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The Dialectics of Mobility: Capitalism and Apocalypse in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Simon Schleusener

> There's not a lot of good news on the road. In times like these.
> Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (186)

1 In this essay, I attempt to contextualize Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* against the backdrop of the new capitalism. Consequently, *The Road* is read here as an example of what, in allusion to Lionel Trilling, might be referred to as the "neoliberal imagination."[1] This does not mean, however, that I understand McCarthy as a neoliberal writer, nor that I understand *The Road* primarily as a neoliberal novel. Indeed, throughout my essay the term "neoliberalism" is not so much used as a well-defined political ideology, but rather designates what a number of economic theorists and political scientists have termed a *mode of regulation*.[2] In the United States, this mode of regulation started to take hold in the late 1970s, becoming ever more dominant under the Reagan presidency in the early 1980s.[3] And although the neoliberal model is currently undergoing a severe crisis, it is nevertheless safe to say that it continues to exist today.[4] My argument, then, is not that *The Road* is a neoliberal novel, but that no matter how much McCarthy attempts to unmark the cultural and social space in his book, it is nevertheless in many ways marked by the conditions of neoliberalism.

2 Along these lines, the essay will focus on two aspects in particular. Firstly, it will highlight the way in which the novel engages with the theme of mobility and utilizes the classic road motif, which has a long and distinct history in American literary discourse. Secondly, it will discuss the peculiar temporality (and seeming "worldlessness") of the novel's post-apocalyptic setting, which is expressed, among other things, in the inability to think and imagine a genuine future. In this respect, my way of analyzing *The Road* is to some extent inspired by Slavoj Žižek's and Fredric Jameson's famous claim "that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (Fisher 2)—a theme to which I will return a number of times throughout the essay.

1. American Literature and the Dialectics of Mobility

3 Throughout American history, positive images and symbols of mobility constitute a key aspect of cultural discourse, ranging from the most conservative national mythology to the desire for radical alternatives. Hence, from Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" to the countercultural imagination of *Easy Rider* (1969), various forms and styles of mobility are evoked as revitalizing forces able to counter tendencies of cultural apathy, stasis, and conformity. Along these lines, the motif of the road has a long history in American literary discourse, exemplified by classic texts such as Walt Whitman's poem "Song of the Open Road," Jack London's hobo memoir *The Road* (1907), or Jack Kerouac's Beat narrative *On the Road* (1957). In his novel from 2006, Cormac McCarthy explicitly picks up on the road motif, but does so in a totally different way and context. In the novel's post-apocalyptic setting, mobility has lost all implications of transgression, discovery, and the pleasures of flight, manifesting itself instead as a means of sheer survival.

4 Hence, the use of the road motif in McCarthy's novel seems to thoroughly contradict Whitman's usage, whose "Song of the Open Road" begins with the following verses:

> Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
> Healthy, free, the world before me,
> The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose. (165)

5 Obviously, there is nothing light-hearted in McCarthy's *The Road*, and hardly a sense of freedom, health, or individual choice. Here, the road is evidently not a symbol for possibility or the pleasures of adventure and uncertainty experienced by a strong-minded and physically able individual. Rather, it seems to be the only route left in a devastated and decaying environment marked by lethal violence and destruction, leaving no viable reason for hope and no way out. Though the man and his son—the novel's two protagonists—eventually arrive at the coast by the end of the book, the road seems to literally represent a *dead end*. And this, I would argue, is not substantially contradicted by the novel's mythical ending with its vague messianic allusions and the fact that, after the death of his father, the son is taken in by a family with seemingly good intentions.[5] While the novel surely reflects on the state of grace, human kindness, and compassion against the backdrop of a wholly catastrophic and hostile environment, there is no evidence anywhere in the book that the sheer existence of such qualities—the survival of people, that is, who continue "to carry the fire" (McCarthy 298)—gives reason to hope for any positive change at large.[6] Instead, the glimmers of goodness one encounters in *The Road* are nothing more than just that: rare instances of human behavior in a setting in which the only thing to effectively hope for is the provisional postponement of death. And this, one can even detect in the survivalist discourse of the father, whose strong sense of endurance is constantly accompanied by thoughts about the inescapability of death and total extinction. At one point in the novel, the reader is told that some "part of him always wished it to be over" (163). Despite his survivalist ethos, then, the father seems to be in secret agreement with his dead wife, who, before committing suicide, explained: "We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film" (57).

6 Now, taking into account the way in which *The Road* contradicts the conventional idealization of the road motif, one can see the novel as an engagement with the more

sinister side of mobility, portraying types of imposed or forced movement rather than the "joy rides" (Kerouac 13) and ecstatic explorations in Kerouac's novel or Whitman's blissful wanderings on the open road. This, as various authors have noted, sets McCarthy's novel in relation to contemporary developments such as the refugee crisis. According to a recent estimation of the UNHCR, more than 65 million people worldwide are currently on the move, most often fleeing war, violence, poverty, political oppression, or the general hopelessness present in the countries of their origin.[7] This being the highest number ever in the history of mankind, it certainly makes sense to read *The Road* against this backdrop, thereby ascribing it with current political significance. After all, not only the man and his son explicitly identify as "refugees" (McCarthy 82), but, in a sense, every character in the book is a refugee. "In those first years," McCarthy writes, "the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing. Wearing masks and goggles, sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined aviators. Their barrows heaped with shoddy. Towing wagons or carts. Their eyes bright in their skulls. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland" (28).

7 Yet, a number of aspects of the novel seem to seriously contradict the possible analogies to the plight of refugees fleeing war, poverty, or political oppression. For instance, while it might superficially make sense to identify the novel's description of so many of its characters along the lines of Giorgio Agamben's conception of *bare life*[8]—something which Mark Steven has undertaken in an essay on "The Late World of Cormac McCarthy" (2012)—what surely contradicts Agamben's narrative is that in *The Road* there obviously is no sovereign power anymore. Instead, all there exists, on the one hand, are seemingly unprotected fugitives and, on the other, what Julian Murphet has dubbed "those prototypical visions of Freudian 'primal hordes' shambling along the roads like the very incarnation of the death drive" (122). People on both ends of the spectrum, however, are marked by a certain "becoming-animal" (Deleuze and Guattari 257), that is, a mode of existence in which the classic opposition between nature and culture has largely disappeared. Certainly, with respect to the boy's and his father's self-identification as those who "carry the fire," there is a desire to maintain certain "forms" and "ceremonies" that might help to at least uphold the *memory* of civilized life[9]—a task, however, which becomes increasingly difficult to accomplish, for, as the narrator explains, the "names of things [are] slowly following those things into oblivion" (McCarthy 93).

8 With regard to my initial question, it is thus not any sovereign power in *The Road* that creates the precarious status of refugees on the move; it is rather the earth itself, which seems to be in a state of complete decay, having lost most of its resources and potentials. As there is hardly any fertile vegetation left, the only way to survive is either to become a cannibal, or, like the man and his son, live mostly of canned goods, the rare remains of the pre-catastrophic era. In this regard, the context of McCarthy's apocalyptic scenario appears to be ontological or geo-philosophical rather than immediately political.[10] Consequently, the reader finds out hardly anything about the catastrophic event that occurred in the past, being left with almost nothing but the brutal reality of "McCarthy's blighted landscape," which "offers only death" (Steven 69).

9 Insofar as the novel's setting is a post-political territory, then, in which the divisions are not anymore those between the included and the excluded, the sovereign power

and bare life, or citizens and refugees, but rather those between (equally animalized) cannibals and their prey, the analogy to the contemporary refugee question has its limits. Therefore, I seek to contextualize McCarthy's refusal to idealize mobility somewhat differently, namely by placing the novel in the context of the new capitalism and the neoliberal culture of movement and time.

10 As sociologists like Richard Sennett and Hartmut Rosa have demonstrated, the culture of the new capitalism is effectively marked by a significant *acceleration* of traditional temporal structures (Rosa) and a turn toward more and more *flexibility* in all aspects of social life (Sennett). Under the conditions of contemporary global capitalism, mobility thus seems to have lost its cultural value as a means to escape from repressive social assemblages and overstep rigid boundaries, since mobility itself has become the general rule to which almost everybody, in one way or another, has to conform. By thoroughly inverting the motif of the road, then, what McCarthy's novel brings to the fore is a general discontent about the dated practice of naively idealizing mobility as an oppositional tool to escape authority, work, or the overall hardships of social life—especially in an environment in which all of these things have themselves become increasingly more fluid and flexible. In this regard, one can see a number of parallels between *The Road* and novels such as J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973) or Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) (both of which have been turned into movies by David Cronenberg). For, in a sense, all of these works, in their very different methods, can be read as revisionary reflections on the status of mobility in the context of modern-day capitalism.

11 This does not mean, however, that I see *The Road* as an actual attack on the cultural coordinates of the new capitalism, because, in another sense, the novel seems to thoroughly remain within the confines of the neoliberal imagination. Along these lines, I now seek to discuss to what extent *The Road* eventually exemplifies Slavoj Žižek's and Fredric Jameson's famous claim that it is easier today to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.[11]

2. The End of Capitalism as the End of the World

12 A useful way of approaching this theme would be through the conceptual lens of Mark Fisher's notion of capitalist realism. As Fisher explains: "The slogan" (that it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism) "captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). In this context, Fisher mentions "dystopian films and novels," which once "were exercises in such acts of imagination—the disasters they depicted acting as a narrative pretext for the emergence of different ways of living." Today, however, the world that is projected in such works "seems more like an extrapolation or exacerbation of ours than an alternative to it" (2). With regard to *The Road*, one could thus argue that the world that is portrayed here appears less like an imagination of alterity and difference, but instead seems like the delineation of a Hobbesian "state of nature" extrapolated from the basis of our own experience of dog-eat-dog capitalism. Like other capitalist realist works, *The Road* could be said, then, to display the form of an "anti-mythical-myth," claiming (as Fisher remarks about gangster films and reality hip hop) "to have stripped the world of sentimental illusions

and seen it for 'what it really is': a Hobbesian war of all against all, a system of perpetual exploitation and generalized criminality" (10-11). This "realism"—which renders naïve and illusionary any faith in viable change—is echoed in the boy's and his father's continuous use of the phrase "okay," signaling the generalized acceptance of the assumption that there is no alternative. As the father explains: "Okay means okay. It doesnt mean we negotiate another deal tomorrow ... There is no other deal. This is it" (McCarthy 175-176).

13 While I would not go so far as seeing the "late world" portrayed in *The Road* simply as the mirror image of the world of "late capitalism," I do believe that some of the novel's aspects can in fact be fruitfully linked to certain themes and motifs of the neoliberal imagination. Among these are the post-political space the novel opens up by presenting an imaginary reenactment of the state of nature, in which the only human conflict left is the one between the self-styled "good guys" and the cannibalistic "bad guys"; its ruling out of any alternatives to the decaying world it presents (besides some rather vague eschatological hints); its inability to imagine a different (or even *any kind* of) future; and the general sense it conveys that somehow all possibilities have been used up and the world at large is in a state of universal exhaustion.

14 If we place *The Road* in this context, its dystopian vision seems like a dark replica of Francis Fukuyama's famous "end of history" thesis.[12] Obviously, while Fukuyama, witnessing the end of Soviet-style communism, was generally positive and optimistic about what he perceived as the global victory of capitalism and liberal democracy, *The Road*'s version of "the end of history" comes in a very different outfit. What both views have in common, though, is that they look at human development from the perspective of a possible ending.[13] But while Fukuyama judges the alleged demise of totalitarianism favorably, McCarthy—perhaps under the impression that the victory of capitalist democracy has by no means prevented the emergence of one crisis scenario after another[14] —transforms this relatively happy ending of history into the dark revelation of a global apocalypse. If we accept this analogy, then, for a writer like Cormac McCarthy it does indeed seem to be easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. Or more precisely: to thematize the global crisis of capitalism seems possible only by way of a vision of the end of history, and ultimately, the end of the world.

15 In what follows, I would like to mention just a few examples of how this "sense of an ending"—to allude to Frank Kermode here—is actually conveyed in *The Road*. In terms of temporality, there is the generalized sense of a certain "pastness" that characterizes the time-space in which the boy and his father move around. Moving through the ashes of the former civilization, their survival completely depends upon finding remains of the past in deserted houses or dugouts, most importantly preserved food or drinks in cans, but also rusty tools and gadgets that have survived the unnamed catastrophe. In this fixation on the past, *The Road* seems to exemplify Franco "Bifo" Berardi's notion of "the end of the future." As Berardi explains, with the onset of the neoliberal era, the future-orientation of progressive modernity has started to become replaced by what he terms a "*dystopian imagination*" (17), interrupted only by the vague utopianism of cyberculture, which by now, however, has lost much of its future-optimism and attraction as well.[15] In *The Road*, one can observe that time does certainly not stop, but that the concept of the future seems to have almost completely vanished. As McCarthy writes in his characteristically clipped prose: "No lists of things to be done. The day

providential to itself. The hour. There is no later" (56). With respect to this negation of futurity, it is significant that, besides the boy, the novel hardly features any children—according to Lee Edelman the prime symbols of any politics oriented toward the future. [16]

16 Now, it would be possible, of course, to argue that the boy is fulfilling precisely this symbolic function, embodying a sense of futurity and a "glimmer of hope" (Dorson 185). The point is, however, that in a more general sense these qualities are remarkably absent in the novel's portrayal of post-apocalyptic life, which is why the boy's existence is clearly mythologized at times. In other words, if we choose to take the novel's vague messianism for granted, then we can always point to the boy as the symbol of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 2) or the survival of hope in even the most hostile environment. If, however, we concentrate on how this environment is actually portrayed—seeing the messianic solution merely as a way of compensating for the absence of any solution—then we are faced with the picture of a worldless world, in which no hope and no collective sense of the future exists anymore.[17] With regard to this anti-futurist sentiment, *The Road*'s most striking gesture is thus a scene which contains what is perhaps the novel's cruelest image: a "charred human infant" roasted on a spit by a group of three men and a woman, who, apparently, had just given birth (212).

17 I want to continue with another image, though, one that is less brutal but equally striking. The image I mean is that of the son drinking what is his first—and presumably also his last—can of Coca-Cola, a can which the father found in the ashes of a former supermarket. In a sense, the mere fact alone that the drink is mentioned by its brand name seems noteworthy in a novel which has so often been categorized by the general "namelessness" (Murphet 119) of its characters, places, objects, and even its all-pervasive catastrophe. Similar, then, to the mentioning of the two protagonists' "grocery cart" (McCarthy 3) early on in the novel, the can of Coca-Cola is an item that somewhat helps the reader's orientation in time and space, reconnecting *The Road*'s post-apocalyptic wasteland with the context of late capitalism and American consumer culture. Yet, as much as the reader is familiar with such an all-too-common commodity, the son is most certainly not:

> What is it, Papa?
> It's a treat. For you. ...
> The boy took the can. It's bubbly, he said.
> Go ahead.
> He looked at his father and then tilted the can and drank. He sat there thinking about it. It's really good, he said.
> Yes. It is.
> You have some, Papa.
> I want you to drink it.
> You have some.
> He took the can and sipped it and handed it back. You drink it, he said. Let's just sit here.
> It's because I wont ever get to drink another one, isnt it?
> Ever's a long time.
> Okay, the boy said. (22-23)

18 Among other things, what is striking about this passage is how the Coke, as maybe the last of its kind, is elevated here from an everyday product of mass consumer culture to a singular item, a rare artifact surrounded by a mystical aura. On the one hand, one can

thus detect "a gesture of nostalgic reminiscence" (Donnelly 70) here, or even more so, the fetishization of an iconic consumer item. On the other hand, however, McCarthy may also call on us to engage more carefully with mass produced objects and commodities, raising the question of whether our behavior as consumers might change were we to think that each Coke we get to drink could be our last one.[18] I would prefer yet a different interpretation, though, arguing that with the portrayal of what might well be the last Coca-Cola on earth, McCarthy does in fact touch upon a possible end of capitalism in this scene. Yet, what is characteristic about the way in which he engages with this possibility is that he does so only by way of simultaneously portraying the end of the world. As is generally the case in post-apocalyptic fiction, however, "the end is never really the end" (Steven 71)—and so the journey continues. It is not too surprising, then, that the two protagonists do indeed encounter another Coca-Cola later in the novel, when they discover a hidden bunker filled with boxes of canned food and drinks (McCarthy 157). This incident, in which the Coke is mentioned only in passing, somewhat contradicts the earlier singularization of the item, reminding the reader of the sheer magnitude of serial mass production. In other words, even when the world comes to an end, one may always find a lost can of Coca-Cola, hidden somewhere in the ruins and ashes of industrial society.

3. Conclusion

19 In the introduction to his book *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (2015), Paul Mason writes the following: "All readings of human history have to allow for the possibility of collapse. Popular culture is obsessed with this: it haunts us in the zombie film, the disaster movie, in the post-Apocalyptic wasteland of *The Road* or *Elysium*. But why should we, as intelligent beings, not form a picture of the ideal life, the perfect society?" (xxi). While Mason most likely refers to the film version of *The Road* here, his question could equally apply to the novel. Yet, given McCarthy's reputation as a writer with nihilistic tendencies (see Dorson 146), the possibility of him portraying "the ideal life" or "the perfect society" seems like a rather far-fetched expectation. What is noteworthy about *The Road*, then, is not the novel's darkness or pessimism per se, but the fact that it seems to be able to only express its discontent with the destructive tendencies of the contemporary world through the rather conventional eschatological structures of apocalyptic narrative. Of course, it ultimately remains speculative whether or not McCarthy was at all inspired by ecological disaster, the nuclear threat, or socioeconomic developments (the book was published about a year before the beginning of the subprime mortgage crisis in the US). But the question is not really about McCarthy and *The Road* alone. Indeed, it is an all-too-common feature of today's popular culture that such political issues and crisis scenarios are oftentimes communicated via the patterns of apocalyptic narrative, something which may not only convey the false assumption that we are actually "living in the end times" (Žižek), but which also runs the risk of eventually depoliticizing these issues.[19]

20 The tendency to use the patterns of eschatological discourse and apocalyptic narrative in order to address the problems of a crisis-ridden present is particularly common in the genre of dystopian science fiction and disaster films. *Soylent Green*, for example, Richard Fleischer's ecological sci-fi thriller from 1973 (fittingly the year of the oil crisis), clearly engages with the environmental issues outlined in the Club of Rome's

influential "Limits to Growth" report, which was published a year earlier. So while *Soylent Green* and other dystopian films of the 1970s pick up on the growing environmental consciousness of their time, Mark Fisher argues that, in later years, the genre has increasingly been used to address what "is specific to late capitalism" (1). As an example, Fisher draws special attention to Alfonso Cuarón's science fiction drama *Children of Men*, a movie that came out in 2006, the same year in which *The Road* was published.[20] Obviously, to compare McCarthy's *The Road* with a film like *Children of Men* is difficult for a number of reasons. But leaving all aesthetic differences and questions regarding media specificity aside for a moment, it is interesting to see how the two works do indeed share a number of aspects that seem to be reflective of the neoliberal imagination. Here is what Fisher says about the film:

> The catastrophe in *Children of Men* is neither waiting down the road, nor has it already happened. Rather, it is being lived through. There is no punctual moment of disaster; the world doesn't end with a bang, it winks out, unravels, gradually falls apart. What caused the catastrophe to occur, who knows; its cause lies long in the past, so absolutely detached from the present as to seem like the caprice of a malign being: a negative miracle, a malediction which no penitence can ameliorate. Such a blight can only be eased by an intervention that can no more be anticipated than was the onset of the curse in the first place. Action is pointless; only senseless hope makes sense … *Children of Men* connects with the suspicion that the end has already come, the thought that it could well be the case that the future harbors only reiteration and re-permutation. Could it be that there are no breaks, no 'shocks of the new' to come? Such anxieties tend to result in a bi-polar oscillation: the 'weak messianic' hope that there must be something new on the way lapses into the morose conviction that nothing new can ever happen. (2-3)

21 Now, despite their different plots and settings, it is remarkable that both works express very similar attitudes regarding the future, the process of decay, and the cause of the catastrophe. Moreover, both works seem to agree on the general assessment that there is no alternative: "Action is pointless; only senseless hope makes sense." In many ways, Fisher's qualification of *Children of Men* therefore applies to *The Road* as well: "Watching *Children of Men*, we are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (2).

22 I would like to conclude my essay by sticking with this phrase just a little bit longer. Although it is sometimes attributed to Žižek (see note 11), the sentence—which most likely was inspired by H. Bruce Franklin's 1979 article "What Are We to Make of J.G. Ballard's Apocalypse?"[21]—has been used by Jameson much earlier. And while Jameson is typically considered a theorist of the "Utopian impulse" (*Political Unconscious* 278) rather than the *dystopian* imagination on which my essay has focused, he is also among the authors who first drew attention to late capitalism's anti-Utopian tendencies.[22] Probably the first time Jameson makes use of the above-quoted phrase is in *The Seeds of Time* from 1994. Here he writes: "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations" (xii). Roughly a decade later, though, in an essay on the architect Rem Koolhaas, Jameson modifies the sentence, now explaining: "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" ("Future City" 76).[23] With regard to *The Road*, a somewhat similar point has been made by Mark Steven,

who sees parallels in the portrayal of the "late world" of McCarthy's novel and the "worldlessness" attributed to late capitalism by authors such as Žižek and Badiou.[24] While I highlighted some of these similarities as well, my essay made a slightly different point. For *The Road* does not use the end of the world to imagine capitalism per se. Rather, the novel conceives of a version of the end of capitalism, which indeed—in keeping with the neoliberal imagination—coincides with the end of history, and eventually, the end of the world.

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Soylent Green (1973). Dir. Richard Fleischer. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

The Road (2009). Dir. John Hillcoat. Dimension Films.

Žižek! (2005). Dir. Astra Taylor. Zeitgeist Films.

NOTES

1. See Trilling's essay collection *The Liberal Imagination* (1950). The term "neoliberal imagination" has been used by several authors before me. See, for example, Frow (1999) and Michaels (2005).
2. See especially Aglietta (2001).
3. See Harvey (2009).
4. On the crisis of neoliberalism, see, for instance, Duménil/Lévy (2011), Wallerstein et al. (2013), Mason (2015), and Streeck (2016). On the continuation of neoliberal policies after the financial crisis of 2008, see Crouch (2011) and Mirowski (2013).
5. According to James Dorson, "the faint messianic hope in the novel's ending" can be understood as constitutive for *The Road*'s overall success on the book market: "the religious motif for conservative readers, the glimmer of hope for liberal readers. It seems fair to assume that without this unlikely *deus ex machina*, *The Road* would not have been selected for Oprah's Book Club, and presumably would not even have won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction" (184-185).
6. It is true, however, that in a number of passages the father refers to his son as a God or a godlike figure (see McCarthy 3, 78, and 183). Hence, if one would follow a strictly

theological interpretation of *The Road*, the novel's ending—in which the son is told "that the breath of God was his breath" (306)—might indeed signal "the second coming of Christ" (Grindley 13). Yet, as Sebastian Domsch has argued, the "optimism" of the novel's ending can only be valid in the realm of religion, since nothing in the narrative indicates that the catastrophic "stasis of the material world" (Domsch 185; my translation) will at all be reversed. It seems, then, that McCarthy's use of myth and the language of religious redemption does not represent any viable solution, but, on the contrary, is meant to make up for the absence of any solution.

7. For more on this, see the UNHCR's Global Trends Report (2016) on "Forced Displacement in 2015."

8. See Agamben (1998).

9. See McCarthy: "Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (77-78).

10. Among others, Mark Seltzer has noticed this ontological dimension of the novel, which he relates to its "speculative realism." There is, for example, a pronounced engagement in *The Road* with "the nature of things apart from us—and apart from how we see them (cold, autistic, alien, uncoupled, implacable, a world unheard of—these are some of McCarthy's terms for this)" (Seltzer 190).

11. This slogan has sometimes been attributed to Slavoj Žižek, for in a documentary film from 2005 he states the following: "Think about the strangeness of today's situation: Thirty, forty years ago, we were still debating about what the future will be: communist, fascist, capitalist, whatever. Today, nobody even debates these issues. We all silently accept global capitalism is here to stay. On the other hand, we are obsessed with cosmic catastrophes: the whole life on earth disintegrating, because of some virus, because of an asteroid hitting the earth, and so on. So the paradox is that it's much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism" (see *Žižek!*). A few years later, in *Living in the End Times* (2011), Žižek repeats a version of the slogan, but acknowledges that Fredric Jameson has used it before him (334). I will say more about the slogan's genealogy—and on Jameson's usage —at a later point in this essay.

12. Fukuyama first articulated his ideas on the topic in an essay which was published in *The National Interest* in 1989. *The End of History and the Last Man*, his more comprehensive book on the subject, came out in 1992.

13. See Fukuyama: "And if we are now at a point where we cannot imagine a world substantially different from our own, in which there is no apparent or obvious way in which the future will represent a fundamental improvement over our current order, then we must also take into consideration the possibility that History itself might be at an end" (*End of History* 51).

14. One might think here of various kinds of ecological disasters, the long-time effects of climate change, the ongoing nuclear threat, permanent warfare and global terrorism, the continuous flow of refugees, several breakdowns of the financial system, and the constantly increasing socioeconomic inequality.

15. See Berardi: "A *new utopia* appeared during the last decade of the century that trusted in the future: *cyberculture*, which has given way to the imagination of a global mind, hyperconnected and infinitely powerful. This last utopia ended in depression, after the sudden shift in perspective that followed the 9/11 event, and it has finally produced a growing system of virtual life and actual death, of virtual knowledge and actual war. The artistic imagination, since that day, seems unable to escape the

territory of fear and of despair. Will we ever find a path beyond the limits of the *Dystopian Kingdom*?" (17).

16. See Edelman: "[W]e are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child" (11). Edelman's own queer studies perspective is of course explicitly directed against this logic. Accordingly, he argues that "reproductive futurism" imposes "an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity" (2).

17. Accordingly, it was due to the bleak prospects of raising a child in such a world that the boy's mother committed suicide (see McCarthy, 57-60).

18. In his study on the "practice of misuse" in American consumer culture, Raymond Malewitz makes a similar argument. Reflecting on McCarthy's description of how the father opens the can of Coca-Cola, he writes: "McCarthy chooses to narrate the action precisely ('he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it'), and in so doing calls attention to the curious singularity of this repetitive action. In other words, the father and son misuse the can of Coke, turning a disposable object into a ritualistic thing. The bizarre sanctification of consumption, in turn, suggests that the material thing has begun to break free from its commodity status. As the thing gathers the father and son within the shared space of ritual, it also emanates a greater authenticity or aura: this can of Coke appears to be the last of its kind" (188).

19. On the problems of such a "catastrophism"—particularly if it is used as a political strategy—see the essays in Lilley et al. (2012). Besides the question of how politically useful it is to link, for instance, the most pressing environmental issues of our time to a possible "end of the world," such a scenario is also not very realistic. For even if the worst possible consequences that scientists currently attribute to climate change will turn out to come true, this would nevertheless mean that humans will most likely have to live with these consequences—no matter how devastating they are—for thousands of years to come. Perhaps this prognosis would even serve as a more effective wake-up call than the conventional logic of apocalyptic narrative, which all too often couples the paralyzing fear of a coming catastrophe with elements of arbitrary hope for redemption or some kind of magical rebirth.

20. The film is based on a novel by P.D. James, which was published in 1992.

21. See Franklin: "But Ballard's failure to understand the source of this collapse, or rather his failure to carry forward the understanding he reached in 'The Subliminal Man,' leaves him mistaking the end of capitalism for the end of the world" (103). I encountered the possible connection between this text and Jameson's statement in Beaumont (79, 88).

22. See, for instance, Chapter 6 in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), "Utopianism After the End of Utopia" (154-180). For a more recent reflection on the dystopian propensities of late capitalism, see Jameson's "An American Utopia:" "We have seen a marked diminution in the production of new utopias over the last decades (along with an overwhelming increase in all manner of conceivable dystopias, most of which look monotonously alike)" (1).

23. In his essay "An American Utopia," Jameson has returned to the phrase once again, stating: "It is easier, someone once said, to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism: and with that the idea of a revolution overthrowing capitalism seems to have vanished" (3).

24. See Steven: "Our moment lacks its world because the splintered shards of meaningful existence have ceased to register within a globalized, superstructural expression. Now, 'the planet's inhabitants' and the cultural worlds they would otherwise inhabit slip through the desiccated syntax of 'postmodernism' and into the lexical grid of 'the market.'... With this chapter I argue that on the pages of Cormac McCarthy's apocalypse novel, *The Road*, the cultural logic of worldlessness is first allegorized in narrative and then turned back against itself in generic form and characterology" (64). For the most part, Steven refers to Badiou's book *Polemics* (2006) and Žižek's *The Parallax View* (2006) here.

ABSTRACTS

In the post-apocalyptic setting of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006), a father and his son "push down the road a battered shopping cart, containing their bare provisions, on a thoroughly consumed earth" (Seltzer 189). Despite the fact that the novel seems to be situated in an indistinct no-man's-land, marked by a curious absence of time and history, this essay argues that it is indeed worthwhile to historicize *The Road*. By placing the novel in the context of the new capitalism, the article explores the ways in which McCarthy's treatment of mobility deviates from previous American road narratives, which typically celebrate the pleasures and possibilities of movement and flight. Concentrating on the novel's dystopian "catastrophism," the essay will further investigate its relation to temporality, history, and the future.

INDEX

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, Capitalism, Apocalypse, Dystopia, Mobility, Future, Catastrophe

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