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## **A Thing that Cannot Be Put Back Again**

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## A Thing that Cannot Be Put Back Again

Francisco Díaz Klassen<sup>1</sup>

Science fiction, as a *reflective* genre, tends to portray the fears and paranoias that make up the undercurrent of society. Under this premise, Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road* can be read not as an outlining of the destruction of the world, but rather as an inquiry into what caused that destruction.

KEY WORDS: apocalyptic narratives, science fiction, the road, Cormac McCarthy.

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## INTRODUCTION: SCIENCE FICTION'S REFLEXIVITY

What if this present were the world's last night?

John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*

One of the most compelling features of the genre of science fiction is its configuration, “a curious mixture of invented gadgetry and archetypal narrative motifs very obviously derived from folk tale, fairy tale and Scripture, recycling the myths of Creation, Fall, Flood and a Divine Savior, for a secular but still superstitious age” (Lodge, 137). The narrative of myths which sought to explain the present by looking at the origins of the world might have given way to narratives that seek to explain the functioning of the present by predicting alternate futures (or alternate presents or alternate pasts). As Susan Napier has observed, an “intriguing aspect of science fiction [is] its ability to uniquely reflect and comment upon modern culture” (329). Even though it portrays “imagined realit[ies] that [are] radically different in [their] nature and functioning from the world of our ordinary experience” (Abrams 288), “these new societies mirror and comment upon our own;” that is to say, science fiction, “a powerful instrument of satire” (Chabon), seems to be chiefly oriented inwards the society which produced it and the individuals that populate it, in a way giving voice or face to that society within the boundaries of this new “imagined” scenario.

With this in mind, and taking into account Brian Aldiss’s definition of the genre as “[h]ubris clobbered by nemesis” (qtd. in Cuddon, 791), I propose that Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* presents the unavoidable punishment (*nemesis*) that our society’s pride (*hubris*) brought about. After all, what seems to be characteristic of the genre of science fiction is its relation to paranoia: paranoia to what the future might bring, but also of what the present is like. This is particularly seen in the subgenre of post-apocalyptic fiction.

Kane Sanes, in his paper “Post-Apocalyptic Fiction: Holocaust as Metaphor,” discusses the subgenre as part of what he calls “the doomsday industry,” which consists, “in part, of political

activists and journalists... warning us of potential catastrophes.” He adds that “[p]ost-apocalyptic fiction has a peculiar place in this industry: its role is to take these exaggerations and exaggerate them... [providing the] message that our wisdom will have to keep pace with our power if we are to use the new powers of technology correctly” (1). As its name indicates, post-apocalyptic fiction presents the world after it has already been destroyed or damaged almost beyond repair, as in *The Road*; what makes it different from the apocalyptic fiction of, say, *1984*, is precisely this totalizing destruction that dismantles the societal structure as we know it, many times forcing it back to a more primitive stage, as in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, the trilogy *The Matrix*, *12 Monkeys* or *Mad Max*. As James Berger suggests, the destruction is “not only final and complete but absolutely clarifying. It would unmistakably separate good from evil, true from false” (8). The etymology of the word points to that as well: the Greek *apocalypse* means “to disclose” (Cuddon, 48).

Of course, *The Road* could also and significantly be labeled as a dystopia. Whereas utopia, a term coined by Thomas More derived from the Greek word *eutopia*, means “no-place,” “nowhere,” and is “a pun on *eutopia*, ‘place (where all is) well,’” dystopia means “bad place” (Abrams, 337; Cuddon, 957), which is significant not only because of its intrinsically negative connotation, but also because, unlike utopia, it is not an impossible state. This is to say that whereas works such as *The Republic* depict a world that both the author and its readers assume as pertaining to the realm of theory, dystopic narratives as *The Road* pose an element of plausibility which is inherent to its foundations.

Both utopias and dystopias deal basically with the same issues—“the conditions of family, consumerism of riches, ownership of things, organization of public life, role of religion,” among others, and according to Paul Ricoeur, an utopia conceives “an empty place from which we can look upon ourselves” (58). This *reflexivity*, as he calls it, again reinforces the idea that the genre is reality-oriented, and that there is a “constitutive role that helps us rethink the nature of our social life” (58).

*The Road*, a novel where the word ‘black’ is repeated in 57 pages, ‘cold’ in 93, ‘dark’ in 71, ‘dead’ in 62, ‘end’ in 24, ‘gray’ in 60, and ‘nothing’ in 66 (Sepich), is “a paradoxical, oxymoronic discourse that measures the incommensurable and speaks the unspeakable” (Berger, 19). In that sense, it is in many ways a conventional piece of post-apocalyptic or dystopic fiction. Its characters are regular individuals, with no special abilities, who are forced to face an event or take on a role which they were apparently not prepared to cope with. The only thing that is unconventional about it is the neutrality in terms of tone: McCarthy pays little or no importance to the destruction of the world itself, something that contrasts a great deal with most of the post-apocalyptic fiction. In terms of the aforementioned films, Sarah Connor, the character played by Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, dreams constantly of the nuclear explosion that will destroy the world, the fire which will bring about, and the children which will die in the playground; in *The Matrix*, when Neo is liberated from the machines, we see a big general shot that by being subjected to a slow backwards *travelling* accentuates the destruction of the world made by the machines in all its magnificence (we see thousands of rows containing thousands of people working as batteries); in *12 Monkeys*, the *montage* Terry Gilliam uses in some scenes clearly separates the pre-apocalyptic world from the post-apocalyptic one: shots with curious angles when he deals with the future, whereas steady and more conventional ones to deal with the present. In *The Road* the burnt world happens to be the scenario of the narration and the thing that ultimately gives it its meaning; but even though the Father constantly ponders about the things he lost, the destruction of the world is not central to the novel’s main ideas, something which is evidenced by the fact that there is no serious reflection about it, and that the moment of the impact is recalled in a somewhat domestic, non-transcendental way:

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window: What is it? she said. He didnt answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was

already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass. He dropped to one knee and raised the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go. She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? she said. What is happening?

I dont know.

Why are you taking a bath?

I'm not. (52-3)

And the same thing happens with its immediate consequences: “They sat at the window and ate in their robes by candlelight a midnight supper and watched distant cities burn” (59). What seems to be relevant in *The Road*, or at least what I see as the clarifying aspect after the destruction of the world, is the existence of the Boy, born afterwards, and the opposing attitude he has in relation to that of those who lived before and experienced that *end*.

#### **A THING THAT CANNOT BE PUT BACK AGAIN**

It had already occurred to him that he would probably never be safe again in his life and he wondered if that was something that you got used to. And if you did?

Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old*

*Men*

*The Road* presents the narrative of a father and his son as they travel south for months through the nuclear winter landscape of what was once America, gazing at “[t]he ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be” (274). They carry with them an old shopping cart full of supplies and blankets with a motorcycle mirror attached to it, so as to see if someone is coming. The planet, or at least a large portion of it, has burnt and thus everything is gray in this unearthly setting,

where ash falls from the sky as if it were an incessant rain: the water, the trees, the skies, the earth, and of course the overwhelming, infinite and impassible road, perhaps the only thing that has remained untouched by the disaster.

Nothing can grow out of the soil in this new world—the sun is just a “vague gray light” (143)—and the mummies of the dead fill the scenery as if they were epitaphs for a dying race. It is indeed a very similar *Waste Land*: “Here is no water but only rock / Rock and no water and the sandy road / The road winding above amongst the mountains / Which are mountains of rock without water / If there were water we should stop and drink / Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think / Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand / If there were only water amongst the rock” (Eliot, 876). Though they wear masks—rather veils made out of old shirts—so as not to breathe the smoke and ash directly from the air, the Father has been exposed to them for ten years, and the consequences disclose themselves. When we read that he coughs blood every morning—the only color amidst the gray (30)—we realize, as he does too, that he is going to die. For nothing lasts in this world—most species have become extinct, the forests have withered and “[a]ll the trees in the world are going to fall sooner or later” (35)—and in the case of the mother, “[a] creation perfectly evolved to meet its own end” (59), who happened to be pregnant of the Boy by the time of the disaster, apparently it was hope that she ran out of. Though it is not actually described, we assume that she killed herself because she thought that they were “the walking dead in a horror film” (55), living a life devoid of all meaning. But the Father thinks differently, or at least wants to, or is too afraid to face that undeniable truth (69), and so they go south, to the coast, hoping they will find a different, less devastating picture there, away from the cold dawns where “it all turn[s] to ash instantly” (21) and where there is “nothing to see” but “blackness without depth or dimension” (67).

We also learn that they carry a pistol with two bullets in it, meant not only to scare strangers away, but to kill themselves if—or when—all hope is lost. For the world is not a safe place, and it

only seems natural that the Father has taught the Boy to place the pistol in his mouth (“You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up”) and pull the trigger (“Do it quick and hard,” 113) so as not to get captured, enslaved, raped and eaten by one of the multiple groups of scavengers that populate the road. They live fearing death, be that in the hands of the freezing cold, the cannibals who eat each other if they have to (71), starvation, or even the attack of someone who may want their blankets or the remains of their canned food.

Not much is said about the nature of the disaster. We read of earthquakes that suggest a deep alteration of the ecosystem (28), of a sort of explosion that brought about a bright light which made the clocks stop and echoes what we know of nuclear bombings (54), of clouds that block the sun (158), and of ash covering the earth as the result of it having burnt. Kushner says that his is all brought about by a meteor crash (Screen 7), but Chabon—who speaks of a non-specified “man-made disaster” (Screen 3)—supports the nuclear theory. In any case, it is not that important. What is relevant is Alan Warner’s statement that “[t]he center of the world is sickened” (Screen 1). He says that what caused the apocalypse in this novel is not really relevant, or at least not so much as what it produced: civilization has been destroyed. In fact, we can see that the only human survivors—if we choose to call them that—are the cannibals, their victims and their slaves (women among them); scattered families such as that of the Father and the Boy (and also examples of a reverted type that engenders children just to eat them later; 198); and a sort of inhumane type of wanderer we might associate with the figure of the *Muselmann* that appeared in the concentration camps during World War II and which becomes significant to post-apocalyptic fiction in general, in so far as the end of the world brings about a precarious existence very similar to that of the concentration camps. The so-called survivors only exist to live in the present, to experience every minute, in a somewhat stationary attitude. They are shy and introverted, inhumane almost—the walking dead. After all, the world of the novel is depicted as a gray concentration camp (165), covered in ashes, where there is



also no “after” the extreme, as “[t]here is no later. This is later” (54), and, in fact, even death will die (173). It is no wonder that the figure of the *Muselmann* should appear under those conditions.

Giorgio Agamben, in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, discusses the figure of the *Muselmann* and quotes Primo Levi’s description of “the complete witness” (150), “the non-human,” “an intimate estrangement from the world” (153), to describe this type of man that has suffered the death of his human part (155), remaining vegetal-like. We see a couple of examples in the novel that fit the pattern. “I live like an animal,” says one of them (172), who does not know when he last ate; he only minds about the present, and only superficially, as if surviving were an instinct (166). This is made more explicit when he acknowledges his condition of “living dead,” after saying he does not wish to die: “But I might wish I had died. When you’re alive you’ve always got that ahead of you” (169). The *Muselmanns* of the novel, as their counterparts of the Jewish Holocaust, are not alive anymore, are “not anything” (172), and yet “could be anybody” (172).

In the novel, each group lives a separate existence and does not wish to come across the others (though for obvious reasons the cannibals are not that reserved), which is something that enhances the character’s anguish, since they are in a constant dread, always “on the lookout” (151). This is reasonable enough: along the way we see the Father and the Boy encountering many dangers and, significantly, presenting opposing views towards their reality. Whereas the Father is content with being “each other’s world entire” (6), the Boy wishes to validate the thought, more abstract than real, that they are not the only ones “to carry the fire,” and find “other good guys.” He is always interested in others, immediately trusting and caring for them, not seeking retribution (174) but taking responsibility for his actions, direct or indirect as they might be, as he is “the one who has to worry about everything” (259). His “improbable appearance” after the world has been destroyed seems to have created the impression on the Father that he is quite something (59), perhaps the last God on earth (172). And if not, at least he is “God’s own fire-drake” (31), the Father’s “warrant” (5),

the moral compass of the novel (“If he is not the word of God God never spoke;” 5), “a thing that even death cannot undo” (210). This is especially suggested in a scene where the Father tries to give the Boy the remains of their cocoa, saving none for him: “I have to watch you all the time, the boy said. / I know. / If you break little promises you’ll break big ones” (34). And even the reader can be impressed by the several times he is depicted “watching everything” (7; 17; 37; 41; 76; 133; 141; 225; 236; 251; 273; 277), as if he were not part of the world, only an observer. In fact, the idea that he bears no resemblance with the rest of the survivors is constantly stressed throughout the novel. We see cannibals sobering up to his presence (256), a traveler not knowing “what” he is (172), and the Father impressed once and again about his nature (“I dont know what he believes in;” 174). This almost conscious veneration makes the Boy seem as if he were the representation of something mankind has lost forever, something that needs to be mourned properly, an idea that is suggested by this passage: “There were times when he sat watching the boy sleep that he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasnt about death. He wasnt sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he’d no longer anyway to think about at all” (130). But this does not change the fact that the Father and the Boy see reality, its dangers as well as its possibilities, from opposing points of view. As Mark Holcomb suggests, this “tension between the rank self-centeredness necessary to survive as an individual and the altruism required to survive as a species” is central to the novel (Screen 1). And it is significant as well, because what differences the Father from the Boy is that the Boy never experienced the world before the apocalypse, and therefore belongs completely to that after. The Father, instead, sees and understands the present world in relation to its pre-apocalyptic counterpart. That is why he keeps looking backwards through the rearview mirror attached to the cart as they “advance,” an image reminiscent of the myth of Orpheus, but also of Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*, according to the reading Walter Benjamin makes of it. He says that “[t]his is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past.

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (Screen 5). The Father cannot let go of the past as they strive to find a better place for him and the Boy, which produces a sort of collision between the two characters, since they do not share a single notion of the reality they live in. In fact, a moment comes when the Father “understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed” (153). And he cannot explain this planet to the Boy, who does not know what a Coke is (23), or a telephone (7), what the word ‘neighborhood’ stands for (95), or what it means to be in one’s house (25). He cannot “enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own” (154): “the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past” (53-4).

As they travel, the Father keeps thinking and dreaming of the past, while he tells the Boy “[o]ld stories of courage and justice as he remembered them” (41), stories that he has to eventually stop telling, since the Boy does not believe in them anymore, thinks they are “not true... in the stories we’re always helping people and we dont help people” (268). The dreams are also lies: they are “rich in color” (21), whereas the world they inhabit is mostly gray.

One of the interesting things they come across in their journey is a bunker that has never been inhabited and in which they find “everything... The richness of a vanished world” (139). Ironically enough, the people that built it probably died before ever using it. And yet they must leave. As Michael Chabon says, “the shelter has been built to withstand fallout and fire, but it is not secure against the depredations of man” (Screen 4). This is not the only instance where they find a shattered “paradise” they must abandon. In another situation they see a house where “[t]he windows were *oddly* intact” (105, emphasis added). The fact that they encounter something that is not destroyed can only provoke suspicion in both of them. The Boy may feel this because houses are remnants of the pre-apocalyptic society, a society he has learnt to fear and avoid. In his mind, the

other houses they have frequented are still very much present, and therefore they do not speak of security or comfort to him but of the “bad guys.” In the case of the Father, suspicion arises from the fact that he is by now used to the new landscape of the post-apocalypse; in other words, a house that is not shattered to pieces and the windows of which are not broken brings back the old world to his head. And this sudden appearance of what is familiar in what should be unfamiliar produces in him what Freud calls “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar,” the *unheimlich* (515). Their fears are proven correct when they find “survivors” who have been locked in the basement by cannibals, and are waiting to be eaten (110).

In the end, after going through abandoned towns with “littered streets” (150), the skeletons of civilization, they arrive in the south, but the blue ocean the Father had promised the Boy is as gray as everything else. The Father dies, and the Boy is left alone with the promise that not only does he “carry the fire,” but that the fire is inside him (279). While mourning this modern Prometheus, who has given humanity the fire and to whom the Boy “talks to” instead of “talking to God,” other survivors—apparently a scattered family and not cannibals—find him and take him with them. They have a daughter and so we might be tempted to think of the possibility of a future for mankind in the union of the two. The wife prays, perhaps signaling that a sense of moral will prevail. And yet the final passage is an ambiguous one:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (286-7)

Strictly speaking, the fact that they find trout—as it happens with the morels—is a positive sign that life on earth may be reappearing. And yet the section when it says “maps of the world in its becoming” echoes in a disturbing way that of “[p]erhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made” (274). Not to mention the fact that the grammatical construction of the phrase points to an indeterminate time (“once there were”); it may not even refer to that of the Boy and his new family.

Nuclear bombings or meteors hitting the earth: in either case it would take more than ten years (the time elapsed since the apocalypse) for life to appear again. There is no hope for mankind, no life left. That is the message conveyed in the novel. And in that sense, the Boy, who like the trout is also hope, a reappearing of life—as he was born *after* the disaster—seems to be nothing more than an ironic revelation of how things should have been but are not (or how things were and ceased to be). A consciousness that can preserve a species, but in a world where it cannot endure.

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