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Anarchetypal Journeys in Post-apocalyptic Narratives. The Implacable Darkness of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Abstract: Cormac McCarthy is well-known within the literary world for his rather bleak writing, and *The Road* (2006) is without doubt one of the novels that exemplifies this characteristic the most. In an attempt to join the already extensive critical literature on McCarthy from an original perspective, the purpose of this paper is to examine *The Road* by combining the analysis of the post-apocalyptic narrative's elements with a focus on the characters' journey itself. To this end, my approach would bring into discussion Corin Braga's concept of the "anarchetype", the opposite term for the archetype understood in a cultural sense, namely as a recurring model or an artistic constant. I argue that this concept, representative for the vision of the decentred postmodern subject, structures McCarthy's novel through the way in which it builds the plot out of episodes that succeed one another in an unpredictable way.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy; Anarchetypal Journey; Post-apocalyptic Narratives; Anarchetype.

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Considered by Andrew O'Hagan as the "first great masterpiece of the globally warmed generation"¹, *The Road* (2006) is one of Cormac McCarthy's most acclaimed novels and also an important representative of both post-apocalyptic texts and the so called "climate fiction" sub-genre of dystopian literature. At the same time, by having a journey towards "a promised land on the American coast"² as its core narrative element, the book has also been compared with John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, but McCarthy's entire oeuvre is based on much more varied themes and influences: from echoes of Homer, Dante, King James Bible and Shakespeare and all the way to the literary tradition of the American romance, of the philosophically preoccupied narratives of Melville, Hawthorne, Poe and Dostoyevsky or the southern gothic genre, "in all his works McCarthy is concerned with the human drama in all its facets, the forces of history, and with the role of violence in the life of the world writ large"³.

However, darkness gets a special treatment in his writings. Confronting it but also seeking "its deepest recesses"⁴, McCarthy also attenuates its effects by

adding touches of hope, goodness and sensibility to his narratives, and this is also visible in the story of how the idea for *The Road's* plot came to him. In his televised interview with Oprah Winfrey from 2007⁵, he mentions how he was with his son in El Paso one night, some years before, and he imagined how would that town look in around 50-100 years from then. Although he envisioned these apocalyptic "fires on the hill", McCarthy didn't surrender to a despairing perspective and said instead that "we should be grateful" and focus on what we still have, work together so that such visions don't become our reality anytime soon.

In this regard, *The Road* is a novel particularly representative for combining a desolate worldview with short passages of optimism and sensibility, so a big part of this paper will be dedicated to presenting the ways in which the book's postapocalyptic elements give voice to McCarthy's projections about the future of America's territories, as well as to outlining some possible solutions for stopping or reversing the already set in motion force of destruction. In order to do this, however, and to have a larger perspective upon how uncharted soil was perceived in the American continent, we need to take a step back and reconsider the various narratives that have shaped the collective imaginary upon America's wilderness starting from Cristopher Columbus until the 21st century.

Many critics have noted how, throughout history, the American landscapes have always been depicted in extremely positive or negative terms. For example, in *Post-modern Cartographies*, Brian Jarvis states that "one of the distinctive features to the history of the representation of [space] is

its tendency to encourage responses that gravitate towards utopian and dystopian extremes. It was the best of places, it was the worst of places, but always the land itself loomed large in the imagination of America"⁶. Starting from here, Andrew Keller Estes also reviews some of the most important changes of perspective that occurred within geocriticism, essentially dividing them according to the tradition they belong to: the classical one (where taming the dark forces of nature was equated with social progress) or the romantic one (where it was the pristine nature that was celebrated)⁷.

From the very beginning, it was obvious that the New World was constructed based on what the Europeans believed about it, and this is exactly what happened in Columbus' case: treaties of medieval geography like Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi*, myths of the Golden Age or the biblical tradition shaped his imagination in such a way that he ended up finding what he already knew he would find. However, the reality of severe hardship they found themselves in and the suffering that took place on both sides soon made Columbus' fellow colonists feel that "instead of a second Eden, America became a howling wilderness in which man and beast likewise degraded"⁸. This soon led to the trend which began with Amerigo Vespucci's writings, where the New World was seen as a source of demonic tendencies like cannibalism and its landscapes were described in dystopic terms.

Keller Estes then goes on to mention the ideas of Buffon, Cornelius De Pauw and Abbé Raynal, a few of the 18th century writers who proclaimed the inferiority of the plants and animals from the New

World in comparison to the ones from the Old World, as well as the impossibility for either man or animal to evolve there due to the unfavorable climate. In a similar manner, but with a vision dominated by religious concepts, the puritans viewed the American landscapes as “a howling wilderness that was, on the one hand, testing ground for the pure, and on the other, the place for Christianity’s revival. [...] Just as Satan tempted and fought Christ, he also inevitably battled against the founding of a holy community in America”⁹. The insect plagues, the failed crops and the hostility of the Indians were all elements that confirmed the puritans’ view that God’s attitude towards his people could be read in what happened to the landscape. In this regard, one can only look at the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne, a famous puritan writer, to see how he adapts themes and motifs from Gothic literature and transforms the forests in predilect spaces for sin, temptation and death¹⁰.

Then, together with Thomas Jefferson’s theory about how the open American spaces are inherently connected with the “liberty, opportunity, social equality and high personal morality of its citizens”¹¹, the narrative slightly changes: starting from the idea of turning the wilderness of these territories into useful farmland, the colonizers propagated the perspective according to which these territories were empty and not inhabited by indigens, thus posing as the good guys who help the idea of never-ending expansion become a foundational myth of modern American culture. Ultimately, other later myths and symbols such as the image of the West, the spreading of highways all across the continent and the American Adam with his Edenic

garden are all examples of projections that have often shaped the American imaginary and the people’s beliefs about these territories in contradiction to their actual reality.

But what about McCarthy’s America in *The Road*? How is the US space portrayed here and what is its connection with its citizens now, in the last decades of the 20th century, when the novel’s plot is allegedly unfolding? As a core theme of this book, the post-apocalyptic elements of its setting have probably been analyzed in every paper ever written about *The Road*, so my mention of them will try to gather only the essential ideas which will prove my thesis that in a destroyed world filled with signifiers without references, there can also be no structure or ordinatorial meaning.

First of all, the cause of the disaster that sets the characters’ journey in motion is unknown and eventually irrelevant, as McCarthy has mentioned in an interview¹², but the lack of radioactivity and the fact that there are still quite a few people alive rules out the option of a nuclear attack and suggests a more natural disaster like a meteor strike. In any case, as the focus is not on what brought the catastrophe, but on how does the world look after it, almost every one of the book’s paragraphs contains at least a few adjectives that refer, in a way or another, to the death of the landscape. McCarthy tells us from the first pages of the book how “the city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust”¹³, while later on in the plot the father sees “for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe.

And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it"¹⁴.

This implacable darkness that dominates *The Road's* atmosphere both physically and psychically and that renders everything either dead, or dying, is significant to how McCarthy portrays the American landscape after versus before the cataclysm. Due to the high visual impact of the scenes, this difference is much more visible in the movie made by John Hillcoat in 2009 after the book. Starring Vigo Morgenstern and Charlize Theron, the film opens with a sequence of very brightly lit and colorful images of the happy family, an aesthetic that will never appear again after the apocalyptic event. This is significant for the already-mentioned portrayal of the American space as "the best of places, the worst of places", and McCarthy is masterfully demonstrating how, now more than ever, both perspectives can coexist in the span of the same few years.

More specifically, the father's dreams and memories of the pre-apocalyptic past remind us of the historical utopic connotations for the wilderness, and we have seen above how Andrew Keller Estes linked them to ideas such as "bounty, goodness, democracy and terrestrial paradise"¹⁵. On the other hand, *The Road's* characters' everyday reality resonates with the dystopic visions according to which the wild spaces were predisposed to bring various sins and death. In relation to this, a worth mentioning aspect is the fact that wilderness, as a concept, began being used only since civilization was theorized and in opposition to it, as before that all environment was seen as habitat where man and animals

coexisted. Since this distinction is no longer valid in *The Road*, as all elements connected to civilization and human culture are gone, people have also returned to a type of existence where ethics and moral law no longer function. Because of this, they cease to be proper humans and transform into beasts that no longer have their predatory instinct prohibited by any moral code of conduct. As Christopher J. Walsh also puts it, McCarthy's portrayal of how people would react to such an apocalyptic event "suggests how close we are as a species to a primordial existence, how fragile our claims to superiority over the world truly are"¹⁶.

Keller Estes also takes the analysis even further and talks about another key element of American culture that is perceived differently after the cataclysm, namely consumerism. Our usual projections about a possible dystopic future for our planet always involve an excess of consumption and technology, but here this relationship is problematized and nature seems to rebecome that hostile environment which threatened the lives and moral integrity of the Puritans. Thus, in a world in which the characters are forced to search for food as through a garbage can, waste is no longer the negative result or product of consumerism (as neither is the shopping cart), but the essential instrument and source for surviving. In a similar manner, technology's potential negative use is shown but somehow ignored (the fully stocked shelter they find is praised for the food it provides without second thoughts about the nuclear terror that probably was the cause for its construction), and instead the focus falls on how important it is for the promethean and cultural connotations

of technology (“the fire” carried by the good guys) to be passed on from generation to generation¹⁷.

If we would want to go even further with the analogies, we could also notice how this post-apocalyptic world seems to be built on a wasteland iconology similar to T. S. Eliot’s poem, as well as on biblical imagery that reminds the readers of the natural disasters brought up by the Seven Seals, Trumpets, Thunders and Vials in the book of Revelation¹⁸. The Bible actually is one of the main sources for the idea of the apocalypse in American literature, the other one being the very real possibility of humanity’s total destruction during the ‘60s – ‘70s, due to all the techno-nuclear and ecological threats from that period¹⁹. Now a thriving genre in both literature and film, the post-apocalyptic theme is mostly constructed as a consequence of human behavior and thus it reflects our already existing fears about both climate-change related disasters and the dystopic future waiting for us due to man’s innate predisposition to violence and depravity.

With all these post-apocalyptic elements as the background of the action’s unfolding, while also taking into consideration the fact that the novel’s early title was “The Grail”, some critics have constructed their analysis of *The Road* starting from a presumed Christ-like iconography in the figure of the boy, who is seen by his father as a “golden chalice, good to house a god”²⁰. Lydia R. Cooper, in “Cormac McCarthy’s ‘The Road’ as apocalyptic grail narrative”, draws some parallels between *The Road* and the early Grail texts, focusing on themes such as the dying king and his kingdom, the human corruption and how the grail “becomes a metaphor for that which is

capable of healing a world terribly in need of spiritual or moral renewal”²¹. In her reading, the boy as a chalice becomes the one who brings “the essence of divinity back to a corrupted world”²², but he is also compared with the figure of Perceval because he looks up to the heroes from his father’s stories and he tries to imitate their chivalric deeds.

At the same time, the father as the dying Fisher King, “wounded and infected by that which is destroying the land”²³, leads Cooper to associate *The Road* with T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*: “just as Eliot applies the Waste Land and Fisher King motifs to an apocalyptic version of London in order to address social and ethical concerns, so also *The Road*’s evocations of those motifs suggest the power of the grail narrative as a metaphor for an extended study on a world seemingly ‘wounded’ and ‘wasted’ beyond recognition, possibly beyond salvation”²⁴. McCarthy’s text could thus become an apocalyptic version of the grail narrative, where the focus goes on the destroyed and wounded elements of the land, the ones showing that death has replaced fertility in being the force that drives the whole world forward.

Based on these aspects we could go forward and notice, like many other scholars have already done, the quest-character of the two characters’ journey and its noble purpose of keeping the boy alive in order to prove, through his being, that the human race still deserves to live and is still capable of keeping alive the divine spark in its’ soul through not giving up on morality and other human values, but the most relevant element to this article’s thesis remains the fact that the end of this quest is not in sight. The book’s finale shows us the boy

as being equipped with his father's ethical teachings and we must imagine he is better prepared to face the world's dangers and dire future, but we don't know for how long he must keep going or if he will succeed at all. The novel's open ending thus supports my thesis about the structure of *The Road* being anarchetypal, but before analyzing this concept in more depth, we shall also take a look upon how the geographical structure of the journey is also one that lacks a fixed and ordered character.

Most of the scholars who have focused their research on McCarthy's works agree upon dividing it into two periods: the first one contains his early texts (*The Orchard Keeper* – 1965, *Outer Dark* – 1968, *Child of God* – 1973, and *Suttree* – 1979), set mainly around his native places from Tennessee and the Southeast, while the second one (comprising *Blood Meridian* – 1986, *The Border Trilogy* – 1992-1998 and *No Country for Old Men* – 2005) deals mainly with places from Mexico, Texas and the Southwest. *The Road*, being published soon after *No Country for Old Men*, in 2006, challenges this classification by putting forth a plot without a precisely identifiable location, a location that many researchers have tried to pin down.

For example, in his study called "The Route and Roots of 'The Road'"²⁵, Wesley G. Morgan takes notice of some of the geographical analyses of the actual route taken by the father and the boy in the novel, as other critics have placed the action anywhere from Georgia to the barren Southwest, the coast of California or the Gulf Coast, but through various quotes from the text he eventually picks up the trail in Middlesboro, Kentucky and then traces it all the way down to a couple of

possible cities in South Carolina, 200 miles away from the Atlantic Coast. Some of the locations Morgan mentions are Cumberland Gap, Harrogate (Tennessee), Norris Dam, Knoxville (where McCarthy's family also used to live), Gatlinburg, Newfound Gap in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park on the Tennessee/North Carolina border, Cherokee and Franklin (North Carolina), The Cullasaja River and the Boone-Douthit House, now the Rocky Retreat Bed & Breakfast in Pendleton, South Carolina. However, even this apparently precise identification of places remains approximative at best when we consider the state of the map they use and its now unreliable relation to the spaces it was supposed to chart.

In "Cormac McCarthy, Violence, and Borders: The Map as Code for What Is Not Contained", Daniel Weiss analyses the functions of map in McCarthy's prose and he notices how the writer challenges the traditional view of the map as a source of physical knowledge, focusing instead on how it contains other (metaphysical) elements that the viewer is unwilling to recognize. Therefore, in *The Road*, maps have the function of coding violence rather than revealing the information one seeks when looking at them, precisely because "violence has made borders and boundaries irrelevant in the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*"²⁶. In this way, Weiss also sees the novel as a kind of "post-nuclear" western because it "relies on man's relation to space, maps, and boundaries (including survival against climatic elements and general privation), law is a function of the individual (and its reliance on guns), and the novel plots a quest where the characters are defined by 'good and bad' guys"²⁷.

As Daniel Weiss puts it, in this postapocalyptic setting the road loses its function of giving direction and becomes another wound of the landscape, a physical entity that takes the shape of a long black line scratching the American continent. If the space is reshaped, it can no longer be determined by using a map that references a previous world and geography. Thus, McCarthy seems to critique our usual understanding of a map's function and relation to the world it is supposed to represent, making us aware of how fragile our projections upon it actually are. And if we look at the characters' interactions with their map, all these elements become even easier to observe.

First of all, the map itself stands as a symbol for the decay of such objects in the current state of the world, one where any attempts to refer to a previously charted and organized territory have become irrelevant: "the tattered oil company roadmap had once been taped together but now it was just sorted into leaves and numbered with crayon in the corners for their assembly"²⁸. This is proven every time the characters try to locate their position on the map, as their presumptions are either wrong ("They were some fifty miles west of where he'd thought"²⁹, "You always think we've gone further than we have"³⁰), or non-existent ("They studied the pieces of map but he'd little notion of where they were"³¹). In a very sharp contrast to this state of facts is the one from the pre-apocalyptic world, where people's existence was strongly anchored in reality and everyone had a sense of belonging to a community and social order due to their rigorously delimited place in the world. In one of his frequent moments of nostalgia, the father

remembers how "he'd pored over maps as a child, keeping one finger on the town where he lived. Just as he would look up his family in the phone directory. Themselves among others, everything in its place. Justified in the world"³². By learning the names of cities and rivers by heart and measuring their progress on the map daily, the boy is searching for the same feeling of being anchored in something, but the map isn't able to respond to his needs and thus perform its function anymore.

There is, however, a touch of hope in the way McCarthy decides to end his novel, as its last fragment proposes a new approach to the world and implicitly a new type of map to document it. In this sense, apart from outlining the progressive changes that occurred within America's relation to its spaces and landscapes, Andrew Keller Estes also analyses these two different types of maps that guide *The Road's* journey. The first one is an anthropocentric one, made by an oil company with the purpose of encouraging driving and tourism in order to increase gasoline consumption and thus seeing the environment as raw material for human exploitation. In contrast to an artefact that points to the worst excesses of such a view upon nature, the second type of map is presented in the final paragraph of the book:

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 mystery³³.

Dynamic, plural and proposing “a view in which nature is seen to have intrinsic rights and to go beyond human understanding”³⁴, this biocentric map problematizes man’s place within its environment and sees him as part of the biota. At the same time, it offers a way out of “the anthropomorphic maps [that] indicate failed writings of American spaces, writings that misrepresent, for one reason or another, the environments in which we live and of which we are a part”³⁵. The worldview proposed by the second map remains, however, an uncertain solution for an uncertain future, as the state of things in the world described by McCarthy throughout the book doesn’t leave much space for such a drastic change of perspective as this.

As a conclusion to this discussion about the geographical elements of *The Road*, we can also bring into analysis the actual locations from across the United States where the movie based on this novel was filmed. These include various colorless, blasted landscapes from numerous deserted or hurricane-affected areas from the states of Pennsylvania, Oregon, Louisiana and Washington³⁶, so this brings another dimension to how the relation between man and his environment is tackled in this story. The film locations are, of course, not relevant to the plot of the novel, but they are relevant to the idea that America is full of such spaces and so the precise localization of the action doesn’t matter.

Moreover, the abundance of such abandoned and devastated by natural disasters places all across the US continent illustrates how this place doesn’t need a nuclear explosion or any other type of apocalyptic catastrophe to match the descriptions from McCarthy’s book. Our world already looks like that, as it can easily be observed in the movie, so the dystopic characteristic of it is one of the aspects that *The Road* underlines extremely well.

On the other hand, this possibility of placing the narrative virtually anywhere on the US map (there are almost no proper nouns to reduce the ambiguity) suggests another particularity of the narrative: its anarchetypal structure. Opposing the archetype in a cultural sense, the anarchetype was defined by Corin Braga as

made up of three Greek etymons: the prefix *a*, *an* (‘a-,’ ‘anti-,’ or ‘contra-’); *arkhaios* (‘old,’ ‘original,’ or ‘primitive’) or *arkhê* (‘beginning’ or ‘principle’); and *týpos* (‘type’ or ‘model’). Grouped in pairs, these roots can be found in ‘anarchy’ (comprised of *an* and of the verb *árkhein* – ‘to lead’ or ‘guide’) and ‘archetype’ (‘first type,’ ‘original model’). Depending on how we combine all three of them, the anarchetype would denote, then, either an ‘anarchic model’ of text, which rejects and destroys structure, or an ‘anti-archetype,’ to wit, an ‘exploded’ or fragmented archetype³⁷.

Literary works structured archetypically and anarchetypically are quite easy to distinguish as well. In Braga’s words, if the former are based on narratives that flow “in an organized, centered, and unified manner”, respecting Aristotle’s rules about the

unity of place, time, and action and follow a finite, homogeneous and complete scenario, the latter behave “anarchically and chaotically”, they don’t come with a central, totalizing meaning and they are “developing instead in surprising and contradictory directions that cannot be subsumed under a single scenario”³⁸.

It has been stated that *The Road* could be seen as an unconventional archetypal frontier journey that focuses on what has been lost from the old world instead of what is found through discovery and exploration of the new one’s bountiful territories³⁹, but I think it is precisely here where the concept of the archetype can become useful in better characterizing this type of narrative. We could, for a start, take into consideration the linguistic component of the narrative to prove how this theory stands its ground.

As some of the already cited scholars have also noticed, the whole text consists of separate paragraphs of more or less half a page in length which reflect the way in which the characters’ journey flows: “the journey itself is of a piece, a series of short stages, entirely on foot, and comprising a continuous whole [...] punctuated by infrequent intervals of rest and shelter or by rare but violent encounters with other travelers”⁴⁰. Then there’s also a certain rhythm that carries the reader forward, in McCarthy’s usual manner of combining deep philosophical themes with scattered descriptions of the book’s desolate landscapes. And as for the actual language that is used in these descriptions and throughout the novel, a minimalist aesthetic can be observed in how most of the words are nouns, fit for a reality where the prime function of communication would be to

account for people’s struggles for shelter and food. In addition, the descriptions in which these nouns occur all seem to have an inventory type of character, one that rather echoes than shape the environments it refers to⁴¹.

This fragmentation of the text into various chunks, each representing another episode from the characters’ journey, is significant for how these episodes could actually be reordered without the meaning of the plot to be affected, according to the anarchetypal logic. We would still have the same journey made by the father and his son towards warmer territories even if they found the food shelter before reaching the father’s childhood house or if meeting the cannibalized group of refugees took place after reaching the coast. Furthermore, they have already been on the road for a few years when we join their story (“He thought the month was October but he wasn’t sure. He hadn’t kept a calendar for years”⁴²), so at times the whole narration feels like randomly selected prompts from an ill-kept journal (“Late in the year. He hardly knew the month. He thought they had enough food to get through the mountains but there was no way to tell”⁴³).

At the same time, the relation between the main storyline and all the episodes it is composed of, taken individually, resembles the one between a cabinet and its drawers. Every character or group of characters encountered by the boy and his father on the road have their own story which could lead to separate storylines if explored properly, but eventually all of them remain just episodes that accelerate or slow down the rhythm of the action. However, the whole plot is made solely of such episodes, be they only about the father and the boy or

about other characters too. This aspect, together with the equal weight given to all the things happening in such a fragment – through the paratactic style of narration – creates a world devoid of the concepts of hierarchy and causality⁴⁴ and thus validates my thesis according to which the order of the narrative episodes is not a fixed one due to the anarchetypal structure of the text.

Another important aspect to note is that the event which was supposed to be the final destination of the journey, reaching the seashore, turns out to be just another disappointment in the long and ongoing series of things not connected to their references anymore: “Out there was the gray beach with the slow combers rolling dull and leaden and the distant sound of it. Like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of”⁴⁵. Being forced to keep moving, as the sea doesn’t bring them the comfort they hoped for, the characters have to come to terms with the fact that *The Road* will continue to take them endlessly forward through the same gray and destroyed landscape. The map has thus failed to show them a better place for carrying on with their lives after the disaster, so this inexistence of an end-point for their journey illustrates the inherently anarchetypal character of a voyage in post-apocalyptic times. Since a clear route from point A to point B is no longer possible because point B looks the same as point A, the only thing remaining is an interminable wandering that renders maps as “nothing more than an example of Enlightenment hubris, another of our vain attempts to order and neatly represent the world when there is a violence and volatility to it that we will never be able to chart or control”⁴⁶.

It’s essential to remember that the so-called “geographic monumentality of the New World” made a great impression on its colonizers, so, as a result, “many of the key words in the discourses of American history and definitions of that nebulous entity referred to as ‘national identity’ are geocentric: the Frontier, the Wilderness, the Garden, the Land of Plenty, the Wild West, the Small Town, the Big City, the Open Road”⁴⁷. Following this logic, the road narrative is also probably the most representative literary form for the American culture, but in McCarthy’s case the myths usually associated with it (mobility and prosperity) are seriously problematized. Although the majority of his books have as their main characters young men who leave their homes and venture into the wilderness, these journeys rarely fulfil their expectations and instead reveal the inaccuracy of their projections about the territories they go to explore.

In *The Road*, this aspect is strongly connected to what gives the title of the novel, as roads – and particularly those images with long open highways stretching into the horizon – have actively been a part of the pop-culture-shaped American dream. However, now not only these projections are inexistent, but also the slightly less glamorous reality that stood behind them, as can be observed from a dialogue between the father and his son: “These are our roads, the black lines on the map. The state roads. / Why are they the state roads? / Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states. / But there’s not any more states? / No. What happened to them? / I don’t know exactly. That’s a good question”⁴⁸. Far from being a symbol for freedom or for movement towards a better

future, the roads have now become one with the dead landscape, decaying both *because* the natural disasters happening around them and *with* the human corpses already carbonized and melted into it.

Consequently, any journey taken upon what seem to be the last remaining human artefacts is at the same time without any destination, labyrinthic and very close to a living hell. This anarchetypal character of any possible journey undergone in such circumstances also poses a problematic ethical question: is it any better to go on forever like this, instead of choosing the “easier way out” that the boy’s mother used in the novel, namely suicide? This paper’s area of research is not large enough to cover this dilemma as well, but it is still important to note how both codes of conduct and of movement are relativized and ultimately suspended in a world where all one can do is to keep going forward, regardless of the outcome of this journey.

All in all, *The Road’s* appearance into a 21st century heavily affected by several wars (both cold and hot), terrorist attacks and politics or economy related crises left a heavy impression on McCarthy’s public precisely because “it offers a dark response to the threefold fears of nuclear terrorism, looming environmental disaster and America’s slipping status as the sole superpower”⁴⁹. In this context, the author’s exploration of a world without borders (and, in fact, without almost any of the elements that shaped it before) illustrates man’s perpetual problematic relation with his environment, his need to build walls for keeping the peace just to start another war after they have fallen and technology’s double potential to educate and destroy depending on the hands in which it falls.

In such a (fictional) world – where an apocalyptic cataclysm also took place – maps are no longer able to maintain a truthful relation to the territories they should represent, which in turn means that no voyage made along the lines drawn there could reach an actual destination or follow at least a clearly structured route. My paper used Corin Braga’s concept of the anarchetype for describing this type of journey, a text where the narrative episodes go along a rhizomatic pattern and can be reordered without the bigger meaning of the plot to be affected precisely because it is not built gradually from the chronological order of its parts. In the end, the destruction brought on by the apocalypse has not only a geographical character, but it affects human relationships and their ways of making sense of their world as well. And I would like to conclude with a passage from John Cant’s analysis of *The Road*, which underlines very well this ambiguity of the book’s open ending, its attempt to end on a hopeful tone a story about the ever-decaying nature of humanity: “in the long end all things will pass and the pattern of movement that was set in being aeons ago will one day cease and days will be no more since there will be no-one to measure their passing”⁵⁰.

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NOTES

1. This is one of the best-known critical views upon McCarthy’s book and it appears on the back cover of the 2010 Picador edition.
2. Linda Woodson, “Mapping ‘The Road’ in Post-Postmodernism”, in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Vol. 6, Special Issue: *The Road* (Autumn 2008), p. 88.
3. Steven Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2011, p. 7.
4. *Ibidem*, p. 5.
5. “Cormac McCarthy Bombs on ‘The Oprah Winfrey Show’”, 06.06.2007, online since 18.11.2009, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xb74sg>.
6. Brian Jarvis, *Postmodern Cartographies. The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Culture*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1998, p. 1.

7. There are multiple critical texts about the ways in which the image of the New World changed from an angelic to a demonic one and Keller Estes' analysis is an excellent summary of many of them, but it would also be worth mentioning two of the first writers who gathered these contradictory travel reports made by various explorers into a comparative study: André Thevet with his *Les singularitez de la France Antarctique* (1557) and Jean de Lery with *Histoire d'un Voyage fait en la Terre du Brésil* (1578).
8. Andrew Keller Estes, *Cormac McCarthy and the Writing of American Spaces*, New York, Rodopi, 2013, p. 63.
9. *Ibidem*, p. 67.
10. *Ibidem*, p. 68-69.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 74.
12. John Jurgensen, "Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy" (interview with Cormac McCarthy), *The Wall Street Journal* (November 20, 2009), text available at URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704576204574529703577274572>, accessed on June 22nd, 2023.
13. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, [eBook edition], p. 10.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 110.
15. Andrew Keller Estes, *op.cit.*, p. 79.
16. Christopher J. Walsh, *op.cit.*, p. 262.
17. Andrew Keller Estes, *op.cit.*, p. 197-201.
18. Carl James Grindley, "The Setting of McCarthy's 'The Road'", in *The Explicator*, Vol. 67, Issue 1, 2008, p. 12.
19. Andrew Keller Estes, *op.cit.*, p. 194.
20. Cormac McCarthy, *op.cit.*, p. 64.
21. Lydia R. Cooper, "Cormac McCarthy's 'The Road' as apocalyptic grail narrative", in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (summer 2011), p. 220.
22. *Ibidem*, p. 224.
23. *Ibidem*, p. 226.
24. *Ibidem*, p. 220.
25. Wesley G. Morgan, "The Route and Roots of 'The Road'", in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Vol. 6, Special Issue: The Road (Autumn 2008).
26. Daniel Weiss, "Cormac McCarthy, Violence, and Borders: The Map as Code for What Is Not Contained", in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Fall 2010), p. 84.
27. *Ibidem*.
28. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, [eBook edition], p. 36.
29. *Ibidem*, p. 153.
30. *Ibidem*, p. 165.
31. *Ibidem*, p. 107.
32. *Ibidem*, p. 153-154.
33. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, [eBook edition], p. 241.
34. Andrew Keller Estes, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 102.
36. Movie locations, "The Road", text available at URL <https://movie-locations.com/movies/r/Road-2009.php>, accessed on June 15th, 2023.
37. Corin Braga, "Anarchetype: Reading Aesthetic Form after 'Structure'", in Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (eds.), *Theory in the "Post" Era: A Vocabulary for the 21st-Century Conceptual Commons*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, p.122.
38. *Ibidem*, p. 123.
39. Laura Gruber Godfrey, "The World He'd Lost": Geography and "Green" Memory in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 52, No. 2, p. 167-168.
40. John Cant, "The Road", in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Cormac McCarthy*, New York, Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009, p. 184.

41. Linda Woodson, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
42. Cormac McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
43. *Ibidem*, p. 25.
44. Ciarán Dowd, "The Hum of Mystery: Parataxis, Analepsis, and Geophysiology in "The Road", in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2013), p. 28.
45. *Ibidem*, p. 181.
46. Christopher J. Walsh, *In the Wake of the Sun. Navigating the Southern Works of Cormac McCarthy*, Knoxville, Newfound Press, 2009, p. 269.
47. Brian Jarvis, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
48. Cormac McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
49. Andrew Keller Ester, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
50. *Ibidem*, p. 197.