REVIEW

On Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island*

Chelsea Erieau

FRIEDRICH Kittler's conception of network discourse has proven a remarkably prescient theorisation of a twenty-first century identifiable by what Manuel Castells calls its "interactive networks."[1] Indeed, the defining characteristic of human society in our modern era is interconnectedness: corporations, cultures, and individuals are stitched together in networks upon networks. Using a paratactic logic — a surface simplicity in which clauses are placed alongside one another but devoid of any specific grammatical subordination — to represent the idea of the network in textual form, Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* (2015) embodies the governing principles of the contemporary digital age.[2] This textual representation of networks, in turn, embodies Gilles Deleuze's theory of "dividuation," casting individual bodies as homogenous, regulated subjects operating in a form of control society.[3] The result of dividuation is a flattening of emotional experience; the breakdown of hierarchical relationships; and the removal of agency from the social subject. The world of *Satin Island* is one of a subtle, flattened form of control, enforced not by institutions but by the social subjects themselves. Dividuation is made manifest in *Satin Island* as subjects find themselves stripped of personhood and instead remade as information machines.

Satin Island is presented in the form of a business report, with numbered sections refracting the central plotline (such as it is) and embodying the neoliberal age in its very form. The main character, U., a corporate anthropologist, has been commissioned to write a Great Report: a summation of the entire era that identifies "what's taking place right now" (63). Early in the course of his project, U. organises a "meeting" to gather ideas about the Report and refers to those gathered as "civil servants" and "the discussion's participants" (54). The use of these pronouns acts to signify their dividuation, overwriting the individuality of the subjects in favour of their relevance to the wider system. U. describes the discussion room as follows:

> We had, in the company's offices, a room purpose-built for such discussion. It had lounges, armchairs, even beanbags — all chosen to induce as relaxed and casual an atmosphere as possible, so that the discussion's participants could just chew the fat while we watched them through a two-way mirror that formed one of the room's walls. (54)

The division between U.'s team and the participants they are viewing is made clear, as the subjects are perceived as valuable only for any information they may hold and reproduce. Yet, the labelling of U.'s colleagues by the impersonal collective pronoun "we" also establishes a subtle alienation: any further mention of the individuality of members of U.'s team is conspicuously absent, and thus their value is also emphasised in direct correlation to their position in the network. Personal identity is irrelevant, and there is a sense that the very existence of the individual is reliant on the network; the material self has been overtaken by its existence in codified form. U., for example, wonders whether he and the other occupants of this networked world are merely "actions and commands" within the "key chains" of the overriding script (134). The repeated technical jargon of U.'s ruminations enforces the idea that social existence is determined by an incorporation into the wider system. In short, the human part of the individual self becomes irrelevant, and thus dehumanised.

Further, in *Satin Island*, to be a part of the network age is to facilitate endless reflection on information, and the distance that this mode

of objective analysis demands results in a detachment from emotional experience. In an ironic twist, *Satin Island* sounds most like the business report that its form mimics when its narrator describes traditionally emotional experiences. U.'s usual descriptive imagery for even the most mundane of thoughts, and his rambling thought processes that link networks of information, do not translate to his personal relationships. For instance, U. finds himself in a casual relationship with a girl named Madison, one in which signs of affection are conspicuously absent, and instead U. seems more fascinated by the information she holds. The simplicity of the clauses that refer to their physical interactions — "Again we had sex" (53) — contrasts starkly with the complex clauses that typically follow their engagements, and which are used for the most mundane of thoughts throughout the text. This is perhaps clearest when in contradistinction with the more emotional material:

> 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. (53)

In his romantic relationship, traditionally considered one of the most personal of human connections, U. is most detached. This reflects the essential flattening of emotional experience through the endless cycle of the network, and the detached reflection it demands.

Similarly, the normally articulate U. has no words when his friend Petr tells him about his terminal cancer diagnosis: "Shit, I said" (39); "Far out, I said"; "Far out, I said again; I didn't know what else to say" (40). U.'s retreat to colloquialism underscores his inability to connect or empathise. The last time U. visits Petr in hospital, he reflects: "The next — and final — time I visited Petr, I realised that I'd been wrong on the subject of the windows." (146) The aside itself — a phrase within a phrase — is yet another example of network complexity operating at the formal level of the text, whilst narrative attention is drawn to the fact it is the "final" visit. In foregrounding Petr's death, the audience is positioned to expect some sort of emotion. And yet, the sentence upends this expectation, instead reporting U.'s immediate return to

the windows, the status of which he expands upon for the remainder of the passage; ruminating on their placement, their cleanliness, and whether they were dirty because of a "housekeeping oversight, or, if not an oversight, a small act of administrative penny-pinching" (146), U. also casually refers to the "immanent obliteration" of the people in the ward, and to the finality of the visit without much concern (146). U.'s dissemination and recognition of networked patterns, even as his friend lies dying, represents the overarching theme of the book: that is, the loss of authentic human connection in a hyper-networked society. In fact, even death appears to provide no release from the constraints of the network. When Petr's wife sends mass text messages from Petr's phone after his death (to inform contacts of his passing), U. reflects, "for almost all intents and purposes, the sender was Petr… All we need to do to guarantee indefinite existence for ourselves is to keep our network contracts running" (149).

   Satin Island thus presents the network as a non-hierarchical, peer-to-peer control society in line with Deleuze's dividuation theory. The novel's flattening of hierarchy is reflected in contemporary society: Castells' postulation that corporations have shifted from "vertical" methods of corporatism to a rhizomatic, "horizontal" model, for instance, is one prominent example of how controlling networks operate in our contemporary world.[4] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri draw on both Deleuze and Castells to define the society of control as one in which "mechanisms of command become ever more 'democratic', ever more immanent to the social field, distributed throughout the brains and bodies of their citizens."[5] In the era of globalisation, we have moved away from imperialism and towards a system of control based upon societal enmeshing — one in which the labour force and capital are mobilised through global communication networks rather than through sovereign or strictly national powers. The figurehead of the corporation in *Satin Island*, Peyman, is characterised as a semi-divine entity; yet, instead of cementing a hierarchical reality, he reveals the distribution of power across a horizontal meshwork. Rather than being atop a vertical ladder of power, Peyman believes in the value of circulated discourse, representative of the rhizomatic nature of the

control society. For U., coming into contact with Peyman's circulated concepts was "like encountering an amalgam of our own minds, our own thoughts, returning to us on a feedback loop" (44).

Satin Island reflects the horizontal yet circulating power structure of a network in its format. But the novel is also rife with intertextual references to theoretical networks bridging multiple philosophical (and popular cultural) discourses. The work of Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski becomes deeply intertwined with "pre- or proto-Leian heroine[s]," in one memorable instance (77). As such, the novel's paratactic logic seems to embody the same amalgam of minds as that represented in the figure of Peyman. Indeed, all of the text's characters seem to be in similarly horizontal relationships. U. speaks of the proliferation of Peyman-influenced concepts, stating that they "appeared in everything; which is the same as disappearing" (45), a notion that is reflected in U.'s seemingly mundane and reverence-devoid interactions with his employer: "How do you think it went? Peyman asked me after we had left. Oh, I answered: excellently" (72). The circulation and (seemingly) endlessly networked relationship that the control society presents leaves protocols to be determined via common cultural consensus rather than by the sovereign or the bureaucracy. Peyman himself uses the analogy of the tower of Babel to illustrate his ideal, flattened, network; rather than the ascendancy of a hierarchy, Peyman says Babel serves as "a glaring reminder would be occupants are spread horizontally rather than vertically" (47).

Satin Island, as David Rudrum suggests, represents an "epoch-defining statement."[6] It embodies Deleuze's theory of dividuation, envisioning a society that is defined and controlled by the distributed network, propagated by information technology. Individual identity becomes subsumed by the value of encoding and decoding information, while emotional experience becomes flattened and stripped of information. Society shifts from a vertical power structure to a horizontal distribution of control, and from institutional agents to individual agents, where those agents are the perpetuators of the network mentality. *Satin Island*, true to its theme, identifies the patterns of the network society, but offers no solution.

Notes

1. Friedrich Kittler defines network discourse as "the network of technologies that allow a given culture to select, store and process relevant data." See Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900,* trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture: Volume 1—The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

2. Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island: A Novel* (New York: Vintage Books, 2016). All subsequent references will appear in the body of the essay and will refer to this edition.

3. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies" in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

4. Castells, *The Information Age*, 164.

5. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 23.

6. David Rudrum, review of *Satin Island*, by Tom McCarthy, *The Conversation*, 25 September, 2015, https://theconversation.com/review-satin-island-by-tom-mc-carthy-47654.