

## Opponent's Report

### Jan Kesman: "Reconstructing the Myth: Blood Meridian as the New Western" (BA Thesis)

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At first sight, the thesis looks well-researched and quite advanced in comparison with average BA theses submitted at this department. Its forte is not the analysis of the McCarthy's novel, but a diligent study of especially recent secondary sources (the latter feature is in keeping with the Faculty requirements for BA theses). Especially the second part of Chapter 3 (subchapters 3.3 and 3.4) and Chapter 4 are very useful as summaries of the recent research on *Blood Meridian*.

Some interpretations of McCarthy's novel are praised in the Conclusion for their significant influence on the thesis (p. 66; all page numbers are given according to the count in Adobe Reader, not according the actual pagination of the text). It is a pity that the thesis does not contain a critical reflection of these approaches: nothing in secondary sources should be taken at face value. However, as pointed out above, critical reflection of secondary sources is not included in the requirements for BA theses.

The lack of systematic analysis of the novel, especially its philosophical and aesthetic aspects, is, together with the influence of some works of recent criticism (W.H. McNeill, Timothy Parrish, Stephen Fry) the cause that a closer reading of the thesis reveals a number of not quite substantiated and sometimes rather misleading conclusions, which will be discussed below.

Although the bibliography lists two previous theses on *Blood Meridian* and The Border Trilogy (both won the Mathesius Prize), the present reading of the novel is not even marginally engaged with them. Nor does it use internationally published research of department members. This may be understood as the author's effort to approach the novel from a different angle.

Unfortunately, this angle is rather vaguely defined: the author never explains how "the myth of the American West" is "reconstructed" in *Blood Meridian*. Rather, the thesis discusses the myth's "revision" in a specific film genre called by the author "revisionist Westerns" (pp. 4, 6, 14, 24, 35, 36, 39, 40, 63-65), or in historical narratives - "revisionist history" (p. 42). This "revisionist movement" (pp. 14, 24, 64) is difficult to understand as a "reconstruction" of the "Western myth": one should rather speak of the myth's "reshaping" (p. 24) or, perhaps, deconstruction.

Moreover, the angle chosen by the author causes a certain "misprision" (in the sense of "misreading"), exemplified by the extensive comparison of the novel with Western movies. It is not surprising that this comparison is partially undermined by the author's attempt to read *Blood Meridian* as a "historical novel" (especially chapter 3 and expressly on p. 16: "At its core, it is a historical novel..."). Although *Blood Meridian* is based on historical events, it is not a novel representing history as a process with a specific meaning. As the BA thesis of Zdeněk Polívka shows, the novel is based on the disruption of historical continuity which reveals the underlying key moral problems of the colonization and western culture, especially the paramount importance of war conducted as a game (See Polívka, "Religion of War", chapter 2 and below in this report).

The conflation of *Blood Meridian* with later "neorealist" westerns (p. 40) is an attempt to compare a work of literature using a number of specific artistic means (e.g., poetic language mentioned in the abstract of the thesis or the allegory and parable discussed below) which cannot be efficiently employed in film. The incompatibility of artistic means may lead to misleading conclusions, such as "McCarthy found the biggest inspiration in film" (p. 41). Although the drafts of *Blood Meridian* have been compared, with some overstatement, to a "more raucous and ...more traditional western" (Michael Lynn Crews, "Cormac McCarthy's

*Blood Meridian Was Almost a Plain Old Western,” Literary Hub, University of Texas Press, 6 September 2017, <https://lithub.com/cormac-mccarthys-blood-meridian-was-almost-a-plain-old-western/>), the resulting text swerves considerably from all Western genres in order to emphasize the key existential questions of freedom, determinism and violence in the history of Euro-Atlantic civilization.*

A particularly confusing feature of the thesis is the ambivalent relationship between “myth” and “history”. Of course, all myths are historical, as Roland Barthes implies (p. 26), but they cannot be conflated with historical narratives. This would amount to reducing history to an ideological discourse justifying either the status quo or some ideal state in the past and the nostalgia for it (as in the case of Turner’s Frontier Thesis or preceding western narratives: for a parody of these see Mark Twain’s *Roughing It*, 1871, and its interpretation in my *Ruins in the New World*, Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2012, p. 73).

The classification of *Blood Meridian* as a “historical novel” at the core is also problematic in view of the author’s interpretation of Turner’s Frontier Thesis and the relationship between myth and history (or “mythistory”) of the West (pp. 27-28; quoting a disputable argument of William H. McNeill), where myth is clearly predominant. The study of Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973) and *Tropics of Discourse* (1978) might help the author to overcome the ambivalence of McNeill’s “mythistories” (p. 28).

Another, and closely related, type of ambivalence - between “law” and “lawlessness”- is represented by the members and actions of the Glanton Gang. The ambiguity of the gang members, being both “desperados” and “lawmen” (p. 15) should be more emphasized. It does not merely characterize the Frontier history but the total failure of law and legality in the process of colonization. Similar failure can be seen, e.g., in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (influential with McCarthy’s work, see below).

These intertwined moments of ambivalence may result in an overt acceptance of ideological manipulations of the past, typical, as the author correctly points out, of aggressive nationalism, but also, and not incidentally, of the present ideological debates in post-Communist Europe. For instance, it is impossible to admit that the myths of the 1968 invasion (e.g., that its Czech and Slovak victims were killed in “car accidents”) recently spread by the Russian propaganda and appropriated by the Czech Communist leaders, are “historical truths”, although the Czech Communist bosses have defended them as their own versions of historical truth. Although this instance may seem rather abstruse, it only illustrates the pitfalls of McNeill’s approach: the danger of relativism, which the author of the thesis does not seem to notice.

A problematic aspect of the methodology of the present thesis is the use of the theory of myth in Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*. The myths of the American West connect popular culture and the ideology of Americanism. The application of Barthes’s methodology, based on the analysis of contemporary French advertising, media and pop-culture, on the “Western myth” is historically problematic (as the author quotes Barthes, myths are historical). For instance, Frederick Jackson Turner fused the Melting Pot myth (created by de Crèvecoeur) with the Frontier myth, which also originated at the close of the eighteenth century. Based on the legal notion of the “natural right of expatriation”, the Frontier myth has its roots as early as in the times of the War of Independence. Therefore the idea that McCarthy creates “a second order mythology” (p. 14) or, later, in a particularly vague statement, “the third mythological chain on top of traditional westerns” (p. 29), does not describe the thematic structure of *Blood Meridian* nor the historical development of the “Western myth”. In his novel, McCarthy does not create another mythological level above the “Western myth”. Nor is Barthes’ notion of second-order language readily applicable to westerns. Instead of a myth, central role in the thematic structure of *Blood Meridian* is played by an allegory in a specific form of a parable. See my “American Ruins and the Ghost Town Syndrome” (in A

*Companion to American Gothic*, ed. Charles Crow, Malden, MA: John Wiley, 2013, p. 36): the pivot point of the book are the two exemplary tales (of the harness maker who, in an Indian disguise, killed a young traveller and of the traveller's bride and son) told by the judge at the Anasazi ruins and representing the problematic character of American colonization.

McCarthy's subversion of traditional American typological interpretation of history justifying colonial enterprise and constructing the exceptional role of Americans excludes also anthropological interpretations of myth, such as Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (pp. 45-6). It is misleading to interpret the kid as "an archetypal hero of a monomyth" (p. 45). The pseudo-archetypal symbolism of the initial encounter of the kid with the old hermit (archetype of the Wise Man) is violently subverted by the hermit's racism and belief in technology, later taken up by Holden. In such a setting the kid can hardly represent the hero of a "monomyth". Rather, he is a medium of diverse focalization strategies revealing violent substrates of colonization myths.

It would be better to say that *Blood Meridian* deconstructs the myth of the American West, turning it into an uncanny allegory of violent and criminal aspects of colonization (see my "American Ruins and the Ghost Town Syndrome", and the MA thesis of Zdeněk Polívka, "Between Nostalgia and Pragmatism: the Border Trilogy of Cormac McCarthy"). Not accidentally, one of McCarthy's manuscript notes to *Blood Meridian* refers to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the influence of this novella is increasing in McCarthy's later work, especially in *The Road*.

The same can be said of the author's statement that *Blood Meridian* is "remystifying American myth" (p. 15). I am not sure, whether McCarthy aims at any "remystifying". Instead of myth, I would again use terms "allegory" and "parable". Their importance is not only deconstructive (showing the deep moral problems of the colonization mythology), but also historical. Using them, McCarthy subverts the typological approach applied in traditional U.S. histories, including Turner. It can be said that McCarthy follows Melville, deepening his ironic anti-typological approach in *Moby Dick*.

Similar to Melville's novel, the interpretation of *Blood Meridian* requires a deeper knowledge of the American use of Christian myth. There is no mention of the millennialist form of the myth of America (see the books by Sacvan Bercovitch), which was the origin of the representation of the West as a paradise. This was later intensified in the representations of California (see Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, New York: Vintage, 1998; and my *Ruins in the New World*, pp. 40-45). What I also miss in the present approach is a focus on the specificity of American myths (Henry Nash Smith – "virgin land", Leo Marx – "machine the garden", Sacvan Bercovitch – "Puritan myth", etc.). In spite of his paramount importance, Richard Slotkin is not the only person who has explored this field.

I will conclude this unusually long report by a few comments on the thesis's treatment of Judge Holden. Although he can be referred to as "a devil-like creature who calls himself judge" (p. 17) – his more relevant aspect is that of an uncanny Divine figure: "Holden is a substitute of God in His esoteric and exoteric meanings, as an ultimate cosmic force and as a representative of an unknown, absurd law with unknown meaning and jurisdiction: 'What's he a judge of?' asks the kid ..." ("American Ruins and the Ghost Town Syndrome", p. 35).

The allegorical, morality-like meaning of the Anasazi ruins episode (pp. 29, 34), revealing Holden's nature as a champion of colonialism and the progress of civilization is not sufficiently discussed in the thesis. At closer look, Holden's strange behaviour and oration disrupt the interpretation of the novel as a "revisionist Western" (p. 35). "In this pivotal scene of *Blood Meridian*, biblical typology and positivist science combine in the violent representation intended to erase the history of one of the first nations of America from common memory. The result of this erasure is the unlimited space for deceptive rhetoric" ("American Ruins and the Ghost Town Syndrome", p. 36). Seen from this perspective, the

author's conclusions that *Blood Meridian* "accepts violence as a condition of being alive" and "establishes a correlation violence between the necessity of violence and the building of civilization" (pp. 35, 41) show an effect of the "deceptive rhetoric", namely, confusing Holden's stance with the thematic implications of the book, which is deeply critical to the basic colonialist tendencies of American history.

This critical moment of *Blood Meridian* is further reinforced by the representation of Holden's attitudes to war and game, or to war-as-game (discussed in Polívka's BA thesis). The difference between Nietzsche's and Holden's attitudes consists in their understanding of game and play. While Nietzsche points out the joy of game due to which it has to be played on even at the risk of utter defeat, Holden understands the game (and war) as a wager whose only purpose is to win. In a broader context of game theories, Holden's approach to gaming resembles John von Neumann's and Oskar Morgenstern's analysis of capitalist market as a complex game. As a result, the parallel between Holden and Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is more complex than the author or his sources (e.g., Steven Frye referred to on p. 44) seem to admit. The core of this parallel is in the Nietzschean critique of Hegel's master-slave dialectic as a basis of the latter's speculative interpretation of universal history.

Finally, a few notes concerning specific interpretational, structural and stylistic problems:

p. 11 "Melville's White Whale" – the villain in *Moby Dick* is Captain Ahab. The comparison with the whale itself (mentioned also elsewhere) does not work, since its representations are imaginary and their anthropomorphism is subverted by Melville's style.

p. 13 – Subchapter 2.1 is superfluous: the information it contains has already been conveyed on p. 11.

p. 14 "bordellos" – The originally Italian word exists in English, but not in *Blood Meridian*. Etymologically, it does not suit the Anglo-Hispanic setting.

To summarize: the thesis is well researched and remarkable for its attempts to interpret *Blood Meridian* in the context of Western movies and history. However, the above discussed shortcomings preclude proposing a better grade than "**very good**". The final grade will depend of the author's performance during **the defence, to which the thesis is thereby recommended.**

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