Film Reviews

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

Susan Hawkins

As a Cormac McCarthy fan, and long-time member of the Cormac McCarthy Society, I was eager to see how John Hillcoat, Australian filmmaker and director of *The Proposition* (a 19th century outback western) had translated the writer's 2006 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Road*, to the screen. Given the grisly and dystopian details of McCarthy's post apocalyptic America—the unnamed father and son spend all of their energies surviving, scavenging for food as they make their way south to the sea on a state highway, constantly in hiding from the devolved "bad guys," sub-humans moving in packs, raping, torturing, and finally consuming their human food—fans wondered how any director would manage to create a film equal to McCarthy's rendering of the end of the world. And while the casting of Viggo Mortensen as the father made sense, the addition of Charlize Theron as the mother raised eyebrows. Just how different was the script going to be? As it turned out, not *too* different, but the director's choices in terms of focus, tone, and pacing turned what could have been a great film into a weirdly uneven viewing experience.

The film opened over the Thanksgiving holiday in 2009, ironic timing given the vision of extinction, but just in time to

be considered for 2009's Oscar noms. And while the film had its fans, it had a fair share of cranky detractors. Thus *Variety*'s Todd McCarthy noted that Viggo Mortensen (the Father) and newcomer Kodi Smit-McPhee (the Son) "have no chemistry together" and the film, rather than sustaining the tension of the novel's drama, "is one little genre step away from being an outright zombie movie" (www.variety.com). On the other hand, *Esquire*'s Tom Chiarella claimed, "*The Road* is the most important movie of the year," and did not stint in his praise of the acting, script (Joe Penhall), cinematography (Javier Aguirresarobe), and Hillcoat's direction (*www.esquire.com*).

As a viewer who saw it on the big screen, I was impressed by the film's fidelity to McCarthy's text and the ways in which it provides a visual counterpart to the novel's bleak and blighted landscape. The constant grey skies, the cold and snow as they begin their journey south, the deserted gas stations, looted grocery stores, destroyed cities, industrial remains—such images are not, for the most part, the product of special effects magic. Rather Hillcoat and his team shot the film in four states (50 locations), utilizing as the director puts it, "An apocalypse we've already seen" (DVD commentary): post-Katrina New Orleans, Mt. St. Helens, abandoned mines in Pennsylvania. The desolation is established early and, with the exception of the beautifully captured respite the two enjoy in an abandoned but fully stocked bomb shelter, they are constantly on the move, ever in danger of being prey.

I was also impressed with the ways in which the opening sequence appeared to filmically translate key narrative issues: the father's point of view; the relationships between father and mother, father and son; and the significance of the father's memory as a window into the past, the life before all things were lost. Thus Hillcoat begins the film with a flashback to Mortensen and Theron in the sunny, saturated-color world of the past—flowers blooming, a modest home, birdsong, Theron radiant, Mortensen nuzzling a horse, all things alive. A screen door shuts, and the camera pans across a darkened bedroom, flickery light outside the windows. The father rises from

bed, looks out a window, rushes to the bathroom and begins filling the tub while a pregnant Theron moves into view and asks why he's taking a bath. As we watch her listening to distant, muffled voices and cries, the light plays on her face and body as they register her confusion. (Only after the film's title will the audience hear Mortensen's voice over relating the vague details of what the audience already assumes is a catastrophic event.) The sound of running water aurally transitions into the next scene, a close up of Mortensen's emaciated face, bearded and dirty as he wakes in the dark, the boy asleep beside him, both bundled in a rumpled heap of coats. The father rises out of the heap, making sure to cover the boy carefully, walks past a rushing gray waterfall to the lightening sky. In the distance we see the remains of a forest, a few scrawny trunks poking into the sky, the aftermath of a massive forest fire. In the foreground barren mountainsides, denuded of greenery. The boy calls out "Papa! Papa!" and the father moves quickly back to the son's side, hushing him, "It's okay. It's just another earthquake. I'm right here." Fade to black as the title appears in bold white letters.

Immediately the film establishes the utter desolation of the present in relationship to the fullness of life in the past. In the present father and son are alone, the world has changed utterly, and the father's role is to re-assure his son that things are "okay." ("Okay," repeated innumerable times in the novel, works as the linguistic equivalent of the father's physical and emotional re-assurance.) The film's trajectory, like the book's, involves the love story between father and son, and as in the novel, the father's life, even as he weakens from hunger and illness, is devoted to keeping his son alive in the aftermath of an unspecified, global disaster. They are the "good guys" who "carry the fire." They represent what remains of decency, morality, and ethics arrayed against those "others" who, in one graphic example, lock up their naked human food in a cellar, amputating body parts as needed. Given the fragility of their existence, the father's dreams and memories, brief as they are, startle us by their vividness, particularity, and color. And sev-

eral such flashbacks occur in the film, most often featuring Theron (who is terrific given what she has to work with) in beautifully saturated color. But rather than serving as the poignant emblems of the father's lost world, and ours—the one the boy has never known—these cameos take on a different function in the film, one intended to enlarge the father's sense of grief at the loss of wife and mother and also to provide a context for the mother's choice to end her life, to leave the man and boy and walk out into the freezing dark.

The desire to make sense of the mother's motivation strikes me as understandable given that her character occupies so little textual space. In the novel her decision for death is based upon what she sees as pointless and futile survival. The world's few survivors have no hope of attaining a life as it was once lived; all that awaits them is death, whether by starvation or torture, rape, and murder at the hands of cannibals. Hillcoat and Penhall remain true to the novel's dialogue, but they expand the action, circumstances, and physical setting for the scene involving her decision, and thus intensify the father's desperate love for his wife, his fight to keep her with them. Despite Theron's heroic efforts, the mother's leave-taking still feels like desertion. The film thus substitutes the loss of the mother for McCarthy's realistic insistence on what the extinction of the natural world would not only look like but what it would feel like to live each day in a disappearing world.

The elegiac poetry of McCarthy's evocative prose, employed to express the father's memories not only of his wife but also of various animals, trees, flowers, his childhood home, an uncle he worked with as a boy—all of this is dispensed with. Hillcoat and Penhall consciously eliminate McCarthy's poetic prose (one way McCarthy breaks up the utter bleakness of the present) beginning with Mortensen's first voice-over. The actor's tone remains insistently mournful and uninflected throughout; everything he tells us sounds precisely the same. The audience's experience is built, for the most part, on scene after scene of wretched destruction, interrupted by super-brief flashbacks and Mortensen's occasional, sorrowful commen-

tary. Despite a strong opening and any number of successful scenes, the film's pacing, which is to say its editing, falters, lacks tension. The film's tone both visually and aurally, becomes largely monotone.

However, before I discuss the film's two most egregious errors, I want to note what the film does best and that is capture the smaller, quieter scenes, scenes in keeping with the novel's spirit and effect: the son's memory of an emaciated dog and his certainty, in one moment, that he hears one barking; the father's discovery of the planet's last can of Coke, which he gives to the boy as a treat; the son's fascinated stare at a mounted deer's head on the wall of a deserted drug store; the father's hypnotic attention to a sudden massive blaze along the mountains, the flames colorful intensity in contrast to the present world's pall.

In a world headed for extinction, we may be doomed, but that doesn't mean humans have lost their sense of irony. It is McCarthy's dark comedy that Hillcoat misses altogether, not that there's a lot of it, but it's there, and it functions the same way that comic interludes do in Shakespeare's tragedies. You gotta' give the audience a break. And while his style is utterly different, McCarthy on occasion evokes that Beckettian blend of verbal wit and utter existential despair. A prime example occurs in the sequence involving Ely, the ancient tramp father and son encounter on the road. How he has survived this long remains a mystery, but he seems to function either as the parody of a prophet (Ely possibly short for Elijah?) or as a "prophet" for the new, godless present ("There is no God and we are his prophets"). Rather than an unknown actor, Hillcoat casts Robert Duvall, Hollywood's Old Man of choice. Duvall has been perfecting this part for many years, even as a younger man. (Check out *Lonesome Dove* some time.) Despite the layers of makeup, the prosthetic blind eyes, and filthy rags, it's still Duvall's voice, and he plays it straight. Ely says some disturbing, weirdly funny things. The father queries him about wanting to live or die: "Or you might wish you'd never been born."

To which Ely replies, "Well. Beggars can't be choosers" (142). How is this not funny?

The other, and in my view unforgiveable, error the film makes is the Oprah-licious ending. As in the novel, after his father's death, the boy meets a man in the road. This man has a family, and he is willing to take the boy with him. The novel ends with a quite mysterious paragraph that speaks to the beauty of trout and the disappearance of nature. The film, on the other hand, invites the entire family to meet the boy at ocean's edge. I guess this would have been okay; they all look filthy and ragged, all of them except for the dog. Huh? A dog? Yes, a great looking dog, *so* well-fed. OMG. And they all go off together. And this is how focus groups have ruined American movies: the apocalypse meets Lassie.

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The Road. Dir. John Hillcoat. Perf. Viggo Mortensen, Kodi Smit-McPhee, and Charlize Theron. Dimension Films, 2009. DVD.