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Stacey Peebles

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# On Being Between: Apocalypse, Adaptation, McCarthy

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- 1 In *The Road* (2006), Cormac McCarthy envisions a world devastated by an unnamed apocalypse, but throughout his career he has created characters who move through the smoking remains of cataclysm. *Suttree* (1979) opens on a “city beset by a thing unknown,” a civilization suffering “wave on wave of the violent and the insane” (4); *Blood Meridian* (1985) catalogues massacre upon massacre until finally the kid moves through “desert absolute...devoid of feature” where the “earth fell away on every side” (295); *White in the Face* (2006) laments that “Western Civilization finally went up in smoke in the chimneys at Dachau but I was too infatuated to see it” (27).
- 2 Apocalypse is the very essence of liminality, of being in between the old and new worlds. In popular renderings (which might present war, disease, natural disaster, or zombies as the cause), this is a movement from wholeness to devastation. Theologically, however, apocalypse is literally a revelation, the orientation of existence to a transcendent reality. McCarthy’s understanding of apocalypse encompasses both popular and theological models, and that revelatory liminality reflects a way of understanding film adaptation as well. Though many viewers may approach an adaptation without knowledge of the source material, for readers of the original novel—and certainly for scholars—the film always exists in relation to its source text. As an artistic work, it neither stands wholly alone as an independent piece nor can it be brushed entirely aside in favor of an “obviously and always superior” original. A film adaptation is liminal as well, properly understood both as emerging from a source text and as a separate expression.
- 3 Adaptation is a particularly relevant area of study for McCarthy scholars given the author’s long interest in cinema and his deep involvement with three of the seven film adaptations of his work. Here, I’ll focus on John Hillcoat’s 2009 film adaptation of *The Road*, the most explicitly apocalyptic of McCarthy’s narratives. The novel and film incorporate both the popular conception of apocalypse as disaster as well as the theological understanding of it as the revelation of previously hidden mysteries. As I’ll argue, however, the film inhabits its liminality uncomfortably, approaching the novel with a

reverence that ultimately fails to productively superimpose Hillcoat's vision with McCarthy's.

- 4 Like those who had worked on Billy Bob Thornton's 2000 adaptation of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) nine years earlier, the director, cast, and production team of Hillcoat's *The Road* were open about their admiration for McCarthy's novel and their desire to do justice to their films' source material. "I remember being terrified because the book was so important to me," commented Matt Damon in an interview about *All the Pretty Horses*. "Just feeling like, you know, I can only blow it" (*Acting McCarthy*). Adapting a beloved novel for film, of course, can sometimes be dangerous business. An audience's eagerness to see the story come to life onscreen can result in strong opinions, and often negative ones, about the ensuing film. Adaptations that don't meet those expectations are said to be "unfaithful," to "betray" their source text, and in particularly egregious instances, to be outright "violations" or even "perversions." The notion of fidelity is an unhelpful one for scholars, as Robert Stam observes, and reveals a deeply rooted prejudice for literature over film—notable in early adaptation studies like George Bluestone's 1957 *Novels into Film*, or even further back, in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1766 *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, in which he argues that textual and visual arts should be clearly demarcated and not permitted to "take unbecoming liberties in the heart of the other's domain" (91). Using the idea of fidelity to evaluate adaptations "is essentialist in relation to both media," Stam writes. "[I]t assumes that a novel 'contains' an extractable 'essence,' a kind of 'heart of the artichoke' hidden 'underneath' the surface details of style" (15). It's also a less applicable concept in an age in which adaptations can draw on literature but also from other films, television, graphic novels, theme-park rides, and video games. How would a film "stay faithful" to a theme-park ride? "Adaptation has run amok," writes Linda Hutcheon, and she means it as anything but a condemnation (xiii).
- 5 If not fidelity, what then is a better framing concept for the analysis of adaptations? Stam notes the many tropes that have been suggested in the years since Bluestone: "adaptation as reading, rewriting, critique, translation, transmutation, metamorphosis, recreation, transvocalization, resuscitation, transfiguration, actualization, transmodalization, signifying, performance, dialogization, cannibalization, reinvisioning, incarnation, or reaccentuation" (25). The angle one chooses, of course, also depends on which facet of adaptation one wishes to examine. Hutcheon discusses film adaptations as formal entities, as processes of creation, and as processes of reception; she finds the Darwinian metaphor of evolution a generative one, in which stories "adapt to those new environments by virtue of mutation" (8–9, 32). Thomas Leitch has sought to dethrone the source text and the method of comparative evaluation by emphasizing that every text is an intertext "that incorporates, refracts, refutes, and alludes to many other texts, whether literary, cinematic, or more broadly cultural" and that "source texts must be rewritten; we cannot help rewriting them" (17, 16). Leitch also categorizes different types of adaptations as "curatorial" or "superimpositions," terms which I find useful for thinking about how filmmakers have approached working with McCarthy's novels. And as for Stam, he draws on Gérard Genette's idea of transtextuality, all the ways that one text can refer to other texts (a concept that itself draws on Bakhtin's understanding of dialogism and Kristeva's of intertextuality). Adaptations, he concludes, "redistribute energies and intensities, provoke flows and displacements; the linguistic energy of literary writing turns into the audio-visual-kinetic-performative energy of the

adaptation” in what he calls—in a nice counter to the moralistic condemnation of “unfaithful” films—“an amorous exchange of textual fluids” (46).

- 6 Fidelity may be outré as an organizing principle in adaptation studies, but it can still be a problem “variously conceived and defined by the filmmakers at hand,” as Leitch notes (20). Certainly those who have adapted McCarthy’s work for the screen have openly acknowledged the author as a source, though they do so with differing degrees of deference. In the case of *All the Pretty Horses*, the deference was considerable, even to the point of considering the book a kind of sacred text. “I had that book with me all the time,” said Julio Menchoso, who played the captain in Billy Bob Thornton’s film. “It was my Bible, you know. All the time.” Henry Thomas echoed that sentiment: “It was pretty easy to embody these characters because I had a Bible that was the book, that I could look at and see more than what the script was telling me.” Thornton’s own comments were more equivocal. He expressed a strong sense of ownership of the project, though he also imagined telling McCarthy, “I apologize in advance about screwing up your book up because it ain’t going to be your book. It’s going to be as close as I can get to getting the spirit of it across” (*Acting McCarthy*). Thornton acknowledges the inherent difference of text and film and the fact that a translation of one to the other is impossible—but also apologizes for that difference and positions the film as inherently lesser, something that can only “get close” to the spirit of the book. (That said, it’s also worth noting that in this same set of interviews, a number of actors remark on Thornton’s famously folksy humility, which they say masks a sure-footedness and self-confidence evident in his working practices. Many of the actors gush over McCarthy, but Thornton may not be quite as deferential as he sounds.)
- 7 Those involved in adapting *The Road* also found McCarthy’s novel inspiring and expressed a desire to tell the story appropriately and well. In one interview Viggo Mortensen, who plays the father, holds a worn copy of the novel that is fairly bursting with Post-it Notes—but Mortensen also seems to understand that the film will be telling its own story. He talks about speaking with McCarthy on the phone and trading conversation about his son and McCarthy’s son, “and after I hung up I realized I really hadn’t asked him any of the questions about the book.” He laughs, and adds, “And I thought, well, you know, I don’t... maybe I don’t need to” (“Making of *The Road*”). The screenwriter Joe Penhall speaks glowingly of McCarthy: “There’s only ever a writer like that once every few decades,” he says. “Hemingway, Carver, Faulkner... and he’s in the pantheon of those great American writers.” Of their own project, he says that “we were on a mission, from God, to tell this unvarnished, you know, unadorned.” It sounds like extreme devotion, though he tempers it with a chuckle that perhaps acknowledges his allusion to *The Blues Brothers* here, and frames their “mission” not as a precise translation from page to screen but rather a desire to avoid altering the story for the purpose of making it less challenging or more palatable for an audience.
- 8 Overall, however, Thornton’s *All the Pretty Horses* and to a large degree John Hillcoat’s *The Road* take what Leitch calls a curatorial approach, one that “impute[s] to their literary sources powers beyond their own” and seeks to “preserve their original texts as faithfully as possible” (96). Leitch contrasts this with other approaches, one of which he calls a superimposition, a kind of adaptation that “superimpose[s] more or less explicitly identified coauthors on the material it borrows from literary sources” (100). (A good example of the latter, I think, is the 2007 adaptation of *No Country for Old Men*, which is as much a Coen brothers film as it is a McCarthy narrative.) Despite the largely curatorial

approaches of the adaptations of *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Road*, both of the finished films do make small but significant changes to the narrative. Those changes have the effect of avoiding the potential for tragedy. As novels, neither *All the Pretty Horses* nor *The Road* is obviously tragic in an Aristotelean sense, as are other works like *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Counselor* (2013). *Pretty Horses*, however, does serve as the first part of the ultimately tragic arc of the Border Trilogy, and some have called *The Road* an ecological tragedy, a warning about humankind's hubristic refusal to care adequately for our environment. (This reading of *The Road* depends, however, on how one interprets the cataclysm that devastates the landscape that the man and boy move through.) Both works emphasize that suffering is not easily ameliorated and that you can't go home again, emphasizes that the two film adaptations elide in favor of more positive senses of closure. Joe Penhall spoke about his desire to keep *The Road* "unvarnished," but as I'll argue, the finished film does soften the impact of what could otherwise be a more tragic ending.

## 1. Adapting Apocalypse

- 9 *The Road's* postapocalyptic tale of an unnamed father and son navigating a gray, ash-covered landscape is similar to *No Country for Old Men* in its more minimalist prose and its engagement with, as well as revision of, popular genres. Writing in the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin called it "pure poetic brimstone" that is "simple yet mysterious, simultaneously cryptic and crystal clear." In 2007 *The Road* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and Oprah Winfrey chose the book as the next selection for her book club, guaranteeing that the novel would find an even wider audience than it already had. That interest was compounded by the runaway success of the Coen's *No Country for Old Men* when it was released in 2007 as well as the public's appetite for apocalypse stories generally. The genre that dates back to the flood stories of Gilgamesh, Genesis, the Quran, and the Hindu Dharmasastra as well as the Book of Revelation came to life on film fairly early, as in August Blom's Danish film *Verdens Undergang* (*The End of the World*, 1916), though it's been most popular onscreen in the years since World War II. In Blom's film a comet passes close to Earth and wreaks havoc, a scenario revisited in later films like *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*, both from 1998. But the culprits of disaster in this multifaceted genre are various: they can be environmental, as in *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004); the result of artificial intelligence run amok, as in the Terminator films and the Matrix trilogy; zombies, as in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968); or war, as in *La Jetée* (1962) and *The Day After* (1983); as well as monsters created by nuclear radiation like Godzilla and Mothra.
- 10 "Apocalypse" or "postapocalypse" are the common terms used to refer to this genre, indicating simply that the narratives involve widespread and catastrophic destruction. Religious studies scholars, however, would be quick to point out that apocalypse means something much more precise in their discipline. Apocalypticism, writes Lorenzo DiTommaso, can be found in ancient sacred texts as well as contemporary narratives, and can be defined as

*a distinctive combination of axioms or propositions about space, time and human existence.* It presumes the existence of a transcendent reality, which defines the cosmos and everything in it, but remains almost entirely concealed from observation and beyond the grasp of human intellection. It contends that the present reality is constitutionally structured by two antagonistic and irreducible forces, which are typically identified with good and evil. It maintains that a final resolution of the

conflict between these forces is both necessary and imminent, and that it is also redemptive, in the sense of a deliverance from the present reality. The apocalyptic worldview further assumes that the revelation of these mysteries orients existence, and gives life meaning and purpose. (474; original italics)

- 11 The *Left Behind* films (2000, 2002, 2005), which imagine events of the Rapture and the Tribulation occurring contemporarily, obviously fit that definition, as do, in DiTommaso's reading, the *Matrix* films, though not most zombie films.<sup>1</sup> In much the same way that calling *Blood Meridian* a Western doesn't provide adequate explanation of its content, *The Road* sits uneasily within the apocalypse genre. If one defines the genre broadly to include the films I listed above, *The Road* stands out for its paucity of large-scale spectacle and refusal to reveal the specifics of the disaster itself. If one considers a definition like DiTommaso's, on the other hand, the narrative hardly lays out a definitive understanding of the world and a "transcendent reality," and it certainly doesn't offer an imminent final resolution of the conflict between good and evil. But as I'll discuss, both the book and the film do depict a father in search of or grappling with the possibility of an apocalyptic understanding of the world in the way that DiTommaso defines it. And although the film is largely a curatorial adaptation, its conclusion takes a notably different approach to the final "revelation of mysteries" than does the novel, emphasizing deliverance instead of loss.
- 12 *The Road* was clearly not going to be *Mad Max* or *The Terminator*, but producer Nick Wechsler pursued and optioned the novel even before it had been published. He liked what he read and beat out other offers to option it—because, he said, his competition was "afraid of the material, obviously. It's very dark stuff" (qtd. in Chiarella). Wechsler enlisted John Hillcoat to direct, whose only other feature film was *The Proposition* (2005), a darkly beautiful and quite McCarthian Australian Western. Hillcoat then hired Nick Cave and Warren Ellis, with whom he had worked on *The Proposition*, to compose the score and the Australian playwright Joe Penhall to write the screenplay; as Penhall and Hillcoat worked on the script, the novel gained traction and fans, and they were suddenly aware of the "incredible pressure" to make the film a worthy adaptation (Chiarella).
- 13 The production company was 2929 Entertainment, with Dimension Films (run by Harvey and Bob Weinstein after they left Miramax in 2005) handling domestic distribution. Viggo Mortensen as the father was the first role cast, and in early 2008 Charlize Theron had signed on to play the mother—a small role for a big star, but one she was enthusiastic about because "she's a big fan of the book" and because she enjoyed working with Nick Wechsler on *The Yards* (2000) (Siegel). Australians Kodi Smit-McPhee and Guy Pearce (who had starred in Hillcoat's *The Proposition*) joined the cast shortly thereafter as the boy and "the veteran." Filming began in February, with the finished product slated for release in late 2008 (Vancheri).
- 14 The shoot received positive press coverage, which often focused on the devotion that Mortensen and the eleven-year-old Smit-McPhee were bringing to their roles, as the two actors appear in nearly every scene in the film. No one was surprised by Mortensen's dedication, which had already been noted in coverage of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003), *A History of Violence* (2005), and *Eastern Promises* (2007). Child actors, however, have generally been cause for more anxiety. But although he was a relative unknown at the time, people were also praising Smit-McPhee. In a long piece about the film's production, Charles McGrath reported for the *New York Times* that "[s]ome of the crew privately referred to [Smit-McPhee] as the Alien because of the uncanny, almost freakish

way that on a moment's notice he switched accents and turned himself from a child into a movie star. Days after the filming of a climactic, emotional scene, people on the set were still marveling at Kodi's performance." Anticipation was high, and there was even some talk about Academy Award nominations.

- 15 In October 2008, however, Dimension moved the film's release from November of that year to 2009, citing the need for "more post-production time and a less crowded theatrical calendar" (Zeitchik). As with any delay, this caused concern that this meant the film was somehow foundering. In fact, instead of cutting out material, the filmmakers used the extended postproduction time to add about fifteen minutes to the running time as well as some voice-over narration by Mortensen that directly echoes McCarthy's prose (Strauss). And as I've noted, McCarthy's prose was indeed the inspiration and guiding light of the production.

## 2. *The Road* on the Page

- 16 The novel that the filmmakers thought so highly of reveals its setting and focus in the opening sentences: "When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world. His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath" (3). The world is cold, dark, and gray, but the nameless man and his son survive together—the child's every breath is precious to him. For the father, the world is shaped by the loss of nearly everything that was familiar: family homes, communities, warmth, animals, crops or any readily available food, social structure, safety, and even language, as the "names of things [are] slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true" (88). The boy's mother chose to commit suicide rather than wait to suffer what she thought was inevitable: their capture, rape, murder, and consumption by the wandering bands of cannibals desperate for any kind of food. The man endures in order to protect his son, whom he loves completely and sees as a kind of divine light in an otherwise dark world: "He sat beside him and stroked his pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god" (75). McCarthy titled an early draft of the book "The Grail,"<sup>2</sup> likely referring, as that and other passages suggest, to the son. But though the son is unquestionably a source of goodness and light for the father, the father's belief in an externally divine source of guidance is vexed at best: "He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God" (11–12). The father's love for his son makes their existence in this endarkened world all the more unbearable.
- 17 The cause of all this darkness and suffering is left ambiguous. McCarthy only writes that the clocks stopped at 1:17 a.m. when there was suddenly "a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions," followed by "a dull rose glow in the windowglass" of the family's home (52). The result is ash that clouds the skies and seas and kills all plant and animal life, making it necessary for humans to live on canned food—or on each other. Many postapocalyptic narratives dwell on the apocalypse itself, but *The Road* simply doesn't offer enough information to draw a conclusion. The earth and humanity have been devastated, but what's to blame? As a cause, nuclear war could provoke discussions

about humanity's scientific hubris and propensity to violence, a tragic flaw that leads to massive devastation; on the other hand, a meteor could lead to reflections on fate or the purpose of a God who would allow such a thing to happen. David Kushner reported that at the Santa Fe Institute, McCarthy had asked questions of his colleague Doug Erwin about the meteor strike that caused the dinosaurs' extinction sixty-five million years ago and what the ensuing environmental effects would be. Though the details of the environmental devastation rendered in McCarthy's novel are somewhat different from what Erwin describes as the aftermath of a meteor—Erwin notes that skies would be blue rather than gray and that there would be “a lot more ferns”—he read *The Road* and decided that “this is what McCarthy was up to.” Even so, Kushner writes that while “McCarthy suggests that the ashcovered world in the novel is the result of a meteor hit, [McCarthy's] money is on humans destroying each other before an environmental catastrophe sets in. ‘We’re going to do ourselves in first,’ he says.”

- 18 The characters themselves never speak about what caused the cataclysm—perhaps because it no longer matters or perhaps because they don't actually know what the cause was. For his part, the father blames both God and his fellow man for their suffering and for the pain of loving a son in such circumstances. He damns God, wishes to throttle Him—perhaps God orchestrated such a downfall, or at least did nothing to stop it. Yet other humans are also at fault. When one of the cannibals grabs the boy and holds a knife to his throat, the father must shoot him, grab his son, and run to escape the others. “This was the first human being other than the boy that he'd spoken to in more than a year,” he thinks later. “My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word” (75). How people like this “brother” have responded to calamity, bomb or meteor, denies what makes them human and thus makes the world—which is a world of narrative and meaning-making as much as it a physical place—a lie.
- 19 Lest we think that such a thing is only possible in speculative fiction, McCarthy reminds us that humanity has a long history of treating others like mere objects. When their search for food grows particularly desperate, the father and son approach a once-grand house. They cross a porch where “[c]hattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays” (106). McCarthy's use of the term “chattel” emphasizes that the slaves who served this plantation house were the personal property of the master, thereby making the slaves' children property as well. It makes sense, then, that this house built on the backs of slaves is also the site of the father and son's most horrific discovery. As they explore it, they find a locked cellar, which the father hopes contains a storehouse of food. It does, in a sense. When the father forces the door open, they look in and see “naked people, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous” (110). To the cannibals living in the plantation, these people are merely a food source to be used as needed.
- 20 The image of them suffering naked in a confined space also evokes the gas chambers of the Holocaust, a point that McCarthy drives home when he writes a few pages later that the boy, starved, exhausted, and traumatized, looks like “something out of a deathcamp” (117). Jay Ellis argues about this sequence that “cannibalism in *The Road* cannot be considered outside our historical memory of slavery, but also our awareness of the fragility of human interactions around commerce” (61). This is no far-fetched sci-fi tale, in other words—humans, as the father knows all too well, are entirely capable of treating



one another as objects and are at times seemingly eager to do so. It's a landscape in which people can become commoditized, and one's willingness to commoditize others renders one a kind of soulless zombie. In that sense, *The Road* isn't as different from an apocalyptic zombie movie as it might seem, as iterations like George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) make a fairly obvious connection between American consumerism and the consumption of human flesh. In the father and son's understanding, the cannibalistic consumers here have indeed lost their souls—become bad guys, or zombies—although arguably that loss is possible whenever people are seen and treated as objects, or commodities.

- 21 It's a bleak world—"[b]arren, silent, godless," as the novel succinctly puts it (4). Reason enough, perhaps, to justify the mother's suicide, which she saw as the only option in the face of those dangers. Even the father, who begged her not to do it, sees the logic behind her decision and tries to prepare himself for the moment when he might have to kill his son in order to save him from the same fate as the people in the cellar: "[H]e knew that if he were a good father still it might well be as she had said" (29).
- 22 In all this darkness, however, the father's love for his son is an illuminating force. He may shake his fist at an absent God, but the father does see a divine goodness in his son, calling him "the word of God" and "God's own fire-drake," and sees him "glowing in that waste like a tabernacle" (5, 31, 273). That goodness often conflicts with the father's survivalist instincts, as the boy wants to help the other people they see regardless of the potential danger of doing so. That conflict arises most obviously when a thief steals their food and supplies; they track him down and the father forces the thief to give everything back, and further, to strip naked. "I'm going to leave you the way you left us," he explains, eye-for-an-eye style, but the boy sobs (257). Later the father relents and goes back to the spot where they left the thief, returning the clothes, but the man is gone. "You're not the one who has to worry about everything," the father reminds the boy. "Yes I am," the boy corrects him. "I am the one" (259). The father worries about their survival, but the boy worries about their morality, their goodness. "I am the one," he says, a Christlike statement that is appropriate considering his advocacy of mercy and forgiveness. (Critics have been somewhat divided on the theological implications of passages like these. Allen Josephs has argued, for instance, that one can make "a textual case for God, or more specifically, a Christ-like figure in the boy" [137], while Erik Wielenberg claims instead that the book presents a "morality [that] does not depend upon God for its existence or justification" [1].)
- 23 Whatever the source of the boy's goodness, it wins over the father in the end. Weakened by illness, injury, and starvation, the father dies, but not before he tempers his pragmatism with a statement of faith, an apocalyptic understanding of the world. After reminding him to keep going south, keep the gun with him, and not to take any chances, he also says, "You need to find the good guys"—and they are out there, he now believes. "You have to carry the fire," the father insists, and he assures the son that the fire is real and that it's "inside you. It was always there." Finally, he tells the boy that after he dies, the boy can talk to him and will hear him respond. "You can talk to me and I'll talk to you. You'll see" (278–279). The fire is real—a transcendent reality that defines their existence and gives their lives meaning. And because of that transcendence, the love between the two of them will exist even after the father dies. He doesn't talk about a final conflict between the good and the bad guys, though he does still invoke that Manichean duality and believes that his son will go forth and find some kind of deliverance.

24 And indeed he does. The boy mourns his father and then ventures out to the road, where he encounters a man who takes him into his own family and affirms that he is carrying the fire despite his unfamiliarity with that phrase (283). It's an ending for the boy that "reconciles barbarous destruction with eloquent hope," as Ashley Kunsu has written (69), and Lydia Cooper has similarly described how the novel "expresses a deep pessimism regarding humanity's self-destructiveness, but it concurrently proffers an affirmation of the individual's ability to experience a transcendent, and perhaps ultimately redemptive, empathic connection with others" 234). The boy's apocalypse story ends with a validation of his faith in the existence of good in the world and the ability to find that good in other people.

25 The ending of the boy's story, however, is not the end of the novel, which closes with a much-remarked-upon passage:

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. (286–287)

26 The passage echoes some of the father's vivid memories of life before the disaster, descriptions that contrast the inescapable, haunting grayness of the postapocalyptic world. In one memory that is redolent of the sublime, he remembers watching "a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain and break with the keel of its breastbone the midmost from a flight of cranes and take it to the river below all gangly and wrecked and trailing its loose and blowsy plumage in the still autumn air" (20). In other passages the father recalls "the perfect day of his childhood," spent towing an old stump behind a rowboat with his uncle, the shore "lined with birchtrees that stood bone pale against the dark of the evergreens beyond," the edge of the lake "a riprap of twisted stumps, gray and weathered, the windfall trees of a hurricane years past" (13). A few pages later he remembers watching trout "swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath" (30). Those trout reappear in the final passage, in a world that existed "once," so long gone it seems like a fairy tale. Following as it does the son's meeting with and welcoming into his new family, this passage offsets the hope of that new beginning, though it does so with undeniably beautiful imagery. The trout are simultaneously touchstones of a beginning, "the world in its becoming," and heralds of its end, "a thing which could not be put back" or "made right again." The patterns in their skin are both maps and mazes—twisted trails, some that show you where you're going and some that deliberately obscure your destination. After the close attention to the father and son that is sustained throughout the entire novel, and the focus on the deep significance of their human choices, this final passage performs a very cinematic cut to an extreme wide shot. Here, all things are older than man—that is, they are unanthropocentric, not focused on the human. The final word of the novel, "mystery," emphasizes that though the boy's story has concluded with an affirmation of principles and a validated understanding of the world, the world's own story is much more ambiguous. This is not a "revelation of apocalyptic mysteries," to use DiTommaso's phrase, but rather their continued obscurity.

27 In their interpretations, however, critics have found ways of understanding the significance of that final passage, even in revelatory apocalyptic terms. Michael Chabon

has argued that the book is a kind of ecological tragedy, in which the loss of the world is felt most keenly through this father-son relationship:

What emerges most powerfully as one reads *The Road* is not a prognosticatory or satirical warning about the future, or a timeless parable of a father's devotion to his son, or yet another McCarthyesque examination of the violent underpinnings of all social intercourse and the indifference of the cosmic jaw to the bloody morsel of humanity. *The Road* is not a record of fatherly fidelity; it is a testament to the abyss of a parent's greatest fears. The fear of leaving your child alone, of dying before your child has reached adulthood and learned to work the mechanisms and face the dangers of the world, or found a new partner to face them with. The fear of one day being obliged for your child's own good, for his peace and comfort, to do violence to him or even end his life. And, above all, the fear of knowing—as every parent fears—that you have left your children a world more damaged, more poisoned, more base and violent and cheerless and toxic, more doomed, than the one you inherited. It is in the audacity and single-mindedness with which *The Road* extends the metaphor of a father's guilt and heartbreak over abandoning his son to shift for himself in a ruined, friendless world that *The Road* finds its great power to move and horrify the reader.

- 28 Like Chabon, those who consider the novel from an ecocritical angle note that the book's serious reflection on the realities of living in this altered environment raises issues relating to global warming, mass extinction, nuclear war, and environmental politics. Regardless of what caused the tragic loss of the world in the novel, reading it should spur us to think about the consequences of our actions on both the personal and political level—reading it should be an environmental revelation. McCarthy's novel, then, can be understood as an eco-tragedy, though the causes of the earth's peripeteia are left unclear. The aftermath, however, is quite clear, and despite the significance of the father and son's choice to remain “good guys” and “carry the fire” of humanity and morality, on a larger scale McCarthy reminds the reader that some things really can't be made right again.<sup>3</sup> Though the film adaptation depicts the bleak environment and the depth and moral significance of the father-son relationship, it backs off somewhat from the novel's eco-tragic elements, suggesting in the end that broader recovery may indeed be possible.

### 3. *The Road* into Film

- 29 The opening of the film emphasizes the harsh transition from the pre- to postlapsarian world. A montage of bright, sunlit images of trees, flowers, a comfortable house, and a happy husband (Viggo Mortensen) and wife (Charlize Theron) gives way to a scene of father and son (Kodi Smit-McPhee) waking to the sound of “just another earthquake” in a dark and dirty camp in the midst of a gray landscape. “Cold, gray days, no animals, crops long gone,” the father explains in one of his occasional voice-overs. “As the world slowly dies.” As the man and boy move through the desolation, he further describes the roaming gangs of cannibals and the constant concerns about food, the cold, and their shoes.
- 30 “Sometimes I tell the boy old stories of courage and justice, difficult as they are to remember,” the father explains. “All I know is that the child is my ward, and if he is not the word of God, God never spoke.” The voice-over accompanies an image of the man reading to the boy by firelight, turning the pages of a worn book. “If you flicked your tongue like a chameleon, you could lick the food off your plate without using your hands,” he reads. “What would your mother say?... If you had eagle eyes you could spot a running rabbit.” The book—which is not included in McCarthy's novel—is *If You Hopped*

*Like a Frog*, by David Schwartz, and is designed to teach children about proportions and also about the abilities of animals. The snippet of text that we hear is rendered deeply ironic in the context of the film—animals are now gone, food is hardly plentiful enough to be toyed with, and there are much worse hunters in the world than eagles. Finally, the question “What would your mother say?” has a much bleaker resonance than simply as a comment about table manners. Like the animals, the mother is also gone, an absence that the film underscores with frequent flashbacks to the father’s life with her both before and after the disaster. The father’s prelapsarian memories of her are sensual and wordless, and their lush coloration is all the more striking for its contrast with the unremitting grayness of every other scene.

- 31 While many films focusing on large-scale disasters and/or their aftermath rely heavily on computer-generated imagery or other special effects to create the setting, Hillcoat filmed in real places. A number of locations in Pennsylvania were used because of state tax breaks for film companies as well as the availability of seemingly postapocalyptic scenery: abandoned stretches of freeway, deserted coalfields, a burned-down amusement park (McGrath). But the filmmakers also “deliberately used America’s real apocalyptic zones,” said Hillcoat (Chiarella). They shot in a ruined shopping mall in post-Katrina New Orleans, and a brief vista that shows two ships sitting beached on a freeway isn’t a visual effect—it’s real film shot in the aftermath of Katrina. “We had to doctor the image, grunge it up, make it more toxic, set it into our world,” said Hillcoat, “but these places were not hard to find. There’s a fair amount of devastation already in the American landscape.” The area around Mount St. Helens also features in part of the film. While McCarthy reminds readers of humans’ atrocities toward other humans with references to slavery and the Holocaust, Hillcoat uses visual evidence of disasters like Katrina and Mount St. Helens to underscore nature’s ravaging power (though in the background of another scene, Hillcoat inserted footage of smoke from the Twin Towers’ destruction on 9/11, an allusion to a man-made ashen landscape [Chiarella]).
- 32 Much of the novel’s theological content derives from the father’s statements or, more often, his thoughts. The film represents some of these considerations visually. In the opening sequence the man and boy walk by a billboard spray-painted with the message “Behold the valley of slaughter / Jeremiah 19:6.” In the Old Testament the prophetic book of Jeremiah addresses Israel’s infidelity to God and calls for repentance. Verse 19:6 reads: “Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that this place shall no more be called Tophet, nor The valley of the son of Hinnom, but The valley of slaughter.” This refers to Gehenna, a place outside ancient Jerusalem where people worshipped false gods and sacrificed their children, “[filling] this place with the blood of innocents” (19:4). Thus, among other punishments, “I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one of the flesh of his friend in the siege and straitness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straiten them” (19:9). Someone, then, sees the disaster and the practice of cannibalism as God’s punishment for wrongdoing, an apocalypse with a discernible cause and effect, similar to that prophesized in Jeremiah.
- 33 The film also depicts the warmth, light, and bounty of an underground bomb shelter that the father and son discover, and the boy’s untutored offering of thanks to “the people” who are no longer there but whose stockpile made their continuing survival possible, at least for a while. He doesn’t “say grace” in the traditional sense, but his sincerity gives the moment the resonance of prayer. Later, as the father’s consumptive cough grows

worse and the boy worries he'll die, they take shelter in a ruined church. The two embrace in close-up after the boy begs the father to stop coughing, and then the scene cuts to a wide shot that includes the dim daylight coming in through a cross-shaped window in the church's wall. They are illuminated here by the cross, a visual corollary for the metaphorical fire they remind each other to continue carrying and a reminder, the film suggests, of the transcendent reality of love itself.

- 34 These moments of religious imagery are small but significant and indicate that a Judeo-Christian understanding of the story is possible if not overtly evident. In fact, the filmmakers attempted to market the film to a specifically Christian audience, working with A. Larry Ross Communications to make faith-based communities aware of the film. Phil Hotsenpiller, teaching pastor at Friends Church in Yorba Linda, California, "developed a discussion guide and sermon series for the movie around such topics as life and death, good and evil, love, and the environment, and [traveled] to cities throughout the country hosting screenings for pastors and other faith-based leaders" (Kwon). *Christianity Today* gave the film four out of four stars and called it "a triumph of beauty, tragedy, prophecy and redemption" (McCracken).
- 35 What some critics have lamented about the film, however, is the portrayal of the mother, a less-seen but significant character. As Charlize Theron plays her, the decision to leave the man and boy to commit suicide is an abandonment. The film flashes back to the father and mother's conversation across a kitchen table, two bullets on the surface between them. "I should have done it when we had more bullets," she says. "I don't know why I listened to you." Her tone is harsh and accusatory. "I should just go ahead and empty every goddamn bullet into my brain and leave you with nothing," she adds. "I would take him with me if it weren't for you." "Listen to yourself," the man pleads. "You sound... crazy." "Other families are doing it," she responds.
- 36 Theron says these lines with cold hostility, which may be true to the character but undermines the philosophical strength of her argument. Suicide could be considered a rational choice in the face of their probable capture by blood cults who, as she puts it, will "rape me and then they're going to rape your son and then they're going to kill us and eat us." And despite his words in this scene, the father comes to agree with her. Later in the story, when he and the boy are about to be overtaken by a group of particularly ruthless cannibals, he gives the boy the gun. "Don't be afraid," he says. "You're going to have to do it just like everybody else." Seeing the boy's incomprehension, he then takes the gun and points it at his son's forehead. "What are you doing?" the boy asks. "Will I see you again? When will I see you?" The father is ready but not quite able to do what he earlier condemned his wife for contemplating—but as his will is tested, the cannibals are briefly distracted and the two instead make a harrowing escape.
- 37 And so the mother's argument for suicide has a force that is belied by the writing of her character and by Theron's performance. In the novel McCarthy gives this argument fuller articulation, an articulation that he expands further in *The Sunset Limited*; there, suicide as a response to both personal and collective human suffering is the central narrative and thematic issue of the play. (McCarthy wrote *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* in 2005–2006, and so this overlap makes sense.) In McCarthy's *The Road*, the father remembers the "hundred nights they'd sat up debating the pros and cons of self destruction with the earnestness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall," and the mother's eloquent, if bleak, statements that a "person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost" (58, 57). She says, echoing White in *The Sunset Limited*, that

her “only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope for it with all my heart” (57). The father, for his part, thinks at times that his and his son’s survival is a failing rather than a triumph: “You will not face the truth,” he tells himself when there’s only a single round left in the revolver. “You will not” (68). In drafting the novel, McCarthy himself clearly considers the mother’s character and actions significant and labels many pages of an early draft concerning her decision to commit suicide “The Mother.”<sup>4</sup> How and why she makes her choice are as important as its effects.

- 38 In the film her decision is stripped of the bulk of that reasoning and rather appears as an inability to properly care for or about her family. Though the man cries when he remembers her after her death, he also struggles to release her memory, throwing away her picture and pushing his wedding ring off the edge of a high overpass with reluctant finality. “She was gone,” he says in voice-over after a flashback to her final departure, “and the coldness of it was her final gift. But she died somewhere in the dark and there’s no other tale to tell.”
- 39 Though the justification for her actions is reduced, the mother remains a significant presence in the film. Casting a star like Charlize Theron clearly necessitated expanding her screen time—though this was never going to be a leading role—and the result is that the loss of the wife is the primary loss, the absence that creates the coldness of the new world. In the novel, given the setting and circumstances, many things are mourned—lost youth, other family and friends, language itself, and of course the flashing brook trout in the novel’s final passage. But in the film the mother represents the totality of this lost community and beauty. Susan Hawkins has written that the flashbacks of the mother contextualize her absence at the expense of those other emphases, and thus the film “substitutes the loss of the mother for McCarthy’s realistic insistence on what the extinction of the natural world would not only look like but what it would feel like to live each day in a disappearing world” (56). Dianne Luce has written similarly that “[t]he film’s exclusive representation of memories of the wife and rejection of all the man’s other memories suggest far more than the novel that the loss of her overshadows for him all other losses.” While this is “largely true to the spirit of McCarthy’s depiction of their marriage,” these omissions also “work together with other small changes to diminish the novel’s profound depiction of ecological loss” (Luce 2). The film’s addition of small hints of the possibility of renewal, like a beetle wondered over by the father and son, leaven the film with a level of hope that, for Luce, “undermines the devastating impact” that the story should have (4).<sup>5</sup>
- 40 McCarthy has said that his young son John, born in 1998 and eight years old when *The Road* was published, was very much his inspiration for the story and the character of the boy. “[A] lot of the lines that are in there are verbatim conversations my son John and I had,” he told John Jurgensen of the *Wall Street Journal*. “I mean just that when I say that he’s the co-author of the book.” But as much as the relationship between father and son powers the novel and is its undeniable heart, the father still cares very much about the lost world as well. His memories, particularly those of natural scenes like streams, trout, or falcons, have real weight and imbue the final passage’s tone of both celebration and elegy with an ambiguous power. The film, by using the mother as the primary site of loss, makes recovery more possible as well. Hillcoat’s adaptation ends with the boy being taken in by the new family, with another little boy and a girl, and it gives the mother (Molly Parker) a new line, an assurance that “we don’t have to worry about a thing.” It also reveals that the family is accompanied by a healthy-looking dog, a visual indication that

the family can look forward to something more than brute survival. The novel emphasizes the boy's deliverance from imminent torture and death, though the film offers the possibility that the world itself may avoid tragedy as well with the addition of the dog, the beetle, and the absence of a final statement that things cannot be put back or made right again. Here, perhaps they can, even on a larger scale.

- 41 Loss, the action of the film suggests, can be ameliorated. Over the credits, the filmmakers include the distant sounds of families at leisure on summer lawns—children playing, a sprinkler, a lawnmower, a barking dog, birds, and a call to supper. Those sounds fade out into a low, minor tone, and this ambiguous combination of hope and lament is the only gesture the film makes toward a less than positive conclusion; it's left uncertain if this final soundscape is intended to indicate the possibility of recovery or serve as an elegy for the lost world and a reminder of the simple beauty we may take for granted. (Alfonso Cuarón's film *Children of Men*, released in 2006, also uses the sound of children at play over the end credits to similarly ambiguous effect, after following the story of a woman who gives birth to a child after two decades of human infertility have devastated society.)

## 4. Taking Stock

- 42 Like the ambiguity of the novel's ending, taken as a whole reviews of *The Road* were neither decidedly positive nor negative. *The Road* was put into wide release on 25 November 2009, though the earliest reviews were in response to screenings at film festivals in Venice, Telluride, and Toronto. Many were measured but positive—Geoffrey MacNab captured the tone of most in the title of his review for the *Independent*: “Bleak but Moving Tale of the Apocalypse.” (Terrence McSweeney has aptly noted that “bleak” is “a word that almost every review of the novel and film seems contractually obligated to contain” [42–43].) However, two essays in particular were the most striking precisely because they weren't measured. Tom Chiarella, writing for *Esquire* in June 2009, explained in a lengthy piece why “*The Road* Is the Most Important Movie of the Year.” In contrast, in one of the first reviews after the film's premiere in Venice, Todd McCarthy wrote for *Variety* that “[t]his ‘Road’ leads nowhere.” Chiarella praised the environment of the film as a “quietly seething dream” and effuses that “there was not a single stupid choice made in turning this book into this movie.” Nonetheless, he notes, “You won't want to see this one twice.” Todd McCarthy insisted that you shouldn't even see it once. It's “very, very far from the film it should have been”—which is to say, it's not “harsh and daring,” and neither is it “shocking, haunting, and, at the end, deeply moving.”
- 43 But even good reviews noted the bleak storyline, the grayness of atmosphere and tone, and the filmmakers' curatorial approach to the source text. In *USA Today* Claudia Puig called the film “grimly faithful” to the book, and A. O. Scott of the *New York Times* said that the script “follows the novel as faithfully as a hunting dog.” Christopher Kelly called the film one of the worst of the year, in part because Hillcoat is so “excruciatingly literal” in the way that he “translat[es] McCarthy's grim panoramas to the screen.” Kelly said that Hillcoat ends up “suffocating the audience,” who don't have recourse to McCarthy's lyric prose to leaven such visual despair.
- 44 Box office numbers reflected the film's mixed reviews. It did better than *Pretty Horses*, the worldwide gross of which was slightly over \$18 million for a movie whose estimated production budget (excluding marketing) was \$57 million. *The Road* was hardly a

sensation, with a worldwide gross of \$27.6 million over a production budget of about \$25 million, but it didn't take the same kind of dramatic loss (*Box Office Mojo*).

45 McCarthy himself saw an early cut of the film in February 2008, and much to Penhall's and Hillcoat's relief, thought that it was "really good" and insisted that he "didn't drive all this way [to Albuquerque] just to blow smoke up your ass" (Penhall). One still wonders if he was just being polite, but around the time of the film's release in 2009, he sat down with John Jurgensen of the *Wall Street Journal* for a lengthy interview and included John Hillcoat in the conversation; Jurgensen noted that the two men "showed easy affability in their friendship, despite what could have been a prickly collaboration." McCarthy reiterated his admiration for the adaptation, which he said absolutely "caught the spirit of the book," and also noted that like the Coens, Hillcoat "didn't need any help from me to make a movie." He emphasizes here that an adaptation is its own, independent artwork, and that "[y]ou don't embroil yourself in somebody else's project"—clearly desiring credit for the film to go to Hillcoat. It's also true, however, that after that 2008 screening in Albuquerque, Penhall and Hillcoat received four typed pages of notes from McCarthy that Penhall called "generous" and "extraordinarily useful." "Notes, at the best of times, are one of the world's great arse pains," said Penhall. But this was different: "Those four pages I should have framed." Though McCarthy wasn't involved to the extent he was on other projects, he was interested enough to trade thoughtful ideas with the filmmakers.

46 In that conversation, Jurgensen also asked him what he thought of Thornton's adaptation of *All the Pretty Horses*, and McCarthy's verdict was that "[i]t could have been better." He goes on:

As it stands today it could be cut and made into a pretty good movie. The director had the notion that he could put the entire book up on the screen. Well, you can't do that. You have to pick out the story that you want to tell and put that on the screen. And so he made this four-hour film and then he found that if he was actually going to get it released, he would have to cut it down to two hours.

47 McCarthy understands the curatorial approach as misplaced fidelity and criticizes that method of adaptation with regard to *Pretty Horses*. He doesn't discuss *The Road* in the same terms—though many critics did—and indicates that Hillcoat's film demonstrates the selectivity or interpretation that adaptation requires. Certainly *The Road* demonstrates that old stories are powerful—and hence their appeal as well as their danger. They can drag the father back into the past but also propel the son into his future while providing him with a way to navigate those new experiences. It is the mother's story, however, that is narratively enlarged and yet philosophically impoverished in the film, a problem that is heightened, I think, when *The Road* is set against *The Sunset Limited*, in which the arguments for a commitment to a world with others and with God (as articulated by Black) and for the necessity of self-annihilation in the face of an absurd, violent, and isolating world (as articulated by White) are given full rhetorical and dramatic consideration.

48 In the end, *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Road*, which were made with such reverence for the original novels, seem to be haunted by them—though at the same time, neither film is quite as haunted as it should be. Both, after all, are stories about loss—of the West (or at least the idea of the West), of loved ones, of the world that once was. *The Road* ends with an affirmation of the revelatory fire that the father and son carry, and a fairly clear sense of optimism for a restored world, tempered only by that minor tone overtaking the



sounds of children playing during the final credits—though that optimism feels a bit false after the film has spent some one hundred minutes emphasizing the difficulty of survival. It is a cinematic narrative that flirts with tragedy but avoids it in the end.

- 49 In *The Road* the boy is a character whose personality—and perhaps even his divinity—is defined by his belief that some people can be trusted, by his daring to reach out in even the bleakest of circumstances. McCarthy celebrates this quality even as he delimits it—the boy will probably not save all of mankind, like the protagonists of so many apocalypse films, as there are some things that really can't be made right again. Hope, however, is a sustaining force, even (or perhaps especially) in Hollywood. The Coen brothers waded into the dangerous waters of adaptation and emerged with Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay; Tommy Lee Jones had a quieter success with his version of *The Sunset Limited*; Ridley Scott and James Franco fared less well with *The Counselor* and *Child of God*. McCarthy's prose will likely prove ample inspiration for more visions to come.

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## NOTES

1. Material in this article is excerpted from the following publication with the press's permission: Stacey Peebles, *Cormac McCarthy and Performance: Page, Stage, Screen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017).

It's worth noting here that religious studies scholars have debated differing definitions of "apocalypse," which tend to apply much more specifically to sacred texts and their particular historical context. See John J. Collins's *The Apocalyptic Imagination* for an overview of these definitions and how they relate to literary genre, historical movements, and eschatology.

2. *The Road* draft, labeled "The Road—1st draft" by McCarthy, and includes the label "The Grail" on typescript pages, Cormac McCarthy Papers box 87, folder 6, n.p. Southwestern Writers Collection, Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos.

3. An earlier draft of this final passage appears in a folder of notes and fragments, and as written here it emphasizes loss and finality to an even greater degree: "Brook trout in a teal-colored stream that smell of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. Their white edged fins wimple in the slow current. In this deep glen. A world older than man. Humming with mystery. What has come contains the all of what has been. And now it is no more." "*The Road* notes and fragments," n.d., typescript pages, heavily corrected, Cormac McCarthy Papers box 87, folder 3, n.p.

4. *The Road* draft, labeled “The Road—1st draft” by McCarthy, typescript draft, heavily corrected, Cormac McCarthy Papers box 87, folder 6, n.p.
5. Interestingly, included in a folder of notes and fragments in his manuscript materials for *The Road* is a draft of a scene in which the father sees a firefly and wonders at it: “What sort of light could penetrate the shroud of gloom in which the earth turned.” This is a literal source of light in addition to the son’s metaphorical light. This scene appears neither in other drafts nor in the novel as published, perhaps because it emphasizes the possibility for ecological renewal further than McCarthy wished (or perhaps because the novel was already heavy with imagery of fire and flame). *The Road* notes and fragments, n.d., typescript pages with heavy corrections, Cormac McCarthy Papers box 87, folder 3, page labeled “The Grail” and “33/183.”
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## ABSTRACTS

Cormac McCarthy’s career-long interest in ideas of apocalypse is most evident in his 2006 novel *The Road*, which was then adapted for film by John Hillcoat in 2009. Apocalypse can be understood as a liminal state, existing in between the old and new worlds, a similar kind of space to that inhabited by film adaptations, which are situated both in relation to their source text and also as new artworks. McCarthy’s novel and Hillcoat’s film each incorporate the popular conception of apocalypse as disaster as well as the theological understanding of it as the revelation of previously hidden mysteries. The film, however, inhabits that apocalyptic and adaptive liminality uncomfortably, approaching the novel with a reverence that ultimately fails to productively superimpose Hillcoat’s vision with McCarthy’s.

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## AUTHOR

### STACEY PEEBLES

Stacey Peebles is NEH Associate Professor of English and Director of Film Studies at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. She is Editor of *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* and author of *Cormac McCarthy and Performance: Page, Stage, Screen* (U of Texas P, 2017), as well as *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier’s Experience in Iraq* (Cornell UP, 2011). She is also editor of the collection *Violence in Literature* (Salem P, 2014) and co-editor of the special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* titled “Enduring Operations: The Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq” (2017).