

# John Hillcoat's *The Road*.

## A survival journey

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### Abstract

This article provides an analysis of the movie *The Road*, directed by Australian John Hillcoat, as an atypical *road movie*, not only owing to its post-apocalyptic context, but also because of the almost complete absence of vehicles. The analysis emphasizes the raw human condition. The trip is not initiatory, but rather a forced displacement for survival.

**Key words:** Road movie; Cinema; Tragedy; The human condition.

Let us use the pen in the inkwell. Perhaps this action should be removed owing to its arrogance, but something tells us that it is better to begin this way. We're going to say a bit about ourselves. We are those who always imagine things, that border on the tedious, striking reality in which we live. We can put on earphones, choose a *Low Roar*, *New Order*, or *David Bowie* song, and begin thus: Giant robots appear, fighting against our 260-foot high ancestors, that some nut had the brilliant idea to create. We bump into a woman from another reality who implores that we save her world, or a gentleman who seeks the components to create a proper sword with which to end the dragon who kidnapped the princess.

Our favorite genre is science fiction, and we prefer to watch it at the movies. We grew up with the phrase "*Welcome to Jurassic Park*", and are stunned to see the way in which the crewman on the ship *Nostromos* opened his chest, and we fell completely in love with the story that focuses on *replicants*.

This garnish will serve as the basis upon which to analyze the movie *The Road*, an atypical registry in the *road movie* genre. In order for this to occur, we must consider two antecedents to this movie: *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn, 1967) and *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1996). They both seem like interesting films, although the second stands out because of the way it develops, its editing, acting, and provision of memorable moments in cinema history. With this in mind, we will analyze the movie that is the object of the present essay, a film from 2009, directed by John Hillcoat, and protagonized by Viggo Mortensen (*The Lord of the Rings The Fellowship of the Ring* [Jackson, 2001] and Kodi Smit-McPhee (*Let me in* [Reeves, 2010], with the participation of Charlize Theron (*Mad Max: Fury Road*, [Miller, 2015]).

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## The road

*The Road* (Hillcoat, 2009) begins with a story about nature and its splendor in five takes. Its beauty seduces and even ignites the spirit (*carrying the fire*), while it is set in a protection zone illuminated by sunlight, that intensifies the colors of the flowers, plants, and animals. In the fifth take is a door that closes bit by bit. Simultaneously, the colors of nature begin to opaque, a gesture of oblivion.

The next scene, with an evident color change, presents a poorly-lit room that elicits a mood of ambiguity. The characters' actions, the strange lighting from outside of the house, and even the sound, stir uncertainty in the audience. Just when one begins to form a hypothesis about the story, the film moves to a close-up of an emaciated, neglected face, which later expands to reveal a dirty hand covering an infant. All of this is a prelude to tell us that radiant green beauty no longer exists. All that remains is a melancholic landscape that reeks of death.

With this precedent, the movie's central thread involves specific staging. It is decanted anachronically, which means that the future-present fades into the past (at times), and these changes always occur in the form of dreams that officiate as memories of a calming nature, and the warmth of a home that no longer exists. These dreams are constantly frustrated because the hero must awaken and be aware of the imminent threats that surround him.

It is known that cinema developed the vocation of narration with moving images, and later added voices, as well. In this case, we have a narrator (an accompanying voice) that is able to lend strength to the images, operating as an assertive resource. The narrator is our protagonist. Said narrative tool only appears a few times, but has the ability to put the hero's tormented soul on screen.

*The Road* may well be considered a literary story, owing to its narrative decisions. Doubtless, it reminds one of stories told by the fireside. The daily story ends with the arrival of night, as if one chapter had ended and the next was expected with the new dawn. Dreams, in analepsis form, *strengthen* the argument subtly, and similarly, when they conclude, they use a chapter from the past to lend form to the general panorama.

Given the post-apocalyptic context, the character cannot access chronological time. He ignores the calendar date: "*I think it's October*". Doubtless, this distortion is echoed in the staging offered, thanks to its anachronism, a version of temporality after the end of watch time.

This is an atypical road movie. Motorized vehicles are memories of the past. They serve as protection, bunkers for travelers to doze off in for a bit at night. They operate as survival mechanisms, despite their immobility. The entire journey toward the American south occurs on foot.

## The heroes and journey

One gaunt face, a few dirty fingers that have touched millions of ruins, but not a single piece of food, threadbare clothes that indicate minimal or nonexistent hygiene, are crucial traits that

aid the construction of the protagonists' characters, in terms of their physical appearances and relationships with the post-apocalyptic environment. As the story is told, the actors' physical changes are observed, and what a striking change it is!

There are two protagonists: a father and son. As it is, they do not have names (in fact, none of the characters do). This may be a resource for the audience to identify with the various avatars in the paternal relationship, although for the world's tragedy after civilization to reveal one's name is a luxury that no one can afford. Who cares? The important thing is survival, right?

The first part of the movie shows the protagonists overwhelmed with desperation. Behind an incessant search for resources, failure strikes. The situation becomes ominous as the father considers ending his and his son's lives. There is cruelty and rawness on-screen. Despite this, the story presents small pauses, in which the calm and tranquility remind them of a life in which enjoyment was possible.

The desire to survive requires sanity to be placed in parenthesis. As the film nears its end, the father becomes a monster. He does not make good on the promise he made to his son to keep his humanity (*we are the good guys, right?*). He becomes another predator without respect for remaining survivors. The son, conversely, embodies innocence and humanity as a possibility. While the father prepares him to do what is necessary to survive, the child's resistance keeps hope alive. As a road movie, the trip modifies the characters. Although its focus is not discovery, the father finds his dark side, and the child finds a way to maintain his innocence.

The masterful staging oscillates between panoramic takes that reveal the desolation of the post-apocalyptic world and the close-ups and medium shots that permit recognition of the filial connection between father and son. The landscape and intimacy achieve a new symbolism in the midst of the trip.

It should be mentioned that this post-apocalyptic world is populated by some strange beings, which resemble cannibal zombies, and generate terror on the road. This is an allegory for the monstrosity that places the protagonists on the verge of losing everything that makes them human.

## Conclusion

*The Road* sends a raw message about the complexity of maintaining one's humanity. The movie, directed by John Hillcoat, does great work showcasing the family's desperation, madness, attempt to destroy itself, and resistance against adversity in a hostile world. All this is achieved with a commitment to visual silence, terse dialogues, and staging that serve as the landscape of desolation. It is a road movie with no road or vehicle, but the trip is still able to alter the travelers.

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