

World of Ash: Employing Materiality in *The Road*

Honorable Mention, Social Sciences

Author: Travis Crowell

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) relates a bleak post-apocalyptic vision that elicits a profound sense of loss and oblivion. It isolates its protagonists, a father and son, against a backdrop of ash and grey in a landscape that is blasted and desolate. Humanity's few survivors wander ruined cityscapes and empty country, a world of orphans after the silencing of culture. In 2009, director John Hillcoat and screen-writer Joe Penhall adapted the novel to film, bringing McCarthy's nightmare to a more visual medium. Both versions employ material culture, the physical representation of culture, in the construction of a horrific landscape. Material culture includes our architecture, landscapes, the objects we make, lighting, or almost anything which has been modified or marked by human influence. It is the many aspects of culture with which we interact through our physical senses. As such, material culture is paramount in how we imagine and create both ourselves and the world around us. In both novel and film, the material culture represented in *The Road* connects us to an imagined dystopia, one that is more disturbing because of how familiar it feels.

McCarthy never explicitly identifies the primary cause of humanity's destruction, but by bomb, divine rapture, or otherwise, the earth is nearly vacant of life. All that remains are wandering refugees that just barely retain a trace of their humanity. Although this is a visceral tale about the relationship between a father and son, the landscape is what is most striking. McCarthy sets the dismal tone early in the novel, describing the land with terms like "bare," "blackened," and "cauterized." The world we know has been reduced to ash, the remainder of something burned out and soon to be swept away. This material has meaning, and as Tilley (1996) argues, an ontological significance.

In *The Road*, ash blankets everything. Unlike dust, which accumulates on things forgotten or untouched, ashes are the material remains of something burned. Ash is the remnant of something reduced, and its near ubiquitous presence in every description of the surrounding environment persistently reinforces the feeling of ruin. This pervasive sense of dread invades even the past. Memories turn to ash, and even in imparting a sense of hope, "[the father] could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own" (McCarthy 2006:130). In the way that ash is a reduction of what was, the pervasive presence of ash in *The Road* is a constant link to things that have been lost.

While McCarthy has to be insistent in his descriptions of burning and ash, Hillcoat's film shows us the trauma visually, and everything depicted takes on a similar consistency. A coating of ash creates a uniformity in appearances. The landscape is defined more by contour than by colour. Ash fills the air and

diffuses the light of the sun. Hillcoat's film is gray-washed and bleached of stark colour, likening the landscape to the moral ambiguity that exists in the survivors.

The film opens with a series of establishing shots that gives a post-apocalyptic sense of the world. The landscape is blasted, stripped of vegetation and life. Massive trees are overturned, uprooted and rent with scars. Cars scatter the urban landscape like glacier erratics, abandoned by a vanished population long ago. They too have been stripped of colour. A dilapidated barn and abandoned tractor in a field spell the end of agriculture. Rubble and debris fall out of doors and windows, buildings that became engorged and burst. Richards (1996), in his analysis of landscape, observes that "Space is broken up and ordered in a particular manner" (314). The world here has no order, but has been thrown into chaos. Each home is an unsightly premises. Nothing is as it should be. A description by McCarthy reads:

The land was gullied and barren. The bones of dead creatures sprawled in the washes. Middens of anonymous trash. Farmhouses in the fields scoured of their paint and the clapboards spooned and sprung from the wall-studs. All of it shadowless and without feature (149-50).

There is no logic or reason behind where anything lies. The trash has lost all character and definition, and the farmhouses are in stages of becoming undone. That they are shadowless further detaches them from any kind of human experience (Bille & Sorensen 2007:268). A present this bleak can hold little promise for a future.

The other thing both the film and novel do well when dealing with landscape is convey impotency and emptiness. The film frames the man and boy in a way that sets them against their immense landscape, and they are dwarfed by it, rendered almost insignificant, on the verge of being snuffed out or swallowed. The novel accomplishes this in a similar way when the pair encounter a corpse on the road who has been struck by lightning: "He was as burnt looking as the country, his clothing scorched and black" (McCarthy 2006:42). Looking back on his inert form on the road "...you couldn't even tell what it was" (Ibid.:43). When the human spirit leaves the lightning-stricken man, he becomes as anonymous as the trash in the passage above. This is what death brings: a sort of nothingness.

The use of what Bille and Sorensen (2007) call lightscapes, in both the book and film, further enhances this atmosphere and tone. Sources of light are either the strained rays of the sun, candles, or wildfires. Light is therefore either tenuous and fragile, or unpredictable and beyond human control. The fallout shelter is the only place with electric lighting, and in the film, this turns on only for a brief moment to illuminate the splendor of the room's bounty before it too retreats. Electricity has proven to be a fad and fire has reclaimed its role of prominence in the survival of humanity.

This use of fire is a return to the original representation of man's mastery of the elements and culture (Richards 1996:315). As a campfire, fire provides security and warmth, and is both a beacon of hope to the lost and an emblem of humanity's struggle to uphold its ideals. McCarthy, as well as Hillcoat, contrast this with scenes depicting the ambivalence of fire. In the film, the pair are shown silhouetted

against a forest inferno that forces them to move camp. Fire, the Promethean gift, is no longer bound by civilization's controls.

The acoustic property of material is employed to draw the audience into the experience of living in this world. McCarthy uses the sound of rain on the tarp, and the thunder "cannonading" down the mountains, to reinforce his characters' exposure (40). As with fire, there is no real shelter or safety. Early in the film, Hillcoat uses the sound of rain hitting the tarp to the same effect, transitioning from the sound of running water in the past to the beating rain in the present. This simple but clever technique takes us from a sound associated with modern living to one of inadequate shelter. McCarthy achieves a similar effect through the use of rain on the thin metal forming the cab of a truck (39). We, the audience, can relate to the experience of escaping the elements under a vehicle roof, but have likely never been forced to do so under situations as dire.

Landscape indirectly references what has been lost, but material objects often directly reference memory and experience (Moshenska 2008:123). A scene in both the book and the movie has the father visiting the house where he grew up. The boy is completely divorced from any experience with a world before destruction and grows uneasy as he watches his father become lost in memory. The boy "[w]atched shapes claiming [his father] he could not see" (McCarthy 2006:22), as the man is recalled to the past by his presence in this space. Small marks in the home reference his childhood, like the holes on the mantle where they hung stockings, and the notches on the beam that monitored his growth. In the film he tries to describe this world to his child, but there is no connection that can be made. In the end he picks up a flower-patterned couch cushion, already an anachronistic depiction, and settles it into its proper place on the couch before he sits and reflects. Not only does this convey a sentiment of longing for the past and the lost, but it acknowledges the role of material space in our cognition. When the man decides to give up on the memory of his wife, he does so by leaving the photo of her on the bridge.

Absent from the novel, the piano takes on a significant role in the film as a metonym for the loss of the man's wife, but also for the father's unyielding dedication to the survival of his son. The piano is initially featured in memories of the past, as the wife teaches the husband how to play. This love of music is reinforced by showing scenes of them at the opera, which casts them as cultured people of stable social status. Later memories, of destroying the piano to create firewood essential to life, are connected to the extinguishing of his wife's will to continue. From then on, the appearance of any piano recalls this painful moment, this sacrifice for survival, and the loss permeates further when both father and son realize they can no longer remember how to play. Interestingly, piano is prominent in the film's soundtrack, both haunting and hopeful, and is significant in fostering a greater sense of optimism than the novel permits.

Hillcoat's film features a flashback in which the man first hears the concussions that herald the cataclysm and sees the light of flames flickering on his bedroom wall. Stoically, he moves to the bathroom and begins to fill the tub with water. His wife asks him why he is taking a bath, and he replies,

“I’m not.” Already, material objects have taken on a changed meaning in this new context. The scene also implies there was some prior expectation that this event may happen. Another scene that elicits reinterpretation from expectations in the novel involves the man wrapping the boy’s feet and dressing him for the cold (McCarthy 2006:84). Though this resembles a parent getting a child ready to go outside, here the purpose is for survival, not play. This use of cut tarp and old coats to bind the child’s feet further emphasize the desperation of the moment.

A number of scenes in both the novel and the film achieve poignancy by the way in which the post-apocalyptic context skews familiar scenarios. When his wife tells the man she has given up, that she is going to leave her husband and son for the embrace of death, the scene is set up as to what might be a domestic argument. They argue in barely hushed voices, the wife’s resolved tone contrasted by his desperate pleas. They could be talking about divorce over the dinner table, hoping the boy would not hear. The lamplight conveys the sense of ambiguity, extending extra meaning to its surroundings (Bille and Sorenson 2007: 275). What alters this scene the most, though, is the presence of the loaded pistol. A symbol of protection in the novel, it is reimagined on film as a tool of release. A single-shot of the pistol could save you from a fate worse than death, spare you from withering hope, and provide an escape from what you may suffer at the hands of other survivors. We are also reminded of the tenuous protection this gun offers, containing only two bullets. In the film, there is actually a physical negotiation over the pistol, in which neither adult is willing to allow the other to handle it. The pistol itself is ambivalent, a sort of indifferent third-party that possesses incredible influence, but cares nothing for the outcome. In the hands of the man, it represents a hope for survival. In the hands of the woman, it is an acceptance of oblivion.

Suspense and dread, which are foundational to the overall atmosphere of both the film and novel, are also built through the use of material culture. When the pair chance upon a grand old house, the father recklessly searches the home, and as for the signs of danger, “All these things he saw but did not see” (McCarthy 2006: 93). The house is grand, the columns of the porch resembling that of a southern plantation, evoking a connection to another period in American history when human beings were treated as livestock. In the book, it is up to the reader to recognize that the odd piles of clothes, the cauldrons used to render hogs, and the recent ashes of a fire are all out of place. In the film, we see similar images cut with the anxious looks of the boy. The boy, like the audience, realizes that the man’s desperation causes him to overlook subtle signs of danger. Items associated with butchering appear in disturbing places: outside, large meat hooks hang from a swing set while a giant cleaver rests in a stump where an axe should be. When they enter the basement, the flickering flame of the lighter is only a thin shield of safety against whatever hides in the deep shadows. It is a dark and disturbing scene that unfolds with great effect because of the building realization that this home is actually a slaughterhouse used by cannibals.

These packs of cannibals roam the countryside in *The Road*, and represent one of the greatest dangers confronting the man and boy. Materiality is heavily employed in constructing first impressions of the deadly marauders. They wear canister masks, biohazard suits, and hoods, things that hide and obscure

their humanity and identifying features. McCarthy describes their movement as predatory, aware and alert to their surroundings, "Slouching along with clubs in their hands, lengths of pipe" (51). Here, the club is a metonym for primitive and base. People have regressed in this world, and McCarthy describes the pipes as clubs because of their long association with human barbarity. The description of the cannibals constructs them as subhuman monsters who have suffered a lurch back in evolution. Their clothing expresses this loss of humanity and their hostile intent towards the people around them (Tarlo 2007:132).

The fallout shelter, in contrast to the cannibals' house, employs material culture to the opposite effect: it is an oasis in the wasteland, a place where, for a while, father and son can live a life of abundance. Inside is all the "richness of a vanished world" (McCarthy 2006:117). This sense of security is created by the surplus of food, as well as familiar conveniences like the stove and bunk-bed. For a moment, man and boy are removed from the blighted landscape overhead. Hillcoat casts the shelter food in a rare show of colour. Memories of the past in the film are also shown in full colour, and this connects the canned and bagged food to a warmer yesterday. It also sets a contrast with the opposing worlds the man and the boy have been raised in. A dinner scene in this setting illustrates the cultural distance between the man, smoking a cigar and drinking Jack Daniels in his suit jacket, and the boy, who has no concept of what these things mean, and has never seen his father transformed this way.

There are some existential underpinnings to the journey of a man and boy set against the stark background of this world. In this landscape, basic philosophical questions about life, death, and survival can be approached without pretention or distraction. Material culture and materiality construct this opportunity, operating on a level almost beneath cognition. McCarthy employs a number of similes and metaphors that relate to larger questions about hope and faith. Describing a falling gray snowflake, "He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of Christendom" (13). A striking visual in the film is a section of road lined with telephone poles, wires hanging from power couplings perched like birds, looking like great crosses being hauled to the earth. This gets the brain working in religious motifs, and makes one consider the role of spiritual belief in survival. In a novel which stresses survival in a world where there is no hope, faith is a fragile and eroding concept. Yet, it is faith and hope which also drive the man and boy in their journey.

Material culture and materiality in the novel and film versions of *The Road* construct this world and bridge this experience with our own understanding. It is hard to understand life with no future. The earth is dead, the environment is wasted, and nothing living remains except scattered refugees, mere ghosts. There is no place where things are better. By using material culture to connect this world to our own, McCarthy and Hillcoat force us to reflect on the potentially ruinous path our society is set upon. There are many scenarios like nuclear war or climate catastrophe that may result in the apocalyptic setting created by McCarthy. The bleak landscape isolates the experience of the father and son, forcing us to meditate on loss, and to explore decisions made in the immediacy of survival even with little hope beyond the present. Everything we know is ash, and it is in acknowledging that the world we know is

gone that we can consider the fundamental character of humanity and the factors which drive our quest for survival.

References Cited

Bille, Mikkel and Tim Flohr Sorensen

2007 An Anthropology of Luminosity: The Agency of Light. *Journal of Material Culture*. 12: 263-284. <http://mcu.sagepub.com/content/12/3/263>.

McCarthy, Cormac

2006 *The Road*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf

Moshenska, Gabriel

2008 A Hard Rain: Children's Shrapnel Collections in the Second World War. *The Journal of Material Culture*. 13: 107-124. <http://mcu.sagepub.com/content/13/1/107>.

Richards, Colin

1996 Henges and Water: Towards an Elemental Understanding of Monumentality and Landscape in Late Neolithic Britain. *Journal of Material Culture*. 1: 313-335. <http://mcu.sagepub.com/content/1/3/313>.

Tarlo, Emma

2007 Hijab in London: Metamorphosis, Resonance and Effects. *Journal of Material Culture* 12: 131-156. <http://mcu.sagepub.com/content/12/2/131>.

The Road

2009 John Hillcoat, dir. 111 min. The Weinstein Company. The United States.