

### **STYLES OF EXTINCTION: CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD***

Julian Murphet and Mark Steven, eds.

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Since its publication in 2006, *The Road* has generated an abundant corpus of scholarly research due to its unique narrative style and the endless cultural, ethical, eschatological, environmental, metaphorical, etc. dimensions it encompasses. *Styles of Extinction: Cormac McCarthy's The Road* (2012) is a compilation of essays dedicated to this provocative task. Whilst some of the texts may prove repetitive, or overlapping, in their theoretical framing and articulation, and in spite of a certain lack of coherence in the overall approach, the present volume provides the reader with a highly valuable, multifaceted critical analysis of Cormac McCarthy's award-winning novel. Mark Steven and Julian Murphet, the editors, have written an insightful and pertinent introduction that covers the most relevant thematic and formal aspects and situates *The Road* within the cultural and historical significance of the novel tradition. The introduction closes with a brief catalogue of the dissertations we are to encounter in the book. Surprisingly, the book's last essay is omitted from this inventory; when we reach Zournazi's personal account of her viewing of John Hillcoat's homonymous film (2009) it feels somehow out of place, perhaps precisely due to this exclusion from the aforementioned catalogue.

The first two essays in the volume stand apart from the rest in the sense that their object of analysis is much more specific: each with its own purpose, they both concentrate on stylistic strategies that are crucial to the novel's structure and identity. "The cold illucid world": The poetics of gray in Cormac McCarthy's *The*

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*Road*”, by Chris Danta, may ironically be the most lucid and most illuminating contribution of all, with its meticulous dissection of the paramount protagonism of countless greys in a seemingly monochromatic world. The analysis of light gradation serves Danta to explore in depth the novel’s linguistic as well as main philosophical issues. Similarly, Sean Pryor’s essay provides a remarkable scrutiny of McCarthy’s mastery of rhythm, unveiling the poetic mechanisms that operate behind the author’s characteristic prose, particularly displayed in this work, to convey its profound lyrical beauty and intensity. The essays that follow focus on *The Road*’s allegorical dimension and nature, in an approach to McCarthy’s text that is eclectic, often brilliant if at times slightly dimmed.

“Spring has lost its scent: allegory, ruination, and suicidal melancholia in *The Road*” develops the idea that the allegorical sphere in the novel functions as a means to negotiate the impact of the trauma for the characters and the narration. Applying Walter Benjamin’s concept of melancholia in art as a modern strategy for modulating the decadence of experience, Grace Hellyer analyses allegory in *The Road* on the premise that survival is not, *per se*, a reason to live. As the author points out, the mother’s suicide and her reference to her own family as “the walking dead in a horror film” emphasises “that modern condition in which life requires an argument” (2012: 54) since there is no intrinsic value in it. This idea also emerges from an exploration of the allegorical behind other resources in the novel, from the use of the word “okey” to convey several meanings<sup>1</sup> (or none at all) that surpass affirmativeness, to the symbol of the fire palliating the loss of the sun, or the ritualism constructed around the boy within a world that has been dispossessed of all meaning.

Like Hellyer, Mark Steven refers to the polysemy—or “semantic transfiguration” (2012: 81)—of “okay” and also draws on Slavoj Žižek’s thinking, this time supplementing it with ideas from Alain Badiou and Frederic Jameson, to configure a vision of (American) cultural postmodernism that frames the ‘wordlessness’ ideology preponderant in *The Road*. Starting from these premises, the novel depicts a sense of wordlessness for humans linked with an enhancement of animalism that reveals the lack of an appropriate space for contemporary subjectivity within a globalised, market-shaped historicism. Biological extinction affects all living creatures alike thus blurring the human category, which becomes indistinguishable from that of the animal in the dehumanised universe of *The Road*. Steven also stresses the uniqueness of McCarthy’s treatment of the apocalyptic genre in its invalidation of postmodern discourse, while suggesting that beyond this hyperbolic end or eschatology may lie a regenerative potential. This is also hinted at in the treatment of the characters’ “self-reflexive sense of being in the world” (2012: 84), particularly the boy’s, who recaptures “an older, seemingly abandoned form

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of literary subjectivity” (2012: 84) which Steven compares to the ‘lyrical-I’ voice of Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*.

Like Steven, Paul Sheehan contemplates McCarthy’s scenario as one completely deprived of *homines sacri*; whereas the former sees the characters shifting into a *homo homini lupens* paradigm in their animalisation, the second focuses on their pure *homo vivere* ascription. “Road, fire, trees: Cormac McCarthy’s post-America” reads *The Road* as a critique, rather than a warning, of the political itinerary followed by the 21<sup>st</sup> century West, especially by the USA, interpreting its religious and metaphysical tone as a testimony —“where effects are of greater import than causes” (2012: 91)—. Refugees and cannibals in the novel are the result of a void of civilization which echoes our own *uncivilised* society: one that is submerged in “the problem the worst” (2012: 92) in which the dialectics between capitalism and terrorism produce a kind of apocalypse and displacement alike. Here Sheehan makes a note of the recent resurgence of un-human figures in popular fiction, such as zombies and vampires. Parallels with the walking dead have already been drawn in this volume by Hellyer, who even alludes to George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), but Sheehan points out that that the figure of the vampire, which could be associated with capitalism, is replaced in *The Road* by that of the cannibal in a shift from artifice —the mythological scope of civilization— to nature through the “all-too-human” and “anti-capitalist” practice of anthropophagy (2012: 94, 95). In this sense, Sheehan goes beyond the environmental vindication proposed by many critics like George Monbiot (2007) and perceives an ode to nature, or an emergence of alter-nature in *The Road*. This would also serve to reinforce the idea of capitalism’s decadence: the constant ambivalence of all the imagery in the novel, from the road itself to the trees or the fire, runs parallel to the difficulty in distinguishing civilization from barbarism.

“The cave and *The Road*: Styles of forgotten dreams” brings back the concept of the refugee icon as a transposition of the geopolitical distribution generated by the USA and its war on terrorism. Like Sheehan, Julian Murphet uses Badiou’s sense of wordlessness to address this national, global and diasporic dislocation, alluding again to the ‘capitalist nihilism’ and to a failed *homo sacer*. A very interesting contribution here, drawing on this biopolitical dimension of the novel, is the analogy Murphet establishes between constitutional dialectics (State-Civil Society) and parental ones (Father-Son) disguised not only in the way the main characters interact with others but also in the very speech form each of them uses: dictatorial in the father’s constant imperatives and hopeful in the boy’s use of auxiliary/modal verbs and conditional tenses. This device has elicited different interpretations when considering the overall text, such as that of Lydia R. Cooper, who regards the use of the imperative mode in the narration as a way to permit the

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reader “to overhear the father talking to himself” (2011: 146). Murphet’s main argument is, nevertheless, the use of animals and animal expression in the imagery of McCarthy’s novel following the American tradition of the ‘animal as the sacred’, to find in the final passage, devoted to the brook trout, the major sign of “the book’s puritanical economy” (2012: 127).

Although Paul Patton also mentions the theme of September 11, his approach does not stick to the geopolitical and cultural consequences of the historical milestone, but moves on to the idea of uncertainty rooted in the realisation of a sublime event. As well as appointing fire as a symbol for endangered morals in a post-religious humanity, McCarthy’s *Fire* enhances the unpredictability that derives not from the unnamed catastrophe and its obvious effects, but from the type of humanity that might emerge as a result. The last essay in this compilation deals with John Hillcoat’s filmic adaptation of *The Road*; an afterword that indeed does move forward from the written word, to address the cinematic narrative which followed the publishing of the novel. Even though the abrupt shift of tone and register here comes, as I have already mentioned, rather unexpectedly, Mary Zournazi’s text provides a different perspective to McCarthy’s diegesis and representation, which could have made a good conclusion to the compilation. In her analysis of this desolate world’s visual portrayal, Zournazi highlights the *contemporaneity* of what she regards as an “ecological road movie” (2012: 146) and suggests that the child’s genuine kindness is an embodiment of human morals.

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In spite of the weaknesses that may commonly derive from a collective work, all in all, *Styles of Extinction: Cormac McCarthy’s The Road* stands as an inspiring contribution to the scholarly study of this masterpiece. With literary referents as varied as Beckett’s *Endgame*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* or the very Quixote by Cervantes, and a critical framework rooted in Western —particularly Marxist— philosophy, the essays contained in this compilation are committed to an exhaustive enquiry of *The Road*’s hermeneutics with a laudable result. *Styles of Extinction* honours its title in the heterogeneous approaches of its texts, the profound examination of McCarthy’s own style and the allusion to an ultimate end, to the “very hyperbolic nature of the destruction” (Kearney 2012: 165) that radiates from this holistic apocalypse.

## End notes

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<sup>1</sup>. An extensive and very revealing analysis of the multiple meanings of the term “okay” in *The Road* can be found in “‘Okay Means Okay’: Ideology and Survival in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*” by Paul D. Knox (2012).

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