

## Praise for *Men in Space*



“McCarthy has perversely managed to make fiction that feels exuberantly fresh and alive.”

*The Independent*

“McCarthy writes with devastating charm and lucidity – there’s scarcely a loose sentence in the book.”

*The Guardian*

“McCarthy is fast revealing himself as a master craftsman who is steering the contemporary novel towards exciting territories. In unravelling the defining minutiae of an event in history, he manages to reveal to us the widening disintegration of our own present.”

*The Observer*

“A confident and intelligent meditation on failed flights of transcendence.”

*Times Literary Supplement*

“In Tom McCarthy, English fiction has a new laureate of disappointment.”

*Time Out*

“*Men in Space* is a compelling and imaginative philosophical novel; McCarthy describes a world in which we are only occasionally party to brief, frightening intimations of greater forces at work, like the mysterious half-tuned transmissions at the ends of a radio dial.”

*Frieze Magazine*

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# MEN IN SPACE

TOM MCCARTHY



*For Jean-Christophe Roelens*

Despite the richness of their colour, it is the line that is the basic means of expression in the work of the Bačkovsko masters. Executing a rigorous set of formal procedures, lines never allow themselves to become mere accessories to the expression of volume, to imply depth or to confer realism: instead, they help present the world they depict as unreal, flat and dematerialized. Using inverted perspective and multiple points of view which they place within the painting itself, the Bačkovsko masters set up a continuous style that enables them to represent several moments of a story on a single panel. As for the human figures, their sensory organs are drawn out and isolated, relinquishing their biological functions as they become sanctified. Their faces, serene and concentrated, are not configured to produce dramatic effect, but rather to foreground their owners' elevated sorrow.

Klára Jelinková, *Murals of the Bačkovsko Ossuary*  
(Unpublished MA Dissertation, AVU, Cz: 1986, pp. 8-9)

Here's Anton Markov, sitting at a table, running his finger round a saucer's rim as he watches his compatriot Koulin stride across the Malostranská Kavárna's floor. Koulin takes bouncy, elastic steps. He swings his arms and hips round chairs and tables. He turns like an ice skater to glide backwards for two paces as he skirts around the waitress, a girl of twenty-odd. Wall-mounted mirrors, one on either side of the door from which he's just emerged, the door that leads off to the toilets, render the event in triplicate: three Koulins – front, left profile and right profile, like in police mugshots. There are three waitresses too, three sets of background customers. Looking at the multiplying scene, Anton recalls his refereeing days in Bulgaria: the trick was to see all the near-identical shirts, repeated runs, sudden departures, switches and loop-backs as one single movement, parts of a modulating system which you had to watch as though from outside, or above, or somewhere else.

“So anyway,” says Koulin, sliding back into his chair and stretching his arm out across the radiator behind him, “this Yugoslavian's place is in Prague Four, by Nusle. He lives on the fourth floor. Me and Milachkov thought we'd scare him by saying we'd throw him out of the window. So we turn up there and it's him that opens the door to us, in a towel-robe. It must be about 10 a.m. Mila knocks him straight down and we pick him up, one of us at either end, and carry him towards the window. But while we're lugging him there, this girl walks in out of the bedroom. And guess what?”

His eyes beam across the table, pink-flushed with excitement.

“What?” asks Anton.

“She’s naked,” Koulin tells him. “Really lovely body. Brown hair down her back. Small round tits. When she sees us she starts crying and screaming *Oh don’t hurt him! Please don’t hurt him!* I start to explain that we don’t want to hurt him but he owes Ili money for the cigarettes he’s selling on his patch, but she just cries and screams some more. The Yugoslavian’s all calm because he’s dazed from Mila’s punch, so he’s no problem, but this girl is kicking up a storm. And then...” He shifts his arm. “This bit is kind of difficult to explain exactly as it happened... Well, she pissed herself. But what I noticed is a kind of dribble – no, I lie, it wasn’t a dribble: it was more like a bag had burst just on the inside of her leg. A bag that wasn’t there before. Or like when someone throws a water balloon, you know, and it explodes. One solid mass. At least, it was solid till it hit the floor, one of those criss-cross floors, all wood, what do they call them?...”

“*Parquet. Parquetry.*”

“Right: till it hit the parquetry. Then it broke. Really bizarre. Because she was naked there was nothing to interrupt its fall. And this girl, this beautiful naked girl just stood above it, screaming. I don’t know if she’d even noticed what she’d just done...”

Did Koulin tell a similar story about Anton, their first meeting? Did he slide into a similar chair – perhaps this very one – and, stretching his arm across the radiator, say to his friend Milachkov: *So there’s me and Janachkov, and Jana’s itching to break this guy’s finger, got his finger in his hand, this short, smart-ass guy, maybe Jewish with the face he has. And Ili’s there too, and he starts explaining to the guy what he’s done wrong, importing all that pop and selling it bang in the middle of Prague without going through us, or anyone else for that matter...* And behind the casual anecdote, Anton pinned against the wall rigid with fear, wishing he’d never noticed in the first place that Prague’s *potraviny* had been out of lemonade all summer, never suggested Zdeněk

drive to Germany to get some, hoping Helena wouldn’t come home just then, hoping they’d just break his finger and leave it at that, not punch him in the stomach or the face, or at least not the balls, please not the balls – when suddenly he heard Ilievski speak to Janachkov in Bulgarian. *Don’t break it just yet*, he told him. Anton whined *You’re Bulgarian!* And Janachkov immediately let the finger go.

“What the...”

Ilievski here, speaking for all of them while they stood back and stared. It was as though shared nationality had *embarrassed* them out of hurting him. From then on it became like an engineering faculty dinner or one of those BFA post-match receptions. Ilievski asked him how he’d come to live in Prague, what he did beside (chuckling now) selling lemonade on other people’s patches without paying dues, what he’d done back in Bulgaria... They discovered that they’d both grown up in Dragalevtsi, and that Ili had had a considerable amount of money riding on the ’87 grudge match between Levski and CSKA, money which had doubled after Anton awarded a contentious penalty to CSKA in extra time.

“How much did you pay for the pop?”

“Ten Deutschmarks per crate.”

“Not bad at all. How would you like to work for me? I can offer...”

Anton accepted on the spot. That evening he went to the Bulgarian church on Ječná and lit a candle for whatever guardian angel – or neural impulse – had made him blow for handball four years earlier.

“...and then this second girl walks in,” Koulin’s saying, “though she’s not naked, more’s the pity. She tries to calm the first girl down. The parquetry’s not varnished, so the piss has made a big dark patch across it...”

Anton, still orbiting the saucer with his finger, pictures the patch, its jagged edges, the frightened girl above it. In his mind he pauses the scene, steps in, tells the girl *It’s OK*,

*just keep calm, things work themselves out*, then, standing among them, regulates the other figures' movement around the room: sends her friend to fetch a knee-length jumper for her, holds Koulin and Milachkov at bay beside the window while the Yugoslavian comes round, digs out some money, pays them... It works: the story ends without anyone else getting hurt. When he's finished telling it, Koulin slides an envelope across the table to him.

"Passports?"

"Passports."

Anton slips the envelope into a dossier he's got with him. Ilievski, Koulin says, will be at the car market by Palmovka at eleven thirty.

"He told you that?"

"Yeah. I was with him last night. He wants you to meet him there."

"OK, then. Let me..."

"I got that."

Koulin flips the bill over, sliding his thumb up so that the paper slots between his right hand's middle and index fingers.

"You've practised that."

"What?"

"Nothing. Thanks."

Outside, the sun's breaking through the thick December cloud that was covering the whole city as Anton made his way to the Kavárna. Roofs – red-, gold- and brown-tiled – are still icy. Anton crosses the tram tracks at the edge of Malostranská Náměstí and walks down Mostecká, past bureaux de change and shops selling Bohemian crystal. He lets his shoe-soles scrape the pavement's alternating black and white cobbles. It's a habit he has. Helena complains that it wears his shoes out, but he likes the noise, the sand and tap. His rhythm is broken when he passes beneath the portal onto Karlův Most: there are too many people on the bridge.

It's the usual crowd: journeyman artists hawking sketches of the Staré Město skyline, or drawing people perched on stools in front of them. *Portréty*, *Karikatury*. Solitary violinists playing Mozart, red fingers poking through the ends of cut-off gloves, frosted breath drifting off the strings. Quartets of musicians playing more Mozart. Minstrels dressed in pseudo-eighteenth-century frills and stockings singing Mozart arias a cappella. Always fucking Mozart. There's a quick-change artist doing the three-cups-one-ball trick, a troupe of red-nosed Slovaks in national costume twanging thick pieces of string attached to rough-cut wooden blocks. There are organ grinders; dreadlocked jugglers; hair-wrappers, cross-legged on woven mats; masseurs; tarot readers; puppeteers; men with parrots and boa constrictors; women selling tacky jewellery. And tourists, endless tourists, wearing brightly coloured scarves and jackets, oozing and coagulating around maps and cameras like some dense, radioactive mass, a fluorescent toxic spill; coagulating around Anton too, hemming him in...

The bridge ends, releasing him onto the tramlines on Křižovnická. Through the thinning red and yellow coats he can see Zhelyazkov and Spasiev behind their stalls on Karlova. Zhelyazkov's wearing a combat jacket and a Sparta scarf. Bottles of lemonade are piled up in pyramids on the stall: Anton's lemonade. Right next to Zhelyazkov, Spasiev's toggled up in a thick fur coat. He's got his bulkiest Soviet army hat on, ear-flaps down. In front of him sit rows of other Soviet army hats: infantry, light cavalry, armoured division, sappers. Bulk-made in Turkey. Anton's seen a whole consignment of them in Ilievski's garage once, Janachkov grumbling as he scuffed them with sandpaper, one by one.

"Comrade pilot," Spasiev shouts, pulling an airman's cap down over Anton's head, "fly us somewhere warm!"

"Have you heard the joke about the Russian pilot and the English pilot who both crashed on the same desert island?" Anton asks him.

“Go on.”

“The English one is looking through a telescope and he sees a St Bernard dog – one of those giant dogs with tiny barrels of rum tied to their necks – swimming towards the island. So the English pilot says: ‘Hey, look! It’s man’s best friend!’ And the Russian pilot grabs the telescope and looks through it and says: ‘Yeah, and there’s a dog with it!’”

There’s a pause, then both men bend over in laughter. They stay crumpled for a while, then look up at each other and immediately crumple again, the laughter growing louder, shoulders and backs shaking as they cough and sob over the joke. Spasiev’s banging on the table. Zhelyazkov’s leaning forwards on his stall’s canopy. Eventually he straightens up, pulls a hip flask from his combat’s pocket and holds it out to Anton.

“Man’s best friend!”

“Exactly. Oh, right. No thanks.”

“Lemonade?”

“Thanks, no.”

Zhelyazkov pulls a wad of cash out of another pocket and slaps it against Anton’s chest. Spasiev opens up a metal box and does the same. Anton counts both wads, then slips them into his dossier.

“Here, I’ve got another one. This American delegation goes to Moscow to visit a factory. So the Party tell the factory chief that American delegations are always asking about anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, so to make sure he shows them some happy Jewish workers. The chief says: ‘But there aren’t any Jewish workers here, because you made me fire them all last year.’ So they say: ‘OK then, choose a worker and we’ll give him Jewish papers and we’ll call him Comrade Rubenstein, and when the Americans come he’ll show them his papers to prove he’s Jewish and he’ll tell them that he’s treated just as well as everyone else.’ So the chief goes off and picks out Comrade, I don’t know, say

Comrade Tabalov, and gives him the Jewish papers and tells him to answer to the name of Rubenstein and so on. So the American delegation comes and sure enough they ask the question about anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, and the chief says: ‘Gentlemen, there is no anti-Semitism here. Our own Jewish comrade, Comrade Rubenstein, will tell you as much. Call Comrade Rubenstein!’ They wait, and wait some more, and some more still, and after ages the assistant chief comes back and whispers in the chief’s ear: ‘Chief! Comrade Rubenstein has emigrated to Israel!’”

This time the laughter’s forced.

“That’s Jews for you,” says Spasiev, prefacing his observation with a click of his tongue.

There’s an awkward silence. They think he’s Jewish too. He’s not: solid Orthodox. By thirteen he was bearing cups at Sveta Sofia. Uncle Stoyann would give him rosaries and Prayer Books on his birthdays. *I don’t speak English, but it doesn’t matter*, Stoyann told him as he met Anton for the last time before leaving on a religious visa for Philadelphia; *I’ll talk vulgate Latin with the other priests. That’s one language even you don’t speak!* Each time he steps into an Orthodox church, even here in Prague, the smell of incense and the dull chanting from the seats behind the altar usher him back into his childhood and, at the same time, summon up the tall buildings, gushing steam and stilted metros of Uncle Stoyann’s new home that he hasn’t made it to, not yet...

He’ll go up to the automat at Mústek, make a pick-up from Janachkov, then hop on the yellow line. Pleasantries first. To Zhelyazkov:

“The pop not selling so well?”

“Too cold.”

“You should sell coffee. Hot wine.”

“Tell Ilievski to sort it out with Saudek.”

“Saudek?”

“Runs the next patch.” Zhelyazkov jerks his thumb towards the stall five metres away. Steam is piping out of two large samovars. A board in front reads: *Káva, Čaj, Svařené Víno*. “Little Bulgaria ends here. It’s Czechs from here on up to Husova. They made Ili agree we won’t sell hot stuff.”

“Well, that’s capitalism. You’ll clean up come spring. I’ve got to go.”

At the top of Karlova Anton glances into the window of the Prague House of Photography and sees a girl sitting at a desk. On a wall hook behind her hangs a leopard-skin, or possibly fake-leopard-skin, jacket. She catches his eye, smiles. Does he know her? Shy, he presses on, crosses Staroměstské náměstí and walks up Melantrichova. The sky’s blue now, with small clouds hovering round its edges to the northwest, over Letná. Anton enters the Korunní Automat, sails past the roast-chicken counter and makes for the cake-and-coffee section. There they are, camped out around tables: money changers. Czechs and Poles, Algerians and Moroccans, Russians, Turks. Shouting figures and exchange rates to each other; laughing, arguing, jostling; shunting their clients from one table to the next; swapping cigarettes and calculators; re-exchanging money back among themselves between transactions; hopping from one language to another, to a third, a fourth – as though words, too, had negotiable value. Anton picks out Janachkov, who’s hitting hard on two North Africans, shoving a napkin with some kind of algorithm written on it in their faces: wants them to buy zlotys. He sees Anton, breaks off his negotiations, reaches into his trouser pocket, takes out a wad of five-hundred-crown notes and hands it to him.

“Vodka?”

“No. Thanks. How much have you got there?”

“Ten thousand. Coffee, then?”

Janachkov’s always gone out of his way to be nice to Anton since the finger incident. He lends him porno videos, Bruce

Lee films. Anton hasn’t told him that he doesn’t have a video, and wouldn’t watch porn or karate if he did.

“I’m late for meeting Ili. Got to rush.”

He’s carrying quite a loaded dossier now: there must be fifteen thousand crowns in it. Although there are free seats, he stands in the metro carriage, clutching it to his chest. Fifteen thousand crowns, plus – what, ten, twelve passports? Wouldn’t want to get picked up right now. He never has been, not in Prague. He was interviewed by the police back home, when he applied for permission to go to America. *Visiting relatives? Shouldn’t be a problem. Just sign here, we’ll send these papers on to the DS...* Then came the letter, one week later: due to his disloyal decision to request a US visa, his licences in both civil engineering and football refereeing were being revoked. There was a postscript, informing him of his statutory right to appeal against the decision and, attached, a form to fill out if he wished to do so. Did anyone ever appeal? He thought of doing it just to see if they’d go along with it, set up a sham appeals board for him, props, personnel and all, but Helena scotched that idea. *It’s not a game, you know...* But maybe that’s exactly what it was: a game, a rigged game. Nobody ever said that games had to be fun.

Palmovka. The buildings are more shabby around here. Stalls beside the road sell cigarettes, drinks, lotto cards. Anton walks past a compound from which ventilation shafts rise up. Facing this, there’s a small factory of some sort. The car market’s sunk to the right of the road just beyond this, fifty or so metres before the road rises up into Libeňský Most. From beside the tramlines Anton can see Iliievski standing by the entrance to one of the car dealers’ lots, beneath a string of tinsel flags that sparkle in the sunlight. He’s wearing a thick coat and inspecting a Mercedes. Milachkov’s kicking around behind him. Rambo’s weaving and darting around people’s legs. Ili will be talking car

– the only reason he still deals in vehicles. They're high-risk, low-yield when set against his other ventures, but he just loves being around cars and car people, talking car. He's got two Mercs in his garage, plus the Skodas, which he lets his men run around in. He's peering down into the bonnet, poking around with his fingers, as though he were some great physician and the Czech mechanic next to him a gangly junior houseman.

Anton walks down the stone steps from the road, shakes Mila's hand and waits for Ilievski to finish. At the back of Ili's head, the part mirrors won't show him, his hair, already grey, is thinning out. His back is firm, well padded by the coat. Cashmere, light-brown. He'll never see himself from that side either: the way he'd look to an assassin, sneaking up behind him. Does it ever occur to him, when he turns his back on everything – lost in contemplation of food, a woman's body, the combustion engine – that the Russians, or the Yugoslavians, or the Czechs, might have his number? Maybe that's why Mila's always with him, standing just behind. But what if the Bulgarians themselves wanted him gone? A hit from inside his own outfit, one of his own men – his children, you could almost say: they're all in their thirties; he must be fifty-something. Which one would it be, the parricide? Janachkov? Koulin, Milachkov himself?...

Ilievski pulls his head out from under the Mercedes' bonnet and turns round. His skin is firm and leathery, grey in the jowls despite being close shaven. Around the eyes and temples are stiff wrinkles that Anton's always thought of as repositories of some kind of wisdom, or power. The wrinkles intensify as Ilievski catches sight of him and smiles.

"Hey hey! Anton!" He wipes his right hand on a rag before he takes him by the arm and pulls him towards the car. "Look at this."

Tubes, wires, cylinders. What's he looking for?

"It's pretty dirty, I suppose..."

"What? No, that's just oil. It's normal. Look there: the head gasket's come loose. Pity – the rest of it's in really good condition. What do you have for me there?"

He wipes his other hand while Anton opens up his dossier and fishes out the contents. Ilievski flips through the money, passes it to Mila, then shakes Koulin's envelope.

"Registration documents?"

"Passports. And that's a legal document from Branka."

"Good, good. How's Helena?"

"OK. Misses her children."

"You know my offer's still open. If ever..."

"She's reluctant. To do it that way, I mean. But if she changes..."

"Sure. Come walk Rambo with me on the island."

"Look over there!" says Milachkov. "There's someone filming."

It's true. A man is walking by the rows of cars some twenty metres away, filming as he goes. He's young and casually dressed: jeans, jumper, coat, red scarf...

"So what?" asks Ilievski, shrugging. "They're always filming licence plates round here. Idiots."

"Why?" says Anton. "I'd have thought it was a sound way of identifying..."

"Lesson one," Ilievski announces, holding up his finger.

"Mila: what's the first thing you do to a stolen car?"

"Change the plates, Comrade," Mila answers, in a high voice.

"Have a star, young pioneer."

"But," Milachkov steps out of character now, "they're usually in uniform when they film here."

Ili shrugs. "Maybe today's the day they get their costumes washed."

"I know a joke," says Anton. "There's this ship, this naval, say, destroyer, and it's been at sea for maybe seven, eight months, and the men on it, the sailors, are all filthy, and they

all want nothing more than just to take a bath and put on some fresh clothes. So one day the captain gathers them all together and says: ‘Men! I’ve got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that you’re all going to get a change of clothes.’ And the sailors all cheer. And the captain says: ‘The bad news is that you’re changing with him, you’re changing with him, you’re...’”

It’s easy. Milachkov’s dropped his case, he’s laughing so much. Ilievski’s thrown the rag onto the ground. The Czech mechanic stoops to pick it up, smiling politely, looking awkward. He must be in his early twenties. Anton translates the joke into Czech for him; he chuckles slightly at it – as though he’d been served cold leftovers. Milachkov says:

“Sparta game this Saturday?”

“What?” Anton asks, then: “Oh, yes. Against Košice. Right. Let’s go together.”

“Meet you in Bar Nine on Újezd beforehand. Half-past one.”

“*Perfektní.*”

Ilievski’s started walking onto Libeňský Island. He whistles to Rambo; Anton jogs along to catch him up. The road is unpaved, bordered on one side by corrugated iron fencing which is listing with the gradient of the slope. Behind the fence, a few bare birch trees. Rambo runs back towards Ilievski and then turns around and scouts ahead of them, sniffing at tufts of grass and pools of oily water, shattering with his paw the thin sheets of ice resting on their surfaces.

“I love bright days in winter.” Ili’s looking up into the clear-blue sky. “Look, Anton: there’s the moon already.”

He stops, clasps his hand around Anton’s shoulder – firmly, so the fingers dig into the bone – and turns him round. The moon is hovering above the birch trees two thirds full, its surface faint and silvery-blue.

“That only ever happens in the winter.” Ilievski releases

Anton as he says this; they move on. “It’s the way the earth is facing. Tilted back, away from the sun. We wouldn’t see that if we were in, for example, Australia.”

“I like it too,” says Anton. “The moon out when it’s still light. You don’t know if it’s day or night.” There’s a song with that phrase, but in English. *Don’t know if it’s...* Dylan? No, Hendrix. For the next few metres, the lyrics play through Anton’s mind, a muted soundtrack: *Excuse me, while I kiss the sky...* They’ve come to a house set off the road. One storey, whitewashed plaster walls. Must have been built in the Fifties, Sixties, pretty typical suburban architecture – only its front wall, the north-facing one, has been replaced by sheets of glass. As they clear the house, a lawn drifts into view. On the lawn, spread all across it, sculptures stand, sit, lie. Some of them, still intact, show soldiers waving flags as they advance heroically across invisible battlefields, or overalled men and women holding aloft hammers and sickles, as though displaying them to some crowd long since dispersed. Others, fallen, show workers bending over lathes or blowing glass through long, trumpet-like tubes that nestle in the grass. Some are broken: there’s a gymnast swinging round the handles of a pommel horse, but his arms have snapped off at the wrist, leaving him rotating in the wrong dimension, through the lawn’s surface...

“Very fitting,” Ilievski murmurs.

They move across the lawn, among the sculptures. Some of the figures are facing one another; others are turned away to stare towards the house, the river. Some are so decrepit that rusty wires protrude from their arms and thighs. Cracked elbows, a shoulder and two torsos curled up fetally litter the ground. It reminds Anton of pictures Helena once showed him of Pompeians fossilized in lava. Next to a discus thrower an enormous iron cast of Stalin’s head lies on its side, eyes gazing blankly at the athlete’s feet. One ear has fallen off and sits upturned towards the sky. Ilievski raps his knuckles on