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The Character of Anton Chigurh in the Coen Brothers' "No Country for Old Men" as an Expression of Reflections on Evil and Violence... =
Postać Antona Chigurha w obrazie "To nie jest kraj dla starych ludzi" braci Coenów jako próba refleksji nad miejscem zła i przemocy...

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**THE CHARACTER OF ANTON CHIGURH IN THE COEN
BROTHERS' *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN* AS AN
EXPRESSION OF REFLECTIONS ON EVIL AND VIOLENCE
IN AMERICAN CULTURE**

POSTAĆ ANTONA CHIGURHA W OBRAZIE *TO NIE JEST KRAJ
DLA STARYCH LUDZI* BRACI COENÓW
JAKO PRÓBA REFLEKSJI NAD MIEJSCEM ZŁA I PRZEMOCY
W KULTURZE AMERYKAŃSKIEJ

Abstract

In *No Country for Old Men*, the 2007 film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's eponymous novel, the Coen brothers juxtapose the conventions of the Western against a hyper-realistic portrayal of drug wars fought along the southern border of Texas in the 1980s. The ridiculously incongruous, almost fantastic character of Anton Chigurh – an indestructible hit man, whose cruel deeds transgress the boundaries of conventional logic and morality, can be interpreted as a symbolic

Abstrakt

W filmie *To nie jest kraj dla starych ludzi* [2007], będącym adaptacją powieści Cormaca McCarthy'ego pod tym samym tytułem, reżyserzy zestawiają charakterystyczne dla westernu konwencje gatunkowe z hiperrealistycznym, krwawym obrazem wojen narkotykowych rozgrywających się na teksańskim pograniczu w latach osiemdziesiątych XX wieku. Absurdalnie niespójną, odrealnioną postać nieuchwytnego, płatnego zabójcy, którego okrutne czyny wykraczają

representation of the universal nature of violence, an embodiment of the contemporary perception of radical evil, a frightening condensation of brutality inscribed into American culture, an allegory of neoconservative America's fears or, finally, a metaphorical vision of a deserved punishment inflicted upon the modern, callous civilization of the nation, which allowed consumerism, materialism and vice replace its original, simple values. The Coens' *Chigurh* is a postmodern parody of a classic antihero, who evokes both the echoes of the Western with its youthful optimism and a clear code of conduct, and the *noir* poetics, which accentuates the helplessness of an individual in the face of the ubiquitous evil and the world's indefiniteness. He is also an obvious allusion to Judge Holden, the menacing, devil-like figure in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* – the writer's magnum opus which subverts the meanings traditionally attached to the myth of the Old West, thus deconstructing and demythologizing the notion of *regeneration through violence*, defined by Richard Slotkin as the key concept for the American identity and ideology.

Keywords: the Coen brothers, violence, the Western, postmodernism, Cormac McCarthy, the American West, Manifest Destiny

poza granice ludzkiej logiki i konwencjonalnej moralności, interpretować można jako symboliczne wyobrażenie uniwersalnej natury przemocy, ucieleśnienie współczesnego rozumienia skrajnego zła, przerażający kondensat charakterystycznej dla amerykańskiej kultury brutalności, alegorię poczucia zagrożenia trapiącego neokonserwatywną Amerykę, czy wreszcie metaforyczną wizję kary wymierzonej amerykańskiemu społeczeństwu, które pozwoliło, by proste, pierwotne ideały narodu wyparła bezduszna cywilizacja konsumpcji, pieniądza i występku. W ujęciu Joela i Ethana Coenów *Anton Chigurh* to postmodernistyczna parodia klasycznego antybohatera, która zderza tradycję westernu z jego młodzieńczym optymizmem i czytelnymi zasadami z poetyką *noir*, akcentującą bezsilność jednostki wobec wszechobecnego zła i chaosu świata, oraz wyraźnymi aluzjami do postaci Sędziego Holdena z głośnej powieści *Krwawy Południk* McCarthy'ego, w której pisarz podejmuje się dekonstrukcji i demitologizacji opisanego przez Richarda Slotkina, kluczowego dla amerykańskiej tożsamości i narodowej ideologii, pojęcia *odrodzenia przez przemoc*, trawstując znaczenia tradycyjnie przypisywane ikonycznym bohaterom mitu założycielskiego Ameryki.

Słowa kluczowe: bracia Coenowie, przemoc, western, postmodernizm, Cormac McCarthy, Dziki Zachód, Manifest Destiny

No Country for Old Men, Joel and Ethan Coens' first direct adaptation of a literary work, is a neo-western film based on the Cormac McCarthy novel of the same name. Commonly assessed as very faithful to the original text, the picture is actually an intriguing reinterpretation of its source, which, as Welsh [2009, p. 81] observes, has been *changed so subtly that perhaps most viewers may not even notice*. The directors unfold the same, slow-paced yet highly violent story set in the early 1980s in West Texas, which serves as an unconventional morality play, where good is not fully noble while evil, driven by impulses beyond the scope of ordinary human values, which thus cannot be easily defined as ethically reprehensible, defies the boundaries of straightforward moral evaluation. Welsh [2009, p. 81] refers to the film as *an updated Western*, suggesting that its main aim is conveying the confusing logic of *'frustrated frontier' of the late twentieth century, a dystopic West where Evil has a postmodern spin . . .*

In the Coens' hands the typical narrative conventions of the Western and the clichéd iconography of the genre – cowboy hats, pointed toe boots, rifles and horses – become fused not only with the more modern trappings and appalling realities of present-day crime but also the ridiculously incongruous, almost unreal character of Anton Chigurh – an excessively cruel, dispassionately meticulous hit man with an unsettlingly indefinable foreign accent and an ostentatiously bizarre, anachronistic pageboy haircut inconsistent with the Texan conventions and the generic images of masculinity. Hired by one of the drug cartels to recover the two million dollars which Llewelyn Moss, a Texan welder and Vietnam veteran hunting in the desert, stumbles upon at the site of the carnage resulting from a drug deal that went awry, Chigurh overtly contradicts the formulaic representations of a villain in classic Western films due to his idiosyncratic demeanour, emphasized by the eccentric murder weapon – a cattle bolt gun attached to a huge, hand-held compressed air tank, as well as the character's striking duality and ambiguity, which the viewer is constantly reminded about.

On the one hand, Anton Chigurh is a fantastic being that seems to have come from another dimension to impose his own rules on both the film's projected reality and all the other characters – in one of the scenes, when unexpectedly attacked by Moss, he hides behind a car and then, after being wounded, he dissolves into the darkness as if he was invisible. Carson Wells, a rival assassin employed by the very same drug cartel to put a stop to his uncontrollable and irrational murders, observes that Chigurh, when committing his dread-inspiring acts, is driven by his own, deviant moral code and a unique, alternative set of rules, which no man except him can comprehend. Chigurh continues the tradition of alienated Coenesque antagonists, such as Leonard Smalls in *Raising Arizona*, Charlie Meadows in *Barton Fink* or Gaear Grimsrud in *Fargo*, whose deeds violate all established social norms as they *exist on a separate plane with a disgust of civilized life and of normalcy* [Doom, 2009, p.XIV]. Welsh [2009, p.74] perceives him as *an allegorical abstraction* – the personification of death or the devilish force that goes well beyond the confines of our mundane reality. The Coens seem to encourage associations with the iconic character of the sci-fi cyborg the Terminator – the similarity between the two characters becomes apparent during the self-surgery scene, closely reminiscent of the analogous sequence in James Cameron's picture, when Chigurh, unlike ordinary mortals, fastidiously removes a bullet from his leg without feeling any pain. Both of them are indestructible killing machines, devoid of normal human emotions, that have come from parallel worlds to strike terror into the hearts of humans.

On the other hand, despite his superhuman features, blatantly psychopathic nature and the ominous countenance, Chigurh's appearance and behaviour are characterised by a kind of unremarkable, geeky clumsiness and ordinariness. His human traits surface on rare occasions, for instance when for a short while he chokes on a cashew nut during a bloodcurdling conversation with the gas station owner whose innocent questions he considers to be too inquisitive. According to one of the witnesses Chigurh's physicality is hard to pinpoint: *He looked like anybody. . . . There was nothin unusual lookin about him. But he didnt look like anybody you'd want to mess with* [McCarthy, 2007b, p.163]. The

Coens' and McCarthy's anti-hero can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the dark side of human nature and the universal character of violence that lurks in all of us, echoing Jean Baudrillard's concepts, which stress the illusory nature of our confidence in man's natural goodness, contrasting the inevitability of evil, which is downplayed by the contemporary culture, with the commonly accepted notion of the accidental misfortune, which lets us neglect the fact that evil is essentially *an original power and, in no sense, a dysfunction, vestige or mere obstacle standing in the way of good* [Baudrillard, 2005, p.139]. Paryż [2014, p.15] points out the apocalyptic dimension of *No Country for Old Men*, which makes us aware that *the eternal evil can come to the surface in modern times and lead to the annihilation of all humankind*.¹ For Tyrer and Nickel [2009, p. 91] Chigurh represents an archetypal menace, *danger that cannot be denied* or a typical human fear of the future.

The Coens, who quite clearly imply that *Chigurh may be a heaven-sent agent to demonstrate the Truth of Evil to myopic mortals*, seem to move away from the essentially realistic framework of McCarthy's source novel toward a definitely more symbolic and metaphorical dimension, perhaps under the inspiration of the gothic prose of Flannery O'Connor, whose influence they have often acknowledged. Chigurh bears a strong resemblance to the figure of the Misfit in O'Connor's story *A Good Man is Hard to Find* – both characters are psychopathic *structural agents of change, disturbing the Ordinary and destroying the very illusion of Ordinarity*, which consequently allows people to obtain a kind of revelation, the gift of deeper understanding and, in a religious context that is especially well marked in O'Connor's works, also the possibility of salvation [Welsh, 2009, p.79]. This interpretation is reinforced by Gilmore [2009, p. 64], who describes Anton Chigurh as an updated version of the traditional image of Death carrying a scythe, whose appearance makes humans realize how inescapable the end of their existence actually is and how unimportant or simply faulty the rules by which they have lived so far eventually turn out to be. As Chigurh states in his conversation with Wells just before he kills the other hit man, after rejecting the offer of being given the briefcase with the two million dollars, which Wells managed to track, in return for saving his life: *If the rule you followed led you to this of what use was the rule?* [McCarthy, 2007b, p.115] The character, whose role and objectives within the story never become precisely explained to the viewer, is an enigmatic force with motivations and conduct that elude the principles of conventional, human logic, which suddenly materializes in the film's plotline to dispense punishments on behalf of a higher order of justice – it is a reaction to Llewelyn Moss's act of greed, as he decides to steal the case filled with banknotes, or, more broadly, a response to what seems to be brought sharply into focus by both the picture and the novel: the extreme materialism of people living in today's world and the ensuing, increasingly degenerate crime and violence. Topolnisky [2009, p. 114] perceives Chigurh as *violence personified, . . . a terrifying distillation of the preoccupation with the violence that runs through all Westerns and through contemporary society*. For

¹ All translations from Polish into English by the author of this article.

Doom [2009, p.154] he should be viewed as *the Coens' natural progression of violence, a frightening representation of contemporary society*.

The title of McCarthy's novel is derived from the first line of William Butler Yeats's poem *Sailing to Byzantium* which is the lament of an old man who withdraws from the modern, material world into the safe, spiritual haven of art, complaining about young people having no regard for the experience of past generations and the wisdom of old age. In the world of *No Country for Old Men*, which is an allegory for modern civilization, *things are out of alignment, . . . balance and harmony are gone from the land and from the people* [Gilmore, 2009, p.73-74]. Faced with the spread of unstoppable vice and blatant bestiality that have become the trademark of contemporary American culture, Ed Tom Bell, a good-natured, aging sheriff who investigates Chigurh's crimes, gradually adopts a shamefully passive strategy of survival, avoiding direct confrontation with the increasingly brutish violence which he does not feel capable of combating. Warso [2014, p.183] believes that *Bell's trepidation and resignation, caused by the collapse of semantic structures, should be considered with reference to general . . . human fear of death* as well as the sheriff's unwillingness to resort to the means necessary to fight modern crime effectively. His approach of an almost stoical, dejected observer of escalating crime and bloody drug wars constitutes a radical departure from the idealistic stance of classic Westerns while his conservative belief that it is the widespread decline of traditional social norms and manners among today's young people that lies at the root of all evil can sound unwillingly humorous:

These old people I talk to, if you could of told em that there would be people on the streets of our Texas towns with green hair and bones in their noses speakin a language they couldnt even understand, well, they just flat out wouldnt of believed you. But what if you'd of told em it was their own grandchildren? Well, all of that is signs and wonders but it dont tell you how it got that way. And it dont tell you nothin about how it's fixin to get, neither. [McCarthy, 2007b, p.157]

At the end of the film old Ellis exposes sheriff's fallacious reasoning and reminds him that wanton killing has always been a part of American experience by referring to the death of Uncle Mac, a lawman shot down in 1909 on his own porch by a gang of criminals, who sat on their horses watching him die in his wife's arms. As Ellis says: *What you got ain't nothin' new. This country is hard on people. You can't stop what's coming. It ain't all waiting on you. That's vanity.*

For Lincoln [2009, p.145] McCarthy's novel is a moral fable depicting a frequently explored theme of the collision between the world of ordinary *little guys and big evil forces* controlled by powerful individuals who keep a low profile but generate havoc, destruction and death. The Coens, whose previous films often focused on the Kafkaesque clash between an average individual and the all-powerful, evil system being the effect of the ruthless, mercenary values of capitalism, are keen to pursue this trope. Forced to confront Anton Chigurh in the course of the picture's plot, whose events add up to a what is effectively a cat-and-mouse game, Bell and Moss, taciturn and rough but at the same time sincere and honourable individualists, are the true representatives of the

American West – they are tough yet upright, ordinary men close to the rough scenery and the simple cultural roots of this harsh land which still cultivates the original ideals of the American nation. They are, however, unable to preserve their raw energy and eventually lose their fight against evil which is an inherent part of the contemporary world. The business operations of drug cartels, whose bosses dressed in suits occupy elegant offices on top floors of modern skyscrapers, are a mirror image of corporate mechanisms and the cold-blooded violence they are responsible for is a distorted image of the heartless American capitalist system.

Even against the context of the highly brutal drug crimes of the border region and the growing desensitisation to atrocity, the viewer finds Chigurh's inhumanity truly frightening and downright incomprehensible – he treats his victims like animals to be slaughtered and kills people who happen to cross his path in a disturbingly casual manner, obsessively making sure that no one who could possibly identify him is left alive. He does not exhibit a single trace of conventional human morality or empathy and, unlike many Western villains, he is not interested in gaining fame, respect or money. The driving force behind his actions, which seems much more important than the enormous amount of money he eventually appropriates for reasons that seem little to do with materialistic impulses, is the sheer physical pleasure and the sense of omnipotence he gets from his violent acts. This is clearly manifested in the picture's opening sequence when, with an expression of utterly perverse ecstasy on his face, he uses his handcuffed hands to commit a bestial murder of a local policeman. As the Coens imply, Chigurh lets the officer arrest him only to release himself from custody with ease and demonstrate his superiority over the ordinary world with its established order of things. He is guided by his warped sense of justice and commitment to his own, peculiar ethical code, which he refers to when offering some of his victims a chance to be saved dependent solely on the result of a coin toss. Through the simple game of chance Chigurh denies himself the right to make life-and-death decisions motivated by sympathy or conscience. He perceives his role only as a blind instrument in the hands of fate, having absolutely no scruples about murdering people, as if he had no say in this matter, even when there is no apparent, practical need to kill a particular person.

As Gilmore [2009, p.76] points out, the message of the film juxtaposes and simultaneously blends two major traditions of American popular culture – the Western with its youthful optimism and untroubled confidence that all hardships can be overcome through unflinching perseverance and clever practicality, rooted in the frontier experience of the pioneers of the American West, and noir with its more mature, pessimistic or even fatalistic vision of the state of the American psyche. The latter accentuates an individual's helplessness which, despite their intellectual aptitude, strength of will and desperate efforts, makes them acutely vulnerable to evil inflicted by other people or the unpredictable and uncontrollable developments which imply the world's overwhelming indifference. Even Chigurh, who seems to hold all the cards in the story as a terrifyingly cold-blooded envoy of Fate, cannot eventually avoid life's ironic potential. We are as surprised as he is when in one of the final scenes he unexpectedly falls victim to a trivial

car crash, capitulating to the world's entropic nature – the moment is also a symbolic indication that there is a power which is hierarchically superior to the apparently omnipotent villain. The notion of destiny, which is so significant for him that he proclaims himself to be its messenger, turns out to be the reflection of our impotence in the face of the unrelenting course of events, *a creation of the mind incapable of facing the complexity of the universe, a post-factum interpretation* [www 11].

The character of Anton Chigurh, as one of the most intriguing and complex cinematic representations of evil, not only in the contemporary Western genre, effectively shifts the significance of the film's storyline from the 1980s setting to a more universal, contemporary perspective. For Covell [2009, p.96] he is a postmodern hypertext, a heterogeneous conglomerate of cinematic and literary motives and figures, which *destabilizes the idea of a singular Western identity, . . . a human palimpsest, wherein images and aspects of earlier texts and cultural artifacts may be perceived . . .* The Coens' Chigurh seems to convey a critique of modern America perceived, just like in Jean Baudrillard's worldview, as a postmodern hyperreality dominated by mass media and consumer culture, where the endless meanings multiplied by ubiquitous signs that override the realm of the real lead to the emergence of a simulated reality, resulting in fragmented human identities and a loss of individual experience replaced by simulacra. An attentive viewer will undoubtedly pay attention to numerous hints that define the projected world as an allegory of today's civilization, in which media, trademarks, consumer goods and technology have been brought to the fore, taking over the personal dimension of human existence. Seemingly irrelevant details of attire and clothing brands become an important determiner of the characters' identity, often having more significance than their emotional responses or roles within conventional social networks, both of which are reduced to a bare minimum. Ellis [2009, p.137-138] points at the picture's fetishisation of technology, which is also highlighted by McCarthy's text as one of Chigurh's inherent traits. Contemporary strategies of evil, which he represents, rely to a large extent on the use of sophisticated weapons, cars, medicines or phones – they seem to satisfy the subconscious need to seek emotional support from potent objects, which is characteristic especially of young males who are the key readers of crime fiction, whose conventions McCarthy appropriates in his novel. As Czaplinski [www2], commenting on Baudrillard's theories, observes, the highly unstable world of simulacra is a paradoxical result of the modern world's desperate struggle for complete comprehension of its own reality, while resorting to violence appears to be the only viable way to regain a degree of certainty about what surrounds us and who we are: *We can reclaim our identity only by breaking away from the global order of signs, which does not encompass individual variations. . . . In response to this kind of reality . . . one has no other option but to be a consumer or a terrorist.*

Welsh [2009, p.77] believes that the picture can be interpreted as an allegory of neoconservative America's fears concerning the imminent threats looming both outside the territory of the United States, as a consequence of the preemptive war in the Middle East, and within it – due to perceived and real dangers posed by radical Islamists. The

film, whose blood-soaked landscape is largely the result of Mexican gangsters' exercise of unrestricted violence, may also be viewed as a reflection of *the conservative hobgoblin fear of an alien invasion from south of the border* – the cultural and social anxieties arising from the influx of illegal Hispanic immigrants who make up a substantial proportion of the most numerous and the fastest growing ethnic minority, which, according to conservatives, might in the future undermine the foundations of the American cultural identity. Significantly, Llewelyn Moss is eventually killed by a Latino gang which pursues him independently of Chigurh.

Although the character of Anton Chigurh is strongly based on its literary predecessor, the postmodern sensibilities of the Coens have transformed him into a subversive parody of a classic Western villain, highlighting the most disturbing aspects of the contemporary American culture: the crisis of identity, the degradation of the original, positive values of the nation and the increasing intensity of gratuitous violence. If we consider the enormous scale of deadly destruction that he is responsible for, deriving obvious pleasure from the brutality of his violent acts, his dehumanizing manner of killing people, his pseudo-intellectual remarks, dubious aestheticism and dark uniform-like clothes combined with the obsessive need to demonstrate his superiority over other characters, the quasi-*Nietzschean negation of conventional morality and the rejection of the concept of free will* in favour of life's fatality, Chigurh becomes quite obviously an ironic embodiment of the modern perception of extreme evil filtered through the inconceivable cruelties of the Second World War, rather than a manifestation of violence rooted in the harsh realities of the American West with its clear and simple, masculine code of conduct. Buryła [www 1], referring to concepts put forward in *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* by Berel Lang, suggests that evil as a force can evolve and improve its methods to reveal at one point in history, as it happened during the Holocaust, its absolute form, which is completely beyond our understanding – it is *so radical that previously only the Devil was able to tap its potential*. As sheriff Bell states in one of his monologues, trying to understand the monstrous, almost mechanical cruelty of the drug wars fought along the southern border of Texas, the existence of Satan *explains a lot of things that otherwise dont have no explanation* [McCarthy, 2007b, p.123]. In his opinion modern America has now reached exactly this stage of its history – God's presence cannot be seen and the country found itself on a downward spiral of moral decline and the escalation of violence. Nobody can operate in this reality more efficiently than Chigurh who is devoid of all scruples and doubts as he *has achieved an evil state of grace that the ambivalent masses will never know* [www 7].

As Covell [2009, p.107] reminds us, by emphasizing the passing of the ideals of the Old West with its original, raw attitudes, the Coens initiate their favourite intertextual game, playing not only with a few classic, cinematic representations of Western antiheroes, such as the psychopathic gunslinger Jack Wilson in *Shane* [1953] or the sadistic bounty hunter Lee Clayton in *The Missouri Breaks* [1976], but also with Cormac McCarthy's literary oeuvre. Chigurh is clearly an allusion to the terrifyingly ominous character of Judge Holden from the writer's earlier novel *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness*

in the West – the critically acclaimed book, often considered to be McCarthy's magnum opus, portrays bloody massacres involving Americans, Mexicans and native tribes which took place in the United States-Mexico borderlands in the mid nineteenth century in the aftermath of the Mexican-American war.

Blood Meridian, whose warped, Western poetics and numerous themes are alluded to by McCarthy himself in his *No Country for Old Men*, is based on a real historical episode – a gang of mercenaries under the command of John Joel Glanton, commissioned by the governments of the Mexican states of Chihuahua and Sonora to clear the territories of hostile Apaches, decided to increase their profits and went on to decimate friendly tribes and the local Mexicans they were supposed to protect, provoking violent acts of retaliation on their part. As Smith [www 10] notices, *Glanton's legacy shifted from war hero to alleged mass murderer in less than a year*. Paryż [www 9] calls the events *the flip side of the actions undertaken under the doctrine of expansionism, which sanctioned violence used as a means to sustain the civilisational supremacy of white people, that is the Anglo-Saxons*. For Jarniewicz [www 4] McCarthy presents a revisionist picture of the era when the American spirit of expansionism entrenched itself and turned into the Manifest Destiny philosophy. The American Frontier, a veritable no man's land, where everyone wages apocalyptic war on everyone else and the omnipresent evil, which does not fit any logical model of the world order, gains full sovereignty, is not presented as an area where good confronts evil in the difficult yet morally and religiously justified civilizing mission as it is the case in the traditional Westerns – here it is the encapsulation of *cosmic chaos, where there is no difference between barbarity and civilization, law and lawlessness, virtue and vice, order and disorder*. *Blood Meridian* can be perceived as the American equivalent of *Heart of Darkness* as its *cruel climate of the place pushes people towards extremes* irrespective of their cultural affiliation [www 9]. McCarthy deconstructs the cultural significance of a well-established myth rooted in the history of the American Frontier, which Richard Slotkin [2000] famously described as *regeneration through violence*, defining it as one of the fundamental, American intellectual concepts, under which violent acts against other, purportedly barbaric races and countries have the long-term, noble aim of developing and augmenting the nation's progressive social and political model, which is supposed to pave the way for a new, better world. In the cruel reality that *Blood Meridian* projects no regeneration is, however, possible – what we are faced with is only the brutish, depraved violence, the characters showing no trace of the demythologized frontiersman ethos and the death mercilessly inflicted on other human beings which inevitably brings about the demise of the perpetrators themselves. As Jankowicz [www 3] observes, *The Wild West in Blood Meridian is savage not only because it hasn't been explored, described and tamed, but also due to the fact that those who arrive in it from elsewhere (the civilized territories) harbour the primitive, violent and destructive energy*.

Judge Holden, Glanton's sadistic, devil-like deputy, based on a real, historical personage, portrayed in Samuel E. Chamberlain's memoirs published as *My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue*, is the personification of a force that drives human beings

to commit evil deeds, presented as *an amalgamation of numerous archetypes from the mythic West, . . . the new version of the hunter myth*. The character subverts the meanings traditionally inscribed into the iconic heroes of the American founding myth, such as the folk legends Daniel Boone and David Crockett – he is *a new myth that restructures American attitudes and beliefs about what it means to be an American and how Americans must relate to the landscape they inhabit* [Spurgeon, 2009, p.88-89]. The multi-talented, albino-skinned, hairless giant with an almost insane predilection for murder is, like Anton Chigurh, a symbol of the universal character of evil, which constitutes an integral part of man's nature, and an immortal, superhuman being, who indulges in toying with people's lives as well as enunciating his erudite, pseudo-philosophical viewpoints in order to demonstrate the knowledge about the world and the human condition which is unavailable to ordinary people. Covell [2009, p.103] draws our attention to the need to dominate and control the world that both characters share, which is expressed in often unnecessary acts of killing – they become symbolic gestures of appropriation and ownership they do not hesitate to apply against completely innocent and harmless creatures. Judge Holden, who styles himself as a man of reason and science, is overwhelmed by a compulsive urge to describe and catalogue aspects of the surrounding world and subsequently destroy the originals – even birds are killed after Holden has sketched them as he regards their freedom as an insult. His relentless desire to dominate the natural world, whose sole ruler he wishes to be, seems to be a caricature of Enlightenment thought, which is clearly evoked when he says: “*Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent*” [McCarthy, 2007a, p.136]. As Mastalerz and Szcześniak [www 8] point out, the character *thrives on chaos. He eulogises warfare as an art of conquering the world, believing that unless you are at war, you are already dead.*

While Chigurh's obsessive consistency and his deterministic attachment to the notion of fate can be seen as the reflection of our defenselessness against the world's unpredictability and the power of evil that derives from the essence of human existence, Holden represents the mindset of a colonizer driven by a sense of a historical mission based on the precepts of Manifest Destiny – in Stasiowski's opinion in an effort to subjugate other people and his surroundings, he rejects moral laws, which frequently sympathise with the underdog, in favour of laws of history that promote the winner [www 11]. The same attitude was in fact the driving force behind the expansion and hegemony of the United States not only in the American continents but also globally. Referring to the aforementioned concept of *regeneration through violence*, deeply intertwined with the Manifest Destiny ideology, Covell finds the common denominator of Holden's and Chigurh's brutality. He believes it to be an ironic commentary on the typically American tendency to accept or even mythologise violence, which, no matter how cruel and destructive it might be, has contributed to the strengthening and flowering of the nation's identity – until now Americans define themselves, using another well-known Slotkin's term, as the *Gunfighter Nation* [Covell, 2009, p102-103]. In Slotkin's opinion, the frontier myth, which has always underpinned the American political and public discourse as a justification of the interventionist policies, was invoked by Westerns, some of which,

such as *High Noon* [1952] or *Shane* [1953], reinforced it, while others, particularly in view of the overt cruelties of the Vietnam War, provided an increasingly cynical interpretation of its assumptions by showing, like Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* [1969], the horror and absurdity of killing and therefore demythologizing one of America's key cultural narratives [www 6]. Hage [2010, p.91] believes that McCarthy's focus on *sheer violence and slaughter* has a similar aim of undermining the tendency to aestheticise the genocidal roots of the nation in line with Frederick Jameson Turner's classic notion of the Western frontier as the cradle of best American traits – *continuity of violent epochs that extends beyond the historical frontier* is the underlying theme of McCarthy's prose.

By making the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, The Coens, who throughout their oeuvre have been consistently preoccupied with exposing the degraded reality of America's most cherished values and ideals, seem to have found an artistic and ideological soulmate in the novelist who, according to Jankowicz, believes that his primary aim as a writer is to voice *the critique of the American identity and founding myths (whose role in the contemporary social life of the United States is more evident than ever before)* . . . His graphic, elaborate images of extreme violence are a means of waking the reader up from an emotional stupor that makes us indifferent to cyclical, increasingly radical manifestations of evil – one of the chief constituents not only of the American culture but also of the human civilization in general [www 3]. The directors' postmodern, ironic detachment from the value of social mechanisms and the significance of an individual human existence, which defines the picture's landscape along with the hyperbolically pervasive violence and the grotesque mightiness of evil, is a reflection of the same vision of the world that guided McCarthy in *Blood Meridian*. The novel's framework of a Western epic, as Jarniewicz observes, contains no deeper message to be inferred by the reader and no attempts at ethical or intellectual analysis – the only suggestion it offers is the one of all-encompassing void and indefiniteness. *The mystery is, as one of the characters in the novel says, that there is no mystery and the characters in the course of the events are just 'shades craving for designata' – empty shadows cast by no one* [www 5]. Both McCarthy's prose and the Coens' film seem to generate a similar, pessimistically disorienting sense of not being embedded in any logical universe which could offer a meaningful explanation of our existence within it.

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