

Vol. 7, No. 3: CLRI August 2020 | p. 116-131

Re-conceptualising ‘contemporaneity’ by  
Thinking through the ‘criminality’ of the World  
using Chloe Hooper’s *The Arsonist: A Mind on  
Fire* and Tom McCarthy’s *Satin Island*

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**Abstract**

Inspired by Theodore Martin’s *Contemporary Drift* and “Contemporary, Inc.,” this essay explores the ‘emptiness’ of the contemporary category by thinking through the criminality of the world. It also explores how genre allows authors to come up with innovative and complex ways to fill the ‘emptiness’ of contemporaneity by providing new knowledge about the world we live in.

**Keywords:** Contemporaneity, criminality, contemporary uncertainty, genre and contemporary writing.

## **Introduction**

Chloe Hooper's *The Arsonist: A Mind on Fire* and Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* emphasise the criminality of the contemporary world. Hooper's investigation of the Black Saturday Bushfires and her probe into the mind of the perpetrator—Brendon Sokaluk, is a contemplation on how the world works in criminality. In McCarthy's novel, the protagonist—U's investigation of the case of the dead parachutist, who plummeted to his death, provides us with a similar commentary on crimes and criminals. Theodore Martin, in *Contemporary Drift*, insists that contemporary books, like detective novels, for instance, attempt to provide us with answers so that we might be able to figure out the uncertainty that plagues the contemporary world (98). Following from Martin, this paper illuminates how the process of investigations in Hooper's *The Arsonist* and McCarthy's *Satin Island* provide us with answers, and as a result, fill the 'emptiness' of the contemporary category.

## **The 'emptiness' of contemporaneity**

The desire to define the 'contemporary' is in itself, an acknowledgement of the emptiness of the contemporary category. This is because, as Martin observes in his essay "Contemporary, Inc.," the "uncertainty [revolving around 'contemporaneity'] precedes its content" (125). Since 'uncertainty' is an element of the contemporary world, hence, one can only try to define the 'contemporary' and provide viable solutions to its 'uncertainty' through

speculations, or what McCarthy suggests in "half-formed notions" (para. 5.3). Hooper treads a similar path in her novel *The Arsonist*, where she tries to find the answer to the question: why did Brendon Sokaluk light the fires in Latrobe Valley that led to such widespread loss of life and property? In trying to answer this question, Hooper comes up with viable "solution[s] to the uncertainties that enthrall and confound our contemporary moment" (Martin, *Contemporary Drift* 98). Since Hooper was not a witness to the Black Saturday Bushfires, she recreates the entire narrative of her novel from the legal transcripts. However, no matter how hard she tries to unearth the answers to her questions, the truth is bound to remain "[i]mprecise and unformed" (Martin, "Contemporary, Inc." 125). This is because, as Hooper did not bear witness to the crime, what she writes in *The Arsonist* is "a number of competing versions of a set of events that can claim to be no closer to an objective or a material reality than any other" (Smith 22). Hooper concedes at the end of her novel, in the "coda" that the writing process was agonising for her because of the inconclusiveness of the story of the Black Saturday Bushfires:

*I've nearly finished writing this book, which came in fits and starts, after persuading people to speak, and learning of material that was hard to access, then too hard to deal with. I have spent years trying to understand ... [Brendon] and what he did, my own motivation sometimes as indecipherable as his. And, I wondered, what if, having asked the police and lawyers dozens of questions, then more questions, trying to get tiny details right, I essentially*

*ended up with little more than a series of impressions?  
Would the result be ultimately a fiction?*

This extract is indicative of Hooper's struggle to unearth a world of certainty from a world of uncertainty. Put differently, Hooper wrestles with the statements of the police and the lawyers involved in the case of the Black Saturday Bushfires, which conflict with one another, to come up with a comprehensible narrative of the cause behind the fires and Brendon's—the perpetrator's involvement in them. On one hand, "[t]he police and prosecutor's view [was] that ... [Brendon] was cunning and calculating," and on the other hand, the lawyers believed that Brendon was "a hapless naïf, a simpleton more sinned against than sinning, caught up in events beyond his control" (Hooper ch. 8). In her attempt to give a logical explanation of the bushfires and Brendon's role in lighting the fires, Hooper ends up being entangled in inconclusiveness.

### **Knowledge of 'nonknowledge'**

So how does *The Arsonist* address and fill the 'emptiness' of the contemporary category? According to Martin, the "novels of the wait [such as detective novels] rethink the relation between the known and the unknown by showing us how knowledge plays out, dialectically, over time" (*Contemporary Drift* 98). Borrowing from Martin, what I want to suggest is that it is not the final resolution or the answer to the question: what was the motivation behind the crime that provides solution to the uncertainty

plaguing the world in the novel, but the viable solutions to the 'uncertainty' come from the gradual unravelling of the various mysterious circumstances over time that surround the actual crime in the novel. In the case of *The Arsonist*, which is based on a true crime, and where the readers are probably already aware of the court case against Brendon and its verdict, nevertheless, Hooper's narrative in her novel gradually uncovers the various mysteries that compound the actual crime.

In this regard, the genre of Hooper's novel—'creative non-fiction,' helps her to unravel the mysteries and narrativise them in an accessible form for her readers. John Frow, in his book *Genre*, considers genre as a "constraint," that assists in "structuring and shaping ... [the] meaning ... of [the] text ... to realise certain purposes" (80). In other words, what Frow means is that the formal characteristics of a genre provide support to structure the meaning and content of the text to meet distinct objectives. In *The Arsonist*, since Hooper was not a witness to the actual crime and neither were her readers, when she uses the legal archives on the Black Saturday Bushfires to construct the narrative of her novel, she constantly jumps between fictional writing style and non-fictional reportage to give as complete a picture of the bushfires as possible to her readers. This is made possible by the flexible style of the 'creative non-fiction' genre, which helps Hooper to narrativise the events of the bushfires, such as, the distressing experiences of the people caught in the fires—

something, which Hooper's readers might not be aware of. In chapter two, for instance, Hooper writes:

*Three hours ... [later] two CFA [Country Fire Authority] volunteers ... walked through a burnt garden, and on the verandah, under a melted laser light, a man sat shaking, draped in wet towels from head to toe. Using a fire blanket, they lifted and carried him to the back seat of their ute. They drove him away along roads walled by flames, passing the shells of burnt-out vehicles. A skeleton in one sat upright in the driver's seat.*

The above extract begins with an almost objective reportage, which reports at what time the volunteers arrived and how they worked to help a victim; however, somewhere, in the process of narration, the objective reportage takes the form of a fictional narrative style, which is especially noticeable in the descriptions of the scenes during the bushfires. Through images like the "roads walled by flames," "the shells of burnt-out vehicles," and "[a] skeleton ... in the driver's seat," Hooper gives her readers a glimpse into the events of the Black Saturday Bushfires, which the readers have not witnessed. As a result, the mystery behind the principal question: why did Brendon light the fires fades into the background, to be replaced by heart-wrenching accounts of the victims caught in the fires. By producing reliable knowledge about the events of the bushfires, Hooper allows her readers to have some insight into the situations, and consequently, she gives newfound meaning and significance to the 'uncertainty' plaguing the events of the bushfires. For instance, in the abovementioned extract, the description

of the burnt vehicles and the charred body suggest the intensity of the firestorm, which “explain[s] an event ... inexplicable to everyone else” (Thomas, as qtd. in Martin, *Contemporary Drift* 95), especially when the perpetrator—Brendon Sokaluk allowed in his confession that he might have unknowingly lit the fires by dropping a cigarette butt. What I want to suggest is that what might seem like unlikely—a half-burnt cigarette causing an intense firestorm capable of killing people, draws our attention to our “society in which we become ... aware of how little we know about the risks that surround us” (Martin, *Contemporary Drift* 96). This points out the paradoxical nature of contemporary knowledge, where we make sense of the ‘uncertainty’ and fill the ‘emptiness’ of contemporaneity through the knowledge of our nonknowledge. Put differently, by gradually unravelling the conditions of contemporaneity—the important facts about the nature of the world we live in—a world of risk, Hooper provides her readers new knowledge about the contemporary world, which fills the ‘emptiness’ of the contemporary category.

### **Unknown ‘esoteric’ knowledge**

In *The Arsonist*, Hooper also probes into the mind of Brendon—the perpetrator, to explore new uncertainties surrounding contemporary uncertainty. She characterises Brendon as a man of contradiction and writes:

*The legal contest had pitted the story of a fiend against that of a simpleton, but the two weren't mutually exclusive.*

*Brendon was both things. Guileful and guileless, shrewd  
and naive (ch. 10).*

This reflects the very nature of uncertainty that plagues our world, where the good versus evil trope has reached an impasse. However, this “does explain something about the complicated case of ... [the] contemporary moment ... [by] [g]iving new meaning” to it (Martin, *Contemporary Drift* 111). For instance, in trying to answer the question: why would Brendon light the fires, Hooper concludes at the end of her novel, in the “coda” that

*there isn't a standardised Arsonist. There isn't a distinct part  
of the brain marked by a flame. There is only the person  
who feels spiteful, or lonely, or anxious, or enraged, or  
bored, or humiliated: all the things that can set a mind—any  
mind—on fire.*

Here, Hooper indicates that the world works in criminality. In trying to put forward a sociological argument about the criminality plaguing the 'contemporaneity,' she observes that it is the lack of moral engagement of the society that gives birth to criminals. Put differently, it is society's disregard for a moral commitment that leads to discrimination against certain individuals or communities, which often results in crimes and criminals. Since these individuals or communities are pushed to the fringes of society, their resulting spite or vengeance often take the form of crimes. In Brendon's case, his psychological impairment coupled with the unfair treatment he received as a kid from his classmates and later on, the lack of support and understanding from both—his co-workers



and neighbours, turned him to an unsuspecting criminal. Brendon was both—a guileless victim and a guileful culprit. Although this explanation does not solve the social instability caused by his crime; however, Hooper's argument on the criminal nature of the contemporary world draws our attention towards the complexities associated with contemporaneity, and in a sense, provides us with an otherwise unnoticed esoteric knowledge about the world we inhabit. This unpredictable but extremely crucial knowledge of the present fills the 'emptiness' or nonknowledge of the contemporary category.

In a similar vein of discussion, in McCarthy's *Satin Island*, the protagonist—U's investigation of the case of the dead parachutist tries to alleviate the uncertainty or the mystery surrounding the parachutist's death. In the process of his investigation, U comes up with numerous theories to demystify the mysterious circumstances that led to the seasoned parachutist's death—some of them viable—like the possible involvement of another parachutist in tampering with the parachute, but others not so much—like U's conspiracy theory about a cult of parachutists around the globe with a Russian Roulette pact. Nevertheless, the gradual unfurling of facts, throughout U's investigation process, suggests that the process of knowing something takes some time. According to Martin, "the slow accumulation of facts [over time] by which, without entirely realizing how or when, we come to know the world around us" (*Contemporary Drift* 119). Martin's

words reflect the dynamic nature of the contemporary world. The contemporary world is constantly on the move—it is always 'in transit.' This knowledge itself alleviates the 'uncertainty' of contemporaneity by defining what contemporary means. Consequently, the knowledge of the contemporary can be characterised as a "temporal dynamic, or dialectic, of *knowing* and *unknowing*" (Martin, *Contemporary Drift* 121). Put differently, the contemporary world can be conceptualised as what we know about it, or what we can know about it and what we are yet to know about it. U's investigation of the case of the dead parachutist treads a path between the 'knowing' and the 'unknowing.'

Thus, the contemporary gradually unfolds itself through U's investigation process. In chapter three of *Satin Island*, for instance, U observes that

*... an examination of the dead man's gear had unearthed evidence of tampering. The rig, or harness, he'd had strapped onto his back contained two parachutes—three if you counted the small, handkerchief-sized "drogue" that, once deployed, is meant to suck the main chute from the rig—and it had transpired that the cords attaching each of these to one another, to the rig and, ultimately, to him had been deliberately severed. The severing had been carried out with expertise and cunning; all the chutes had been repacked correctly afterwards, so that no outward sign of any interference would be visible. The deed could only have been done by an insider: someone connected to the airfield and the club, who knew the rigmarole of parachute-assembly, the protocol of jumping and jump-preparation—packing, storage, safety-checking and so forth; in short, by another parachutist (para. 3.8).*

This extract depicts how knowledge plays out dialectically over time. U picks up his investigation from where the newspaper report left it—from the fact that there was evidence of tampering with the parachutist's parachute. The subsequent descriptions of the components of the parachute and how they work together for the parachute to function properly provide the readers with esoteric or uncommon knowledge which they most likely do not possess. According to Martin, "the mystery's solution almost invariably involves subtle but important facts that were concealed from the reader, or depends on the esoteric knowledge the reader is almost certain not to possess" (*Contemporary Drift* 99-100). In other words, U, as well as the readers of the novel need this uncommon knowledge about the internal workings of the parachute to come up with viable solutions to demystify the mysterious circumstances that led to the death of the parachutist. As a result, U and the readers of *Satin Island* (in their process of reading), arrive at the conclusion that the expertise with which the man's parachute was damaged could only have been done by another parachutist, who possesses the practical knowledge about the workings of a parachute and the protocols involved in parachuting. Thus, in the above extract, knowledge unfolds in-between the 'knowing,' that is, evidence of tampering with the parachutist's parachute and the 'unknowing' of why would anyone vandalise the man's parachute, and as a result, the uncommon or esoteric

knowledge revealed in the process fills the 'emptiness' of the contemporary category.

### **Contemporaneity exists in ideas**

However, U is aware that he can never come up with an irrefutable explanation to demystify all the mysteries that compound the parachutist's death. As Peyman—U's boss argues that no one can have absolute knowledge, or what he calls "pure, unconditional knowledge" (para. 5.1), but rather the knowledge that people possess "is an endless set of migrations: knowledge-parcels travelling from one field to another, and mutating in the process" (para. 5.7). Likewise, U's frustrated attempts to solve the puzzle of the parachutist's death by piecing together the puzzle pieces of information from news reports reflect that he can only successfully create a coherent narrative from what he observes. However, the sheer amounts of data in the media reports (and the information provided by the parachute-club safety officer to U through their digital correspondence) make it difficult for U to process everything and provide a final incontestable resolution. Metaphorically speaking, U's failed attempt at solving the mystery of the parachutist's death represents the inconceivability and impracticality of the concept of unquestionable expositions in the contemporary digital age. In this regard, the narrative form of *Satin Island*, which comprises a "fragmented style [of writing, helps by] work[ing] against the production of a linear and teleologic

narrative, [and as a result] undermin[es] ... the coherence of the narrative" (Nunning and Scherr 494). What I want to suggest is that by using the formal features of the 'experimental fiction' genre in *Satin Island*, McCarthy through his protagonist U scrambles to conceptualise and articulate the nontotalisable array of information surrounding the case of the parachutist, which is diffused across the complex media network in the contemporary world (in the novel). However, U fails in joining the dots to arrive at conclusive reasoning or produce a linear narrative because of the overwhelming assemblage of information available in this digital world, which depicts what it is like to live in the contemporary moment—with an abundance of data making no complete sense. But one might wonder: what does this have to do with the 'emptiness' of the contemporary? According to Lauren Berlant, "[t]he present is something given back to us by those who reflect on it" (446). Put differently, by reflecting on the condition of contemporaneity, we get new insight about the contemporary world, and as a result of this, the 'emptiness' of the contemporary category gets filled with new knowledge and understandings.

Similarly, U's developing hypotheses in *Satin Island* about the dead parachutist's case as to what might have happened with him, which evolve in parallel to the media coverage of the case, provide important and necessary insight into the situation. For instance, in chapter four of McCarthy's novel, U reflects that

*[t]he crime itself, the moment of its actually-happening, would have occurred when, just after he threw his drogue out, as he awaited the familiar jolt and the ensuing drag, the reassuring easing of his downward plummet brought on by the opening of the parachute itself, the victim realized that these things hadn't occurred, that he was still in freefall. The happening-moment would have taken place a second time after he'd pulled his ripcord and again felt no consoling bite, met with no purchase on the air around him; and a third when he'd attempted to deploy his reserve chute, equally fruitlessly. Did that mean there'd been three crimes instead of one? Perhaps. ... [T]he question of the murder's true location resolved itself for me: I realized that the crime scene ... was the sky (para. 4.9).*

This extract echoes Peter Osborne's concept of contemporary, which according to him "is beyond possible experience," and hence, the contemporary "exists only 'in the idea'" (*Anywhere or Not at All* 22). Put differently, what U recreates about what might have happened with the parachutist by hypothesising about him, exists only in his mind. Nonetheless, through his conjectures, U makes the contemporary more complete, in the sense that his suppositions fill in the gaps in knowledge. What would seem inconceivable, that is, the sky being a crime scene, becomes more comprehensible when knowledge plays itself out through U's assessments of the crime, which trace the moment of its actual-happening.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, Hooper and McCarthy, in their respective novels, fill the 'emptiness' of the contemporary category by addressing the notion of 'contemporary uncertainty' and

its characteristic feature of 'nonknowledge,' or the lack of knowledge through their inquiry into and exploration of two acts of crime. As a result of their inspections, they come up with viable solutions to explain some of the mysterious circumstances that surround the two crimes, which make the incidents more comprehensible.

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