringly eroticised woman, contrasting with the rather cold relation he has with his girlfriend Madison:

Later that evening, I saw Madison again. Again we had sex. Afterwards, lying in bed, I found my mind drifting once more, among images of oil. I moved through dark and ponderous swells, black cresting waves and fleck-spattered shingles, before settling in pools in which oil, spent and inert, lay draped over rocks and animals alike. When it covered whole rocks and whole animals, it looked like PVC, like fetish gear. The

rescue and clean-up teams' protective suits looked both perverse and prophylactic at the same time. Offshore, where the waves were breaking, I could see a sluttish Aphrodite frolicking in blackened foam, her face adorned with the look that readers' wives and models have in dirty magazines (McCarthy 2016: 61).

A sense of empathy and interpersonal interaction is replaced by the *Einfühlung* involved in the movements of imagination. U. participates in empathy in terms of the purely aesthetical feeling-into. It is almost as if protagonist and reader could touch the black oil surface and sense the carnal contours of the forms beneath. The human form is violently covered by a layer of oil, that is, a coating of sameness, which actually is made up of pure nature. The human amalgamates with matter.

Giuliana Bruno has analysed the materiality of screens and filmic light at length in her study *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (2014). She draws attention to the fact that an installation by Anthony McCall makes us 'sense the materiality of filmic light' (2014: 69). The borderline between protective and 'perverse' here adds an erogenous dimension to the covering materiality. Like the light in McCall's installation, that which should mediate or just be a passive screen has become an agent of matter. In the novel the blackness of oily and tarry matter becomes a metaphor for the dark shroud of death or nothingness as well as it remains itself as matter, as smoke or soot potentially covering the human body. U.'s colleague Petr is slowly taken by cancer and in the protagonist's mind he is gradually covered by particles from burning oil:

[B]eneath the villages, down in valleys that stretched as far as the eye could see in every which direction, oil wells burned, their smoke-plumes blackening the sky—and blackening the orange groves as well as they drifted across these, leaving tarry deposits on trees' barks, on leaves and on the fruit itself. When that scene came to me, when I pictured all its hatred, all its violence, all its blackness, being injected into Petr, I knew—instinctively and with complete certainty—that he was going to die (McCarthy 2016: 106).

There is an almost palpable risk involved in such a metaphorical sphere where matter becomes blackness and death. The totalising tendency of postmodernity was to introduce a largescale play of difference. The ecocentric counterpart is, according to Hubert Zapf, an essential sameness, which we may sense in McCarthy's fictional treatment of the topic (Zapf 2014: 55). However, looking at *Satin Island* as a whole, it more closely resembles Zapf's conceptualisation of cultural ecology, since 'it thinks together the two fundamental aspects of an ecological onto-epistemology, *connectivity* and *diversity, relationality* and *difference*' (2014: 55). The difference in *Satin Island* is that

there seems to exist an underlying Nietzsche-inspired idea of an eternally justifiable ultimate order: the minimum entropy of the aesthetics of death.

Another distinction is that McCarthy uses oil as the aesthetic covering that shrouds the diversity of the colours of things and has its analogy in the text that veils the potential diversity of ideas. The dark matter of oil drapes everything. For an environmentalist, the death of the earth is the ultimate catastrophe, for McCarthy's narrator it is a tantalizing thing of beauty:

It was the world, its stuff, that had left its deposit—on the windows and in Petr's bones, his organs, flesh and arteries. The stuff of the world is black. If Petr's flesh was turning black it was because he'd let the world get right inside him, let it saturate him, until he was so full of it that it was bursting out again, erupting with a radiating luminescence (McCarthy 2016: 168).

In a similar way earth holds its deposits of oil, which are pockets of time, pent up energy that always was ready to burst, to erupt into radical destruction. The oil becomes a force in the narrative, covering the protagonist with its mental-material presence. At one point he becomes carried away by a reverie of a speech he would hold in front of an imagined audience. In this rather long monologue, oil incarnates the abstractions of death, purity, beauty and redemption—all in its worldly manifestation:

[The environmentalists'] entire mindset is a product of aesthetics. Bad aesthetics, at that: misguided and ignorant. They dislike the oil spill for the way it makes the coastline look 'not right', prevents it from illustrating the vision of nature that's been handed down from theologians to romantic poets to explorers, tourists, television viewers: as sublime, virginal and pure. Kitsch, I tell you (here I'd thump my fist into the podium, three times in quick succession): kitsch, kitsch, *kitsch!* And wrong: for what is oil *but* nature? Rock-filtered organic compounds—animal, vegetable and mineral—broken down and concentrated by the planet's very crust: what could be purer than that? When oil splatters a coastline, Earth wells back up and reveals itself; nature's hidden nature gushes forth. The man who brings this gushing-forth about—the drunk ship's captain, oversightful engineer or negligent safety officer, or, behind these, the oil magnate, or, behind even him, the collective man whose body, faceless and compound as oil itself, is the corporation—he should be considered a true environmentalist: nature's more honest intermediary, its loyaler servant (McCarthy 2016: 134).

The use of the word 'reveals' is significant here. The veil is lifted. Purity and truth gush forth, only then again to cover and veil, as a text may veil its depth and its profound

secrets. That which for Jane Bennett (2010) in her work *Vibrant Matter* could lead to a green materialism—that is, to understand human participation in nature and non-human as hope or as an emancipatory force—is presented as a black materialism and somehow as the ultimate truth. An intriguing detail is that veiling matter itself is nature. Nature veiling nature. Human agency unites with the agency of matter. The fully aestheticised world—human or human-world is dead.

An empathic deep-ecological awareness demands that the Husserlian *Lebenswelt* is transcended so that the immanentism—that makes for instance climate change denial possible—is broken. However, in *Satin Island* that transcendence is accomplished in terms of a Nietzsche-inspired aesthetics that involves the sameness of death and the partial absence of human intentionality. The avant-garde stance provokes deep-ecologists as well as cornucopians. To return to Zapf (2014), we could agree about the importance of literary creativity and cognition: '[Literature's] metaphorical transformations generate ever-new emergent spaces in texts, in which conventional dichotomies of thought are dissolved and new ways of perceiving the vital interconnectedness between culture and nature are envisioned' (66).

Veil

When we now turn to other phenomena in *Satin Island* the concept of *Einfühlung* will still be central. It can be understood as empathy in the ordinary language semantics but concomitantly as the 'feeling-into' of the aesthetic experience. In McCarthy's work, we get a clear distinction in that the ordinary aspect is amputated. The purpose is arguably to distil and cultivate aesthetic cognition in order to offer it up for meta-cognitive scrutiny. The display of detachment is explicit. The protagonist's girlfriend Madison tells him about violence in relation to G8 summit protests she participated in:

They stamped on people's legs, and heads, and chests; I saw this one guy's chest crumple as they stamped on it—and I heard his ribs cracking too. It's a strange sound, she told me; a bit like those old chocolate bars—the ones with the synthetic honeycomb inside, that used to crunch when you bit into them. Crunchies? I asked. Yes she answered, that's right: Crunchies. Those were good, I said. Yes, she concurred; I'm not sure you can get them any more (McCarthy 2016: 178).

The *Einfühlung* becomes directed towards the aesthetic materiality of the fictional world, which clearly is a human in the sense of the ordinary meaning of empathy. There is no fellow-feeling empathy, but rather a 'feeling-into' when it comes to the materiality of the surrounding world, especially its aesthetic dimensions. It encompasses our

imaginatively accessible way of cognizing for instance the haptic (tactile) aspects of perception, which makes the materiality of the environment to be felt. Thus, 'ahuman' in our context means both this detachment and the constant eruption of the constituting flow, which is equivalent to the mattering of matter.

The ontological status of the presented entity is irrelevant from the point of view of *Einführung* aesthetics. In analysing architectural art, Giuliana Bruno (2014) emphasises the primordial inter-connectivity of the mental and the material. What Bruno draws attention to in the art of Katrin Sigurdardóttir, is the monadological mattering of matter, at least philosophically suggesting that cognition is world and world is cognition. *Einführung* facilitates a non-trivial conceptualisation of the materiality of cognition and the world of perception:

In yet another inner-outer, connective reversal, a miniature highway is mapped out from a diagram of the neuronal pathways activated in our brains when we have an emotional response to perception. As [Sigurdardóttir] makes the fabric of lived space perceivable in foldable screens and reversible pathways, the artist exposes the neurological texture of the architectural fabrication, proving yet again that an architectural imaginary is a product of mental life, propelled by the movement of mental energy and the empathic projection that connects us to the material world (Bruno 2014: 202).

Satin Island is similar to Sigurdardóttir's project. While McCarthy's novel represents the commonplace postmodern epistemological failure, the text nevertheless persists in advancing a materiality aesthetics and the cognition thereof. On the plot level, McCarthy stages Levy-Strauss's failed anthropological project in trying to map out the *langue* of human culture. Another level of reading suggests that this epistemological miscarriage is reflected in the novel's elusive Koob-Sassen project. However, as aesthetic cognition in itself, the novel puts forth ideas that may be read in terms of empathic materiality as suggested by Vischer and developed by Bruno.

U. regards films of Lagos traffic typically on a screen, which on this occasion is the office wall, and the camera angle is from a bird's-eye perspective:

Almost everything in Lagos is public transport: yellow buses, huge blue and red and brown trucks. The streets, he went on, aren't wide enough for them, so they wedge and squish together. Look, he said: this portion coming up is great. I watched the wall, the footage. He was right: it was pretty awesome. Chains of buses maybe seven or eight long, these rivers of bright yellow, were trying to push their way down arteries that were too narrow for them, while isolated blocks of other colours tried

to break in from the sides, insert themselves into the chains. When they succeeded, sequences of alternation and progression started typing themselves out: it looked like those helix-maps of DNA (McCarthy 2016: 30).

Here concrete patterning resembles ‘arteries’ and ‘helix maps’, that is, patterns of human morphology, trans-metaphorical manifestations of images of human ‘cognition’ in a broader sense, which constitute images of the human thinking herself as shape and shaping herself as human. Notably, the colleague points out: ‘The whole city’s like a painting, painting itself as you watch’ (McCarthy 2016: 31). Even if we restrict ourselves to understanding this as solely a literary expression of something else, we cannot deny that the patterning of its cognition highlights the ahuman within the human. These patterns are nothing more than themselves. They do not reveal any surplus meaning other than showing that the human thought thinks itself, almost like a painting, painting itself. The protagonist feels his thoughts taking shape in the form and pace of the sounds from his office’s ventilation system. These patterns synaesthetically translate themselves from sound into vision:

Sometimes these patterns took on visual forms, like those that so enchanted eighteenth-century scientists when they scattered salt on Chladni plates and, exposing these to various acoustic stimuli, observed the intricate designs that ensued—geometric and symmetrical and so generally perfect that they seemed to betray a universal structure lurking beneath nature’s surface, only now beginning to seep through; and I, too, in my basement, sometimes thought I saw, moving in ripples on the surface of a long-cold coffee cup or in the close-up choreography of dust-flecks jumping on an unwiped tabletop, or even on the fleshy insides of my drooped eyelids, the plan, formula, solution—not only to the problem with which I was currently grappling, but to it all, the whole caboodle—before, waking with a jolt, I watched it all evaporate, like salt in a quiet breeze (McCarthy 2016: 18–19).

Synaesthetic phenomena draw attention to the aesthetic empathy. Archaic experiential patterning contribute to the fabric of the text. On the level of aesthetics, the differentiation between the senses and the distinctions between artforms become less important. There is no use searching for the secret behind the veil. The entire enigma is in the surface of the veil.

The novel actually commences in such a riddle—a conundrum that is very real and a hoax at the same time. The protagonist is initially stuck in the Turin airport, watching numerous screens, mostly displaying the oil spills. However, more importantly, the Italian city is the location where the Turin shroud is kept, the covering supposedly swept

around Christ's body after crucifixion. All is here literally on the surface. There is no truth behind this veil, but the veil itself creates the aesthetic tension needed. Without a minimum of unknowing, art would be impossible. The novel leads its readers into such philosophical cognition. Matter is not the opposite of the creativity of the artist. All of these components go together. Matter is itself a creative agent:

Turin is where the famous shroud is from, the one showing Christ's body supine after crucifixion: hands folded over genitals, eyes closed, head crowned with thorns. The image isn't really visible on the bare linen. It only emerged in the late nineteenth century, when some amateur photographer looked at the negative of a shot he'd taken of the thing, and saw the figure—pale and faded, but there nevertheless. Only in the negative: the negative became a positive, which means that the shroud itself was, in effect, a negative already. A few decades later, when the shroud was radiocarbon dated, it turned out to come from no earlier than the mid-thirteenth century; but this didn't trouble the believers. Things like that never do. People need foundation myths, some imprint of year zero, a bolt that secures the scaffolding that in turn holds fast the entire architecture of reality, of time: memory-chambers and oblivion-cellars, walls between eras, hallways that sweep us on towards the end-days and the coming whatever-it-is. We see things shroudedly, as through a veil, an over-pixelated screen. When the shapeless plasma takes on form and resolution, like a fish approaching us through murky waters or an image looming into view from noxious liquid in a dark-room, when it begins to coalesce into a figure that's discernible, if ciphered, we can say: *This is it, stirring, looming*, even if it isn't really, if it's all just ink-blots (McCarthy 2016: 3–4).

Whatever the 'bolt' may stand for, it is always the case that matter matters. The temporary forms do not all have to be explained or pinned down. The veil presented as the Turin shroud in focus draws our minds in the direction of Schopenhauer. In Schopenhauer's thinking, the veil prevents the human being from seeing the 'truth': 'for he is involved in the *principium individuationis*, deluded by the veil of *Mâyâ*' (Schopenhauer 2011: 455). The difference in the cognition of the novel is that there is nothing behind the veil of matter, but the veil is a necessity for the function of *Einfühlung*. Aesthetic patterning does not need a conclusive sentence or a definitive answer to anything. We are immersed in a synaesthetic and metaphorical space that involves our perceptive capacity. Similar to the 'over-pixelated screen', perceptual patterns keep flowing over us. Even though the 'what' withdraws, there is still a pattern on the surface.

McCarthy's novel is on one level superficial. The commonplace trope of postmodern epistemological failure appears as a half-heartedly utilised plot device. Paradoxically,

the reader needs to reach deeper to grasp the truly superficial level that correspondingly contains depth. In addition, the surfaces of materiality are made manifest in the central misreading in the novel's title. The protagonist aims to visit Staten Island in New York and a billboard sign with the name on it becomes distorted because of impediments in U.'s field of vision. Thus, *Satin Island* is a misconception, but fittingly it is textile, texture and text at the same time. It can also be seen as the material used in parachutes, which is part of a separate theme of falling. The ending is the terminus of matter as the city dump of Staten Island, among other things holding the debris from the World Trade Centre. However, phenomenologically speaking the novel does not end on such a depressing note, since the protagonist never goes there in the end. The journey to the end-point of matter is aborted. *Satin* may be the textile that drapes and veils the whole narrative into this superficial enigma.

The potentially ever ongoing mattering of matter draws our attention to the subject of time. In addition, the novel's motif of buffering concentrates the issue of time even further. The constituting flow of experience, prior to consciousness, is in our aesthetic context the flow of matter itself. If matter ceases, then experience ceases and halts hanging in a recess as analogously a computer does when buffering, waiting for the flow of information to catch up with cognition's awareness of that flow of material. The protagonist ponders this phenomenon while fixating the symbol showing the buffering:

Staring at this bar, losing myself in it just as with the circle, I was granted a small revelation: it dawned on me that what I was actually watching was nothing less than the skeleton, laid bare, of time or memory itself. Not our computers' time and memory, but our own. This was its structure. We require experience to stay ahead, if only by a nose, of our consciousness of experience—if for no other reason than that the latter needs to make sense of the former, to (as Peyman would say) narrate it both to others and ourselves, and, for this purpose, has to be fed with a constant, unsorted supply of fresh sensations and events (McCarthy 2016: 85).

The raw material for narration is this constituting flow of experience-matter. This encourages a return to the ideas of *Einfühlung* and the materiality of experience we focus on. In this sense, narrativity is matter and matter is narrativity. In fact, following the cognition of *Satin Island*, everything is matter and aspects of matter. The enigma of the world resides in the inaccessibility for the human to the ahuman inside herself that essentially drives art. Such a state of affairs concurrently harbours a specific chronotope, which accommodates all time. This is the primordial understanding of experience and its aesthetic dimension, which is simultaneously part of cutting-edge

technology. Historically, we have not come any further and we will not come any further. All progress is just an expansion of some aspect of what was already there, a facet of the making/finding of the metaphorical sphere of the *chora*.

Satin Island asks us to consider the novel as an artform. It depends on materiality, but it simultaneously functions as a resilient artform in being able to narrate and think such an understanding of art and materiality. The novel seems to have the capacity to think through itself as technology and incorporate new forms of technology and other text types into its world too. It has moreover contributed to the contemplation of the ahuman within the human. As Zapf (2014) argues, the focused creative relation between mind and matter harbours levels of deep-ecology and one could extend it to involve technological extensions of human existence. Creativity is a capacity in itself that expands thinking and thereby amplifies the world: this dynamic power appears in the in-between space of subject and object, the metaphorical space in which mind meets matter:

The fundamental ecological relation between mind and matter, culture and nature, thus emerges as a particularly powerful generative signature of literature. Its metaphorical transformations generate ever-new emergent spaces in texts, in which conventional dichotomies of thought are dissolved and new ways of perceiving the vital interconnectedness between culture and nature are envisioned. As an ecological force within culture, literature is a medium that represents the exclusions of the cultural system and symbolically reintegrates the nonintegrated into language and discourse. The neglected relationship between culture and nature is one of these exclusions, and its symbolic empowerment is a major function of literary creativity and of the larger process of cultural criticism and cultural self-renewal that literary texts perform (Zapf 2014: 66).

This interconnectedness is clearly made manifest in the novel's excess of the patterning of matter itself as an inevitable part of human experience. Speaking in ethical terms, *Satin Island* provocatively introduces a seemingly anthropocentric sphere that completely neglects nature as the non-human entity that at least commonsensically would benefit from *Einfühlung* empathy. However, as an aesthetic statement—a piece of philosophical cognition—the novel may achieve the opposite. The Kafkaesque late capitalist atmosphere may incite a contrary response in the reader.⁷

⁷ In his reading diary, Derek Attridge comments on this prominent aspect of the narrative: 'The anthropological outlook that makes events like this objects of analytical scrutiny merges surprisingly easy with the capitalist impersonality of the Company; all is grist to both their mills' ('Tom McCarthy's Fiction: A Reading Diary,' *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, 2016, par. 32).

Repetitive Patterning

Highlighting the phenomenon of Homo Faber, Ihde and Malafouris establish a vital connection between postphenomenology and Material Engagement Theory. The human is always already merged with things in terms of being primordially a ‘maker of things’ and almost in the same fell swoop in turn being made by these things. I shall here use Ihde and Malafouris to contrast their ideas with the fictional world of *Satin Island*. The authors take a clear cornucopian stance:

There is nothing inherently good or bad about a new technological development, but given the importance that they have in human life and our way of thinking, it pays to study in more detail the specific effects they might have on us. The challenge here is not how to liberate ourselves from technology: it is how to turn technology into an instrument of liberation and critical self-consciousness (2019: 196).

The difference in *Satin Island* is that the protagonist there inhabits a space within a technological shell that others have constructed. U. utilises the available technology in this domain, but is not the maker of this technology. Rather, he takes it upon himself to collect and interpret human/cultural patterns and draw these together in order to reveal the ‘master plan’ beneath it all. However, most of the patterning comes out as ‘empty’ repetition, seemingly without any discernible telos. While stuck at the airport in Turin, watching the oil-spills on the various screens available, there are some children playing: ‘Two boys ran past me; one fell down, his brother jolted to a halt, backtracked a few paces and roughly pulled him to his feet; they ran on’ (McCarthy 2016: 7–8). Typically in play, movements are repetitive, seemingly without any other purpose than the game itself: ‘The same two boys ran past me. Once more the small one’s feet slipped out from under him: it must have been the angle as the floor rounded the row of seats—that, and the fact that the floor was polished. Once more his brother (if it was his brother) picked him up and they ran on’ (McCarthy 2016: 10). Such patterning resembles repetitive scribbling on an empty slate. The theme of patterning ties in with the overall ecocritical aesthetics of the mattering of matter. In order for such patterning to have a particular sense, the meaning would have to be inscribed and analysed according to some convention of meaning. *Satin Island* suggests that such a framework of meaning does not exist.

While in a meeting with a minister, the protagonist watches the minister undoing her shoe’s buckle with her other foot:

The way we were positioned allowed me to see these shoes, and what she was doing with them. As first one, then another person presented, responded, queried, clarified,

proposed, counter-proposed and so forth, she rubbed one of her feet against the other, so that her right shoe's toe, its outer edge, moved up and down against the side-arch of its neighbour. She performed this activity non-stop throughout the meeting, even when she herself was talking. I thought at first that she was scratching herself, that she had a bite or irritation on her left foot that was itching. Twenty or so minutes into the meeting, though, I had to abandon this hypothesis: while even low-level scratching has a kind of franticness about it, an angry, stop-start rhythm, her movement was so regular and methodical that it seemed almost automatic (McCarthy 2016: 81).

This causeless activity is presented in a similar way to the boys' play. To the protagonist it is obviously fascinating because it is quite meaningless; empty patterning and repetition without a discernible purpose. The activity seems to weave a kinaesthetic pattern out of nothing, thus implying human behaviour itself participates in the blind mattering of matter. It may be viewed as meaningless or as an attempt at using patterning and repetition to cover up the fact that there is nothing authentic under this superficial patterning. As Nünning and Scherr (2018) point out, 'U. does not have a clue about what he is supposed to do most of the time' (496). Meaning has to be injected into the mattering of matter and the patterning of patterns.

To emphasise another pattern in relation to this, we have the oil spills again in the protagonist's reverie of the speech on behalf of oil as vibrant matter. At one point, U. connects oil with time: 'Is not the flow of oil the flow of time itself: slowly but inevitably crawling, in a series of identical, repeating pulses, to some final shoreline? It *embodies* time, contains it: future, present, past' (McCarthy 2016: 136). In strict phenomenological terms, the flow of oil resembles the Husserlian flow that is required for there to be any consciousness of time at all. In temporal terms, oil could be said to consist of a concentration of the past in the form of transformed and unified matter. That flow can be traced onwards into another pattern of the black tarmac on the streets of Paris, which have turned them into perfect racetracks for roller-bladers. The protagonist watches film clips of the repetitive movements of these skaters showing 'hundreds of legs gliding through city streets' (McCarthy 2016: 65). The smooth undulating movements are planted in the mind of the protagonist and later when falling asleep, U. feels his 'mind drift[ing] through black streets' (McCarthy 2016: 76). These black strings resemble the neuronal paths depicted in Sigurdardóttir's artwork: 'The tarmac ran on endlessly, running each street into the next as I advanced along them, heading nowhere in particular, just gliding, on and on; on either side, at the periphery of my vision, coffee-chain concessions ran together, like the tarmac, in a smooth, unbroken

blur' (McCarthy 2016: 77). Here the flow of perception becomes the flow of thought and there is nothing more to this patterning than solely self-manifesting as this surface configuration: '*That's just the way it is*' says a voice inside the protagonist's head (McCarthy 2016: 77). In the cognition of the novel then—even though the oil thread seems to suggest that the fully aestheticized humanity is dead—this does not affect what Deleuze refers to as 'a life'. The open-ended cognition in *Satin Island* proposes that some life-form persists out of declarative language's reach.

Into this pattern of patterning falls also yet another vision of humans and human activity that typically is viewed from a bird's eye perspective (*sub specie aeternitatis*). U. and his colleague Daniel watch a film clip, this time of pilgrims touching the sacred stone of *Kaaba*:

As pilgrims shifted from kneeling to standing position, all in unison, the image's whole texture changed. When, nearer the centre, they all started circling, they became a spinning comet, petals on a flower, bright water flowing down a plughole. At the very centre, the smooth movement met with some resistance as hands reached out to the cube and got some traction on its granite, if just for a second, before being swept onwards as new hands replaced them. The process seemed endless, self-perpetuating: as each static row of white-robed figures was picked up and swept into the swirl, the next row moved up one to take its place [...] (McCarthy 2016: 110).

Apart from imaging the worship of matter, or matter as the stand-in for the sacred, this is also human activity resembling patterns of matter in comets, flowers and flowing water. The 'self-perpetuating' process does not seem to have a telos; it constitutes the patterning of movements that conjures up the idea of the human shaping itself in alignment with pre-existing 'natural' patterns. The human becomes attuned to the mattering of matter itself. Notable is that the image has 'texture', emphasising the synaesthetic materiality of the fictional world. The patterning phenomenon has a clear analogy in the protagonist's imagination when trying to create an image of the Koob-Sassen project. He imagines that he sees human activity from above.

[D]windling minarets that seemed, at their cloud-laced peaks, to shed their own materiality, turn into vapour. Below them, hordes of people—thousands, tens of thousands—laboured, moving around like ants, their circuits forming patterns on the sand; patterns that, in their amalgam, coalesced into one larger, more coherent pattern, just as the meandering, bowing, divagating stretches of a river delta do when seen from high enough above (McCarthy 2016: 78–79).

The imagination sees human movements like ants creating patterns that again correspond to an ecological phenomenon, thus displaying the agency and creativity of matter. The protagonist's desire to uncover a universal master pattern that explains it all shines through. However, as established above, *Satin Island* forwards itself only as an island of order in the mad swirl that veils its own constitution. In all, such patterning challenges an aspect that has become a truism about McCarthy's fiction. As summarised by Daniel Lea: 'McCarthy's is therefore a universe of things, geometries, patterns, inscriptions, and networks, but it is never a place of transcendence' (2017: 116). However, as has been indicated, the mattering of matter and the patterning of patterns are transcendencies, since a world that does not form, transform and reform, would be impossible to even imagine.

Satin Island stages the aesthetic as a form of cognition. *Einfühlung* is activated, but without any sense of fellow-feeling empathy. What is instead highlighted is an aesthetics of the surface, the mattering of matter and the patterning of patterns. The mind is dependent on the constituting flow that constitutes the ahuman within the human. The novel tries out the thought of the beauty of a world without the human as an individual subject. This seems to imply the death of man and a contemplation of the mattering of matter. However, in the end U. walks 'past the growing stream of people, out of the terminal and back into the city' (McCarthy 2016: 217). The concept of 'a life' posits the survival of pure immanence. Similarly, regarding the essay-novel as an ecocritical anti-novel, one could still see its effect as bringing about the opposite. The acceleration of the thoughts of consequences of the capitalist machine may make the reader an avantgarde to the 'immoral' avantgardist novel. The Nietzschean aesthetics prevail as the eternal beauty of death.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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