

# Exploring Landscape in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

*Space and landscape have been essential themes in the American literary imagination since its very beginnings. Modernist representations of the city in American literature were generally connected with the ideal of progress, universality and civilization, while the rural landscape was seen as the authentic, genuine and wild. The postmodernist vision of the city deconstructed the image of the city as a symbol of progress with the creation of the alienated self and the vision of the wilderness was dismantled as a myth. The following paper deals with the ways in which this transition is reflected in Cormac McCarthy's novel No Country for Old Men (2005). Through an examination of his use of the landscape we aim to show the shift between modernist and postmodernist America and suggest the metamodernist tendencies in McCarthy's fiction.*

*Key words: landscape, western, thriller, metamodernism, altermodernism*

Explorations of landscape in Cormac McCarthy's fiction are by no means a new academic endeavour. McCarthy's deep and ongoing engagement with the American landscape or, more specifically, the landscape of the American Southwest infuses most of his earlier, so called western novels such as *Blood Meridian* (1985), *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). The scholarly consensus on these novels generally considers them to be a critique of the frontier ideal and of Manifest Destiny, concepts which are themselves undergoing a redefinition in 21<sup>st</sup> century America especially from the perspective of emerging fields such as ecocriticism, bioregionalism or studies of space and place (Jillet 2016; McGilchrist 2010). Dianne C. Luce argues that "McCarthy not only reflects or subverts landscape paintings and techniques in his fiction, but he deploys his landscapes in *Blood Meridian* as one means of narrative commentary that transcends its often fairly objective narrative stance" (2017: 2).

McCarthy views landscape as a necessary component of a seemingly firm identity which gradually becomes fragmented; the protagonists, who initially appear as traditional western heroes, are transformed into disintegrated individuals unable to comprehend the transition between the old America and the America that is yet to come. Neil Campbell writes that "McCarthy's west is a borderlands both geographically, but also metaphorically, a space for physical and philosophical migration, where issues of life and death, myth and reality, dream and actuality intersect and cross like his characters in its landscapes" (2000: 23). Similarly, Pierre Lagayette asserts that "borderlines are not just spatial divisions, they separate two historical universes that irremediably cement the linearity of time" (2013: 88). If we limit McCarthy's fiction to the literature of the American South, then we should take into account Cawelti's observation of McCarthy's use of landscape as "his own restless quest from Knoxville, Tennessee, to El Paso, Texas, from the heart of the south to the edges of the West" (1997: 165). He goes on to explain that "in this way, McCarthy not only exemplifies some important aspects of the Southern identity as it is reshaping itself in the era of the Sunbelt, but in deeper sense he can be seen as a postmodern avatar of the restless drive toward the West" (ibid.).

Borderlines, crossings and oscillations either in a physical or metaphorical sense are very much present in McCarthy's 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men*, the title of which suggests a crossroads between the worlds of the old and the new. The title of the novel is inspired by Yeats' poem "Sailing to Byzantium" in which the aging narrator, much like McCarthy's Sheriff Tom Bell, finds himself painfully out of step with the world around him: "That is no country for old men, the young / In one another's arms, birds in the trees, / — Those dying generations—at their song" (quoted in Hage 2010: 121). This borderline between the old and the new in McCarthy's novel is depicted by the narrator of the story, the aging Bell and his young counterpart, the 36-year old Vietnam veteran Llewelyn Moss, in a seemingly simple plot. While Moss is out in the desert hunting antelopes, he stumbles across two million dollars left among the remains of a shoot-out over a drug deal which has gone wrong. In deciding to take the money he immediately becomes a target for Mexican drug dealers and the psychopathic killer Anton Chigurh. Despite Bell's attempts to warn Moss, he is killed along with his wife; Chigurh survives and the sheriff retires. The novel is generally placed among McCarthy's "less significant work" (McGilchrist 2010: 133); however, as we aim to show in this paper, when read in the light of metamodernism, the work gains an exciting new dimension.

In terms of historical context, McCarthy illustrates the atmosphere of the American West in the 1980s which saw an enormous boom in the cross-border drugs trade. This development is reflected in the setting of the novel, which takes place in the border towns of Texas such as Sanderson and Del Rio and the city of El Paso, and even stretches into Mexico. The emergence of the new criminal underworld of the drug trade along the border is seen as a consequence of the globalization which had started penetrating the American Southwest and which accelerated the end of the mythical West. McCarthy underlines the demise of the myth by showing how the new drug culture has changed the perception of borderlines and its subsequent relationship between the local and global. McCarthy can be seen as a writer "whose singular prose at once foregrounds and incorporates the deathliness of language in his stories of an evacuated yet thoroughly commercialized American West—a topos and a space defined, Holloway suggests, by the ravages of globalization" (quoted in Lurie and Eaton 2004: 755). By placing the American West in juxtaposition with the globalized threat of the drug industry, McCarthy is asking what kind of culture can emerge from such a confluence. Nicholas Bourriaud poses a similar question in his definition of altermodern culture when he states that "a new modernity is emerging, reconfigured to an age of globalisation – understood in its economic, political and cultural aspects" (2015: 255).

McCarthy's reference to (local) history covers more than the borderland issues of the American West of the 1980s. Annie Proulx (2005) refers to the increased level of violence in America as a whole at that time when she asks why McCarthy chose to set his novel in the 1980s:

Is it because this is the year when Ronald Reagan, after a blitzkrieg television ad campaign, ousted Jimmy Carter and the Republicans gained control of the Senate for the first time in almost 30 years? Or because the New Mexico penitentiary riots, the murders of Atlanta black children, the shootings of John Lennon, Dr Herman Tarnower, ex-congressman Allard Lowenstein, physician-author Michael Halberstam and many others, as well as the US Coast Guard's firing on a marijuana-laden fishing boat off the Florida coast, all made headlines indicating a violent country flaming out of control?

However, McCarthy's historical context of 1980s America only serves as the centre point of his historical digressions which go back to WWII in the re-emerging memories of Sheriff Bell or to the Vietnam War and its consequences for the nation through the character of Llewelyn Moss. McCarthy sees war as a traumatic experience and another disruption of the myth of heroism which prevent both characters from understanding the new world which is emerging at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bell's unresolved trauma from WWII in which he left his comrades to die and yet received a bronze medal pushes him to save Moss from making a similar mistake and falling for the crime. However, the post-Vietnam malaise forces Moss deeper into decline; a western "good old boy" out hunting for antelopes who is tempted by the big money of the drug world. So through this seemingly simple western plot turned thriller, we are guided through America's transition from the end of modernism with an examination of the consequences of WWII to the end of postmodernism in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and finally confronted with the premonition of a new world which will emerge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the character of Chigurh. Bourriaud draws a similar comparison in his altermodern manifesto which notes the way in which artists create their art via different forms of narrative: "As they follow the receding perspectives of history and geography, works of art trace lines in a globalized space that now extends to time: history, the last continent to be explored, can be traversed like a territory" (2015: 259). In *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy interweaves the past and the future just as he does the genres of the western and the thriller. The very juxtaposition or mixing of the two genres indicates one of the key elements of postmodernism, but it also suggests a new hybrid genre of the "philosophical" thriller. However, McCarthy is not only experimenting with genre; he subordinates this experimentation to his characterization and setting, especially his use of landscape.

The first instance of the encounter between the relatively isolated/local world of the American West with the new global threat is the drug business and technology that become predominant themes in the second part of the novel. Initially the narrator of the story, Sheriff Tom Bell, is depicted as a traditional western character in an almost pastoral western setting, a figure on the edge of retirement who represents the old world. Cuddon (1999: 983) defines the western as a

genre of fiction - usually in short story or novel form - associated with the western states of the USA (sometimes called the "Wild West") and more particularly the South-west (i.e. the region encompassing the border states of Arizona, New Mexico and Western Texas) and what was known as the "Old South-west", which included the area between the Savannah River and the Mississippi which formed the south-western frontier from colonial times to the 19th century.

The most well-known writer of American westerns, Andy Adams, presents the West "as a moral landscape in which and against which characters fight and struggle. Their destruction or salvation/redemption depends on how they cope with and respond to the codes of violence which prevail" (Cuddon 1999: 984). Bell in *No Country for Old Men* himself casts the West as a moral landscape; he is proud of the fact that he has never killed anybody in the course of his law enforcement career and emphasizes the familiarity of the landscape of his county together with a longing for the past:

I never had to kill nobody and I am very glad of that fact. Some of the old time sheriffs woudnt even carry a firearm. A lot of folks find that hard to believe but it's a

fact. Jim Scarborough never carried one. That's the younger Jim. Gaston Boykins wouldn't wear one. Up in Comanche County. I always liked to hear about the old timers. Never missed a chance to do so. The old time concern that the sheriffs had for their people is been watered down some. You can't help but feel it. Nigger Hoskins over in Bastrop Country knowed everybody's phone number in the whole country by heart.

(McCarthy 2005: 63)

On the other hand, the increasing levels of drug-related crime brings Bell to the gradual realisation that he is unable to comprehend the scope of evil which drugs and the new type of criminals such as Chigurh represent, and he longs to return to the familiar world of the old West. His fear of facing the new evil, a force which is out of his league, forces him to think about faith again or to consider a return to the traditions of the West:

I think if you were Satan and you were settin around tryin to think up something that would just bring the human race to its knees what you would probably come up with was narcotics. Maybe he did. I told that to somebody at breakfast the other morning and they asked me if I believed in Satan...I had to think about that. I guess as a boy I did. Come the middle years my belief I reckon had waned somewhat. Now I'm starting to lean back the other way.

(McCarthy 2005: 218)

Bell understands his impotence in the face of this new type of crime and eventually transgresses against the rules of the thriller genre by abandoning his investigation. The discrepancy between the obsolete world of the old westerner Bell and the breakneck speed of the world into which Moss is heading is emphasized by the use of technology in police work, a feature which Bell is absolutely unaware of and yet it "somehow kills Moss", something which Bell never realizes:

I don't know that law enforcement benefits all that much from new technology. Tools that comes into our hands comes into theirs too. Not that you can go back. Or that you'd even want to. We used to have them old Motorola two way radios. We've had the high-band now for several years. Some things aint changed. Common sense aint change. I'll tell my deputies sometimes to just follow the breadcrumbs.

(McCarthy 2005: 62)

Bell is unable to keep up with technological progress in this new and globalized world but it allows Chigurh to be omniscient and omnipresent and follow his prey rapidly through different landscapes and territories without being noticed. In a reference to the end of the territory as we know it, Marc Augé claims that "culture has never been a spontaneous product that any one territory could appropriate. This illusory definition resurfaces today because there no longer is any territory. It is one of the illusions maintained by globalization" (quoted in Bourriaud 2015: 268). Bourriaud concludes that "in a world every inch of which is under satellite surveillance, territory takes the form of a construction or a journey" (ibid.). Thus we see that the technology which helps Chigurh to track down Moss is entirely beyond the understanding of Bell, and this ultimately denies the aging Sheriff the possibility of reaching a definitive final destination. The end of a territory and the construction of a journey is captured well by McGilchrist (2010: 4) in reference to the young cowboys from McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*:

The placelessness and futility felt by McCarthy's young cowboys is related to the economic disenfranchisement felt by those engaged in many traditional occupations which waned in importance in the wake of post-World War II industrialization and globalization. Additionally, McCarthy's characters' belief in the tenets of the frontier ethos, representing and idealized vision of American history, are revealed as both hollow in content and productive of further depredations on both people and landscapes.

As with Bell, Llewelyn Moss is initially also a traditional character of the western genre; he is a welder, a former Vietnam war veteran and a skilled gunman. Early in the novel, McCarthy sets Moss firmly within the southwestern landscape and within the western trope as he sets out on his antelope hunt:

Moss sat with the heels of his boots dug into the volcanic gravel of the ridge and glassed the desert below him with a pair of twelve power german binoculars. His hat pushed back on his head. Elbows propped on his knees. The rifle strapped over his shoulder with a harness leather sling was a heavy barreled .270 on a '98 Mauser action with a laminated stock of maple and walnut ... The antelope were a little under a mile away. The sun was up less than an hour and the shadow of the ridge and datilla and the rocks fell far out across the floodplain below him. ..He lowered the binoculars and sat studying the land. Far to the south the raw mountains of Mexico. The breaks of the river. To the west the baked terracotta terrain of the running borderlands. He spat dryly and wiped his mouth and wiped his mouth on the shoulder of his cotton workshirt.

(McCarthy 2005: 9)

In the traditional western, the protagonist is usually a lone gunfighter who, after some hesitation, eventually decides to defend the good. Later he is joined by a sheriff or a lawman and they fight evil together. Moss fits this mould of this kind of moral hero at the beginning of the novel when he returns to the scene of the shoot-out with a bottle of water for the dying Mexican (his last attempt to go back to the good and moral world). McCarthy follows this tradition of the western genre until this very moment. However, once Moss decides to keep the money he has found, he crosses the borders of his western world and moves into the fierce territory of the thriller (see more in Arbeit 2006). McCarthy's first suggestion of decline can be seen in *Blood Meridian* (1985) which dismissed the myth of the western hero by depicting the Glanton gang as a criminal gang uses the disguise of Manifest Destiny to allow them to scalp anybody they come across for profit. In *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy uses post-Vietnam America in order to underline a similar message: the futility of the heroism of war and the post traumatic and post-modernist situation which war trails in its wake. This is yet another instance of McCarthy suggesting metamodernist tendencies, with his characters oscillating or transiting across different landscapes. Such crossings between different landscapes and borderlines or the restless quest-journeys from the South to the West suggest a similarity with Vermeulen and Akker's (2010) definition of metamodernism which:

oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to

and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern.

The settings in which we see Moss also mirror this oscillation; he leaves the peaceful western landscapes for the urban outskirts and later the city itself, trading the wilderness for civilization. This kind of escape from the well-known landscape of the western or local space to an unknown global environment marks the first sign of modernity which Bourriaud calls the exodus: "This may be defined as a wrenching separation from the traditions, customs, everything in fact that anchors an individual to a 'territory' and the habits of a culture petrified by fixed ways of doing and saying things" (268). By crossing the border of the local space, Moss enters the global world in which it is impossible to apply the rules of the local or, in the terminology of genre, he enters the world of the thriller. Abrams defines the genre of the thriller as any novel which features "a rapid sequence of sensational events; often, such novels represent hairbreadth escapes of a protagonist from relentless and terrifying pursuit by sinister enemies" (2011: 85). Cuddon considers the thriller to be one of the most remarkable literary phenomena of the 20th century (1999: 915). The main difference between the western and the thriller is in their setting. While the setting of a western is predominantly that of nature, the frontier, the open plains or the mountains, the setting of the thriller is overwhelmingly urban. The original good protagonist is replaced by an antagonist who is usually mysterious, a role which Anton Chigurh fits precisely. While in the western the preoccupation of the protagonist is with the good, in the thriller there are no such moral criteria. Moss steps from the world of the local into the global and is unfortunately unable to grasp the rules of this new territory. As with Bell, Moss fails to understand the rules of the thriller in a metaphorical sense, and he is unable to see the limit of his capabilities. When waxing on the topic of greed with a gas station attendant, Chigurh describes Moss' exact predicament: "The prospect of outsized profits leads people to exaggerate their own capabilities. In their minds. They pretend to themselves that they are in control of events where perhaps they are not" (253). The oscillation between different landscapes represents on the one hand a nostalgia for the idealized western past which had never actually existed; as McGilchrist (2011: 137) points out in reference to the cowboys in McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*:

Their nostalgia for a past time leads not to wholeness but to alienation and fragmentation. This fragmentation of self is reflected in a fragmentation of language throughout the trilogy, in which the cowboy protagonists are usually monosyllabic, at best taciturn, even in two languages. The inchoate expressions of the boys mirror the mystery of the thing they seek: a land and a time whose very existence is posited on myth.

The character of Moss also represents the fragmentation of self, as this hunter and Vietnam vet, symbols of heroism in the American modernist context, finds his life spiralling out of control upon deciding to keep the drug money; his fate mirrors the decline of America, a process which many would trace back to the wake of the Vietnam War.

When contrasted with the protagonist figure of Moss, the antagonist Anton Chigurh represents something extraordinary and exotic just like the landscape into which Moss has stepped from his western setting: "The man turned his head and gazed at Moss. Blue eyes. Serene. Dark hair. Something about him faintly exotic. Beyond Moss's experience" (112). The exoticism of Chigurh and the world he represents seems to be in line with

Borrioud's assertion that "our current modernity can no longer be characterized by either the modern discourse of the universal gaze of the white, western male or its postmodern deconstruction along the heterogeneous lines of race, gender, class, and locality" (quoted in Vermeulen and Akker 2010). He suggests that it is exemplified instead by globalized perception, cultural nomadism, and creolization (ibid.). Chigurh's appearance seems alien to Bell, to Moss but also to Carson Wells, a hitman who has been hired to eradicate him and who warns Moss about him: "He's not like you. He's not even like me" (173). Daniel Butler explains that Chigurh's outlaw appearance is hard to place: "something about him is familiar native, and domestic, but he is at the same time vaguely foreign-looking. He is a product of the border whose appearance unsettles the binary categories on which borders depend (2011: 42).

Indeed, Chigurh is a new type of a villain in this novel and evades traditional characterization. He kills with precision; all of his actions are planned methodically and he is a "perfectionist" in a sense that he kills anybody who is connected to the crime (for example, Moss' wife). Mellen (2008: 30) describes Chigurh as "a paragon of military discipline, who seems to have extinguished all compassion". And yet Chigurh is a kind of a principled villain in whom even Sheriff Bell can find something to admire. There are also many similarities between Chigurh and the mysterious antagonist of Judge Holden from McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian*. Just like Holden, Chigurh is a perfectionist and something of a philosopher: "one might find it useful to model himself after God. Very useful, in fact" (256) and also an ascetic: "You think I'm like you. That is just greed. But I'm not like you. I live a simple life" (177), has little regard for human life: "You are asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I have only one way to live. It doesn't allow for special cases" (259). Both Holden and Chigurh can move across different landscapes and they have the ability to escape death unscathed or to disappear into the landscape without a trace. While Holden in *Blood Meridian* represents evil and the greed of Manifest Destiny, Chigurh seems to embody the metamodernist type of a character of the global world who is a traveller, a nomad. Rebman (2016: 112) compares these two characters when she states:

The American West has lost its vast and empty expansiveness and trades it for the exoticism of the border country and the naturalization of a variety of heritages. As the Judge embodies the empty expanses, Chigurh mirrors the various heritages, his accent clean, his looks faintly exotic, his appearance an amalgamation of the settlers' and indigenous origins. And while Judge Holden's very name insinuates the characters' "hola" over his surroundings, Chigurh's name remains unplaceable and unpronounceable.

Chigurh's transient and avatar-like character seems to be the result of the new modernity that is emerging in contemporary America. He is a traveller, a nomad and a wanderer who can appear and disappear in space; his final destination is unknown because in the words of Nicolas Bourriaud (2009): "the artist becomes 'homo viator', the prototype of the contemporary traveler whose passage through signs and formats refers to a contemporary experience of mobility, travel and traversing."

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Space and landscape are important literary elements in McCarthy's fiction. While in *Blood Meridian*, landscape is depicted as an almost omniscient character hovering above America's

violent history, in the 2006 novel *The Road* it is used as a tool to show how the destruction of the environment is accompanied by the absolute denial of humanity. Landscape in *No Country for Old Men* is used as means of delineating the transition of American society in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century through territorial crossings but also crossings in history to show the end of modernism, postmodernism and emergence of what we call metamodernism. McCarthy achieves this transition through various juxtapositions either in his use of opposing themes such as good or evil or in his opposing use of the landscape. The underlying vision in his novel is to show that with the emerging modernity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, landscape in the American literary imagination presents new challenges in understanding contemporary America itself.

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