

THE URBAN SHIFT OF THE WESTERN: INSCRIPTIONS
OF VIOLENCE IN CORMAC McCARTHY'S
NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

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*“That is no country for old men. (...)
An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick (...).”*
—W. B. Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*

*“And I brought you into a plentiful
country, to eat the fruit thereof and the
goodness thereof, but when ye entered,
ye defiled my land, and made mine
heritage an abomination.”*
—Jeremiah 2:7

Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to analyse of the function(s) of violence in Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men* as well as in its 2007 highly praised screen adaptation. The analysis of the use of violence in these works starts from the premises of the embedded, inherent violence of the *western* genre, seeking to speculate on its contemporary developments and adjustments as well as on its conflicting conventions. “Collapse” seems to be the leitmotif of the novel as it defines both the structure and the substance of this modern western that, infused with elements of detective fiction – an unsolved crime, moral ambiguity, violence, and an action-driven narrative, epitomizes the urban shift of the genre. The paper will also briefly tackle issues connected to the conventions of the western genre so as to delineate a context for the centrality of stark violence in the modern western.

Keywords: *myth, western, violence, masculinity, deconstruction, collapse.*

To begin our exploration on the functions of violence in the modern western, whether considered as a literary or film genre, we shall first of all briefly ponder

upon *the concept of violence*. The working definition of violence chosen here is Michael Kowalewski's, as spelled out in his *Deadly Musings: Violence and Verbal Form in American Fiction* (1993): "Violence is thus popularly understood as an act of aggression that is usually destructive, antisocial and degrading in its consequences and that usually seems deliberate." (7) Dissatisfied with the common perception of violence as merely a functional device, he concludes that violence is frequently a subject in American fiction as part of the process of, to quote Steinbeck,

"ripping a reader's nerves to rags" is felt to be an activity continuous with life, not books, and thus depictions of realistic violence over riveting examples of how writers imagine the kind of intensity such 'life' supposedly entails vividly evoked scenes of violence over a crucial means by which a novelist can shatter social complacency or literary convention. (25)

In her analysis of what she calls "the mythos of violence", Barbara Whitmer defines violence as "injurious or destructive discourse or action of one person or group toward another" while a violence mythos is

a collection of beliefs that articulates attitudes in Western culture about violence. (...) The violence mythos includes the war hero myth, the victimizer/victim dynamic of exploitation, the mind/body dualism, the cowboy myth, the myth of competitive individualism, the theory of innate violence, the myth of male aggression, the military-industrial complex, technological determinism (especially destructive technology), the subordination of women, the myth of the superiority of rationality over emotion and creativity, and the myth of the elite human species. The violence mythos contains these shattered traces of trauma in the Western cultural imagination. (1)

In Whitmer's view, "at the core of the violence mythos is the belief that humans are innately violent and hence require external community structures to control them." (1) Still, there is an ambivalent attitude to violence that is both condemned and proliferated, both banished to the outskirts of humanity and evoked as a centrally-human attitude:

Although violence is condemned, at the same time it is represented ubiquitously, in the media, the news, sports, entertainment, advertising, as conflict resolution, with a plethora of inadequate measures for damage control in an age of the victimizer/victim and an addiction to violence. (3)

Other critics have defined violence in terms of a violation of personhood, of an infringement, denial, abuse, or disregard of another physically or otherwise. (*Cf.* Robert McAfee Brown, in Whitmer 21). Violence is thus a problem of structures that can be remedied through a reconciliation of the opposites, whether such

antagonisms are the individual vs. community, man vs. woman, nature vs. civilization, present vs. past, reason vs. emotions etc.

As one of the major literary and film genre that has relied on violence so extensively, the western has seduced generations of viewers and film critics; everyone has dreamed of “its wild beauty, revelled in its masculine violence, condemned in its incipient fascism, discovered the American trauma in its arid deserts, and found repressed significance in the fast draw (Wright 1). Analyzing the western as a film genre pervaded by death, Jane Tompkins was wondering why it hates women and language so much, pointing out that westerners “are obsessed with pain and celebrate the suppression of feeling; their taciturn heroes want to dominate the land, and sometimes to merge with it completely—they are trying to get away from other people and themselves.” (6-7)

If the West was initially devised as a place of escape from civilization, a place of immersion into nature and perhaps of returning to a primitive state, we can only assume that women disturbed this haven. In Tompkins’s view, “*Cowboy* posits a world without God, without ideas, without institutions, without what is commonly recognized as culture, a world of men and things, where male adults in the prime of life find ultimate meaning in doing their best together on the job.” (38) In the cowboy’s world, the cross is replaced by the gun, a gesture that implies the rejection of Christianity, therefore of civilization, and perhaps a return to the prelapsarian world, a means of escape from society to return to a primal level of existence.

As Robert Wright points out in his summary of recent violence theories, “From an evolutionary point of view, the leading cause of violence is maleness. (...) Men have evolved the morphological, physiological and psychological means to be effective users of violence.” (5) The reassertion of a sense of lost maleness is reactivated over and over again setting out the action of westerns, the outcome being a series of violent confrontations from which the male hero always walks out victorious.

Referring to westerns, Robert Warshow considers that, in fact, violence is not the point of a western, but rather

a certain image of man, a style, which expresses itself most clearly in violence. Watch a child with his toy guns and you will see: what most interests him is not (as we so much fear) the fantasy of hurting others, but to work out how a man might look when he shoots or is shot. A hero is one who looks like a hero. Whatever the limitations of such an idea in experience, it has always been valid in art. (5)

As the oldest, most enduring cinema genre,¹ the western has been a protean genre as well, having assumed different shapes, styles and ideologies in time, somehow encapsulating the core beliefs of generations of viewers. It is protean to such an extent that some analysts have put forth the idea of the death of the genre although, as medium of myth propagation *par excellence*, the western cannot be considered dead without a necessary annulment of the values it has carried along, values that belong to national identity. Thus the term *decline* used by Cawelti is more appropriate to point to the decreasing production and perhaps popularity of the genre while this decline may be the consequence of a relativisation of the American uniqueness and exceptionalism. He wrote:

I suspect that the decline of the western reflects our growing uncertainty about American uniqueness and about the special place of the West in establishing that uniqueness. This erosion of the western genre is clearly connected to the increasing abandonment of the Turner thesis and other concepts of American exceptionalism. (6)

On the other hand, this belief in exceptionalism may have been shifted to other genres—the gangster movies for instance.² The genre cannot go into oblivion simply because of the great number of variants its basic story has enjoyed. The openness and the flexibility of the genre make it possible for it to include elements from other genres or allow various surface transformations.

David Lusted prefers the term *diminished centrality* as he analyses a complex list of factors that contributed to the decreasing production of westerns: the changing conditions of the film production studios, the rise of urban America and of the suburbia that leads to a reorientation towards other genres, the developing sophistication in the military field that, in turn, leads to an iconography change, the changing perspectives on race and gender and the already found modern identity (5-7).

The erosion may also have been caused by the new emerging mentalities that acted against the somewhat rigid roles employed in the western. Thus, the

¹ Although there is no commonly accepted definition, we may define the cinema genre as a model, a type or prototype, having certain common features or constituents that are easy to recognize. According to Berry Keith Grant, genre movies are “those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations” (in Neale 9).

² The gangster movie features the same “iconography of action fiction” (Lusted 6) and exceptional hero as an outcast, fighting his way to the center of the society. With the disappearance of the rural landscape and the expansion of the urban ethos, the dramatic space represented in the western genre needed other means of expression and the gangster movie soon became an appropriate frame for the western hero ethos, giving it a modern historical aspect or iconography.

pressure of the protest against the marginal roles assigned to women³ or to Native Americans, the re-evaluation of their contribution not only to the heritage of the West, but also to national history, or the growing environmental awareness have challenged the genre formula.

The number of westerns has decreased indeed as the genre made way to other types of cinematic production, but once in a while a powerful and aesthetically relevant western emerges. It would be, therefore, more appropriate to speak about a transformation of the genre than about its death. An “unlikely candidate for cultural oblivion” (Lenihan in MacDonald 6), the western is still appealing⁴ although perhaps in shapes that critics would no longer consider “western-like”. For example, Larry McMurtry talks about the appeal of the western that is not endless and that is likely to subside to social and cultural transformation as he argues that “since the West definitely has been won, the cowboy must someday fade. (...) An urban age demands an urban figure. And the secret agent, like the Westerner a sort of insider-outsider, is an updated type of gunfighter.” (in MacDonald 8)

With Cormac McCarthy’s novels, especially with *No Country for Old Men*, the urban shift of the western becomes a modern, inherent feature of the genre. McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* explores the instances of the loss of control on the part of the community and its chances for survival in a universe in which the central word is collapse. “Collapse” then seems to be the leitmotif defining both the structure and the substance of this modern western that is infused with elements of detective fiction—an unsolved crime, moral ambiguity, violence, and an action-driven narrative. The embedded, inherent violence of the western genre is pushed here to the limits, being more elaborate than any of the flesh and blood characters. Actually, these are only briefly depicted; as they interact with each other or their fate, they seem to be rather pawns moved around and about irrationally by an implacable, merciless transcendental force. McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* is a novel of violence⁵ in the sense that

³ Films like *Bad Girls* (1994) or *The Quick and the Dead* (1995) are examples of Hollywood’s attempts at bringing women in the center, a sort of retribution for its long history of ignoring the other sex, of objectifying it.

⁴ The success of the latest *3:10 to Yuma*, or *The Assassination of Jesse James* proves that the western, as a cultural item, is deeply embedded in the viewer’s conscience (American or non-American).

⁵ As Patrick W. Shaw defined it, a novel of violence has violence as its central narrative focus and as the conflict that energizes the plot. This essential violence is distinct from incidental instances of violence that merely attend another major action that is not violent. Further, the novel of violence has a recognizable vocabulary of violence. (...) the characters are defined by the violence, rather than having the violence act as an

violence is not merely decorative, incidental or gratuitous, but the one point of commonality to which all the actual characters relate. This is either through rejection, like sheriff Bell, through infliction, like Anton Chigurh – the emotionless, compassionless killing machine – or through mere accident, as in the case of the apparent protagonist Llewelyn Moss, who accidentally comes across the dead drug dealers and their money out in the desert. A tooth-and-claw realist, McCarthy envisages a new type of western, keeping conventional elements within the frame of contemporary beliefs, expectations and techniques. In other words,

McCarthy's Westerns employ elements of the tradition: cowboys, an American West heavily influenced by Hispanic culture, ranches, Indians, the frontier, settlers, cavalry, the gunfighter, and what happens when all of these things collide. For McCarthy the collision unveils a loss of innocence for the young and old male protagonists. (...) he works against convention by ensuring that, ultimately, all of his main characters fail or only partially succeed in their ambitions. (Greenwood 22)

With their screen adaptation of *No Country for Old Men*, the Coens escort us through a world that leaves little choice other than death. The film opens with a shot of desolate, wide-open country in West Texas in June 1980. The first shots seem to reiterate the traditional formula of the western genre, gradually revealing the landscape through a pan. In the the Coens' western, space remains an iconic element, but its substance acquires additional meanings. Dark images that subtly turn into lighter ones evoke the scenery as if waking up from a dream, but instead viewers witness the nightmarish stories of the protagonists. In *No country for Old Men*, space carries the same mark of collapse as the narrative itself; it is not rendered as a vast field that can be captured through one movement of the camera, but as a series of shots that show not only different places, but also different times as the day wanes into night. Thus, this fragmentary space, broken into pieces, evokes some of the chaos that dominates society. Not being able to master it is a sign of the hero's failure. We see Llewelyn Moss trying to shoot an antelope yet having trouble in dealing with the distance:

That Llewelyn Moss takes an ill-advised shot at too great a distance and probably fatally wounds an antelope, and that it takes him so long to walk toward it (as if he would get close enough to shoot it again), fools even this native of the area into thinking that out there in the desert, he can pick up what

adjunct element in a series of actions and responses that constitute a rounded fictional personality.” (6-7)

does not belong to him and get away with it. A visit to this area confirms the ease with which Moss might feel he has all the space in the world. Indeed, despite his modern equipment, Moss fails to get close enough to the antelope for a successful shot. (Jay Ellis 45)

In a voice-over narration, the one interior monologue that the film retains out of the thirteen that run through the novel, the local sheriff, Ed Tom Bell tells of the changing times: in the old days, some sheriffs never wore guns, like his father, who was the sheriff before him, an evocation that is a requiem for the old ways. Signaling the gruesome times that lay ahead, Bell recalls having sent a teenage boy to the electric chair for killing a girl simply because he wanted to kill someone. Appalled by this murder, Bell is unable to make sense of his times, trapped in a nostalgia or admiration for the old timers.

In the Coens' version the alternation of exterior action and inner reflection that consistently appears in McCarthy's novel is replaced by ritual-like shifts from loud, violent scenes with moments of utter silence, thus building suspense and imposing a certain pace, but mostly suggesting (and allowing) the breathe in–breathe out pattern of the natural rhythm. The narrative turns to Anton Chigurh's arrest and escape—a preview of the extraordinary power and methods of the one who would apparently play the role of the villain. Only in the third instance does Llewelyn Moss, the apparent protagonist of the novel/film appear. At this point, it is important to underline the fact that McCarthy's treatment of characters is different from that of the realistic narrative in the sense that they function as epitomes of a certain ideology, symbols of a cultural vision. Depicted in scattered details, with names that are either too complicated or too common, Greenwood sees them as “one of the primary modes through which McCarthy expresses this distinctive vision of the American cultural experience”(15). He also contends that

McCarthy's characters are often symbolic creations; they function as direct links to themes being explored in the novel. These symbolic characters reflect how McCarthy has abandoned the contemporary use of social realism as a narrative approach in favor of stylistic structures that embrace forms that are more common to classical Greek tragedies and epics and the Bible. (Greenwood 15)

Llewelyn Moss seems to be the good guy according to the tradition of the western, although he neither initiates the story nor does he end it; in fact, he is killed long before its ending. To a certain extent, he does embody some of the values of the western hero, the knight of the prairie, the archetype of masculinity, although he fails as a mediator between nature and society, between the individual and community. His first missed shot in the film anticipates his failure, although he proves laconic, resourceful, ambitious, stoic, having

exceptional survival skills. Yet, in the bigger picture of the violent universe, he is indeed portrayed as

a little man up against lethal odds and forces much bigger than himself, huge fortunes and ruthless powers, [that] bets his life, stash, and love against overwhelming odds. He is fated to fail. How he fails is the hyperreal story, the drama of everyman against destiny and ill winds and corruption. (Lincoln 141)

He fails as a saviour when he brings water to one of the dying dealers too late; his delayed response is also inadequate as his return with water becomes a means of letting himself dragged into his tragic destiny. He also fails as an initiate as his journey throughout the territory does not end in some sort of illumination or individual/collective salvation, but in sudden death. Moss serves as an ironic counterpart for the cowboy and his frontier values:

independence, self-reliance, and most important, innocence. McCarthy's young cowboys are never victorious. They die young or die old and alone with attainment of the pastoral ideal held out of reach. Sometimes, it is just a little out of reach; sometimes it is so far away that it was never a realistic possibility. In these failed lives, McCarthy undermines the long-standing tradition of the triumphant male in the Western genre. (Greenwood 23)

Not only does McCarthy subvert the figure of the cowboy through Llewelyn's inadequacy and failure, but he also "alters the cowboy's character by making cowboys anachronistic within the narratives he creates for them." (Greenwood 22) He achieves this through sheriff Bell's portrayal as an ineffectual, laconic World War II veteran who carries out the investigation following the trail of the murders, struggling and failing to make sense of the sheer enormity of the crimes with which he is faced. For Jay Ellis, the true protagonist is Sheriff Bell. Yet he is as inadequate in the role of the saving hero as Moss. Trapped in time, he is "so haunted by the past that he can only see the present as dark and confusing." (Ellis 134) Tired, caught unaware by the challenges of the modern society, a critic of the decaying moral values of his fellows, Bell is doomed to fail trapped in the glorious past time. He is the consciousness upon which the evils of the modern society are projected and he has no means of escape. Both the book and the film end abruptly with the failure of Bell's dream. Having evoked his father lighting out the territory in the West, Bell puts forth his nostalgia for the old timers:

I had two dreams about him after he died. I dont remember the first one all that well but it was about meetin him in town somewheres and he give me some money and I think I lost it. But the second one it was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night.

Goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothin. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make afire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up. (NCFOP 319)

History seems to be the dream from which Bell woke up. The ideal of the frontier is thus only a dream; Bell cannot do anything against the evil, cannot intervene on behalf of his citizens. He is caught up in the same wave of violence that he cannot oppose. As the old sheriff Ellis assumes, “you can’t stop what’s coming...That’s vanity.” (NCFOP 319)

Jay Ellis compares Bell with Jeremiah in the Old Testament, pointing out that Bell’s interior monologues resemble Jeremiah’s laments. Bell’s complaints recapitulate the same concerns as in the Bible:

First, he sees the evil as having arrived from outside his place in the form of somehow invading Indians that “scalped and gutted like fish” the women and children of those “early settlers” (...) Second, the evil arrives from the outside in the form of drugs, run and dealt by “Mexicans”.(...) the third, inmost worry of God and Bell is that their children have given up their acknowledgement of what is good and righteous because of some failure on the part of God or Bell; the parent ultimately owns all failures of the child. (Ellis 151)

To further push the ironic distance from the traditional western, the center of the narrative is assigned, in our opinion, to Anton Chigurh, the evil character of the novel/film, the villain. His inability to comprehend human life is matched only by his ability to take it, as he does with ruthless abandon throughout the narrative. Hired to track down drug money by a group of Americans, he quickly kills those who hired him and begins to search for the money on his own.

Foreign scented and “faintly exotic,” Chigurh shows the devil’s mastery of weapons of destruction, from slaughter yard tools, to trucks and a transponder the size of a Zippo lighter, to rifles and handguns and sawed-off shotguns. He knows exactly how to strangle a deputy with handcuffs cutting into his own wrists. He is (...) cunning, and know-how: the certitude, efficiency, and indifference of a highly tuned executionist. Malign will gone rancid, he enjoys doing it right. (Lincoln 143)

Chigurh, (mistakenly called *sugar*, which is both ironic and relevant for Moss’ innocence), a “ghost” as Bell calls him, seems to be an implacable force of evil rather than a flesh and blood villain, an epitome of the victims’

predetermined, inevitable end. In one of the early instances of the movie, as he kills an innocent man with his cattle gun, he assigns ritualistic gestures to his deed (“Hold still”, Chigurh tells him as if preparing for something similar to baptism).

His physical features are rather blurred. His only distinguishing feature: his “blue as lapis”, cobalt eyes that allow no feeling or humanity underline his lack of humanity, lack of emotion. He is a surface that cannot be altered. Otherwise, he is just average. Or, as one of the boys describes him in the novel:

He was medium height. Medium build. Looked like he was in shape. In his mid thirties maybe. Dark hair. Dark brown, I think. I dont know, Sheriff. He looked like anybody. (...) He didnt look like anybody. I mean there wasnt nothin unusual lookin about him. But he didnt look like anybody you'd want to mess with. When he said somethin you damn sure listened. (*NCFOP* 279)

Stripped of any motivation to kill, Chigurh is in fact stripped of the negative/positive category. He claims that destiny has brought his victims in his path. Oddly enough, Chigurh is described as having his own set of morals, however twisted they may be. He does not kill at random, he does not act with or out of negative feelings. As he depicts himself, he is “someone who is an expert in a difficult field. As someone who is completely reliable and completely honest.” (*NCFOP* 277)

He sees himself as a hand of fate; an instrument who exacts what is supposed to happen upon those to whom it is supposed to happen. His flipping a coin to decide his victims’ fate is a relevant gesture for this character that is as implacable as destiny. Only in two instances does he not toss the coin to decide destiny. He serenely tells Carla Jean: “Your husband had the opportunity to save you. Instead he used it to save himself.” (*NCFOP* 269) Thus, he deprives his victims of the possibility of a real choice. Even his means of killing reiterates the idea that his victims never have a choice.

By killing people with a cattle gun, Chigurh is turning them into livestock, denying their humanity. Moreover, by shooting them in the forehead with it, Chigurh simultaneously deprives them of their living sight while imprinting in them a symbolic third eye. (Ellis 137)

Not only does the world collapse in *No Country for Old Men*, but so does the narrative itself. First, there is a graphic collapse that enhances the absurdity of the world that unfolds itself before the reader. Thus, the dialogues flow confusingly given the lack of quotation marks, suggesting a verbal intensity that accompanies the violence of the action as such. Also, the short, fast-paced chapters that are mingled with Bell’s inner monologue interludes contribute to the graphic collapse. Then, there is a sort of mental collapse of reason that has to

do with the way the narrative itself flows. The lack of a straightforward, orderly narrative, that constantly shifts from one hero to another (to enhance the confusion on the hero – antihero issue) and that is often abruptly interrupted, is masterfully intertwined with italicized interludes as outer perspective is connected to inner perspective. Thus, intended confusion and the sudden twists and turns that suggest lack of narrative control make the reader struggle to make sense of this fictional world as hard as the characters seem to.

The peculiar structure within which McCarthy develops the story provides a bitter comment on the representation of manhood in this new kind of western. Each of the three central male characters is deprived of his manhood one way or another, so they all fail to occupy the narrative center of the novel. For Bell, the act of telling his own story in a first person narrative involves a subversion of his manhood. Conversely, Moss is denied a central place because he has no control of the narrative in which he acts as protagonist, his story being told in the third person. Last but not least, dehumanizing Chirgurrh makes him unfit to act as a moral center, as the western hero used to, leaving absurd violence the only center of this utterly absurd universe evoked in *No Country for Old Men* in which not only the old, but also the arch-hero and, eventually, humanity itself are, to paraphrase Yeats, paltry things or tattered coats.

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