

THE LONELY ROAD

A new kind of apocalypse emerges in Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel, *The Road*. Nature here is not an active presence which verdantly reclaims former human habitations, as in a certain apocalyptic tradition which started with Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. Rather, nature asserts itself by failing any more to be the invisible support upon which any conceivable human life-world depends. A catastrophe has happened—McCarthy doesn't explain what it is because, for those who endured it, the catastrophe *would* be inexplicable, a sudden and total destruction of the taken-for-granted network of cause and effect upon which all narratives (about life, society, the world) had up until then relied. It is an eco-catastrophe, which, like a reverse neutron bomb, destroys everything—plants, trees, animals—except people. This is bitterly ironic if, as might be the case, the catastrophe has been caused by human action. What we can be sure of is that human action cannot now put it right. Nothing can. Such hope as there is in *The Road* is not based on reason; how could it be? The hope that persists is either hardwired into the organism itself, a stupid ineradicable drive to persist in conditions where death would be preferable, or it is some kind of Gnostic religious impulse, a faith in a distant and unknowable God that has, to all appearances, abandoned the Earth. The two, unnamed central characters—the father and son whose desperate struggles we follow—refer to themselves as “carrying the fire,” that spark which makes human existence more than bare life, and which distinguishes them from the cannibalistic brutes around them who will do anything to survive. McCarthy's Hobbesian Protestantism emerges in its starkest form in *The Road*, where the world is ash and the stars are dimmed. Earth has become a dead crust; the dark, heavy matter that the Gnostics thought was the lowest form of being has now reached its most degraded state. “All the beings of our world are, in the eyes of the Gnostics, the sediment of a lost heaven,” Jacques Lacarriere writes in *The Gnostics* (City Lights, 2001, 19). “And from the bottom of this dark sea, man perceives nothing of the luminous surface of the upper world except in ephemeral forms, evanescent phantoms which are like phosphorescent fish that alone illuminate the age-old darkness of the great ocean depths. And our matter, because it is heavy, because it is

dark—the darkest and heaviest of all—is also the least dynamic, the most immobile, as fixed and as heavy as atoms reduced to their nuclei. Immobility, the glacial cold of matter and flesh deprived of primal fire and sinking ineluctably towards that absolute zero which is the final stage of material death.” With all the dead forms on which we have lived now used up, Earth in *The Road* is a burned-out husk that approaches this “final stage of material death,” tending toward total entropy and inertia.

John Hillcoat's reverent film adaptation renders very convincingly McCarthy's vision of an environment reduced to shades of ash grey. The problem is not so much what Hillcoat leaves out, but what he adds. In the *Guardian* (January 7, 2010), Peter Bradshaw complained that the film has omitted an incident from the novel where parents eat the remains of their own infant child's corpse; but this is one of the few moments in the book which has a touch of the Grand Guignol, and its removal does little to soften the horror. What does soften it is the addition of a voiceover, which as Bradshaw pointed out, “has a calming, distancing function, no matter what revulsions are being described.” The very form of the voiceover presumes a time of tranquillity when the man could look back and reflect on his tribulations, but there is no such time in *The Road*. McCarthy's novel is harrowing because its post-apocalypse is not a time of interregnum, a temporary interruption in civilization preceding its restoration: it is the long, drawn-out end. Things are already appallingly, unbearably bad, but they can only get worse. The voiceover form presumes a future audience that has weathered the terrible storm where none can feasibly be imagined. Even Anne Frank had the (in the end justified) hope that the time of Nazi barbarism would pass and that her writings would be read by a sympathetic audience. But in *The Road*, language itself is dying and those who speak it will surely be extinct within a very few generations. “The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities,” McCarthy writes (Picador, 2007, 93). “The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought.”

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, a key concept is that of the “big Other”—an imagined judge whom we try to impress or convince, and whose virtual presence gives social reality its consistency. What is so inappropriate about the voiceover is



Nostalgic consumption

The Road. Photo: Macall Polay, 2929/Dimension Films. Courtesy of The Weinstein Company.

that it implies a big Other to whom it is addressed. Yet *The Road* shows that, virtual as the big Other may be, it depends on concrete representatives: institutions, shared social conventions, language itself. When these disintegrate, it dies too. Viggo Mortensen's man has divested himself of illusions—the environment he exists in cannot sustain them, that is part of its horror—so it is hard to believe that he could hold onto the illusion that there is anyone out there who could listen to his account. The voiceover is as incongruous as Nick Cave and Warren Ellis's mournful music, which also strikes the wrong note. The world of *The Road*, clearly, is a world in which mournfulness is a luxury—but it is a luxury which the film's marketing felt it could not do without. The Weinstein Company press notes tell us how “poignant” the film is, but “poignant” is not a word that comes to mind much when you read the novel. The shared, symbolic domain in which

poignancy could be meaningful has been shattered. Hillcoat's view that the film “can be viewed as a more mythic metaphoric journey of the soul, a fable, an adult fairytale about the passing of one generation to another, that inescapable reality of mortality and the archetypal parent's greatest fear, guilt and heartbreak in leaving the child behind” neutralizes the novel's horrific sense of impending extinction, which is both unthinkable and yet horribly plausible. It will happen eventually, and, when it does, the “passing of one generation to another” will only be an excruciating extension of the process of extinction itself.

Post-apocalyptic fictions, as Fredric Jameson has noted, have often been pretexts for imagining utopia. Yet *The Road*—like *Children of Men*, perhaps the most interesting post-apocalyptic film of recent years—is instead a symptom of the inability to imagine alternatives to capitalism's entropic, eter-

nal present. In *Children of Men*, the world might be ending, but capitalism goes on—franchise coffee bars and internment camps coexist. In *The Road*, capitalism has definitively ended, but this by no means clears a space for imagining something different. Rather, as we watch the film we feel very intensely the absence of capitalism’s structures, institutions, and—especially—commodities. Capitalism and its lost commodities *themselves* becomes posited as a utopia: the can of Coke that the man shares with his son in a significant scene stands in for a whole world of commodity plenty that there is now no longer any point pining for. What is left over from capitalism, however, is its sense of individualism: a dogged and resourceful frontier spirit that persists even though there are no frontiers left to conquer, only the corpse of nature and the few remaining products of dead human labor to pick over. The man and the boy exist in a world in which Margaret Thatcher’s dictum has come true: here there really is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families. Well, that isn’t quite right, actually: in addition to individuals and families, there are organized gangs of cannibals, and I will return to this figuration of collectivity shortly.

We are confronted with humanity in a version of what Hobbes supposed to be its natural state. In the section of *Leviathan* preceding his famous description of life as “nasty, brutish, and short,” Hobbes writes of: “a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own inventions shall furnish them withall. In such conditions, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving,

and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society, and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death” (part 1, chapter 13). All of which captures the situation in *The Road* very well; except that *The Road* is much worse than the infernal strife that Hobbes imagined. For Hobbes, it would still possible for humans to remove themselves from the state of nature, precisely by submitting themselves to the authority of a big Other, the sovereign. Whereas in *The Road*, the end of nature also entails the end of the big Other. No sovereign could replenish this wasteland. The death of nature here means that the conditions of perpetual war which Hobbes imagines can never end. The strange implication is that only when nature has perished can human beings actually descend into the state of nature: only then can they emerge as what they “really are.” But such purported definitions of the true nature of humanity are invariably ideological operations and this goes for McCarthy’s bleak fiction, and its adaptation, too.

As contemporary capitalism tries to do, *The Road* forecloses the possibility of collectivity. When, in the aftermath of the catastrophe, the man and his wife stay locked down in their own house, you wonder why it is that they didn’t go to neighbors, friends, or extended family—why, that is, their first impulse wasn’t to band together with others to deal with the terrible new situation. This possibility is not considered in *The Road*, either in the novel or the film. Instead there are only loners, who are either helpless or hostile; gangs who only organize together in order to exploit others; and—albeit only in the novel and the film’s closing moments—another family. The novel refers, very much in passing, to communes: the character called the thief in the film, played by



Birth in a barren land

Threads. © 1984 BBC. DVD: BBC Worldwide (U.K.).

Michael Kenneth Williams, is referred to by McCarthy as “an outcast from one of the communes” (273), but even this tiny implied trace of possible positive collectivity is expunged by Hillcoat. The boy repeatedly wonders if he and his father are still “the good guys” — a question which hangs in the air because, time and again, the man refuses to help others or to consort with them except in very limited ways or for a very short periods of time.

In the novel, the man reflects on the power of traumatic images. “Just remember that the things you put into your head are there forever” (11), the man tells his son. (“You forget some things dont [sic] you?” the boy asks. “Yes. You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget,” his father replies: the mordant wisdom of this world without a future.) There are of course shocking moments in Hillcoat’s film—one thinks especially of the scene in which the man and the boy stumble into a darkened cellar where people are being stored as living meat—but there are no images here quite so harrowing as those in Barry Hines’s 1984 British TV drama, *Threads*. Reading McCarthy’s novel, I was frequently reminded of *Threads*, whose cataclysm is the result of a nuclear war, but which is devoid of even the thin redemptive promise that *The Road* feebly holds out. Many of the images in *Threads*—of a woman giving birth in a brutal new world in which language has devolved to grunts; of the haggard survivors generations after the war, pathetically hoeing toxic, unyielding soil—are indeed likely to remain in my head forever, having long since fused with nightmare. But even in such conditions of utter horror, *Threads* remains concerned with problems of collectivity, of how society could reconstruct itself when all the “threads” that had previously held it together have been obliterated; the same is true of Terry Nation’s less harrowing series, *Survivors*, which originally ran between 1975–77. (The BBC is currently screening a high-gloss remake.) In *Survivors*, nature is not destroyed; instead a swine flu-like virus has killed nine-tenths of the human population. With 1970s ecopolitics in the background, the major questions that *Survivors* posed were all about collectivity: how are resources to be conserved, how is labor to be organized. Such questions are meaningless in *The Road*, where conservation of resources can only temporarily stave off their inevitable total depletion, and where, in the absence of any raw materials for production, labor can only amount to scavenging.

What is missing from *The Road* can also be inferred by contrast with a more recent apocalyptic thriller, *Terminator Salvation*. All of the criticisms of McG’s renewal of the franchise for its lack of plot or character development are no doubt justified. But there is something deeply resonant about



The fightback?

Terminator Salvation. © 2009 T Asset Acquisition Company LLC. DVD: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment (U.K.).

Terminator Salvation’s imagery at the moment. In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, we find ourselves surrounded by what the theorist Alex Williams has called “ideological rubble”: the neoliberal “End of History” has been debunked, but we are not in a new world so much as a bombed-out space, strewn with the debris of failed political-economic systems. After the financial crisis, neoliberalism can no longer claim to offer the only system that works; it, too, is now a relic, albeit a relic that still dominates our current (post-catastrophic) world. *Terminator Salvation*’s cybergothic, Black Metal vision gives mythic form to this desertified political terrain. The film pitches us into the future war that, in the earlier films, we have only seen in glimpses, this future war between embattled human collectives and the cyborg armies of techno-capital presaging a new struggle over the present. *The Road*, like *Threads*, acts as a kind of negative inspiration—after living with such horror in fictional form, we feel that we would do anything to avoid it occurring in actuality. *Terminator Salvation* is galvanizing in a different way. What is its pulp existentialist slogan, “There is no fate but what we make,” if not an alternative way of saying that, against all the odds, another world is possible?

MARK FISHER is the author of *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009).