Buffer Zones: Visuality & the Time of Networks in Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*

In *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* Peter Boxall suggests that while the history of the novel has been 'intimately entwined with the procedures by which we have fashioned our idea of the world', 'the new century has witnessed a collective failure of our temporal and spatial sense, a confusion about where and when we are'. He refers to the advent of what he calls, quoting Paul Virilio, the 'era of instantaneity' in which digital communications unite the globe in a single temporal logic of simultaneity. Subsequently, 'the narrative forms we have available seem no longer to be well adapted to articulating our experience of passing time.' Boxall highlights Tom McCarthy's work as an example of fiction which has particularly registered this shift in lived temporality since the beginning of the current century.[1] McCarthy's 2015 novel *Satin Island*, I will argue, registers these shifts in lived temporality at the level of its narrative structure and its handling of imagery, whose hermeneutic opacity points away from a realist aesthetic of duration towards a figural framework that dramatises a world of frozen simultaneity. My argument will focus on a close reading of one particular image from the repertoire of the novel's narrator: a buffering circle, such as appears in place of a cursor whilst a computer catches up with a command or whilst a piece of information on a webpage loads.

Satin Island is, at its most apparent level, the story of the attempt of the narrator, an anthropologist with some former fame in his field, known as U., to carry out a writing project. He has been tasked by his boss, Peyman, to write what he calls 'the Great Report'. Peyman describes this as a total anthropological document of the present: 'The First and Last Word on

1 Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 20-21; ibid. p. 5.

our age. […] Not just *a* book: *the* fucking *Book*.' As part of a larger project now undertaken by his company, known as 'The Koob-Sassen Project', he is asked to start bringing some definite form to the Great Report, which has hitherto only existed at a conceptual level.[2] The narrator travels to conferences and takes meetings and, between and during these events, considers and collects various images and texts which he believes may give him a formal point of entry to the Great Report.

Boxall describes the temporality of McCarthy's earlier novel *Remainder* as characterised by 'an extraordinary kind of aphasia': 'time and space hang together in ways so new and so strange that we have to relearn our most basic orienteering to get from here to there, from one second to the next'. For the nameless narrator of *Remainder*, time is at once vastly accelerated and static, 'irrelevant, suspended, each instant widening right out into a huge warm yellow pool'.[3] Similarly, in *Satin Island*, the passage of time for U. is not clearly marked. The novel includes many passages of detailed description or reverie in which narrative time seems to dilate but which are followed, as is the elaborate fantasy scenario of chapter 10, by the dismissal of long spans of time: 'Thus passed the week.' *Satin Island* is a retrospective narration, the text described by U. as 'this not-Report', but there is very little evidence of conventional narrative construction – the foregrounding of exceptional events such as would form the nodes or turning-points in a realist narrative. The novel's narrative tempo is structured instead by the rhythms, at once repetitive and unstable, of post-industrial labour, commuting, internet browsing and casual sex. The novel's linear surface structure, with chapters neatly divided into sections which might seemingly progress in an orderly succession, is contradicted by the way in which, on the one hand, narrative scenes spill from one section to another, and, on the other, by the aforementioned essayistic or purely descriptive passages. U. himself acknowledges the apparently contentless or unpunctuated

2 Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015), p. 56-57; ibid., p. 7.
3 Boxall, p. 21; Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (Richmond: Alma Books, 2005), p. 205.

nature of the narrative: '(*events!* if you want those, you'd best stop reading now)'.[4]

In the seventh chapter, in the Company's offices, as work on Koob-Sassen progresses, they are 'afflicted by frequent bouts of buffering.' The narrator, happily, tells us what the buffering circle means. His comments are worth quoting at length:

> The buffering didn't bother me, though; I'd spend long stretches staring at the little spinning circle on my screen, losing myself in it. Behind it, I pictured hordes of bits and bytes and megabytes, all beavering away to get the requisite data to me […] stacks of memory banks, satellite dishes sprouting all around them, pumping out information non-stop, more of it than any single person would need in their lifetime, pumping it all my way in an endless, unconditional and grace-conferring act of generosity. […] It was this gift, I told myself, this bottomless and inexhaustible torrent of giving, that made the circle spin: the data itself, its pure, unfiltered content as it rushed into my system, which, in turn, whirred into streamlined action as it started to reorganize [sic] it into legible form. The thought was almost sublimely reassuring.

But, in the next paragraph, U. goes on:

> […] on this thought's outer reaches lay a much less reassuring counter-thought: what if it were just a circle, spinning on my screen, and nothing else? What if the supply-chain, its great bounty, had dried up, or been cut off, or never been connected in the first place? Each time that I allowed this possibility to take hold of my mind, the sense of bliss gave over to a kind of dread. If it was a video-file that I was trying to watch, then at the bottom of the screen there'd be that line, that bar that slowly fills itself in – twice:

4 *Satin Island*, p. 110; ibid., p. 115; ibid., p. 13.

> once in bold red and, at the same time, running ahead of that, in fainter grey […] 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.

He then concludes that unless we continually replenish the supply of experiences our 'consciousness' has to reflect on, 'we find ourselves jammed, stuck in limbo […] Everything becomes buffering, and buffering becomes everything.'[5]

This image is intensely overdetermined, structured in opposing ways without necessarily being in contradiction. The flat plane of the image – the monitor upon which he is looking at it – gives rise to a 'pictured' depth of data. But the data itself, 'pure, unfiltered content', is without form, and is only present through this act of mental imaging – its translation into the metaphor of 'gift' – and the screen's own operation of graphic rendering. But this imaging itself becomes an instance of paucity and dread: it's 'just a circle'. The spatial or visual rendering of a time that promises fullness – a formless bliss, flowing and 'pumping' – reverses into a structured time that is contentless, experientially bare and, in effect, suspended. As space disappears in the transposition from the circular to the linear, time ceases to exist as *duration*, as a diachronic trajectory of differentiation and change. The object is characterised by an antimony of meanings: explanation, the plenitude of the *signified*, exists, but in such abundance that the meaning itself becomes unclear and indecipherable. The meanings proffered by the narrator each depend on the negation of their own conditions of possibility, provided by the other meaning. What we are presented with, in *Satin Island*'s symbolic framework, is a 2D image with two obverse sides, which don't add up to a legible

5 McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p. 67-68; ibid., p. 68-69.

whole.

It is worth briefly indicating here what, in fact, buffering is. For a buffer circle is not simply a graphic representation of stalled progress: as defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Computer Science*, a buffer is '[a] temporary memory for data'. In a circular buffer, a single buffer is treated as if composed of discrete chunks of memory joined end-to-end, like so; this is why if you are, for example, watching a Youtube video, it doesn't load all at once or smoothly over time, but in fits and starts.[6] In a sense what we *see* in the buffer circle is processing itself but in effect we don't. RAM memory is not built in circles, so this is a *conceptual* structure: the circle creates an identification between this deeper meaning (the 'gift' of data) and its flat counterpart onscreen. Representation – the process by which the data of the world is 'made legible', but also by which this process is itself represented – is itself structured as a form of abstraction; this is, in one sense, the fundamental operation of the digital, which translates the indexical or representative order of the analogue into the quantitative bareness of code.

In the most basic sense, the buffer circle, as symbol, inserts the time of the digital into the novel, functioning as a metonym for a whole infrastructural order and logic that isn't quite congruent with U.'s narrative time (despite the ostentatiously informational nature of his work). As art historian and media theorist Boris Groys notes, 'all medial operations with images and signs can be described in terms of temporal economy.' Jonathan Crary, developing the earlier work of Guy Debord and Manuel Castells, has characterised the temporality of network society as 'a time without time, […] a time without sequence or recurrence', in which the subject must be 'constantly engaged, interfacing, interacting, communicating or processing'.[7] What the narrator sees in the buffer circle, then, is a glimpse of this time that makes indifferent the extremes of dynamism and frozenness, a time of production that is in

6 'Buffer', in *A Dictionary of Computer Science*, ed. by Andrew Butterfield and Gerard Ekembe Ngondi <www.oxfordreference.com> [accessed 14 March 2016]

7 Boris Groys, *Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media*, trans. by Carsten Strathausen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 162; Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 29; ibid., p. 15.

fact cyclical. But, as we have seen, this very graphicness or apparent representational literalness, which seems to promise such a direct plenitude of meaning, is also and in fact a mode of opacity and antimony, in which the diachronic process of differentiation or dialectical movement by which meanings might be parsed or produced are both racing and at a standstill.

Whilst this temporality may not be precisely homologous with what we think of as the experiential time of the narrative, this time of buffering is replicated across a number of images, whose dilated moments of time come increasingly to dominate the narrative. In chapter 4, as U. begins his 'dossier on oil spills', he looks for images similar to those he glimpsed at the beginning of the first chapter: 'I looped on a spare laptop a video-clip [his colleague] Daniel found me: it showed a close-up sequence of a few feet of seabed across which oil was creeping, carpeting the floor as it coagulated.' Time creeps, moving without volition before the moment ceases and repeats itself. As he notes later on, the image of the oil spill displays '[d]ifferentiation in its purest form [….] Ones and zeros, *p* and *not-p*: oil, water.'[8] The buffer zone of an oil slick sliding through water, viewed from above in the first chapter, is replicated in the description of a woman to whom, in the 7th chapter (again), U. remembers talking: he looks 'at the objects she had placed around her […] She was, like many single women in her situation, using these objects to create a buffer zone around herself, in which her lifestyle, personality and, not least, availability were simultaneously signalled and withheld.' Meaning emerges, then, only in the buffer zone between terms, separating out homologies; but, as we have seen, the time of the buffer is cyclical, stranded. On the one hand, then: processing, writing, differentiation; on the other: oil, data, what U. calls '[t]he stuff of the world[, which] is black' – two halves that do not add up to make a whole. It is worth recalling, in this connection, U.'s claim that the time of the buffer is '[n]ot our computers' time and memory, but our own': the distinctions collapse.[9] The possibility of narrative – of the novel

8 McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p. 34-35; ibid., p. 104.
9 McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p. 71; ibid., p. 135.

form itself – as a durational structure, rather than a cyclical temporality of imagistic captures, depends on this buffer that both splits and mediates between local time and the simultaneity of networks. But the buffer's very mode of *making-visual* dramatises its persistent failure, inscribing in the narrative an experiential time that becomes non-time.

It is only towards the end of the novel that a third term emerges: the island of the title, which appears in a dream. It appears as a transfiguration, in the mode of early Christian dream-visions, of the Great Report, which now manifests as a "trash incinerating plant", the surfaces of whose '[g]iant mountains' of oozing, smouldering rubbish hint 'at a deeper, almost infinite reserve of yet-more-glowing ooze […] that made the scene so rich and vivid, filled it with a splendour that was regal.' This, it would seem, is the image that, in sublating the two others, solves the antimony: it is at once dynamic – 'full of bustle' – and serene, 'splendid', 'rich and vivid'.[10] In this image is staged the obliteration of writing, of narrative and of the frustrations of buffering hinted at in chapter 10's vision of a world '*improved*: augmented, transformed' by its submersion in oil: the world becomes a totality of the black 'stuff' it thought to constitute itself by excluding – the 'flow of oil' that '*embodies* time, contains it: future, present, past.' The Great Report ceases to be writing, becoming instead an image of the radically dedifferentiated.[11]

But it is necessary here to turn for a moment to the wider conditions of possibility for this symbolic matrix within the text. It is worth noting that, having used the word 'description' extensively, we have in effect bracketed out the entire question of 'narration'. In an early essay arguing for the politics of an aesthetic grounded in the procedures of 19th century realism, Lukács opposes the two terms.[12] For Lukács, as Fredric Jameson writes, the distinctive feature of realism 'is seen to be its antisymbolic quality; realism itself comes to be distinguished by its

10 Ibid., p. 130-131.
11 Ibid., p. 106, p. 109.
12 Georg Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', in *Writer & Critic and Other Essays*. Trans and ed by Arthur D. Khan (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1970) pp. 110-148.

movement, its storytelling and dramatisation of its content'. This is opposed to description, of which, in Lukács' account, symbolism itself is a 'symptom': 'a purely static contemplative way of looking at life and experience'; 'description, as a dominant mode of representation, is the sign that some vital relationship to action' – to, we can say, the diachronic or time as qualitative duration – 'has broken down'. Symbolism is framed as a means of compensating for the paucity of meaning in the disenchanted world that the novel form takes as its object: it 'imposes a meaning on them by fiat'.[13] The narrative structure of *Satin Island*, then, can be seen as one long attempt to re-enchant a world of objects rendered null and silent by the instrumentalising logic of capital in its long history. This would include all three terms of the strange antimony that appear in the visual schema of buffering.

But what I want to suggest in closing is that this reframing of the narrative's surface-level symbolism in its wider historical ground does not imply, I think, a Lukácsian call for a return to a realist aesthetic, but rather what Boxall calls 'a new narrative realism' adequate to the temporal strangeness of network societies.[14] For the increased invasion in *Satin Island* of lived time by the “time beyond time” of the digital – this symbolic, allegorical and visual logic, which leads away from its own frozen antimonies, is, for us in the economies of the 21st century, quite precisely and banally realistic.

13 Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: 20th Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 196; ibid., p. 200-201; ibid., p. 198.
14 Boxall, p. 22.