

The road



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The post-apocalyptic novel “ The Road”, written by Cormac McCarthy was published in 2006. [1] It deals with the journey of a father together with his son, who try to reach the coast after America, its nature and civilisation has been destroyed by some catastrophe. Therefore some important issues are implied: travelling, fear of death, nuclear war, goodness, religion, cannibalism and of course the relationship between father and son. Maybe that is the reason why McCarthy dedicated the novel to his son: John Francis McCarthy. In 2007 McCarthy won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for this novel. 2]

In 2009 the Novel was made into a film, also called “ The Road” and directed by John Hillcoat. [3] There are some interesting aspects, regarding the similarities and differences between the novel and its cinematic adaptation. The Novel Cormac McCarthy tells the story of a journey, made by father and son. They survived a nuclear catastrophe, which is not described in detail and want to go south in order to reach the coast. They have a card in order to carry their habits. They hope for a humanitarian climate, nourishments and other peaceful survivors. Due to the apocalypse, they have to deal with a lot of trouble during their trip.

In order to survive despite the lack of food, a lot of people became cannibals. Cannibalism is no option for the man and his son, because they belong to the good ones. Therefore they have to be careful who they trust and their search for food is more difficult. In addition they have to take care for their clothing, especially for their shoes because it is very cold since the catastrophe. [4] “ Mostly he worried about their shoes. That and food. Always food. ” (McCarthy, 2006: 17) [5] The most problematic aspect is the father's task to

raise his son under such circumstances without neglecting the sense of humanness.

The world he knows was completely destroyed and there is no commonchildhood. The son has to cope with aspects like cannibalism and suicide very early. He also has to accept the circumstance, that his father is going to die sooner or later and that he needs to be able to live on his own when the time comes. His father tries to prepare him as good as he can. McCarthy tells the story among 287 pages. He uses 3rd person narration, where the narrator is omniscient, because he knows about thoughts, dreams and fears of the father and his son. His style of writing without chapters stresses the travel motive.

It highlights the fact that the protagonists have to go on and on until they reach the coast and that there are no other important stages in between. Another important technique is the avoidance of names which means that both protagonists remain anonym. This technique highlights the aspect, that in case of a nuclear catastrophe, this scenario could happen to anyone. The father and his son serve as representatives for humankind. In addition there are no concrete names of places which indicates, that this scenario could not just happen to anyone, it could also happen anywhere in the world.

There are two more aspects, which remain unclear. The first one is the fate of the mother. The book does not make clear what happened to her because for them, it does not matter. She is gone and that is all they need to know. Secondly there are no details mentioned when it comes to the catastrophe which also indicates that it is not important what happened. The man and his

son are alive and so they have to challenge the circumstances, indifferent what caused them. “ The clocks stopped at 1: 17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. (...) A dull rose glow in the windowglas. (McCarthy, 2006: 52) McCarthy creates a very desperate imagery. His preferred chosen words are dark and sad. He uses short sentences, which guarantees that the novel is written in a minimal, but tough very closely style. [6] “ No list of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later. All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. ” (McCarthy, 2006: 54) Even the dialogues between father and son or between them and strangers they met are very short.

In addition there are a lot of details described, no matter if they are tolerable or hardly shocking. “ They could smell something cooking. Let’s circle around, the man said. (...) They left their food cooking. (...) What is it? He said. What is it? The boy shook his head. Oh Papa, he said. He turned and looked again. What the bay had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. ” (McCarthy, 2006: 198) The two unnamed Protagonists The son is about 10 years old and was born after the catastrophe. That is why he does not know the world as it was before.

He has although no childhood like one would think of. He has to grow up without his mom, knowing that his father will also fade away one day. Therefore he has to learn very much important skills in a short amount of time. He has no real toys and no other kids around him. In contrast he knows how to kill himself and feels responsible for his father, who became ill. It is important to say, that the son serves as a symbol for hope. “ He knew only

that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke. ” (McCarthy, 2006: 5)

Not only for his father, also for other people they met. For example Ely, the second stranger they met thought that he was an angel. Within the story the young boy grows from a child with a lot of questions and fears to a boy with a big sense of humanity, who knows a lot about the world he lives in and feels responsible for other people. “ The man squatted and looked at him. I’m scared, he said. Do you understand? I’m scared. (...) You’re not the one who has to worry about everything. The boy said something but he couldn’t understand him. What? he aid. He looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one. ” (McCarthy, 2006: 259) The father can be characterized as a reactor. Whenever it comes to violent actions he is just acting in self-defence. He knows the world as it has been before the catastrophe, and feels sorry for his son but he also knows that he can not hold the horror away from him. He faces the fact that his son has to live on his own one day and that it is his job to make sure that he will be able to do so. Therefore he is distrustful when it comes to strangers.

He always reminds his son to be less helpful and a bit more wary but often he does not succeed. In addition he is very ill and weak. The only reason why he is able to go on without committing suicide is his son. Everything he does is for him. “ He held the boy close to him. So thin. My heart, he said. My heart. But he knew that if he were a good father still it might well be as she had said. That the boy was all that stood between him and death. ”

(McCarthy, 2006: 29) Ending The ending of the novel is a happy one. They manage to reach the coast and the father dies in peace.

After some days other survivors appear. There is another man, a woman and two other children, a boy and a girl. The boy talks to the man and makes clear that they belong to the good guys who “ carry the fire”, which means that they do not kill and eat other people. After he made that clear, it is okay for him to go with them. Therefore the ending implies a new beginning, because it could be possible that the boy and the girl create descendants one day, which would be a first step to get a new population. “ The woman when he saw him put her arms around him and held him. (...) I am so glad to see you.

She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn't forget. ” (McCarthy, 2006: 286) The Movie The movie “ The Road” was published in 2009. John Hillcoat (Director) and Joe Penhall (Screenplay) produced a cinematic adaptation of the novel with the same title and story which takes 111 minutes. The role of the father is played by Viggo Mortensen and Kodi Smit-McPhee plays the role of the son. [7] As already said, the story is almost the same. There are just a few changes within it.

For example there are some flashbacks to the time before the catastrophe and shortly after it, when the mother was still alive. In addition there are some omissions because of details which would have been too shocking, like the passage with the infant corpse. [8] Despite those supplements and omissions Hillcoat and Penhall did a really good job. They managed it to copy the imagery of McCarthy's special style of writing into the atmosphere of the film. Therefore they used a number of techniques. [9] The depressive and sad atmosphere is easily created by mostly grey and brown colours.

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Furthermore the film was produced in wintertime, when there automatically lies snow and the trees are without leaves. The film implies no ordinary scenery, because it is not a complex story. The contrast comes when the flashbacks to the time before the catastrophe are shown. The colours change into very intensive ones, it is summer and you always hear nice piano music. One could also argue that the piano serves as a symbol for the presence of the mother and for civilisation because it represents culture. When the father remembers his wife there is always piano music which accentuates the scenes.

Later in the film he has to cut an old piano into pieces in order to get wood for a fire. This is a clear indication that he is angry with his wife because of her decision to commit suicide. Those scenes are different to the few passages about the mother in the book. She is not a big issue in the novel. Within the book the story is told by an omniscient 3rd person narrator. In the cinematic adaptation the man tells the story. This is a contrast to the book, where the actions, feelings and thoughts of the man are part of the narration.

On the one hand one could argue that this contrast is problematic because in the end the father is going to die and the way of narration could be too personal. But on the other hand Hillcoat and Penhall had to choose someone who tells the story and they had no other opportunity if they want to have the option of flashbacks and omniscience. According to the protagonists there is one other existing difference. In the book the boy seems to accept his fate and tries to make the best out of it. He grows up very fast and is rather adultly than childish.

In the film he collects some artefacts like a broken comb of his mother, wears her clothes and also has a few toys. He is often scared and cries when he is. All in all, the boy is played like a child and not as grown up as he is described in the book. The overlapping aspect is the importance of “to carry the fire”. He is always asking if someone carries the fire, which means not to kill other people and disregard morality and values. The biggest difference between the novel and its cinematic adaptation is the ending. In the book it is described as a happy end.

The father dies, the son meets another family who also carries the fire and can go with them. In addition the family has a daughter, which means that there is a new beginning for civilisation implied. This procedure is the same at the end of the film but there are some details which change the situation. Firstly the thumbs of the veteran are missing or garbled. That was also the case when they met the thief who has stolen their cart with all their goods. Those missing fingers can lead to the suggestion that he had been a member of a cannibalism commune.

This would also fit to the question why a family should voluntarily incorporate another hungry child. In fact there is no food left and every additional person is a risk at the same time. One also has to remember that they have a dog in the movie, which is pure luxury according to the circumstances they live in. According to those details there are two possibilities: either they are just as friendly and careful as the boy and it is an act of charity, or they see their chance in getting extra food without killing someone of their family or group. Novel or Movie? In my opinion both works are really great.

I like the novel of McCarthy very much because of his style of writing and the atmosphere within the story. The dialogues are short, concise and therefore fit totally in. In addition the characters with their actions, thoughts, feelings and dreams as well as the ending of the story are simply realistic. There are some differences when it comes to the cinematic adaptation but those are no reasons for regarding the film as inferior. As already said, I think that Hillcoat and Penhall did a great job because it must have been very hard to transport McCarthy's style of writing into a movie.

What I like most is the ending of the film. It is less clear than in the book and every viewer can decide which option seems to be more realistic. I think the interpretation of the ending refers to ones personal character traits. If the viewer is as prudent, distrusting and sometimes hopeless like the father he will maybe be more likely to see it critical. In contrast a viewer who is as optimistic as the son will probably see the details as unimportant and therefore recognize the ending as a happy end, like the one of the book. This opportunity of individual interpretation is a great aspect of the movie.