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## ARCHETYPAL MOTIFS OF RUINATION AND THE LYRICAL SURVIVAL OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CORMAC MCCARTHY'S "THE ROAD" AND ITS CINEMATIC ADAPTATION

**Summary.** The article “Archetypal Motifs of Ruination and the Lyrical Survival of the Human Spirit: A Comparative Analysis of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Its Cinematic Adaptation” examines the philosophical, symbolic, and aesthetic dimensions of the post-apocalyptic narrative created by Cormac McCarthy in his novel *The Road* and reinterpreted in the film adaptation directed by John Hillcoat, *The Road*. The study focuses on the archetype of universal collapse as a metaphor for civilizational, moral, and spiritual disintegration. The devastated landscape functions not merely as a physical setting but as a mythopoetic space reflecting humanity’s existential crisis and the erosion of cultural memory.

The analysis emphasizes that archetypal ruination operates on multiple levels: ecological destruction, the breakdown of ethical systems, and the fragmentation of language itself. McCarthy’s sparse prose, stripped punctuation, and rhythmic minimalism create a lyrical meditation on suffering and endurance. In contrast, the cinematic adaptation translates this lyricism into visual desolation, muted color palettes, and prolonged silences that externalize inner despair. While the film inevitably condenses philosophical introspection, it preserves the emotional nucleus of the narrative—the bond between father and son.

Central to both works is the concept of “carrying the fire,” symbolizing moral continuity and spiritual resilience. The paternal figure embodies sacrificial love and ethical responsibility, while the child represents hope and the possibility of renewed humanity. Thus, despite the overwhelming imagery of ruin, both the novel and the film articulate a poetics of survival. The human spirit persists not through heroism or triumph, but through compassion, memory, and relational fidelity. Ultimately, the comparative analysis demonstrates that archetypal destruction paradoxically becomes the condition for revealing the enduring lyrical core of human existence.

**Key words:** Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, archetypal ruination, human spirit, survival, cinematic adaptation.

**Problem statement.** The publication of Cormac McCarthy’s “*The Road*” in 2006 marked a transformative moment in contemporary American literature, signalling a profound shift in the trend of a writer who was previously defined by the Southern Gothic and Western genres. For university students and scholars alike, the novel offers a dense, multi-layered exploration of survival, morality, and the fragility of civilization within a framework that McCarthy himself describes as a departure from his earlier vernacular aesthetics. Awarded the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the work is frequently characterized as a post-apocalyptic odyssey, a narrative that stripped humanity down to its most fundamental elements: a father, a son, and a shopping cart of scavenged remnants. This story, emerging in the middle of the 2000s, resonates deeply with a cultural surroundings defined by post-9/11 anxieties, environmental concerns, and a burgeoning interest in the “end of history”.

McCarthy’s narrative follows an unnamed man and his son as they traverse a scorched, ashen America toward the coast in search of warmth and safety. The world they inhabit is cauterized, a landscape where the sun is obscured by grey clouds and the very trees are ashen effigies. “They were days fording that cauterized terrain... It took two days to cross that ashen scabland” [1, p.8]. “The tank beneath was filled with charcoal, pieces burned out of whole sticks and limbs in carbon effigies of the trees themselves.” [1, p.71] In this environment, the traditional markers of civilization have been eradicated, replaced by a state of nature where the living are few and the predatory “blood cults” [1] roam the roads. “He thought the bloodcults must have all consumed one another” [1, p.9] The novel functions as a modern myth, drawing upon the structures

of *The Odyssey* and the Grail Legend to elevate a survivalist narrative into a profound meditation on the “best and the worst that we are capable of”.

The subsequent 2009 film adaptation, directed by John Hillcoat and scripted by Joe Penhall, faced the formidable task of translating McCarthy’s “unfilmable” prose defined by its lack of punctuation and calculated conciseness into a visual medium. Hillcoat’s adaptation is noted for its unshakeable fidelity to the spirit of the novel, even as it navigates the inherent limitations of the cinematic form. By analysing the interplay between the book’s linguistic strategies and the film’s visual translation, this report seeks to illuminate how “*The Road*” functions as both a literary masterpiece and a significant achievement in multimedia adaptation.

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** Many European and world scholars analysed the mediality in Cormac McCarthy’s novel “*The Road*” and John Hillcoat’s movie. Among them are Chang Huitong [2], who investigated the narrative of postmodern ethics in Cormac McCarthy’s “*The Road*”, Dewei Chen [3], who analysed evolution and future trend of film adaptation art under the background of digital media, Jimena Escudero Pérez [4], who investigated the styles of extinction in Cormac McCarthy’s “*The Road*” and others.

**The purpose of the article.** This research aims to establish a link between Cormac McCarthy’s novel “*The Road*” and its film adaptation directed by John Hillcoat and scripted by Joe Penhall, to analyse similarities and divergent features in a literary masterpiece and its cinematic version. Hence, the empirical and comparative methods were used in the course of the research.

**Presentation of the main material.** Cormac McCarthy’s prose in “*The Road*” is an exercise in the subject of stylistics, frequently described by critics as laconic, deadpan, and unconventional. The author chooses not to use the quotation marks and standard punctuation. This choice helps guide the reader and speeds up the story. The absence of formal structure reflects the state of the world. As civilization dissolves, so does the grammar that once governed human interaction. The dialogue is clipped and brilliant, reflecting characters who are no longer capable of expressing basic emotions under the immense pressure of their circumstances.

This minimalist style creates a sense of immediacy and, particularly in scenes of sudden violence or discovery. For example, the discovery of the locked basement of prisoners is rendered with a bluntness that forces the reader into the same state of shock experienced by the protagonists. “They scabbled through the charred ruins of houses they would not have entered before. A corpse floating in the black water of a basement among the trash and rusting ductwork... 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.” [1, p.75] The novel’s structure lacks chapters and resembles a journal. This choice emphasizes the feeling that these are the last words of a man trying to survive in a world that has already ended. McCarthy’s language has a rhythmic quality. It employs a repetitive, almost biblical tone that adds to the mythic scale of the journey.

A key feature of the novel is the anonymity of its main characters. By referring to them simply as “the man” and “the boy,” McCarthy allows readers to see themselves or their loved ones in those roles. This technique transforms the narrative from a specific account of a father and son into a universal struggle for humanity. The lack of names represents the loss of personal history and social

identity in the post-apocalyptic void. In a world without records or society, names become useless. The man acts as a pragmatist, driven by his instinct to protect his child. The boy serves as the story’s moral guide. He is often described using religious imagery, like a golden chalice or a grail, suggesting he embodies the last remnant of goodness in a godless world. “The boy didnt stir. He sat beside him and stroked his pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god” [1, p. 43]. This dynamic creates tension between the man’s deadpan realism and the boy’s faith. This contrast centers on the theme of “carrying the fire of hope.”

The central ethical question in “*The Road*” is whether it’s possible to remain a good person in a world where moral structures have collapsed. The man often tells the boy that they are “carrying the fire,” a metaphor for preserving human empathy, civilization, and love amid total destruction. For the boy, being one of the good guys means both refusing to eat other humans and showing mercy to the Other, the strangers they meet on the road who are often just as desperate as the main characters are. “Firstly, McCarthy reversed the Grail motif and Abraham archetype in *The Road*, questioning the certainty of universal ethics and absolute faith based on the requirements of modernity with the Christian tradition... He also portrayed clear faces of the passers-by to convey the theme of the Other, so as to make the readers feel the responsibility they had to strangers. By seeing the Other and making choices independently in moral dilemmas, individuals attain postmodern moral subjectivity” [2, p. 130].

McCarthy explores this issue through postmodern ethics, marked by uncertainty and the need for independent judgment. The novel includes impersonal debates where the man and boy discuss whether they should share their meager supplies with others, like the old man Ely. These discussions encourage readers to reflect on their responsibility to strangers, even when that duty threatens their own survival. The boy embodies postmodern moral subjectivity, constantly pushing his father to acknowledge the humanity of those they encounter, acting as a mirror for the man’s own diminishing empathy.

The world of “*The Road*” is often analysed as a reflection of the state of nature described by political philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. “But the question lieth now in the state of mere nature where there are supposed no laws of matrimony, no laws for the education of children, but the law of nature” [5, p. 123]. In the Hobbesian view, the absence of a common power leads to a war of “all against all,” a condition vividly illustrated by the novel’s wandering bands of cannibals. “Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues” [5, p. 79]. These cannibals are the result of a “civilization void,” where the “dialectics between capitalism and terrorism” have produced a state of total displacement. “If a covenant be made wherein neither of the parties perform presently, but trust one another, in the condition of mere nature (which is a condition of war of every man against every man) upon any reasonable suspicion, it is void” [5, p. 84].

Cannibalism in the novel highlights the ultimate rejection of civilization, a concept associated with pure evil and human decay. By showing humans farming other humans for meat, McCarthy illustrates how quickly a sentient species can revert to its most primal instincts. “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" [3, 63]. In contrast, the father's desperate attempts to uphold the social contract within their small community signify the last stand of human dignity.

Theologians and critics also engage with the novel's religious themes. They note that it exists within what Charles Taylor terms the "immanent frame," a secular age where transcendent hope haunts the characters. "Here is a crucial collective good which seems "consubstantial" with God, or in some essential relation to transcendence.

This kind of consubstantiality is one, positive set of ways in which the immanent frame may be lived as inherently open to transcendence" [6, p. 558]. While the man often feels despair, viewing the world as devoid of divinity, the boy consistently appears as a holy remnant. This indicates that mystery remains central to human existence. Even when things seem irreparably broken, the act of sacrificial love between parent and child serves as a form of redemption.

The novel's ending, where the boy encounters a new family, is seen by some readers as a surprising miracle. This conclusion emphasizes that survival by itself isn't a sufficient reason to live. Instead, it is the transfer of one generation's wisdom and the on-going flame of hope that gives life meaning. The boy's survival suggests that the human endeavour may continue, even though the world itself remains irreparable.

"By the end of the 20th century, the post-modernist deconstruction trend introduced multiple theories for adaptation research, and promoted the deconstruction of the centrality of the original work." [3, p. 26].

Transforming McCarthy's prose into John Hillcoat's 2009 film involved a careful process of adaptation. Words on paper became images on a screen. Hillcoat, known for exploring isolating settings and brutal themes in films like "*The Proposition*", was viewed as a good choice for capturing McCarthy's world. Working with Joe Penhall's screenplay, Hillcoat aimed to portray a world in deep trauma while staying true to the novel.

One significant challenge in the adaptation was the novel's "wordlessness." In film, a director must convey the story through visuals and actions, while an author can directly express characters' thoughts and feelings. Hillcoat used voiceover narration to maintain the book's intimate, diary-like quality. This choice provided a calming, distanced effect, even during scenes of intense horror. Despite the film's grim tone, it emphasizes the deeply moving connection between father and son, enhancing the emotional intensity of the story's themes.

The casting of Viggo Mortensen as the Man was widely praised; his performance is described as towering, haggard, and durable, holding the entire plotless picture together. "Viggo Mortensen is absolutely brilliant as an unnamed survivor, trekking slowly towards the east coast with his son, played by Kodi Smit McPhee" [URL 1] Mortensen's ability to transition from tenderness to brutality captures the dual nature of the man's struggle, his commitment to both physical survival and the socializing of his son. Kodi Smit-McPhee's portrayal of the Soy was also highly regarded for its subtle and raw quality, with director Hillcoat noting the child's incredible intuition on set.

A significant change in the film is the expanded role of the Woman, played by Charlize Theron. In the book, the wife's presence is minimal, defined by her absence and her eventual sui-

cide. The film, however, uses vivid flashbacks to elaborate on her slow decline toward hopelessness, providing the audience with a better understanding of her choice to abandon her family. These scenes, which often show the previous world in brilliant sunshine, serve as a stark contrast to the droning gloom of the post-apocalyptic present.

The visual identity of Hillcoat's *The Road* is heavily defined by the poetics of grey, a concept derived from McCarthy's frequent mentions of ash and dust. Cinematographer Javier Aguirresarobe showed real locations, seeking a realistic atmosphere that matched McCarthy's grim and horrifying text. The filmmakers took advantage of bad weather and natural light, removing the sun to create a sense of complete and utter doom.

The film was shot in a number of the US states, including Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Louisiana. Pennsylvania, in particular, was chosen for its abundance of locations that looked abandoned or decayed, such as coalfields, dunes, and run-down parts of Pittsburgh. The production also used areas shattered by Hurricane Katrina, effectively turning real-world disasters into the visual references for the apocalypse. This use of desolate imagery and creepy location-photography allows the film to reach the essence of the human condition.

Critics generally agree that John Hillcoat's "*The Road*" remains extremely faithful to McCarthy's novel, implementing almost all of the book's dialogue and its bleak tone. However, the process of adaptation necessarily involves choices and changes, reflecting the constraints of the cinematic medium and the director's own creative lens. One significant departure is the omission of the novel's most shocking and grotesque details, such as the "roasted newborn baby," a scene that was deemed too much for viewers to endure.

The film also shifts the emphasis of the ending. In the book, the man's death occurs at a campsite in the woods, and the arrival of the veteran is treated with suspicion and ambiguity. The film moves the father's death to the beach, a place that has served as their goal throughout the journey, symbolizing a completion of the man's mission. The veteran's family is also more clearly portrayed as good guys, with the inclusion of a mother and children providing a more definitive sense of hope for the boy's future.

The film's score, composed by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis, is described as elegiac, plangent, and minimalist. While the music enhances the heartrending poignancy of the father-son relationship, some critics argue that it "robs" certain moments of their full poignancy by distancing the audience from the reality of the scenes. A specific critique focuses on the scene where the man discards his wedding ring, while the book relies on the silence and the sound of the ring's traversal, the film's lulling music is seen as a softening of McCarthy's harsh aesthetic.

However, the sound design of the film overall is successful in creating a mummified atmosphere, with the rumbling of the distant catastrophe and the whump of falling trees providing a constant sense of environmental threat. This auditory landscape matches McCarthy's grim and horrifying world, making the journey feel like an engrossing and stunningly real experience.

The relationship between Cormac McCarthy's "*The Road*" and John Hillcoat's film adaptation illustrates the complex interplay between fidelity criticism and adaptation as interpretation. While the novel achieves transcendence through the sheer poetry of McCarthy's exalted prose, the film attempts to evoke a similar feeling through cinematic imagery and atmosphere. Both works success-

fully confront the inherent savagery of men, acting as the spiritual equivalent of staring at the sun.

For university students, *The Road* serves as a critical text for studying contemporary American literature and the science fiction sub-genre of post-apocalyptic fiction. It challenges traditional American values and beliefs by placing them in a world where they no longer have any structural or thematic support. The work's allegorical dimension and its exploration of bio politics and ecology ensure its continued relevance in a world facing its own environmental and social crises.

Members of the environmentalist movement have claimed *The Road* as a valuable tool for warning about the dangers of pollution and climate change. The novel's depiction of a world without plants and animals serves as a sharp reminder that human survival is inextricably linked to the natural world. This ecocritical perspective emphasizes that narratives both influence and are influenced by ecological issues, promoting a more profound awareness of the interconnection between humans and their habitat.

Sociologically, the film's depiction of the man and the boy as unwashed bodies pulling a metal cart evokes the image of the homeless in modern American cities. Hillcoat noted that the shopping cart is a precise view of a familiar thing, grounding the high-concept apocalypse in a simple human response. This connection to contemporary American life was a key factor in the novel's Pulitzer win and its enduring power as an allegory about life and death.

**Conclusion.** Cormac McCarthy's "*The Road*" remains a monumental achievement in contemporary literature, a work that successfully gives new energy and strength to the myth of the frontier within a dystopian ideological moment. Its minimalist style and postmodern ethics challenge the reader to confront the fragility of human civilization and the permanence of parental love. The 2009 film adaptation, while unable to capture the vast, crushed emptiness of McCarthy's novel in its entirety, stands as a brave and respectfully faithful version that leaves a deep and lasting impression.

The intertextual engagement between the book and the film highlights the unique possibilities offered by both literature and media. While the novel uses language to create a modern myth, the film uses visual imagination to create a cinematic equivalent of the original. Together, they offer a multifaceted critical analysis of what it means to be human at the end of the story. Whether through the wordlessness of the page or the poetics of grey on the screen, "*The Road*" continues to haunt and disturb its audience, serving as an unflinching meditation on the best and the worst of humanity.

The narrative's ultimate power lies in its unexpected miracle of hope, the fire of hope that refuses to be silenced even in a burning world. For the man and the boy, the journey south is not just a search for safety, but an aimless wander that becomes a path paved with divine generosity through their shared love. Readers and spectators are forced to re-evaluate their own connection to the moral universe, much like a traveller on McCarthy's road, wary but still carrying the fire.

"Since its publication in 2006, *The Road* has generated an abundant corpus of scholarly research due to its unique narrative style and the endless cultural, ethical, eschatological, environmental, metaphorical, etc. dimensions it encompasses." [6, p. 143].

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#### **Демецька В., Баняс Н., Лізак К. Архетипні мотиви руїни та ліричного виживання людського духу: порівняльний аналіз роману Кормака Маккарті «Дорога» та його кінематографічної адаптації**

**Анотація.** У статті здійснено порівняльний аналіз архетипних мотивів руїни та ліричного виживання людського духу в романі Кормака Маккарті «Дорога» та його кінематографічній інтерпретації. Дослідження зосереджується на багатовимірності образу знищеного світу, який постає не лише як постапокаліптичний пейзаж, а як символ краху цивілізації, моральних орієнтирів і культурної пам'яті. Архетип руїнації розглядається як метафора екзистенційної кризи людства, що виявляється у втраті етики та соціальних структур.

Стаття досліджує теми руйнування, виживання та людяності в романі «Дорога» Кормака Маккарті та його кінематографічній версії, режисером якої є Джон Хілкоут. У дослідженні акцентується увага на двох центральних темах: архетипному знищенні світу, що слугує тлом для подій, і ліричному виживанні людського духу, яке розкривається через стосунки між батьком та сином.

Роман і фільм змальовують похмурий і безжиттєвий світ, де природа випалена, суспільство зруйноване, а людське існування зводиться до боротьби за виживання. Твір Маккарті підкреслює відсутність надії та деградацію моральних цінностей. Водночас, зв'язок між батьком і сином виступає символом любові, стійкості та збереження людської гідності навіть у найбільш безнадійних умовах.

У статті розглядається, як кінематографічна адаптація здебільшого зберігає емоційну сутність та візуальне

зображення згасання, хоча деякі інтерспективні моменти роману були скорочені, що змінило акценти на внутрішніх конфліктах і філософських роздумах. Оцінюється ефективність передачі глибинних тем твору Маккарті через кінематографічний образ.

У романі ліризм досягається через мінімалістичний стиль, ритмічність і фрагментарність оповіді, що підкреслюють внутрішню драму персонажів. Фільм передає цю атмосферу засобами візуальної експресії: приглушеною кольоровою гамою, повільною динамікою та акцентом на мовчанні. Попри скорочення філософських роздумів, екранізація зберігає емоційне ядро твору, а саме, стосунки батька й сина як втілення любові, жертвності та надії.

Як роман, так і його адаптація акцентують увагу на двоїстих темах екзистенціальної руїни та незламної волі до виживання, демонструючи здатність людського духу витримувати архетипне знищення.

Образ «несення вогню» інтерпретується як символ духовної неперервності та моральної відповідальності. Таким чином, навіть у світі тотальної руїни утверджується ідея незламності людського духу. Руйнування стає умовою виявлення внутрішньої сили людини, її здатності зберігати гуманістичні цінності в критичних обставинах.

**Ключові слова:** Кормак Маккарті, «Дорога», архетипна руїна, людський дух, виживання, кінематографічна адаптація.

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