

Film as communicational mediation of the ecological crisis: Avatar and The Road

ABSTRACT

This paper is a communication-oriented, ecological interpretation of James Cameron's recent film, *Avatar*, and of John Hillcoat's *The Road* – two films that address the current global ecological crisis very differently. By 'ecological' is meant that – in the case of *Avatar* – the film is ecologically significant in its stressing of the vital interconnectedness of all living beings both with one another and with their inorganic environment. The question of how this ecological stance is cinematically articulated in *Avatar*, in science-fictional terms, is all important, because a communicational failure in this regard would fall short of imparting to audiences the potential outcome of the continuing destruction of ecosystems, comparatively speaking, on Earth. In *The Road* the ecological dimension is encountered very differently, because the cinematic-communicational means employed function in a register at odds with that utilised in *Avatar*. The point of this paper is to explore the communicational differences, including the one regarding cinematic-communicational *register*, between the two films, regardless of the fact that, arguably, they promote the same ecological insights.

INTRODUCTION

What happens when cinema employs its inescapable communicational-semiotic means – coded audio-visual signifiers unfolding or functioning along the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, available for decoding by viewers – very differently in terms of thematic register, despite sharing the same theme, in this case the spectre of ecological destruction? You get two films as different, and yet as related, as James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) and John Hillcoat's *The Road* (2009).¹

These two films are, in my judgement, among the most communicationally pertinent of recent years, given the increasing evidence that anthropogenic climate change is accelerating, and is very deleterious to the living conditions of all living beings on the planet (Kovel, 2007; Lovelock, 2010). Why pertinent in communicational terms, one may ask. The answer should be obvious, but may be succinctly stated. Because most mainstream ('feel-good') films do not address issues of climate change and its effects, or of the consequences of exploiting natural resources, these two recent fiction films should be singled out for the welcome focus both provide on these problematical issues. Even if it is in fictional terms, the fictions concerned resonate powerfully with changing ecological conditions on Earth today, so that it is unlikely for any reasonably informed viewer to be unaware of this. Moreover, as I hope to demonstrate, the two films communicate these ecological concerns in an exemplary fashion.

I have used the semiotic terms *syntagmatic* and *paradigmatic* axes above. They are part of the semiotic vocabulary that enables one to talk clearly about the meanings of texts, language and films, and they can be employed in structuralist and poststructuralist ways. Language, as well as an image sequence (in speech, literature and art, including cinema) consists of signs, which the structuralist linguist, De Saussure, split up into *signifiers* (words, images, gestures, and so on) and *signifieds* (the conceptual meanings of words, images, etc.).² The word (signifier), 'tiger', means 'large, furry, striped, carnivorous mammalian feline or cat, whose natural habitat is the jungle' (signified). If I talk about tigers, my words follow one another on the syntagmatic or sequential axis or level of meaning, and every word or signifier that is added, changes the meaning (signified) of what I am saying. However, it is not only sequential or syntagmatic meaning that matters; paradigmatic, or associative meaning also contributes to it on another axis or level. Consider the sentence: 'The tiger stood very still; only its tail moved slowly from side to side, like a big tabby cat showing its excitement about being fed, or is it its irritation at not being fed?' Here, the sequence of signifiers or words (syntagmatic axis) tells the reader more as it unfolds, while the paradigmatic association of 'tiger' with 'tabby cat' amplifies the meaning of tiger by associating it with more familiar creatures, namely domestic cats, and simultaneously contrasting it with such pets, which would not normally instill fear in the spectator (whereas a tiger probably would).

Films also work in terms of signifiers and signifieds, functioning at the level of the syntagmatic ('what follows what') and paradigmatic ('what belongs with what') axes of meaning, except that

¹ See Appendix for a summary of the film narratives

² See Andrew (1976: 219-226) and Olivier (2010a) for an elaboration on the relevance of De Saussure's work for cinema, for example in the film theory of Christian Metz.

here one is confronted with image sequences and dialogue (speech) working together. Still, cinema lends itself to an analysis or interpretation along these lines. One last thing: if one employs these semiotic terms in a structuralist way, so that there is a strict distinction and separation between signifiers (words, images) and signifieds (conceptual meanings of words and images), one is reasonably assured of a 'stable' interpretation, given the stabilising or 'anchoring' function of signifieds. However, if one erases the strict distinction or separation between signifier and signified – so that every signified or conceptual meaning is also, in its turn, a signifier, this means that one has switched to a complex poststructuralist register (Derrida, 1982; Olivier, 2005). I believe that the latter is really unavoidable, and therefore my interpretations of *Avatar* and *The Road* are largely poststructuralist.

It must be stressed at the outset that, regardless of the interpretive meaning(s) that can be derived from viewing these two films, such meaning is inseparable from the power of the image configurations and image sequences that instantiate the films in paradigmatic and syntagmatic terms – that is, respectively, comparatively (associatively) determined and sequentially (narratively) generated meaning. The advanced technical means of production notwithstanding,³ these cinematographically fashioned audio-visual images are therefore, as inescapably as in the case of the pioneering sight-and-sound cinema of the early 20th century, the carriers of narrative (sequential, syntagmatic) and associative (paradigmatic) meaning that viewers 'decode'⁴ or interpret in the course of viewing the films.

As far as their respective narratives are concerned, in the case of *Avatar*, an imaginary situation of eco-destruction on a lush, fictional moon (which functions as a metaphor for Earth) is averted by the diegetic joining of forces between an initially 'paralysed' human, representing humanity, and a population of indigenous peoples. Despite enjoying social, cultural life, these humanoids are not alienated from nature, but conjoined with it at a mythological level. The genre employed by Cameron here is science fiction, and to some extent cinematic fantasy. The register is one that indexes hope – arguably even a degree of optimism – regarding the possibility of vicariously and paradigmatically resolving a planetary ecological situation that, by all accounts, could become precarious, if not dire and ultimately calamitous. As in the case of all genuine science fiction, it is a fictional critique of science and its offspring, technology, in a double-sided manner: it exposes both the creative power and the destructive force of science and technology (Olivier, 2002).

The Road, by contrast, is a protracted cinematic imagining of a time and space beyond the occurrence of the calamity, when the Earth, or nature, has finally collapsed, and all that is left to survivors is either to prolong their hopeless lives by scavenging the countryside and cannibalising

³ These include everything that cinema can draw on today, most notably 3-D and CG-technology.

⁴ *Decode* here means 'interpret or understand in terms of identifiable codes', whether these be 'cultural' codes (for example a certain country's national flag, or a hat that is associated with a specific practice, such as being a 'cowboy'), or cinema-specific codes (such as a panoramic shot, or accelerated montage – a sequence of images that succeed one another at an accelerating rate). For an elaboration both on this (and on the fundamental means of signification, namely signifiers and signifieds, and also on the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic axes of meaning) see Andrew, 1976: 219-224; Olivier, 2010a.

their fellows, or to commit suicide. Here the genre is *film noir* (*neo-noir*, more precisely), and the register is one of hopelessness at the level of realism, but arguably a modicum of hopefulness at a symbolic level. In classical *film noir*, a maverick 'detective' figure, in the literal sense of the word, pursues disjointed and confusing clues in an attempt to unravel a crime or mystery of some kind against a backdrop of some kind of institutional corruption, and in an ambiguous relationship with a *femme fatale* figure. She either leads to his downfall, or 'takes the rap' in his place. By contrast, *neo-noir* films employ all the elements of classical *noir*, except that they reflect a much freer interpretation of the meaning of 'detective', corruption, *femme fatale*, and so on. *The Road* belongs to *neo-noir* cinema in so far as the *noir* protagonist – the father – is not literally a detective, but indeed metaphorically so, because he is trying to unravel the biggest mystery of all – the meaning of (human) existence. Similarly, the corruption in question is not restricted to an institution like the police, or the army, or the church (all of which feature in *noir* films), but in a radical way to humankind as a whole. And as I shall demonstrate, the *femme fatale* exercises her power over the *noir* hero, not in the present, but from the past, in the guise of memory flashes.

Significantly, the two films employ the same kind of contrasting images (on different scales) – those depicting a moon (*Avatar*) or a planet (*The Road*) where nature is still intact, and countervailing images of nature destroyed (or collapsed, dead). In *Avatar*, the nature images depict a domain resplendently beautiful, if teeming with danger; in *The Road*, minimally employed nature images reflect the former existence of trees, flowers and animals alongside humans. These respective images however do so with a different directionality, as it were. Those of a still resilient nature in *The Road* hearken back to a time *before* the catastrophe of nature's demise, and are overshadowed by contrasting images pertaining to the latter sorry state, denoting a more recent, calamitous condition. The contrast operates differently in *Avatar*, where image sequences of natural beauty contrast with scenes of the destruction of a significant part of the natural setting where the Na'vi tribe – central to the plot – live, namely the so-called 'Hometree'. But importantly, in *Avatar* the sequence of relevant images reaches a point where the images point *forward* to the future survival of nature, given the destruction of forests by sophisticated technological means being halted in quasimythological fashion. What is left of nature in *The Road* is but a pale, cadaverous remnant of what used to be bountiful nature *before* its disintegration. These contrasts are communicated to viewers through cinema's means of communication, namely audio-visual signifiers in the form of images (image sequences and image complexes) and sounds, including dialogue, at the intersecting levels of the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic axes.

1. COMMUNICATION THROUGH IMAGES IN 'AVATAR'

How is this achieved? In *Avatar*, Cameron contrasts the intra-cinematic space⁵ within which the members of the human occupational force on the moon – Pandora⁶ live and interact with one another, with the intra-cinematic space where the Na'vi – indigenous people of Pandora –

⁵ 'Intra-cinematic space' comprises the fictional cinematic (as opposed, for example, to the literary) realm within which the narrative unfolds, and within which medium-specific principles and conventions obtain.

⁶ It is significant that, in Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman (counterpart of Lilith, rather than Eve, in Biblical terms), who was sent by the gods with a box filled with multifarious evils, in order to avenge the titan,

live and interact with one another and with humans. This is done by means of a subtle visual shift in the colour-tonality of the scene-sequences, which imparts to these a quasifantastical (or fantasy) character. Therefore, although these two distinguishable intra-cinematic spaces are both presented by way of images and image configurations, the shift from one, realistically presented setting, to the other, quasi-fantasy setting by means of a change in colour tonality is easily interpretable. In fact, this shift can hardly be misunderstood by viewers as signifying a transition from one social and natural world to another, which is qualitatively very different.

In the case of images presenting activity at the human occupational force's compound, the cinematic code of the signifying images is one of film realism, which one easily recognises as representing social reality more or less as we know it (except that it is conspicuously militarised). But those images comprising a visual projection of the Na'vi world on Pandora are just as easily recognisable as being somehow different, and therefore not straightforwardly representing a familiar social reality. One might call them 'quasirealistic'. Then there are several scene sequences where the two kinds of images – representing different 'worlds'⁷ – come together visually. The effect is that, in these, the images convey the message that both kinds are to be regarded as representing a world that is 'real', or at least potentially real. For example, where ultra-modern, technologically advanced helicopters traverse the natural space of Pandora – such as flying past the so-called 'floating mountains' – the powerful electro-mechanical machines contrast sharply with the unspoilt natural beauty of the Pandoran landscape. In the course of the battle scenes this contrast is even more pronounced. Here, the human helicopter battleships are confronted by Na'vi warriors on six-legged 'direhorses' and pterosaur-like flying 'banshees' – two very different battle modes: the one hypermodern, the other premodern or primitive.

In *Avatar* the image sequences constituting the world of the Na'vi are sufficiently unusual in their immediate appearance⁸ to make one wonder what their relation with ordinary, everyday social reality is, i.e. what their aesthetic-ontological status is. Imaginatively conceived and presented, alien humanoid beings (the Na'vi), together with exotic Pandoran flora and fauna, are quasirealistically presented as interacting with humans – something that promotes the interpretation of the action in largely (albeit quasi-) realistic terms.

In light of this, the film's diegetic space-time appears to represent what Roland Barthes (1975: 14) calls a 'text of pleasure', as opposed to a 'text of bliss'. This is a literary-theoretical distinction between 'readerly' texts that may provide pleasure, but do not challenge or disrupt the reader's

Prometheus's theft of fire from the gods. She opened the jar out of sheer curiosity, thus releasing the evils into the world. From the humans' perspective, the moon Pandora is therefore named to denote the 'evils' that they have to face to extract the precious metal, unobtainium, from it, but simultaneously the feminine reference of the name suggests the belief, antedating the time of the ancient Greeks, that the Earth (or, here, the moon Pandora on which living things exist) is feminine – the so-called great Goddess of hunter-gatherer times.

⁷ I am using 'world' in the sense of 'a totality of interrelated meanings that are more or less coherent'.

⁸ This is partly because of the novel cinematographic means employed to generate them: computer generation and 3D technology.

subject-position, and those 'writerly' ones that shatter literary rules, inducing an ecstatic or blissful transgression of the reader's subjectivity. A 'text of pleasure' therefore represents a familiar space-time field within which action takes place, and does *not* require of viewers to make a mind shift to be able to understand an unfolding narrative. By contrast, in the case of a 'text of bliss', just such a mind shift is required for viewers to be able to orient themselves in the space-time continuum of a world that is wholly unlike that of everyday experience. Hence, although the world of Pandora does, indeed, 'look' different from that on planet Earth, with exotic plant and animal species,⁹ space-time seems to function pretty much the same as on Earth. No insurmountable problem is posed to viewers to adapt to, revise and reconceptualise the structure of intelligibility of a novel 'world' in terms of space-time relations or linguistic, political, or gender relations (the Na'vi's political organisation resembles that of 'premodern' tribal communities, complete with clan chieftain and shaman).

As stated earlier, where such a radical adjustment is called for, one has encountered a 'text of bliss'. All the novel, 'alien' surroundings on Pandora seem to suggest that it is such a 'text of bliss'. On the other hand, the preceding considerations argue that this is not the case: the narrative landscape is traversed, time flows and language functions in the 'normal' manner, instead of disrupting one's spatiotemporal awareness so drastically that it is difficult to make sense of the film's meaning-constitutive images. Hence, it must indeed be a 'text of pleasure'. And yet, other considerations argue in favour of it being a 'text of bliss'¹⁰, the visual interpretability of its images on the model of a text of pleasure notwithstanding.

Specifically, it may be argued that, precisely at the level of ecological relations (articulated both in language and images) *Avatar* qualifies as a 'text of bliss', considering the stark contrast between the Na'vi's understanding of such relations and that of the humans. To put it in terms of Heidegger's philosophy of technology, all the sight-and-sound images signifying the prevailing attitude of humans towards the natives of Pandora¹¹ project the assumption underpinning modern technology, namely that they and everything else on their moon are 'mere resources', or a 'standing-reserve' (Heidegger, 1977: 16-18; Olivier, 2010c). In other words, they are to be 'used' – here, for purposes of financial enrichment, which is shown to be more a matter of existential impoverishment in the course of the film. And if the Na'vi should be 'unusable' as resources, or worse, stand in the way of extracting the usable resource, unobtainium, they would be forcibly removed, or even exterminated. The Na'vi, on the other hand, are depicted as beings who experience themselves as being part of nature – not in terms of impossibly 'harmonious' relations

⁹ These include beautiful flowers that shrink to minimal size when touched, a blue-skinned humanoid race, gigantic 'prehistoric' land-animals resembling a mix between hammerhead sharks and triceratops, flying predators that dwarf terrestrial eagles, and six-legged 'direhorses' (probably borrowed by Cameron from Edgar Rice Burroughs's 'John Carter on Mars/Barsoom' novel series), among others.

¹⁰ On a previous occasion (Olivier 2010c), I opted for *Avatar* being a 'text of pleasure', but here other considerations (mentioned, but not pursued in my previous interpretation) indicate otherwise.

¹¹ They derogatorily think of them as 'blue monkeys'.

(they do hunt and defend themselves against predators), but nevertheless symbiotically, living within an encompassing web of interconnected life forms.

This, I would argue, explains why *Avatar* may be understood as a *text of bliss* – such a mode of existence is so far removed from contemporary humans that a profound mental adjustment is required to identify with it. Contrary to initial impressions of *Avatar* lending itself to a structuralist approach, it also inserts a poststructuralist moment into the film's interpretation. The signifiers (images and dialogue) representing the Pandoran ecological state of affairs are subject to the complexifying double-take characteristic of poststructuralism. Their signified meaning does not rest content at the stable level of a quasirealistic interpretation, but demands (or invites) a further signifying step, an imaginative transposition to a different world on the part of the audience. It is needless to emphasize that this mental shift towards strangeness is accompanied by a significant degree of disruption of an everyday, consumerist and technocratic attitude towards nature.

When one looks carefully at the images communicating human activities at the Pandoran base of RDA,¹² and compare these with images projecting activities on the part of members of the Na'vi – on their own, or interacting with humans and indigenous animals – the contrast, in ecological terms, is telling. In the scene where paraplegic Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) arrives on Pandora to take his deceased brother's place in the 'avatar' programme, one is immediately struck by the militaristic, heavy-engineering environment of the humans' compound. Lumbering, electronically operated mechanical giants thunder past him, while he is dwarfed by the wheels of mining trucks trundling past, with long, feathered arrows (signifying a primitive, hostile presence) jutting from their tyres. These images comprise the symbolic framework of a ('human') culture and society intent on subjecting nature to its collective will, markedly contrasting with the images of the Na'vi. The latter intimate exactly the opposite, namely the fabric of a culture that, although dependent for its survival on the natural things around it (plants and animals), nevertheless regards these creatures as being part of an encompassing, interconnected whole. As much as their own members, these other living beings are therefore deserving of respect and awe on the part of the Na'vi.

As a case in point, one may recall the scene sequence where Jake's Na'vi avatar (a genetically synthesised Na'vi/human 'body-substitute' for himself), has been marooned in the Pandoran jungle after a skirmish with, and escape from, a huge cat-like creature (appropriately called a 'thanator', that is, a 'death-beast'). It is not long before he is surrounded by what appears to be the Pandoran equivalent of a pack of wild dogs ('viperwolves'). By all appearances, he would have succumbed to them (despite his courageous self-defence), had Na'vi 'princess', Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), not intervened to rescue him, killing one of the creatures in the process. Instead of gloating over her 'prey', however, she kneels down next to its lifeless body and 'communes' with it in commiseration for having had to take its life, accusing Jake of having unnecessarily caused her to do so because he is 'like a child'. This is only the first of a series of scenes in which Jake, in his avatar body, is instructed in the ways of the Na'vi, which entail a reverence for all living things.

¹² The mining company that is exploiting the moon for the excessively expensive and 'valuable' metal, unobtainium

Throughout the film, signifiers extend, enhance and reinforce this impression of a salutary relation between the Na'vi and nature. In fact, viewers come to see and understand Pandoran life forms of all kinds to comprise an interconnected web of life, where even the forest trees function like an extended nervous system communicating with all other creatures on the planet. It is crucial for my argument, that *Avatar's* constitutive image sequences and image configurations communicate a conception of ecological relations very different from those encountered in *The Road*.

Images of the Na'vi sitting, holding hands and facing the 'Tree of Souls', in no uncertain terms project just such an ecological understanding and practice predicated on the intimate *interconnectedness* of humanoids, animals and plants on Pandora. This happens, for instance, in the scene where they are attempting to draw on the life force represented by their (pantheistic) deity, Eywa, to save the life of the wounded botanist, Grace. This explains why Jake, in avatar form, can implore the Na'vi goddess, Eywa, to assist them in their battle against the ostensibly (militarily) superior humans, and why it makes sense that Eywa responds at the eleventh hour, as manifested in the animals on Pandora joining the battle against the human intruders. Biologist and Na'vi researcher, Dr Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver), believes that the true treasure on Pandora is not the metal, unobtainium, but the centuries-old 'knowledge' of the interwovenness of all things, preserved in the ecosystems of the planet. Tellingly, when she attempts to persuade Administrator Parker Selfridge (Giovanni Ribisi), the Chief Company Executive of the RDA colony in charge of mining operations, that this is the case, he rejects her claim as being superstitious. And yet, as the combined force of the audio-visual images, in both registers of meaning – the sequential syntagmatic and the associative paradigmatic – persuade the audience that such interconnectedness of all life forms is real, or at least, should be considered as such.

In the film, there are many scene sequences in which these audio-visual signifiers bring viewers face to face with the different, irreconcilable dispositions towards nature on the part of the human colonisers and the Na'vi, respectively. One that does so graphically is where Jake, having been given the opportunity by the Na'vi (for his avatar) to be initiated into their customs (by Neytiri), reports back to Colonel Quaritch (Stephen Lang), the militaristic officer in charge of company security. In the course of this debriefing session, the colonel shows Jake a scale holograph of 'Hometree' and its environs, where Neytiri's clan of Na'vi live. He does so with a view to drawing Jake's attention to the large deposits of unobtainium in the soil under the tree – the biggest deposits they have been able to trace on Pandora. Thus, armed with the foreknowledge, at this stage of the narrative, that 'Hometree' is where the Na'vi live, and having witnessed this gigantic tree, which towers majestically above the rest of the forest, one cannot help but experience a certain mismatch. On the one hand, there is the human, economically and technologically informed conception of the tree, which is just 'in the way', and on the other there is the Na'vi conception of it, according to which it is their ancestral home, redolent with mythological and other cultural meanings. When the humans finally launch their military attack on Hometree in order to bring it down, in this way forcing the Na'vi out and clearing the way for mining operations to commence there, the earlier scene functions as backdrop for understanding this scene sequence. At stake is the full extent of the violence that Quaritsch and his soldiers are imposing on Hometree (symbol of the intertwining of life forms on Pandora) and its inhabitants by means of sophisticated

military technology such as rocket launchers. It is a scene sequence that demonstrates the total disregard for ecological integrity – in fact, for life – on the part of the people from Earth, and it is communicated forcefully by means of moving images of destruction and suffering.

It is significant that the powerful images of *Avatar* are employed, not only to visualise these contrasting relationships between people and nature, on the one hand, and between the humanoid Na'vi and nature, on the other; they also serve to convey to viewers what is required to become 'dis-alienated' from, or reconciled with, nature beyond the technocratic attitude towards it that most humans display. It must be stressed that this does not entail a kind of 'harmony' with nature in the sense of the complete absence of 'hostility'¹³ between humanoids and natural creatures, such as predators or the 'banshees', which the Na'vi submit to their will as 'flying horses'. On the contrary, while the relevant images project their respect for nature as something of which they are a part, their dependence on hunting animals for food, as well as the enduring danger of being killed by predators and other animals is also indicated beyond question. For instance, when Jake faces his last test, before being initiated into the Na'vi tribe of Hometree, that of having to confront a 'banshee' (at grave risk of losing his life) and subjugate it in order to bond with it for life, the image of the winged animal rearing up, hissing threateningly as Jake approaches it, leaves no doubt as to its intentions. However, once Jake has successfully mounted it and 'fused' his (avatar's) 'hair' with a similar appendage on the animal's body, they soon become as one, flying through the air at breakneck speed with grace and beauty. These image sequences, with Jake (as avatar), Neytiri and other Na'vi warriors streaking through the air on their 'banshees' among the 'floating mountains' on Pandora, are among the most resplendently representative regarding the inter-creatural relations on the part of the Na'vi. They stand in stark contrast to the human attitude of unadulterated mastery towards nature. Ecological relations on Pandora require a certain 'mastery' on the part of the humanoids (Na'vi). But it is an ambivalent 'mastery', not intent on unilateral domination, but on mutual respect and what Heidegger (1976: 236; see also Megill, 1985: 138-140; 152) called 'letting-be' (*Gelassenheit*)¹⁴ – the 'letting-be' of things according to their own inalienable nature.¹⁵ By contrast, human attitudes towards nature, as represented in the

¹³ I use the word 'hostility' advisedly here, given the intimate link, demonstrated by Jacques Derrida, between 'hostility' and 'hospitality'. In a nutshell, Derrida shows that a 'host' is not in a position to be 'hospitable', if there is not a smidgen of 'hostility' in his or her attitude, which is necessary to be able to exercise jurisdiction over the means of extending hospitality (the home, food, sleeping facilities, etc.). See Derrida, 2005; Olivier, 2007b.

¹⁴ *Gelassenheit*, or 'letting-be' is Heidegger's answer to the persistent technological, technocratic assault on the being of nature, the Earth and of humans. In contrast to the violent intrusion represented by this, *Gelassenheit* lets things or beings be themselves, allowing their own-most character to assert itself. It is nothing passive, however, but an active 'letting-be'.

¹⁵ See in this regard my paper on ecological art as paradigm of 'hospitality' in the Derridean sense (Olivier, 2007b), where I discuss the ecological art of Andy Goldsworthy as being exemplary in this regard. One could interpret *Avatar* along similar lines, where the Na'vi would be the counterpart of the ecological artist (Goldsworthy).

images comprising the film narrative, is one of one-sided domination and exploitation, exemplified by the mining company's technocratic, militarily reinforced appropriation of Pandoran soil.

In this regard, it is noteworthy to recall that, in as far back as the 17th century, René Descartes (1972: 119) – 'father' of modern western philosophy – proclaimed that he looked forward to humans being the 'masters and possessors of nature'.¹⁶ This is a chilling image, if one considers the degree of eco-destruction inflicted on natural ecosystems since that time by the technological offspring of the very 'new' (modern) science that so captured Descartes's imagination, and by the economic system that developed in tandem with it (Kovel, 2007). Compare Descartes's optimistic assessment with Martin Heidegger's (1977: 16-20) indictment of modern technology, the spawn of science: it has launched an 'assault' on nature by 'setting upon it' and relegating it to the status of a 'standing-reserve', to be used and placed in the service of humans, without acknowledgement of its own inalienable nature or being. To Heidegger, technology is not, as most people think, just an 'instrument', like a screwdriver. In fact, it is not a thing at all, but a way of ordering the real, a means of representing things. He talks about its 'essence' as *Gestell*, i.e. enframing or framework. (Heidegger, 1977: 20):

Enframing means the gathering together of that setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve. Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological.

Small wonder that humans' obsession with technology – visible in the insistence, that everything, from psychological problems to social and even religious ones, may be resolved through technology (Melchert, 1991: 576)¹⁷ – blinds them to the interconnectedness of all beings, so clearly apparent in *Avatar*.¹⁸ Contrast the technological assault on Pandora's soil with the Na'vi perspective, that

¹⁶ Descartes's precise words in his Discourse on method of 1637 were (1972: 119):

... it is possible to attain knowledge which is very useful in life ... instead of that speculative philosophy which is taught in the Schools, we may find a practical philosophy by means of which, knowing the force and the action of fire, water, air, the stars, heavens and all the other bodies that environ us, as distinctly as we know the different crafts of our artisans, we can in the same way employ them in all those uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature.

¹⁷ In Melchert's words (1991: 576):

In the age of enframing, where everything is understood as standing-reserve, there is no 'room' for God. (Or perhaps even God is thought of as 'standing-reserve', a kind of public utility that can be used to gain the satisfaction of one's desires; one often gets this impression from the television evangelists).

¹⁸ Although it cannot be pursued at length here, I should point out that a different kind of technology is conceivable, and indeed, perceivable in *Avatar*, namely, one that is not predicated on the 'ordering' of, and assault on, nature, reducing it in the process to a 'standing-reserve'. Instead, such a technology acknowledges the intertwining of human culture with nature, and exercises a techné or knowledge, not as imposition on, but collaboration with, nature. See in this regard Olivier (2010c).

everything on their moon is somehow connected, and moreover, that all her life forms are sacred in a manner the technocratic humans cannot grasp (with the exception of only a few, such as the biologist, Grace). It then seems inevitable that there should be a showdown between the forces that represent life and those that stand for death through the exploitation of what is 'useful' (read: 'profitable') to humans, with scant regard for living things. What this interconnectedness really means, as far as the relation between humans and nature is concerned, is made clearer by Joel Kovel (2007: 98) where he observes:

... we think of nature as the integral of all ecosystems, extending in every direction and beyond the limits of the planet. Talking of integrals means talking in terms of organisms, and of Wholes – in other words, the systematic introduction of an ecological vision commits us to positing reality as an interconnected web whose numberless nodes are integrated into holistic beings of ever-exfoliating wonder ...

From the perspective of an encompassing, ecologically interconnected life-system of living beings, as understood by Kovel (above), and projected in the relevant scene sequences in *Avatar*, the fictional moon of Pandora functions as metaphor for planet Earth, and reminds one irresistibly of James Lovelock's notion of *Gaia* (first mooted as hypothesis, and more recently increasingly being accepted as a viable theory). *Gaia* theory started out, as all explanatory concepts or conceptual frameworks do in science, as a hypothesis formulated by Lovelock in a 1968 paper. After a torrid history of being criticised, ridiculed (as New Age 'mythology') and rejected by scientists, it has finally come to be largely accepted as a respectable theory – one that can be tested and one which makes predictions possible (Lovelock, 2010: 105-122). In a nutshell – and overlooking all the very complex experimental and inferential scientific details involved (accessible in the chapter of Lovelock's book referred to above) – the Gaia hypothesis states that the Earth's climate is 'maintained near an optimum for the ecosystem' (Lovelock, 2010: 105).

This may seem innocent enough, but when it was developed by Lovelock and other scientists like Lynn Margulis, it increasingly surpassed the more modest – and 'reactionary' – claims by earth scientists or geochemists. The latter believe that their disciplines are sufficient to explain the regulation of the climate in relation to ecosystems or living biota, without assuming an entity ('Gaia'), holistically conceived, which regulates 'itself'. In effect, Lovelock's investigations led him, through various stages of modelling and application, to the insight that *Gaia* (a new, and simultaneously old, word for the Earth) is a name for the planet that *self-regulates* all the geochemistry and surface temperature in relation to the survival and flourishing of living entities in ecosystems.

Strange as it may seem, evidence now exists that this is indeed the case – apart from the as-yet 'unfalsified' 'Daisyworld' model that Lovelock (2010: 112-116) constructed – that by the early 1990s, Gaia theory had enabled eight out of ten accurate predictions to be made. And, in 2008, American scientists Zeebe and Caldeira published a paper based on the measurement of gases in Antarctic ice cores, confirming that, over hundreds of thousands of years, *self-regulation* of both carbon dioxide and temperature had indeed taken place on Earth (Lovelock, 2010: 110).

In a nutshell, therefore, Cameron's film is an audio-visual celebration of Gaia theory – fictionally displaced to a distant solar system – which claims that the Earth evolves 'as if it were a living organism' (Lovelock, 2010: 115; see also Officer & Page, 2009; Olivier, 2010b). This is where the idea underlying *Avatar's* projection of a 'living moon/planet' (Pandora) merges with Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis and theory. The idea is compatible with the ecological relations that are perceived as existing between the Na'vi and the rest of nature on Pandora, but conflicts violently with the eco-destructive attitudes and practices of the intra-cinematic human colonising force, and by extension, of the vast majority of human beings on planet Earth today.

Although most viewers would probably be unaware of Lovelock's Gaia theory and its relevance in respect of *Avatar*, the idea is integral to the film narrative, and is metonymically embodied in its constitutive images. Hence, understanding their meaning, which is not difficult in narrative and associative terms, communicates to audiences the insight that there is an (axiologically preferable) alternative to the technocratic approach to nature. This alternative is visibly and audibly conveyed by those image complexes that signify the Na'vi's ecological intertwinement with Pandoran nature.

3. IMAGES OF ABJECTION IN 'THE ROAD'

In Barthes's terms, *The Road* may, like *Avatar*, be described as a 'text of bliss', because it makes great demands of viewers as far as adjusting to its projected space-time location is concerned. This is also, as in the case of *Avatar*, not primarily because it plays around dislocatingly and almost incomprehensibly with the very nature of time and space,¹⁹ but in light of its presentation of a world that is hardly recognisable as that of planet Earth. In fact, the phrase, 'text of bliss' – where 'bliss' is the translation of the French, *jouissance* (orgasm, extreme enjoyment) – may even be misleading in this regard, and perhaps one should rather call it a (film) 'text of abjection', following Julia Kristeva's use of the term. Kristeva (1997: 153-154; Olivier, 2007a, 2008) uses 'abjection' and 'the abject' in the sense of the process, or substantively speaking, the thing, that fills one with a kind of horror, such as a corpse, or certain insects (cockroaches, spiders), and as such always occupies a place relegated to the periphery of consciousness. Unlike the completely intolerable – in the case of trauma, for instance – which is repressed, relegated to unconsciousness, the 'abject' remains there, in the background, like the shadow of horror that one would rather not face, or even think about, but of which one cannot rid oneself once and for all.

In *The Road*, viewers have to confront precisely such a state of abjection, in the sense of extended image sequences of a scarcely recognisable Earth where, possibly, because of complete ecological collapse, or a nuclear cataclysm, or as a result of an obliterating solar flare, nature

¹⁹ As in what Lyotard calls 'acinema' (Lyotard, 1989) or what could be dubbed 'extra-ordinary cinema' (Olivier, 2009), where all the 'normal' space-time expectations of everyday experience are called into question by, for example, eschewing all 'secondary revisioning' attempts at imposing coherence on recorded images through editing.

is no longer intact²⁰. Moreover, shocking evidence is presented of barbaric behaviour on the part of some humans who are scarcely identifiable as humans – given their subhuman actions towards others. At the same time though, the central characters try their best to retain a sense of human dignity despite their abject circumstances. Understandably, therefore, the image-signifiers communicating such actions and also the prevailing (fictional) conditions of a truly ‘abject’ state of the planet and of people, are neither pleasant nor enjoyable (except perhaps to masochists) to view and decode. The sight, for instance, of a frantically screaming young woman and a girl – presumably her daughter – fleeing desperately from a pursuing band of men, and within the context of a world where, so the audience has learnt, people have turned to cannibalism to survive, is harrowing in the extreme. Hillcoat’s directorial strategy, to leave some of this audio-visually horrifying spectacle to the imagination by resorting to auditory signifiers at the moment when their pursuers catch up with them, predictably exacerbates rather than relieves viewers’ vicarious experience of their plight. After all, it is bad enough for women to be raped by men, but infinitely worse (also) to be eaten.

Flashback-sequences depict a situation before the disintegration of nature, showing a colourful world of trees, flowers and animals. In the opening scene the man/father (Viggo Mortensen) is, for example, stroking a horse. By comparison, the landscape (together with what remains of devastated cities) that comprises the intracinematic present, or backdrop to the journey that father and son (Kodi Smit-McPhee) undertake in the hope of reaching the coast, is grey and devoid of colour. The audience is confronted with ashen images of a world that appears to be slowly dying – something confirmed by the man’s voice-over narration. Such predominantly sombre colours – often in chiaroscuro composition – together with the voice-over are among the characteristic attributes of *film noir*, a genre that arguably registers the mood of an era (Olivier, 2004). It is no accident that *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), reputedly the first recognisable, fully fledged *noir* film to appear, made its debut during World War II. As pointed out earlier, *The Road* may therefore be viewed as *neo-noir*, the other features of which include an ‘alienated detective’ figure, a *femme fatale*, minor characters that strike one as being morally compromised in some way, and an element of social corruption, usually detectable in the unravelling of an institution like the police, the army, the church, parliament, or – at its most ambitious – in the depravity of humanity as such.

All of these are present in *The Road*: the man/father represents the estranged detective figure, alienated from the world, from his fellow humans, from God – the only connection with whom

²⁰ In The Guardian Online under the heading, ‘50 People who could save the Planet’ (Wikipedia, n.d.), there is an entry on Cormac McCarthy, writer of the book on which the film, *The Road*, is based:

The Road, by the 74-year-old American writer Cormac McCarthy, imagines a father and his son trudging south through a landscape where nature and civilisation are in their death throes. It’s oppressive, horrifying and poetic, and is widely seen as both a parable and the logical extension of the earth’s physical degeneration. His predictions may be scientifically fanciful, but the book, published last year, may have far more influence in the next 30 years than any number of statistics and front line reports. It was nominated by George Monbiot, who says, ‘It could be the most important environmental book ever. It is a thought experiment that imagines a world without a biosphere, and shows that everything we value depends on the ecosystem.’

In the film this abject world is made frighteningly real at a visual level.

he perceives in his son – and who is searching for warmer climes, for food, for safety, and for a reason behind all the suffering. The woman/mother (Charlize Theron) is the *femme fatale*, whose ambiguous memory – she chose to commit suicide rather than risk being raped and devoured by cannibals – haunts the man for the duration of the journey. This is the case, not least because she is genetically, visually, present in the facial features of the boy, and complicates his decisions regarding their prospective actions. The characters they encounter along the road are all morally dubious – understandably, because they are all fighting for survival in a world *sans* God, without reason or morality, without hope. The only possible exceptions to this rule are the man and his ‘family’ who ‘adopt’ the boy, bereft of his father, right at the end, after assuring him that they are among ‘the good guys’, or those who ‘are carrying the fire’ – a poignant Promethean symbol of civilization and reason, invoked by the father when the boy needs motivation to carry on. And as for the indispensable element of corruption belonging to *film noir*, it is here encountered in immodest measure: nature, as well as the whole of the rest of humanity, it seems, has been corrupted, leaving those who ‘carry the fire’ as its last hope of redemption. Apart from this, one may agree with Joan Copjec (1993: xi), that a film may still be read as *noir* even if all the formal features are not manifestly present – hence, even if some may disagree with my identification of these structural features in *The Road*, I would argue that its visual tonality, its aesthetic timbre, as it were, belongs with the sensibility of *film (neo-) noir*.

In what way do images of abjection in *The Road* bear on ecological relations? In the words of George Monbiot, referring to the book on which Hillcoat’s film is based (Wikipedia, n.d.) : “It could be the most important environmental book ever. It is a thought experiment that imagines a world without a biosphere, and shows that everything we value depends on the ecosystem”.

The difference between reading the book and viewing the film is important here. Reading it necessitates readers’ conjuring up images of a totally degraded world, which is usually salutary insofar as it activates the imagination. Being confronted by powerful, audio-visual cinematic image configurations of desolate land- and cityscapes, and exacerbating images of depravity, of supposedly ‘human’ beings feeding off other human beings, may not leave as much to the imagination. But the *visual experience* of so much abjection exercises an affective force on viewers’ minds that borders on the ineradicable (albeit abject). This continues haunting one long after seeing the film, and drives home, by omission,²¹ the indispensable function of what one usually takes for granted, namely, nature or a functioning biosphere.

Looking more closely at the images comprising a paradigmatic scene may clarify what I mean. Early in the film narrative, father and son are shown, pushing a semi-functional shopping cart, containing their meagre belongings, along the eponymous road (to nowhere). The backdrop is a grey, apparently scorched landscape with the pitiful, dry remains of trees protruding from the ground like prickly matchsticks. The countryside is both colourless and lifeless; the sky is grey

²¹ *The Road* may therefore be said to employ an instance of what Lyotard (1984: 81) calls the ‘modern sublime’, which ‘presents the unrepresentable’ – in this case, the functioning biosphere in its totality, which would be impossible to ‘present’ – by ‘omitting’ certain ‘contents’.

and overcast. Nowhere is there any sign of life, other, that is, than these two people. Their derelict shopping cart represents, graphically, what their consumer culture entailed, and what is left of it. The barrenness of the surrounding land epitomises what has become of a once vibrantly alive natural world or encompassing ecosystem: a cadaverous realm of death and decay, incapable of sustaining life. The consequences are vividly, graphically projected in the images bearing the rest of the film narrative. These range from images of dereliction and destitution to more disturbing ones of armed gangs hunting down people for food, of others imprisoning people for 'harvesting' their limbs piece by piece, and of desperate others, unapologetically thieving from people in equally dire straits as themselves. These images from *The Road* project or communicate a notion of (the death of) ecological relations that cannot be more different than they already are from those suffused with vibrant life, cinematically encountered in *Avatar*.

I believe that calling the images in question, from *The Road*, 'images of abjection' is an apposite description of the register of meaning in which they operate. This description places the film in the category of 'texts of bliss' (Barthes), which constitute a world wholly unlike that of everyday experience. The related question one has to ask here concerns the reason for the director, John Hillcoat, choosing the genre of *film* (or *neo-*) *noir* as vehicle for a work of cinematic art that projects a tone, or mood, of utter hopelessness in the face of (what is left of) the intra-cinematic, extant world. The best answer is probably that *film noir* is the genre that, more than any other, accommodates quests for meaning (among other things) on the part of protagonists who have been disabused of all conventional illusions, within a world where signs of moral decay and corruption abound. Hence also the play on darkness, intertwined with lighter shades, which is indicative of the underlying assumption that there is no pure, unadulterated 'goodness' available to human beings – whatever (moral, ontic) 'good' there may be – always presents itself as already intertwined with what is 'bad' or 'evil'. Purity is but a dream. Judging by its constitutive imagery, in this respect *The Road* represents a kind of *non plus ultra* in the genre of *film* (*neo-*) *noir* – it is hard to imagine a cinematic setting more devoid of hope on such an all-encompassing scale.²²

3. CONCLUSION – 'AVATAR' AND 'THE ROAD': STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

While both of these films address and develop an ecological theme, they do so – as should be apparent from the preceding discussion – at opposite ends of the spectrum concerning ecological possibilities. To grasp what is at stake regarding the extreme antithesis that obtains between them, it should be recalled that, as Kovel indicates (above), an 'ecology' exists when there is an interconnectedness between and among various, constitutive entities or organisms, without which none of them – on their own – could exist as they do. In this sense, it should be obvious

²² For a thoroughgoing discussion of the cinematic 'logic' underpinning the various films belonging to the genre of film noir, see Olivier (2004), where it is argued that it displays a bifurcated 'logic', according to which some noir films obey a logic of 'diabolical evil', while (more numerous) others work according to a logic of 'radical evil'. *The Road* would belong to the latter category, which is predicated on the belief that humans do have a choice between good and evil (the man and his son 'carry the fire'), while the 'diabolical evil'-class noir films project the belief that humans unavoidably always choose evil.

that, on a 'living' planet, there are many ecologies that exist side by side, but which, at a higher, more inclusive level, combine into a more encompassing ecology, until one reaches the all-encompassing planetary ecology of which all the others are subsystems.

In *Avatar*, Cameron gives one a glimpse into the destruction of an important node ('Hometree') in the ecology of an imaginary, life-sustaining moon, Pandora. It hints at the political requirements for such a process to be halted in its tracks, lest it progress to the point where the planet is no longer able to recover from advancing ecodestruction.²³ In *The Road*, by contrast – as pointed out before – the destruction of the ecosphere does not lie, as in the case of *Avatar*, in a possible future, but in the past as a *fait accompli*, and the film explores the hopeless fate of people against such an unalterable background. The interconnected images in both of these films serve their respective projects well – as I have tried to demonstrate – despite the fundamental differences between them in mood and tonal register. In both cases they accomplish the communicational task of potentially awakening viewers to the grim prospect of ecological degradation and possible collapse through the sheer power of their (audio-visual) images. In this, they exemplify the best in cinematic art.

Appendix – The film narratives

The narrative of *Avatar* is set on the moon Pandora, in the star system of Alpha Centauri, in the year 2154. The Resources Development Administration (RDA) Corporation has established a mining colony on Pandora, a lush, fictional, earth-like moon of breathtaking natural beauty and botanical and zoological biodiversity. The indigenous population of linguistically communicating humanoids, the Na'vi, live a life of 'relative harmony' and interdependence with the other living beings on the planet. One is struck by their reverence for life, as witnessed in their acknowledgement of other creatures' sacredness when they have to hunt and kill them for their own survival (reminiscent of the San people, or Bushmen's bond with the living beings on which they depend for survival). Into this world of savage beauty come humans with the overriding purpose of mining a precious metal appropriately named 'unobtainium', of which there are rich deposits in Pandoran soil. In a manner that recalls the ambivalent strategies of terrestrial colonisation (by the English, the Germans, the Dutch, the French, the Spanish, the Portuguese and others), they practice a two-pronged policy towards the Na'vi. On the one hand, they try to win their cooperation and confidence through the provision of 'education' and medical aid (neither of which the Na'vi want), while, on the other, they adopt a military stance that allows them to gun down the Na'vi whenever they get in the way of lucrative mining operations. One of the strategies employed by humans in their effort to make the Na'vi more amenable to their profit-driven actions, is to make use of 'avatars' or genetically engineered substitute Na'vi 'bodies' (containing both Na'vi and human genetic material – an important fact, considering the possibility of engendering offspring with indigenous Na'vi). By means of these, humans can enter the otherwise inimical Pandoran atmosphere (in which they are unable to breathe) and interact with the locals, while the human 'controller/driver' is lying in a

²³ See Olivier (2010c, 2010d and 2010e) for a sustained exploration of these ecopolitical implications of *Avatar*.

kind of electronic cocoon, or control pod, at base. This is where the character of Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) comes in. Jake is a paraplegic marine, who takes the place of his scientist brother (who was killed gratuitously before he could take up his contract) in the avatar programme on Pandora. For Jake the opportunity to walk again, albeit with an avatar body, is exhilarating, and when things go awry with his first mission, he is rescued from Pandoran 'viperwolves' by Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), the daughter of a Na'vi chieftain, who rebukes him for forcing her to kill one of the creatures superfluously. Much to her dismay Neytiri is given the task of teaching Jake the Na'vi ways by her mother, Mo'at (the Omaticaya Na'vi clan's shaman or *Tsahik*), and also of teaching the young Na'vi warrior who has been identified as her future 'mate'. When the leader of the avatar programme, botanist/biologist Dr Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver) learns of Jake's incipient integration into the Na'vi, she is delighted, given her genuine scientific interest in understanding them and their relations with the planet's bio-diverse living beings. Colonel Quaritch (Stephen Lang), the (militaristic) commander of RDA's private security company, *Secops*, is equally delighted, but for different reasons. He wants the requisite military 'intelligence' from Jake to be able to strike the Na'vi if they cannot be persuaded to leave their present home – called Hometree (a colossal tree that towers over the rest of the vegetation in the forest – because the richest deposits of unobtainium are underneath the tree. To cut a long story short, Jake (or rather, Jake's avatar) passes the gruelling 'initiation tests' and is accepted into the Na'vi. Predictably (and in a manner reminiscent of the story of native American woman Pocahontas and settler John Smith), he and Neytiri have fallen in love, and in the process he has also fallen in love with the Na'vi ways, so that he no longer wishes to betray these people. Consequently, he tries to prevent the Colonel from destroying Hometree, but fails in the face of the overwhelming military might of the humans, who carry out the destruction by firing rockets into the base of the tree, sending the surviving Na'vi fleeing into the forest. When the Colonel finds out that Jake has switched sides, he 'disempowers' Jake by disconnecting him from his avatar (which, as a result, collapses helplessly among the Na'vi, to their consternation). But Jake, together with an avatar 'cocoon', is taken by helicopter to a remote part of the jungle by his friends (including Grace), from where he can rejoin the Na'vi, in an attempt to defend the humans' next target, namely the indispensable 'tree of souls'. In the battle that ensues between the heavily armed humans and the Na'vi – this time joined by Pandoran animals (apparently in response to Jake 'connecting' with Eywa through the tree of souls) – the Na'vi and their allies prove to be victorious, and the humans are sent back to Earth (described as 'their dying planet'). Finally, Jake's life force is transferred via intensive interconnectivity (if I may call it that) to what used to be his Na'vi avatar body (a process also attempted with Grace, who had been seriously wounded, but who died in the process).

By contrast, the narrative of *The Road* (based on the novel by Cormac McCarthy) unfolds on Earth, but not one of a natural beauty comparable to that of Pandora. The film does admittedly open with a scene sequence displaying such beauty – trees, flowers and a horse being stroked affectionately by a man – but one that turns out to be dreamt by one of the main characters. This man is travelling on foot, together with his young son, across the desolate wasteland that used to be the bountiful Earth, but is now a pitiful landscape covered by the trunks of dead trees, sticking out like quills from a porcupine carcass. They are shown, either looking for something to eat, or for shelter, or trying their utmost to avoid the roaming bands of men looking for, and

hunting down other living creatures, including humans, to be eaten by them. In between these scenes there are periodic flashbacks to the time when this man and a woman – the mother of the boy, who resembles her eerily – were still together, before nature was destroyed. For this is the situation depicted in harrowing glimpses as the narrative unfolds before one's eyes: nature has finally caved in; plants are dead; no animals seem to have survived. One is never afforded any information as to the exact causes behind this, but early on the voice-over narration by the father informs the audience that the 'clock stopped' when there was a 'searing white light', followed by a 'series of concussions'. This suggests a nuclear Armageddon, or perhaps a planetary conflagration by solar flare, and one is aware of sporadically manifested signs of near-total ecological destruction in the intracinematic world – in fact, the man talks about symptoms of the 'world slowly dying', such as the worsening cold. The man is trying to reach the coast with his son, and one can gather that he hopes to find some kind of succour there. Along the way they encounter adversity aplenty, this ranging from lack of food to being apprehended by a member of a gang of men-turned-cannibals – whom the father disposes of by using one of the two precious bullets he has kept in case they have to commit suicide in the face of something too dreadful to contemplate. They also inadvertently discover a cellar-cum-bomb-shelter stacked with food, which they enjoy for a while, before the suspicion that someone has noticed their whereabouts forces them to leave, taking as much of the canned food with them as they can. Along the way they encounter a pitiful old man with whom they share some of their food. When they get to the coast, the father is prompted to swim towards a stranded ship to look for more food, while his son falls asleep on the shore. A black man gets away with the food and the father's clothes, and when the latter returns, they set off in pursuit. When they finally catch up with the thief, the father forces the man not only to return the food and clothes that he took, but cruelly to take off all his own clothes, leaving him naked in the road (to the uncomprehending consternation of his son). They also get into a situation near some buildings where someone wounds the father with an arrow, to which the father responds by shooting a flare from a flare gun that he found on the boat, killing the archer – in this way provoking the ire of a woman who was evidently dependent on the latter. These incidents, together with others, create the impression of an ecological and spiritual wasteland within which confused people are either struggling to survive in the most primitive, uncivilised of ways, or resort to suicide to escape a worse fate, such as the pair witnessing how a fleeing, screaming woman and young girl are chased down by a gang of men, and encountering a group of people living in a house where others are kept prisoner under ghastly conditions (evidently to be eaten). Intermittently there are flashbacks to the time when the father and the boy's mother were still together – before and after his birth, under 'normal' natural and social conditions as viewers know them and also, later, under conditions that already reflect the dire, and worsening natural and social circumstances. From conversations between the man and the woman, evidence of the descent into barbarity surrounding them gradually emerges. She finally indicates her choice of suicide rather than what she perceives to be a hopeless attempt to cling to life, and eventually leaves, presumably to do the deed. But her image keeps on returning to him on the eponymous road to some oneiric place of salvation, hinted at when he tells his son that they are 'the good guys, who carry the fire' – a powerful Promethean image that the son clings to by repeating it several times in the course of the story. The arrow wound proves to have weakened the father, who is coughing blood and realises that he is dying. Lying on a desolate

beach, after entrusting his son with the revolver (containing one bullet) and drawing on his last strength, he speaks what few words of encouragement he can muster before he expires (to the apparent disbelief of his son, who guards the father's body for some time). The son becomes aware of a man following him, and it turns out that he is one of a family – father, mother, son and daughter, even a pet dog – who have been observing himself and his own father for some time. After some initial misgivings about the man's intentions, and having been invited to join the family, the boy overcomes his understandable suspicion and does so. It is symbolically significant that this only happens after he has asked the crucial question, namely whether they are among the 'good guys, who carry the fire' – where fire symbolises, as it has since time immemorial, the seed of civilization. Hence, despite being at times unbearably bleak and harrowing to watch, the narrative ends on a seemingly, although improbably, hopeful note for the boy.

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