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Actants and Networks in *Skagboys*:

Thatcher, Crime and Mundane Artifacts as Mediators

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Abstract

While *Skagboys* portrays the descent into heroin addiction of young, working class Scots during the Thatcher era, shifting the analysis from a strictly human perspective to one focusing on the agency of objects opens up the novel to new readings wherein morality emerges through nonhuman actors. Welsh's work has traditionally been hailed as Scottish working-class realism that portrays its characters unideologically, to the point that the novels, through the characters, appear without morality. Drawing upon Latour's notion of Actor-Network Theory, ANT, reveals a Thatcherite materiality permeating the story, prescribing the moral behaviour which the characters of *Skagboys* repeatedly clash with as their heroin addiction and junk desperation grows. The impacts of the security camera, the smoke detector and the collection tin provide the basis for the analysis. This highlights two types of marginalization for the characters. Firstly, in the characters' hopeless prospects with regards to employment due to Thatcher's neoliberal politics, and secondly as objects of detection and control exerting agency in the world which the characters navigate. These objects presuppose and foil crime, effectively becoming extensions of Thatcherite morality, keeping the criminal and unemployed in check.

1. Introduction

Published in 2012, Irvine Welsh's novel *Skagboys* is the prequel to Welsh's 1993 novel *Trainspotting*, taking place in 1980's Leith and Edinburgh, and portraying its characters' descent into heroin addiction. These characters are working class, growing up in social housing schemes, and none of them move on from primary school except for Renton. Manual labor is their prospect, but its demand is in sharp decline. Heroin, on the other hand, is readily available at the onset of the novel, as it is processed from morphine steadily being smuggled out of Blandfield Works, a pharmaceutical factory in Edinburgh. Unemployed, increasingly bored, and junk-sick, the characters become entrenched in various criminal networks and activities which become increasingly troublesome throughout the novel. *Skagboys* is arguably more overtly political than *Trainspotting*. It connects the intravenous drug-use and subsequent HIV epidemic to the rampant working-class unemployment caused by Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal policies. As Welsh writes in the chapter *Notes on an Epidemic 2*: "Following the election of Margaret Thatcher, in the spring of 1979, unemployment levels tripled from 1,2 million to 3,6 million in 1982. . . hundreds of thousands of young, working-class people in the UK had a lot less money in their pockets and a lot more time on their hands" (139).

While *Skagboys* portrays the 80's unemployment crisis, it simultaneously depicts material changes in Edinburgh caused by Thatcherism. Governmental mistrust to the people is expressed through posters appearing in public spaces encouraging people to report "benefit cheats" to the state (141). New tenements are built in Leith, the part of Edinburgh where the characters grow up, where they see themselves as unwelcome: while fleeing from the police, Renton notes that "there's a slip road that cuts ontae a street leadin tae the courtyard ay this new yuppie scheme n we could cut through it, but the homesteaders are unlikely tae be shy at pickin up the blower if they see natives hingin about their property" (396). *Skagboys* thus plays out in a time of significant transformation

both in Edinburgh and for the working class. It is tempting to view *Skagboys* solely as a testament to the deterioration of the disenfranchised working class; people being pushed to the margins of society through ostracizing neoliberal policies, their only connection to the state is to collect their dole. But *Skagboys* also portrays the birth of a controlling Thatcherite materiality permeating Edinburgh, which the characters clash with.

Generally, criticism of Welsh's work has focused solely on how his characters interplay with society, but in *Skagboys* various objects determine how the characters' lives play out. While *Skagboys* has not yet been subject to literary criticism, *Trainspotting* has gained attention, largely being interpreted as postmodern critique of how UK politics marginalizes the working class. While these interpretations are accurate and resonate with how societal and political power is perceived, they tend to overlook the ways in which this power is enforced. The criminal networks of *Skagboys* are sabotaged not by law enforcement but by a number of security devices that the characters meet and struggle with such as a security camera, a smoke detector, and a collection tin. While being a story about human descent into addiction, *Skagboys* thus also delineates the obscure ways that political control emerges through a new kind of programmed materiality that presupposes, and braces itself against, crime. Therefore, it is essential to understand the objects of *Skagboys* as more than mundane artifacts, but instead as powerful entities with as much agency as the human actors.

Bruno Latour's approach to Actor-Network Theory (ANT) enables the analysis to do that, wherein the subject/object dichotomy is discarded, instead regarding both humans and objects as agents. In *Where Are The Missing Masses*, Latour claims that "to balance our accounts of society, we simply have to turn our exclusive attention away from humans and look also at nonhumans. . . who make up our morality" (152-153). In *Skagboys* this only rings semi-true. The characters are not moral, but their attempts at immoral and criminal behaviour are foiled by objects with an apparent morality emerging through their materiality. ANT is a relational ontology, meaning that social

reality – what we can do, what we cannot do; the very nature of our being – is determined by relations between both humans and objects and their associations. For literature this thereby entails a lessening of the hermeneutical approach to human actors and their motivations than is perhaps tradition in literary criticism. Instead, the main focus of this thesis will be on the concrete ways that the social reality in *Skagboys* is produced through traceable associations between human and nonhuman actors.

This thesis, through a close reading, examines the agency of key nonhuman actors in *Skagboys* and traces their networks – their literal connections to other actors, but also the actions that precede and follow them. The point is to elucidate how these key nonhuman actors exert influence on *Skagboys*'s working class characters through their mutual engagements. This thesis argues that some nonhuman actors' agency serves the interests of more powerful entities than their immediate connections, that they in practice become Thatcherite agents, prescribing certain moral behaviour through their networks. The social reality of *Skagboys* is thus understood as a continuous creation between human and nonhuman actors, wherein a Thatcherite prohibitive morality emerges.

Through this approach, the security camera that is put up in Blandfield Works emerges as an active and moralizing agent of the state, extended into the private sector, that deters both theft and heroin use. Its network rips apart the criminal networks that *Skagboys*'s characters engage in and rely on to support their heroin addiction. The smoke detector is, through this reading, revealed as a hibernating state network extended into the private sphere, making it a potential informer. Its network exacerbates Spud's heroin use. The collection tin emerges as an agent of Thatcherism working in the public sphere, moralizing through the way it presupposes theft expressed in its materiality of durable polymer. The tin becomes the catalyst for Renton's subsequent state- and criminal networks.

2. Background: Thatcher's Legacy, Welsh's Work, and the Postcritical Approach

This chapter will go through key changes that Margaret Thatcher made during her time in power, Irvine Welsh's depiction of the Thatcher era's working class, and Rita Felski's postcritical approach to literature, used in this thesis as a means to utilize ANT for *Skagboys*.

2.1. Thatcher's State Revolution

Margaret Thatcher is a contentious political figure in the UK, as she revolutionized the state from a working-class friendly welfare state to one marked by neoliberalism. As *Skagboys* plays out during this reshaping of the state, most of the characters explicitly blame Thatcher for the hopeless situation they find themselves in. In the article "The Impact of Thatcherism on Health and Well-Being in Britain," Alex Scott-Samuel, Clare Bambra, Chik Collins, David Hunter, Gerry McCartney and Kat Smith claim that Thatcher's policies made the UK increasingly unequal (55). They highlight the "deregulation of the labor and financial markets. . . privatization and marketization of the main utilities and state enterprises. . . promotion of home ownership (including the widespread sale of public housing stock). . . curtailing workers' and trade unions rights. . . significant cuts to the social wage via welfare state retrenchment. . ." (54-55). Poverty nearly doubled between 1975 and 1985 to 12.0 % (59). The article concludes that "post-industrial areas, notably in Scotland, fared particularly badly" during Thatcher's time in government (66). Essentially, the changes for the working class of the UK meant that both their livelihood and the social security, should they become unemployed, are under fire by Thatcher's policies.

Paradoxically, while Thatcher diminished the state's role as provider of security, she simultaneously strengthened its power executively and through the police. Bob Jessop sees this move as authoritarian populism in his article "Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism: Dead but Not Buried." Jessop argues that amongst the distinctive features of Thatcherism was the creation of a centralizing strong state project (20). Jessop identifies some of the authoritarian tendencies as ". . . a continuing

decline in the legislature's residual independence from the executive, the concentration of executive power within the prime minister's office and, in addition, a further decline in the rule of law in favour of particularistic and discretionary regulation. . . the state's pre-emptive police powers were strengthened" (28). Thatcher's legacy thus emerges as one of creating a strong state, in which order is strictly enforced and centrally controlled, while at the same time dismantling the foundations for especially the working class.

2.2. Welsh and the Working Class

This working class is what Welsh's novels tend to depict, and he does this in a groundbreaking way. In his article "Irvine Welsh's Novel Subjectivities," Jeffrey Karnicky claims that Irvine Welsh's works marks a new, influential, and unique way of writing that denies traditional modes of identity: he dubs this "Welshian subjectivity" (137). This means that "in *Trainspotting* and his other fiction, Welsh details a new configuration of literary character, a novel subjectivity emerging from the contemporary urban Scotland" (137). These novel subjectivities, according to Karnicky, negotiate class and race politics, issues of national identity, and psychological conceptions of selfhood as the characters struggle to invent new ways of living in the contemporary world (137). This struggle is apparent in *Skagboys* especially in the characters' repeated clashes with the law. Their attempts to live on their own terms becomes void, as a subtle and indirect control materializes in the social reality they navigate.

In *The Edinburgh Companion to Irvine Welsh*, Matt McGuire identifies a pervasive sense of community breakdown amongst the characters of *Trainspotting* as a result of Thatcherism (20). According to McGuire "the decimation of heavy industry, the privatisation of public services and the liberalisation of the free market were regarded by many as an onslaught on working-class communities. . . Thatcherism also sought to discredit the notion of class, arguing that the goal of society was to maximise economic efficiency by freeing individuals to pursue their own interests"

(20). Welsh's Edinburgh novels thus depict the working class in its most chaotic and transformative period, where the political backdrop seeks to undermine the very notion of class. This thereby complicates the sense of community and identity that *Skagboys*'s characters could otherwise have identified with.

This "Welshian" depiction of the Scottish working class is, according to Berthold Schoene in his "Introduction" to *The Edinburgh Companion to Irvine Welsh*, uniquely nuanced and unideological (1). Schoene states that "unlike in other, perhaps more typical working-class writing, in *Trainspotting* class is a complex and complicated thing as each social category is shown to splinter endlessly into multitudinous sub-strata, so that ultimately what Welsh's readers are left with are groups of individuals marked by various degrees of ostracism" (2-3). Hence, Schoene argues that *Trainspotting* must be read as a document to subcultural despondency. Still, Welsh does it, at least in *Trainspotting* and some of his later work, without an apparent ideological agenda – the almost nihilistic behaviour of his characters is allowed to stand on its own and is not placed at the door of a repressive class system. According to Schoene, Welsh writes "without subscribing to a project of proletarian liberation. . . Welsh's characters are left to *be* rather than represent, even if as a result his work appears at times to be without morality" (4-5). The implication of this is essentially that Welsh depicts members on the fringes of the working class without romanticizing them. Their stories are allowed to appear as immoral.

However, while the characters of *Skagboys* certainly appear to act without morality in some of their criminal activities, that does not entail that Welsh's work itself is without morality. Instead, the morality is found in objects rather than the characters, which the analysis, by using ANT, will show. It is tempting to presume that the working class has been left to rot by Thatcher and her policies dismantling this class's industries. But elements of control linger in these characters' lives through the technology they interact with. Morality thus emerges in *Skagboys* not as a human trait, but as a

prescriptive effect of objects which serves to keep Thatcher's abandoned working classes reined in. This aspect of *Skagboys* – the Thatcherite objects of control – is what ANT serves to foreground.

2.3. Literary Postcritique

Applying ANT to literature has the potential to highlight new connections between the text's world and the politics within it, but it should be investigated by tracing associations between actors and networks. In her article "Latour and Literary Studies", Rita Felski states that "Actor-network theory does not exclude the political – it is deeply interested in conflicts, asymmetries, struggles – but its antipathy to reductionism means that political discourse cannot serve as a metalanguage into which everything can be translated. The task is to account for as many actors as possible, to be specific about forms of causation and connection. . ." (740). The implications of this, for an analysis of *Skagboys*, is that structures, capitalism or even Thatcherism cannot be interpreted as the unequivocal cause for the characters' hardships. They may be part of the cause, but if they are, they must be traceable. When investigating conflicts and struggles, asymmetries in these events' outcome will inherently emerge. These asymmetries will thereby highlight the political implications that should be traced.

In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski advocates for an open mindedness in literary criticism, which she dubs "postcritique," as this can bring surprising results to the field. Felski argues that traditional literary critique has become mired in habitual readings of texts that just reproduces the desired meaning of the critic's school of thought. Across all literary approaches, the critics engage in a "hermeneutics of suspicion," according to Felski, where they try to gleam hidden meanings from texts. Felski states that "these practices combine, in differing ways an attitude of vigilance, and wariness (*suspicion*), with identifiable conventions of commentary (*hermeneutics*) – allowing us to see that critique is as much a matter of affect and rhetoric as of philosophy or politics" (2-3). A certain sense of scepticism towards the texts thus emerges, wherein it is the critic's task to crack its code and

unequivocally determine what the work is really about. This suspicious reading is, according to Felski, “a strong theory that risks tautology in its determination to find its own bleak prognoses confirmed over and over again” (152). What Felski proposes instead, her postcritique, is an openness to unexpected results, readings that “does not trace textual meaning back to opaque and all-determining power while presuming the critic’s immunity from the weight of this ubiquitous domination. . .” (152). Instead of trying to trace textual meaning through interpretation to opaque and all-determining power, the metalanguage which Felski warns against, she proposes key notions from ANT such as tracing actors and network to treat the text on face value in order to avoid hermeneutics of suspicion.

3. Theoretical Departures: Actor-Network Theory and its Use in Literature

This chapter will introduce ANT's perception of the social and key vocabulary of the theory. In addition, literary ANT analyses of novels will be examined, focusing on the political operationalization of the theory.

3.1. The Social as a Product of Associations

Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social* is a defining work within ANT, taking to task how the perception of the "social" has become a sort of metalanguage into which unexplainable elements of knowledge production is translated. Latour's aim is to be more precise about the very nature of being, without any metalanguage to fall back upon, by acknowledging both human and nonhuman actors and their agency. Latour concludes that "ANT is simply the realization that something unusual has happened in the history and sociology of scientific hard facts, something so unusual that social theory could no more go through it than a camel through the eye of a needle" (106). What is experienced as social reality is, instead of a determining backdrop within which life is lived, a continuous cocreation of multitudes of actions between agentive entities.

Reassembling the Social offers an alternative method to understanding reality, one in which everything, even the social, is continuously created through human and nonhuman actors' association to one another and the action that these associations generate. Explaining the heart of ANT, Latour states "the aim of this sociology of associations more precisely: there is no society, no social realm, and no social ties, *but there exist translations between mediators that may generate traceable associations*" (108). Translations and mediators will be examined later on, but the implication of this is that reality is procedurally generated through associations between agentive entities rather than underlying structures. What is at stake in *Reassembling the Social* is thus ontological: *Reassembling the Social* argues for a relational ontology – that the nature of being is generated through associations between different actors in a continuous process.

Evidently, Latour emphasizes the notion of agency as an ontological factor. He states that “the most powerful insight of social sciences is that other agencies over which we have no control make us do things. . . we will have many occasions to see how action is distributed among agents, very few of whom look like humans” (50). With regards to agency, ANT rejects the dichotomy between human and thing, subject and object, instead using the terms *human actor* and *nonhuman actor*. Both are understood as having agency. Latour uses *actant* as a unifying expression for both. What matters in ANT is the actants’ capability of generating action, their agency. This is in ANT defined as “agencies are always presented as *doing* something, that is, making some difference to a state of affairs. . .” (52). As is evident, intentionality plays no part in this definition. For a human or nonhuman actor to have agency, what matters is the capability to change a state of affairs and the specific action of doing that.

These exertions of agency must then be explained concretely and thoroughly: “In ANT, it is not permitted to say: ‘No one mentions it. I have no proof, but I know there is some hidden actor a work behind the scenes.’ That is conspiracy theory, not social theory. The presence of the social has to be demonstrated each time anew; it can never be simply postulated” (53). The implications of relational ontology are thus fairly clear: if social reality is created through associations between actants it is inherently traceable, and therefor action cannot be hidden. If they cannot be traced, they cannot be the cause. The tracing of action between actants should be investigated in the networks the actants are engaged in.

3.2. The Implications of Network

The term “network” implies more than merely interconnectedness between human and nonhuman actors in ANT. Latour states that “network is an expression to check how much energy, movement and specificity our own reports are able to capture. Network is a concept, not a thing out there. It is a tool to help describe something, not what is being described” (131). It might be more

precise, albeit less catchy, to call networks the “work of the net.” Imagining a fisherman’s net, each convergence of strings can be imagined as a network in the ordinary sense, and each link between is the action that precipitates the network. For ANT, the heart of inquiry lies in the link between networks, in the actions that transform social reality, the way causes and effects, relational engagements between actors, create the specific “works of the net” that can be experienced. That is networks in ANT. The actual network itself is unavoidable in this description, but it is not at the heart of the concept, nor is it unique to ANT; networks in the traditional sense is found in all sorts of theories.

Latour seemingly regrets using the term “networks,” explaining that “if *worknet* or *action net* had any chance to hold, I would offer it as a substitute. . . *Work-nets* could allow one to see the labor that goes on in laying down *net-work*: the first as an active mediator, the second as a stabilized set of intermediaries” (132). Networks in ANT must thus be understood as containing both *worknet* as a mediator and network understood as a stable intermediary. For ANT, referring to network thus entails the relations between actants themselves, and *also* all of the action that goes into creating and maintaining that relation caused by the actants’ agency. It is a reciprocal shaping of social reality and meaning-making, dynamic and continuous, affecting causes and effects, the very possibilities and consequences which the social reality is built upon.

So far, this thesis has tried to clarify the need for ANT to understand knowledge production and to untangle the web of intertwined actants producing social reality through network. Actants and networks constitute the framework of ANT, as the bearing forces of vocabulary to explain the relational production of reality. An actant engaging in this transformation of reality, carrying out its agency, is what Latour calls a “mediator.” They are the drivers of social action. Latour states that mediators “transform, translate, distort, and modify meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry. . .” (39). Any actant not transforming, not engaged in networks, is an “intermediary.” They

may enable mediators to exert their agency, but they themselves do not transform. The process of transformation, what concretely happens when a mediator exerts its agency, is in ANT called “translation.” This process is thus located between mediators and their intermediaries. According to Latour, translation is not an actor, nor a force working behind the scenes, but the connection that “transports transformations” (108). Thus, investigating any relationally generated social reality means taking a look at the translations between mediators.

3.3. Nonhuman Actors Make Us Moral

Reassembling the Social describes the materiality of actants as “figuration,” the flesh and features that make them have some form or shape (53). However, in his essay “Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts,” Latour most clearly exemplifies how materiality can determine an object’s role as mediator and as prescriptive of moral behaviour. Here, Latour argues that nonhuman actors – the artifacts – have a “program of action,” a sort of coding for it to fulfill its function, and at the same time it has an “antiprogram” which deters use that goes against its programming (168). These programs and antiprograms reveal themselves in the artifact’s materiality.

To exemplify how materiality also prescribes behaviour, Latour turns to the Berliner key. The Berliner key’s form is symmetrical with a “key-head” in both ends instead of a key-head and a handle in opposite ends. To lock and unlock the door, the user therefor has to push the key all the way through the lock and finish the process of going through the door from the other side. According to Latour, the key and lock thus prescribes certain behaviour, stating that “instead of begging “close the door behind you please” it is slightly more ambitious and *orders*: “relock the door behind you” (172). Essentially, the materiality of the key, the lock and the door thereby prescribe certain behaviour by deterring others. So, do the tenants lock the door because they are inherently moral and good neighbors? Or has the choice of acting that way been taken out of their

hands and relegated into artifacts? Latour argues for the latter, stating that “we have been able to delegate to nonhumans not only force as we have known it but also values, duties, and ethics. It is because of this morality that we, humans, behave so ethically, no matter how weak and wicked we feel we are” (157). As exemplified by the Berliner key, prescriptive moralization of materiality can be evident in even an artifact that seems simple, and this materiality contributes to the artifact’s translation as a mediator.

3.4. Using ANT to Trace Literature’s Political Implications

Operationalizing ANT for literature sheds new light on texts, serving to elucidate concrete ways in which political power is asserted through actants. ANT’s refusal to dichotomize subject and object reveals new ways in which a narrative’s action is controlled or generated in part by politicizing the objects’ translation. Elin Käck’s article ““They Fix ‘em So You Can’t Win Nothing”: Agency in *The Grapes of Wrath*” concludes that “the basis for the entire novel and the progression of its narrative is, most fittingly, two different kinds of machines resulting from technological advances” (192). These two machines are the tractor and the car. Käck’s analysis draws upon ANT, revealing various objects as mediators for action. She notes that “the migration of the characters is caused by a tractor, by a bank, by a handbill, by the land; the migration is performed by recourse to an automobile; the shortage of work is caused in part by machines and technologies that facilitate large-scale production and the industrial canning of fruit” (185). Käck’s utilization of ANT thus reveals itself, acknowledging the specific entities, the mediators, whose translation causes the migration, thereby avoiding shoving any metalanguage down the novel’s throat.

Despite this, Käck “does not propose a Latourian reading of Steinbeck’s novel so much as a rereading of the novel informed by various contributions from agency theory” (188). Käck uses Jason Puskar’s “interagency” meaning that agency emerges as a joint project between human and

technology (188). Käck also refers to Alfred Gell's agent-patient relationship, which argues that in "any given transaction between 'agents' one agent is exercising 'agency' while the other is (momentarily) a 'patient'" (192). Both Puskar and Gell's agency theories has, like ANT, done away with the notion of limiting agency to humans. Käck attributes much of the novel's action to "that of the bank, whose dirty work other agents, such as the tractor, perform" (193). Clearly, Käck identifies more powerful actants creating action through their associations, which enables her analysis to ascend from merely pointing out nonhuman actors. Her analysis gives political meaning to the agency of these actants. Käck notes that "Steinbeck's novel is doubtless conducive to readings focusing on the societal power structures. . . focusing on how the novel portrays agency does not mean entirely dismissing or denying those structures. Rather, it is a matter of scrutinizing the figurations of action and, conversely, the lack of agency within those structures, especially those of capitalism" (187). While Käck is arguably using metalanguage such as "structures" and "capitalism" as much as Latour argues that the sciences use "social," Käck's methodology is profoundly focused on concrete associations. She does not resort to empty metalanguage, but instead scrutinizes how the actions come to be. Her analysis utilizes key ANT terms to highlight the concrete ways in which entities of power exert their influence in the narrative.

In "The Made Man and the "Minor" Novel: *Erewhon*, ANT and Empire" Anna Neill likewise utilizes ANT's equality of actants, and the networks generated by their mediation, to elucidate *Erewhon*'s political implications. Neill states that "*Erewhon* highlights a modern form of human autonomy that is nonetheless bound closely to the machine. The "Machinate Mammal" is the made man: a being abstracted into the profits that he draws from his land or other colonial ventures, and that he multiplies through the trading networks of empire" (69). Neill argues that technologies serves as extensions of colonists, making them able to move goods and make money

across vast distances. In this sense, it is as much the technologies as it is the humans that creates the trading empires; it emerges as an effect of the reciprocal engagements between them.

Emphasizing the effect, and understanding the political implications of it, is paramount to Neill's use of ANT. She argues that *Erewhon* "teaches us that our current critical romance with anti-anthropocentric, actor-network-rich forms of representation forgets how a flat ontology may play out in the history of capital and empire. . . we need to remain alert to the histories in which the human and the non-human find definition and agency" (55). The implication of this is, much like in Käck's article, that a meaning must be gleaned from the evident actants and networks. We must not become so focused on just investigating the nonhuman actors that we forget to look at the larger implications of the networks that are created. Neill cites Latour's assertion from *Reassembling the Social* that "a good text "traces a network" in which every participant, human or non-human is an actor" (70). Neill thus argues for a literary use of ANT emphasizing the tracing of networks which then allows for the analyst to recognize its inherent, and political, impact on reality: "in our enthusiasm for the great novel's exquisite tracing of network. . . we may forget to read for histories of dispossession and dehumanization in which networks themselves remain far from innocent" (70).

As Felski has argued, and as Käck and Neill have shown, the merits of ANT do not necessarily exclude the political from literary analysis. Instead, ANT gives new insight into the concrete ways that the political manifests in reality, and in a sense, it reverses the political from being the sole cause to an effect of association between actants. Therefore, understanding the security camera, the smoke detector, and the collection tin in both in their role as situational mediator of criminal networks as well as their Thatcher network can elucidate both the relational and political implications of these actants.

4. The Grassing Technology and Moralizing Materiality of *Skagboys*

In this chapter, the security camera at Blandfield Works, the smoke detector and the collection tin will be examined through ANT. How the objects appear in the book will be described first, then an examination of its moralizing materiality, followed by the object's crime- and Thatcherite network.

4.1. The Agency of a Security Camera

The most significant nonhuman actor, the most impactful mediator, in *Skagboys* is undoubtedly the security camera that is placed within the processing room of Blandfield Works, monitoring exactly what happens to the batches of pure, white morphine that is produced, as experienced by Russell Birch. He smuggles the morphine out, because “it was Russell’s job to test the purity of each batch. So easy, then, for him to scoop a load of the merchandise into a plastic bag, and stuff it down his trousers” (187). Russell, then, drops off the bag in the toilets, where another worker picks it up and brings it out of Blandfield itself. Only this time around, the room is monitored. On his way out, Russell is met by the head of security who demands that he “hands over the stuff” (187). Russell feigns ignorance, to which the head of security answers “we can do this the hard way if you like, Russell. But I’d rather spare you that” while pointing to the security camera (187). Russell thus hands over “the stuff.” He had not noticed the camera, noting that “he felt unmasked, not just as a thief, but worse, as a fool. It was as plain as all the other mundane apparatus of the plant, and he hadn’t even noticed its installation. Russell stood gaping and powerless, as he wondered what the men watching the monitor on the other side saw in his face” (187). The camera has evidently monitored Russell’s stealing, and his reaction to the head of security pointing at the camera implies that it has recorded him stealing too, or at least Russell believes he has been recorded. Thus, Russell is caught red-handed, giving up his lie as soon as he sees the camera.

Zooming in on the materiality of the camera, it is the most technical of these grassing and moralizing technologies, needing several other nonhuman actors to carry out its role. Brushing past

the knickknacks the machine itself is built of, its program of monitoring is enabled by a monitor placed elsewhere with a human to observe. Presumably, the recordings are stored since the head of security points to it. Its role as mediator thus prescribes a much larger function than being merely an observer. It is observing and at the same time recording and storing what it observes so it can be rewatched – the ultimate grass, as it were. It is both witness and evidence. As Russell explains to Seeker, whom he smuggled for, “they’d caught me on these new cameras they’ve installed everywhere” (231). It is within a room full of gadgets, presumably mounted on a wall, all the material within this room makes it inconspicuous, making Russell not notice it amongst all these other “mundane apparatus” (187). This nonhuman actor does not physically disable the option to steal morphine, but it pretty much guarantees getting caught and, in that sense, it prescribes a moral way of acting.

To thoroughly analyze what nonhuman actors do, Latour conjures an exercise stating that “as a more general descriptive rule, every time you want to know what a non-human does, simply imagine what other humans or other non-humans would have to do were this character not present” (Where Are The Missing Masses 155). Instead of the security camera, Blandfield could have hired security guards to monitor the room. But the security guards could decide to smuggle morphine out, or they could be bribed to turn the other cheek. They could fall asleep, or they could develop such a trusting bond with Russell Birch that they assume he is not smuggling. Had a security guard witnessed Russell smuggle morphine out, any case against him would also partly rely on Russell not managing to get rid of the package, or else it is merely word against word. A security camera negates all of that. It is reliable, its program entails both monitoring and evidence. Delegating a previously human job, security guard, to a machine in turn enables said security guard to oversee a much larger space of Blandfield – every room with a camera has now become observable at once

through these impactful nonhuman actors. The security camera thus becomes a mediator for protection of the morphine, strengthening the powers of Blandfield's security guards.

4.1.1. Security Camera as a Prohibitive Agent

The security camera becomes a foil to the heroin-networks of Edinburgh, transforming the social reality of *Skagboys* and the drug users that it follows. Up until the camera's installation, the heroin being injected by Edinburgh's drug users had been processed from the white morphine, but the camera puts an abrupt halt to that. The effects are significant in the drug community. Crime rings are upended and hierarchies change as supply chains shift; dealers become stingy due to the heroin-drought and drug users become increasingly desperate in their hunt for money; impure brown heroin is smuggled in from England and Spud comes down with wound botulism from injecting it. Essentially, the heroin-networks centered around the smuggled morphine are restructured or abolished because of the security camera. Having been declined getting heroin on credit by Johnny Swan, his usual dealer, Renton notes that "thaire's nae white now, n the broon's hit toon big time. Swanney's puntin it for somebody else, so he's way doon the peekin order" (387). A network around "the white" has up until this point been continuously engaged, a smuggling-network, wherein Johnny Swan had a degree of control, the principal points of which is the production of the white, the successful smuggling operations and the drop-off at Johnny Swan's flat. From that point, user-networks emerge from each junk-sick customer knocking on Swanney's door. The camera's translation has changed the nature of these networks, as Johnny Swan himself describes: "The White Swan's just a cog in a wheel these days. . . Ah'm a branch manager ay Virgin rather than the owner ay Bruce's Record Shoap. If ye ken what ah mean" (387). Johnny Swan is no longer a self-employed dealer but has instead become part of a larger criminal organization because of the security camera becoming a mediator that deters smuggling from Blandfield Works. Evidently, the interconnections between actants are not static even if they

periodically stay the same. This only means that no mediator has arrived to upend the networks – the interconnections *and* the actions that precipitates them. New actants emerge in the net of social reality, one of which is the security camera, changing the very possibilities of actions. Another Edinburgh dealer, Seeker, encounters the same problem. He bitterly remarks that “Now he was no longer The Man. All the people he’d been supplying the quality stuff to, through in Glasgow, down in England, with their fucking useless Paki brown shite, stuff the junkies here wouldn’t look at or even know what the fuck it was, now *he* worked for *them*” (233). These recreated dealer-networks in turn affects the lives of Edinburgh’s drug users, causing a drought on heroin throughout *Skagboys*, finally making Renton and his friends so junk sick and desperate that they attempt, and fail, to break in to Blandfield Works. Prior to that, Renton has called Seeker asking if he was holding, getting the response “. . . there is nothing at aw in this fucking toon” (519).

One of the security camera’s roles as a mediator is arguably as a Thatcherite actant, its translation deterring criminal, and thus immoral, behaviour. Like Latour argues that the Berliner key *orders* its users to lock the door behind them, the security camera does not only say “do not steal morphine from this room”, it also orders people to stop taking heroin. Its role as a mediator in the smuggling- and heroin networks disables the use of heroin that originated in the camera’s sphere of influence. In this sense, the security camera becomes a Thatcherite materiality – a nonhuman actor whose agency serves the interests of the lawful, and thus moral, side of the UK. There are caveats to this, of course, as it is unlikely that the camera was put up solely for the purpose of pleasing Margaret Thatcher. Russell was not reported for the smuggling, so it is arguable that Blandfield Works is not overly occupied with following the law for the sake of morality itself. In a sense, Thatcher has nothing to do with the camera at all, but its translation in the social reality of *Skagboys* deters drug use and it thereby serves the interests of Thatcher’s policies, nonetheless. Prohibition of drug use is thus not solely in the hands of the law enforcements, but also inscribed in

the materiality of the security camera and its mediating role in networks. The camera prescribes a morality that reaches far beyond the room it has been installed which deters both the smuggling and using of heroin. It becomes an object of detection and control whose translation in its networks prescribe a morality by clamping down on drug use. Thus, as a mediator the camera prescribes a Thatcherite morality wherein heroin use is deterred, which some unemployed Scots have become dependent on. However, the camera also reorganizes heroin networks across the UK, globalizing them, much like Thatcher's neoliberal policies, causing the networks to import "fucking useless Paki brown shite."

4.2. Spud's Fall and the Smoke Detector

Commonplace and unobtrusive, a simple smoke detector sets in motion events much larger than its function prescribes in *Skagboys*, specifically for Spud Murphy, when he and the rest of the cast breaks into an attorney's house to rob it. When Begbie insists on smoking in the house, having been warned he will set off the detector if he does, he concludes that "some cunt's gaunny huv tae go up n shut that fuckin alarm oaf!" (198). That job falls upon Spud, who finds a ladder and attempts to disable it: "ah climb up the steps headin for that red light that's blinkin away oan that white disc. . . ma eager mitt's closing in oan the detector n ah'm jist aboot tae unscrew it when ah feel a twist n the squeak ay ma soles seperatin fae the metal n ah'm flyin through the air, n next thing ah ken is thit ah'm lyin oan the stone flair" (198-199). Spud breaks his arm during the fall, having to go to the hospital by the end of the chapter.

Spud's fall is the effect of the smoke detector's materiality. Had it been possible to turn it off without unscrewing it, Spud would likely have been right up and down again without hassle. Had it been less sensitive to smoke, or perceived by the characters as less sensitive, it had not needed to be removed in the first place. Had it been hidden away instead of placed on the ceiling, had it not had a blinking red light, it might not have been noticed. As Latour States in *Where Are*

The Missing Masses, every artifact “re-inscribes contradictory specifications. . . every wheel and crank is the possible answer to an objection. The program of an action is in practice the answer to an *antiprogram* against which the mechanism braces itself” (168). The lack of an off button is thus an antiprogram; the machine bracing itself against being turned off. Its program is to screech audibly if it detects smoke to warn about fire, so it is not meant to be disabled. Worth noting is the ladder, which becomes mediator between Spud and his attempt at disabling the smoke detector. However, the smoke detector is the sole reason Spud had to get onto the ladder in the first place. The smoke detector is placed on the ceiling because smoke rises, and it has a blinking red light as an affirmation that it is still working, even when it is not performing its program. This materiality collides with the gang’s intentions in the house; the placement and light make it noticeable, and the absence of an off button complicates its disabling. Whether or not it would start screeching just because of a cigarette being smoked can be up for debate, but its translation as a mediator in this specific action is clear: they assume it will go off, and therefore they must shut it off. The smoke detector’s material translation, bracing itself against being disabled, causes Spud to fall and break his arm in the situational network between the detector and the characters during the break in.

4.2.1. State Networks in the Private Sphere

The smoke detector’s function in *Skagboys*’s narrative likewise transcends that of a mere object lending fidelity to material descriptions; it keeps Spud in heroin dependency and becomes the mediator between Spud and rehab. Spud had tried heroin before the break in, first trying it after getting fired from his job at a removal firm (88). Up until him breaking the arm, though, Spud was not hooked, even going so far as to state “the Salisbury Crag is dangerous but, so ah’m sortay no daein it again” (197). The pain of his broken arm is, in the narrative of *Skagboys*, the event that throws Spud over the edge from an occasional heroin user to an addict. After falling, Spud thinks to himself that “the way this airm’s nippin, ah widnae mind a wee shot ay the Salisbury right now,

ken? . . . ah'm jist wantin sorted oot up here cause ah'm felin bad, bad, bad, man. Ken? Ye sortay wonder if the cats'll gie ye morphine fir a burst airm. If no, ah'm pure hightailin it doon tae Johnny Swan's. . ." (205). Spud keeps using, eventually developing wound botulism from injecting the impure brown heroin, which gets him admitted to the hospital and eventually sends him, voluntarily, off to rehab (370). Spud's addiction to heroin is thereby intimately linked to the smoke detector through the narrative; this mundane artifact's materiality, being noticed because of the placement prescribed by its program, causes Spud to climb up a ladder to unscrew it, only to fall and break his arm. Thus, the social reality in which Spud becomes addicted to heroin, gets sick from injection, and finally joins rehab, is an effect of reciprocal engagements between human and nonhuman actors – the smoke detector becomes a mediator for his continuous heroin use.

However, the smoke detector is also a potential mediator between law enforcement and the characters – its potential translation is state networks extended into the private sphere. In a larger context, then, the characters are really trying to prevent the networks of state and law enforcement that is set into motion in the event that the smoke detector is activated. In a sense, the network between the smoke detector and the state are in hibernation as long as no fire breaks out – the smoke detector becomes an inconsequential intermediary, only giving signs of life by its blinking red light. But it has the capacity to become a powerful mediator once activated. The smoke detector thus emerges as yet another instance of technology that is potentially in conflict with the criminal activities that the characters of *Skagboys* engage in. Its translation in the given situation determines it as a grassing technology, that is how the characters perceive it, and in this sense, it becomes an agent of the law. While it does not prevent the characters from robbing the house, it does make the break-in more fraught with danger of getting caught doing it. Apart from making Begbie smoke outside, the smoke detector does not prescribe a clear moral behaviour, but it is yet another artifact that, when understood as a mediator, shapes the social reality in favour of the law through the way

that it further complicates immoral, criminal, behaviour. As Felski states in “Latour and Literary Studies,” ANT is interested in the struggles, conflicts and asymmetries of how the political emerges concretely in the social reality: and should the smoke detector awaken from intermediary to mediator, it is thoroughly, and asymmetrically, a technology which favours the interests of the state. The smoke detector thus emerges as a Thatcherite materiality, extending state power into the private sphere, exerting a degree of moral control over the characters’ criminal activities.

4.3. The Preventive Morality of a Collection Tin

Another seemingly innocent and mundane artefact with a larger role in the narrative is the collection tin which Renton and Matty steal from a local shop. Its translation into *Skagboys* essentially puts Renton into forced rehab, through which he emerges with newfound networks to drug dealers and users. At this point in the narrative, there is a drought of heroin in Edinburgh because of the security camera in Blandfield Works. Junk sick and desperate, Renton sells some of his most prized records for some quick cash (385). Renton’s money is used at Johnny Swan’s flat, his usual dealer, to pay back previous heroin-loans, and he is unable to get more on credit: “nae hireys, nae gear. Thaire’s no a lot gaun around so what thir is goes tae the boys wi the poppy upfront” (387). Thus, Renton, accompanied by Matty, once again needs to make quick cash, which they do by stealing a yellow collection tin from a shop. They try opening it with both a knife and a hammer to no avail: “this evil unyielding resin, this synthetic, carcinogenic, non-biodegradable pishy fuckin polymer will barely fuckin scratch. Even a hacksaw widnae dae it; this needs a fuckin grinder oan it” (390). Renton and Matty decide to smash the tin by throwing it on pavement from a great height, which they do at Keezbo’s flat. Renton “drops it n watches it fall, hittin the deck wi an explosive crack as it splatters open n the coins strew in a glittering shower across the forecourt” (395). This creates a ruckus with children vying for the money on the pavement alongside Matty, and the tin’s owner coming around the corner noticing the yellow shards of plastic and starts

screaming. A police car arrives and Renton, Matty and Keezbo try to flee but are eventually caught. In a sense, the collection tin does exactly what it is programmed to do: keep the money secured within. Only with a great deal of work and hassle do Renton and Matty manage to break it.

The tin's materiality has theft as a predetermining factor of its program, revealing a preventive morality built into it. In his rehab-diary, Renton describes the tin's role of his incarceration very clearly: "That's how I wound up in here, for a few fuckin bob in a gantin plastic collection boax. The bother we had openin it. . . that's what landed us in the fuckin cells! Some troll makin an example ay druggies! A poxy collection tin!" (423). The collection tin does not prevent the stealing of itself, but its materiality largely prevents the extraction of its goods. In "Where Are The Missing Masses," Latour laments that his car cannot start unless he has put on his seatbelt, prescribing a morality just like the Berliner key does. Latour traces some of the actors creating this moralization, concluding that "it has become logically – no, it has become sociologically – impossible to drive without wearing the belt. I, plus the car, plus the dozens of patented engineers, plus the police are making me be moral" (152). Does the resilient "pishy fuckin polymer" make theft impossible? Not really, but it might make people be more reluctant to steal it than had it been made of paper. In this sense, making the collection tin out of durable polymer makes its moral power more preventive than prescriptive.

The tin's mobility mediates its ability to collect and drop off money, but this also enables theft. Presumably, the tin is supposed to be dropped off and opened by the people responsible for the collection, the Cat Protection League (*Skagboys* 142). Had it been welded to the countertop, or had it been chained in place, it would become closer to fully prescriptive in its morality, physically disabling theft. All this to say that through the inherent materiality of the collection tin, an enabling and disabling of certain behaviour emerges; possibilities change because of how the collection tin is programmed. It is mobile, and thus Renton can steal it, but it is difficult to open resulting in them

having to smash it in a public place which attracts police. The narrative moves the way it does because of this simple collection tin's materiality that braces itself against being stolen and opened.

4.3.1. "Pishy Fuckin Polymer" as a Thatcherite Materiality

Renton's momentary network with the collection tin is the determining cause of him winding up in St. Monans, the rehab facility, and engaging him in several state networks. Having gotten caught, Renton is registered within the police system, marking him in a loose network of people caught for criminal offences. Where the preventive materiality of the collection tin failed, the task of moralizing now falls to the state, giving Renton "a stark choice: basically either jail (at least remand until it goes tae court) or rehab, in a new project, which ah huv tae sign up for forty-five days, or ah'm charged wi the original offence" (398). Renton choses rehab, emerging after the forty-five days momentarily clean, and with brand new connections to other heroin addicts and dealers. Rehab is run by a woman whom Renton dubs "Skinny-Specky," who states that "the essence of St Monans is a collaborative venture between two health boards and three social work departments" (403). Because of the tin's translation, Renton thus also becomes engaged in a network that is part of a bureaucracy of the state comprising five departments, these institutions all exerting power of their own.

The collection tin is also a mediator for Renton engaging in new heroin networks through his stint at St. Monans. St. Monans attempts to reeducate its patients into being both clean and moral citizens. Skinny-Specky describes St. Monan's ideology as ". . . about being drug-free. You'll come off the methadone maintenance here. You'll be part of a group, a *society*, here at St. Monans, one that works, rests and plays together. . ." (404). The rehabilitation is thus two-sided: getting its patients clean and educating them on social behaviour – mold them into people who always buckle their seat belt before starting their car, and who leaves collection tins where they are regardless of how hard they are to open. To encourage this rehabilitation, St. Monans employs several nonhuman

actors whose translation makes them mediators of both rehabilitation and drug-networks. Among these are a pool table, a guitar, two diaries, but most notably are the weights, which mediates association between Renton and Seeker (431). After being discharged, Seeker has become one of the first people Renton calls in order to score heroin. From stealing the tin and to being discharged from St. Monans, Renton has thus become mired in several networks of bureaucracy and as many criminal ones. The nonhuman actors which St. Monans use to rehabilitate thereby also create new drug-networks for Renton, all of which come as a consequence of the collection tin as a mediator.

Renton's whole trajectory from stealing the tin marks it as a Thatcherite agent, working in the public sphere, the "pishy fucking polymer" being a sort of Thatcherite materiality presupposing theft and causing Renton to get busted. Its effect in the social reality of *Skagboys* is that of crime prevention. Like Latour argues that him, the car, the patented engineers and the police are making him be moral when his car will not start without an attached seatbelt, the same pattern can be seen in Renton's network with the collection tin. He, plus the collection tin, plus the tin's creators, plus the police make Renton get busted and sent to St. Monans. Behind all of these associations is the security camera at Blandfield Works, since the heroin drought is what made Renton become so desperate for money in the first place. Further behind all of this is the sharp increase in unemployment for the working class of Edinburgh. When Renton engages with the collection tin, he is really engaging with a Thatcherite materialism that presumes criminal behaviour in society. It thus braces itself against theft, revealing a new network in the public sphere that can be traced to the neoliberal transformation of the UK.

Conclusion

Applying ANT to *Skagboys* has thus revealed how life amongst the unemployed and drug addicted parts of Leith's working class is further complicated not just by the obvious political machinations of Margaret Thatcher, but also through seemingly apolitical nonhuman actors which in reality are powerful mediators engaged in heroin-networks through associations with drug users, but whose translations also appear as Thatcherite materiality. These nonhuman actors exercise control over the social reality that the characters navigate. These artefact's effect as mediators is that of catalysts for transformations in the criminal networks that the characters are engaged in. The security camera not only creates a drought on heroin in Edinburgh, it restructures the relations between criminal interconnections across the UK, it transforms the social reality of drug users and their dealers so thoroughly that Renton becomes so desperate for money that he steals the yellow collection tin. The collection tin, in turn, has profound impact on the networks that Renton engages – it becomes the catalyst of the network between him and St. Monans, an extension of the state as well as new criminal networks. The smoke detector might look like the odd one out, but this is solely because the characters managed to keep its network in hibernation. Its potential as a mediator, setting into motion state networks, is still there even if that effect did not materialize beyond making Spud an addict. Using ANT has thus elucidated some of the more obscure parts of heroin networks, exertions of political power and of prescriptive morality that shapes the social reality that the characters of *Skagboys* navigate, located both in the private sphere, private sector and in the public sphere.

Framing the analysis of *Skagboys* to move from the artifacts' in-narrative context to extensions of Thatcherism is arguably a controversial move when utilizing ANT. After all, a key point in Latour's *Reassembling the Social* is that knowledge production across sciences utilizes the "social dimension" as a metalanguage to explain all that they cannot account for. The intention has

not been to lay all the hardships of *Skagboys* at the feet of Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher is not necessarily the sole cause for anything in *Skagboys*, but her impact is traceable through associations, making her at least part of the explanation. The impact of her politics on the working class is within the world of *Skagboys* an unignorable avenue of investigation. Writing about ANT research, Latour notes that every statement is “making some additions and subtractions to the list of agencies endowed with a legitimate role in the world. The only thing that can stop the enquiry is the decision by analysts to choose among these moves the ones that they deem more reasonable” (*Reassembling the Social* 57). Thus, the analyst has some agency over the investigation, and Thatcherism is for *Skagboys* the most reasonable political aspect to investigate along with the heroin networks. The characters of *Skagboys* sees Thatcherism as the metalanguage to explain their lives. Spud articulates this most poignantly: while having a conversation about his unemployment, Spud is asked “you are vun of Maggie’s millions, yes?” to which Spud answers “that’s pure it, man. Cast oan the scrapheap by Thatcherism” (499). As the characters themselves sees Thatcherism as the cause of their hardships, it would be a disservice to *Skagboys* to ignore its impact. Their social reality is *also* shaped by the rampant unemployment of the 80’s, and Thatcher’s neoliberal policies are deeply entrenched in this.

While ANT’s analytical boon is the conception and foregrounding of networks, revealing artifacts’ obscure associations to both crime and Thatcher, this methodology is arguably its bane, too. Following ANT too faithfully, blindly tracing networks throughout *Skagboys*, the end result would most likely have been flat and uninteresting, not providing any new understandings to Welsh’s work. The political aspect of literary criticism is backgrounded too far if ANT is followed too faithfully. Networks are arguably hyperexponential, as each point of convergence might be traceable to hundreds of other mediators, which each connect to hundreds of others. Doing this would thus just create an overview of associations in *Skagboys*, providing an apolitical list of

interconnections between humans and things. For literature, within the contained world of the work, such empirical research would not generate interesting nor reasonable implications. Thus, to properly use ANT as an analytical tool for literature, the critic has to rein in the theory, lest the analysis gets lost in the vast webs of network. However, using ANT as this thesis has done, there are other perspectives to *Skagboys* worth investigating other than the technologies of control. Heroin and the spreading of HIV are key themes of the novel. Understanding needles as mediators of both heroin use and the HIV-epidemic ravaging the drug community, and heroin as mediator between characters and criminal activities, would further nuance the marginalized state the characters are left in. Applying a Foucauldian perspective to the analyzed objects would also grant interesting results. The security camera could then be construed as a disciplinary measure, not very unlike the prescriptive materiality located in the ANT analysis, but especially the collection tin seems interesting from this perspective. The tin being located in the public sphere thus enables a sort of pressure to be a good citizen by giving money in a place where the act is observable by others.

However, having focused on nonhuman actors through ANT has revealed powerful mediators of detection and control complicating the lives of a disenfranchised working class in *Skagboys*. Welsh's novel is, while being about heroin addiction in 80's Edinburgh, therefor *also* an account of how various mundane artifacts shape the social reality of these characters living on the fringes of social standing. While Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal revolution of the British state may have reduced its practical role in the lives of its subjects, the prescriptive control over the people has not subsided. Instead, parts of it has become entrenched in the various nonhuman actors that shape the social reality along with the characters.

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