

**ABSURD LIFE SIMULATED UPON THE BLANK CANVAS OF THE WORLD;
CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*
ALONGSIDE BAUDRILLARD AND CAMUS**

William Dwyer

Sammendrag

Cormac McCarthy roman *The Road* (2006) og *Albert Camus'* *Myten om Sisyfos* (1942) tematiserer valget mellom selvmord og en monoton kamp når meningsillusjonen er blitt avslørt som en sosial fabrikkasjon. I romanen proklamerer McCarthy «*there is no god and we are his prophets*», en skrekkelig idé hvis man leter etter ekstern mening, men omvendt en bemerkende tillatelse til å skape. McCarthy sidestiller en far som forsøker å skape mening, tross overveldende bevis på at denne er en sosial fabrikkasjon, med moren, som rasjonelt nok begår selvmord. Å bruke *Jean Baudrillard* som filosofisk linse på *The Road* tvinger leseren til å gå gjennom en forlatt verden, en simulasjon der flytende bilder er løsrevet mening og simulakraet åpenbart. Ved å kombinere *The Road*, *Simulacra and Simulation* og *Myten om Sisyfos* avsløres livet som irrasjonelt fordi simulasjonen vi har fanget oss selv i er absurd. McCarthy viser likevel at vi ved å omfavne en kunstnerisk kamp for å skape et personlig konstrukt er i stand til å føle oss levende.

Nøkkelord

Cormac McCarthy, Jean Baudrillard, simulakrum, selvmord, Albert Camus.

Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006) and *Albert Camus'* *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), grapple with the choice of suicide versus struggle when meaning is exposed as socially fabricated. McCarthy declares, “*there is no god and we are his prophets*”, a dismal idea if one is searching for external meaning but conversely an empowering permission to create. McCarthy juxtaposes a father who chooses to produce absurd meaning with a mother who rationally commits suicide. Using *Jean Baudrillard's* philosophical lens to read *The Road*, forces the reader to walk through a world of simulacra where floating signifiers are detached from meaning. Combining *The Road*, *Simulacra and Simulation*, and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, exposes that living is irrational because the simulation we have incarcerated ourselves within is absurd; however, McCarthy shows that in embracing the artistic struggle of creating a personal construct we feel most alive.

Keywords

Cormac McCarthy, Jean Baudrillard, simulacra, suicide, Albert Camus.

It is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them.

Jean Baudrillard

Introduction

When presented with overwhelming logical evidence that meaning garnered from life is simultaneously difficult to construct and validated only by a temporary social construct, perhaps one must consider that the rational response is suicide. However, despite the evidence, humanity continues to dig their toes into the soil and push their monotonous task uphill yet again fabricating a hegemonic simulation of nationalism, deontological duty, and moral purpose fully understanding that mass-extinction or geologic cataclysm will inevitably erase all evidence of the Anthropocene. However, this labour should be praised, not as delusion, but a grand artistic endeavour celebrating the orchestration and composition of an absurd life. In 1942 Camus flipped the myth of Sisyphus when he presented the protagonist, not as a punished slave to the gods, but as a smiling rebel unbroken in his mundane task. Furthermore, he extends this metaphor to the reader; thus he confirms and justifies his sentiment presented later in 1951's *The Rebel*.

To juxtapose the choice of a rational suicide versus absurd artistic living, this essay uses two characters from Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, wherein the choice to live or die is made abundantly clear as the author presents a world detached from hegemonic morality and external validation where all meaning is personally accrued through extended suffering. Despite, Camus' optimistic presentation of a smiling Sisyphus it is ambiguous and open to interpretation, thus this essay brings in the work of Jean Baudrillard to help explain ontological contrasts between simulation, as social construct, and reality to help the reader understand why Camus' *Sisyphus* and McCarthy's *The Road* are ultimately displays of hope and optimism against their dismal backdrop. McCarthy's *The Road* forces the reader to look beyond a socially constructed hegemonic simulation and face the reality that meaning and purpose are independently constructed, difficult, and temporary, positing suicide therefore as the rational choice; however, when reading the novel alongside the philosophy of Baudrillard and Camus the irrational choice of choosing to live offers optimistic opportunity to artistically express personal meaning, become a rebel, and attain ultimate self-efficacy.

To arrive at the conclusion that one can fabricate artistic personal meaning as an artistic rebellion against the imposed hegemonic construct we can reference the work of Camus and Baudrillard. In 1942 Camus reversed the archetype of Sisyphus from tragic protagonist/martyr to rebel/revolutionary when he presented the figure in the enjoyment of his punishment. In the classic myth, we leave our protagonist rolling a large rock up a hill only to pause at the top, watch gravity take hold, cascade back to the base, and thus begin the task again for eternity. It is an existential metaphor many of us have sympathised with far past its Grecian publication date when we find ourselves standing above a copy machine at work or sitting through yet another staff meeting. However, what makes Camus' essay so intriguing is his depiction of Sisyphus walking back down the hill towards his redundant task stating, "if the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy" thus providing the reader with the option that he may be enjoying this personally fabricated sport of uphill boulder rolling (2018, 121).

And why not? Certainly there is a large market of treadmills and watches that gather numbers to spreadsheets for meaningless comparison that many are subscribed to. Although it may be hard to accept that one would enjoy such a an endless task, one must remember in the time of writing Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus were building off Nietzsche and Kierkegaard making the claim that essence is a constructed fabrication upon a subjective reality and therefore we are the masters of our hegemony and accept full responsibility for the fabrication of

absurd meaning within the monotony of our struggle. Camus lays this idea out clearly near the start of *Sisyphus* stating, “This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction”, meaning that beyond the objective nouns placed in front of an individual it is up to the conscious being to hang adjectives upon them and knit them into some sort of schematic purpose, emotion, or morality as there is no puppeteer beyond our personal consciousness doing it for us without our complacent submission to it (19). This thought marks a shift from previous deontological notions of having societal norms and hegemonic power structures judging what is acceptable and what is deviant for the greater good. Therefore the narrative of our protagonist can be flipped as submitting to the construct of the gods is optional, thus Sisyphus can be seen as either a tortured victim or a conquistador of the useless when Camus writes, “the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (123).

In conclusion, if one is fated to a prescribed repetitive absurd action within a social construct and sees the only choice beyond self-destruction, then one can find sovereignty within the essence projected on the existence of the task when they take ownership of the construct’s orchestration; therefore the total rejection, suicide, although perhaps a rational response to absurdity, leads to the loss of an opportunity to graffiti personal artistic meaning on this grand narrative. Camus summarises this sentiment later in 1954’s *The Rebel* stating, “If one believes in nothing, if nothing makes sense, if we can assert no value whatsoever, everything is permissible and nothing is important”, thus, optimistically, all is available for the personal construction of meaning (1960, 13). One is placed in reality, but Camus exposes that it is up to us to submit to the essence of a hegemonic construct layered upon it.

In order to examine this hegemonic social construct and form it more concretely, one can use Baudrillard’s extended metaphor of omnipotent simulation covering objective reality. As a philosophical provocateur, Baudrillard forces readers to question modernity’s interaction with ontology, making the claim that we are all part of one large simulation separated from reality by screens, advertising, and symbols that behave like floating signifiers. Although Baudrillard focuses on screens and the post-modern state, the metaphor of simulation can be extended to nationalism, social construct, and religious symbolism as well; like many French post-structural philosophers his writing is intentionally open to interpretation. Baudrillard relates to Camus as his simulation can stand for the fabrication of meaning, or essence, placed upon an objective reality, or existence, a subject experiences, much like Sisyphus exhibiting personal sovereignty upon a perceived eternal punishment.

Baudrillard’s philosophy implies that it is the myth of external meaning layered on perception that organises the world within a social construct, summarised when he states, “we need a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin to reassure us as to our ends, since ultimately we have never believed in them”, and although he acknowledges a suspended disbelief in a socially constructed hegemony, or simulation, the serious consequences can be seen in examples when crowds rush government buildings in the hopes of restoring meaning from a non-existent past (Baudrillard 2010, 1563). For clarity, an example of living in a simulation that many of us have experienced in the modern world is a walk through the modern supermarket, where different parts of a large complex are organised in sections of meat, grains, or vegetables resembling a central farmers markets of a city. Above the fish section one might see advertising of fishing boats on a Norwegian Fjord and above the dairy section one might see images of healthy cows in flowery meadows lined up before advertising of colours and packaging, both of these masking the fact that these realities do not exist anymore. It

is more likely that the fish are raised on a fish-farm and processed in a factory and the cow is plugged into a complex milking machine in a feedlot.

The symbols, advertising, and images are Baudrillard's simulation, or suspended disbelief that we operate within. Both industries wrap their products in plastics and images delivering to the consumer a "visible past" and "visible myth of origin". Baudrillard argues that there is a kind of modern fatalism of slipping into the simulation explaining, "Every reality is absorbed by the hyperreality of the code and simulation", meaning that this hegemonic brainwashing we are all victim to has a kind of fatalistic inevitability (1993, 23). Pessimistically, Baudrillard states, "Perhaps death and death alone, the reversibility of death, belongs to a higher order than the code. Only symbolic disorder can bring about an interruption in the code", thus presenting suicide as a rational response if one is to think about removing oneself from the social construct simulation (25). In fact Baudrillard goes so far as to claim that this suicide might be a way to rebel against the enforced social construct stating, "every death and all violence that escapes the State monopoly is subversive; it is a prefiguration of the abolition of power", as when one opts out of this simulation, the simulation itself loses a participant that feeds its belief into existence (195). Restrictions on doctor assisted suicide or religious disdain for suicide thus are a response to a hegemonic simulation's desperate attempt to fuel itself into existence.

Reading Baudrillard alone would leave one with two options, either fated to live in a simulated post-modern façade grasping at images of reality that no longer exist and ultimately succumbing to meaninglessness, or total rejection by suicide. When presented with this binary option it does seem like suicide might be the rational choice. However, when we pair the knowledge that Camus exposed in *Sisyphus* and McCarthy in *The Road* a third empowering option emerges, to find joy in the construction of one's personal simulation and a rejection of hegemonic norms, despite simultaneously acknowledging the absurdity of meaning and fallacy of legacy. This optimistic lifestyle choice and rejection of rational suicide may be hard to understand, which is why we turn to the protagonists in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, who expose these options and clarify the possibilities.

The Road

Cormac McCarthy wrote *The Road* as a depiction of a world after a cataclysmic event focusing not on "the bang" but the "whimper" of humanity limping towards its inevitable extinction, and on this desolate backdrop, McCarthy places characters grappling with the options of witnessing their meaninglessness or choosing self-immolation. McCarthy turns anthropocentric arrogance into triviality by providing a limited explanation as to humanity's extinction event stating only, "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didn't answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass" (2006, 36), thus the reader begins to witness their lack of purpose through the decay of a fragile hegemonic construct. The novel proceeds to follow a boy and his father as they navigate a world devoid of simulation where they occasionally stumble across simulacra now detached from meaning. For example, McCarthy describes billboards advertising cities that are now ash, currency ignored in dust without worth, and flags from imagined communities now insignificant. For a clear example, the simulation is exposed as an

empty symbol in the conversation between the man and the boy as they look towards the deteriorating map for guidance:

The tattered oil company roadmap had once been taped together but now it was just sorted into leaves and numbered with crayon in the corners for their assembly. He sorted through the limp pages and spread out those that answered to their location.

We cross a bridge here. It looks to be about eight miles or so. This is the river. Going east. We follow the road here along the eastern slope of the mountains. These are our roads, the black lines on the map. The state roads.

Why are they the state roads?

Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states.

But there's not any more states?

No.

What happened to them?

I dont know exactly. That's a good question.

But the roads are still there.

Yes. For a while.

How long a while?

I dont know. Maybe quite a while. There's nothing to uproot them so they should be okay for a while. (29)

The novel provokes a reader as it forces them to confront the meaninglessness of the social construct and the inevitability of its disappearance. The map here can be symbolic representation of all societal constructs in the novel; without concrete deontological grounding for morality the reader is left to confront both isolation and sovereignty with only a fading remnant of a moral compass. Chris Gilbert, in his article "The Quest of Father and Son: Illuminating Character Identity, Motivation, and Conflict in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*", summarises the necessity of personal moral construction in the novel by stating, "*The Road* is unique in that it depicts the behaviour of characters who are no longer informed and controlled by social institutions: there are no schools to learn in, no laws to obey, and no people to govern. In other words, this is a novel that suggests how humans behave when no one else is watching" (Gilbert, 43). Although this echoes the same played-out moral conundrum as whether or not to smash Piggy with a rock on a beach in *Lord of the Flies*, it goes a bit further as it forces the reader to realise that the island we are all shipwrecked on is the world that currently surrounds us, as the symbols and absurdity we attach meaning to in the world are ultimately floating signifiers. One must then face the predicament of conscripting to a simulation and hegemonic construct consciously knowing of its superficiality, removing oneself through suicide, or Camus' third option of making personal meaning in the world. This is the predicament that *The Road's* post-apocalypse presents for the reader, and McCarthy posits two characters as a response to the blank canvas of the world.

To be or not to be...

Although the novel centres around a nameless father and son adrift in a world of ash, there is a consistent haunting of the boy's mother, whose suicide is assumed in one of the many flashbacks and resonates as an option for the characters throughout the novel. We know little of the mother beyond her being objectified in flashbacks, which would misguide many into following the criticism that McCarthy is a masculine writer; however, by committing suicide she can

also be seen as rejecting the role of mother, defying a male protagonist, and the rational binary opposite to her male counterpart who is blinded by his emotional irrationality in continuing a Sisyphean task of walking a road to nowhere. The mother justifies her suicide in the novel stating,

I should have done it a long time ago. When there were three bullets in the gun instead of two. I was stupid. We've been over all of this. I didn't bring myself to this. I was brought. And now I'm done. I thought about not even telling you. That would probably have been best. You have two bullets and then what? You can't protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that? I'd take him with me if it weren't for you. You know I would. It's the right thing to do. (2006, 38)

Here the mother states that killing her child is the "right" thing to do and one can sympathise with her as the other option is extending the suffering of life and witnessing extinction. McCarthy posits the question of mercy killing and suicide as a rational choice when confronted with the meaninglessness of life coupled with extended suffering.

Much like Sisyphus watching his rock fall back to the start of his mountain and visualising the eternity of boulder rolling laid out before him, the mother is seeing the future where her offspring is suffering from constant traumatic abuse. And what would the profits of her labour accrue? She states, "Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I can't. I can't" (39). The twist here is that suicide is not an emotional decision but perhaps the rational choice when faced with a life of rape, murder, and cannibalism (40). Alan Noble comments extensively on the role of the mother in his article "The Absurdity of Hope In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*" and agrees that suicide may be the best option stating, "Based on what they know about the world after the apocalypse, there is no reasonable response except suicide" (Noble, 99). Noble goes on to show the absurdity of the Man's emotional response accepting life stating, "The kindest act a father can do for his child is to kill him or her before the child suffers too greatly (...) the conflict between his ethical obligation to spare his son from enduring severe suffering and his duty to preserve his son according to his divine calling", thus admitting that the ethical thing to do would be to murder his son (96). Here the reader is confronted with the ethical dilemma where rationality is flipped, or as Noble explains, it is "an inversion of Abraham's test of faith, the father in *The Road* must make the absurd and unethical decision to preserve the life of his son", thus making a leap of faith towards a clearly-falsified personal construct where the choice of living is rewarded only with continual suffering (103). The choice to continue on a road to nowhere in a world devoid of meaning with no foreseeable reward alongside simulacra blowing through the ash, is perhaps the very symbolic epitome of absurdity were it not for the conclusion of the novel, where much like Camus' Sisyphus, we see the protagonist both suffering and smiling in his self-destruction.

Although the book takes place in a post-apocalyptic wasteland at the dawn of the Anthropocene's extinction, one should take a moment and apply these heavy questions to the world surrounding us now. Although the mother chooses a quick death, one must also realise that the father is choosing a prolonged death and both are self-immolating choices, as there is no option that allows for any quarter of absolute permanence in memory. Although most of us do not live in a world where confronting cannibalising rapists is a possibility on our morning suburban commutes, there would be few of us who would admit that our lives are lacking

struggle, despite the challenges being more mundane. Furthermore, there would be few of us who could rationally justify the longevity of our legacy past a few successive generations beyond a shadow of DNA. If the father keeping his son alive is viewed as a form of abuse due to the irrational suffering and lack of hope, why then would casting teenagers out into a world of rising global temperatures on the brink of various nuclear conflicts be not also considered abuse? Why then would not decreasing the surplus population and relinquishing limited resources for future generations, much like the mother's choice, be the rational option when one removes the social construct and stigma of suicide?

Despite this, many of us make the absurd leap and attempt to justify meaning and hope in a world through conscription to a given simulation. Camus confronts this dilemma directly stating, "unless we ignore reality, we must find our values in it", meaning that we need to choose to find value in the world and it is not an external value forced upon us (1960, 27). For Camus, if we go past the initial choice of life over suicide then, "belief in the absurdity of existence must then dictate his conduct", meaning that meaning beyond objectivity is only a self-constructed simulation (2018, 6). Although it is easier to claim oneself a victim of a hegemonic system to justify our actions, when one realises that our conscious life sits on a geological timeline next to a star that will eventually expand and turn everything from Jerusalem to Mariana Trench into plasma, there is no rational reason in the abdication of personal judgment to this external social construct with any kind of authority. Of course one could argue a position of privilege here, as certainly groups like the Spanish Inquisition found creative ways to ruin the day of unfortunate minorities, but everyone will eventually succumb to painful meaningless death at the hands of a construct regardless of whether it is now or in the next 50 years and in the history of time, it will not matter much. To this degree, Camus states clearly, "suicide settles the absurd", thus abdicating it as the rational choice (2018, 54). Yet, despite this rational option most of us chose to go on and reject suicide; this is not in cowardice but through finding enjoyment within the struggle.

As Camus describes Sisyphus descending back to his boulder, "the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy", claiming there should be an acknowledgment and celebration in the absurdity of building a civilisation that will inevitably collapse in on itself (121). Camus, and the father in *The Road*, both expose that it is not the attainment of meaning that we should be searching for, but revelry within the impermanence of evolving struggle. Although *The Road* delivers depictions of a wasteland that is, currently, far from ours, the questions and philosophical threads are not any different than the ones we confront daily, and we too must make the decision to descend the mountain with joy in this our symphony of struggle.

Life in the Bunker

Suicide is the first choice the reader confronts in the *The Road*, but after one chooses life McCarthy presents another split, which is the choice to be passive in the face of an imposed construct in light of the terminus of existence or struggle to create personal meaning despite the absurdity. Two thirds of the way through the novel the man and the boy come across a sanctuary within the suffering when they find a safety bunker built by an unfortunate doomsday believer who was unable to make it to the entrance. McCarthy lays out the description in a cascade of sentence fragments stating, "Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gal-

lon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toilet-paper, paper plates. Plastic trash-bags stuffed with blankets. He held his forehead in his hand. Oh my God, he said. He looked back at the boy. It's all right, he said" (2006, 95). Although gallons of water may not seem like winning the lottery to the modern reader, after following our characters down a road populated by cannibalistic catamites and pregnant women birthing children like vegetables on a farm, the contrast is stark.

For days, the father and the son recuperate in the bunker taking warm baths, shaving, and preparing fresh cups of coffee to accompany their biscuits and gravy breakfasts. Meanwhile, the world beyond the bunker continues to go out in a whimper into self-destruction. The boy and the man symbolically separate the bunker from reality through ritualistic purification as they fumble through vague memories of constructs; for example, they begin their meal in the bunker by thanking the people who left them the supplies stating, "Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldn't eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didn't get to eat it and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God". Although a bastardised version of grace, it is an allusion to the sacrament of communion that contrasts the earthly world beyond the walls (100). Jung Narie supports this view stating in her article "Individualism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*; the highway to unsustainability": "Cannibalism is a destructive way of eating. Communion, on the other hand, is a productive way of eating in that it concerns one's unity with an imagined god - the transcending of self", therefore the bunker is a kind of ignorant tabernacle of white noise separated from a world of chaos and misfortune (Narie, 98-99). With this peace and solitude, the reader is shocked when the man and the boy choose to birth themselves out of the bunker and face struggle yet again and not continue their existence within the ignorance of the given simulation. The exiting of the bunker is a juxtaposition McCarthy could not get more blunt with:

Then he turned down the lamp until the flame pattered out and he kissed the boy and crawled into the other bunk under the clean blankets and gazed one more time at this tiny paradise trembling in the orange light from the heater and then he fell asleep.

The town had been abandoned years ago but they walked the littered streets carefully, the boy holding on to his hand. They passed a metal trash-dump where someone had once tried to burn bodies. The charred meat and bones under the damp ash might have been anonymous save for the shapes of the skulls. No longer any smell (...). (2006, 103)

The rejection of the sanctity of the bunker for the exertion of the road is clearly irrational and can only be explained by confronting arguments of ontological perspectives at their core. For what would life be in a bunker beyond a comfortable simulation? The dilemma McCarthy presents after suicide is whether one is to choose a life of comfort within a simulation or a life of struggle to construct personal meaning.

We have already confirmed that the world of the novel is devoid of external meaning and therefore absurd, but if one chooses to find personal joy in the struggle over suicide, despite the lack of meaning, then the next question must be how to construct this fabricated simulation. We can use the depiction of the bunker to metaphorically symbolise a choice of living within a given simulation or exiting into an objective world. Baudrillard states that a simulation is, "substituting signs of the real for the real itself", much like all the canned products and objects found within the bunker presented as symbols separated from the reality of the world (Baudrillard, 2010, 1557). One would have to do a great act of suspended disbelief to remain

in the bunker and call it the “real world” knowing full well that reality could crack the walls and leak in at any point. For Baudrillard the inevitable procession into a simulation happens in phases as he explains:

This would be the successive phases of the image:
It is the reflection of a basic reality
It masks and perverts a basic reality
It masks the absence of a basic reality
It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (1560)

To consciously live within the bunker, therefore is the metaphoric equivalent of living within a constructed simulacrum outside reality, or stage 4, as it stands in contrast to life beyond. To explain, think of a can of peaches within the bunker, the image on the can will only mask and pervert the world beyond the bunker and is no longer attached to anything outside the simulation within the walls; although it exists as a real can of peaches within a simulacra. The can of peaches reflects a void in the world, residing only within the accepted simulation of the bunker as long as you never open the door. Before the event that triggered the extinction of the Anthropocene, the canned peaches were something that “perverts a basic reality” as they are industrialised fruit and not fresh, hand-picked from a tree. As the outside world dies these peaches mask an absence and then bear no relation to reality whatsoever; they move through Baudrillard’s stages. If one is myopic enough to simply look at the bunker they can relish in their ignorance, but the boy and the man accept that this is a place apart. McCarthy presents a character who consciously reverses the order of simulation and walks back through the perversion of images and into a world of objects that reflect pure reality, albeit charred bodies and shrunk heads on sticks. Camus seems to speak directly to the man’s choice when he writes, “The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation” (Camus, 2018, 60). Here Camus is showing the exact choice to leave the bunker and go beyond a given simulation despite knowing that there is no hope for legacy.

The man and the boy are handed a comfortable simulation of the world in the bunker and can choose to dwell within it for a time, much like the modern man is presented with an imagined community, an ethical construct, and an deontological order but all these will eventually collapse; Camus gives us the choice to temporarily dwell within this construct or be an absurd man and claim self-efficacy. *The Road* simplifies the world so that choices that are often crowded with complications are laid bare. First there is the choice of suicide or life, next there is a division between adhering to the simulated construct or constructing your own uncertain meaning. If the simulated construct is optional and one steps beyond it, then it is here that one can begin to construct an absurd personal meaning upon an absurd meaningless world. What is most difficult for a reader to be exposed to when presented with these choices, is the realisation of the personal sovereignty of their choices.

When the boy and the man exit the bunker they consciously choose to enter into a world detached from meaning, and thus must construct personal meaning apart from any given construct. Noble summarises the characters’ conscious delusion as, “Through his characters McCarthy gives us a vision of absurd faith, and in so doing suggests that regardless of how horrific our situation might be, we can act in faith and resist the siren call of nihilistic suicide;

we can choose to have hope in a good God, in goodness itself, although such a hope is irrational by ‘human calculation’”, thus explaining the contradiction of acknowledging that meaning is personally constructed while simultaneously realising the necessity in so doing (Noble, 108). Upon leaving the bunker and choosing to walk onto the scratched blank canvas of the world it is up to the man to build a purpose for the boy as there is not a history or simulation to complacently ascribe to. After walking out of the bunker they meet the only character who gives himself a name, a signifier that is soon revealed as a pseudonym, Ely, no doubt chosen by the author due to its prophetic allusion, and he summarises the lack of simulation as, “Where men can’t live gods fare no better” (2006, 123), meaning that all divinity is not given externally, but constructed from the conscious human. The man’s judgment is exercised and passed on to the boy throughout the novel as the man is continually referencing others as “bad guys” while assuring the boy that they are “good guys” and will not become “bad guys”. However, in a world where hegemonic judgment has disappeared and suicide is a rational choice, the reader realises that these arbitrary labels of “good” and “bad” are only hung on groups from the point of view of the father and not attached to a surrounding code. The exposing of morality as a floating signifier is not something new, as both Nietzsche and Foucault speak to these as subjective, but what the novel does here is lay the world bare so that the reader is forced to confront the absent roots of a moral construct. The man in the novel deludes himself and the boy with ideas that they are good in conversations like when the boy asks,

We’re going to be okay, aren’t we Papa?
Yes. We are.
And nothing bad is going to happen to us.
That’s right.
Because we’re carrying the fire.
Yes. Because we’re carrying the fire. (103)

Anyone this far into the novel would realise that this assurance is based on nothing rational and there is no possible way that one could have faith that they are going to be alright in this world. Constructing the idea that you are “carrying the fire” and this will somehow protect you from bad things is clearly an artistic delusion. The reader knows this, yet somehow it is reassuring to see the man construct a morality in the boy and assure him of a future. The repetition throughout the novel that the man and the boy are “carrying the fire” is a clear example of the beginning of a social construct that draws a line of morality between the “bad guys” and themselves, and although this is arbitrary and fabricated from the consciousness of the man, it gives purpose for the journey and reason to continue the struggle down the road of life. There is reference to this construction in Camus’ *Sisyphus* when he states, “the same reason as the thinker, the artist commits himself and becomes himself in his work”, meaning that the production of life and thought is simultaneously the production of art (2018, 97). To live in a bunker away from the world or committing suicide might be the rational choice, but to see the struggle of living as artwork gives personal meaning, therefore “carrying the fire” in a world lacking a social construct is an opportunity to have life act as artistic response. There is no delusion that the morality the man is attempting to instil in the boy is beyond fragile and lacking attachment, but this is not the point as the choice to strike out on one’s own and create new thought in a bleak world stands in contrast to the blank canvas and thus gives permission to the reader to do the same.

Do not go gentle into that good night

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is more than a post-apocalyptic dystopia survival story as it does not focus on the action and violence of the world, but the joy in constructing personal, temporary meaning; thus the book is a paradox as its dismal backdrop also reveals an optimistic opportunity to challenge the reader to choose a life beyond conscription. Much like Camus' *Sisyphus*, McCarthy's novel presents characters in dire circumstances choosing life over death and rebelling against the social construct imposed upon them. Coupling this with the philosophy of Jean Baudrillard, we see the simulated construct placed upon the world as optional and not fatalistic. Although bleak at first glance, where suicide is rational and not killing your child could be argued as abusive, the novel coupled with an existential philosophical lens exposes the reader to an empowerment that they are in charge of their fate and not confined victims of a simulation.

Although McCarthy needs to destroy the world in order to expose these choices in stark contrast, examples of choosing struggle and life in our world begin to emerge after reading the text. Certainly protagonists choosing struggle over complacency show themselves as popular in stories of marathon runners or Everest climbers eating one another on distant Himalayan ledges, conscription to simulation is often celebrated in heroic war narratives where the protagonist carries the flag into a storm of bullets; however, one must realise that all of us are choosing a personal attraction towards struggle on a daily basis. Even the choice to have children in this world is completely irrational, as one is rewarded with less sleep, finances, and tranquillity to be rewarded with more work and ever present doses of cortisol. However, people have children because this is the absurd artistic representation that they can leave on the world. Facing the scientific facts that our time period and sociological simulation occupies a small fragment of the cosmic timeline one must admit that we are all conquistadors of the useless and relish the opportunity. Although we suspend our disbelief, we will inevitably face not only our personal death, but eventually the extinction of the human species and the eradication of our planet.

We are then left with the choice of exiting the simulation and leaving the struggle, or choosing to continue down the road constructing trivial meaning, as art, as we go. In Camus' *Sisyphus* the gods "thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor", but applying this to our world we can see that all our labour is hopeless, and rather than having this justify complacency this should awaken an opportunity to create art with personal meaning not confined to hegemonic constructs imposed externally (2018, 119). Perhaps then McCarthy's quote "there is no God and we are his prophets," should not be met with a victimisation and complacency, but be read much like William Ernest Henley's classic line from *Invictus*: "I am the master of my fate,/ I am the captain of my soul" (2006, 121; Henley). In the search for meaning and purpose, there is no quarter, but within the artistic struggle of creation there is opportunity to look beyond the simulated hegemonic construct of the gods and smile.

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