

Catastrophe and its Aftermath in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Abstract

*This paper focuses on the less exceptionalist images of America in McCarthy's *The Road* and DeLillo's *White Noise*. The two novels evoke a world dominated by violence, catastrophe, on its way to the final, the post-apocalyptic white noise and the human resistance over death as contemporary aspects of the 21st century.*

*DeLillo's 1985 novel shows features of mass manipulation and simulation, such as those in the chapter 'The Airborne Toxic Event', largely speculated by the media. The novel explores the theme of death as a metaphor for the "white noise" of the contemporary world. DeLillo's novel describes several responses, more or less adequate ways of coping with it. The metaphor of "white noise" might be seen as dramatizing death in contrast with an intangible transcendence in a world fed up with confusing images promoted by an ever more powerful force associated with the mass-media. Besides, the novel explores what Randy Laist calls in his *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's Novels* the "semiotic influence of television" (2010: 90), in which the characters are trapped in the center of televisual consumer disclosure.*

*Another representation of catastrophic death is conveyed in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. The novel offers an even more chaotic, post-apocalyptic image of America in parallel with the portrayal of an affectionate father-son relationship. The characters of the novel plough through a desolate landscape strewn with ash and devoid of living animals and vegetation, as a metaphor for the loss of hope in a world that has lost its bearings, where traces of humanity still glimmer here and there, without many chances of survival. The paper reimagines exceptionalist America in exceptional circumstances, but these circumstances are far from being beneficial for anyone, American or otherwise, due to the American image of power as being overshadowed by nihilism and desolation.*

Key words: *exceptionalism, image of power, desolate landscape, white noise*

This paper aims to examine how the representation of catastrophe, nihilism and the ephemerality of human nature are depicted as a characteristic of American postmodern literature, such as in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. The former expresses a post-apocalyptic

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image of the United States of America, portraying also the relationship between a father and his son and their struggle to survive in a desolate place. The latter represents features of mass manipulation in which the theme of death is used as a metaphor for the "white noise", the nothingness and superficiality of the contemporary world.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* describes the journey south taken by a young boy and his father after an unnamed catastrophe has struck the world. The man and the boy, who also remain unnamed throughout the entire novel, travel through the rough terrain of the south-eastern United States. The conditions they face are devastating: rotted corpses, landscapes destroyed by fire, abandoned towns and houses. These two travellers are among the few living human beings remaining on earth, who have not been driven to committing murder or cannibalism.

The novel begins with the man and boy in the woods, as the two of them are making their journey along the road. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic world, date and place unnamed, though the reader can assume that the place is set in the United States because the man tells the boy that they are walking the "state roads" (McCarthy 2006: 43).

If we are to refer to Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy in his "The Parable of the Madman", human nature is no longer a creation of God since God itself became a "divine decomposition". Nietzsche's famous quote "Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (Nietzsche 1882: 181) suggests the ephemerality of divinity and its creation, the fact that human nature is transitory and so its belief in God. This idea is represented at the very beginning of the novel when the father from *The Road* speaks his first words: "If he is not the word of God, God never spoke" (McCarthy 2006: 5). In other words, the man declares that his son is the word of God or that God never spoke and this ambiguity presides throughout the novel. The man's statement suggests that either his son is the word of God or that the universe has lost its creator, God.

McCarthy also chooses to use no quotation marks in dialogue and he leaves out the apostrophes. Because the novel is a post-apocalyptic story, the absence of these punctuation marks might serve as a way for McCarthy to indicate that in this new world, remnants of the old world like electricity, running water and humanity no longer exist or they exist in very limited amounts.

Despite their misfortune, the man and the child remain determined to survive, reaffirming to themselves that they are the "good guys" who do not seek to harm others. Unfortunately, the father's health worsens as they

travel and by the time they reach the ocean, he is near death. He continually coughs up blood, and the two are forced to move at ever slowing rates each day. Finally, he dies in the woods lying next to his son in the middle of the night. The boy remains by his side for several days after his father's death but eventually he meets a kind family who invite him to join them.

What links McCarthy's novel to the principles of civilization is the fact that it contains both a perceivable moral code and a view about what makes life meaningful despite all the hardship. What relates *The Road* to catastrophe and the decline and disaffection of civilization is its story and the faith of its characters.

As related to Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud transfers the intra-psychic conflict between the ego and the id, the pleasure principle and the reality principle, the unconscious and the conscious mind etc. that he had analyzed in his psychoanalytical writings over to the domain of human civilization. Civilization itself comes to be defined as a space of conflict or as an extension into cultural community of the tensions that stigmatize the individual psyche. In this sense, Freud shares general cultural pessimism or anti-modernism, a kind of scepticism about the accomplishments of civilization. He recalls three sources of human suffering:

- A. The human body: it is fragile, weak, mortal; the body causes pain; it is unavoidable; people cannot overcome the frailty of their bodies and will never control nature completely.
- B. The world: the superiority of nature; natural catastrophes; people's inability to control nature; nature as necessity.
- C. Social relations: society, social legislation. These two limit the satisfaction of human nature's pleasure; social relations should be under human control. People cannot explain why they cannot dispense with social suffering, why they cannot control their social interactions in such a way that they do not avoid the greatest displeasure for all.

Therefore, one can attest that the reason why we cannot dispense with social displeasure is because a piece of nature lies behind social conflict. Moreover, according to Freud's theory, common feelings are regarded as features of civilized human nature. *The Road* is also an example of how

human feelings abandon the human mind and are replaced by the “instinct of destruction” (Freud 1962: 69).

Set sometime in the future after a global catastrophe, *The Road* chronicles a father and a son as they tread along a forsaken patch of highway peopled by marauders and cannibals. *The Road* can also be viewed as a possible aftermath of the post-9/11 world in which civilization becomes a catastrophe. The post-apocalyptic setting plays upon the public’s fear of terrorism, pandemics, genocide and weapons of mass destruction. The desolate landscapes stand for a wasteland in which life deserted: “Trees as dead as any. He picked up one of the heavy leaves and crushed it in his hand to powder and let the powder sift through his fingers” (McCarthy 2006: 209).

The landscapes are filled with destruction, fear of death, death itself dominating what once was full of life:

“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” (McCarthy 2006: 138).

Despair and the fight for survival dominate their journey into darkness and fear. The travellers were hunted by cannibals and they could only hide in the forest, waiting for them to vanish:

“They left the cart in the woods and he checked the rotation of the rounds in the cylinder. The wooden and the true. They stood listening. The smoke stood vertically in the still air. No sound of any kind. The leaves were soft from the recent rains and quiet underfoot. He turned and looked at the boy. The small dirty face wide with fear. They circled the fire at a distance, the boy holding on to his hand. He crouched and put his arm around him and they listened for a long time” (McCarthy 2006: 210).

Cormac McCarthy’s early novels were set in Tennessee, whilst his later move to El Paso resulted in the extension of his interest in Texas and the Mexican borderlands for his later works. For McCarthy, these lands largely symbolized the decline of the mythology of American ideals of frontier and of the civilizing of the wilderness, with his lyrical descriptions of the landscape and nature counterpointing the decay of the rural past and the ever-present evil in his stories: “Evil hovers over the corpus of McCarthy’s writings, like a vulture, waiting to descend” (Welsh 2010: 88).

McCarthy's later novels also show his exploration of the inter-cultural issues and ethnicity of the Southwest, together with the decline of the myths of American pastoral utopianism.

The Road appears to be a significant departure for McCarthy involving the desperate quest of a father and son to survive an unexplained, and seemingly global, disaster. In *The Road*, the erasure of history and civilization is placed in the near future, whereas all of McCarthy's earlier works are placed in the past.

Death and the spectre of death pervade *The Road* from the onset through descriptions of the landscape, the protagonists' struggle to survive and the constant threats of murder and starvation. The earth is already steeped in death and ashes. Most living creatures and plants have not survived the disaster that has destroyed civilization. For example, cows are extinct and the boy has never before seen birds or fish: "On the hillsides old crops dead and flattened. The barren ridgeline trees raw and black in the rain" (McCarthy 2006: 18).

John Cant agrees in his *McCarthy, and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* that in *The Road* "we are present in another of McCarthy's allegorical worlds". He suggests that *The Road* can be seen to depict modern America and by implication the whole of the Western world as literally and metaphorically a waste land, with a rural past as corrupt and devalued; he further argues that there is a continuity throughout McCarthy's works that depicts the failure of the "grand narrative" of American Exceptionalism (Cant 2008: 268).

Also, Lydia Cooper suggests a different interpretation of *The Road* as a quest to find the lost holy grail of Jesus. She echoes others who see the novel as a response to an "immediate and visceral fear of cataclysmic doom after in the US 9/11" (Cooper 2011: 221). Cooper questions whether human beings deserve to survive or whether the decline of the West and America has gone apart from redemption. She suggests that the constant reference to "carrying the fire" in the novel is a metaphor for the practice of civility and ethics that seem to be totally endangered throughout the novel. *The Road* depicts a nightmare world of fire and ash as a visual metaphor for death and cultural collapse. Cooper also describes *The Road* as "a viscerally realistic wasteland" (Cooper 2011: 221) and also sees the devastation as a metaphor for internal corruption.

What Ely, the only person with whom the protagonists have contact says: "There is no God and we are his prophets" (McCarthy 2006: 143) suggests that he and others are there to preach the central message of the

reality of their world: that it is the only world. Prophets are necessary in order to correct the usual ways of the world. If the atheists are prophets, it is because they are correcting an error such as human hope. In this view, humans shape civilization and do not possess any divine comprehension of life or of the universe. To Ely, it seems that the universe is so indifferent to humans that humans need to learn this basic lesson in order to confront reality.

McCarthy points out to the readers the vulnerability of the human nature--the fire of human compassion is all too easily extinguished when it encounters adversity.

In Don DeLillo's novels, such as *White Noise* and *Libra*, simulation stands for a symbol of forsaken reality, a manner of manipulation of the masses, the inability of the human mind to grasp the trickiness of various power games.

Catastrophe, human vulnerability, simulacra and chaos are also suggested in Don DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*, which stages a primal scene of the electronic age. The Gladneys have their eyes captivated by the TV screen, taking in image after image of "floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes" (DeLillo 1986: 64). The scene is familiar enough, but there is something arresting about the enthusiasm of these media consumers for all things catastrophic: "Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, and more sweeping", so narrates Professor Jack Gladney (DeLillo 1986: 64).

The "instinct of destruction" Sigmund Freud recalls in his *Civilization and its Discontents* recurs in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, as well. Throughout his novel, especially in the second part of the novel calamities are perceived by the characters as events that give them the awareness that life is real and intense and not monotonous and useless, as it is presented in the first part of the novel.

White Noise explores several themes that emerged during the mid-to-late twentieth century, e.g., rampant consumerism, media saturation, novelty academic intellectualism, underground conspiracies, the disintegration and reintegration of the family, human-made disasters, and the potentially regenerative nature of human violence. The novel's style is characterized by a heterogeneity that utilizes different tones, styles, and voices that have the effect of yoking together terror and wild humour as the essential tone of contemporary America. Also, DeLillo's *White Noise* emphasises the political influence on people, as the ultimate force of

manipulation, corruption, invented reality and destructive power of simulation.

The TV in *White Noise*, especially in the first part of the novel can be viewed as a direct means of simulation offering a hyper reality to people, the main characters of the novel who perceive virtual reality as being real.

“You have to learn how to look. You have to open yourself to the data. TV offers incredible amounts of psychic data. It opens ancient memories of world birth. It welcomes us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern. There is light, there is sound...look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles...the medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently” (DeLillo 1986: 49).

What makes disasters so fascinating, so thrilling, so involving? The answer will be that the visual media turns *all* events into entertainment and there is the human cathartic need for consuming such news. *White Noise*, to the extent that it is a story about a disaster, “an airborne toxic event,” is a symptom of the culture of calamity. It also offers a diagnosis. Troubled by the inevitability of death, haunted by post nuclear anxieties about impending technological and environmental annihilation, the novel presents disasters as an expression of existential anxiety, as an entirely natural response to the prospect of personal and collective abolishment.

The fact that anxieties and desires fuel an appetite for spectacles of destruction is especially significant precisely because disasters thoroughly present themselves to the reader as spectacles.

In the novel, the toxic event first started as a curiosity for the Gladneys then it emerged as being an image of destruction inflicting fear and death:

“The enormous dark mass moved like some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings. We weren't sure how to react. It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low, packed with chlorides, benzines, phenols, hydrocarbons, or whatever the precise toxic content. But it was also spectacular, part of the grandness of a sweeping event, like the vivid scene in the switching yard or the people trudging across the snowy overpass with children, food, belongings, a tragic army of the dispossessed” (DeLillo 1986: 127).

For the main protagonist of the novel, the calamity or the “airborne toxic event” is the proof that life occurs unexpectedly: “Let him bloom, if that’s what he’s doing” says his father, “in the name of mischance, dread,

and random disaster". The protagonist is transformed from spectator to actor, exhilarated with a powerful sense of self: "Was it possible that out of the turmoil and surge of this dreadful event he would learn to make his way in the world?" (DeLillo 1986: 131).

White Noise, as the title suggests it, consists of a chorus of background sounds that hum throughout the narrative. The traffic hums, Babbette hums, the supermarket is filled with endless sounds, and commercials and fragments of television shows continually interrupt the narrative.

Also, the question "Who will die first?" frequently recurs in Jack and Babbette's conversations and provides an insight into their relationship to each other. Each claims to want to die first, because the burden of living without the other would be more unbearable. The irony, however is that each is so terrified of death that they can hardly bear to live.

DeLillo properly places disasters at the centre of contemporary fields of desire, gesturing at a theory of attention for the postmodern age. The culture of calamity reveals a general psychological addiction to images and stories of disaster in our society, though this varies in significant ways across registers of class, gender, and race. There is also a decisive structural or ideological component to the American dependency on disasters.

Evoking critical aspects of the contemporary world, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* describe a world in which disasters are always happening, a world dominated by nihilism, catastrophe and the struggle for survival, the expulsive need of the human mind to believe as well as its inability to see the truth.

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