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ARTICLE

## 'Where danger is, there rescue grows': Technology, Time, and Dromology in Tom McCarthy's *C*

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On one level, Tom McCarthy's *C* comes out as a postmodern intertextual patchwork that borrows the form of the *Bildungsroman*. Accordingly, the protagonist Serge travels from birth to death in a forthrightly chronological narrative, but that journey is accompanied by the fact that the text's modernist historical context is partly embedded in a posthuman and postmodern ontology. Technologically speaking, this version of modernity displays itself as *technē*, both in terms of artistic creation and as technology innovation (the radio transmitter, the car, the aeroplane, the cinema). Moreover, the novel equates technology with dromology (from Gr. *dromos*: race course) dealing with increasing speed as economic and political advantage, but it also reveals its human downside in terms of disaster (war, car crash, aeroplane crash). Through the protagonist, *C* forwards technology as death drive and the human as always already being *ahuman* (*technē* as primordial attribute of *bios*). In terms of time, the narrative seemingly incarnates the occidental obsession with teleology and eschatology. This article goes through these dimensions, but in addition it contends that there is another level at work in the narrative. Considered as artistically rendered philosophical cognition, the novel puts forth the Stoic *apatheia* (equanimity), Husserlian flux, and anachronistic temporality as giving way to a peculiar kind of faith. This is closely tied to the artistic creativity of *technē*, including the activity of writing, which rescues a form of transcendence from conventional postmodern elimination. Dominant discourses of technology and time—apocalyptic and utopian—are challenged in this reading.

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**Keywords:** *technē*; telos; eschatos; stoicism; Husserl; flux

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In the introduction to the International Necronautical Society's (INS's) text collection *The Mattering of Matter*, Nicolas Bourriaud states: 'Die-hard materialists, [INS members] have no need to prove the existence of a life after death. Indeed, the contrary would be closer to the truth: what they are promoting is death-before-life—a fundamentally more radical proposition' (McCarthy and Critchley et al. 2012: 30). As a member of this semi-tongue-in-cheek society, Tom McCarthy may effortlessly be read as a forthright promoter of death and posthumanism. To a large extent, McCarthy's novel *C* fits this theoretical mould. However, to fully adopt INS's declared posthumanism, as well as McCarthy's interview statements, in relation to the literary text would obviously prematurely close down a number of other interpretative possibilities. To be sure, this is so even if we choose to completely disregard the intentional fallacy problematic involved. The present study acknowledges some of the traits that have become givens in readings of *C*—excessive intertextuality, Derridian deferral, media archaeology, hard-core materialism, obsession with the concept of death, etc.—but in addition, the investigation seeks to put such propositions to the test by adopting a more presuppositionless hermeneutic attitude. The study will rather discern the effects of McCarthy's concerns and situate them in the context of a broader technology discourse. The reading below ultimately claims that *C* actually contains a form of 'spirituality,' even though it is supposed to be pure 'anathema' to the INS (McCarthy and Critchley et al. 2012: 30). However, this dimension does not come forth as the simplistic type of holiness that Bourriaud seems to posit. Covertly, it makes itself manifest in close relation to the scholarly established levels of McCarthy's narrative. Below I shall read the work into and out of the posthuman theoretical discourse. Ultimately, the purpose is to discern the effects of the protagonist's Stoicism and how that reintroduces faith as a vitalising force.

To give a very brief contextualisation of the analysis in a more established posthuman discourse let me modify some central concepts. Even though Katherine N. Hayles defines the posthuman in relation to temporality as 'we have always been posthuman', she also frequently refers to the phenomenon as 'transformation'

and something that need not have an apocalyptic outcome (1999: 291). This seems to presuppose a linear techno-human development. McCarthy's *C* is in certain aspects even more radical than that, since it appears to want to escape teleology and progress altogether. In Bruno Latour's theoretical framework, *C* appropriates the 'Middle Kingdom' in which the borders between technology, human and nature always already are blurred (1993: 79). The deviation from Hayles and Latour consists of a maintained connection to 'divinity' (crossed out or not). *C* establishes itself as *amodern* (not non-modern or modern) and via the protagonist Serge as *ahuman* (to avoid 'post' since it seems to presuppose a 'pre'). It does not search for *arche* or *telos*, but enforces naked faith in the midst of a dromological swirl.

As Catherine Lanone has argued, McCarthy's 2010 novel *C* 'keeps pasting and transmitting texts and echoes, playing upon irony and textual cannibalization, obsessional archive and Derridean deferral, as the parasite becomes the system itself [...]' (2014: 8). This conspicuously postmodern prism, as foregrounded by Lanone, obviously refracts the narrative's central *leitmotif* of technology as well. However, the poststructuralist aspects of the text's semantic organisation are also bound up with the novel as a whole in terms of it deriving its basic configuration from the *Bildungsroman*—albeit minus any prominent moral growth and with a premature death—but with the chronological narration of a life-span from birth to adulthood and a very precise historical setting. This draws our attention to the issue of time. From a temporal perspective, the novel reveals noteworthy characteristics already on a macro level. Firmly set in the early twentieth century—roughly from the late eighteenth hundreds up until 1922—the novel obviously contemplates historically real technological novelties from a contemporary viewpoint. As noted by Justus Nieland, McCarthy engages in 'media archaeology' (2012: 570). Jean-François Lyotard's statement that '[m]odernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity' is relevant here, since modernity viewed as an historical phenomenon spans modernism and postmodernism (1991: 25). On one plane, *C* displays a merging of modernist technological paraphernalia and postmodern

philosophical ideas.<sup>1</sup> The most prominent postmodern idea here is the elimination of transcendence. However, it shall be argued that on a more subtle level *C* actually contains a form of transcendence.

Moreover, as mentioned, temporality is significant strictly narratologically. Since Serge is the dominating focalizer, his present is the central constitutive component and it is in this experiential zone we are offered the philosophical contemplations of appearing phenomena as well as more finely tuned affective timbres. Lanone ascribes a specific function to Serge in relation to the novel's form:

Unlike modern radio stations that use continuous audio waves, early radio transmitters relied on Morse code, sending dots and dashes that the receiver converted into sounds. The receiving device was called a detector or coherer. Serge, the pylon-man, is indeed a piece of apparatus encoding and receiving text messages, a patchwork of echoes reconnected and revisited, a switch-board. (2014: 5)

In addition to having that function, Serge is also a time-coherer. Temporal coherence is established through the experiential sphere of the protagonist. This dimension indicates Edmund Husserl's constitutive flux, which is characterised by 'the absolute properties of something to be denoted metaphorically as "flux," as a point of actuality, that from which springs the "now," and so on' (1981: 286). This is an impor-

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<sup>1</sup> Any use of the term 'postmodernism' needs to be qualified. Stephen D. Brown analyses Michel Serres's concept of the 'parasite' and provides a concise modification of postmodernism that clarifies my conceptual context here: 'The terms postmodernism and post-structuralism are often used in characterizing the dominant trends in European social-cultural theory over the past three decades and the corresponding philosophical resources that they have typically drawn upon (e.g. DERRIDA; FOUCAULT; DELEUZE). It would be more accurate to describe the problematic that is being responded to here as essentially post-Kantian, involving the elimination of transcendence' (Brown 2013: 85). Post-Kantian analysis typically subjects any claim to foundational categories to relentless 'deconstruction in order to shift the work of analysis towards terms and propositions that are clearly situated in locally contingent – and hence contestable – epistemic practices' (Brown 2013: 85). For instance, Lanone sees *C* as 'a wired dummy chamber,' i.e., as an example of such post-Kantian ontology and annihilation of transcendence (2014: 8). In contrast, I claim that the novel contains an inherent resistance to being regarded solely as a postmodern echo chamber.

tant detail that has to be borne in mind as we delve into the larger temporal structures involved when we scrutinise *C*'s depiction of technology, which is the primary focus of the present study. In terms of temporality and primal experience, the novel harbours an immanent resistance to the postmodern traits highlighted by Lanone. Before turning to a brief outline of an existing technology discourse in terms of time, it should also be mentioned that the novel is in this analysis partly regarded as a multifaceted philosophical statement. As an aesthetic object, the novel makes manifest a specific cognition, which the attentive reader may reconstruct after the impact of the aesthetic experience.<sup>2</sup> In the case of *C*, the reader is persuaded to think technology in a particular way and below we shall see how some aspects of this cognition differs from an historically more established technology discourse, especially as regards its different conceptualisations of time.

### **Technology, Teleology, and Eschatology**

Clearly, the centrality of temporality also emerges from the topic of technology itself. Technology and science in fiction quite often tend to be future-directed in one way or another. As formulated by Lyotard: 'Unlike myth, the modern project certainly does not ground its legitimacy in the past, but in the future' (1991: 68). Technology in particular is frequently fictionally assessed in terms of potential usefulness and/or ethical implications evoked by such pragmatism. Already in Francis Bacon's utopian 1627 narrative *The New Atlantis*, the technology of the islanders is exhibited in terms of its utility and power:

We have also engine-houses, where are prepared engines and instruments for all sorts of motions. There we imitate and practise to make swifter motions than any you have, either out of your muskets or any engine that you have: and to make them and multiply them more easily, and with small force, by wheels and other means: and to make them stronger and more violent than

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<sup>2</sup> C.f. Roman Ingarden, who argues that 'there is always present in the literary aesthetic experience a core of intellectual acts of understanding, because these acts are indispensable in performing the reading' (400). These acts of cognition also contain philosophical dimensions, which may force the reader to rethink conceptualisations of a certain topic such as for instance technology.

yours are; exceeding your greatest cannons and basilisks. We represent also ordnance and instruments of war, and engines of all kinds: and likewise new mixtures and compositions of gun-powder, wild-fires burning in water, and unquenchable. (2016: 24)

In all, through the display of various forms of utilized science in the house of Solomon, Bacon predicts a prosperous and empowered future for humanity if science is used rationally and soundly. The telos of such wisely used technology will provide humanity with salvation on earth. For Bacon, faith in science and technology goes hand in hand with faith in God. Stephen A. McKnight argues that 'Bacon conceives of Solomon's House (i.e., the recovery of natural philosophy) as the complement to the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple (i.e., the restoration of true religion)' (2005: 75). In any case, that kind of telos is repeatedly challenged throughout literary and philosophical history by narratives and thinkers who discern the ominous ghost in the machine.<sup>3</sup> In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer criticise the exaggerated belief in rational thought and technological reason. According to them, technology always works in the hands of the dominating classes and it is ultimately the driving force behind the 'disenchanted nature,' which allegedly goes hand in hand with the disillusionment of art:

The concordance between the mind of man and the nature of things that [Bacon] had in mind, which overcomes superstition, is to hold sway over a *disenchanted nature. Knowledge, which is power*, knows no obstacles: neither in the enslavement of men nor in compliance with the world's rulers. [...] kings, no less directly than businessmen, control technology; it is as democratic as the economic system with which it is bound up. *Technology is the essence of this knowledge.* (1997: 4; emphasis added)

The most notable feature of Adorno and Horkheimer's argument is the dogmatic doomsday tone with its tinge of absoluteness. Given their setting, techno-science's

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<sup>3</sup> For a longer and more detailed assessment of technology as related to philosophy and literature in the twentieth century, see Alex Goody's *Technology, Literature and Culture*.

instrumental aspects move past Baconian teleology towards eschatology. The Christianity in Bacon is actually enhanced by the Marxist refutation of the techno-economy they posit. Technology as a topic evokes teleological and even eschatological cognition. Thus, technology is seen as a distinctly autonomous process of progression, especially when it is subjected to substantial critique.

Another notion concomitant with technology in literature and literary criticism is the suddenness of its appearance. In his well-known study of the American pastoral *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx describes and comments on a moment taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne's notebooks:

[T]here is something arresting about the episode: the writer sitting in *his green retreat* dutifully attaching words to natural facts, trying to tap the subterranean flow of thought and feeling and then, *suddenly, the startling shriek of the train whistle* bearing in upon him, forcing him to acknowledge the existence of a reality alien to the pastoral dream. What begins as a conventional tribute to the pleasures of withdrawal from the world [...] is transformed by *the interruption of the machine* [...] (2000: 14–15; emphasis added)

Technology obviously is suddenness, speed, autonomy, and noise. It interrupts the harmony of 'the subterranean flow'. It comes with some kind of demand. As J. Adam Johns claims: 'For [Leo] Marx, the *actual* suddenness of the machine drives the romantic perception of the machine's suddenness, which drives the problematic world-picture of the organic/mechanical divide, which is oriented toward the *telos* or *eschatos* at which the order of the world will be determined' (2008: 15; emphasis in original).<sup>4</sup> Criticism of technological progress reinforces the temporal ontology of the object of critique. The end is in such cases actually more strongly felt than it is in utopian narratives.

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<sup>4</sup> I adopt parts of the basic structure of Johns's theoretical setup here, but the analytic outcome is obviously different when applied to Tom McCarthy's novel.



In Martin Heidegger's influential essay 'The Question Concerning Technology' we find a similar scenario of technology having emerged *ex nihilo* in the agricultural Eden.

The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit. The field that the peasant formerly cultivated and set in order [*bestellte*] appears differently than it did when to set in order still meant to take care of and to maintain. The work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field. In the sowing of the grain it places the seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its increase. But meanwhile even the cultivation of the field has come under the grip of another kind of setting-in-order, which *sets* upon [*stellt*] nature. It sets upon it in the sense of challenging it. Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry. (1977: 14–15; emphasis in original)

At some point technology became sinister. The peasant used to 'take care of' the soil. After technology's arrival the soil has become a mere repository for 'the mechanized food industry'. The machine is posited as the manual worker's adversary. Technology has emerged as an active agent since the idyllic landscape 'has come under [its] grip'. Its ontological status threatens humanity. As concerns the overarching argument here, Heidegger is a point in case. By postulating an idyllic ahistorical past, he simultaneously creates the ideological framework from which we are forced to think technology. If mankind does not act, we will ourselves become the very Enframing [*Gestell*] (that is, the notion of nature as a mere standing reserve) that we subject our environment to. The gaze metamorphoses into that which used to be its object. Humanity will itself become standing reserve. Heidegger's thought resides within the framework of teleology and eschatology. These concepts govern the temporal aspects of Western thinking about the essence of technology.<sup>5</sup> However, there is another

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<sup>5</sup> To further support the dominance of this established technology discourse we may in addition turn to Herbert Marcuse. His work *One-Dimensional Man* contains most of the traits outlined. Technological reason is domination, it has suddenly arrived, it progresses, it turns everything and everyone into

dimension involved here too, which I shall return to when analysing the achievement of McCarthy's novel more in detail. In 'The Question Concerning Technology,' Heidegger's ultimate aim is to urge us to rethink technology without the preconception of Enframing, in other words, to reimagine it by returning to the Greek root meaning of *technē*, which encompasses other creative processes such as arts and crafts.<sup>6</sup> *C* is itself an artwork and thus a manifestation of *technē*. Furthermore, the suffix of the word 'technology' is *logos* or *legein*, which according to Heidegger is derived from *apophainesthai* that means 'to bring forward into appearance' (1977: 8). In the context of the present analysis, this means that technology operates on at least two levels simultaneously: as a theme or topic in the text-world of the novel, but also as the aesthetic statement of the novel itself.

In literature as well as in philosophy, the challenge is to think technology differently. The question is if we can think technology without progress, teleology, and eschatology? Johns neatly sums up the conceptual fallacies that underpin the sketched technology discourse:

We labour under heavy misconceptions: machine technology is as rooted in medieval Europe as it is in the nineteenth century; [...] technology and literature precede the "mechanistic" philosophies of science that supposedly generate them. Belief in the machine's time-shattering entry into the garden is ideological, not historical. Yet critics and enthusiasts, leftist and reactionaries, subscribe to shared beliefs: technology is sudden, its moment is now, and it drives toward some end, whether wondrous or terrible. (2008: 49)

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instruments, and as in Heidegger, there once was a 'pre-technological' Eden that is close to irretrievable: 'Artistic alienation [as pre-technological authenticity] succumbs, together with other modes of negation, to the process of technological rationality. The change reveals its depth and the degree of its irreversibility if it is seen as a result of technical progress. The present stage redefines the possibilities of man and nature in accordance with the new means available for their realization and, in their light, the pre-technological images are losing their power' (2002: 68–69).

<sup>6</sup> 'Technikon means that which belongs to *technē*. We must observe two things with respect to the meaning of this word. One is that *technē* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Technē* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiēsis*; it is something poetic.' (Heidegger 1977: 12–13).

Johns's critique opens up for the possibility of regarding technology as being capable of taking on different forms without necessarily progressing. Johns also draws attention to the fact that technology developed gradually a long time before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hawthorne and Heidegger's landscapes are already shaped by technology. Moreover, drawing on Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's concept of *bios* as *autopoiesis*, Johns modifies the concept of life in a way that has relevance for the analysis below. He contends that his 'fundamental divergence from their work is that they see *bios* as a particular form of *technē*, a self-generating technique, whereas [he] see[s] *technē* as a *universal* attribute of *bios*. *Technē* is what *bios* does, not what it is; it is an attribute, not (as for Maturana and Varela) a full description of *bios*' (Johns 2008: 50–51; emphasis in original). I follow Johns's definition here. *Technē* is to be understood as a primordial phenomenon when we engage with McCarthy's novel, but it is not to be regarded as life itself.

In the investigation that follows I shall argue that McCarthy artistically reimagines technology in a sophisticated way. First, his text provides a backdrop firmly anchored in more recent theory by presenting technology as dromology (from Gr. *dromos*: race course). In that way the text introduces an anachronistic philosophical dimension disturbing the notion of historical progress. Dromology also helps to circumvent the idea that technology arrives instantaneously on the scene. Second, the narrative indicates that humanity is always already attuned to *technē*, as creative beings and with an always already established machine-like propensity. In accordance with this immanent logic, the text slips out of the more crude man vs. machine deadlock. Third, *C* avoids teleology by having the protagonist Serge act as someone who embraces death and therefore partly upholds a Stoic attitude that eventually resembles faith in the midst of the seemingly complete absence of God. I shall first illustrate how dromology is established, then go on to unveil the primordially mechanised human, and finally return to and close the argument with an analysis of time understood as anachronism and flux. Ultimately, the claim is that *C* returns to the elemental source-point of Husserlian flux and *technē* as aesthetic creativity, which also harbours the semi-religious dimension, already introduced as the INS's

anathema. Thereby, the novel escapes some of the constraints of the technology discourse outlined above and presents faith without teleology and eschatology.

### **Dromology and Apathea**

Among other technical entities, McCarthy's novel foregrounds telegraphy. The very beginning introduces a machine producing sounds that pervade the garden as 'an intermittent, mechanical buzz' (McCarthy 2010: 5). Serge's father experiments with wireless telegraphy that represents a part of the cutting edge technology of the era. Wireless to replace the wired communication, which will further speed up human correspondence over vast spatial distances. Paul Virilio's theory of dromology is entirely about speed. According to Virilio, history is driven by the increasing speed of the dromocracy, eventually resulting in the downplaying of the importance of space:

THE REDUCTION OF distances has become strategic reality bearing incalculable economic and political consequences, since it corresponds to the negation of space.

The maneuver that once consisted in *giving up ground to gain Time* loses its meaning: at present, gaining Time is exclusively a matter of vectors. Territory has lost its significance in favor of the projectile. *In fact, the strategic value of the non-place of speed has definitely supplanted that of place*, and the question of possession of Time has revived that of territorial appropriation. (2006: 149; emphasis in original)

Accelerated speed entails that greater distances can be covered in less time. This goes for both war technology and communication media. As when Serge early in the novel picks up radio signals that 'seem to contain all distances, envelop space itself, curving round it like a patina, a mould . . .' (McCarthy 2010: 67). Thus, speed and time take precedence over physical space. In *C* the reader is gradually drawn into this process. Serge is pushed on by forces he in no way is able to control. He seemingly incarnates the 'projectile' that follows the 'vectors' criss-crossing space. Clearly, he does not display any will of resisting these energies. He is moved to Kloděbrady's

recreation facilities to cure his *mela chole* after his sister's suicide, then to the training camp for the military flight crews, then transported to the front, then to the prison camp, then back to London, and eventually to Alexandria and Cairo and the sites of the pyramids. In general, Serge does not lack agency but in all of these movements the overall affectivity is that he becomes the object that is moved. Speed and logistics themselves are the driving powers. Dromology is in place and Serge as well as the reader are subjected to its system. This compelling momentum forward encompasses central aspects of human culture, not least economy and production. Serge's mother produces silk and is approached by a keen buyer who thinks the pace of manufacturing should be increased:

"Versoie originals," she tells him.

"Naturally, Mrs Carrefax," he answers. "Finest around. If you produced five times as much we'd buy it just as fast."

"Five times? You want five times more?" she asks him.

"I said *if* you made five times as much we'd buy it."

"Why would I want to make five times as much?" she asks him.

"You'd make more money." [...] "And what with technology leaping forward as it is, new century and all that, you might consider—." (McCarthy 2010: 33; emphasis in original)

Obviously, Serge's mother is not interested in more money so the whole thing is dropped. However, the main point here is that what is seemingly about economy is on a more profound level dromology. As formulated in Benjamin H. Bratton's introduction to the 2006 edition of *Speed and Politics*: '[T]he mobilization of economic production is characterized less in terms of maximizing surplus labour value than according to the distribution of metabolic intensification in the service of an historically comprehensive acceleration' (Virilio 2006: 14). Furthermore, Benjamin Noys discusses the Futurist project in similar terms claiming that 'accelerationism is always an intervention or a selection of forces, particularly structured by the need to integrate labor within a new "mechanical" configuration' (2014: 17). It is this overall force of accelerationism that Serge is drawn into.

Another prominent feature of dromology and *C* is the inevitability of the accident. According to Bratton, Virilio 'sees the cumulative destiny of dromological globalization as a successively violent, increasingly integrated history of *accidents*,' which means that '[t]his Ballardian depiction of technology suggests that the invention or adoption of a new technology is always also the invention and adoption of a new accident' (Virilio 2006: 20; emphasis in original). World War I may in itself be seen as a dromological accident. Serge also lives through two other concrete accidents in the narrative: an aeroplane crash and a car crash. Moreover, when taking the tests to join the air force he gets the task of explaining how railway track curves should be built in order to prevent the trains from flying off the tracks. He knows the answer but his mind trails off to imagine the accident that would occur if two trains coming from opposite directions were to meet in the curve:

Yet even as these things take shape in his imagination he realises that not only will they fail to prevent the collision, but it was they *themselves*, in their amalgam, who caused it in the first place: the catastrophe was hatched within the network, from among its nodes and relays, in its miles and miles of track, splitting and expanding as they run on beyond the scope of any one controlling vision; it was hatched *by* the network, at some distant point no longer capable of being pinned down but nonetheless decisive, so much so that ever since this point was passed—hours, days or even years ago—the collision's been inevitable, just a matter of time. (McCarthy 2010: 119; emphasis in original)

In accordance with dromological determinism, the cataclysm is 'hatched *by* the network'. Here we see a micro version of the eschatology common in the established technology discourse. There does not seem to be any way for humanity to stop this accelerating technology. It is hardly a coincidence that Serge envisions a train crash. This form of accident draws the reader's attention to metaphorical dimensions that have been elaborated by for instance Walter Benjamin. He comments on the Tay Bridge disaster in which a whole train crashed into the Tay because a part of the bridge had been ripped away by a ferocious storm (Noys 2014: 88). Noys claims that

Benjamin's argument forwards the catastrophe as a prerequisite for a reformation of capitalist accelerationism (thus avoiding yet another catastrophe) (2014: 91). According to Noys (interpreting Benjamin), this type of accelerationism also potentially 'breeds passivity before the productive forces' before the accident even occurs (2014: 91).

However, I contend that Serge's possible 'passivity' is even more radical and appears on a philosophical rather than a political plane. The decisive aspect in *C* is that Serge's behavioral response to this overall affectivity is that of a Stoic, especially in terms of his emphatic *apathea* (equanimity) towards the technological and dromological laws.<sup>7</sup> He even seems to covet the disaster in some bizarre almost fetishist fascination with mechanistic carnage. As train parts are 'screaming ecstatically,' Serge feels as if 'space itself [is] crumbling' and that 'machinery [is] breaking bonds as it comes into its own [...]' (McCarthy 2010: 119). There are no signs of angst or any explicit urge to stop the imagined catastrophe. This pattern runs through the whole narrative. For instance, in the war when a German Albatros attacks Serge's plane, the pilot of Serge's aircraft almost in panic screams at him to shoot, but 'Serge is not going to shoot. He feels tranquil, passive' (McCarthy 2010: 173). This clearly displays the Stoicism that comes together with the text's preoccupation with Freudian Thanatos, which here in this passage more appropriately would be the Keres (the demons of violent death in ancient Greek mythology). Since this world is already in place, Serge and the reader just enter it as a readymade dromological given. Thus, the narrative does not exhibit yet another version of the machine's arrival in the garden.

Serge's Stoic detachment is even further enhanced when after the war he crashes with his father's car. According to Nieland this is a splendid restaging of the Italian futurist F. T. Marinetti's renowned car crash, which obviously accentuates the link between *C* and the modernist avant-garde (2012: 570). In terms of time we have a

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<sup>7</sup> The Stoic attitude to determinism is not to be confused with fatalism and it does not completely eliminate agency: '[T]he Stoic thesis of fate is not a thesis of fatalism. Quite unlike the fatalist who claims that human efforts, wills, and deliberations are irrelevant to our actions, the Stoic insists that our actions are up to us because they do depend on our assents and wills, not simply on external causal factors' (Meyer 1999: 272). Serge's attitude resembles that of the Stoic since his indifference to death engenders equanimity towards external factors more generally.

fictionalised historical event draped in dromological theory. From the perspective of dromology nothing progresses. The forms of technology may change, but the law of increasing speed and the inevitability of the accident prevail. In addition, Husserlian constitutive flux shows its power to give birth to time consciousness. Time, impressions, and flowing matter become the same thing here. Absolute flux is as death itself not *in* time. Human agency is momentarily obliterated.

Green, blue and black run by; sometimes an angry shout weaves its way into the air's tapestry, a klaxon whose tone dips and falls off as it passes. The colours run closer and closer to him; the tapestry becomes a screen, a fixed frame through which sky and landscape race, nearer and nearer all the time: soon it's as though he were no longer merely watching the projected image but pressing right up against the surface of the screen itself. *Into* it even: somehow the space around him has become material. It's not just wind whipping his face: the colours having merged to brown are on him, scraping right against his skin and pressing down into his mouth. There's some kind of inversion going on too: the screen's surface has rotated and is now above him. From it comes the sound of crashing metal. The noise travels down to meet him, as though from a more elevated world: it sounds like a big iron lid being closed on him. Then it goes quiet. He's in some kind of nether region now: a mole, being stuffed like drawers and cupboards with an old, familiar substance. (McCarthy 2010: 235–36; emphasis in original)

The old familiar substance is earth (soil). The technology crash becomes a temporary, symbolic burial. However, the passivity and Stoicism of the driver are the most notable things here. Serge sits there passively as if watching the landscape materialise and eventually embrace him. Abstract and immaterial entities such as colours and sound become concrete and tangible and suck him into the ground. Ceaseless flow is as inevitable as death and it makes manifest the constitutive ground of any conceptualisation of time. Husserlian flux is always prior to any notions of past, present, or future. The use of the word 'tapestry' moves the impressions towards religious ritual and liturgy, since that art form most often displays biblical motifs in its ico-



nography. Dromologically speaking, the phenomenology of the event is completely logical. In the present reading, the crash mainly highlights two things. First, Serge is placed within the dromological reality as a semi-detached bystander: 'There's some kind of inversion going on [...]' is an odd manner of expressing that the speeding car is turned upside down. The whole event obviously unfolds in such a way that we get the impression that the accident itself is the agent and Serge incarnates the role of the passive object. Second, this setup is disturbed by Serge's Stoicism. The overall effect becomes even clearer if we zoom out and relate the attitude itself to the technology discourse outlined above. Humanity ought to embrace progress—and possibly smooth over negative consequences in a Baconian fashion—or reject and remonstrate in a Heideggerian or Adornian style. It seems as if a purely passive stance is excluded by the discourse itself. Thus, in *C*, the commonplace teleological and eschatological aspects are disconcerted by the protagonist's behaviour.

### **Human Automatism and *Technē***

McCarthy's eccentric way of treating technology becomes even more accentuated if we add the dimension of the text's proposition that humanity always already partly *is* a primordial machine. In Johns's modification of Maturana and Varela, *technē* is an attribute of *bios*. Thus, life may be defined as closely intertwined with creativity as well as automatism in a more general sense. Throughout the narrative there is a chiasmic pattern: insect activity is human activity and human activity is insect activity. Insects pervade the text and humans are frequently compared to insects or animals. As Lanone suggests: 'Among the tropes that create a post-human mechanical identity is the recurrent image of insects. There is a web of insects, from the *vers à soie* of Versoie to the Egyptian scarabs (not to mention butterflies, lice and ticks, and the mysterious thing that, in the Pharaoh's tomb, bites Serge on the ankle and kills him, an infected tick or parody of Cleopatra's snakes)' (2014: 6). The *vers à soie*, the silk-moth—the tiny spinning machine of Serge's mother's silk factory—produces threads woven into textile as the words of the novel are ordered into the text. The text is in turn similar to the soundscapes of telegraphy permeating the narrative. For instance, the doctor who delivered Serge heard the buzzing sounds of telegraphic

experiments in the beginning of the narrative. The next day before leaving he hears similar sounds again: 'He picks a very quiet buzzing sound up as he moves across [the lawn], but it's not the same as the buzzing he heard coming from the stables: this one seems less agitated, less electrical. He understands why as he comes to the lawn's far side: beehives are set among the limes' (McCarthy 2010: 11). The adjacency of insect and human technological activities indicates that they are very similar, or perhaps even identical. Animals in general display mechanistic behaviour, and as Lanone has proposed, the whole war section may be regarded as displaying 'the rhapsodic becoming-machine of Serge' (2014: 6). After Serge's plane has crashed he walks through the demolished war landscape.

The ground around the pond is coated with military refuse and metallic dust, as though fragments of the sky had flaked off and fallen to earth. Birds are moving among these: jackdaws, crows and ravens, picking through the pieces with *gestures as mechanical and irregular as the broken parts themselves*. Smoke drifts around their beaks. As Serge comes near they all take off and fly in a long, funerary procession towards nearby woodland, their shadows strafing the ground. (McCarthy 2010: 176; emphasis added)

Viewed in this way, animal behaviour becomes a semiotic system of mechanical processes. A certain sign triggers another set of signs to work according to a pre-programmed system. Again, it is noteworthy that Serge does not react in any particular way; he just registers the birds' machine-like behaviour. A response in accordance with the delineated technology discourse above would be to emphatically make manifest the human as markedly distinct from the animalistic automaton. Johns forwards the idea that 'the prisoner's automatism haunts us; under the gaze of the slave and the animal, our own clockwork automatically twitches in recognition, and "we" struggle in the web, poor flies, to escape the automatism "we" see in "them"' (Johns 2008: 216). The seemingly peculiar anomaly in *C* is that Serge never displays this reaction.

In the narrative, human activity is placed on a par with such animalistic automated conduct. After the war, Serge participates in the lively London life of the early

nineteen-twenties. His contemplations tend to view humans from a distance; almost in the ways he viewed the ground activities of the war from the perspective of his aeroplane.

He turns from her wordlessly and watches the jazz band play. *They look like machine parts too, extensions of their instruments, the stoppers, valves and tubes.* Their bodies twitch and quiver with electric agitation. So do the bodies of the dancers. One girl, gyrating with another, lets a shriek out: it's a shriek of joy that manages to carry on its underside a note of anxiety, a distress *signal*. The music carries *signals* too: Serge's eyes glaze over as he tunes into them. [...] When Serge closes his eyes, the *signals* become images: *words* and shapes being *written* out in light against a black void, then erased, then written out again, worlds being made and unmade [...]. (McCarthy 2010: 212–13; emphasis added)

In this synesthetic vision sounds and other signs resemble a text-world or world-text that comes together and dissolves with mechanistic regularity. In Serge's drug-infused consciousness, the movements of people at the party resemble 'the way London's cabs and busses pulse and flow, negotiating space [...]' (McCarthy 2010: 212). This exposes the frequent recurrence of the fusing of macro and micro worlds as a flat dimension of a system of movements or a kind of 'clockwork motor' seemingly without any individual human agency. When on the boat in Egypt towards the end of the narrative, Serge feels that everything belongs to this mechanical reality.

Serge is so used to the boat's rhythms by now that they colour everything around him: he has the impression of being not in nature but in *some giant mechanism*, like a clock, sextant or theodolite. The stalks and herons that strut and peck their way through marshes look *mechanical*; the marshes themselves, the fields, settlements and stretches of desert beyond them look *mechanical* as well, alternating and repeating like a flat panorama that's wound round and round by *a dull, clockwork motor*. Passages of desert

suggest epochs—present, Napoleonic, ancient—which loom into focus like so many photographic slides, one following the other with *an automated regularity*; sometimes several epochs appear simultaneously, as though two or three slides had been overlaid. *Even the movements of humans take on a mechanical aspect*: chibouk-stuffing, tiller-plying, boom-guiding, forehead-rubbing, test-tube-lowering and hoisting, spying. Events follow the same sequence as they did yesterday: Alby and Pacorie and Serge conduct their three-way stand-off; tea and biscuits are served; Laura lectures Serge on Osiris, *the information streaming out like a strip of punch-card paper* issuing from her mouth—constant and regular, as though, by rubbing her forehead, she had set her exegetic apparatus at a certain speed from which it wouldn't deviate until instructed otherwise. (McCarthy 2010: 283; emphasis added)

The narrative as a whole suggests that human behaviour is *technē*, both as potential for creativity and as the established negative kinetic regularity of the automaton. The most prominent attribute of *bios* is *technē*. So the human as a machine only shows that this capacity is deeply lodged in *bios*. This mechanistic and seemingly deterministic behaviour does not exclude complexity. The bees in the beehives referred to above constitute a community of extreme intricacy. Similarly, human technological being may seem primitive and repetitive when viewed in this way. Regarded as a whole, however, human *technē* is elaborate. This passage is also important in terms of time. There seems to be a form of stasis suggested by the simultaneousness of present and 'ancient' times, which hints at the exclusion of historical progress. Technology is then not necessarily onward movement towards telos. It is just a primeval capacity making itself manifest as *technē*.

Serge embraces the idea of primordially being a machine. Taken in the context of the entire narrative, this comes out as a hankering for an external confirmation of what he already senses that he is; it displays a curious sense of existential homecoming or amalgamation of existence and essence, to use even more markedly existentialist terminology.

The idea that his flesh could melt and fuse with the machine parts pleases him. When they sing their song about taking cylinders out of kidneys, he imagines the whole process playing itself out backwards: brain and connecting rod merging to form one, ultra-intelligent organ, his back quivering in pleasure as pumps and pistons plunge into it, heart and liver being spliced with valve and filter to create a whole new, streamlined mechanism. Sometimes he dreams he's growing wings and, waking up, prods at his breastbone, trying to discern an outward swelling in it; each rib feels like a strut. He shakes after flights just like the others, but he doesn't mind: the vibrations make him feel alive. (McCarthy 2010: 164)

This is very far from the commonplace conceptualisation of an unbridgeable opposition between man and machine. Serge's affective disposition confirms the more modern idea of *technē* as a primordial attribute of *bios*. Here again the temporal structure of the novel comes to the fore. Set in the early twentieth century the fictive scenario presents the modern rendering of the relationship between *bios* and *technē* as lodged within the human being temporally before posthuman theory had developed and Marxist and Christian teleologies—or their residues—were still more dominant. For instance, Johns proposes that '[r]omanticism and Marxism see history teleologically: history, unlike mechanical philosophy, begins with nature and ends with the conflict between nature and the machine' (2008: 25). In *C*, that hypothesised opposition does not appear. Becoming one with the aeroplane vibrations, Serge feels more 'alive'. *Bios* is always already intertwined with mechanistic dimensions. The machine is part of the garden on a primeval level. It cannot arrive since it is already there.

As indicated above, *C* presents modernity within the modernist historical epoch but embeds the technology involved in postmodern philosophical ideas. Furthermore, by introducing the protagonist as stoically embracing the dromological text-world a rather strange effect makes itself manifest. By responding to death with equanimity, Serge seems to eliminate the teleological and eschatological energy

that fuels established occidental conceptualisations of technology. Lanone contends that 'Serge simply embodies the death drive of modern technology' (2014: 7). The novel's irony concerning this is that Serge does not own his death. He may express his death drive all through the narrative, but eventually it is a chance event that takes his life. The question is whether the novel ultimately posits death as an absolute end-point.

This draws our attention back to the issue of time. In Revelation 22:13 we read: 'Ego to alpha kai to omega, ho protos kai ho eschatos, hē archē kai to telos'. In the English Standard Version this is rendered as: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end'. Time is here hypostatized as an inevitable closure. If we juxtapose this temporal notion with Kantian ideas about progression as a ceaseless movement towards the perfection of humanity we get a summary of conventional teleological possibilities. In Adorno and Horkheimer's critical assessment of Kantian thought they put forth the Enlightenment telos as a utopia: 'As the transcendental, supra-individual self, reason comprises the idea of a free, human social life in which men organize themselves as the universal subject and overcome the conflict between pure and empirical reason in the conscious solidarity of the whole. This represents the idea of true universality: utopia' (1997: 83). Thus, we have temporality as telos and eschatos in biblical thought and in Kantian Enlightenment. We also have time in the Marxist critique of reason in terms of the urge to reformulate telos as catastrophe and thereby as eschatos. McCarthy's novel proposes a way out of this stalemate. When fighting in the war, Serge receives a book with selected poems by Friedrich Hölderlin. Serge fixes on the same lines that are central in Heidegger's 'The Question Concerning Technology': 'Where danger is, there rescue grows' (McCarthy 150). *C* addresses this proposition. The 'rescue' offered is a fictional and aesthetic statement that forces the reader to reimagine technological ontology. The novel's accentuation of this perpetual reimagining (*technē*) constitutes its transcendental dimension that challenges the idea of death as end-point. McCarthy's novel may be said to endorse Johns's pithy formulation: 'Refusing a technological Eden, we undermine the technological *eschatos*. The masquerade continues' (2008: 220).

## Anachronism and Flux

Obviously, the obligation is to think technology differently, which clearly applies to the conceptualisation of time. Central to notions of time in *C* are movements in opposite directions, anachronism, and Husserlian flux. First, the temporal movements consist of the *Bildungsroman* chronologically moving forward, while Serge's sensations when travelling up the Nile towards the end of the narrative seem to go backward in time. The narration and the narrated move towards a point of cancellation, which eventually culminates in Serge's death. Second, the whole novel is built on the anachronisms of ideas. 'Anachronism' semantically consists of 'ana' (backwards) and 'khronos' (time), which further accentuates the opposite movements. Third, these temporal paradoxes ultimately draw attention to Husserlian flux as the source-point of experience and time consciousness. Serge as focalizer is the time-coherer.

When travelling on the boat up the Nile towards the end of the novel, Serge has the sensation of becoming one with the primordial flux, which underlies temporality itself.

[The Nile's] formlessness seems to have overrun not only the feeble effort to contain it within field-boundaries but also any attempt to box it temporally: today, it's no longer epochs that stare back at Serge from it, but time's basic units themselves, its material particles, freed of their hour-glass-walls and multiplied to infinity. He still has the impression of being held in a machine, but now it's one whose operator has abandoned it—or, perhaps, died inside it, at its very core—leaving its motions to repeat without a reason for doing so anymore. Actions are reduced to their own remnants: Pacorie's arm flops and reels over the side like a decrepit lever or gear-handle; he, Alby and Serge spy on one another so half-heartedly it's almost comic, their circular choreography of jottings, sideways glances and averted gazes no more than a set of empty and incomplete gestures. (McCarthy 2010: 285)

Earlier the stream of impressions seemed to become matter during Serge's car crash. Here time itself materialises and appears to be sucked up into its own 'basic units,' which indicate 'infinity'. Eternity is contiguous to the presence of experiential flow without telos. Time has become pure time. Actions are without purpose. All teleology has been eliminated. The 'operator' is gone or dead. Motions and intents become 'circular choreography'. This image may seem depressing and it obviously takes away everything we associate with notions of human freedom, dignity, and individuality. However, on the level of fictional rhetoric, the scene enacts the liberty *from* teleology and eschatology. There is no room for the violent human distinctions between herself and machine, animal, and nature. Furthermore, *C* as an aesthetic object in its own right rethinks technology as primordial *technē*. In the flux itself, there are no divisions between consciousness, world, and time. There is not even a present from which to think *archē* and *telos* since flux is always prior to time consciousness, which in turn constitutes the notions of past, present, and future. Serge has the distinct feeling that 'they're somehow drifting leeward in time, too: slipping back—or, more precisely, *sideways*—in it, losing traction on the present' (McCarthy 2010: 276; emphasis in original). The felt disintegration of the present means a falling back into the pure flow of experience and thereby sensing the underlying flux that constitutes time. The archaeologist Laura travelling on the same boat tells Serge about ancient Egyptian philosophy on the topic of time, in which Osiris swallows the sun 'bringing about the repetition of creation, the timeless present of eternity,' explicitly stating that 'ancient Egyptian cosmology had no apocalypse, no end: time just went round and round [...]' (McCarthy 2010: 281). Myth and alternative timescapes challenge the ideas of chronology and technological progress.

Via Serge, *C* may be seen as a time-coherer. Philosophically the novel states that everything we see as 'new' technology is actually already prefigured in the artefacts of modernist technology as displayed in the novel. As pointed out by Nieland, 'Simeon's Carrefax's utopian dreams of a global communications network seems to anticipate the birth of the internet [...]' (2012: 293). The core of it is that history and technology do not progress from the perspective of primordial human *technē*. Throughout



time we have innovative forms and variations of the same. Something similar could be said about language and literature. *C* as *technē* reveals the power of art in terms of its manifestation as an act of creation, even if it is made up of fragments and the eternal return of the same. What is clear is that narratologically *C* would not be possible without the notion of a primordial flux. Serge's experiences would in that case be completely unrepresentable and the only option would be absolute silence.

However, the narrative is of course also—in accordance with a postmodern ontology—an assemblage of ambiguities. As regards the issue of authenticity vs. inauthenticity, Daniel Lea propounds that McCarthy's first novel *Remainder* displays a clear ambiguity in terms of identity. According to Lea, *Remainder* is not 'comfortable rescinding the self-reflexivity of the deconstructed subject' but on the other hand it is not prepared to 'dispense totally with the idea of the irreducible self' (2012: 464). Something similar could actually be said about *C*. Towards the very end when Serge is ill from the insect or snake bite he received in the dark dungeons of the pyramid, he hallucinates that he is being shot through by a powerful pulse of static, apprehending it as 'a burst of static—a static that contains all messages ever sent, and all words ever spoken; it combines all times and places too, scrunching these together as it swallows them into its crackling, booming mass, a mass expanding with the strength and speed of an explosion of galactic proportions, a solar flare' (McCarthy 2010: 308). The vision suggests that the protagonist is a receiver and transmitter of information. What we mean by world is actually the assembled energy of signs. However, this does not mean that we have to say with Lanone that the novel's imagery of existential gloom is 'navigating inauthenticity and the borders of death, turning the text into a black box, emitting static, intertextual obsolete fragments, noise re-enacting echoes of catastrophe' (2014: 8). The text's ambiguous status allows us the freedom to read inauthenticity as authenticity. When Serge towards the end says: '*The Call: I'm being called,*' the doctor immediately interprets the signified to be concrete, that Serge expects a message via the wireless on the boat (McCarthy 2010: 309; emphasis in original). This interpretation follows the rationale of the novel. It is not difficult to see that Serge's utterance inevitably contains a metaphysical dimension, since

the narrative does not exclude that Serge could experience God's silence turned into a call (albeit in a hallucinatory state of mind). The protagonist as an echo of signs is both there and not there. Nothing is really closed. Everything remains open. Hölderlin's words linger:

Nah ist  
Und schwer zu fassen der Gott.  
Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst  
Das Rettende auch.

Close by  
And hard to grasp is the God.  
Yet where danger is, grows  
What rescues as well.

(Qtd in Felstiner 1989: 99)<sup>8</sup>

*C* as a narrative suggests that primordial *technē* touches upon the limits of language and human cognition. Technology and art as forms of human *technē* do not necessarily progress. The 'rescue' the novel forwards is that narrativity will always retain something of humanity's propensity for mythological dimensions. The encounter with death is concomitantly an encounter with *technē* as the aesthetic source-point. As time-coherer, Serge indicates the flux that precedes experience and time-consciousness. Flux is as inescapable as death, which is earlier shown when the protagonist behind closed eyes sees 'worlds being made and unmade' (McCarthy 2010: 213). The absoluteness of death is also the complete silence of God. The writing and creation of worlds will go on as vitalising forces of humanity. *C* excogitates technology without progression. *C* thinks the regenerating force of *technē* without ultimately positing a technological eschatos.

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<sup>8</sup> The stanza is also quoted in *C* in a slightly different translation in two parts (McCarthy 2010: 150–51).

## Conclusion

Historically established conceptualisations of technology involve teleology and eschatology. Basically, these discourses attempt to deal with technology's presupposed autonomy and progress in various ways. Tom McCarthy's novel *C* challenges these discourses by presenting a dromological text-world that does not affect the protagonist in a predictable way. Serge's Stoicism neutralises the aggressive progressivity of dromological speed. Moreover, since the human in *C* is defined as already being mechanistic, the human vs. machine divide is avoided. Thereby, technology cannot suddenly appear. It is rendered as a primeval part of the garden. By regarding *technē* as bringing-forth into appearance, thus including art as an elemental outburst of *technē*, the novel itself becomes a statement of power and paradoxically a form of the vitality of life through its embrace of death. In addition, by presenting technological inventions appearing in the modernist era draped in later philosophical theories, *C* introduces anachronism as the rule, thereby cancelling teleology and progress. Since the protagonist is the focalizer and the time-coherer, absolute flux comes forth as an inevitable transcendence, which contests the dominating post-modern ontology. Furthermore, Serge does not choose his death. The event does not constitute a final textual manifestation of his technological death drive. He does not disappear in a momentous technological Armageddon. He is subjected to mere chance, which is obviously the same as fate in the Stoic sense of the word,<sup>9</sup> and he dies of something as primitive and ancient as poisoning or bacterial infection. As a manifestation of *technē*, *C* functions as a vitalising force disturbing received ideas about the phenomenon of technology.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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<sup>9</sup> See note 7 above.

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