

## Dummy Chambers and Ur-Houses: How to find your way around *Remainder*

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The author of *Remainder* briefly entertained the idea of being his own central character, or so he would have us believe:

When I first had the idea for *Remainder* my initial thought wasn't a novel. I had this moment of déjà vu in a bathroom, exactly like the protagonist, and I thought, I want to do that. It could have been an art piece, then I thought, maybe that's not really that interesting. I'd need the whole building, I'd want the cats, then it gets interesting. In fact it's only really interesting if you expand into the street. You'd have to have the shoot out and even that's not enough. You would need to do the bank heist, then I realised it would have to be a novel.<sup>1</sup>

The moment of déjà vu that Tom McCarthy refers to here is the book's crucial episode – an encounter with a fissure in the bathroom wall – which produces a intensely vivid yet unlocateable recollection of another building: '[I]t was growing, minute by minute, as I stood there in the bathroom, this remembered building, spreading outwards from the crack'.<sup>2</sup> The passage echoes that most iconic piece of literary remembering, in which the narrator of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, prompted by the taste of a madeleine dipped in tea, suddenly perceives the dimensions and details of his childhood home. And in naming his fictional building 'Madlyn Mansions,' McCarthy gives a sideways acknowledgement to Proust, whose buildings similarly grow and spread, 'stretch and shape themselves...assuming form and substance' like Japanese origami miraculously emerging from a single pellet of paper immersed in water.<sup>3</sup> More of Proust and sponge cakes later but, returning to McCarthy's statement, it seems that this reverie occurs firstly in the author's own experience, in a real bathroom, where it produces an impulse to construct a physical space rather than a novel. He wants to build, not write.

Yet the possibility is rejected almost as soon as it presents itself: as an 'art piece' or 'installation' the bathroom could conceivably be recreated, but this is too limited in scope. At the same time, the more compelling prospect of recreating the building itself, and of pursuing this chain of reconstructions outwards to its logical conclusion, quickly reveals itself to be a logistical impossibility. So instead, McCarthy's demiurgical impulse is displaced onto his fictional stand-in, who does what the author himself cannot. Commandeering an entire building, he modifies every detail to correspond to an architectural blueprint which

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<sup>1</sup> Catrin Morgan, *Phantom Settlements* (Ditto Press, 2010), p. 171.

<sup>2</sup> Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (Alma Books Ltd, 2011), p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: The Way by Swann's: The Way by Swann's Vol I*, trans. by Lydia Davis, New Ed (Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 50.

exists only in his own memory or imagination (we are not sure which). He shapes reality to conform to specifications at once demanding and mysterious to even himself. He meticulously recreates not only the phantom bathroom with its cracked wall, but the apartments around it, the other apartments around that, and the floors above and below. He recreates the marbled floor, the kinked glass in the windows, the cats on the roof and the stains on the ground. His imaginary house and the real one coincide exactly, right down to the parts that are less clearly pictured: their haziness is rendered as blank, white non-space. And it's not just the building itself that must be recreated. The moment of déjà vu involves the smell of frying liver, the sound of piano playing, a neighbour putting out the rubbish. And so the building is populated with actors, or rather 're-enactors', to perform these momentary acts over and over again. Soon, such re-enactment zones proliferate outwards beyond the boundaries of his initial building project, into a warehouse, a crime scene and eventually a real bank, resulting in a disastrous bank robbery known to be a re-enactment only by its perpetrators, but not its victims.

According to McCarthy's account, *Remainder*, in its gestation, hovered uncertainly on the boundary between novelistic space and physical space, fiction and the real world. The uncertainty is resolved in one sense: this is a novel, not an art installation or a building. In another sense, however, the ambivalence remains, played out in *Remainder's* preoccupation with the nature of spaces and locations, their borders and intersections. Probing and finally dissolving the thin membrane between reality and 're-enactment zone', the novel makes its readers 'preternaturally aware of space...it forces us to recognise space as a non-neutral thing.'<sup>4</sup> It is a novel that creates spaces only in order to collapse them, in a way that questions and subverts its own, novelistic boundaries. Exploring the spatial conventions and limits that circumscribe it, it threatens simultaneously to collapse onto the flat surface of the page, and to spill off it. 'One thing all fiction guarantees is that it will describe a place that doesn't exist', writes Daniel Soar: 'ideally a place that bears some relation to the world you think you know but is larger, stranger, bolder and more promising.'<sup>5</sup> His review in the LRB praised *Remainder's* ability to conjure just such a vividly realised world. This notion of fiction as a 'world' is familiar one, and, as in Soar's review, often the criteria by which the worth of a novel is judged: Does it create a fully realised and three-dimensional imaginary environment? Can we believe in it, and lose ourselves in it? The idea has spawned a branch of theory exemplified in the work of narratologist and philosopher Thomas Pavel, who

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<sup>4</sup> Zadie Smith, 'Two Paths for the Novel', *The New York Review of Books*, 20 November 2008, p. 4  
<<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/nov/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/>> [accessed 18 May 2013].

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Soar, 'The Smell of Frying Liver Drifting up from Downstairs', *London Review of Books*, 9 March 2006, p. 27 (p. 1).

elaborates a theory of such places.<sup>6</sup> Fictional worlds, according to Pavel, must be considered as having an ontology of sorts. They may not have a concrete existence in the same way as, say, Birmingham or the Bodleian Library, but nevertheless they must be considered as having a kind of existence, as worlds complete in themselves but occupying a parallel realm. They are worlds separate from, yet resembling, our own. The formulation encapsulates some of the most culturally prevalent assumptions about the workings of fiction, but while it might describe a particular kind of novel - falling broadly in the realist tradition - it does not get us far with *Remainder*. Pavel's notion of a discrete, parallel imaginary realm does not adequately describe the spatial dimensions of *Remainder*, which seems instead to operate according to different topographical principles, continually shifting and probing the border between the imaginary and the real. Its plot turns precisely on the proliferation and overlapping of different kinds of space, and in this sense Daniel Soar's review misses the mark: Rather than describing a single, non-existent place, *Remainder* describes multiple places that don't exist, each in a different way. It seems concerned precisely with questions of artifice and demarcation, with plural and complex spaces that interrupt and contradict one another. Conventional notions of a fictional world fall short precisely because it's the very nature of fictional space that the novel wants to question, rendering it unfamiliar, paradoxical and claustrophobic.

If the disorienting spaces that *Remainder* conjures into existence are not those of an immersive fictional world, then mapping them requires a different set of coordinates. McCarthy's own statements invite us to locate his work not in the naturalistic spaces of realist narrative, but in a more francophone lineage of Modernism and self-conscious experimentation. He acknowledges a debt to Robbe Grillet's work, *Jealousy*, in which the interior of a house becomes the minute and maniacal focus of a story of marital paranoia.<sup>7</sup> Obsessively rehearsed, the details of the rooms and their layout lose any sense of naturalism, and instead assume a claustrophobic intensity analogous with the narrator's own disintegrating internal world. McCarthy likewise expresses admiration for Jean Philippe Toussaint's *The Bathroom*, about a surreal and self-enforced confinement in a bathtub.<sup>8</sup> But perhaps in its fascination with the paradoxes and *mise en abyme* of representation, *Remainder* most readily calls to mind the work of Borges, whose work continually circled conundrums of authenticity and artifice, fictional and real spaces, and whose enigmatic, ludic philosophical fables are not so much stories as thought experiments, in which narrators come face to face with their doubles, and the text of *Don Quixote* is rewritten, word for word,

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<sup>6</sup> T. G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, New Ed (Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> See McCarthy's introduction: Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*, trans. by Richard Howard (Alma Classics Ltd, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Tom McCarthy, 'Stabbing the Olive', *London Review of Books*, 11 February 2010, pp. 26–28.

by a different author. Borges famous paragraph-long story, 'On Exactitude in Science,' about a map so large it precisely overlays the territory it charts, acts as a kind of conceptual template for *Remainder*.<sup>9</sup> This Borgesian trope of a life-sized representation of the real is the compelling and paradoxical idea at the heart of McCarthy's novel, and is one that leads us away from the familiar and comforting spaces of fictional worlds and into a more unsettling realm of simulacra and simulation. It also one that seems to have a particular resonance in contemporary culture, having more than one recent iteration. The publication of *Remainder* occurred at almost the same time as the release of Charlie Kaufmann's film *Synecdoche NY.*, featuring Philip Seymour Hoffman as a frustrated dramatist who suffers a head trauma and receives a large sum of money, which he then uses to construct a stage set the size of a city.<sup>10</sup> He hires an army of actors to re-enact his own life, but the performance, which has no audience, is unfinished and unfinishable, since it keeps pace with, and bleeds into, his real life. The striking parallels between novel and film, both featuring a neurologically damaged protagonist obsessively constructing increasingly elaborate simulated environments, led to speculations about influence and even plagiarism. However, the provenance of these plot elements and the question of which came first is less interesting than the disorienting and counterintuitive possibilities they jointly suggest. In a sense, they exist as remediated, alternate versions of one another, their shared thematic logic precluding any claim to originality and precedence, since both concern the impossibility of locating authenticity in a world of simulations. Their re-enactments are less fictional worlds than Baudrillardian simulacra, eclipsing their originals rather than existing in parallel to them, a logic which raises the intriguing possibility that McCarthy's novel and Kaufmann's movie could both be copies of one another: The film of the book is simultaneously the book of the film.<sup>11</sup>

Twin narratives of doubling and re-enactment, each existing as doubles of one another: The scenario is certainly strange enough to be the premise of a Borges story. But the case is stranger still, since *Remainder's* plot of life-sized simulations has yet another iteration, existing not in film or literature, or in fiction at all, but in Monchengladbach, Germany. Tom McCarthy may early on have abandoned early on the idea of being his own protagonist, but in any case the gesture would have been superfluous, since a flesh and blood version of his fictional character already existed in the shape of artist Gregor Schneider, who obsessively turns existing buildings into life-sized replicas, populating them with enactors. Schneider lives and works in a three storey house in Rheydt, Germany. In fact, the house *is* his work, an ongoing project entitled *Haus u r*. In the mid 1980s, while still a teenager, he 'began to

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<sup>9</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (Penguin Books, 1999), p. 341.

<sup>10</sup> Charlie Kaufman, *Synecdoche, New York [DVD] [2008]* (Revolver Entertainment, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Kaufman's protagonist in fact considers 'Simulacrum' as a title for his demented Magnum Opus.

transform this house into the projection of his thoughts', and for over twenty years he has been ceaselessly dismembering and reconstructing it from the inside, building false walls, windows and ceilings in front of real ones, creating new openings and spaces, and concealing others.<sup>12</sup> The house, although its exterior remains nondescript, has effectively been turned into something else. Exactly what this might be is unclear: Existing terminology falls short when it comes to describing the nature and scale of Schneider's building projects. They have been described as 'architectural palimpsests', sculptures, environments, installations, but Schneider himself insists that he just builds 'rooms'.<sup>13</sup> These are rooms within rooms, however. A coffee room looks one of the more innocuous and normal places in the house but, exiting through a gap in the wall, another view reveals that the whole room is a fabrication, rotating imperceptibly on wheels. The daylight and breeze through the window are provided by artificial light and a fan.

More often, the artifice is indistinguishable from reality. Observers cannot know that walls conceal other walls, that surfaces are movable, or that a door has disappeared from view. Even Schneider himself declares that he 'can't distinguish anymore between what has been added and what has been subtracted.'<sup>14</sup> The house at times resembles a normal domestic interior, but at the same time there is something unnatural and unsettling about it. Schneider gives each room a title consisting of a number and a designation that sometimes has a ring of comforting familiarity, (the coffee room) but sometimes produces just the opposite effect ('the largest wank'. 'The smallest wank', 'the disco' 'the brothel'). This is a real building in an ordinary street, but the rooms inside it are 'located outside all normality.'<sup>15</sup> The house, like the one reconstructed by *Remainder's* protagonist, is no longer itself, but a simulation. And Schneider's rooms, like those in the novel, are also populated by re-enactors. *Haus u r* is occupied, or at least haunted, by a mysterious character called Hannalore Reuen, whose name appears on the front door in the conventional German fashion. Questioned about Reuen, Schneider is evasive. It's not clear if she is an artistic collaborator, a real person or Schneider's alter ego. Her face is never pictured, but she features in a series of photographs, apparently the victim of a violent crime, prostrate and face-down. In 2004 Schneider took over two adjacent houses in London's Whitechapel to create a work entitled *Die Familie Schneider*. The two houses, all but indistinguishable from one another internally, had the same dreary décor, the same food in the fridge, and the same

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<sup>12</sup> Jens Hoffman, *Flash Art* January-February 2001, issue 216, p107

<sup>13</sup> Raul Zamudio, *Flash Art* Jan -February 2004, number 234, p110

<sup>14</sup> Veit Loers, Brigitte Kolle and Adam Szymczyk, *Gregor Schneider: Totes Haus ur/Dead House Ur 1985-1997* (Frankfurt am Main: Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach; Galeria Foksal, Warsaw, 1997), p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen and Daniel Birnbaum, *Gregor Schneider: Venice Biennale 2001*, ed. by Udo Kittelmann (Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2001), p. 44.

stains on the wall. They also had an identical cast of inhabitants engaged in the same repeated actions: A woman stood at the sink washing up, while next door her twin did the same. More disturbing goings-on in the bathroom and bedrooms were also duplicated: A man in the shower, hunched over, seemed to be masturbating, and a child sat in the bedroom with its head covered by a dustbin bag.<sup>16</sup>

The same real-yet-fabricated buildings; the same eerie moving tableaux repeating endlessly. McCarthy's and Schneider's buildings might be mirror images of one another, one in the pages of a novel and the other in an actual street. Reading these spaces alongside one another brings us closer to an understanding of the kind of shared territory they inhabit. It is a territory whose boundaries are difficult to discern. Schneider's walls behind walls mean that, like Russian Dolls, layers nestle within one another, each calling the artifice or authenticity of the others into question. 'When you open a window, you get no view of the street or the garden. Behind the window is a second window. There seems to be no outside. Everything leads back to the house'.<sup>17</sup> In *Remainder*, too, there are continual questions about what is outside and what is inside the main character's artificial world. Having turned an entire building into an imaginary environment, he then constructs a miniature scale model of it, complete with miniature re-enactors inside, making their movements dictate those of their full-size counterparts. He sets in motion what is known as the 'Droste Effect', a never-ending recursive device in which, for example, a painting contains a representation of itself. But what lies at the edges of these multiple levels of artifice? We are in a fictionalised South London that seems like the real thing, complete with mundane detail and authentic bars and street names. But is this Brixton setting only a 'set'? Is it real or an imitation of the real? One of these authentic street names in particular, Plato Road, draws attention to the whole vexed question of artifice versus authenticity. The narrator's relentless reconstructions are a search for ideal Platonic form, the singular, transcendent incarnation of his vision rather than a mere debased material copy. *Haus u r* carries similar implications, its initials standing ostensibly for Schneider's address, Unterheydernerstrasse, Rheydt, while gesturing also towards the notion of an elusive original or the source. In both cases the search for the Platonic ideal – the 'Ur-house' – is built on an insurmountable paradox; the real world is inauthentic and in need of modification. It must be adapted, replicated and reconstructed in order to be authentic.

The distinction between inside and outside, between real and artifice, is complicated still

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<sup>16</sup> Colm Tóibín and Andrew O'Hagan, *Gregor Schneider: Die Familie Schneider* (Steidl, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Birnbaum, 'Interiority Complex: Gregor Schneider's House UR, 1985 -' *Art Forum Summer* Vol 38, Number 10 (2000), p. 144.

further by a proliferation of copies. Schneider's *Haus u r* has been recreated in its entirety down to the smallest detail in galleries around the world. In 2001, its anonymous, sometimes cramped and scruffy domestic interior was reconstructed, incongruously, inside that monument to Nazi bombast, the German Pavillion at the Venice Biennale. The house in Rheydt - itself already a replica - is replicated again and again as an art exhibit. Schneider and *Remainder's* protagonist produce spaces that are doubled: they are physically 'real' yet simultaneously artificial, they are 'here' and yet at the same time elsewhere. Schneider describes the sensation of being simultaneously in two places: '[W]hen I was in the finished room in Berlin, I was in Rheydt. Do you know the way people on spaceships beam themselves from one place to another?'<sup>18</sup> These doubled spaces, the same but different, with their overlapping layers of reality and artifice, are instances of what Anthony Vidler calls an 'architectural uncanny'. Vidler shows how, in the uncanny's play of doubling, the other is experienced as a replica of the self, 'all the more fearsome because apparently the same'.<sup>19</sup> And the site where such disturbing ambiguities between self and other, real and unreal are most frequently enacted is domestic space. Tracing early cultural manifestations of the uncanny, Vidler writes that 'its favourite motif was precisely the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence'.<sup>20</sup> The spaces constructed in McCarthy's novel and Schneider's work enact, in the most literal sense, the slippage Freud describes between that which is *Heimlich*, (homely) and that which is *Unheimlich* (uncanny). In the German, the two are not simply opposites, but rather the meanings of the former contain elements of the latter, so that the space of the familiar is haunted from the start by that which is unfamiliar and threatening. In the case of *Remainder* and *Haus u r*, a lived environment is a replica, a home which resembles but is no longer itself.

These building projects share the same kind of disturbing ambiguities, and generate the same kind of uncanny spatial frisson. These are very similar kinds of space, clearly, but what kind is that? What type of space might exist both in a novel and in a real street, criss-crossing the boundary between fiction and its other? The novel's protagonist gives us some clues as to the nature of the place we are in, musing on the connotations of the sports pitch and the stage set. Both are arbitrarily demarcated zones in which space becomes 'charged', so that the movement of bodies within it, their trajectories, the precise details of their relation to one another and to the space and surfaces around them acquires a special significance. Schneider and McCarthy create spaces are similarly charged; 'fired up, silently zinging with

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<sup>18</sup> Loers, Kolle and Szymczyk, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, New edition (MIT Press, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Vidler, p. 11.

significance'.<sup>21</sup> Yet clearly they are not sports pitches, and nor are they quite stage sets, although they seem to be a setting for something. The exacting detail and precision with which Gregor Schneider and his fictional counterpart scrutinise space, surface and movement suggests that their charged zones are the site of a baffling but exhaustive series of investigations. Both have an obsessed fascination with minute details. 'I look at a wall and am interested in any unevennesses on its surface: the tiniest hole, the slightest protuberance', says Schneider.<sup>22</sup> Remainder's narrator is similarly transfixed by cracks and oil stains, 'capturing' them in diagrams. Schneider describes 'experiments', involving 'going into a room and leaving it again, hoping that the experience would linger there', while the novel's narrator obsessively scrutinises his own actions, practising an accidental turn of the body and a brush against the kitchen worktop over and over until it become 'natural'.<sup>23</sup> Equally closely, he dissects the gestures of his re-enactors, analysing their precise geometrical patterns moment by moment: 'I'd break the sequence down to its constituent parts – the changing angle of her headscarf and her stooped back's inclination as she moved between two steps, the swivel of her neck as her head turned to face me – and lose myself in them'.<sup>24</sup>

Schneider and McCarthy's spaces most resemble not sports pitch or stage set, but crime scene. The kind of location where such investigations are carried out, where movement and trajectory, surface and angle acquires such charged significance is the aftermath of a crime, sealed off so that events can be recreated through forensic examination of their traces. The analogy has already been noted in the case of Schneider, whose rooms seem to bear the traces of violent or disturbing events.<sup>25</sup> As a teenager he describes photographing a particular murder scene, scrutinising it for echoes of what took place there. His later work, too, is often an overt attempt to engage with death and its aftermath, sometimes through replica bodies grotesquely strewn across the gallery floor, their faces covered, and other times through more subtle yet chilling details which speak of the unspeakable. Sharp-eyed visitors may spot blood on the radiator pipes in his twin Whitechapel houses, for instance. But even when devoid of blood and bodies, his bare and anonymous white rooms 'radiate a kind of clinical violence'. In their sheer mundanity, they resemble precisely the kind of spaces depicted in police photographs. Remainder's building works might lack the macabre menace of Schneider's rooms, but their re-enactments of inconsequential movements nevertheless foreshadow the crime reconstructions that the narrator is inexorably drawn towards.

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<sup>21</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, p. 133.

<sup>22</sup> Loers, Kollé and Szymczyk, p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> Loers, Kollé and Szymczyk, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, p. 151.

<sup>25</sup> They are, as critic Ben Lewis observes in a TV documentary, 'a cross between unfurnished lets and crime scenes'. *Art Safari 1 DVD*.



Encountering the scene of shooting in Brixton, he seems to discover what he was looking for all along. His minute obsession with angles, surface and details, his repeated replaying of certain movements and actions, pretty much his entire repertoire of obsessive behaviours in fact, he finds encoded within the disciplinary procedures of forensics. He immerses himself rapturously in the literature and the diagrams of forensic analysis. 'Each line, each figure, every angle – the ink itself vibrates with an almost intolerable violence, darkly screaming from the silence of the white paper: something has happened here, someone has died'.<sup>26</sup> Forensic procedure exerts this powerful hold over the narrator 'because it's real': it seems to guarantee a route out of the realm of the second hand and the simulated, and provide a way, finally, to merge with the real.

But even – perhaps especially - the crime scene is second-hand and simulated: 'the road itself was like a grand master, one of those Dutch ones thick with rippling layers of oil paint'.<sup>27</sup> Transfixed as his is by the details, the narrator nevertheless reveals that this scene is still caught up in the system of representation he seeks to escape. As his re-enactments seek to come closer and closer to reality, so they force a crisis in this system. His final project involves 'lifting the re-enactment out of its demarcated zone and slotting it back into the real world'.<sup>28</sup> He enacts an imaginary bank robbery, but stages it inside an actual bank. The boundaries of the re-enactment zone dissolve, and the scripted staging of a crime is transformed, catastrophically, into an actual crime. What results is not a seamless merging with the real, but an irresolvable conflict between differently constructed kinds of space. The episode in the bank is the culmination of an escalating territorial dispute between the private and public, the imagined and the actual, artifice and reality. The phrase 'turf wars' is one that the narrator muses on, thinking of gangland shootings and squares of grass, but the turf war in which he is caught up is one between the fictional world and real world. This is precisely the logic of the crime scene as described by theorist Mark Seltzer, less a specific location than a focal point in the contemporary cultural imaginary, it is a site overdetermined with anxieties and fantasies about authenticity, violence and representation. At the crime scene, states Seltzer, 'fact and fiction have a way of changing places'.<sup>29</sup> In *Remainder's* re-enactment-turned-crime, the two cross and collide, producing a volatile scene whose scripted moves explode into violence and death when one of the enactors accidentally shoots another. A fictional bank robbery produces a real shooting, which is then reincorporated into fiction, 're-enacted' by the protagonist.

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<sup>26</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, p. 173.

<sup>27</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, p. 187.

<sup>28</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, p. 244.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (Routledge, 1998), p. 16.

The crime scene is the epicentre of a wider cultural domain that Seltzer calls the 'pathological public sphere', an overlit, technologically saturated, unstable domain in which conventional modes of subjectivity and distinctions between the real and the imaginary are radically reconfigured. Seltzer draws on Baudrillard, suggesting that the individual and authentic, becoming incorporated into a limitless series of technological reproductions and duplicates, loses its claim to primacy. Such hyper-mediation erodes conventional distinctions between public and private. This new kind of public sphere is no longer the counterpoint to an individual, domestic or psychological domain, but becomes instead a 'crossing point of private fantasy and public space'.<sup>30</sup> It is this zone that accounts for the warped dimensions of both *Remainder* and Schneider's constructions. *Remainder's* 'world', if it has one, belongs not in the space of fiction as such, but in this new zone of the pathological public sphere, which criss-crosses the conventional boundaries of the imaginary or the fictional. It is this territory that Scheider and McCarthy's built environments share, operating precisely according to its 'intersecting logics of seriality, prosthesis and primary mediation'.<sup>31</sup> To catalogue Schneider's modifications is to work through 'every possible repetition and duplication of basic architectural units: "wall in front of wall, ceiling under ceiling, section of wall in front of wall, room in room, lead in floor"'<sup>32</sup> These reiterations of what is already there have become indistinguishable from the real thing: 'The original dimensions and configuration of the various rooms is all but impossible to reconstruct'.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the only way to perceive its complex layers is not to view the house itself, but Schneider's videos of his tortured navigations as he 'huffs and groans to gain access to the crawl spaces and interstices that no one else sees between the pre-existing structural walls and his additional false ones'.<sup>34</sup> In *Remainder*, too, mediations continually replace their originals. 'It's me, the real me' says the narrator, interrupting his own prosthetic answerphone voice, but in truth he has no real self. Every movement and action in his repertoire has had to be painstakingly learned from scratch, following his accident. His memories have returned 'in moving images...like a film run in installments', which appear less real than watching Robert De Niro on the cinema screen.<sup>35</sup> At least De Niro seems natural. Everything about the narrator is unnatural, second hand: '[J]erking back and forth like paused video images', he is already his own mediated double.<sup>36</sup> His reenactments are a bid to be authentic, to merge seamlessly with reality, but only introduce yet more layers of mediation. He insists that no cameras are used, but he himself is a kind of recording device,

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<sup>30</sup> Seltzer, p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> Seltzer, p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> Birnbaum, 'Interiority Complex' p. 144.

<sup>33</sup> Bronfen and Birnbaum, p. 73.

<sup>34</sup> Ossian Ward, 'The feeling is Mutual' *Art Review* Volume LIV October 2004., p103

<sup>35</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, p. 15.

a one-man xerox machine, 'capturing' every detail and producing more and more sketches, transcriptions, representations. And, even as they are acted out, these reenactments are played on a loop, rewound, paused, and replayed at half speed. Filming is redundant when reality already behaves like a recording.

And if these (re)constructed spaces characterise the pathological public sphere, then so do their monomaniacal architects. The subject proper to this sphere is no ordinary person, or rather, it is someone so extra-ordinarily ordinary they become 'hyper-typical'. This is the figure of the serial killer, not an individual so much as a 'type' generated by the statistical analyses and information processing of modern, bureaucratic criminal profiling. The serial killer himself is driven by these same statistical, informational imperatives. His is a pathology, Seltzer argues, that emanates not from the depths of the psyche but conversely, from external factors. It is a perverse internalisation of the logic of machine culture, an 'utter absorption in the technologies of reflection, reduplication, and simulation.'<sup>37</sup> Serial killers are often described in terms of their blankness, their abnormal normality, their absence of distinguishing characteristics. This is an individual defined precisely by a lack of individuality who, chameleon-like, assumes identities according to context and surroundings. The serial killer thus experiences themselves as inauthentic, as a 'simulated person.'<sup>38</sup> Moreover, this tendency to blend into the background goes beyond mere camouflage, but is an effective (and affective) merging with the environment. In other words sheer absence of intrinsic identity leads to an over-identification with place, and particularly those which the killer himself constructs. For this reason construction projects are a character trait of the serial killer, Seltzer argues. There is 'an absorption in place and place-construction that becomes indistinguishable from programmes of self-making and self-construction.'<sup>39</sup>

It seems that exactly this 'reciprocal topography of subject and scene' is what is at work in the building projects of Gregor Schneider and Remainder's protagonist.<sup>40</sup> Both eerily blank and characterless, they seem to match the composite image of the serial killer that Seltzer maps out. McCarthy's narrator, recently emerged from a coma and suffering from neurological trauma, experiences himself as deeply inauthentic. His only sensation – a 'tingling' – is one that he experienced through the process of enactment. Schneider, questioned about his motives, appears similarly blank and compulsive, merely responding

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<sup>37</sup> Seltzer, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> Seltzer, p. 43.

<sup>39</sup> Seltzer, p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Seltzer, p. 49.

that 'there was nothing else I could do'.<sup>41</sup> Whether or not this autism is authentic or merely a persona (and the question seems beside the point in this context of hyperartifice), he claims to have no understanding of his own work. Other statements suggest darkly that his building projects are driven not by conscious aesthetic choice but by a logic compulsion. He recalls being exempted from military service in his teens on the grounds of mental health; 'I was registered as having a perceptual disorder and being mentally ill, but I only told them what I was doing at the time...I told them that I build rooms'.<sup>42</sup> In a TV documentary, asked about the appeal of the filthy Hamburg alleyway he is meticulously recreating in a gallery, he merely freezes, staring blankly at the interviewer. The question of motivation and agency produces a total shut down, an inability to formulate any response at all. Compulsive building and compulsive violence seem somehow inextricably linked. 'The view I had of her was like a murderer's view' says the novel's protagonist, as he describes one of his re-enactors.<sup>43</sup> Schneider too, is prone to taking a 'murderer's view' of some of his visitors. Talking of his isolated guestroom, in which visitors might become trapped, possibly fatally, he reflects wistfully: 'I'd love to stop someone getting away some time.'<sup>44</sup> And if serial killing is about the 'terrifying pleasures of endless replication', then their room-building and re-enactments is driven by a similar impulse and a similar cultural logic.<sup>45</sup> *Remainder's* whose re-enactments begin to follow a chain of gangland shootings, their seriality and escalation shadowing the serial violence itself. And when, finally, the main character becomes a killer, it is not through a violent impulse so much as a mimetic one. He is merely playing someone else, and rehearsing the moments when, in a disastrous bank robbery re-enactment, someone is accidentally shot: 'Essentially, it was the movements, the position and the tingling that made me do it, nothing more.'<sup>46</sup>

If *Remainder* makes little sense in terms of a fictional world, it corresponds much more closely to the dimensions of the pathological public sphere as outlined by Mark Setzler, whose logic of primary mediation refuses to recognise the boundary between fictional and real zones. The space McCarthy creates in his novel is no self-contained parallel imaginative realm, but part of a continuum of proliferating artifice, duplication and iteration. In one sense, then, its spaces extend counter-intuitively beyond circumscribed novelistic boundaries, spilling off the page to haunt and double those of Schneider's *Haus u r*, Kaufman's immense cinematic set and perhaps other places. In another sense, however, its emphasis on artifice and mediation pulls in an opposite but equally disruptive direction,

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<sup>41</sup> Loers, Kollé and Szymczyk, p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> Birnbaum, 'Interiority Complex', p. 146.

<sup>43</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, p. 140.

<sup>44</sup> Birnbaum, 'Interiority Complex', p. 143.

<sup>45</sup> Setzler, p. 52.

<sup>46</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, p. 276.

confronting us with its own fundamental artifice. It disturbs three-dimensional novelistic space by calling attention to its own spatial confinement within the two-dimensional limits on the page. Returning, as promised, to Proust, albeit via the unlikely route of serial killing, we can explore this through the analogy between Madlyn Mansions and Proust's madeleine moment. As McCarthy's sly misspelling indicates, their relationship is as much about differences as similarities. While they both involve the unfolding and realising of a remembered place, the nature of these places is quite different. For Diana Fuss, Proust provides the most complex and elaborate illustration of what she terms the novel's 'architecture of the interior'.<sup>47</sup> Novelistic space, she demonstrates, is associated from its inception with ideas of 'interiority' in two senses; in the first place, the domestic space of the house commonly functions as an analogy for the novel, as in Henry James' 'House of Fiction'. But beyond this, the domestic topography of fiction maps onto personal, individual interiority. The realist novel finds its most common settings in the newly private domestic interior, and its signature subject matter in the interior landscapes of its characters, their development and growth. *In Search of Lost Time* elevates this link between setting and identity into its central principle: domestic space is imbued with memory and psychological significance to such an extent that it acts not only a location of the narrator's childhood memories but also as a setting for his introspective reveries and self discovery as an adult and a writer. Proust is the apotheosis of the already profound novelistic entanglements of domestic and psychological interiority. If the etymology of 'interior' brings together both physical and mental senses of the word, it is in fictional space where the two become indivisible.

Marie Laure Ryan, too, makes a link between Proust, interiority and fictional space. She invokes this Proustian architecture of the interior in order to describe how novels 'transport' readers into their own space. Like the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time*, we can be in one place while mentally inhabiting another. Here is a subtly different approach to the notion of a fictional world, therefore; where Pavel posits their existence in a parallel ontological realm, Ryan suggests they are summoned into existence by a congruence between the reader's affective interior spaces and those of the novel. Fiction's trick of spatial immersion she terms the 'madeleine effect', most powerful when the reader's memory is stimulated and a mental world opens up before us.<sup>48</sup> In a similar way to Proust's narrator, readers of novels bring their own experience and memories to bear in the imaginative construction of a convincing and fully realised fictional world. Clearly, a different kind of space is at work in McCarthy's

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<sup>47</sup> Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Rooms and the Writers That Shaped Them* (Routledge, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 121.

novel, which disrupts this three-dimensional imagining of domestic and psychological interiority. The 'madeleine effect' as described by Ryan is quite different to the 'Madlyn effect' produced by *Remainder*. Where the former produces an immersive, fully-realised fictional world, the latter produces an effect of vertiginous artificiality and one-dimensionality. If novelistic convention often invokes domestic space as an analogue for psychological interiority, then McCarthy's Madlyn Mansions, like Schneider's *Haus u r*, is all surface and no depth. Its interior is not a space that can be read in terms of psychological privacy, since it's not really an interior at all, but a continuous facade. Its surfaces, walls, floors and windows have all been scrupulously re-created at great expense to resemble some lost original. Its hyper-artifice gestures not toward authenticity and an uncovering/recovery of the real, unique self, but instead to the individual as an inauthentic, interchangeable, mediated copy. *Remainder* does operate according to the spatial conventions of fictional worlds, but rather those of Seltzer's pathological public sphere, where the concept of interiority no longer carries the same currency. It produces both a protagonist and a domestic space which are all surface and no depth. The interior, where it exists, is not something private and hidden, but transformed into surface spectacle, most strikingly in a moment when the body's inner spaces are opened to public view. The narrator, having just inflicted a fatal gunshot wound on someone he knows only as 'Two', scrutinises the injury. In an instance of what Seltzer calls 'stranger intimacy' – a type of anonymised interaction characteristic of the pathological public sphere – he probes the wound, fascinated: 'I poked at his exposed flesh with my finger. It was a lot like Four's flesh, it had the same sponge-like texture: soft and firm at the same time.'<sup>49</sup>

If *Remainder* subverts the notion of fictional worlds, it is because of its refusal and subversion of the kind of immersive, interior spaces that Ryan and Fuss associate with the novel. Its protagonist creates worlds as artificial, depthless and blank as himself. In this sense he is not merely an unreliable narrator but an impossible narrator; he is a character within a novel, yet does not subscribe to the paradigm of novelistic fiction, nor to the depth model of subjectivity and space that underlies it. He seems incapable of inhabiting the fictional world as convention demands. Instead, his presence is disruptive, constantly drawing attention to the paradoxes and conventions of fictional, illusionistic space. Like Schneider's coffee room on wheels, he exposes the workings that lie behind the scenes. In staging his re-enactments, he produces a peculiar kind of Beckettian theatre of anti-illusionism, one resistant to immersion and affective involvement. The participants in one re-enactment, speaking at a half speed monotone recite the words 'I- am- real' over and over again, suggesting just the opposite. He creates fictional worlds only to expose their

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<sup>49</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, p. 277.

strangeness and arbitrariness. He populates them not with psychologically rounded characters but 're-enactors' who perform the same actions repeatedly and mechanically at varying speeds. These actions he then scrutinises not for what they might 'reveal' about their performers, but instead as isolated movements, a set of angles and patterns to be 'captured'. In *Tin Tin and the Secret of Literature*, McCarthy argues that the famous comic book sleuth succeeds because he is an adept reader, and can navigate the world of signs. *Remainder's* protagonist seems to illustrate the obverse point, coming to grief precisely because he cannot. Despite his obsession with words, and with their definitions, he does not penetrate language to find its meanings, but focuses at the level of patterns and similarities. He is not at home with depth reading, with immersion, seeing instead only surface. He reads everything as flat, seeing diagrams of his fluctuating shares as purely geometric lines, and the actions he has scripted for his own cast of characters in similar terms. This world he creates is one in which the normal currency of the novel plotline – human subjectivity and moral agency – is excised, replaced instead with the geometry of movements, surfaces and patterns.

As readers, seeing events through his narratorial point of view, we are forced to read in something like the same way. *Remainder* does not permit the kind of readerly engagement we might conventionally expect in a novel. His flattened and blank mode of narration prohibits us from empathising with this character, since he himself is unable to empathise, to relate to other people as individuals. Even more disconcertingly, however, the 'space' of the novel is something we are not permitted to enter fully. Having spent several pages recounting the story of a meeting with a homeless man, complete with details of dogs, restaurant interiors and waitresses, the protagonist's narrative abruptly breaks down: 'the truth is, I've been making all this up'.<sup>50</sup> This moment brings us up short; no sooner has the spatial illusion been created than it is collapsed, prompting a series of other troubling questions about how much we can believe of this narrator's story. What is 'real' in this novel, which events actually happened and which are the product of a traumatised and possibly delusional mind? Is the narrator still in a coma, his mind 'still asleep but... inventing spaces and scenes for me to inhabit'?<sup>51</sup> There are hints that this may be the case, but embarking on this chain of logic leads us ultimately to the disconcerting recognition that of course none of this is 'real'. None of these events actually took place, except in the novel we hold in our hands. Ultimately, we are left confronting the flat surface of the page, but also a question about what it means to conjure imaginary places and people from this surface. Fiction is a highly artificial way of conceptually organising space. Interacting with it successfully

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<sup>50</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, p. 56.

<sup>51</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, p. 51.

involves a knowledge of its conventions, its rules and zones of demarcation. Such rules may be second nature to novel readers, but, as *Remainder* indicates, they are in fact highly unnatural. McCarthy's novel 'trains you out of a certain way of thinking,' as Zadie Smith argues. If 'all novels attempt to cut neural routes through the brain', then *Remainder* 'reroutes' the novel.<sup>52</sup> Smith picks up on *Remainder's* own neurological vocabulary. 'To cut and lay new circuits in your brain' explains the narrator, 'they make you visualise things'. Following his accident, he undergoes therapy to recalibrate his hand eye coordination and so, as he knows only too well therefore, the imagining and visualising of space is learned behaviour, a neurological function that can be unlearned and relearned. In a similar way, the novel seems to imply, reading fictional worlds - reading depth from flatness - is not natural. From its affectless, traumatised, disconnected vantage point, imagining fictional space is not just defamiliarised but even pathologised.

*Remainder* initially hovered between novel and physical space, and in its finished form still oscillates between the two. It is a fiction that refuses fictional conventions, or rather, it consistently explores and exposes these conventions and the spatial paradoxes underlying them. *Remainder's* narrator unfolds his imagined world only in order to collapse it again. In one sense this means it continually exceeds its own textual boundaries, setting up disruptive relays between the supposedly separate zones of the fictional and the real. It doubles and reiterates other, similarly disconcerting non-places, merging with the continuous mediated surfaces of a technologized culture of simulations. In another sense, its flatness only draws attention to its own tangible, textual boundaries. McCarthy's earlier novel, *Men in Space*, has as its central motif of a Byzantine icon which is on the one hand figurative, but whose pictorial conventions and severe geometry draw attention to the flatness of the picture plane.<sup>53</sup> It refuses to be read in terms of illusionistic, three-dimensional space, and instead produces a different, disruptive set of spatial coordinates. This disruption is something *Remainder* enacts also, setting up a constant tension between the illusion of depth and flatness of the medium. Conventionally, the illusionistic space of fiction depends on the effective dematerialisation of the page; a strategic forgetting of the surface in order to read through it and enter an immersive fictional world. *Remainder's* insistent flatness, its refusal to sustain such immersive places brings us back over and over to the artifice of the illusion. Ultimately it brings us back its own fundamental *trompe-loeil*; its own two-dimensional pages. Such paper surfaces may promise depth, it reminds us, but the printed words nevertheless remain there as a troublesome, material reminder that this is an illusion. Its narrator battles with 'stuff' that interferes with the neatness, coherence and perfection he

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<sup>52</sup> Smith, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Tom McCarthy, *Men in Space* (Alma Books Ltd, 2008).



seeks in his re-enactments. Messy brake fluid spills onto his lap, the phone socket disgustingly emerges from the wall and, most tellingly, ink clings to his fingers from his tube ticket. Like the narrator, we are left with the messy, material residue, the inky remainder that stubbornly refuses to dematerialise.