

**Marie Liénard-Yeterian**

Université Nice Sophia Antipolis, France

Gothic Trouble: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the Globalized Order

ABSTRACT

The article explores the way American author Cormac McCarthy uses the Gothic genre in his novel *The Road* as a means to address what has been called “our globalized order,” in particular the way it has turned human beings into consuming or consumed entities. Some dimensions of this globalized order indeed involve the reintroduction of slavery through human trafficking, unprecedented greed and labor capitalism, surveillance and personal data gathering. Hannah Arendt notes in *The Origin of Totalitarianism* that the disasters of the twentieth century had proved that a globalized order might “produce barbarians from its own midst by forcing millions of people into conditions which, despite all appearances, are the conditions of savages.” The artist’s task is to find the right language and images to address the breaking of the world. French philosopher J. P. Dupuy, for example, has argued that the financial world is a way to contain (*contenir*) the violence of competition, placing it into acceptable (symbolic) forms away from primal physical competition. McCarthy’s graphic use of Gothic tropes—including cannibalism, the wild forest, the haunted house, the chase, the conflict between light and darkness, the blurring of boundaries between different categories—creates a shock. The article also addresses the larger question of the impact of globalization on Gothic literature, and the impact of Gothic literature on real world matters as it contributes to and reflects upon and challenges global regimes of economic, social and economic power. In other words, what is the cultural work that the Gothic does in the present?

“Road, where the chains have been dragging, where the bones
of the dead are still lying.”
(Dmitri Shostakovich, qtd. in O’Brien 29)

Geoffrey O’Brien, reviewing November 2014 Metropolitan Opera productions of Dmitri Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great*, notes that “each in its way posed questions about how the horrors of history are somehow transmuted into the exuberance of art” and

each also obliquely instilled an eerie consciousness of these works as messages displaced in time, sending out signals originally aimed at spectators in Russia in 1934 or London in 1587 that we intercept and read by our own lights, as if they were delayed warnings or cries for help. (29)

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This article aims to show that Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* issues similar “warnings” and “cries.”

The Gothic genre was contemporary with major upheavals and societal changes; it first developed as an alternative narrative to the dominion of Reason in the eighteenth century and has retained its countercultural power. It articulates topical fears while engaging with the past, its weight and terrifying elements. The American Gothic, particularly in the Southern context, has been used to excavate and explore historical hauntings. As Keith Cartwright puts it, the Gothic “provides a framework for labyrinthine excavations of the repressed knowledge at the base of our national edifice” (20). Gothic works write Americanness by dealing with national obsessions—the encounter with the Other (such as the wilderness or the Indian)—and guilt; they perform cultural work within American society and articulate epistemological takes on reality, abnormality and normalcy.¹

Contemporary fiction and cinema are thus characterized by Gothic interactions with specific cultural anxieties. Our concerns emerge out of some unresolved issues of the past such as the environmental crisis, rising poverty and illiteracy rates, cutting down jobs following outsourcing to technology, domination of financial capital, and rise of terrorism in its most gruesome deployments. The denial of the human cost of such

¹ A work like *Deliverance* (novel and film) depicts the shift from a lawful order to a lawless world of chaos and savagery. It probes into the possibility of a return of the wild from the wilderness, and glances at “horror” with its attending heart of darkness—human and ecological.

developments—only framed by corporations as “externalities”—has given rise to new modalities of the return of the repressed. As during the French Revolution, our times have inspired more graphic and disturbing forms of Gothic artistic expression, be it in literary or visual modes. The exploitation of the other—his/her reification—is often gothicized through the figure of the vampire.

Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 *The Road* conjures up the legacy of American Gothic literature and moves beyond the national context to address what has been called the “globalized order.” The novel engages with current Gothic explorations of psychological and bodily trauma; it reflects the current concerns over consumption and survival.² It reuses Gothic tropes such as the wilderness, the haunted house, the chase, the conflict between light and darkness, the blurring of boundaries between different categories, and the encounter with the Uncanny, to dwell upon our imaginative terror when thinking about our contemporary world. It creates the special atmosphere of suspense and terror characteristic of the Gothic mode; its plot proposes a gruesome handling of the human body as the backdrop for the staging of current plagues such as human trafficking and labor capitalism. Its landscape of disaster speaks to the neglect of the world’s social and physical infrastructure. An important theme in the novel is transmission: a father (referred to as “the man”) tries to describe to his son (“the child”) a lost world—the world of “long ago”—and make him share in a common humanity (“being the good guys,” “carrying the fire”). This topic resonates with the Gothic’s task to transmit something of a lost world—lost to memory or human consciousness through denial, erasure, amnesia, and destruction.

This article will thus explore McCarthy’s use of the Gothic mode in his novel *The Road* as a way to explore how our globalized order—which promotes greed and unprecedented exploitation, surveillance and personal data gathering—has turned human beings into consuming or consumed entities.³ The traditional Gothic landscape (haunted castle or wilderness) has morphed into a twilight space where basic human bearings have disappeared. The human body and mind, rather than just the landscape, are the location for Gothic horror. Whereas zombies—which are often coded as metaphors for alienated white masculinity—and vampires have become

² On the question of *The Road* and consumerist ideas, see for example Susan Kollin’s article.

³ On the question of surveillance and transparency, see for example Cole 26–28. He concludes: “Increasingly, our governments seem to be insisting that our lives be transparent to them, while their policies remain hidden from us. For the sake of democracy itself, we must do all we can to resist that impulse” (28).

the most suggestive means of investigating and questioning a range of topical issues, no such creatures or Gothic bestiary are featured in *The Road*. The distortion goes beyond physical monstrosity and is located in the *human* handling of the *human* body. We will discuss how the novel engages the American imagination and its Gothic tradition as a departure point for a larger human inquiry.

Hannah Arendt writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

The calamity of the rightless (the displaced) is not that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever. Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law but that no law exists for them. (qtd. in Bromwich 6)

She adds that the disasters of the twentieth century had proved that a globalized order might “produce barbarians from its own midst by forcing millions of people into conditions which, despite all appearances, are the conditions of savages” (qtd. in Bromwich 6). Arendt’s insistence that these “barbarians” wrecking the world are produced “from our midst” suggests how the quintessential Gothic experience—that of the uncanny—pervades our contemporary imagination. The savagery explored by *The Road* is indeed the barbarity induced by an unprecedented greed spawned by our own economic logic. The artist’s goal is to represent the “human condition” in the midst of contemporary stirrings, with a prophetic outlook. French philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy, for example, has argued that the financial world is a way to contain (*contenir*) the violence of competition, placing it into acceptable (symbolic) forms away from primal—and primary—physical competition. The writer’s task is to find the right language and images to address the raw material behind the symbolic gloss. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* reintroduces the literal dimension of violence beyond what some have called the “choreographed violence” and the “symphony of diplomacy,” the theatrical deployment of power in state summits and the display of military might on the field through high tech weapons such as drones (the latest avatar of the “surgical” philosophy of warmongering). His graphic use of Gothic tropes creates a shock; in the words of Southern writer Flannery O’Connor: “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (34).

The horror—“what the mind sees,” as Stephen King puts it (22)—starts on the first page with the breaking up of the border between reality and dream: reality has turned into a living nightmare as time (human time, that is) has come to a standstill, leaving human beings trapped in a present that opens on to no future—or no past (the world of before

has been lost): “the clocks stopped at 1.17” (McCarthy 52). A twilight universe where light seems to have definitely yielded to darkness begets improbable creatures in an improbable environment. The stanzaic structure of the novel functions as a reminder of the structure of Whitman’s poetry when stanzas conjure up different dimensions of American life: in Whitman, to celebrate its coming, in McCarthy, to expose its loss. In both texts, the rawness of the American experience is distilled through poetic images.

Beyond the Whitmanian intertextuality, McCarthy calls upon another dimension of the American imagination—one that speaks directly to the hermeneutics of the Gothic: the question of knowledge. In the novel, the inability to see is emblematic of the inability to know or to move forward (literally and figuratively); it resonates with the place of the senses in the American consciousness, in particular the importance of sight. The signified is—literally—beyond reach because it is beyond sight; human beings are confined to the signifier (the human as food item, as a consumed entity). Apprehending the world no longer takes place through the eyes (the founding myth and gesture initiated in the *periplus*) but through the mouth; the encounter with the world happens through the mouth, inducing some general regressive oral phase.

The novel thus stages a world where human beings have been reduced to the satisfaction of the most basic needs—to eat/to drink—at the expense of all other forms of connection to their environment—be it natural, societal or even familial (parents eating their children, a recurring suggestion in the novel). The notion of progress encoded in the historical allusion through the use of the term “pilgrims” and its attending reference to the building of “a new city on a hill” gives way to a nightmarish vision where the wilderness spawns creatures that are both animal and mineral, alive and dead in a blurring of categories symptomatic of the pervasive chaos and regression:

Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast. . . . And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light where eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of a spider. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pushed in a dull glass bell. (3–4)

Whereas the original move was from a formless “what” into the creation of a shaped “who,” as proposed in Native American creation myths

for example, *The Road* imagines a world where “whos” have regressed into “whats”: the central question no longer is “Who am I?” but “What do I eat?” Every human encounter indeed involves the “reptilian” gaze of the predator desperately looking for his/her prey (stranger, child, spouse, or pet).

The predatory logic has indeed become the only modality for human interactions, as the man notes when they meet one of the gang members in the woods:

This was the first human being other than the boy that he'd spoken to in more than a year. My brother at last. The reptilian calculation 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)

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Such horror resonates with the current disempowerment of individuals when faced with extreme poverty and deprivation. The novel suggests a human lack of agency in the most shocking way to reflect on the legacy of economic systems which have erected financial capital into “the measure of all things” in Protagoras’s words, enslaving part of the world in the process. The master/slave dialectic is conjured up in the novel in a scene that offers a *mise en abyme* of the systems of exploitation:

An army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. Lanyards at the wrist. . . . They clanked past, marching with a swaying gait like wind-up toys. . . . The phalanx following carried spears of lances tasseled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings in some crude forge upcountry . . . behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each. All passed on. (91–92)

The blurring of boundaries characteristic of the Gothic takes an uncanny turn as McCarthy explores the parabolic potential of cannibalism: human beings have been turned into literal food items, as the scene at the mansion suggests. The man and the child come across a human pantry:

Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, 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)

As Richard Gray phrases it, the uncanny can be defined as “that scary disconnection of the human from the nonhuman” (116). Borders between the use of material commodities (including food items) and human subjects are collapsed, creating an uncanny encounter. The omnipresence of consumption in *The Road* through the motif of cannibalism (eating/to be eaten) literalizes the imperative of consumer culture (to consume/to be consumed). Significant societal and interpersonal problems are connected to our omnipresent consumption and greed. Consumer culture interferes with human relationships and offers relations of different natures. *The Road* aims to show the effect consumer culture has on humans and on their relationships as human interactions have been radically altered in such a context. Consumer culture infiltrates and impacts every dimension of the human condition and the human relationship to himself/herself and to the other, be it human or animal (in *The Road*, the eating of the pet is emblematic of such a shift).

The “unhomelike nature of the environment,” to use Gray’s words (116)—its alienated and alienating dimension—characterizes McCarthy’s novelistic landscape, both natural and human. In addition to human regression into barbarity, the novel addresses the pervasive material regression of our Western societies in the wake of the lack of investments in public services and infrastructures. Some recent studies point out that our scientific engineering is becoming underused or even obsolete, as it is no longer possible to afford the cost of fixing crumbling bridges. We might have to resort to ferries in a number of places where bridges have not been maintained, fixed or rebuilt in the wake of recent flood damage.⁴ Will the bridge—a celebrated icon of American progress—become a useless artifact? *The Road* stages rusting cars and trucks sitting on dilapidated bridges, destroyed highways and roads, “[t]he long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges like the ruins of a vast funhouse against the distant murk” (24). These feats of human engineering skills and creativity have regressed to the status of trash. Such landscapes of silent and still disaster offer the perfect contrapuntal image to the current flows of abundance and mobility (people and capital), the fluidity and fluxes of hyperbolic consumption having come to a total standstill. Progress has turned into an ancient curse nagging at the current desolation. The novel narrates the consequences of the greed that prevents—forbids—investing in public goods or services by imagining a haunting fantasy of regression. Deterritorialized objects and obsolete tributes to technological prowess heap into piles of rubbish invading the characters’ material and mental space; these discarded agents of the

⁴ See for example McKibben 53–54.

consumer era mirror the landfills which have turned our earth into a huge bin. The conjured up familiar elements (such as vending machines, trailers, cars, gas pumps, convenience stores, shopping carts) morph into the discombobulated protagonists of an uncanny aesthetics of excess. Their quasi-theatrical nature performs the legacy of mankind and its war on the landscape by representing the scars of conflict and abuse.⁵ This Gothic landscape stages a spectacle of utmost ruin—physical and moral: “everything to the root along the barren bottomland. . . . The roadside hedges were gone to rows of black and twisted brambles. No sign of life” (21).

The tyranny of evil, with its attending death and destruction, informs the Gothic imagination. The Gothic genre plays with borders and transgressions, and rehearses themes of imprisonment and escape, and chase motifs. McCarthy had already addressed the issue of sheer evil in his 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men*. In *The Road*, he literalizes the formulaic Gothic theme of the conflict between good and evil by imagining a world where light has yielded to darkness (for a reason that remains unknown throughout the novel). The world is now “enshrouded” in ashes: “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” (3). The characters’ life revolves around trying to keep a dim light alive, around them and in them; they are constantly looking for oil or wood or anything to ward off the pervasive darkness (and cold).

The physical conflict is reprised in the moral conflict that is couched along Biblical lines.⁶ The novel refers to John’s evangelical proclamation of “the Word” and His incarnation in Christ: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1) and “the Word made flesh” (John 1:14). The father sees the child as his “warrant”: “He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5).⁷ The mother has chosen death as a “new lover,” she cannot face the prospect of the horror awaiting them: “They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant” (56). She vanishes one day, without him and the child knowing it, in a desperate offering, her “gift”/the gift of herself⁸:

⁵ See the exhibit *Conflict.Time.Photography*, The Eyal Ofer Galleries, Tate Modern, London, 26 Nov. 2014–15 Mar. 2015.

⁶ For work on the religious dimension, and the tension between hope and nihilism, see for example Stephen Frye’s book and Allen Josephs’s article.

⁷ For an analysis of this statement, see for example Béatrice Trotignon 207.

⁸ Their discussion earlier in the novel about the number of bullets—the only way out of the horror—makes it clear that she wishes they had thought about suicide when there were enough bullets for each of them: “I should have done it a long time ago. When there

She was gone and the coldness of it was her final gift. She would do it with a flake of obsidian. He'd taught her himself. Sharper than steel. The edge an atom thick. And she was right. There was no argument. . . . In the morning the boy said nothing at all and when they were packed and ready to set out upon the road he turned and looked back at their campside and he said: She's gone isn't she? And he said: Yes, she is. (58)

Her erasure is emblematic of what philosopher Patrick Viveret sees as the “evacuation of eros and the feminine” from the global economy, resulting in a race for “domination and power” (Lasida and Viveret 24). The terrifying presence of evil in *The Road* reads like a counter narrative to hubristic political claims “to rid the world of evil”: the novel indeed makes clear that evil is in ourselves. The child’s mantra—“we are the good guys”—resonates with bureaucratic euphemisms to describe the so-called “war on terror.” The man and the child wage their war on terror by upholding a culture of love and respect for their fellow human beings, rejecting the predatory logic that has prevailed over the world since “the clocks stopped at 1.17,” a breaking point which resonates with our own 9/11 historical rupture. The child functions as a moral benchmark: he “negotiates” (a word he learns from his father) to uphold goodness and pleads in favor of others (the little boy, the old man, even the man who robs them of everything); he jeopardizes his own survival by giving away food he will badly need later, as his father insinuates: “When we’re out of food you’ll have more time to think about it” (175)—all the more so since the man is doomed to a sure death. The gesture of feeding him takes on both absurd and exceptional dimensions, a redemptive free act in this hell of the “numbness and the dull despair” (89). Will the child be a New Adam as he upholds humanitarian ideals by refusing to turn the Other into a “what”? The ending stages a complete family unit (parents and children) that adopts the child. The vision of the “trout” looming up out of a vanished past does not bring closure and relief:

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

were three bullets in the gun instead of two. I was stupid. . . . You have two bullets and then what? You can't protect us. . . . Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. . . . I've taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot” (McCarthy 57).

deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (286–87)

This ending fails to appease the present and the past—leaving us stranded on a road somewhere, close to nothingness maybe.

The Gothic model reflects on the present by conjuring up a dead past—often through the figure of the ghost. The trout is not the only ghost. *The Road* indeed begets a number of ghosts—dead or alive. McCarthy revisits some national obsessions and “curses,” to use William Faulkner’s image, in particular abuses connected to the occupation of territory and slavery. At one point, the father and the son come across a camping scene: some people have left in a hurry, abandoning the food they were getting ready to eat:

They had taken everything with them except whatever black thing was skewered over the coals. He was standing there checking the perimeter when the boy turned and buried his face against him. . . . What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. (198)

The scene offers a gruesome rewriting of the pioneer experience and its legacy of violence. In addition, the recurring suggestion that parents eat—or have eaten—their own children speaks to current political moves aimed at depriving children of basic survival programs and resources (such as the decision to get rid of Food Stamps); the older generation, by appropriating all the resources, “eats” the next one by destroying its chances of thriving and, in some cases, even surviving. As a Southern writer, McCarthy situates the most horrifying scene of the novel in a Southern mansion, “a once grand house sited on a rise above the road” (105). The image of the living food pantry functions as a powerful evocation of contemporary forms of enslavement while conjuring up the legacy of slavery: “He held the boy’s hand and they crossed the porch. Chattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays” (106). Last but not least, McCarthy offers a variation on the thematic importance of the place of the wilderness in the American consciousness by imagining the demise of this key protagonist of the American narrative of success, conquest and achievement—a truly original feature of the narrative. What happens when nature has died? The novel imagines the ensuing wasteland—ecological and moral.

Moreover, the novelistic imagination is haunted by the strange ghosts begotten by images of the “richness of a lost world” which the father tries to recapture and recreate for his son. The only way to retrieve this Eurydice is through books since he can less and less rely on his own memories:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. 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. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (89)

Books containing dangerous, transgressive or forbidden information have been part of Gothic props. They contain secret knowledge and haunt the current imagination as a potential alternative—the road no longer taken, to adapt Robert Frost’s image. The gothicization of the book in *The Road* speaks to the disappearance of the book in our contemporary culture and the problem of transmission. In the novel, the book is a link to the world of the past; it still exists as a physical object, but the knowledge it presents has been rendered powerless or has vanished. The signified that it refers to has disappeared. Yet its content is transgressive in the sense that it provides a counter narrative to the current chaos where human horror prevails. The child indeed often refers to the books and tries to enact in *his* world what he has read about the *other* world—in particular the credo about “being the good guys” and “carrying the fire” which he repeats like a mantra to ward off his agonizing terror.

Lastly, *The Road* reprises an important Gothic feature: the failure of reason. Gothic literature began as a challenge to the hegemony of reason during the Enlightenment and the Industrial Age; in the same way, *The Road* undermines the rational certainties of our so-called posthuman era with its hubristic genesis of a super human entity destined to unseat human mortality. The novel issues a warning against unwavering rationalism. Our current Information Age, sometimes also called the “technophilic age,” has revolutionized the way knowledge is processed, stored, and communicated or shared. The imaginary world of *The Road* shows how such highly organized circuits of information quickly become both unavailable and irrelevant. What has become vital is the knowledge gathered about one’s direct physical environment—the kind of knowledge necessary for the prey to outsmart the predator. The novel dismisses the elaborate networks of knowledge to show how absurd they become in the face of extreme adversity. The survivalist minimalism imagined by *The Road* dismantles the technological apparatus that has rendered knowledge both so trivial and so necessary by proposing a grotesque replay of the predicament of the ordinary citizen. The paradigm shift proposed by *The Road* functions as a foil to the current technological and financial teleology; the

novel features the intrinsic weakness of the human against the hubris of technocratic achievements. It also repudiates the model of participation and convergence promoted by digital culture through the display of grim models of cooperation (to enslave and/or eat others). The recurring importance of sight in the novel resonates with our obsession with seeing or being seen; it evokes the cannibalistic voyeurism underlying our surveillance society (at both the individual and collective level), the gathering of data for commercial and marketing purposes.

Towards the end of the first act in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Linda Loman, referring to her husband Willie, warns her sons: "Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" (56). Her call resonates with a prophetic ring for the Willies of our time. If *The Road* is to be understood as an "apocalyptic" novel at all, it is only if we understand "apocalypse" the way Krzysztof Michalski proposes to do it—not as an event that lies in the future but, in the words of a reviewer Tamsin Shaw, "as a horror that permeates every moment of our lives"—or what some have called "a rolling apocalypse" (Shaw 56). The image of the clock stopped at 1.17 provides another image for this point of no return whose rupture echoes the effect of 9/11 on our consciousness. There is no going back to a sense of normalcy in a world that has been broken asunder, forever divided between a "before" and an "after." The allusion to past horrors—including the Holocaust, as when the child is described as "something out of a deathcamp. Starved, exhausted, sick with fear" (117)—conjures up Adorno's agonizing question: "Is poetry possible after Auschwitz?"

The world described by McCarthy features an order that turns human beings into consuming entities or consumed objects. Likewise, the globalized order functions according to the same predatory logic, feeding off humankind, from personal data consumption for marketing and advertising purposes all the way to bodily forms of enslavement through trafficking. The question raised by *The Road*'s Gothic handling of eating is: What does it mean to be human in consumer culture?⁹ Richard Gray, commenting on Wendell Berry's 1972 *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural*, notes:

In terms of the national history, Berry points out, the opposition is one of "pioneers" versus "homesteaders." On a more fundamental, ontological or theological level, it is one of "the road" versus "the wheel." The road . . . posits a linear, progressive notion of life. . . . The embodiment

⁹ See the Lilly Summer for College Teachers organized on the topic in 2014 at Xavier University, led by David J. Burns.

of the linear vision, as far as human practice is concerned, is the ruthlessness, the competitiveness and division of the global trade. (118–19)

In the novel, the road might be seen as a visual signifier of the aporia generated by progress, and a critical inquiry into its legacy. Man's insatiable thirst for knowledge has morphed into plain physical thirst and hunger, and the road has clearly led to a dead end.

With *The Road*, McCarthy's artistic expression voices the urgency of fiction to speak for reality. The novel invites its readers to renegotiate curves and turns in the way to knowledge, generating what Michalski sees, as described in the review mentioned above, as an "upheaval in our sense of meaning that follows from our awareness of impending destruction" (Shaw 56). *The Road* aims at transforming our globalized reality into a narrative and a poetic project, even indictment and warning. Attention must be paid, indeed.

Finally, McCarthy's novel thus invites us to consider the impact of globalization on literature. It resonates with the latest work done in science fiction whose main function is to address "the global capitalism's starvation of the indigenous to fatten the capitalist" in the words of scholar Lysa Rivera (416). Rivera goes on to show how Science Fiction raises an incisive question: what have we as a society done to get there?¹⁰ We should consider the importance of McCarthy's project and of SF writers, along with the achievements of other authors such as Thomas Pynchon and Margaret Atwood, to creating alternative modes of thinking. McCarthy's novel invites us to consider how the cultural work performed by the Gothic is to transform our "age of innocence" into an age of awareness.

The Road opens a path to reflect creatively on the impact of Gothic literature on real-world matters as it contributes to and challenges global regimes of economic, social and economic power. Can the "barbaric yawp" undergo the Whitmanian transformation into a perfect Song anew? Will the small human family featured in the final section of the novel make it to another road? Let us imagine, perhaps, that the last page gestures toward some faith in humankind after all.¹¹ The form of the novel, at least, exemplifies the demiurgic power of the word again—human and divine.

¹⁰ She describes how the work of visual and performance artists Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Roberto Sifuentes and Rubin Ortiz Torres "militated against anti-immigration racism in the Southland area by creating SF narratives of resistance and parody" (415).

¹¹ Different interpretations have been given about the last paragraph, in particular. See for example Trotignon 206–07, Evenson 59 and Schaub's article.

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