Mexico City, Amsterdam

Tom McCarthy

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In the mid 1990s I lived in Amsterdam. My accommodation, then, was a well-appointed squat. My downstairs neighbour was a Serbian performance artist whose work consisted of dragging his hands down window-panes. Perhaps not entirely coincidentally, one of my flat's windows was missing a sheet of glass. After measuring the hole and trudging off to have a new sheet cut, I boarded a tram whose driver refused to transport me, instructing me, in Dutch, to disembark. I didn't understand, of course; a fellow passenger translated for me, adding, in a reasoned, explanatory tone, that 'if the tram crashed, shards of glass might hurt us'. The emphasis and inflection of his words made it crystal clear that *us* meant the Dutch passengers, not me.

As the tram pulled off again and I stood on the pavement watching it recede, I pictured the only tram crash I'd ever heard of: the one in Mexico City in 1925 in which the artist Frieda Kahlo, seated behind an artisan transporting a small bag of gold dust, found herself both skewered by a metal pole and gilted by the ruptured package. The event formed the basis of her work, which repeatedly shows her transfigured, by some glorious catastrophe, into a tortured icon.

The violent, Catholic splendour of Kahlo's Mexico seemed very far away that day from safety-conscious, Puritan Holland. And yet the Dutch have been living in the shadow of catastrophe since their country's inception. The very land on which they build their houses and through which they run their trams is stolen from a sea that wants it back, protected by dams and polders that defy the basic principle that you can't live lower than sea level. I imagine that Holland first enters the imagination of most of the World's non-Dutch children, as it did mine, via the fable of the little boy who, noticing a small hole in the sea wall, plugs it with his finger and stays there all night to save the town. His civic-mindedness is a Dutch feature, as an English carpenter, encountered in a bar, explained to me one evening soon after my ejection from the tram: 'In the old days, every citizen, irrespective of their wealth or status, had to put in two or three days every year at shoring up the sea wall. Their logic was that if the dyke goes, we're all fucked.'

I wondered who the *we* referred to this time. Puritan theology divides the world into an *us* and a *them*: within a predetermined universe that will end, soon, in apocalypse, a few have been selected – pre-selected – as Elect, the ones who will be saved; the others, indeed the vast majority, however, are the Preterite, or damned. The script's been written, and it can't be changed. But acting in a way consistent with being one of the Elect confers upon the actor an Elect status – one that, since it's not the actor but the writer (God) determining his actions, becomes its own proof, its own confirmation: a logic as self-contained as a polder.

The bar in which the carpenter explained the collective barrage-shoring custom to me lay on the Zeedijk, the location (as its name suggests) of Amsterdam's old sea dyke. The street is full of late-night bars. There used to be one there named *Mexico City*; Camus used it as the setting for *The Fall*. In the novel, 'judge-penitent' Jean-Baptiste Clamence talks, like my carpenter, to an anonymous narrator, comparing Amsterdam's layout, with its concentric canals, to the topography of Dante's *Inferno*. Nowadays, outside the Zeedijk's bars, on the street itself, foreign drug addicts shake and shuffle as they wait for their next hit. While their Dutch counterparts are provided with prescription heroin, these people, modern

Preterite, are kept firmly beyond the polder of social inclusion, scraping its window-pane from the outside. For them, the apocalypse has come, and is repeating on an endless loop: each day is a long, slow catastrophe.

Camus's Clamence dates his own fall to his failure, some years ago, to act to save a woman from drowning: he, like her, has sunk, lower even than sea level. During the short time I lived in Amsterdam, my childhood image of the Dutch boy with his finger in the dam mutated, till it grew into a strangely English one: a boy pulling his finger from the hole, his face, no longer innocent, replaced with the malicious, leering one of Johnny Rotten, two maniacal white eyes glaring from its centre like marble chrysanthemums.

Tom McCarthy is an artist and writer based in Londen. Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder*, which deals with trauma and repetition, won the Believer Book Award 2007 and is currently being adapted for cinema. His new novel, *C*, which is about the relationship between technology and mourning, will be published in 2010.

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